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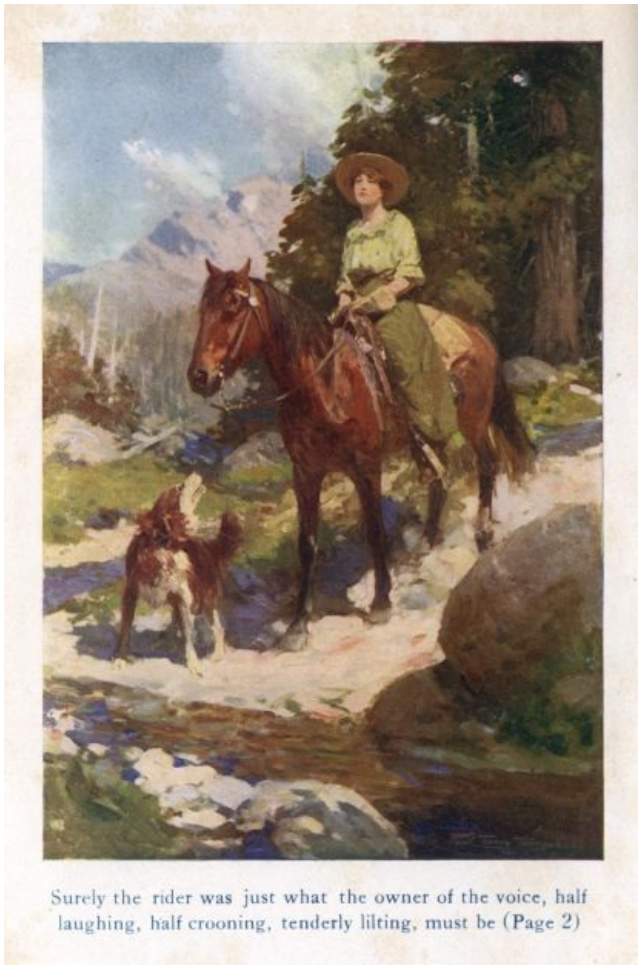

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[Frontispiece: Surely the rider was just what the owner of the voice, half laughing, half crooning, tenderly lilting, must be.]

THE SHORT CUT

BY

JACKSON GREGORY

Author of "Under Handicap," "The Outlaw"

**WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
FRANK TENNEY JOHNSON**

**NEW YORK
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**TO
"MOTHER" McGLASHAN
AND
GENERAL C. F. McGLASHAN**

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ILLUSTRATIONS

THE SHORT CUT

CHAPTER I

THE TRAGEDY

Here was a small stream of water, bright, clear and cool, running its merry way among the tall pines, hurrying to the dense shade of the lower valley. The grass on its banks stood tall, lush and faintly odorous, fresh with the newly come springtime, delicately scented with the thickly strewn field flowers. The sunlight lay bright and warm over all; the sky was blue with a depth of colour intensified by the few great white clouds drifting lazily across it.

No moving thing within all the wide rolling landscape save the sun-flecked water, the softly stirring grass and rustling forests, the almost motionless white clouds. For two miles the hills

billowed away gently to the northward, where at last they were swept up into the thickly timbered, crag-crested mountains. For twice two miles toward the west one might guess the course of the stream before here, too, the mountains shut in, leaving only Echo Cañon's narrow gap for the cool water to slip through. To the south and to the east ridges and hollows and mountains, and beyond a few fast melting patches of last winter's snow clinging to the lofty summits, looking like fragments broken away from the big white clouds and resting for a moment on the line where land and sky met.

The stillness was too perfect to remain long unbroken. From a trail leading down into the valley from the east a shepherd dog, running eagerly, broke through the waving grass, paused a second looking back expectantly, sniffed and ran on. Then a sound from over the ridge through the trees, the sound of singing, a young voice lilting wordlessly in enraptured gladness that life was so bright this morning. And presently a horse, a dark bay saddle pony moving as lazily as the clouds above, brought its rider down to the stream.

Surely the rider was just what the owner of the voice, half laughing, half crooning, tenderly lilting, must be. It seemed that only since the dawn of today had she become a woman having been a child until the dusk of yesterday. The wide grey eyes, looking out upon a gentle aspect of life, were inclined to be merry and musing at the same time, soft with maidenhood's day dreaming, tender with pleasant thoughts. A child of the outdoors, her skin sun-tinged to a warm golden brown, her hair sunburnt where it slipped out of the shadow of her big hat, her lips red with young health, her slender body in its easy, confident carriage showing how the muscles under the soft skin were strong and capable.

At her saddle horn, in its case, was a camera; snapped to her belt and resting against her left hip, a pair of field glasses.

The horse played at drinking, pretending a thirst which it did not feel, and began to paw the clear water into muddiness. The dog ran on, turned again, barked an invitation to its mistress to join in the search for adventures, and plunged into the tall grass.

The girl's song died away, her lips stilled by the hush of the coming noonday. For a moment she was very silent, so motionless that she seemed scarcely to breathe.

"Life is good here," she mused, her eyes wandering across the valley to the wall of the mountains shutting out the world of cities. "It is like the air, sweet and clean and wholesome! Life!" she whispered, as though in reality she had been born just this dawn to the awe of it, the wonder of it, "I love Life!"

She breathed deeply, her breast rising high to the warm, scented air drawn slowly through parted lips as though she would drink of the rare wine of the springtime.

The dog had found something in the deep grass which sent it scampering back across the water and almost under the horse's legs, snarling.

"What is it, Shep?" laughed the girl. "What have you found that is so dreadful?"

But Shep was not to be laughed out of his growls and whines. Presently he ran back toward the place where he had made his headlong crossing, stopped abruptly, broke into a quick series of short, sharp barks, and again turning fled to the horse and rider as though for protection, whining his fear.

"Is it really something, Shep?" asked the girl, puzzled a little. She leaned forward in the saddle, patting her mare's warm neck. "I think he's just an old humbug as usual, Gypsy," she smiled indulgently. "But shall we go over and see?"

Gypsy splashed noisily across the stream, the dog still growling and slinking close to the horse's heels. The girl saw where Shep had parted the grass with his inquisitive nose, leaving a plain trail. And not ten steps from the edge of the water she came upon the thing that Shep had found.

The mare's nostrils suddenly quivered; she trembled a moment, and then with a snort of fear whirled and plunged back toward the creek. But the girl had seen. The colour ran out of her face, the musing peace fled from her eyes and a swift horror leaped out upon her. In one flash the soft calm of the morning had become a mockery, its promise a lie. Here, into the wonder of Life, Death had come.

She had had but an uncertain glance at the thing lying huddled in the tall grass, but her instinct like Shep's and Gypsy's understood. And for a blind, terror-stricken moment, she felt that she must yield as they yielded to the fear within her, to the primitive urge to flee from Death; that she could not draw near the spot where a man had died, where even now the body lay cold in the sunshine.

Her hands were shaking pitifully when at last she tied Gypsy to the lower limb of an oak beside the creek. As she went slowly back along the little trail the dog had made she told herself that the man was not dead, that he was sick or hurt … and though she had never looked upon Death before this morning when it seemed to her that she had looked upon Life for the first time,

she knew what that grotesque horror meant, she knew why the man lay, as he did, face down and still.

At last she stood over the body, her swift eyes informing her reluctant consciousness of a host of details. She saw that the grass around was beaten down in a rude circle, heard the whining of the dog at her heels, noticed that the man lay on his right side, his head twisted so that his cheek touched his shoulder, the face hidden, one arm crumpled under him, one outflung and grasping a handful of up-rooted grass with set rigid fingers.

A sickness, a faintness, and with it an almost uncontrollable desire to run madly from this place, this thing, swept over her. But she drew closer, kneeling quickly, and put her warm hand upon the hand that clutched the wisp of grass so rigidly. It was cold, so cold that she drew back suddenly, shuddering.

Not even now did she know who the man was. It had not yet entered her mind that she could know him. She rose to her feet, and walking softly as though her footfall in the grass might waken some one sleeping, she moved about the still figure, to the other side, so that she might see the face. Then she cried out softly, piteously, and Shep ceased his whining and came to her around the body, rubbing against her skirts.

"Arthur!" She came closer, knelt again and put her hands gently upon the short-cropped, curling hair. "Oh, Arthur! Is it you?" Only now did she know how this man with the young, frank face had died. Now she saw blood smeared on the white forehead, a bullet wound torn in the temple. She sprang to her feet, staring with wide eyes at the little hole through which the man's soul had fled. She turned hastily toward her horse, came back, placed her straw hat tenderly over the short curling hair, and ran to Gypsy.

She was vaguely conscious that her brain was acting as it had never acted before, that her excited nerves were filling her mind with a mass of sensations and fragmentary thoughts strangely clearcut and definite. Like some wonderfully constructed camera her faculties, in an instant no longer than the time required for the clicking of the shutter, photographed a hawk circling high up in the sky, a waving branch, with no less truth and vividness than the body sprawling there in the grass. Emotions, scents, sounds, objects blended into a strange mental snap-shot, no one detail less clear than another.

Jerking the mare's tie rope free from the oak, she flung herself into the saddle, and turned back toward the trail that led across the creek and over the ridge. But Shep had found something else in the grass half a dozen steps beyond the dead man, something that he sniffed at and nosed and that excited him. Making a little detour, she rode back to the spot where the dog, barking now, was waiting for her.

As she leaned forward looking down upon this second thing the shepherd dog had found, she clutched suddenly at the horn of her saddle as though all her strength had dribbled out of her, and she were going to fall. The keen nostrils of the animal had led him to this object with its sinister connection with the tragedy and he had pawed at it, dragging it toward him and free of the green tangle into which it had fallen or been flung.

It was a revolver, thirty-eight calibre, unlike the weapons one might expect to find here in the range country or about the sawmills further back ... and the girl recognised it. The deadly viciousness of the firearm was disguised by the pearl grip and silver chasings until it had seemed a toy. But here was Arthur Shandon dead, with a bullet in his brain, and here almost at his side was a revolver she knew so well....

She covered her face with her hands and shook like one of the pine needles above her head caught in a quick breath of air. Shep looked up at her with his sharp, eager bark and then the gladness of discovery in his eyes changed suddenly into wistful wonder. Gypsy, with tossing head and jingling bridle, turned toward the crossing, quickening her stride, ready to break into a trot.

At last the girl jerked her hands away from a face that was white and miserable, and with angry spur and rein brought the mare back to the spot where the revolver lay. Slipping down, she hesitated a moment, glancing swiftly about as though afraid some one might see her, even with a look that was almost suspicious at the quiet body of Arthur Shandon, and stooping suddenly swept up the thing that had been a toy yesterday and was so hideously tragic to-day. It was with a great effort of her will that she compelled her fingers to touch it, forced them to close upon it and take it up. Then with a little cry into which loathing and dread merged, she cast it from her, flinging it far down stream so that it fell into a black pool below a tiny, frothing waterfall.

"I can't believe it. I won't believe it!" she murmured in a voice that shook even as her hands were shaking. "It is too terrible!"

No longer could she look at the huddled form in the grass, the young, frank face that was so still and white and cold in the sunshine. Throwing herself into the saddle, she swung Gypsy's head about toward the trail, as though she were fleeing from a fearful pursuing menace. Shep, who had run, barking, to retrieve his lost discovery from the black pool under the waterfall, snapped his disappointment from the bank and then splashed through the creek after his mistress.

Two hundred yards the girl raced along the up-trail, her mare running, her dog struggling hard to keep up. Then with a new, sudden fear she jerked her pony to a standstill.

"I ... I can't leave it there," her white lips were whispering. "They will find it, and then ... Oh, my God!"

And now her brain had ceased to act like a strangely magical camera; now sights and sounds and faint odours about her were all unnoticed. Her eyes, wide and staring at the winding trail before her, did not see the broad trees or the flower sprinkled grass or the blossoming manzanita bushes. They gazed through these things which they did not see, and instead saw what might lie in the future, what fate the grim gods of destiny might mete out ... to one man ... if the revolver below the waterfall were found!

Her hesitation was brief; the horror of what might lurk in the future was greater than the horror of what lay back there behind her. Again she urged her puzzled horse back to the stream, flinging herself down just at the edge of the pool. Far down at the bottom upon the white sand, wedged between two white stones, the revolver lay plainly visible. The noonday sun rested upon the deep water here and its secret was no secret at all. She was glad that she had come back.

Snatching up the dead limb of a shrub lying close at hand, with little difficulty or waste of time, she dragged the weapon toward her until she could thrust her arm, elbow deep into the water, and secure it.

She shuddered as when she had first forced her hand to touch it. But with quick, steady fingers she dried it against her skirt and thrust it into the only place where she could be sure of safety, where its voice would be silenced to all except her own heart, deep into the bosom of her waist. And again she was on Gypsy's back, again fleeing along the up-trail.

As she rode, as the rush of air whipped in her face and the leaping body of the mare under her gave her muscles something to do, the blood flamed again into her cheeks; courage rushed back into a heart that was naturally unafraid.

"I have not been loyal," she whispered over and over to herself accusingly. "I have not been a true friend. I have suspected and I know, oh, I know so well, that it can't be! He wouldn't do a thing like that, he couldn't!"

She topped the ridge, sped on for half a mile upon its crest, racing straight toward the east, dropped down into another valley ten times bigger than the one she had just quitted, and still following the trail headed southward again. Here there were fewer trees, a sprinkling of pine and fir, and wider open spaces. Another stream, even smaller than Echo Creek, watered the valley. She rode through a small herd of saddle horses that flashed away before her swift approach, their manes and tails flying, and scarcely realised that she had disturbed them. Off to her left, at the upper end of the valley where were a number of grazing cattle, she thought she could distinguish the figures of a couple of her father's cowboys riding herd. But she did not turn to them.

Gypsy, warming to the race, carried her mistress valiantly the half a dozen miles from the ridge she had crossed to the knoll crowned with great boled, sky seeking cedars where her father's ranch house stood. Half a mile away the girl made out the wide verandahs, the long flight of steps, the hammock where she had read and dozed last night, yes, and dreamed the tender, half wistful, yet rose tinted dreams of maidenhood. She saw, too, the stables at the base of the knoll, to the northward, where one of the boys, Charlie or Jim, was harnessing the greys, preparatory to hitching them to the big wagon. The thought flashed through her mind that he counted upon going out for a load of wood, and that he would be called upon first to bring in another burden that he would never forget.

Her eyes went back to the house. There was some one sitting in a rocker in the shade near the front door. It was her mother. This news would be a bitter, bitter shock to the tender-hearted woman who had called Arthur Shandon one of her "boys."

The girl drew nearer, with no tightening of reins upon Gypsy's headlong speed. Another glimpse through the cedars showed her that there was some one with her mother, a man, broad and heavy shouldered. He turned, hearing the pound of the flying hoofs through the still air as she came on. It was her father. She could see the massive, calm face, the white hair and white square beard.

She was barely five hundred yards from the foot of the knoll when she saw that her father and mother were not alone. The third figure had been concealed from her until now by the great post standing at the top of the steps. But now the man sitting there rose to his feet and turned to look in the direction her parents were looking. A sudden choking came into the girl's throat, a quick rush of tears into her dry eyes. She drew her reins tight, bringing her pony down into a trot, then to a walk. She could not rush on like this, carrying a message of grief and terror; must she hasten so eagerly to speak the word that was going to make life so different to this man?

"Oh, how can I tell him?" she was moaning. "The gladdest, gayest, happiest boy of a man that ever lived! Will he ever be glad again?"

Her mother had waved to her, her father was smiling, proud of her as he always was when he saw how she rode. And the other man who had leaped to his feet was running down the steps, coming to meet her, coming to meet the news she brought.

CHAPTER II

THE SHADOW

The girl drooped her head a little, while Gypsy walked very slowly. Then she looked up again, swiftly, saw that the man was coming on to meet her, saw the great, tall, gaunt form, marked the free swinging carriage which she had noted so many times before, noticed the way he carried his head, well back, saw the sunlight splashing like fire in the red, red hair that in some fashion seemed to proclaim red blood and recklessness. A young man he was with mighty hands and iron body, with life leaping high in his laughing eyes, a man who might have been some pagan god of youth and joy and heedlessness.

His big boots brought him on swiftly until he came to her horse and she stopped, her eyes dropping before his. He twined his fingers in Gypsy's mane and looked up into her face, he laughing softly.

"So you've ridden back to us, at last." His voice was in tune with the rest of him, suggesting the wildness and recklessness that were part of the man's nature. He ran on, half bantering, half softly wondering at the loveliness of her. "Are you pagan nymph or Christian maiden, Wanda?" he asked a little seriously, as nearly serious, one might have said, as it was this man's nature to be.

She raised her lowered eyes, looking at him searchingly. Then he saw the tears that at last were spilling over, the face from which the colour was going again, the traces of horror of that thing which lay far back there under the pines.

"Wanda!" he cried sharply. "You ... There's something the matter! I've been running on like an inspired idiot and ... What is it, Wanda?"

"Oh," she said desperately, "it is terrible! I can't ..." She choked over her words. But they were burning the soul within her, and she ran on hastily. "I found him back there by Echo Creek crossing. He ... he is dead."

"Dead?" repeated the man. "Dead? Who, Wanda?"

"Arthur!" she whispered.

"Arthur, dead?" he muttered, his voice oddly low and quiet. "Arthur, dead? I don't understand."

"He is dead," she said again heavily. "Some one shot him."

She broke off and began to sob. He looked first at her, then along the trail she had ridden, and finally, taking his hand from her horse's mane he turned abruptly and strode off toward the house. He mounted the steps swiftly, passed her father and mother without a word in answer to the questioning faces they turned toward him, entered the door and returned almost immediately, carrying his hat in his hand. As he came down the steps, he put on his hat and bent his head a little so that she could not see his face. He passed her without a sign and went down to the stable. Then she rode up to the house and slipped from her saddle at the foot of the steps. Her father and mother hurried to meet her.

"It is Arthur. It is Wayne's brother," cried Wanda brokenly from her mother's arms. "He is dead!"

She told them briefly, hurriedly. Her father, his eyes strangely hard and inscrutable swore softly and turning without a word to either of the women went back to the house as Wayne had done, got his hat and hurried to the stable. His voice, hard and expressionless like his eyes, floated up to them as he gave his brief orders to Jim to drive straight back to the spot Wanda had described. The girl saw him enter the stable and in a little while come out, riding a saddled horse. Already Wayne Shandon had ridden off along the trail, travelling with a fury of speed that took no heed of the miles ahead of him.

Mother and daughter turned and went slowly up the steps, their arms about each other, their cheeks wet.

"Who killed him, mamma?" whispered the girl, her moist eyes lifted. "Who could have killed him?"

The silent tale that a pearl handled revolver had told her was a lie, a hideous lie. She did not believe it, she was never going to believe it. For an instant there had been a horrible suspicion in her breast, then her loyalty had risen and crushed it and killed it and cast it out. But now she sought some new explanation to take its place, sought it with intense eagerness.

"Who killed him?" Mother's and daughter's eyes met furtively for a quick second. And then the mother's answer was no answer at all, but a broken, tremulous prayer: "Dear God, may they never know who did this thing!"

They did not look at each other again as they crossed the length of the veranda, on the north exposure of the great square house and turned into the spacious living room.

"I am going to my room, mamma," said the girl faintly. "I want to be alone just a little."

She knew that her mother was watching her as she passed through the living room and out through the double doors to the veranda at the east. But she did not turn. She did not ask what her mother had meant, she did not wish to know. She wanted just now more than anything in the world, to be alone in her own room, to take from her bosom the thing which she felt every one would know she had there, to hide it where it would be safe.

To the east of the house in a little sheltered hollow her father, twenty years ago, had planted an orchard. She could see the white and delicate pink of the blossoms, could catch the hint of perfume that a little frolicking breeze brought to her.

She heard voices out there and saw two men coming toward the house. There came to her ears, too, the sound of cool, contemptuous laughter. She knew who it was insolently jeering at the other, knew before she saw them that it was the big, splendidly big fellow, as tall as Red Reckless and heavier, who was known to her only as "Sledge" Hume. She had heard her father say last night that both Hume and Arthur Shandon were coming to-day upon some matter of business in which the three men were interested.

"You're a little fool, anyway, Conway," the deep voice said with that frank impudence which was a part of Hume.

Garth Conway, not a small man by two inches or fifty pounds, although he appeared so beside his companion, made a reply which Wanda did not hear in full, but which reached her sufficiently to tell her that the two men were talking about some trifling matter of range management and that his theory had provoked Sledge Hume's blunt comment. The two men came on, Hume striding a couple of paces in front of Conway, until they caught sight of her. Conway lifted his hat, his sullen eyes brightening. Hume, staring at her with the keen eye of appraisal, did not trouble himself to touch his hat and gave her no greeting beyond one of his curt nods.

"They have not heard," Wanda thought with a little thrill of pity for Garth Conway who was so soon to learn of the death of the man who had been more like a brother than cousin to him. "Mamma will tell them."

She hurried down the veranda to her room which was at the far end, at the southeast corner of the house. But she paused at the door as she heard her mother's voice, shaken and tearful, and the reply that one of the men made.

It was Garth Conway. As though the utterance were drawn from him by the shock of the surprise, jerked from him involuntarily, he cried:

"Dead? Murdered? My God! And he and Wayne quarrelled...."

"Go on!" It was Sledge Hume's heavy, colourless voice. "Just because two men quarrel it doesn't mean that one kills the other, does it?"

"Garth!" cried Mrs. Leland. "You mustn't ..."

"I didn't say that," cried Conway. "I didn't mean ..."

Wanda waited to hear no more. She hurried into her room, to stand there trembling behind the closed door, her face as white as that other face she had looked upon earlier in the day.

"He didn't do it!" she whispered. "He didn't. I know he didn't."

But the thing which she carried in her bosom seemed to be demanding rudely: "Must you shut your eyes to believe with your heart?" And if other eyes than her own saw it?

There was her closet, the open door showing the party dresses she had brought back from school. She shook her head. Her room was so plainly furnished with just a little dressing table, her bed, a chair, a stand with some wild flowers on it, a smaller table with half a dozen books scattered about. Then her eyes rested on the big trunk which had not yet been carried down into the basement.

Running to it she flung up the lid and jerked out the tray. The bottom was half filled with odds and ends, stockings, slippers, linen. She took the revolver from her bosom, dropped it to the

bottom of the trunk, covered it hastily with loose clothing, replaced the tray and closed the lid. But she could not feel that her secret was safe until she had found the key on her dressing table. The lock was troublesome, it was always troublesome. She was down on her knees, had just heard the little click which told her that the lock was fast, and was trying to work the key out again when the door opened softly and her mother came in.

For a moment the two women, motionless, looked at each other fixedly. Then Wanda rose slowly to her feet, a little red flush colouring her brow, a fear which she knew absurd and yet which she could not crush down, rising into her fluttering breast. Then Mrs. Leland closed the door behind her, and stood with her back to it.

"Will you tell me about it, Wanda, dear?"

Her voice was troubled; her frank eyes, so like her daughter's, were at once sad and anxious.

"It is too horrible, mamma." Wanda closed her eyes tightly for a moment, trying to shut out the picture which burned so in her brain. Every little detail stood out in her memory clear cut and vivid, the grass trampled into a rude circle, the hand that clung in death to what it had last grasped in life, the grotesquely crumpled, huddled body.

"Tell me about it, Wanda." Her mother was looking into the frankly distressed face, curiously. Wanda had again the uneasy idea that her mother was wondering about the trunk which she had just locked, and again a quick fear leaped up within her that she might guess the secret it concealed.

"How did you happen to find him?"

"Shep was with me, running ahead. Shep found him."

"And some one had killed him?"

Wanda nodded, her lips tight pressed together, her hands twisting about each other in her lap. For a moment there was silence in the little room.

"Wanda, look at me, dear."

Her eyes turned, wondering, from the window and the orchard beyond, and went swiftly to her mother. The words were very clearly a command now. The voice was lowered a little but had grown more insistent. And it seemed to her that Mrs. Leland's eyes had in them now something more than sadness and anxiety, that they were suspicious. Again Wanda felt the hot blood in her temples.

"What is it, mamma?"

"Who killed Arthur? Do you know?"

"Mamma!" she cried, startled. "Why do you ask that? What do you mean?"

"I want to know, dear. Do you know who killed him?"

"No." It was plain that she was troubled, it was equally as plain that she spoke truthfully. "What makes you think … Why do you ask that?"

"I thought," replied Mrs. Leland, a little uneasily, "that you might have seen something, found something…."

"No, no!" cried the girl impulsively. "I know what you mean. I have no vaguest idea who could have done it!"

The older woman came across the room and sat down at her daughter's side, putting her arm about the slender form.

"Wanda, dear," she said softly. "I am going to tell you something which you don't know yet. Wayne quarrelled with Arthur last night!"

The girl's body stiffened convulsively. She wanted to spring up and run out of the house to some hiding place in the old orchard and be alone. But she answered, her eyes clear and truthful.

"I'm sorry. Oh, so sorry! Poor Wayne. That will make it so much harder for him."

"Yes. It is going to make it hard for him, Wanda. Harder than you have imagined." She paused as if considering the advisability of what she had started to say, and then ended simply, hopelessly, "They are going to think that Wayne shot him!"

"They mustn't!" cried Wanda hotly. "They haven't the right. It would be thinking a lie, a wicked, hideous lie!"

Mrs. Leland shook her head sadly.

"Wanda," she went on quietly, "the first thing Garth said when I told him was that Wayne had quarrelled with Arthur last night. I don't mind so much what Garth says and does, but … I think that Martin is going to suspect Wayne of this, if he doesn't already suspect him."

"But, surely father isn't so unjust, just because he doesn't like Wayne…"

"If it were nothing more than just not liking him! Your father isn't capable of a feeling that is merely negative about people, child. He hated the boys' father; Wayne I think he hates as bitterly."

"But why, mamma? Surely there is no reason …"

"Men, strong men like your father, don't always wait for reasons, Wanda," said Mrs. Leland gently. "He has never forgotten that had circumstances been a very, very little different I might have married the other Wayne Shandon. When we were married and the other Wayne Shandon bought land so close to us your father was the angriest man I ever saw. That was before your time, dear. He rode across the valley the next day; he has never told me what happened but his face was still white when he came home. There are only a few things which can stir Martin into a passion like that."

"But, surely, mamma …"

"When the other Wayne Shandon married and the boys were born it made no difference with Martin. When the other Wayne Shandon died and his wife died and the boys were left the hatred in your father's breast did not die with them. He transferred it to Arthur and the Wayne you know. Toward Wayne especially it has grown strong and bitter."

"But why to him more than to Arthur?"

"Because, my dear, Wayne is his father over and over again! Because he has the same red hair and the same eyes with the same way of laughing. Because his voice is the same, his carriage is the same, his mad, reckless heart the same. Because everytime that Martin sees the Wayne Shandon that you know he sees the old Wayne Shandon I knew … and he hated."

"But it can't be that if a man hates another, and he dies, the man will go on hating his son just for being his son! Father is not so unjust as that, mamma! He will not suspect Wayne of murder, of murdering his own brother, just because of his father!"

Mrs. Leland's hands were interlocked tensely. "There are other reasons, there will be other things remembered about the boy which will make suspicion so easy."

"I know what you mean," the girl cried, breathing deeply. "He is reckless, he is wild, I know. He gambles, he has quarrels with many men. He does things that we would not do, but then we are women! He does things that father would not do, but then father is not young any longer! He is wild because his nature is inherited from his father; it's in his blood, he's young and he has grown up with the far out places. But he is not bad! He is not the kind of man to do a thing like this. What do men call him, men who know him and what he is? They don't call him Coward, they don't call him Cheat, they don't call him mean or dishonest or ungenerous! They call him Reckless, Red Reckless, and they love him! Oh, mamma, can't you see that it is impossible …"

Mrs. Leland rose to her feet, her face grown suddenly pinched and white.

"I don't know," she said with a sigh.

"You believe it too!" cried the girl. "You think that Wayne Shandon killed his own brother!"

A delicate flush stained her mother's cheeks.

"Wanda, child, you mustn't say that," she almost whispered. "I don't believe it. I won't believe it. And if I did … Wanda, I'd remember the man his father was, the gentleman, the true-hearted gentleman, and I should say that I did not believe."

Then, turning quickly so that her wondering daughter could not see the eyes that were blurred with a mist of tears, she left the room.

When she had gone Wanda snatched up the trunk key from her table and thrust it quickly into her bosom. Then she sat down again on the edge of her bed and stared out toward the orchard where the sunlight lay bright and warm upon the apple blossoms … and saw only the quiet body by Echo Creek, that and the face of the man people called Red Reckless.

CHAPTER III

Why had her mother come to her in such a way? Why had she been so quick to see what people would say? Did she believe that Wayne Shandon had killed Arthur; was she afraid that Wanda might have found something that would incriminate him; and did she want to warn her of what the inevitable result of such a disclosure would be?

And she had found something! She had known from the first sight of it, half hidden by Shep's eager pays, that it was Wayne Shandon's. He had shown it to her only last week.

"I am going to teach you to shoot as I shoot," he had laughed, bringing the revolver out of his pocket. "Then I am going to give it to you. And then you are going to make me a pretty bow and give me a pretty smile and say, 'Thank you, Red,' as you did when I chastised your first suitor! Remember, Wanda?"

"Only I don't call you 'Red' any more," she had laughed back at him. "We're grown up now, you know, and Wayne is much more dignified and … and respectful."

"And you can handle your own suitors now," he had retorted. "More artistically and with equal finality!"

Only a week ago out there in the orchard where now the sunlight lay in golden splashes over the fruit trees, she and Red Reckless had bantered each other as they strolled toward the house where Arthur was sitting on the veranda with her mother, watching them. It was a sparkling morning like to-day's, and they had spoken of the old school days before Mr. Shandon sent his two sons to the East to school, of the time when she was eight and he was fifteen and he had "licked" a boy whom she did not like but who was stubborn in vowing that the little girl should eat a red cheeked apple he had brought her. A week ago, and now Arthur Shandon was dead and men were ready to believe that Wayne Shandon had killed him.

She sat very still, while her mind wandered in many directions. The old days rose up vividly bringing back the young faces of Arthur and Wayne and Garth Conway,—they had all played Prisoner's Base and Anti-over at the little white school house down in the valley. She remembered the day when a letter came from Mr. Shandon summoning Arthur and Wayne and Garth to the East, and how merry the boys had been over it. She missed them dreadfully after they went away until vacation came and her own father had taken her with him on a tour of inspection to his four other ranches, up and down the State. For three years she did not see the three boys, their letters had ceased, and she was well on the way to forget her playfellows. And then, when she was twelve and Wayne Shandon nineteen, he had come back.

He had run away. He had quarrelled with his father, and Arthur had tried to show him that he was unreasonable. Then the boy's hot temper had flashed out at his brother and finally at Garth Conway who had long been accustomed to thinking as Arthur Shandon thought. So the youth, in whom love of adventure and hatred of restraint were already marked characteristics, had sold his books, the saddle pony which his father's generosity had given him, his guns and fishing tackle, in fact everything which he might sell even to his spare clothing, had caught a night train and come West again.

Wanda's mother had tried to reason with the boy when he came to them, laughing at the trick he had played his father, full of mockery of the hidebound ways of cities, and had wanted to send him back to Mr. Shandon. She had cried a little over him and kissed him and talked gently with him as was her motherly way. But Wanda's father berated him severely and sternly and Wayne flushed and bit his lip and then went away from them as he had gone away from the East.

More years, happy years for Wanda Leland, sped by and she did not see the boy. Both Arthur and Garth came in the long summer vacations to Mr. Shandon's range and were frequent visitors at the Echo Creek place. Word came now and then of Wayne Shandon, sometimes by infrequent and unsatisfactory short letters from him, more often in elaborately embroidered rumour from men making long trips across the country. He had gone to work for a cattle outfit, taking a dollar a day and doing an ordinary cowboy's work. Even before he was twenty-one, men called him Red Reckless. He had learned to gamble, and to gamble for big stakes. He played poker; he took his chance with the "bank"; but he loved the dice. They were quicker; a man could "make or break" at one throw. It was his way to hazard everything on a throw, to laugh if he won, to laugh if he lost.

Rumour said that he had been shot by a notorious gambler, Dash Dulac; and had come near dying; that he had shot another man up at Spanish Dry Diggings where he had rushed with a frantic flood of men on news of a golden strike; that he had been sucked away with another flux of gold seekers to the Yukon country where he had lived lawlessly with his lawless companions; that he had drifted back to the lumber camps of the mountains; that at last he had returned to the cattle country.

Wanda had gone away to school in the East, spending only her summers upon the Echo Creek ranch. She had seen very little of Wayne Shandon. When Mr. Shandon died, leaving his wide reaching cattle range to his elder son, Arthur had come promptly to take charge of the Bar L-M Outfit, and Garth Conway had come with him as foreman and general manager under him.

Arthur, whose affection for his stormy souled brother had lasted strong through the years, had at last prevailed upon Wayne to "come home" and to go to work for him. That had been a year ago.

A light knock at her door brought back her wandering thoughts to to-day, to Arthur Shandon, to the suspicion which was so quickly lifting its venomous head. She rose from the bed, pushed back the hair which had fallen unnoticed into confusion about her cheeks, and said softly,

"Come in, mamma."

"We were just going to have lunch when you came, Wanda," her mother said quietly. "You must come and have a cup of tea."

"Mamma! I can't."

"But you can!" Her mother smiled a little at her and patted the restless hand she took in her own. "You had a very early breakfast and you must have a cup of tea."

Together they went back to the dining room.

"Where are Garth and Mr. Hume?" asked Wanda.

"They have gone … with the others, dear," Mrs. Leland told her.

The two women sat down in silence. Wanda forced herself to drink half of her tea and pushed the cup away from her. She got swiftly to her feet and leaving the room, went out upon the north veranda, where she saw Julia, the cook, standing at the window, her red hands upon her broad hips, her eyes even redder than her hands. On the window sill were half a dozen fresh, hot pies which Julia had made for "the boys" …

Wanda bit her lips and her eyes went whither her mother's had gone, down the trail along which the men had ridden to the creek.

It seemed a very long time before she saw them. The wagon, with Jim driving slowly and carefully, climbed over a ridge and wound its way down into the valley. Her father, Garth, and Sledge Hume, were riding behind it, abreast and close together. Wayne Shandon farther back was riding alone, his head down, his hat drawn low over his brows.

At last she could see the faces shaded by the wide brimmed hats. They were strangely alike in their hard, set expression, the gravity which told little. These were not, any of them, men given to wearing their deeper emotions on their sleeves. Her eyes ran to Wayne Shandon's face first. It was white, the mouth was sterner than she had ever thought Red Reckless' laughing mouth could be, the eyes were hard and inscrutable.

From him she looked anxiously at her father, then at Sledge Hume, then at Garth Conway. And these faces, stern like Wayne's, sent a little shiver of fear through her.

Her mother went out to meet the wagon, crying quietly. Wanda felt the tears rush with a hotness like fire into her own eyes, and then she turned and hurrying out of sight of the slow procession ran down to the orchard. She was lying there, face down, sobbing like a child, when she felt a shadow over her, heard a man's spurs jingle, and knew who it was that had come out to her.

She looked up at him, wondering.

"Wanda," he said very quietly, his voice strangely steady, "it was good of you to give him your hat. If I were dead and you did a thing like that for me I think I should come back to life to kiss your dear hands."

This was so like him! Oh, just the thing Red Reckless would do! The little thoughtful act of hers had stirred him more deeply than most men are moved even by big things; and the impulse had come to him to go straight to her and thank her. And he was a man who obeyed impulses.

The other men had entered the house for their lunch. It seemed horrible to her that people should be able to eat at a time like this. Wayne Shandon spoke to her again.

"Your father is going to let Jim go with me," he said. "We are going to El Toyon. Then I am going to take him back East."

"East!" she exclaimed,

"Yes. I have a fancy he'd like to be buried close to dad."

"You are coming back soon?"

"Immediately. Within ten days, I think. Good-bye, Wanda."

"Wait a minute," she hesitated. "I want to think."

She had not meant to tell him so soon, in the first shock of the death, about what she had

found. But he was going away, and he ought to know, it was his right to know.

"Will you wait here for me a moment, Wayne?" she asked looking pitifully up into the face of the man whose grave eyes were fixed upon her. "Until I run to the house and get something?"

She was glad then that the other men were able to eat, and that her mother and Julia were waiting on them. Hastening back to her room, she took the revolver from its hiding place in her trunk, slipped it into her blouse and ran back to the orchard.

"Wayne," she whispered coming close to him, suspicious of every little sound in the orchard, fearful of an approaching footstep. "I found something near Arthur. I did not tell any one. As you are going away I had better tell you."

She held out the revolver. The sunlight fell on it, glinting brightly from the polished silver. Wayne Shandon stared at it frowning, as though he could not or would not believe his eyes. Slowly a deeper pallor crept into his white face. Then a terrible look which the girl could not read came into his eyes.

"Good God!" he whispered hoarsely. "You found that near him?"

Suddenly he put his hand out and took it. His fingers touched hers. They were as cold as ice.

"Wanda," he said, his voice frightening her, it was so hard and unfamiliar, "you were good to give it to me."

That was all. She felt vaguely that his mind was groping for other words which it could not find. He slipped the revolver into his pocket, turned and left her.

From the orchard she watched him ride away. Jim was driving the two big greys, while Shandon followed close behind the wagon, sitting very straight in the saddle, his face telling her nothing.... She sank back upon the grass under the apple tree and lay still, staring up at the patches of blue seen through the green and white of the branches and blossoms.

When at last she went back to the house she heard her father's voice lifted angrily. He was talking to her mother and the name flung furiously from his lips was the name of Wayne Shandon.

"Hush, Martin," protested Mrs. Leland. "You mustn't ..."

Martin Leland, his face red, his mouth working wordlessly, swept up his hat and went away to the corrals by the stable. Wanda saw his eyes as he brushed by her and she shivered, drawing away from him.

Garth Conway had already gone, riding the half dozen miles to the Bar L-M to carry word of the death of its owner, and to assume entire charge there until Wayne should return. Sledge Hume was loitering down by the stable.

The day passed, strangely silent. No reference was made in the Leland household to the tragedy which had stirred each member of it so deeply, so differently. Throughout the long afternoon Martin Leland remained among his cattle and horses, often flaring into anger at trifles. Mrs. Leland was in her room, alone, suffering as she might have suffered had Arthur and Wayne been the sons nature had denied to her. Wanda wandered restlessly back and forth, from the house to the stable, about the yard, where the pigeons whirled and circled and cooed.

The days which followed were like this one, silent, tense, expectant. It was as though each one of these people was waiting for something, all but breathless. MacKelvey, a heavy set, quick eyed man, the county sheriff, came one day and talked long with Martin Leland. The two sat for an hour on the corral fence below the stable. After that MacKelvey went away and the waiting, the tense expectancy was more marked than before.

The tenth day came and went its laughing, blue way. Wayne Shandon did not come with it, but Garth Conway rode over that evening. He had had no word from Wayne, although he was expecting him hourly. Two weeks passed, and still no word from Wayne. One by one, slowly, heavily the days went by.

Then at last Garth Conway rode again to the Leland ranch house and brought tidings of Wayne. He had tired of New York, but he was not yet coming West. Instead he was sailing for Europe, and would probably go down into Africa for some hunting.

"Where does he get the money?" demanded Martin Leland sharply.

Garth's short laugh was rather full answer. But he elaborated it into words:

"I am to rush a forced sale of cattle," he said, lifting his shoulders. "He wants two thousand dollars in a hurry. God knows what for. He is going to fritter his property away just as he fritters away everything!"

Leland sprang up from his chair, his two fists clenched and lifted high above his head, his

eyes blazing.

"Martin! Martin!" cried Mrs. Leland.

He dropped his hands to his sides and turned away, the words on his tongue checked.

"Dear God," Wanda prayed within her soul. "Let him be a man. Let him come back soon. Before every one believes he did that thing, before ... they send for him!"

CHAPTER IV

THE WHITE HUNTRESS

Two months, filled with the clean breath of outdoors, had softened the memory of that stark tragedy upon which Wanda had come at the edge of Echo Creek. Not forgotten, never to be wiped clean from the memory, still the keen horror was dulled, the harsh details blurred, the whole dreadful picture softened under the web which the spider of time weaves over an old canvas.

Again life was glad and good and golden. Again youth was eager and hopeful and merry. The death which had come and changed the world had gone, leaving the world as it has always been.

Wanda and Gypsy and Shep saw much of one another. They were all very happy, perhaps because they were very busy. Full of enthusiasm that was at once gay and serious Wanda had thrown herself into her "Work" immediately upon returning home in the early springtime. Before the tragic event which for the time had driven her life out of its groove she had already won for herself the title, bestowed merrily by Wayne Shandon, of the "White Huntress." Her "work," to which she gave up so many hours of each day, was purposeful, steadily pursued, and brought her a vast pleasure. The game she hunted was the squirrel tossing his grey body through the branches of pine and cedar, the quail calling from the hillsides, the cottontail scampering through the underbrush, the yellowhammer, the woodpecker, the wide winged butterflies sailing through the orchard and across the meadow lands. The weapon with which she hunted was a camera which she carried in its black case slung over her shoulder or hanging from the horn of Gypsy's saddle.

Reared since babyhood in a land where men and women were few and where the wild things of the forests were many and unafraid, she had long ago come to look upon the little, bright eyed woodland folk as her playmates. Many of her childhood sorrows and joys were linked with their fates. Her first great grief had occurred when she was ten years old and Jule, her brown bear cub,—named after the cook to whom he bore in the child's eyes a marked resemblance, a slight and necessary variation in the termination of the name taking care of the matter of a difference in sex,—came to an untimely end through the instinctive and merciless conduct of Shep's grandparents. The house was filled with chipmunks who frightened Julia, to whom they were "jest rats, drat 'em," and who raided the kitchen systematically. A trained grey squirrel barked from the trees above the house, and pet rabbits were numerous and unprofitable about the vegetable garden. At the age when little girls in the cities were dressing and undressing their dolls, Wanda was taming a palpitating heart in some little fury [Transcriber's note: furry?] breast or leaning breathlessly, like a small mother bird herself, over a nest in the grass watching eagerly for the tender bills to peck and chip their way out into the wonderful world.

It was but natural therefore that after her childhood had gone and she had outgrown her passion for numberless pets overrunning the house just as her sisters in the cities had outgrown their pleasure in dressing and undressing dolls, she should become the "White Huntress." She loved more than ever the wildness of the forest lands, and the ways of the woodland things were wonderful and mysterious to her. And now, from a new angle, they were her study.

There were days when she rode far out from the ranch house, her lunch at her saddle strings, to be gone until dusk or after the stars came out. She would leave Gypsy tethered where the grass was deep and rich, command Shep to lie down and see that nobody ran away with her outfit, and then tramp off alone, carrying her camera. She knew how to climb up into the tree and to screen herself behind the foliage, so that she might watch the mother bird and her ways, and find out when she should expect the joyous miracle of new life.

When the eggs were hatched Wanda was ready. Days before she had chosen the exact spot on the particular limb where she would place her camera. She had clothed herself as the springtime clothed the forests. A soft blouse of green, short skirt and stockings of green, little cap of green and green moccasins. She crouched upon the broad limb of a cedar or clung more hazardously to the branch of a pine, the tone colour of her costume making no discord with the dusky sheen of the waving branches, and watched and waited. So, when "hunting" was good she had a picture of the mother bird perched upon the edge of the nest in which the eggs lay, a

picture of the nest with the little, new birds obeying the first command of nature, a picture of the parents feeding them the first worm or berry or rebellious bug, a picture of the trial flight when soft young bodies essayed independence on unskilful wings.

At first the girl had been merely an amateur in the early, sweet sense of the word. Then one day she saw a couple of pages in an illustrated magazine devoted to such photographs as these she was playing with. They were better than hers, since the man who had taken them was a trained artist as well as a lover of the wild; and they had been at once a disappointment and an inspiration to her. Then, upon another day, her father who made little comment upon her pastime, handed her a box from the express office in which she found a camera with a lens that would do its part if she learned to do hers. And that was when she threw herself so enthusiastically into her "work."

"I am going to have a page of pictures in that same magazine," was her way of thanking him. "And mine are going to be better!"

She flushed a little at his smile, but when she had gone away and was alone with her new possession and a world of possibilities, her chin was very firm.

She had her own studio in the attice above the dining room, developed plates and films there, and descended the ladder into the hallway flushed with triumph or vexed with disappointment as her efforts proved to be good or bad. The mistakes had been many at first; they were few now.

She became a student of the "Home Life of the Wild Things." They all interested her, they all posed for her, squirrel and bird and butterfly. Inevitably she began to specialise, but her specialisation was not in one species but rather in one process, in the dawning and budding life of the young in the real "home life" before the new fledgling or tiny furred body left the nest for an independent life and a future nest of its own. The wild mates at work upon the house which instinct prompted was to be of use soon, the construction of a swinging pocket hung high up by an oriole, this was a part of the home life, just as essential a part of it as the covering of the eggs, the feeding of the young.

Before the year had swelled and blossomed into full mid-summer she had a pupil. It was her mother. Mother and daughter had always been more to each other than the terms commonly imply, very nearly all that they should connote. They had been friends. Here where the solitudes were mighty and vast, where long miles and hard trails lay between homes and where women were few, they had had but themselves to turn to when need or desire came for the company of their own sex. Mrs. Leland had remained young, in part because hers was a happy, sunny nature, in part because she had had the fires of youth replenished from the superabundant glow of girlhood in her daughter.

But now that the summer came with monotony and silence, now that Arthur Shandon came no more, that Wayne seemed to have forgotten the range country, that Garth Conway was busy every day with the entire management of a heavily stocked cattle outfit, there were long, quiet days at the Echo Creek.

"Wanda," Mrs. Leland said one day, a little wistfully. "Can't I come with you and take a peep first hand into the homes of your wild friends? I'll be very still, I'll stay with Shep and Gypsy if you want me to."

Wanda, at once contrite and happy, was filled with apologies and explanations. She had had no thought that her mother would find an interest in her "play." But if she would come, if she would like to come, oh, she would show her the most wonderful discovery....

So mother and daughter rode out together that day with lunch and camera, and that night worked together in Wanda's attic studio over a highly satisfactory film. The older woman's interest became as steady, as enthusiastic in a deeply thoughtful way, as Wanda's. She learned to love each day's adventure as warmly as did her daughter, she came to have the same tender joy in the unexpected discovery of some new phase of the home life of the wild.

"In all of your hunting you are missing something, my White Huntress," she said one day. "Something which I have discovered!"

Wanda smiled brightly at her over the top of a new picture, pleased with her mother's interest no less than with the print in her hands.

"What is it, mamma?"

"I am not going to tell you yet. But to-morrow when we go out for the oriole's nest, I am going to take your old kodak!"

As they rode the five or six miles to the spot where they were to do the morning's "hunting" Wanda wondered what it was she had missed that her mother had noticed. But she promptly forgot about it when she climbed the great pine which, for her mother's purpose, was so happily situated close to a cliff. She noted with a bright nod of approval as she edged far out upon a horizontal limb that her mother had made her own way up to the cliff top. Long she waited that morning, patient and happy and still, her camera set in front of her, before she got the exposure

she wanted. And she did not hear the other click of the other machine, did not know that her mother had been as patient and as contented waiting to get the picture she wanted of Wanda as Wanda had been in snapping the bird and the nest and the young, hungry mouths at the threshold.

That afternoon they developed and printed, each her own pictures. And when Mrs. Leland had finished she showed Wanda what she had done. There was the picture of Wanda, far out upon the great limb, eager and watchful, her camera ready, the oriole's nest swinging before her, the mother bird just dropping down to it. And below and beyond were the ground, looking immeasurably distant, the fir and pine branches, the forest of trees.

"You see, Wanda, what you have overlooked?" Mrs. Leland's eyes were unusually bright. "You have dozens of pictures that are wonderful, pictures that you strove for for weeks, months at a time! One looks at your picture and sees that it is wonderful, but does not understand how wonderful. You cling to a branch or a tree trunk or the side of a cliff, fifty or a hundred and fifty feet of space below you, and take your picture. People look at the picture and do not see that the wonderful thing, the interesting thing, is how you got it!"

"But ..." began Wanda.

"But," Mrs. Leland laughed happily, "just listen to me a moment, miss. You are going on with your pictures and I am going to follow you very humbly and take other pictures to show how you get them. We'll send both sets to your magazines and you'll see if mine aren't snapped up just as quick as yours!"

So the relationship of mother and daughter which had grown into that of a warm, intimate friendship now developed into closer, more intimate companionship. Together they found bright, brimming days that otherwise might have been dull and empty.

Wanda came to realise that a woman who is forty may be, in all essentials, as young as a girl of twenty, and that the added score of years while it brings truer insight and perhaps a steadier heart does not quench ardour or deaden the emotions.

"Mamma," she said one day, looking up brightly from the development of a film from her mother's kodak, "you are just a girl yourself!"

And Mrs. Leland was just girl enough to flush, and youthful enough to laugh as musically as her daughter.

Thus, as the days went by and they were frequently alone together, Martin Leland being often away on the business upon which he and Arthur Shandon had entered with Sledge Hume, the two women were not lonely. Mrs. Leland accompanied Wanda everywhere to take pictures showing the girl climbing for a lofty bird nest, clinging to the cliffs at the upper end of the valley, crouching hidden among the bushes waiting for a rabbit to hop into the picture, even on the deer "hunt" they had already begun.

So the late summer slipped by more swiftly in its smooth channel than ever, the leaves in the orchard yellowed with the fall, the light green tips upon the fir branches turned dark green, the cattle were driven down to the lower valleys along the creeks, and the first snows of winter dimmed the shortening days.

With the passing of the summer, Garth Conway came again to be a frequent visitor at the Echo Creek ranch house. Since the letter from Wayne Shandon in New York he had had but one communication from the man who now owned the Bar L-M. It had been characteristically short, written in London.

"I am leaving the destiny of the cows In your competent hands," Wayne wrote. "I am legally giving you a power of attorney. This authorises you to run the outfit as you judge best. Make what sales you want to to pay the boys and yourself. Bank the money or re-invest for improvements and more cattle. The Lord knows when I'll come back ... provided the Devil has told Him."

And then, in a postscript, hastily scribbled he had added,

"I have made my will ... Imagine me making a will!... and if I don't come back at all the outfit is yours. Love to the Lelands."

And then, as a second afterthought, he had scrawled at the top of the note.

"A joke on you in case I shouldn't come back, Garth! I want you to sell some cows and send me another two thousand. But I promise not to do it again."

Garth told his news in the living room where the family had been listening to the music of Wanda's lilting young voice with her mother's piano accompaniment when he came in. Mrs. Leland's smiling face grew clouded and distressed and her eyes turned involuntarily to her husband. Martin Leland sprang to his feet in sudden wrath.

"Hell's bells!" he shouted angrily. "Two sacrifice sales in less than a year! Four thousand dollars! And what has he done with it? Got drunk, chucked it away across race courses and card tables ... Would to God I had done what it was my duty to do, that ..."

"Martin!" cried Mrs. Leland. "Martin, dear!"

He stopped abruptly and sank back into his chair. For a little while there was silence, heavy and painful. Wanda's eyes grew misty. Not once since that day in the spring had she been disloyal to Red Reckless, whom she had known in his boyhood, who had fought her early battles for her, who had been the plumed knight of her early girlhood. She told herself now that he had not come back because he could not bear to return yet to the place where he and his brother had spent so many happy days together, that if he was living wildly now, scurrying up and down the world and flinging away his inheritance, it was because he had felt his brother's loss far more than he had let them know, that he was going his pace swiftly to forget what lay behind. And again there rose in her heart the mute prayer that he might come back and be a man and show them all that they had not judged him fairly.

Garth glanced swiftly at the faces of these three people who had heard his news with such varied emotions, and went on to break the silence none of them had noticed.

"Matters are going rather well on the range," he said quietly. "I sold a hundred head at an average of ninety-seven dollars last week and was able to bank the entire nine thousand, seven hundred. Maybe," with a quick smile, "it will be just as well if he doesn't come back in a hurry."

"Oh," cried Wanda impulsively. "That is ungenerous of you! After Wayne says that he is leaving everything to you in his will, too!"

"I don't mean to be ungenerous or yet ungrateful," replied Garth a bit stiffly, flushing under the girl's reproachful eyes. "I only meant ..."

"Wanda," said her father sharply, "you should be ashamed of yourself! Garth has not been ungenerous and you have. And he is right. It would be the best thing for Wayne himself as well as for the range if he doesn't come back for a long time. Garth is working hard for the interests of both. And if any one should be grateful to the man who is running his range for him it is that young spendthrift. You are not thinking, Wanda."

The girl bit her lip and turned away. And she did not make the apology her father expected. Dimly it seemed to her that they were all over ready, over eager to condemn the man whose one crime had been mere heedlessness, who was surely hurting no one but himself, but who offended their ideas in refusing to take life seriously and bear the common burden of responsibility.

"After all," said Mrs. Leland a little hurriedly, "Wayne is only a boy. Oh, he's a man in years, of course, but then some people are fortunate enough to carry their youth with them a long time before it drops off. And," with a smile, "he says he won't do it again!"

Martin Leland smoked his two pipefuls of strong tobacco and then departed to attend to some correspondence. Mrs. Leland soon slipped away to her book and easy chair and cushions in a corner. Until ten o'clock Wanda and Garth bent together over a big scrap book containing the latest additions to the home life of the wild.

Soon afterward even Garth Conway's visits to the Leland home stopped. November came with many dark days and an occasional flurry of snow. The ground might at any time now be covered, the passes choked with the soft drifts, the valleys hidden. The cattle must be moved down the mountains to the foothills where each year they wintered. The Bar L-M buildings were closed, the heavy wooden shutters put up, the corrals deserted until thaw time. Conway with his men and cattle would not come again until springtime came with them.

And over the Echo Creek ranch the silence of the summer passed into the deeper silence of winter. Leland's cattle and men had gone already to his winter range; there was no one at home excepting Mrs. Leland, Wanda, Julia, and Jim who remained to do what little work there was to be done during the term of "hibernating." Martin's interests were too big for him to stay here had he desired to do so; his family would not see him again for the two months or so during which he remained outside.

It was not the first year that the Echo Creek house was not shuttered and closed for the winter. Mrs. Leland had sometimes gone with her husband to spend the storm swept months of the year either at one of his other ranches or in the city, and sometimes she had stayed here. This winter she had no particular desire to leave her comfortable home for the makeshift of a San Francisco hotel and Wanda was eager to stay.

"You'll be cooped up within ten days like shipwrecks on a raft," Martin Leland said when he managed to make a trip back to the ranch in December. "We're in for a hard winter. I wouldn't be surprised if I couldn't get in again or you get out before well on into February or March."

He had made a flying trip between storms, hastening from El Toyon to White Rock over the mail route, coming in from White Rock through the still open pass through the mountains. His one object in coming had been to try to induce his women folk to leave Echo Creek. And the same

day, seeing the threat of bad weather, he went out again, on skis and alone.

There were busy days for all four who remained at the ranch house in making preparations for idle, comfortable days to follow. Jim brought vast quantities of wood from the basement, piling it high in the corner of the living room where it would be convenient for feeding the deep throated fireplace whose rocks would stay warm all night, hot all day, for many weeks. From the yard he brought more wood, piling it in the basement until there were only narrow passageways between the slabs and logs and the finer split stove wood. Julia superintended the placing of her kitchen supplies, secreted those little delicacies which she would require at Christmas time, arranged her canned goods and perpetually fussed and rearranged in her storeroom. Meanwhile Mrs. Leland and Wanda were everywhere at once, overseeing the moving of beds, the shifting of furniture, the making cosy of the home against the siege. And then, howling and shrieking, with deep voice shouting across the pine forests, the winter came in earnest.

Martin Leland had read the signs aright; it was to be a hard winter. There came a wind storm that lasted without cessation for three days; the branches of the cedars about the house tossed like long arms grappling with an unseen foe; here and there a dead limb was wrenched from a tree trunk and hurled far out to be buried in the snow which began to fall in small, hard flakes almost congealed to hail. Then, the three days gone, the wind died down suddenly, the flakes grew larger, softer, the snow clung tenaciously to the trees and fences and eaves of house and stable. Jim in arctic shoes and mittens, his ears lost under the flaps of his cap, having sighed and bestirred himself from his snug comfort by Julia's stove, got his shovel and went up on the housetop.

While the bleak, chill days rushed by Wanda prepared happily for the fine weather which would come, when the sun reflected back from many feet of fluffy snow would warm the air, when in the high, dry altitudes the sparkling, Christmassy world would become a rarely beautiful thing, when she could leave the house and penetrate deep into a solitude which was as different from the solitude of the summer forestland as day is from night. She brought down from the attic her own favourite pair of skis and saw that they were fit. The long slender bits of pine, light and graceful with their running grooves glistening, their turned up ends like Turks' slippers, she stood on end in the living room while she gave them a new coat of white shellac. Her snowshoe pole she tested, making sure that it had sustained no injury during its long banishment to the dark places of the attic, and that it could be trusted in the work she would call upon it to do. She gathered the winter out-door things which she had not used for two years, the white sweater that clung close to her slim, pliant body; the white tasseled hat, mitts, leggins, white bloomers. And then, when a blue and white, laughing day came, and the air was clear and warm, the branches of the trees sagging under their diamond pricked festoons of snow, she left the house, now in truth the White Huntress.

Camera and field glasses went with her; for lunch a bit of jerked beef and a piece of hard chocolate. For to-day she began her winter work. Again she was hunting. The forests as she slipped through them were very still and seemed void of all the life that had swarmed here until the snows came. But she would see snow birds, she might find a coyote or a big snow-shoe rabbit. She would take pictures, too, such wintry pictures as she had never seen, the world locked in the embrace of winter, glistening icicles as big as her body, cliffs thrown into strange, grotesque shapes, fields of untracked white with perhaps the sweep of a stream seeming ink black against the dazzling white background.

And she thrilled to the crunch of thin crust underfoot which yesterday's thaw and last night's freeze had formed, the whip of the dry air in her face, the exhilaration of the long, swift dash as she glided from the crest of some ridge, a silent, graceful creature, into the hollow beyond. Her body bent a little forward, her snow-shoe pole horizontal as a tight rope walker holds his balancing rod, the white world slid away beneath her, little sinks or humps in the apparent smoothness of the snow demanding the sudden leap which shot the blood tingling through the eager body. For the light skis with their three coats of shellac carried her down the steeper slopes with the wild speed of a bird skimming the winter whitened earth.

This first day she took an old favourite way which led her up a gradual slope straight southward until at last she paused, breathing deeply, upon the crest. Far behind her she could see the smoke of the ranch house rising from a clump of cedars; straight ahead the black line of the river. And now, balancing a moment, gripping her pole firmly, settling her feet securely in the ski-straps, she shot downward, taking the steep dip which would lead after a little into a long curve and so bring her flashing through the trees down to the river three miles away.

Her eyes were sparkling, her cheeks glowing, her body warm with the sun's heat and the leaping blood within her, when she straightened up and touching the end of her pole lightly against the snow came to a stop near the river. It was swollen and black, a mighty, shouting thing, the only thing about her whose voice had not been stilled by the snow.

Her eyes turning found close at hand the first tracks she had seen this morning, fresh tracks of a big rabbit.

"I must have frightened him," she thought. "He's gone on upstream."

She turned upstream as the rabbit had done, noiselessly following his trail. And, turned

eastward by a rabbit's track, she followed unconsciously, unsuspectingly, the imperious bidding of her fate. Her own life, the lives of two men would have been widely different had Wanda Leland turned westward instead of eastward this morning.

Already she was a mile above the bridge across which the road ran to the Bar L-M. From where she was a stranger might not suppose that man or horse could find a place to cross in many times that distance; for here the river banks were steep cliffs, never lower than ten feet, rising often abruptly to thirty. Between them the water raged, thundering over falls, leaping into deep pools where the sucking eddies were never still.

And as she moved on upstream, further yet from the bridge, the rocky banks grew steeper, drew nearer to each other, until suddenly the plunging river was lost to her, its thunder muffled. Wanda could see a thick mat of snow from a great, flat topped rock on the far side curving downward, inward, as if from the eaves of a house, the long icicles like sharp teeth set in a monster's gaping jaw.

Close along the edge of the cliffs the course of the fleeing rabbit led, while Wanda's skis left their parallel smooth tracks in a straight line a score of feet back from the steep bank. She slipped silently through a clump of firs, peered around the branches bent down by the heavy snow, and saw the snow-shoe rabbit where he had stopped for a moment. He was a big fellow, the biggest she had ever seen, crouching low, his round eyes bright and suspicious, as he trusted to his colour to protect him. She brought her camera swiftly out of its case.

"There's a chance to get him, after all," she thought eagerly. "It won't be much of a picture perhaps ... just a white blur against a white background ..."

The camera clicked just as the rabbit leaped forward; she thought she had caught him against the dark background of a fir from which much of the snow had fallen. Then, just in front of the frightened animal a little branch of a small pine, suddenly released of its weight of snow, whipped up; a new terror came into the creature's panic stricken breast; he stopped sharply, swerved, lost his head as one of his rattle brained species is likely to do, ran directly toward the girl, swerved again and running straight toward the river, essayed the impossible and met destruction. He leaped far out across the water, attempting a jump that none of his kind could have made safely, and fell short. The furry body described a great valiant arc, shot upward for one flashing second, dropped out of sight.

"Oh, I am so sorry," cried the girl contritely. "You poor little thing."

The woodland tragedy moved her strangely, for she felt that, innocently enough, she had caused it. She moved closer to see if by a happy chance the rabbit had landed upon a rocky shelf far down, hoping that after all she might in some way set him free.

Moving slowly, her camera again in its case, her pole touching the snow, she approached until she could look down. Only the steep wall on the far side, sinking straight and black into the swollen torrent, only a little speck of white far down which might have been a struggling body or a fleck of foam.

"The poor little thing," she said again. "He saw that the far bank is lower than this one, and he was too frightened to guess the distance."

Musing, she thought that her skis were merely settling a little deeper through the crust when she felt a slight sinking underneath. Then, suddenly, she was aware that her skis were dipping downward, that she was slipping. She tried hastily to draw back, she felt that she was still slipping, that the polished surfaces of the skis were answering the call of gravity, that she was being drawn closer, closer in spite of her efforts ...

She made a wild, frantic attempt to draw back, a quick terror gripping her. The shouting river was calling to her, something was pulling at her body steadily as a magnet pulls at a steel, the world was slipping away under her, she was going the way the rabbit had gone ...

Then she threw her body backward, twisting as best she could with the skis clinging to her feet, clutching with her hands at anything her fingers might touch. She heard a splash, knew that the overhang of snow had dropped into the river, knew that one ski was hanging over the brink. And then the hand that had gripped at the smooth snow sank down and clutched the top of a small, hidden pine, she drew herself up and back and in a moment, white, shaking she lay still, not daring to look down.

CHAPTER V

THE HOME COMING OF RED RECKLESS

Winter went its white way, the spring brought a thawing sun, innumerable muddy torrents and an occasional visitor, the robins and blue birds began to troop back to the mountains. Martin Leland was at home, his sturdier steers were in the valleys, Conway came back to the Bar L-M and often visited the Lelands. Sledge Hume rode up from the Dry Lands, fifty miles down the slope of the mountains and was often in consultation with Martin and with Garth Conway.

Warm weather battled against the rear guard of winter, only patches of soiled snow remained upon the north side of the ridges, in the narrow cañons and upon the lofty summits of the peaks standing up about the valleys. The early flowers dotted the valleys, more cattle were moved in, and the season developed rapidly. Conway came frequently to talk with Martin, to remain for supper, to chat with Wanda and her mother. And then one day, unheralded, unlooked for, Red Reckless came home.

It was the supper hour, just after dark. Father, mother and daughter were at the table, when there came a quick step upon the veranda, and the joy which the gay springtime had put into Wanda's heart brimmed up and spilled over.

"It's Garth," said Martin Leland lightly. "I expected he'd ride over to-night."

"*It's Wayne*!" cried Wanda, already upon her feet.

"Wayne!" snapped her father, his face suddenly stern. "What are you talking about?"

"I know his step. It is Wayne!"

Wanda had already run to the door, and flung it wide open. It was very dark outside. The tall form of a man loomed strangely large, dimly outlined against the black curtain of the night.

"Welcome home, Wanderer!" Wanda cried gaily.

Wayne Shandon came in, his big boots dusty with his ride, his red hair catching fire from the light in the room, his eyes laughing, his lips laughing, his voice laughing when he greeted Wanda with two eager hands. He was the same Wayne Shandon who had ridden away a year ago, the same Red Reckless he had ever been.

Mrs. Leland's startled surprise vanished swiftly before her joy in seeing him. But Martin Leland's face went black, his eyes burned ominously, it was as though he had been gripped with a choking, speechless wrath.

"Wayne!" cried Mrs. Leland. "Where in the world have you come from?"

"From a place they call Hell's Annex, seven hundred miles inland from the South African Coast," he laughed lightly. "My arrival timed just to the minute for supper!"

He dropped Wanda's hands with a parting squeeze which was frankly unhidden, strode over to Mrs. Leland whom he kissed resoundingly, and put out a big, strong hand to Martin Leland.

For just a fraction of a second the two women knew that Leland was hesitating, for an instant they waited fearfully, for what he might do. Then he took the hand proffered him, his lips twitched into a hard, forced smile and he said rather colourlessly,

"Well, Wayne, you've come home at last, have you?"

Wayne's answer was a laugh. He seemed filled with laughter to-night. Evidently he had noticed nothing strange in Leland's greeting; he was in the gayest of his gay moods. He had no opportunity to answer Leland's words, for Julia, who had forgotten her usual slow, ponderous method of travel bounced into the room like a wonderfully animated ball at the sound of his voice, and he actually swept the two hundred pounds of her off of her feet as he gathered the big woman up into his arms and kissed her. Then Julia dabbed at her eyes and fled to her kitchen, her emotions finding outlet in an instantaneous desire to make him a pie, Wanda laid a plate for him and supper went on.

Chiefly because of Wanda's eager questions and Wayne Shandon's laughing willingness to tell about his adventures, the abstraction on the part of Martin Leland and the growing anxiety in Mrs. Leland's eyes went unnoticed. Wayne was immoderately hungry as he first frankly confided and then demonstrated, but he found opportunity between mouthfuls to draw, in his sketchy way, the series of pictures which made up the year of his wanderings. He had travelled from New York to London, he had whizzed through Paris and dipped into Baden, he had been seasick on a Mediterranean which wasn't blue, he had barked his shins on a pyramid, he had been swindled out of a ridiculously large sum of money by a little scientist in green spectacles who was out on a mummy digging expedition, and he had gone into the interior after big game. He had managed to take in a Derby and to pick a winner, he had made Monte Carlo recognise that he had come,—although he did not go into detail as to the manner of his departure,—and he had brought home a present for everybody. The skin he had taken from a lion somewhere in some remote jungle to sprawl, rug fashion in Wanda's room, where it created no little havoc in the furniture arrangement and finally caused the dressing table to be shifted to a corner to make place for the enormous, gaping head with the fierce eyes; an Indian shawl for Mrs. Leland, selected evidently

for size and brilliance of pattern, very nearly large enough to carpet the dining room and of an astonishing combination of dark greens and riotous reds and royal purples; an ornate scarf pin for Martin Leland who had as much use for a scarf pin as a Mohammedan for a Bible; an exquisite set of chessmen for Garth purchased with a quick eye to the subtle art which had gone into their carving and with a fine disregard for the fact that Garth had existed for thirty odd years without learning that the curveting progress of a knight is in any way different from the ecclesiastical slant of a bishop, completed the assortment of presents.

Garth himself came in as they were pushing back their chairs from the table, throwing open the door with a merry, "Hello, folks," on his lips. Then as he caught sight of Wayne who had leaped up and swung about he stared, suddenly speechless, his mouth dropping open.

"Well, Garth, old boy," cried Wayne heartily. "Aren't you glad to see me?"

Garth came forward then swiftly, his hand out-stretched. But his eyes were still startled rather than glad, and they passed his cousin turning, full of question, to Martin Leland.

"Of course I'm glad," he said, his voice a little uncertain. And then, laughing, "You just surprised me out of my senses. Why didn't you write that you were coming?"

"Because I'd rather travel three thousand miles to tell you about it than write a letter. I'm amazingly glad to see you. How's everything? How is the range making out?"

"Fine," Garth answered quickly. "You have come to stay? You will be running the outfit yourself now?"

"Business to-morrow," retorted Wayne lightly. "It is after sundown and business should be asleep."

"And does it wake at sunup?" Garth returned with an attempt at Wayne's bantering mood, although a little suspicion of venom lay under the words.

"I had a Mexican friend once," grinned Wayne by way of answer, "who was the wisest man I ever saw. He used to say, 'The day is made to rest, the night to sleep!' We will give our attention to Mañana when Mañana comes. Wanda!" he cried suddenly in the old impulsive way, "will you play something for me?"

Wayne and Wanda went to the piano. Mrs. Leland watched them, her face a little troubled, a little wistful. Garth and Martin Leland, after one swift exchange of glances, rose and went to the rancher's room where they remained for a long time. When at last they returned to the living room Leland glanced curiously at Wayne. He was sitting with Wanda upon the sofa under the big wall lamp, examining her pictures. Garth approached the sofa abruptly.

"We'd better be hitting the trail, Wayne, hadn't we?" he asked. "It's nearly ten o'clock and you remember it's six miles to bed."

Reluctantly Wayne Shandon said his good nights, calling in to Julia that he was going to expect a pie the next time he came, which would be to-morrow if Garth would let him, and the two men went out to their horses. Wanda, bright and happy, waved to the departing horsemen from the door and came back into the room to drop naturally into the silence which had fallen over her mother and father.

Long that night Wanda stared out through the darkness which lay about the orchard with no thought of sleep. She had the feeling that no one in the house was asleep yet, not even Julia whom she could hear now and then moving as softly as physical conditions permitted in her room. That her father and mother were awake, she knew from the drone of their voices coming to her indistinctly.

The spirit of restless anxiety falling upon a household is a thing to be felt through stick and stone and mortar. There had been no such spirit here to-night until Red Reckless had come home. He had not brought it with him, he had brought only his sheer madness of exuberant life, and yet he had left this other thing behind him. Wanda wondered what thoughts, what fears or evil premonitions troubled those other unsleeping brains.

Her own thoughts fled back a year and clung fearfully about the revolver with the pearl grip. She knew that the murder of his brother still remained a mystery and that people do not like mysteries to go long without solution. MacKelvey was sheriff, it was his duty, and it was his habit, to bring some man to book for every crime committed in the county. It was quite possible that the sheriff had been playing a waiting game throughout the year, and that he was waiting for this man to come back as he must do soon or late.

Meanwhile the man who was so vividly in Wanda's thoughts rode through the silent night with his cousin, drinking deep of the peace of the starlit night, finding an old familiar music in the hammering of his horse's hoofs on the grassy hills. Silent himself while thinking of other days and other rides, he did not notice how silent Garth was. They topped the rocky ridge which stood as boundary line between the two ranges, and swerved westward taking the long curve to the Crossing, welcomed back to the home outfit by the great booming voice of the distant river.

Another mile and the river itself, flashing, turbulent molten silver, swollen with the wet winter in the mountains, swept shouting past them.

They turned upward along the river and raced wordlessly the greater part of the remaining half mile to the Bar L-M corrals. When they drew rein in the wide clearing in which stood range house, bunk house, stables and corrals, there was no spark of light about. They unsaddled swiftly, turned their horses loose with a resounding slap to send them out toward the little enclosed pasture, and went up to the range house. At the door of the men's quarters Wayne stopped.

"I think I'll drop in and say hello to the boys," he remarked, already at the door.

"Are you crazy?" cried Garth. "They've been asleep two hours, man. And they've got a big day's work ahead of them to-morrow."

"Oh, shut up, Garth," laughed Wayne good naturedly. "Don't you ever think of anything but work? Come ahead, and watch me bring 'em to life!"

He flung open the door and entered, Garth following in stony silence. It was dark within the long, narrow room, although the starlight gleamed feebly through the dirty window panes. Wayne found the lantern upon the nail where it had hung when he was a boy, lighted it, and turned the wick low so that there was only a wan light in the bunk house.

"Where's Big Bill's bunk?" he whispered to Garth.

Chuckling softly he drew near the bunk which Garth indicated against the wall at the far end of the room. He leaned forward, stooping low, peering into the shadows. Big Bill was fast asleep, his great, deep lungs expelling his breath regularly and mightily, his head with its touseled ink black hair half hidden by the hairy arm flung up over it. Wayne tiptoed away from the bunk, moved two chairs further back against the other wall, and still chuckling with vastly amused anticipation, again approached Big Bill's bedside.

He put out his hands slowly, gently, until they slipped into Big Bill's arm pits. Then, his laughter suddenly booming out he bunched his muscles and a black haired giant of a man in shirt and underdrawers was jerked floundering out of his bunk to the middle of the room.

Big Bill's mighty roar of mingled astonishment and anger brought a dozen cowboys leaping out of their bunks. In the dimly lighted room their blinking eyes made out the forms of two men struggling, one in his night dress, the other in hat and boots. One was Big Bill, for his roar was an unmistakable as the roar of summer thunder. But the other?

"I've been hungering to get my hands on you for a year!" came the laughing voice of the man in hat and boots. "You said that you could roll me, Bill. Now go to it!"

He lifted the mighty body of the struggling, half wakened cowboy clean off the floor, carried him across the room and slammed him down in a chair.

"It's Red Reckless!" cried a voice from the group of stupefied men. "He's come home!"

"You ol' son-of-a-gun!" bellowed Big Bill, half in the surly anger which is the natural right of a man rudely awakened, half in tremulous joy. "Wait ontil I git my eyes open good an' I'll roll you like you was dough an' I'm makin' biscuits out'n you!"

Evidently he had his eyes "open good" before he had done talking. He was upon his feet, the big, swaying body oddly like a clumsy black bear's, his big hands lifted in front of him. And then he threw himself forward, close to two hundred and fifty pounds of brawn and bone hurled like a boulder from a catapult. Some one had turned up the lantern wick. The black head and the red head from which the hat had dropped came together, there was the thud of two strong bodies meeting with an impact that brought a little coughing grunt from each, and Red Reckless had done what any man must do before such a thunderbolt. He was flung backward, went down, and the two big bodies struck hard upon the bare floor. And above the crash of the falling bodies there were two other sounds, Big Bill's grunt, and the laughter of Red Reckless.

They were down, and Big Bill was topmost. But by the laws of the game a man must be forced back until his two shoulders touch the floor before he is beaten. Wayne Shandon's left shoulder was still two inches from the floor.

"You would wake a man up," grumbled Big Bill with that fierceness of tone which spoke a moment of rare delight.

"I'm going to show you something, Bill," gasped Wayne, half choked with the breath driven out of his lungs by the great bulk on top of him and by the laughter within his soul which had not been driven out. "Something I learned from a Jap about three feet high. It cost me a hundred dollars and a broken collar bone. I'll let you off easier, Bill."

The light was none too good, perhaps the boys were not yet wide awake. They didn't know how the trick was done, and it wasn't at all clear to Big Bill.

Wayne seemed to grow very limp beneath his hard hands and watchful eyes. Ready for

trickery Big Bill, while he bore down hard on the left shoulder, and wrenched and twisted at the corded neck, expected anything. He had considerably less respect for a Jap than for a horse, looking upon the race as mimicking apes and not men at all, and he had no wish to be bested by a Jap trick. Yet Big Bill didn't understand.

Somehow Wayne Shandon slipping out of Bill's grasp like an eel through its native mud, had run an arm under his left arm pit, around his neck, over his right shoulder. Wayne's left hand leaped to Big Bill's right wrist. Bill felt that his neck was breaking, that his right arm was broken. And then he knew that Wayne was upon his knees, that his own two hundred and fifty pounds of big battling body were lifted high from the floor, that he was jerked sideways and slammed down. And then the boys were laughing and Wayne stood over him, laughing too, and he knew that his two big shoulder blades had struck the floor together.

"It's a damn' Jap trick," he muttered, more than half angry now, flinging himself to his feet. "White man's fightin' I c'n lick every inch of you from red hair to toe nails."

But Red Reckless was laughing and shaking hands all round and Big Bill found no one to listen to the explanations he made. One after another the owner of the outfit greeted warmly the men who were working for him. Then he swung about, and went back to Big Bill.

"Shake, Bill," he cried. "It was rather a mean trick to do you up to-night but I couldn't wait until morning. I'll give you another chance when you like."

Big Bill grinned and his hard brown hand shut tight about Wayne's.

"There'll be lots of chances," he said shortly, his voice fierce, his black eyes very gentle. "You've come to stay, ain't you, Red?"

A look of vast disgust stole over Garth Conway's face.

"It's Bill and Red as if they're all dogs in one kennel," he muttered. "It isn't hard to forecast what's going to happen to a range with a boss like that!"

He waited a little restlessly for Wayne to finish the conversation into which he had entered with the crowd of cowboys who seemed to have forgotten that they had a day's work before them. But Wayne Shandon, too, seemed to have forgotten. He was half sitting on the table, one leg swinging, his quick hands rolling a cigarette from the "makings" proffered by Tony Harris, his laughing eyes filled with the joy of home coming, his tongue already busied with the answering of many rapid fire questions. No, he hadn't seen all of the world; it was bigger than they'd think. But he had played "gentleman's poker" with club dudes in London, he had hunted with niggers and potted many strange things from an alligator to a cow elephant, he had seen the pyramids—

While Garth lingered at the door, the other men, crowding closer to the man at the table, grew into a charmed circle about him, a picturesque congregation in their underclothes of grey and white and washed out pinks and blues. Within five minutes after the defeat of Big Bill every man of them was either making or smoking a cigarette with all thought of their tumbled bunks forgotten. There were many demands for first hand information concerning wild niggers and pyramids and the ways of the jungle; there were many exclamations testifying in mild profanity to startled wonderment. At last Garth, turning away, called out,

"I say, Wayne, you mustn't forget it's getting late. There's a big day's work for the boys to-morrow."

"This is my home coming celebration, Garth," Wayne laughed back at him. "Hang the work, man. We'll have a half holiday to-morrow if the whole outfit goes to pot."

Anything further Garth had to remark he said angrily to himself as he strode away to the range house. And Wayne, with no further interruption, explained how the games ran at Monte Carlo. Finally, since there was nothing in the world he had learned to love as he loved horses, he came to speak of the Derby.

"The greatest race in the world," he cried, slapping his thigh enthusiastically. "Just because it's the straightest and the stakes are right and the horses are as beautiful as women and as swift as lightning!"

One o'clock came and they were talking horses and racing, the men now upon common ground, their eyes bright with the tale retold of the

CHAPTER VI

THE PROMISE OF LITTLE SAXON

Rose-bud, the unlovely Chinese cook, made the dawn hideous in the range house with his pots and pans and rattling stove lids. To him appeared Red Reckless, touseled and sleepy eyed looking to the astonished oriental's vision like an avenging demon, threatening to choke him to death with his own pigtail and to roast him crisp and brown him in his own oven if he didn't conduct himself with less noise in his pastime of breakfast getting.

"Gollee!" Rose-bud found his tongue as Wayne disappeared into his bedroom. "Led, him come back some more. Led, him boss now!" He stood grinning in slant eyed cunning at the closed door. "Garth him all same go bye-bye now, maybeso?" He pondered the question, with his evil featured head cocked to one side. Then his grin became more profoundly Chinese, more radiantly joyful. "All same hell pop all time now."

And he went about his preparations for breakfast in strange, complacent silence, making his coffee twice as strong as he had made it for a year, the way Red Reckless liked it.

Garth Conway breakfasted alone. A glance out toward the bunk house against the fringe of trees at the far side of the clearing showed him that there was no smoke there, that the men were not about. A little angry spot glowing on each cheek he stepped out upon the porch as though to bring these slumbering men to a swift awakening. But he turned instead and came back into the dining room.

"You Chink fool," he flung at Rose-bud when his cup of coffee was set in front of him. "I don't drink ink for breakfast. What's the matter with you?"

Rose-bud wrapped his body in his long arms and his face in its childish smile, lifted his vague hints of eyebrows archly and nodded toward Wayne's room.

"Led, him come back," he said with unutterable sweetness. "Him like coffee all same black as hell. Him boss now? Too bad. You damn fine boss, Mis' Garth."

And he shuffled back to the stove leaving Garth scowling angrily after him.

Garth breakfasted in morose silence, disregarding the many joyful glances which Rose-bud directed upon him. Afterward he took out his pipe and stuffed it full with an impatient finger. The hesitation which had marked him last night seemed to grow with the slow hours of the idle morning. He had long been absolute, unquestioned dictator of the destiny of the Bar L-M, and he had grown naturally into the way of regarding it half with the eye of its permanent master. It had not only been his entirely so far as management was concerned for more than twelve months, but there had been always the possibility that it would be his to have and to hold, to do with as he thought best, if Wayne should not come back. But Wayne had come back. The coffee was eloquent of the fact; the slothfulness of the bunk house shouted it in his ears. He felt a sense of irritation, of injustice.

"The men will sleep until noon," he growled savagely. "Good heavens, is he crazy? Must he come back and chuck the whole thing to the dogs?"

There was nothing to do but smoke and wait for the next absurdity of a man who had played ducks and drakes with everything he had ever had, who was too big a fool to see—or care, which was it?—what was going to happen when he had run to the end of his rope.

Wayne, rosy from head to foot from his rough bath towel, tingling with the leaping life within him, showing no signs of the all but sleepless night, came out to breakfast before Garth had finished his pipe. He caught Rose-bud by the two shoulders, drove him back against the wall and held him there while he spoke to him.

"I've a notion to jam you through into the other room, you yellow heathen," he informed the cook whose smile was just a trifle uncertain. "If the coffee is good I'll let you off."

Rose-bud's smile became radiant immediately. He poured out the black beverage with the air of a magician conjuring a stream of gold from the old coffee pot, and evinced as great a pleasure in watching Wayne dispose of his breakfast as Wayne himself manifested in the act. Garth came back into the room while his cousin was eating.

"Well, Wayne," he said. "What's the bill of fare for the day?"

Shandon nodded, swallowed and bade Garth a cheery "Good morning."

"To-day?" he repeated after his cousin. "I'm just going to get a live horse between my legs and ride! Big Bill tells me that no man has thrown a leg over Lightfoot's back since I left, and that she's just full of hell and mustard and aching for a scamper. Bill knows where she is; he's going with me to help round her up and then …"

"Well?" questioned Garth drily. "You're going to work on her to-day?"

Shandon laughed.

"Who said anything about work? You're growing to be an awful sobersides, old fellow. Here I haven't been back twenty-four hours and you're already suggesting that I shove my neck into the

yoke. Now, you ought to know better than that."

Garth drew deeply at his pipe, his lips tight about the stem.

"You haven't changed much, Wayne," he said presently.

"Who wants to change?" Shandon retorted lightly. "One would think I'd been away ten years and it was time for grey hairs and long hours of sitting still in the sun." He favoured his cousin with a merry, searching glance and added, "You haven't changed much yourself that I can see."

For no apparent reason Conway flushed slightly and then frowned.

"I had a good hard day's work cut out for the boys," he said casually.

"You're finding plenty to keep them busy, I'll bet," grinned Shandon.

"Yes," carelessly. "We're a bit short handed just now and there is always a lot to do. I've let a man go here and there when he was just eating his head off for us. A half day lost means that much more hard work to be made up."

"Get them busy then, will you, Garth? It's decent of you to save all you could for me, but hang it, don't mind putting on a new man when we need him. The boys have had enough sleep by now and I've sort of slipped out of the routine of the work. Will you go ahead and run the outfit for me until I get back into it? It would be a big favour to me."

Conway swung about toward the door eagerly, and so swiftly that Shandon did not see the light that sprang up in his eyes.

"Glad to," he called back as he went out. "Take your time about getting back into the traces, Wayne."

"Good old Garth," Shandon muttered with deep satisfaction. And then he turned his attention again to the biscuits and bacon.

Garth went immediately to the bunk house. He found the men all asleep; he left them all wide awake.

"Tony," he cried sharply, "come alive there and get the boys some breakfast. You men know that Mr. Shandon is back, don't you? Do you want him to think that this is the way we've been attending to his business for him while he was gone? Bill, get a couple of horses saddled while Harris is getting breakfast for you, and as soon as you eat report at the house with them. You are to help find Lightfoot."

The boys scrambled out of their bunks, and Tony Harris in picturesque night raiment was thrusting paper and kindling into his stove before Garth had gone ten steps from the door he had slammed behind him. Did they want Wayne Shandon to think that they had neglected his interests in his absence? Not by a jug full, growled Big Bill. And he wasn't the kind to think it in the first place or to care in the second, he grunted as he jerked on his overalls and shoved his big feet into his shoes. Mister Shandon! Huh!

But they took their cue from Conway's sharp words and did not wait for breakfast to get ready for the day's work. Big Bill was the first in the corral but the others came trooping after him, roping their horses, saddling and bringing them to the bunk house door to be mounted swiftly as soon as the morning meal could be finished. And, as usual little Andy Jennings saddled an extra horse, a graceful, cat-footed mare, cream coloured, with white mane and tail, for Garth Conway.

There were few words spoken in the bunk house as the men made their hurried meal. Steve Dunham demanded to be told if Red was going to let Conway "run things" for him, or if he was going to be his own foreman as his brother had been before him. More than one man lifted his shoulders at the question. And since there was no answer to be given yet, since that was the one thing they were all thinking about, it was almost a wordless meal.

In a little while Garth Conway was back at the bunk house and swung up into the saddle, his perfect animal, his own graceful form, his somewhat picturesque costume, riding breeches, puttees, wide soft hat and gauntlets making a bit of pleasant colour against the commonplaceness of the ranch yard. He waited impatiently a few minutes until the men came out and then rode away toward the lower end of the valley ordering them curtly to follow him. It was Garth's way; they didn't know what the day's work was to be, although they might come close to guessing, until he chose to tell them. Big Bill alone remained behind, making his way with two horses to the house, where Wayne came down the steps to meet him.

"Hello, Bill," Wayne greeted him lightly. "Feeling sore this morning?"

"Hello, Red," Big Bill retorted with what was meant to be a scowl but which twisted itself in spite of him into a widening grin. "Not sore outside, seein' as I fell easy. Jus' kinda sore inside thinkin' you'd go an' play a low down Jap trick on a man. But nex' time …"

He shook his head in mock sorrow thinking of the thing that was going to happen to the merry eyed man from whom he took his pay.

Red laughed, strapped on the spurs clinking at the saddle horn, vaulted from the steps to his horse's back and bending suddenly forward shot ahead of Big Bill, and sped toward the upper end of the valley where the unused horses were grazing. The cowboy, racing behind him, watched him with shrewd eyes and a grunted comment that he hadn't forgotten how to ride.

When the horses had "run off" their early morning restlessness the two men drew them down to a swinging walk and riding side by side found much to talk about. Shandon asked about this, that and the other horse, giving each its name as if they were men he spoke of, and Big Bill reported promptly and in full detail. Brown Babe had been sick during the winter; a cold running on until it was touch and go if she'd go down with the pneumonia. Doc Trip had taken a hand though, Bill himself having ridden thirty miles to fetch the cowboy who had a rude skill as a veterinary and no little reputation with it, and Brown Babe had pulled through as good as a two year old. Her colt out of Saxon? Say there was a bit of horse flesh for you! Close to three year old now and never a rope on him. Little Saxon they called him. Little? Big Bill laughed softly. The name had stuck since he had been a colt. He was bigger than his dad already, although not so heavy, of course, and he had more speed right now than his mother ever thought of having. If they ever did put on a race—Endymion, Little Saxon's full brother? Big Bill shook his head and spat thoughtfully. Sold six months ago.

"Sold?" cried Shandon sharply. "Who sold him?"

"Conway, of course. He's the only man as has sold any Bar L-M stock."

Shandon started to speak, then closed his lips tightly. Big Bill looked at him quickly, then drew his eyes away and let them rest upon his horse's bobbing ears.

"Of course Garth couldn't know that I didn't want any of the horses, the best horses, sold," Shandon said quietly after a moment. "I wrote to him to use his own judgment in all things, to sell and buy as he thought best. It isn't his fault but— Hang it, I'm just a little sorry I didn't think to tell him. Who bought Endymion, Bill?"

"Sledge Hume," answered Big Bill. "He was crazy stuck on the colt the firs' time he ever laid eyes on him. I guess Conway held him up for a pretty stiff price too. He sure had the chance."

"So Hume bought Endymion," said Shandon thoughtfully. And he seemed less pleased than before. "Oh, well, we'll see what we can do with Little Saxon."

"Little Saxon's a better horse any day in the week," cried Big Bill loyally. "He ain't got the stren'th yet, of course, an' he ain't got the savvy as comes with trainin'. But he's got the speed an' he's got the spirit. Lord, Red, you've got a horse there! Wait ontil you see him runnin' with the herd. He don't eat dust off nobody's heels."

Shandon's eyes brightened. He had seen possibilities in the two year old before he went away, when the colt belonged to Arthur, and it was good to know that Little Saxon had fulfilled the promise of youth. And he saw too, a morning's work ahead of him, such work as the leaping spirit of Red Reckless loved. A wild scamper across the upper end of the narrow valley, skirting the lake perhaps; a headlong race after a horse born of Brown Babe and the high spirited stallion Saxon; the swinging of a rope in a hand that had not known the feel of one for a year; and the final conquest that would come when at last that rope settled about the defiant neck.

"For we'll get Lightfoot first, Bill," he said eagerly. "Little Saxon'll have to go some when I've got Lady Lightfoot under me. And then we'll take the three year old in and begin breaking him."

Big Bill chuckled joyously. And as Garth had said before him he muttered that Wayne Shandon hadn't changed much.

As they rode the valley widened for a little before them, the steep wall of cliffs and crags drawing back upon the right, lifting their crests ever higher, topped by few scattering pines, firs and tamaracks. Here and there a giant cedar flourished in isolated majesty, lifting its delicately formed cones a hundred and fifty feet above its ancient, gnarled roots. The valley itself was for the most part clear of timber and scrub. The herds had not yet come up here this year, and would not come until the lower end had been thoroughly fed off. For here there would be grazing land in abundance until the winter came and all herds must be moved to the pastures far down the mountains where the snow fall was never more than a few thawing inches.

Conversation between the two men died down as they pushed deeper into the solitudes. When they had ridden a couple of miles, the valley narrowed again, the timber line crept in closer at every yard, the mountains drew in abruptly and rose more precipitously in sheer, frowning, dominant majesty, the river shot hissing down its rocky course, a wild thing plunging madly toward freedom and an open world.

So with few words, each man's thoughts wandering as chance and the river and mountains directed them, Shandon and Big Bill rode slowly. That trail brought them at last down close to the edge of the stream as the banks on either hand drew closer together until finally the water

choked and fumed and thundered through a narrow pass. Here they must turn away from its course, climbing a steep shoulder of the mountain, making a difficult way along a seldom used trail, until they came to the crest of the ridge which shot down from the right. Another fifty yards, almost level going, a steep descent and suddenly the fury of the river was but a faint rumbling in their ears, the stillness of the mountains crept down on them and they were at the margin of Laughter Lake.

With a sigh long, deep, lung filling, Wayne Shandon curbed his horse to a standstill. Big Bill turned his head away and a little hurriedly sought for his "makings." For Big Bill had a memory, as so many sons of the frontier places have, a memory that filed and kept record of little things as well as of what the world calls big things. He remembered the day when Wayne Shandon had last ridden here, just the day before Arthur was killed. Wayne and Arthur had come here together; Arthur with some business reason, of course; equally of course Wayne in a mere spirit of idling. The younger brother had ridden along to try out a new rifle he had bought—

"Come on, Bill. Let's find the horses."

Wayne leaned forward suddenly in the saddle, loosened his reins and touched his horse's sides with his spurred heels. And so they raced along the side of the lake as they had raced from the range house, Red Reckless sitting straight in the saddle, his head lifted, his broad hat pushed far back, his tall, powerful body swaying gracefully, easily with his horse's stride.

They found Lady Lightfoot with a herd of half wild animals in a little hollow beyond the head of the lake. A great snorting and stamping, a flinging aloft of proud heads upon arching necks, the flurry of manes and tails, black, red, white, all confused in a rush of colour, the hammering thud of unshod hoofs on soft grassy soil and the herd had followed Lady Lightfoot's lead in wild flight toward the far end of the tiny valley. A wonderful creature was Lady Lightfoot, trim and slender and graceful as a maiden, her coat a little rough from her year in the woods, her silken mane snarled, but her spirit showing in the toss of her head, the cock of her ears, the flare of her nostrils, the fire of her eyes.

"Watch!" yelled Big Bill as he and Shandon thundered along after them, their ropes already in their hands, nooses widening. "See who takes her lead away from her!"

It was half a mile to the far end of the little valley where the almost sheer pitch of the mountains would bring the fleeing animals to a stop. And before they had gone a hundred yards Wayne Shandon's eyes had discovered Little Saxon.

The colt had been almost the last of the two score horses when their startled flight began; already he was seeking the place that was rightfully his, already he had passed half of the herd and running like some great greyhound, was eating up the distance which lay between his outstretched nose and Lady Lightfoot's flickering hoofs. A horse to be seen in a flash by a knowing eye even in a herd many times bigger than this one. A king of a horse, standing a hand taller than the tallest of his companions, with great flowing muscles moving liquidly, with iron lungs under a vast iron chest, with a neck every fine line of which revealed the racing thoroughbred, with tireless strength in the tensing shoulders and hips, with speed in the delicately formed, slender legs; running easily, every leaping stride hurling his great body in advance of some one of the other horses, his floating mane and tail spun silk that flashed in the sun like shimmering gold, his flashing hoofs like a deer's for dainty grace, his coat a deep, rich, red bay.

"Watch him run!" shouted Big Bill. "Watch him run!"

Two lengths behind Lady Lightfoot, a length … and then Little Saxon had slipped by, flashed by, passed like a gleam of summer sunlight, and the mare snapped viciously at the lean, clean body that brushed against her own, robbing her of her place. Big Bill laughed joyously.

"Jealous as a cat, huh, Red? See that?"

"And no man has ever ridden him," muttered Shandon. "Only one man is ever going to ride you, Little Saxon."

But that day they did not take Little Saxon with them back to the home corrals; it would be many a day yet before Little Saxon's training began, before his proud spirit compromised with steel and leather and a master's hand.

With half the distance to the far end of the little valley passed, Little Saxon was a length ahead of Lady Lightfoot, his quivering nostrils scenting danger behind, free range and freedom ahead. Thus Little Saxon first, Lady Lightfoot jealously guarding and keeping her place as second in the headlong flight, a slim barrelled sorrel close at the Lady's heels, the rest of the horses following in a close packed body, the fleeing animals came to the natural bulwark which the mountains lifted before them. Their ropes swinging in ever widening loops, hissing swifter and swifter until in broadening circles they sang shrilly, Wayne Shandon and Big Bill swept on after them.

"Lightfoot first!" cried Shandon sharply. "It's too rocky, Bill—"

The ground was too broken to chance putting a rope over the defiant neck of the three year old who had never known what it was to have hemp touch his lithe body. With Lady Lightfoot it was different. She would leap aside, she would throw her head one way or the other as she saw the lasso leave the hand of her would-be captor; but once it touched her she would stop stone still, too wise, too experienced to struggle against the inevitable.

At last the fleeing horses stopped, whirled and with up-pricked ears and flashing eyes waited and watched. Lady Lightfoot's angry snort trumpeted her fear and defiance; she moved not so much as a muscle except of her eyes which swept swiftly back and forth from Big Bill to Shandon, from Shandon to Big Bill. Then, as almost at the same instant two ropes sped their hissing way toward her she leaped forward, swerved aside, dropped her head a little—and then, instead of breaking into a wild flight, she bunched her four feet and slid to a trembling standstill before either rope had tightened about a steel saddle horn.

"Wise ol' lady," chuckled Big Bill as he and Shandon rode closer to the mare coiling their ropes. "Ain't forgot who's who, have you, Lady?"

The other horses saw their chance and took it. Little Saxon in the lead from the first terrified leap, they shot by Lady Lightfoot, swerved widely about Shandon, and were off and away down the valley.

"Let 'em go," cried Shandon. "We'll follow in a minute and drive them on down to the corrals."

He swung down from his saddle and went up to Lady Lightfoot's high lifted head, a head that rose higher in the air as he drew near. Laying a gentle hand on the quivering nose, he rubbed it softly, speaking to the animal in a tone that coaxed and soothed and assured. He talked to her as a man talks who loves a horse, understands it—as he might talk to a human being. And Big Bill, watching, nodded and grunted approval as he saw Shandon slip the hard bit between the strong teeth, and at last swing up into the saddle and turn a high spirited but well trained and obedient mare down the valley after the runaways.

Fifteen minutes later they caught up with the stragglers of Little Saxon's followers. And it was then that Little Saxon snorted his last defiance at pursuit and achieved his freedom.

The animals had been driven again into a woodland *cul de sac*. Here there was a wide reaching plot of grassy, unbroken soil, and here the two men counted upon teaching the three year old his first lesson of the supremacy of man. As they drew nearer their ropes were again ready, trailing at their sides. Again the horses drew close together, bunched in a mass of watchful distrust. Little Saxon alone held slightly apart, his great head lifted high, scenting mischief. He saw the ropes before they were lifted, and at the first whirl of hemp into the hated loop he knew instinctively that it was he whom they threatened.

"We've got him," grunted Big Bill, confident too soon of easy victory.

Behind the herd rose the cliffs, in front the men came on and at the side was a deep gorge, so steep sided that a horse would not think of going down into it, washed wide by the spring torrents. It never entered Big Bill's head nor Wayne Shandon's nor the heads of the terrified companions of Little Saxon that there was a way in that direction open for flight. But Little Saxon saw his enemies coming threateningly nearer and he took his chance. He drew back until his golden tail swept the granite cliffs; he paused there a brief second, with flashing eyes, measuring chance and distance; he gathered his great muscles as he had never gathered them before; his vast chest swelled to a mighty sigh; and then, before Wayne Shandon or Big Bill had guessed the plan that had risen in his brain he had wagered his life against his liberty.

"Back, Bill!" shouted Shandon warningly, throwing Lady Lightfoot back on her haunches, swinging her away from the plunging three year old. "He's going to jump!"

"God!" yelled Big Bill, as he too jerked his horse back. "He'll break his neck!"

They saw the big horse running, already as a blur of speed before he had done the thirty yards to the rock walled gorge, saw the glinting light from floating mane and tail, heard the thunder of his pounding hoofs, and then—

Then Little Saxon put into his gliding muscles all of the thoroughbred spirit that was in his blood, and taking recklessly his one chance he hurled his great body forward, leaping splendidly. For an instant as that rebellious, beautiful body was suspended in mid air, high above certain death, neither man breathed. Then, with the sharp sound of hard hoofs striking hard rock, Little Saxon landed easily and safely upon the far side, and his silken mane, flowing tail and red bay hide shining with a metallic gleam in the sunlight, he had passed on, through the trees, into an open trail, around a bend and out of sight.

Big Bill rode close up to the gorge.

"I wouldn't jump a horse acrost that for a million dollars!" he said, wondering at what he had seen.

And Wayne Shandon, his eyes very bright, his face a little flushed, cried eagerly,

"A mere horse, no. But Little Saxon isn't that! He's more clean spirit than horse flesh!"

Big Bill did not answer. Perhaps he had not heard. He was thinking:

"When he does break Little Saxon—that wild devil of a man on that wild devil of a horse—What a pair of them!"

CHAPTER VII

THE GLADNESS THAT SINGS

"Well?" laughingly. "Don't you know me?"

Wayne Shandon, riding idly down a lane through the pines, had come close before he saw her sitting with her back to a tree, her camera and empty lunch basket lying beside her. He had left Big Bill and had come on alone, passing around the head of the lake and following the trail which Little Saxon's flying hoofs had made in the fresh sod. Now, as with a quick hand upon Lady Lightfoot's reins he came to a stop, he very promptly forgot all about Little Saxon.

The girl, leaving Gypsy tethered beyond a grove of firs, had found upon the skirt of a densely wooded slope a spot that was like a corner of a woodland fairyland, dim and dusky and sweet scented. The noontide was warm with the rippling sunlight above, a down-filtering ray touched her bare head and dropped flecks of gold in her braided hair.

Shandon, motionless for a little, did not speak nor did his expression change except that it grew more frankly filled with admiration, with sheer wonder at her loveliness.

"Really," she bantered, still laughingly, not to be confused by her old playfellow's look. "I'm neither ghost, goblin nor evil spirit, nor anything worse than just a girl, you know!"

"Are you … just a girl?" He raised his hand slowly, lifting his hat. But not yet did he smile back into her smiling eyes. She had never seen him so grave. "I don't know. You are not the same girl I used to know."

"Why, Wayne," she retorted merrily. "It's only a year. You weren't expecting wrinkles already, were you?"

The steadiness of his gaze made her wonder. His eyes clung to hers for a long moment, left them to travel swiftly up and down the sweet young body that was no longer the body of "just a girl," noted how wonderfully the promise of girlhood had been fulfilled in budding womanhood, came back to her hair and throat and smiling mouth, rested again upon her eyes.

"You are not the same Wanda I used to know," he insisted soberly, shaking his head at her. "Not the Wanda I used to play with at school, to hunt birds' nests with, to steal apples for, to fight other boys for. Who are you, you wonderful thing?"

"The same Wanda," she told him merrily. "And, if you please, not a *thing* at all."

"Do you remember," he went on quietly, still gently serious, "the day when I whipped little Willie Thorp for you?"

"Yes," she answered lightly, yet not remembering all that he remembered. "Of course. You—"

"You came and put both little fat, warm, sun-burned arms round me and kissed me then, Wanda. Would you kiss me now?"

"You should have said that last night," she dimpled up at him. She thought she knew him too well to take him seriously when he dropped into one of his bantering moods, just trying perhaps to see if he could drive a little flush of confusion into her cheeks. "I was so glad to see you, I might have forgotten I had grown up. That we have grown up," she said.

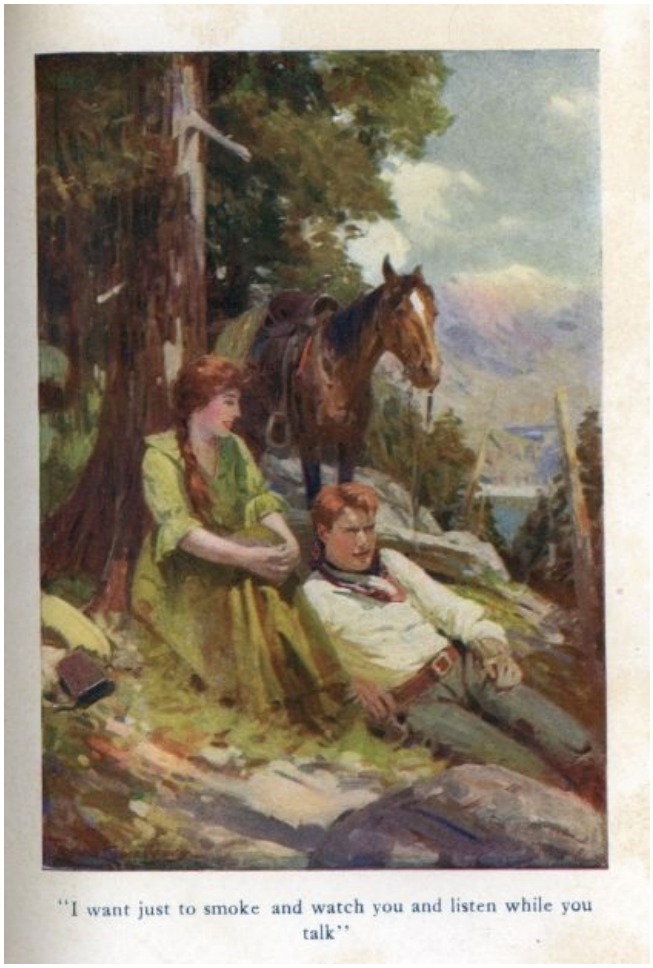
"I wish I had," he said abruptly, flinging his head up with the old gesture she remembered so well. "Wanda, you are the most wonderful girl-woman in the world! What has happened to you? What have you done to yourself? What have you done to your eyes? Do you know, Miss Wanda Leland—are you a little witch and do you do it on purpose?—that those two eyes of yours can make madness in a man's soul?"

"Flatterer!" she countered brightly. "Have you been a whole year making pretty speeches, and must you keep it up now because you've got into the habit and since the pretty ladles of your

travels are not here and I am? Aren't you a little bit ashamed of yourself? Aren't you afraid that you will create havoc by putting a lot of foolish ideas into a country girl's head?"

He laughed at last, becoming suddenly the same old Red Reckless that he had always been, and swung down lightly from the saddle. Dropping Lady Lightfoot's reins to the ground he came to where Wanda sat and having stood over her a moment looking down into the clear eyes which were turned frankly up to him he made himself comfortable at her feet, stretching luxuriously in the warm grass.

"It's great to be back, Wanda," he said musingly, with a deep sigh of content. "You are going to squander a little of your precious time on me, aren't you? I've been deucedly energetic all morning; now I'm just brimful of sunshine and laziness. So lazy that I want just to smoke and watch you and listen while you talk. You will have a whole lot to tell me about all the things you've been doing while I was away."



"I want just to smoke and watch you and listen while you talk"

[Illustration: "I want just to smoke and watch you and listen while you talk."]

She gathered her knees into her clasped hands and smiled down upon the flaming red hair. Before he made his cigarette she found herself answering his questions, telling about her life during his absence.

As she talked she saw his face only now and then when he turned a little to laugh up at her over some trifle that amused him. The story of this year of her life as she told it was a simple, homely little tale, a quiet pastoral of happy content. It had to do largely with herself and her work, with her failures and successes. But she mentioned both Garth and Sledge Hume.

"Hume?" said Shandon, looking up quickly, this time with no laughter in his eyes. "Have you seen much of that man, Wanda?"

"A good deal. He and father and Garth seem to have some kind of business together. Why?"

"Because I don't like him," he told her emphatically. "I don't like to have you know a man like that."

She did not mention Hume again. She admitted frankly that she herself disliked the man although she had tried to think well of him because he was a friend of her father. Running on with the account of her winter adventures, and laughing at the memory of an incident that had been serious enough at the time, she told him how she had imperilled her life in heedless pursuit of the snow-shoe rabbit. Her mood, gay for the moment, was the sort to make light of things which had merely cast a shadow and gone; it was as though from the very presence of Wayne she

had accepted his theory of life, the ability to live keenly, richly in the present, to be oblivious with sealed eyes to the future, careless with deaf ears to the mutterings of the past. She was talking freely, spontaneously, laughing from the very joy of life and the morning and another joy which she did not analyse, looking down at the sunlight caught flaring in his hair. And he, vastly contented, listened and laughed with her.

Then, in the midst of the recital of her last winter's mishap which she strove to make as unimportant as she now considered it, she looked down at Wayne Shandon and suddenly broke off in the middle of a word. He had dropped his cigarette, the hand that she could see had shut tight into a whitened fist, the colour of a second ago had seeped out of his bronzed cheek. As she stopped, wondering, he sprang to his feet and towered over her.

"Wanda!" he cried, and his voice was as unfamiliar in her ears as the view of his drawn face in her eyes.

"Wayne!" she said curiously, staring at him, startled and a little afraid of she knew not what. "Wayne! What is it?"

"What is it?" Shandon's voice had dropped lower, was so hoarse that it did not seem Wayne Shandon's voice at all. "It is just this—"

He broke off as sharply as she had done and moving swiftly as though driven by some great compelling force which dominated him he stooped and swept her up into his arms. She felt the tightening muscles as he drew her close, closer to him; felt a little tremor running through his whole body; heard the beating of his heart; was drawn nearer to him than she had ever been drawn to a man in her life; realised for the first time in a flutter of many sweeping emotions how superbly big and powerful the man was, how almost god-like in the beauty of his muscular manhood ... and then she knew nothing but the wonderful fact that he had kissed her full upon her quivering red mouth.

"My God, Wanda, how I love you!" he exclaimed with sudden wild, unleashed vehemence. "Do you hear me?" He was holding her a little away from him, his arms still shaking about her shoulders, his voice frightening her with the vibrant fierceness that had leaped into it, the love in his eyes glowing like fire. "I love you so that I'd go through Hell to have you, to have you for mine, all mine! So that I might fight a man for daring to look at you, that I might kill a man for harming you! Wanda, girl, I tell you that I love you! Do you understand? Do you know what that means? What love means? When a man loves a woman as I do?"

Always a man of impulse, a man who through years of habit had grown to act swiftly in little things and big things alike, Wayne Shandon flung into impassioned words the emotions which swept through his soul and brain. The sight of Wanda Leland, grown into the sweet, pure beauty of early womanhood, had stirred him to the depths. Her casual mention of other men, Garth, and Sledge Hume, had displeased him so vaguely that he had not fully understood or cared why. And then the light allusion to the danger of death in which she had stood had been the spark in the powder train of his love, his words exploded from the seething consciousness newly awakened, fires long smouldering unsuspected in his heart burst forth in a mighty conflagration of emotion.

Throughout his whole being there was a strange, new, throbbing buoyancy, the gladness that sings, the joy that sparkles. The elixir of life had been set suddenly before him. He did not taste and put it away as some men do; he did not sip sparingly and temperately; but he drank deeply and swiftly so that the wine of love tingled through his blood, made his brain reel and his heart grow hot. It intoxicated his soul and his senses with a rare, glorious intoxication.

He tossed his head back, holding her still a little further from him, and looked into her eyes. His own had changed now, changed utterly in their eloquent speech. They had been fierce, now they grew wonderfully tender. They had been clear and bright and eager; and now they were misty. The first flame of love had leaped through his blood; now an infinite yearning, as gentle as tears, rose from his heart. Love had clamoured, now love was whispering. Love had been insistent; now it pleaded. It had been masterful; now it knelt.

"You love me—*like that*?"

The tumult in the man's soul had awakened conflicting emotions under the troubled, tremulous breasts. She looked at him with wide, clear eyes, wondering. A miracle, the old, eternal, primal miracle, had entered her life. She had looked down, laughingly, on a careless boy; she had been gripped mightily in the arms of a being new to her, a man who loved. From the clear blue of her life's sky there had leaped out a flash of lightning that filled the universe with its light and heat. They had been two gay loitering children; now she saw the man shaken in the gust of his passion.

"You love me—*like that*?"

"God forgive me, yes!"

His voice was steady now but low, scarcely louder than her awed whisper. He dropped his arms, letting them fall lingeringly, and stooping a little, touched her forehead with his lips.

"And," he said with a reverence which stirred her more than his rude embrace had done, "I love you like this, dear."

More often than not the story of one's life is a smooth running tale, the day's page turning gently, going on with the unfinished sentence of yesterday, the end of each little chapter guessed before it has been read. But there are times when the leaves no longer turn slowly but are caught in a sudden gust that sends them fluttering like dead leaves in a September gale; when life no longer loiters, but leaps when the unseen end of the chapter is a mystery, when the letters on the page are shining gold or fiery red.

Such a time had come into Wanda Leland's life. In one swift moment she had risen to a pinnacle, she had looked down upon the level lowlands from the heights. The monotony of the commonplace receded and was lost; the aspect of life upon which she looked was wonderful and new. There had been a change within her. She was no longer the Wanda Leland she had been a moment ago, the Wanda Leland she had been throughout the years of her life. Nor would she ever be exactly that same Wanda Leland again.

Revelation had been lightning, two-tongued. It showed her herself; it explained, it touched with light, it made distinct the shadowy things that had long lain in her breast. And it showed her Wayne Shandon as she had never seen him.

For years they had been playfellows, frank, almost boyish, both of them. Now her heart was beating wildly from the very touch of him. Had she always loved him? Had he always loved her? Was this wonderful, new thing, love, without beginning as it surely was without end?

She looked wonderingly into his eyes. Her own, like his, were clear, bright one moment, starry with a dimness as of unshed tears the next. Tenderness, like a mist, filled them.

"I love you, Wayne," she said, her voice low, trembling just a little, but clear. "I want you all mine as you want me. So that if you went up to Heaven or down to Hell I could go with you."

"Wanda!" he said. "*Wanda*."

She smiled a little at him and put out her two hands.

CHAPTER VIII

"A GAME OF BLUFF AND THE GAMBLER WINS!"

The spirit of unrest which Wanda had felt vaguely the night before did not depart with the passing of the darkness. Something was wrong, radically wrong at the Echo Creek ranch house. Since the unexpected home coming of Red Reckless there had been a subtle difference, a ruffling of the waters which usually ran so placidly at the country home, a darkening and disturbation of the surface which hinted at hidden whirlpools and cross currents.

It was from the master of the household that the day took its colour. In his own room last night he had been restless, sleepless until very late. Mrs. Leland had heard him walking up and down, had heard the noise of his pipe against his tobacco jar many times after the hour when Martin was in the habit of having his last smoke. In the morning he was up and dressed before Julia had built her fire. All day he was strangely pre-occupied and silent. He seemed scarcely to notice Wanda when she came into the dining room to give him his good morning kiss. That was unlike him. Both women noticed it.

After breakfast he did not go out. Instead he went immediately to his study, telling Julia sharply that she need not come in to sweep this morning as he was going to be busy. It was one of the few times he had spoken at all that morning, but not the first time he had spoken irritably. Mrs. Leland's eyes, following him were troubled.

In his private room he sat long at his big oaken table, his brows drawn thoughtfully, his eyes narrowed in deep speculation. The tenseness of the man's still figure, the gleam of the darkening eyes, the obvious moody abstraction told that some vital question had come to him for its answer, that he was fighting it out sternly, that the issue was one of those great issues of life which come soon or late and which must be decided, yes or no, upon the battle ground of a man's soul.

Three months ago he had done a thing from which, at first, his finer manhood had drawn back rebelliously. But—he had done it. There had been a struggle then between the two nicely balanced qualities which go to make up a human personality. The nice balance had been disturbed by clever generalship rather than by open battle. Specious reasoning, aided and abetted by the temptation of a rare opportunity, further reinforced by an emotion which was more or less selfish even while it masked itself as a public and private duty, had routed the sterner sense of justice of which the man was, not without reason, proud. He had in the end

taken the step; being done it had since then been dismissed to a shadowy corner of his mind by his own strength of character; when he had thought of it had only grown stronger in his belief that he had done rightly. And now a man whom he had never expected to see again had come home; the question closed three months ago was still an open question.

A grave, strong minded man, calm by nature, after sixty years of the life of the mountains and forests, he thought to decide each action upon its own merit or demerit and to see that quality clearly, keeping his vision free of emotional mists. With such a man right and wrong are two distinct entities, sharply separate, with no debateable land. An action may not partake of each; it must stand forth black or white. A motive may not be enshrouded in uncertainty; it must be right or it must be wrong.

He questioned himself sternly to-day, frowningly concentrating his mind upon each point as he struggled with it. The time had come now when the decision he made must be one of absolute finality.

"What I am doing is a grave thing," he told himself over and over. "An unscrupulous man would do it in a flash; a weak man might be afraid of it. I must be neither unscrupulous nor cowardly; I must be just. And is not justice with me? Would I not be punishing the guilty, would I not be in a position to reward Garth Conway for a life of faithful service, would I not be justified in protecting my own interests, the interests of my wife and daughter?"

Already, unconsciously, he was seeking to discover for his groping mind the arguments which would acquit him in his own judgment and justify him.

"I hate him," he muttered, "God knows I hate him. But is that the reason I am striking at him? I should be wrong if for purely personal motives I sought to wreck vengeance upon him. But he is guilty, as guilty as hell! It would not be vengeance, it would be retribution. I should but be taking into my hands the work which God had set at my fingers' ends."

His problem instead of clarifying became complicated with involved motives. He told himself grimly that the thing which he had begun was just, merely just. If the courts of law did what he was doing and stopped with it men's voices would cry out against a retribution gone blind and decrepit, maudlin with mercy.

He went once to his safe in the corner, took out a document and stood looking at it thoughtfully for a long time. Finally he replaced it.

"I can ruin him, I can break him utterly," he said slowly. "I can wrest from him the thing which he took brutally with bloody hands. Because I am to profit where he loses must I hold back? The law may never reach him. Is it right then that he should go unpunished? The fortune which one day I shall leave to Wanda will be either swelled or diminished as I decide. Have I the right to draw back now?"

The day dragged on, the conflict within the man's soul continued. Until noon he was in his study. At the dinner table he was silent, morose, and ate little. He made no comment upon Wanda's absence; perhaps he did not notice it. Mrs. Leland, understanding readily that Wayne Shandon's return had its bearing upon her husband's heavy mood, found little to say. She could only hope wistfully that for a little Wayne would come to the house seldom, that Martin would grow used to having him in the neighbourhood, and that in the end he would content himself with ignoring the man whom she knew he disliked, distrusted and suspected. She thought that she understood fully what she grasped only in part.

In the afternoon again, Leland withdrew to his private room, again the battle between motives and desires raged hotly. It so happened that Wayne Shandon, appearing at a critical moment, brought about a decision.

Leland was standing before his window, his smouldering eyes frowning at the meadow down which Spring had come, scattering buttercups to mark her passing. He had not noticed the glossy chalices brimming with sunlight; the springtime had had no softening effect upon his absorbed and troubled mood. But presently the sight of two figures riding side by side down through the pasture whipped a new look into his eyes.

He watched them sharply as they rode toward the house. Their gay voices came to him lifted into soft laughter; their light merriment, so in tune with the springtime, fell jarringly on Leland's ears.

"The fellow has the insolence of Satan," he muttered angrily.

For a moment he lost sight of them as they passed behind the stable. Then, walking, Wanda's face lifted in rosy happiness, Wayne's like a boy's, eager and glad, they came on to the house. Leland stood stone still at the window; Wanda, catching sight of him, threw him a kiss. Wayne, with a brief word to Wanda left her under the cedars in the yard and came swiftly to the study, the light buoyancy of his step bespeaking the exhilaration that danced through his blood. He swept off his hat, put out his hand eagerly as he came into the room, his eyes filled with the brightness of a supreme happiness.

"I am glad that I found you in," he began impetuously. "I don't know how I could have waited … What's the matter, Mr. Leland?"

For Martin Leland, directing at him a piercing glance whose meaning was unmistakable, did not unclasp the hands behind his back.

"You had something to say to me," Leland reminded him briefly. "What is it?"

Shandon met his stare with silent surprise. Then, forcing himself to speak quietly, as though the insult of Leland's attitude had been unnoticed, he said:

"I wanted to tell you that I love Wanda, that some day I hope to make her my wife."

"What!" shouted Leland incredulously. "You—*you* want to marry my daughter! *You*!"

"Yes," said Wayne steadily. "I."

Martin's scornful laugh, forced and hard, drove the happiness from Shandon's eyes and a quick hot flush into his cheeks.

"I knew that you didn't like me," he said sharply. "But I didn't know—"

"That I have no feeling but utter loathing for you," Leland cut in coldly. "That I'd kill you like a dog before I'd allow you to disgrace my name, to wreck my daughter's life. Are you crazy or drunk?"

"I don't understand you," replied Shandon bluntly.

"Then I'll explain so that you will have no difficulty in understanding." Leland's voice, lifted a little, was hard and bitter. "I don't desire the continuance of your acquaintance. I don't want ever to see you again if it can be helped. I don't want you to come to my home, to speak to my wife or my daughter. I don't want your presence sullying the air they breathe. I don't want to have any dealings whatever with you. Have I explained?" he concluded with cutting sharpness.

"Everything and nothing!" Shandon returned, the flush seeping out of his face, leaving it grey. "What has happened? Why do you say such things to me? Good God, man, what have I done?"

For a moment Martin Leland made no reply; nor did his steady gaze waver from the eyes now as stern as his own which looked straight back at him.

"I don't care to discuss the thing with you, Shandon. You know as well as I do why I say them. When you pretend not to know you are at once a liar and a hypocrite."

"I am not a trouble seeker, Mr. Leland." Shandon's voice had grown husky as he strove with the anger within him. "But I think you know that you are the first man who has talked to me like that and got away with it. If I did not know that you are a fair minded man, and that there has been some hideous mistake somewhere, I'd not listen to those words even from you. Tell me what you mean."

A contemptuous smile broke the rigid line of Leland's set lips.

"Your theatrical ranting won't get you anywhere with me, Shandon. It is the thing to be expected. I am the master of my own house and it is quite enough when I say that your presence is not wanted here. If you want more you can supply it yourself. Idler, spendthrift, gambler, brawler, I have until now tolerated you. But there are some things that no man can tolerate. You have said that I am fair minded; the more reason I should wish to be rid of you."

"But," cried Shandon hotly, "the man accused has a right to know—"

"I am not accusing you," interrupted Martin coldly. "I do nothing but tell you that you are not the kind of man I want my womenfolk to associate with, not the kind I want to associate with, and that I want this to be the last time you set foot on my property. If you are not absolutely without pride of any sort you will not make it necessary for me to have you put off the ranch!"

"And you won't tell me—"

"So far as I am concerned the conversation is closed. And," drily, "the door is open."

The anger in Wayne Shandon's heart, unchecked at last, blazed in his eyes.

"I'll go now," he said shortly. "I have no wish to enter a man's house where I am not welcome. But what I have said I have meant. I shall see Wanda when I can, and when she will come to me as she will some day, I shall marry her."

"You are a fool as well as a scoundrel," shouted Leland as he saw the other turn toward the door. "Wanda, when she marries, will marry a gentleman, and not a cur and a coward!"

"Those are hard names, Mr. Leland!"

"Not so hard as another which belongs to you," came the vibrant rejoinder. "If you dare speak to her again—"

"As I most certainly shall," coolly.

"By God!" cried the old man, his clenched fist raised. "You leave my girl alone or—"

Caught in a sudden gust of rage such as had not half a dozen times in his lifetime touched his blood, he strode to his table, snatched open the drawer and whipped out a revolver.

"Go!" he shouted, his face a fiery red. "Go now, without another word, or I'll shoot you."

Wayne Shandon's head was flung up with the old gesture, his eyes grew steely and steady, and his answer was a cool contemptuous laugh.

"You have called me a coward," he said. "You called me a liar." He came back into the room and sat down upon the edge of the table, not three feet from Martin Leland. "Now, prove me the coward—or yourself the liar!"

It was a challenge of sheer reckless impudence, the tempting of a man whose reason was blind drunk with rage. He looked coolly into Leland's eyes ignoring the deadly weapon in Leland's hand.

"I am going to roll a cigarette," he said quietly. "I'll stay just that long."

The fingers which brought out tobacco and papers were unhurried. He opened the muslin bag, poured the tobacco into the trough of his paper, and his hands were steady. His eyes left Leland's a moment to make sure that he was not spilling any of the brown particles; he lifted them again as he sealed his finished cigarette with the tip of his tongue. He swept a match along his thigh; then he went out, closing the door softly, leaving a thin wisp of smoke trailing behind him.

Leland, alone in the study, put his hand to his forehead. It came away wet with sweat.

"A game of bluff and the gambler wins!" he muttered fiercely. "And now—God curse me if I spare him!"

His buoyant stride carried Red Reckless swiftly down into the yard where he had left Wanda. She looked up eagerly as he came swinging on. Then suddenly her heart stood still, chilled with the quick fear of her premonition. The smile which Shandon summoned was at once a brave attempt and a pitiful failure.

"What is it, Wayne?" asked Wanda quickly.

"Your father has forbidden me the ranch," he told her bitterly. "I don't know exactly why. It came out of a clear sky so far as I am concerned. He does not want me to come here again; he does not want you to see me at all, anywhere."

"Wayne!"

"He called me an idler, a spendthrift, a gambler and a brawler," he went on swiftly. "As I suppose I have been.—There has never been anything to make me care—until to-day! You won't let what he says make any difference, Wanda?"

She came closer to him, her eyes brilliant.

"I don't have to answer that question, Wayne," she whispered.

He took her into his arms and kissed the mouth turned up to him, and so left her. She watched him go down to the stable, watched the tall, upright form until Lady Lightfoot carried him out of sight through the pines. Then, her head as erect as her lover's had been, she went slowly to the house.

CHAPTER IX

THE CONTEMPT OF SLEDGE HUME

The window shades in the study were half drawn so that in the late afternoon the room was shadowy. From the fireplace crackling flames cast wavering gleams across the polished oaken

table top and the heavy mission furniture. Leland had not stirred from the chair into which he had sunk after Wayne Shandon's going. Shandon had been gone an hour; he had met Garth Conway at the bridge and now Garth was with Leland.

There was no longer in the old man's eye or bearing a hint of the battle which he had fought all day. He had gone through the hours of his inner struggle and as it had ended three months ago so had it ended to-day. He knew that he would not open his mind to consider the question again. His full piercing eyes were stern and determined. Purposefully he had set his feet into the path he meant to follow without swerving. In a moment of hesitation and uncertainty the supreme argument had come to him; if for no other reason, he must ruin Shandon to save his own daughter from her folly.

"Garth," he said quietly, his deep voice retaining no trace of the emotion which had wracked him only an hour ago, "I am very glad that you have come. I have been expecting you all day."

"I met Wayne," Garth said hastily, watching Leland anxiously. "He was riding like the very devil. I never saw his face look as it did as he shot by me. He had been over here?"

"Yes. I had a plain talk with him. I made it clear to him that he was not again to set foot on my land."

"You didn't tell him—"

"I told him nothing! The man deserves no consideration at my hands. It is not my affair to tell him." He paused a moment, bending his gaze thoughtfully upon Conway's troubled face. "You have had time to think. What are you going to do?"

Garth opened his lips to speak, hesitated and closed them without a word. The air of uneasiness which he had brought with him into the room grew more marked. He shifted a little in his chair. Leland, watching him steadily, waited for him to speak.

"I don't know what to do," Conway blurted out finally. "You were so sure all the time he'd never come back.—Now if I don't tell him all about the mortgage and foreclosure there's chance on top of chance he'll find it out himself before the nine months drag by. And then—" He flashed a startled glance up at Leland's calm face. "He'd kill me! What can I do?"

"You can keep your mouth shut," answered Martin tersely. "You still have his power of attorney, haven't you?"

Garth nodded, his head down again, his fingers nervously busy with his lip.

"Conway," Leland continued with quiet emphasis, his keen glance watching for the effect of his words, "in sheer justice you have ten times more right to be owner of the Bar L-M than that mad fool has. You have slaved for over a year to make it what it is while he has been squandering money you had to scrape to send him. Even while Arthur was alive you were the actual manager. And now all that you have to do is keep still and you can have the place for a very small fragment of what it is worth. God knows I wouldn't put foot on it. There is nothing that the law can touch you for; we have seen to that. Nor will you be doing a dishonourable thing. It is sheer justice, Garth, that you and I will be meting out to him."

Conway's cheeks flushed a little, his eyes brightened at the thought of being some day the owner of the Bar L-M.

"But there's the chance—" he began.

"You are playing for big stakes," Leland reminded him crisply. "Of course there is a chance. But you exaggerate it. Play the game through and you will be a rich man before the year is out."

Before Conway could speak there came the clamorous barking of dogs in the yard and the noise of a horse's shod hoofs. In a moment there was a heavy booted stride up the steps and along the porch, followed by a loud rap at the study door. At Leland's nod Garth sprang to his feet and went quickly to the door, flinging it open.

For a second Sledge Hume's great frame filled the doorway as he paused, looking in sharply, drawing at his gauntlets. Then, brushing by Conway, he entered and stood with his back to the fireplace, still drawing off his gauntlets, his hat still low over his brows.

"Well?" he asked bluntly.

Just the short word, uttered as a command. There would be no wasting of words before they came straight to business. There was about the man, emanating apparently from his physical body something oddly like a materialised aura, bespeaking an aggressive character, a strong, dominant personality. Conway, alone with Leland, was a school boy in the presence of his master. Hume, ignoring Garth, challenged that superiority which Conway's weaker nature acknowledged unconsciously. The look of his eye, the very carriage of his handsome head, invited opposition, questioned an authority other than his own. A big, strong man physically his manner gave the impression that he was a big, strong man intellectually.

Old Martin did not at once speak but sat very still save for the restless fingers upon the table top. It was Conway who, after a brief hesitation, answered.

"We're going to stand pat—"

"I wasn't talking to you, Conway," said Hume coolly. "As far as I am concerned you aren't even a fifth wheel in this thing and you ought to know it. I want to know what Leland has got to say."

Garth coloured angrily but made no reply as he turned questioning eyes to the older man.

"Very well, Mr. Hume," said Leland quietly. "Do you care to sit down while we thresh things out?"

"No, I'll stand. Go ahead."

"To begin with, Wayne Shandon is back."

"I know he is back," spat out Hume. "That's why I'm here. What are you going to do now?"

"We are going ahead just as though he weren't here."

"You think that you can put the thing across?"

"Why not?"

"Just because," Hume shot back at him, "it doesn't seem likely that with the whole country knowing about the foreclosure of the mortgage somebody isn't going to do some talking."

Leland shook his head.

"Let me sum up the case for you," he said. "Arthur Shandon, the day before his death, mortgaged the Bar L-M to me for twenty-five thousand. When time for foreclosure came three months ago Wayne Shandon would have been notified if he had been here. As it was the notice went to his legal representative, Garth Conway. Conway allowed the Bar L-M to go under the hammer and at the sheriff's sale Conway himself bought it in—"

"For you," interjected Hume.

"Yes, for me. But who knows that? People who paid any attention to the transaction came to understand that it had been because of Wayne Shandon's known shiftlessness that the property was allowed to be sold, they knew that Conway was his agent, and that Conway bought it in. There is not a man living who knows anything about the matter who does not believe that Conway bought at Shandon's orders and with Shandon's money; and that the Bar L-M is Shandon's now and was never in any real danger from me. Is it likely then, that any man who believes this is, after this length of time, even going to think to mention the matter to Shandon?"

"You've got the chance to get by with it," said Hume slowly. "And it's a damned good chance."

"We all know the sort Shandon is," continued Leland. "I shall be surprised if he doesn't tire of the life here in six weeks, put through a sale of cattle, take the money and go again. With him away our chance becomes a certainty. In any case, I am going ahead with our work. I have had Garth look into the title of the Dry Lands and he finds that it is perfect."

"Yes. The land is mine and is clear."

"All we need now is the water and we are going to have that in another nine months when I shall have a clear deed to the Bar L-M. Garth and myself have gone ahead as I told you that we would, taking options on every acre we could get in Dry Valley. Before many days we shall virtually control the whole of the valley, just the three of us. Between us Garth and I have expended upwards of fifty thousand dollars in the last five weeks in options and out-right purchases."

"Let me see the papers," said Hume shortly.

Leland went to the safe and taking out a number of papers, handed them to Hume.

"All right as far as it goes," Hume said when at length he had finished his careful examination of the documents and had tossed them to the table. "You haven't got the Norfolk place nor the Ettinger place. What's the matter? They are more important to us than all the rest put together. Did they smell a rat?"

"I don't know. I am confident of closing with Norfolk in a few days, although I may have to pay him five dollars an acre more than I offered any one else. Ettinger is holding out for seventy-five thousand dollars, cash."

"Then he does smell a rat!" Hume's fist came crashing down upon the mantelpiece. "By God, somebody's been talking too much!"

"Mr. Hume," Leland reminded him sternly, "may I call to your attention the fact that nobody knows a thing about this matter excepting yourself, Garth and me? I haven't so much as told my wife—"

"You?" cried Hume hotly. "Who said that you had? You've got brains enough to hold your tongue. That's why I came to you in the first place. But Conway here—"

He swung suddenly upon Garth, his eyes flaming, his face distorted with wrath. Before either of the two men had guessed his purpose he strode swiftly across the room, and gripping Conway's shoulders with his two big hands jerked him to his feet.

"Conway," he snarled, his face close to the others, his eyes burning, his breath hot in Garth's blanched face, "you queer this deal with your infernal gab and I'll—"

He broke off sharply, flinging Conway backward from him so that the smaller man's body crashed against the wall.

"Hume!" cried Leland angrily. "I'll have no quarrelling in my house. If you can't act—"

"I haven't come here to-day for a love feast," sneered Hume, already forgetting Conway as he whirled upon Martin. "What I've got to say I'll say my way whether you and your cursed white rat like it or not. I say that somebody has been talking too damned much! That place of Ettinger's as it is, without the water, isn't worth twenty-five thousand. He'd have sold it for that a month ago and glad of the chance to unload. Now he holds out for seventy-five thousand! What's the answer? You've dragged Conway into this thing; I haven't. I wanted no man in it but you and Arthur Shandon and myself. You because you had the money, Arthur Shandon because he had the lake and the river. I didn't want Conway. He's your pet, not mine. Now, muzzle him if you can."

Garth's angry retort, the first word he had said since Hume sprang unexpectedly upon him, was lost in the low rumble of Martin Leland's heavy voice.

"You've said what you wanted to say, Mr. Hume. We've heard it. We understand each other. I can vouch for Conway's discretion. If you are as careful yourself we are all right. I'll attend to both Ettinger and Norfolk. I shall also see that at the end of the nine months the Bar L-M is mine and that we have the water for Dry Valley."

Hume laughed. Without again looking toward Conway he stooped, picked up the gauntlets he had let fall, and turned to the door.

"You are nobody's fool, Leland," he said patronisingly. "You are taking a chance in freezing Red Shandon out but the law can't go after you. And you stand to win a wad of money."

"Mr. Hume," interposed Leland sternly. "I am not taking over the Bar L-M because there happens to be money in it. I am simply using the weapon of retribution which God has seen fit to put into my hands—"

"Oh, rot!" grunted Hume sneeringly. "Don't come trying to square your conscience with me. I say, go to it, if you can get across with it."

He jerked the door open and then stopped suddenly his hand still on the knob.

"If you do slip up," he said bluntly, "if Red Shandon does hear about it and gets busy, let me know. If he starts making trouble I can put him where he'll be out of the way!"

The door closed loudly behind him.

CHAPTER X

SHANDON'S GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY

Wayne Shandon had grown more silent, more thoughtful than men had ever known him. The two things which had come to him, one as unheralded as the other, the gladness of a deep love, the bitterness which grew out of Martin Leland's words, he kept to himself. He rode far and alone, seeing very little of the men of the Bar L-M or of Garth, to whom he still left the routine of the range, and who made the most of small pretexts to keep up of Wayne's way. Shandon wanted time to think coolly and deliberately for the first time in his life; he wanted time to look inward as well as at what lay without, to cast up the balance of what sums of good and bad were in his soul.

Until now he had been quite content with life as he found it. It had afforded him infinite pleasure, it bubbled up sparklingly from the fountain of contented youth, there had been no need for him to seek to change its flashing current. Moreover, he had never had an incentive to bestir

himself. But that incentive had come now, a two-pronged goad; he was compelled to look to himself, to his own positive effort, for what came next.

Vaguely, at first, he realised that a man if he be a man, has certain responsibilities. He saw clearly, now that he considered life seriously, that a man might err in dalliance and idleness just as he had erred; and he saw too that a man might, like Sledge Hume, go to the other extreme. A man might grow soft muscled literally and figuratively in slothful carelessness, or he might grow hard until he became a machine. He felt dimly that he ought to be doing something like other men. He wanted his life to live freely as he knew how, largely as he sought to learn how. And he wanted Wanda.

At first he was like a sea-worthy ship, in a calm with no definite port in sight. But, in due course, from the one vital fact of his love for Wanda other facts materialised. To begin with he thought with diminishing bitterness of old Martin Leland. The man was old, and he loved his daughter. Rumours of a wild life fly incredibly high and far and fast. Such rumours of Red Reckless's doings had come to Leland's ears, and perhaps it was natural enough that Leland believed them. Shandon had always known his neighbour as a hard man but a just. He made up his mind not to quarrel with him, but instead to so change the tenor of his life that Martin Leland would notice and would approve. If in taking Wanda to her new home he closed her old one to her he would be hurting her.

He saw clearly, there being little foolish conceit in the man's makeup, that he was not worthy. And he understood, though vaguely at first, that it must be his one object now to become as worthy as any man could be of her. And when the fifth day came and Ruf Ettinger rode to the Bar L-M with excitement dancing in his eyes and his tongue clacking, Shandon thought that he saw a beginning.

Ruf Ettinger, a little dried up man of forty-five, was crabbed, cranky, sour and mean. He had the eyes, nose and brain of a fox, while perhaps the rest of him, heart and soul, came close to being just plain hog. He was stingy and suspicious, and people were no more in the habit of speaking well of him than they were of riding out of their way to stop at his place. He was the kind of man that makes his wife and children live in a miserable, two roomed shanty, while he builds a big, warm, expensive barn for his hay and horses. The only time he was ever credited with a human emotion was when his favourite dog died; he cried over it and then got drunk, careless of cost.

Shandon was surprised when he saw Ettinger ride up. He was more surprised at Ettinger's manner when he insisted on Shandon saddling and riding with him where there "wouldn't be no chance of bein' overheard."

Once clear of the house and outbuildings and in the valley where his shrewd little eyes made sure that no other ears than Shandon's would overhear, Ettinger plunged eagerly into his errand.

In brief it was this: Ettinger owned five hundred acres of valley land, down in Dry Valley, some thirty miles from the Bar L-M bunk house. Shandon knew the place well. Ettinger had, also, some money in the bank. How much it was not his cautious way to say until he was obliged to. How much would Shandon say his ranch was worth? Shandon did not know, but hazarded the guess that it might bring twenty-five dollars an acre. He did not consider it worth more because it was good grazing land only for part of the year, and like the rest of the valley there was scant water on it through the summer. Twelve thousand five hundred dollars?

Ettinger cackled; he could sell it to-morrow for seventy-five thousand!

Shandon began to feel the first dim stirrings of interest. Ettinger's excitement was too genuine not to awaken certain glimmerings of interest. Water, that was the thing! Now, if there were water, plenty of water, in Dry Valley; if a man could flood his land from brimming ditches then what would happen? The soil was deep and rich; it had been slipping down from the mountains for centuries; it had never been worn out by farming. Twenty-five dollars an acre? What were the other California valley lands worth where there was the same soil, no better climate and water galore? Napa Valley, Santa Clara Valley, Sacramento Valley? A hundred dollars an acre was dirt cheap; a man thought nothing of paying for a small ranch five hundred dollars an acre!

That was true enough, and Shandon knew it. But there was that tremendous IF.

"It's all right, Ettinger. All but the water! And since the water is the whole thing, and I don't see where you're going to get it—"

"Wait a minute!" cried Ettinger, his eager hand clutching at Shandon's arm. "I tell you I'd a sold that ranch for twenty-five dollars an acre six months ago an' been damn' glad to git out at that. An' right now I could sell for a hundred an' fifty the acre! An' I'm damned if I do it! My nose smells somethin' when a man wants that place that bad, an' I git busy follerin' the smell. If I ever sell at less than two hundred dollars I'm gone crazy."

His excitement growing as the vision of much gold became clearer, he ran on with hasty explanations. He had five hundred acres; Norfolk had close to a thousand and he had made Norfolk begin to think for the first time in his life. He himself had a little money in the bank and

Norfolk had some. There were other men, little ranchers, whom they could whip into line. *And Wayne Shandon had the water!*

Shandon looked at him in amazement, thinking at first that the man was a little mad. But Ettinger's shrewd eyes were sane enough.

"We go right up to your lake," he cried shrilly. "We git busy with some engineers an' pick an' shovel men. We blow the side of a hill all to hell an' what happens? The water just comes a bulgin' down into Dry Creek, an' all we got to do down in the valley, twenty, thirty miles away, is dig ditches an' watch our land turn into a gold mine!"

In a flash Shandon saw the utter simplicity of the whole scheme. Whereas now the river from Laughter Lake shot down the mountains through its rocky gorge, watering his own land and running through little narrow, rocky valleys to the lower slopes, it might here near the head be deflected so that it sped at first through the cañon of the upper Dry Creek, and following a natural course be brought with little expense to Dry Valley. Ettinger's proposition was no fanciful dream; it was hard, unvarnished fact. And, as so often happens when a man sees a radiant possibility, he wondered that he had not seen it for himself long ago.

Here was the golden opportunity his soul, in a mist, had yearned for! He shot out his hand gripping Ruf Ettinger's until the little man squirmed. But even the pain of nearly crushed fingers did not drive the grin from Ettinger's face.

"You're on," he cried exultantly. "Shandon, we'll frame a deal that'll make millionaires out of us."

"And man's work!" was the thought stirring Shandon's heart and brightening his eyes.

They rode on, as Ettinger had planned from the beginning, and covered the two miles to Laughter Lake in a few minutes. They rode up the shoulder of the ridge to the level of the lake; and there Ruf Ettinger's eager finger pointed out where the work was to be done.

It was work which Nature might have planned when the mountains were carved, the lake set in its deep bowl. Fifteen feet from this end of the lake the water swept into a narrow channel, a ridge running down from each side. Here was the spot to deflect the waters before they sped on down over the steep fall. Upon the south side there was a jagged cut in the saw-toothed cliff line. Even now the lowest part of that cut, when once the free soil was scooped out, was not ten feet above the level of the water.

"I rode up here purt' near a week ago," said Ettinger. "I looked this over an' rode back all the way down Dry Creek. It's dead easy, Shandon."

Already Ettinger visualised the cut deepened and widened here with flood gates to control the current. He spurred his horse up the bank as far as he could force the animal, then got down and scrambled on, gesticulating and talking swiftly. Shandon followed him. In a little they came to a point from which they could look back upon the lake, and forward to the windings of the cañon through which Dry Creek ran in winter and spring.

"It can be done," muttered Shandon slowly. "It can be done, Ettinger. I don't know what it will cost, five thousand or ten or twenty; but I do know that those lands down in Dry Valley are going to jump over the moon."

Ettinger made little clucking sounds with his mouth, his way of expressing joy unbounded.

"An' you don't see it all yet," he chuckled. "Lord, I've been layin' awake nights figgerin' on it. We'll bond everything that's loose in the valley. I've got Norfolk settin' tight and we'll round up a lot of the little fellers. It's sort of late, maybe, but them other fellers ain't got everything sewed up by a jugful."

"What other fellows?" asked Shandon, mystified.

Then Ettinger, in his rare good humour loosened his tongue until it poured out everything there was in his seething brain. He told of the scheme of Martin Leland and Sledge Hume, for Garth Conway had dropped an incautious word and the shrewd brain of Ettinger had worked out the puzzle. He told how the three men were trying to do this very thing, how they had planned on getting the water themselves, how Martin Leland had tied up thousands in options and purchases, how Ettinger had been one too many for them and had beat them to Shandon. He chuckled over everything, but most of all over the fact that Martin Leland had tried to buy him out. Old Leland was the keenest business man in the county, was he? Well, Ettinger had fooled him! Ettinger had blinded him with a promise to sell next week for seventy-five thousand. By that time, when Leland came to him—

"What's all this?" frowned Shandon. "You say that Leland, Conway and Hume are already at work, planning to put water from the Bar L-M into Dry Valley?"

"Already?" cried Ettinger. "They been clawin' at the job over a year now. The Lord knows what makes 'em so slow; think nobody else in the world can see straight, or shy on the money

end, maybe. Anyhow they've gone to it tooth and toe nail; they've sunk thousands into it, thousands I tell you! An' now, you an' me, Shandon, can make the bunch of 'em eat out of our hands! They can't do nothin' without your water; that's where we got 'em."

Wayne Shandon's eyes grew bright with a vision, the muscles of his jaw hardened. In sober truth his opportunity had come to him. Hume, a man he hated, Leland, a man who had called him laggard, spendthrift, scoundrel, had put many thousands of dollars into a project which he could smash into pieces. Ettinger had said it: the two of them could make Leland and Hume eat out of their hands! They could get Norfolk and the little fellows; they could tear out the side of the ridge, release what waters they chose, make their ditches, and by improving only their own property make Leland's and Hume's holdings worth nothing. Leland had started it; Leland's unreasonable censure had been a challenge. Here was his answer!

It was business, straight business. Had Leland and Hume been his friends it would have been different. But they deserved no consideration from him. It was his water; he had the right to dispose of it as he saw fit. He would be treating Leland as fairly as he had been treated. Why had they not come to him in the first place? Why had they not offered him the opportunity to get in on the ground floor with them? He would have given them the water then, glad to see Wanda's father prospering. But they were holding out, they were waiting for something, they had made sure of his consent to let them have what they wanted. Why? When they had everything cornered they would offer him a small sum, they would believe him fool enough to leap at it, mouth open, like a fish. Even Garth Conway, his own cousin, had not told him! What consideration did Conway deserve?

"By Heaven!" cried Shandon.

And then he fell suddenly silent.

"We got to git busy in a hurry, Shandon," Ettinger ran on swiftly. "When old Sure-Thing Leland comes to me to close the deal I want to laugh at him."

Slowly the light died out of Shandon's eyes. Was this, after all, the opportunity for which he had yearned? He grew uncertain, a little troubled. An opportunity for what? For becoming worthy of Wanda, for being a man, square and just, a man who must make a new name for himself, a name which would never bring discredit to her when she became Wanda Shandon? In trying to ruin Sledge Hume for the sordid motives of hatred and gain, in trying to strike back at Wanda's father in vengeful bitterness, would he be doing a thing of which later he would be proud to have her know? Was he proving his manhood by accepting for his first business partner a man like Ettinger, who laughed over his feat of tricking another man by a lie? Was he not seeking to blind himself to the right and the wrong of it? This was the sort of thing that Sledge Hume would do; should Wayne Shandon do it? Was his first venture after the priceless gift of Wanda's love to him, to be a thing like this? Had this been the opportunity he had yearned for, to grasp gold full handed, to wreak vengeance, to retaliate against unfair treatment by striking back treacherously? Martin Leland had been unjust, yes. But had there not been strong human reasons for that injustice? Had not his own wild living been cause enough? Was he, from the sharp words of an old man who was jealous in his love for his daughter, to draw an excuse to strike at his own cousin and Wanda's father?

"Ettinger," he said quietly. "I can't do it. You had better keep your promise to Leland."

Ettinger's jaw dropped, his brows puckered in astonishment.

"What's the matter with you?" he demanded sharply. "Can't you see the play? We got the chance to git the water on the land and make them fellers pay for it or sell to us at our own figger, ain't we? Why, it's as good as gold, man! If you don't see enough in it as it stands you are in a place where you can hold 'em up for a bonus to boot."

Shandon turned away, Ettinger's point of view suddenly disgusting him. His golden opportunity had crumbled into dust and ashes. And although the little man by his side waxed voluble in alternating rage and supplication, Wayne Shandon's final word was a positive,

"No!"

CHAPTER XI

WANDA'S DISCOVERY

A supreme happiness had filled Wanda Leland's heart for a few golden hours, so thoroughly permeating every fibre of her emotional being that when sorrow came afterward it could not entirely drive out the whispering gladness.

Never had the forest land seemed so big, so vast and still as during the slow days which followed. She went to it for the comfort she could not bring herself to ask of her mother just yet, and it mothered her, crooned and whispered and sang to her. Through the dew filled mornings she wandered silently; rarely did she return to the house until the sun was low in the west. Never had this world she loved seemed so vitally close to her, so big in a new sense, so eloquently an expression of the divine eternal. Her heart swelled and the talk of the pine tops entered it.

They were sad, glad days. Gladness sang in her heart when in the sun-flooded mornings she rode out alone, and perhaps her devious way brought her to the spot where Red Reckless had swept her up into his arms for the first time, when his kiss had brought love into full blossom in her breast. Sadness brought its shadow and listlessness when day after day passed and she did not see him again, when the eager hope of the morning that he too would ride to that spot to meet her died down in the afternoon's invariable disappointment. Gladness when she thought of him, just of him; sadness when she thought of her father's stern face.

Red Reckless had made no attempt to see her, or to communicate with her. Even while she sought to find excuses for him, that hurt her more than her loyalty would let her whisper to herself. He would come soon. He would know where to find her, know that her woman's heart was taking her to the spot where that heart had really become a woman's. He was thinking of her now as she thought of him. Her heart heard his heart talking to it across the forests and streams.

A woman's heart trusted him, but a maiden's pride permitted no question when Garth rode over as he did twice during the following week. When Garth remarked casually that his cousin was the same old chap he'd always been, and that he seemed to have nothing in his rollicking brain more serious than the breaking of a wild devil of a colt and a horse race which he had set his heart upon, Wanda bent her head a little over her book and gave no other sign of having heard the statement elicited by her mother's question. But the news hurt, too, just a little. There was a quick sting that came and was gone as her love for him surged up again, and it was the same sort of sting, only stronger, that she had felt as a little girl when she thought of him as happy in his boyish pursuits with any one but her. It did not matter now whether it was Little Saxon or Big Bill. She told herself in her own little room that she was a jealous cat. But—

"Oh, dear God, how I love you, Wayne!"

Then, when the days passed and she did not hear from him, there came for the first time a quick fear which was the first ally of that twinge of jealousy. The fifth day came, the day on which he was riding to Laughter Lake with Ruf Ettinger, and she could not know that his every thought was of her. She only felt that, had she been the man, she would not have stayed away. And there came the question and the fear,

"Does he love me as I love him?"

The old, lovers' question ever since Aucassin and Nicolette; the matter for long debate and reiterated argument: "It may not be that thou shouldst love me even as I love thee!" She found herself blushing hotly as she rode alone through the forest at the thought that she was again going to meet him, and that he did not come to meet her. She felt suddenly ashamed and angry both with him and with herself. Was she, to him, like a ripe apple that had dropped into his hand at the touch? Did he think other—?

Her face crimson she reined the startled Gypsy around with a savage jerk, turned her back squarely upon the Bar L-M, and without a look behind her rode swiftly in the opposite direction. She rode for an hour, not turning once, although many a time her heart fluttered wildly and then grew painfully still at some slight noise which to her yearning ears sounded like the thud of a horse's hoofs behind her.

To-day she crossed the narrow valley toward the cliffs rising like a wall upon the far side of Echo Creek. Stubbornly she shut her mind from its daily wanderings; her camera, that she had not used for a week, was going to work for her to-day. The birds that had come trooping back from wintering in the south—robins and blue birds, blue jays and woodpeckers, larks and yellow hammers—made merry din in the morning air. Shep, running on ahead as usual, disturbed half a dozen grouse from the underbrush in a little cañon, and the muffled roll of their whirring wings threw Shep into brief consternation and prolonged subsequent joy. She saw the bob and flash of a rabbit's tail, noticed again and again the lean, muscular body of a tree squirrel, heard upon a wooded slope the snapping and crashing of brush that told of the leaping flight of a deer. The woods were alive with animal folk, her "friends" called to her from every tree and tiny valley, they peeped out at her from burrows and hollow trees.

"We are going to quit being a little fool," she told Gypsy with tremulous emphasis. "And we are going to get a real picture to-day."

A day or so before she had heard with scant attention and no subsequent interest something which in the old careless, love free days sooner would have sent her riding this way in haste. One of her father's men, Charley or Jim, had found a dead cow under the cliffs and had seen signs of bear. He had returned to the spot later and had killed the animal, a she bear, and had seen one of her cubs making its swift, awkward way into the brush. Recollecting the story, and because to-day she yearned feverishly for something to do, Wanda turned Gypsy toward the cliffs, thinking

how she should like, if her fortune were very great, to be able to show Wayne Shandon when he did come to her, the picture of a bear cub playing in the woods.

"I've had so much fun hunting for him!" she would say then. And Wayne would never know how unmaidenly she had been.

Before she had come within a thousand yards of the place where the carcass of the cow was lying she slipped from the saddle and picketed Gypsy. Her lunch she left tied to the saddle strings; camera and field glasses went with her.

Already, in the fast advancing summertime, she had donned her hunting costume. The soft green of blouse and short skirt, of cap and stockings, blended with the many tints of green of the copses and groves and meadows through which she went swiftly and silently. She slipped from tree to tree, making no more sound than the chipmunk scampering almost from under her feet. Her eyes brightened, the colour warmed in her cheek, her heart grew eager. For, sure enough, fortune was good to her; there were two little bear cubs, round and fat and playful, rumpling each other where they rolled in the sunlight in a small grassy open space.

They were a hundred yards away when she saw them, too far for a picture; but as soon as her eyes fell upon them she vowed that she must have a picture. There was little breeze this morning in the quiet woods, but that little blew from where she stood straight toward the spot where the cubs were frollicking. She must circle, come out down yonder behind a pile of rocks, slip behind the great cedar right at the base of the cliffs, and edge on from there on her hands and knees.

But she paused a moment, fascinated, watching them. They were sitting up, their small brown heads shaking from side to side, their sharp eyes watching each other, their little red tongues lolling. They were such baby things, their awkward bodies so like the little bodies of babies just taking the first faltering step, that she wanted to rush at them and pick them up and hug them.

There was the angry snarl of a rifle, sudden and sharp and evil, and one of the little brown bears made an inarticulate whining moan and its playful spirit ran out in red to dye the grass. Its brother fell over backwards in its fright; there came a second shot, the whining of a bullet glancing from a rock, and the cub plunged into the brush. She saw it a moment, lost it, saw it once more running as only the frightened wild things can run as it sped down into a little hollow which hid it from the hunter and thus saved its life, and then she discerned it climbing wildly, clawing its terrified way up the great cedar against the cliffs. When no third shot came she knew that the hunter had not seen it and then, with an angry fire in her eyes, she turned to learn who he might be. Approaching her from the edge of the grove, a complacent smile upon his face, his rifle under his arm, was Sledge Hume.

"Oh!" she cried when he had come close, thinking that he must have seen her. "Why did you do that? It was like murder!"

He stopped dead in his tracks, and then swung toward her. He was so close that she saw a quick, startled look leap up in his eyes.

"Murder?" he said sharply. "What do you mean?"

He had not lifted his hat, it was not Sledge Hume's way to trouble himself with the small civilities. He came on again until he stood quite close to her, staring coolly into her flushed face.

"They were playing just like babies!" she cried breathlessly. "Why did you kill it?"

He laughed.

"Hardly for its skin, since I suppose it isn't worth much," he answered carelessly. "Hardly for its meat as I'm not going to trouble with it. Why, I suppose just for fun then. Because," his tone and eyes touched with a hint of contempt for what to him was a woman's squemishness, "because I wanted to."

Her eyes flashed her growing anger back at him.

"It was so unnecessary," she said bitterly. "They were playing so prettily and happily."

"I watched them for ten minutes before I shot," he said. "Their play was interesting, I'll admit. But they were bears, just the same. They'd grow up some day and I wonder if they'd take mercy then on a pretty little baby calf if they came upon it playing? Your father'd thank me, my tender hearted Miss."

She bit her lip and turned away from him. He watched her a moment, then called,

"Are you riding back to the house? My horse is right back there and I'll ride with you."

"No," she answered quietly. "I'm not going back just yet."

She walked on to where the dead cub lay—stood looking down on it a moment and then moved on. Hume watched her while he filled his pipe and lighted it, and went in turn to look at

his game. He turned the little beast over with his foot, noted with satisfaction the hole which the bullet had torn through the soft body, and then strolled toward his horse. Wanda saw him ride away in the direction of her home, smoking his pipe.

"All men like to hunt, to kill things," she mused. "Are they as cruel about it as he is? Would Wayne have watched the little things playing for ten minutes and then, when he tired of it, shot them in the midst of their play?"

Not until Sledge Hume had topped a gentle rise and dropped down and out of sight upon the farther side, did the girl turn quickly to the great cedar up which she had seen the escaping cub scramble. She was certain that he had not come down. When at first she did not see him she circled the tree slowly, expecting from each new angle to catch a glimpse of the roly-poly brown body. And when, after fifteen minutes peering upward through the widely flung, horizontal branches, she saw him, a swift inspiration came to her; her quarry had not escaped her yet.

The tree, one of the giants of her father's ranch that she knew very well, thrust its crest upward so close to the cliffs that many of the branches had been bent this way and that, flattening against the granite. The lowest limb, twenty feet above the girl's head, was as thick as many a tall tree hereabouts, and was like a giant's arm, bent at the elbow, thrusting the rocks back. She could make her way up this far, working along a ragged fissure in the cliff; thence she could edge out upon the broad limb until she came to the trunk itself. And once there, to Wanda in her hunting costume and with her knowledge of tree climbing, the rest of the way, from limb to limb, might be difficult but would certainly not be impossible or fraught with unaccustomed danger.

The cub had climbed until coming to a limb which like the lowest one scraped against the rock not half a dozen feet from the tapering trunk, he had crept out on it and was lying upon a ledge of rock. Wanda hoped that here was the opportunity of a lifetime. She would climb as high as that limb, and find the cub's flight shut off by the sheer wall rising perpendicularly behind him. Then she would make him pose for her, whether he liked it or not.

Flushed and panting the girl made her way upward until finally she caught with both hands the big lower limb. Field glasses and camera in their cases strapped to her belt in no way interfered with the free play of her muscles. She tested the branch a moment, smiled at herself for hesitating to trust her light weight to a thing which would have carried tons, gripped a firmer hold and swung free of the rocks. Here would have been a picture for her mother had she come with her this morning; the lithe graceful body swinging twenty feet high in air, only hard slab and broken boulder beneath her. Then she drew herself up as a boy does "chinning himself," threw a heel over the limb, and in a flash lay breathing deeply and triumphantly, the most difficult step of her climb achieved.

Slowly, steadily she made her way upward. In the main it was simple enough for Wanda for it was the sort of thing she did over and over week in and week out. Once, already fifty feet from the ground, she did something that would have been simple enough under other circumstances and yet which put a quick flutter in her heart. It was something which would have made the heart grow still in the breast of Wayne Shandon had he seen, which would have brought a paralysing fear for her to a man who loved life for the gamble in it and who took his chances recklessly.

She was perched fearlessly upon a sturdy horizontal limb, her body tight pressed against the trunk, her hands gripping at the roughened bark, steadying her as she balanced. A quick glance upward showed her a bare stretch of bole with the nearest limb on her side of the tree just barely beyond her reach. Slowly she straightened, lengthening her pliant body the imperceptible fraction of an inch, gradually thrusting her two arms up high above her head, still with her hands steadying her as they clung to the bark, her moccasined feet curving to the limb on which she stood. And now she could just touch with the tips of her fingers the broad branch above.

Then she did the thing which would have been simple enough had she stood on the ground instead of balancing high in air; she measured the few inches in distance, she drew her fingers lingeringly from the bark, holding them still above her head, she tautened the muscles of her splendid young body to the work they were called upon to do, bent her knees little by little, and then fearless still but agitated, she leaped upward, and grasped the elusive branch.

For a moment she swung there, secure now and confident, and then, as she had gained the first step in her climb so now she made this one. A slow tensing of biceps, a drawing up of the pendulous body, the quick flash of a heel thrown over the limb, and she lay upon it, laughing softly. It was good and glorious to be young, to have a body that obeyed one's will, to have a steady heart.

Presently she began once more to clamber upward, her way comparatively easy now. Thus at last she came to the branch upon which, as on a bridge, the little brown bear had crossed to the ledge of rock. And together there came to her a distinct disappointment and a pleasurable surprise.

Again the cub had slipped away from her; perhaps by now he was half a mile away and tumbling his awkward and terrified way among the crags.

From below the ledge had seemed to be four or five feet wide; now she saw that it was nearer ten. The conformation of the rocks, beetling above it, had led her to imagine that a straight wall of cliff rose abruptly just at the back of the ledge. In reality they overhung the rudely level space like out-jutting eaves over the sun-deck that might have been carved to his taste by some old cliff dweller in front of his solitary retreat. For there was a cavern here under the frowning brow of granite, different from the many caves of which the girl knew in the rugged mountains only in that it was so roomy and at the same time so secret a place.

Before she left her resting place, she saw the way the cub had gone. Leading upward from the extreme end of the ledge, at the right, there was a deep seam or crevice in the granite, almost filled and choked with fallen rocky debris from above, but affording a trail that even a man might travel to the top of the cliffs another fifty feet above. There was a quantity of fine sandy soil at the lower end of the narrow cut and on the edge of the ledge, and her trained eyes had slight difficulty in seeing the signs of little bruin's headlong flight. As he scurried upward he had left the marks of his toes in long unmistakable scratches.

"I wonder," thought the girl with a little thrill at what her fancy pictured for her, "if any of the rest of the family are at home?"

The mother bear had been killed; one cub was dead; the second had fled to the cliff tops. Here, where bears were growing scarcer every year, there was little danger of her meeting the *pater familias*. And yet—

"If I should meet a bear in there," she laughed to herself, "I wonder who'd be scared most?"

She made herself as comfortable as she could, drew her camera from its case, focused it upon the yawning, black mouth of the cavern and waited a patient quarter of an hour, noiseless and listening and ready. For she was familiar enough with the California brown bear to know that he will not attack when the way of retreat is clear; that while, after he gets into a fight he extracts a great deal of delight from it, still if given his choice he would rather run and keep on moving until he had covered anywhere from ten to sixty miles.

She made herself as comfortable as she could, drew her camera from its case, and waited a patient quarter of an hour

[Illustration: She made herself as comfortable as she could, drew her camera from its case, and waited a patient quarter of an hour.]

When nothing but silence answered her, she leaned out on the limb and tossed her hat into the mouth of the cave. After it she threw some big pieces of bark, making them land well inside with no little noise. As there was still no sound she waited no longer.

The branch out upon which she edged her slow way was both sturdy in itself and made doubly safe by the fact that it lay across the ledge, reaching with its tips to the rock wall at the side of the natural door. In a moment she had scrambled across, had leaped to her feet and was peering into the vast, shadowy interior.

There are few of us for whom a cave does not have a rare attraction, an appeal little short of fascinating, that has in it something of romance perhaps, certainly something of mystery and a dim, vague stirring of primitive and vital feelings, a shadowy harking back to the early life history of mankind. To Wanda Leland, in so many essentials a child of the wild, such a cavern as this was a bit of wonderland. Her swift running, pioneer blood tingled; her heart gladdened with a glow of discovery and exploration. Perhaps cave men had dwelt here, secure and watchful, in the forgotten ages; the idea thrilled. Certainly no man of her own time or her father's knew of the place: that thought made the spot her own, and intensified her eager delight in finding it. It had, to her sensitive, imaginative nature, an aura that she felt had clung to it always. It was a bit of the wild, the retreat of the wild things, sternly expressive of a savage grandeur.

Her sensations a strange composite of many dim, intangible, inexpressible emotions, Wanda tiptoed to the opening, paused listening, took two or three quick steps and was inside the cave. For a moment she fully expected to see the sight she dreaded, a pair of gleaming points of light blazing at her menacingly. And for a little she saw nothing but shadowy, unreal shapes. Her heart leaped wildly as the startling fancy came to her that these were the phantoms of the long dead time when men had lived here, ghosts of the older race.

Then she laughed softly again, once more accused herself of being "stupid," and began her explorations. Little by little as she grew accustomed to the scant light here she made out dim bits of detail. First she realised that her first conjecture had been quite right, and that this was the biggest cave by far that she had ever seen. She moved forward half a dozen steps, walking warily for fear of a fall and found that the light from the entrance died into deep darkness before it could search out the sides of the great cliff room. Then she went back out upon the ledge and gathered from the debris choked fissure an armful of broken bits of dry wood, twigs and needles from the cedar. In the pocket of her blouse were the matches which she always carried with her on her trips and in a moment a crackling flame near the cave door shot its wavering light deep into the dark interior. Then again she hurried in, eager to see what lay before her.

Nowhere was the rock roof lower than ten feet save where far back it slanted toward the floor. The floor itself sloped so gently toward the back that it seemed quite level. She judged at first glimpse, as the firelight drew from the gloom a glinting granite surface here and there, that the chamber was twenty feet wide, that it reached back into the cliffs some fifty feet. She moved back toward what seemed the rear wall, found the floor pitching steeply ahead of her, noticed a rush of fresh air stirring her hair and paused suddenly, listening. A low sound that at first she could neither locate nor analyse, came faintly to her as from a great distance.

With her hand on the rock wall she moved forward again slowly and cautiously. Still the floor pitched steeply as she went on, still the rush of air was in her face and with it the low rumble, growing more distinct. It was like nothing so much as rolling thunder, very far off, or the half heard beat of the ocean on a distant, rock bound coast. Again abruptly the way under foot grew almost level, she was on a plane some six feet lower than the ledge outside, and as she took another step forward, passing round a great slab of granite that jutted out in her way, she came upon an unexpected glint of light and a sight, seen dimly, that made her cry out in startled surprise.

From far above, from some indefinite, hidden opening; the light from the big outdoors filtered down upon her. There was a brooding dusk here made vibrant with the clamouring voice that was no longer like distant thunder but resolved itself into the echoing fall of water. Water that came from the darkness above, that flashed a few feet through the dim light, that leaped out and plunged into the darkness again, shouting and thundering as it dropped into a yawning ink black void rimmed with granite boulders. She crept closer, her ears filled with the din, her eyes bright with the strange, weird, almost unearthly beauty of the place. She crept so close, gripping one of the boulders with tightening fingers, that she could peer downward into the chasm that swallowed the water. It was only a small stream, such as is born in the High Sierra of melting snows, but its dizzy fall, its mad leaping, the echoes that were never still, caused a murmurous sound that swelled and lessened fitfully but was never still.

She found a loose stone and pushed it over the edge, leaning forward swiftly to listen, seeking to trust to her ears since her eyes could tell her nothing of the depth that lay below. She heard the stone strike, clatter against the rocky sides, strike again and again, the sound growing fainter until at last it was lost altogether in the noise of the water.

She stood up, drew back and looked across the chasm which lay like a gash upon the rocky floor. She judged it to be fifteen feet wide, maybe wider; upon the far side and perhaps fifty feet further back, there was a splotch of light indicating a way out there into the open day. But the bottomless abyss shut off all passage to the other side, its echoes growling threateningly as though they were what they seemed to the girl's quickened fancies, the restless mutterings of giant things imprisoned in the deepest bowels of the earth.

"If I ever wanted to run away from all the world," she mused fantastically, "I'd come here!"

And then, suddenly shuddering, she went back hurriedly to the open.

CHAPTER XII

THE TALES OF MR. WILLIE DART

Being a girl very much in love, her lover had been already as long out of her thoughts as he could ever be, and now he came back into them and became the centre of them.

She sat down just outside the doorway of the cave, hat, gauntlets, glasses and camera at her side, her knees clasped in her hands and stared away through the cedar's intricate, rustling needles and across the tops of the forest sweeping away from the cliffs across the verdant miles, and day dreamed. This newly found cave was her own, absolutely her own. No other man or woman in the world knew of it. She would come here again, always careful that no chance eye saw her; she would bring little things to make of it a lady's bower set above the leafy world. There would come, in due season, cushions which she would work secretly in her bedroom at home and which she would fill here with fragrant pine needles and sweet scented herbs; there would be a book or two; little, unused things would disappear from Julia's kitchen, a tea pot, a bit of coffee, knives, forks and spoons; and some day when the full summer had brought the sunshine that would dissipate the shadows of these last days Wayne Shandon would come here, would stand under the cliffs looking up wonderingly; would climb her magic ladder and dine with her.

As she sat, leaning back against the rocks, daydreaming as Youth cannot help doing, her eyes wandered far across her father's ranch. She found the view new to her. Yonder nothing but the fresh green of the tops fir and pine had thrust upward in the spring; beneath them, seen only now and then as it frisked out of shadow and glinted in sunlight, Echo Creek; beyond the creek—

She sat up straight, suddenly picking up her field glasses. Yes, beyond all this she saw the knoll upon which her father's house stood, even the building itself through its clump of cedars. But her glasses, raised higher sweeping back and forth, had found the river, and travelling on picked up the Bar L-M buildings and corrals!— Next time she would bring the larger glasses, and leave them here, hidden in the cave.

For a long time she gazed across the river, her heart beating quickly with the hope that she might see, somewhere in the wide view, the man who was in her heart. Finally, with a sigh, she lowered her glasses, letting them follow Echo Creek speeding down the long slope of her father's valley. And, doing so, it happened that there came into the disc of her vision a man whom she knew she had never seen before. For a few minutes she watched him riding up the valley, idly amused at the awkward manner of his progress. When his horse walked he clung tenaciously to the saddle horn; when the animal trotted he gave her the impression that at any step he was going to fall off. At last, when she had lost sight of him among the trees, and her interest lagged, she made her way down from the cliff, went back to Gypsy and turned her horse's head toward home.

The man whom she had watched clinging to his horse's back so desperately was not only a new-comer to the Sierra and a stranger, but a poor sort of person to be alone where there is a dearth of paved sidewalks and streets with names and numbers. He had lost himself many times since leaving El Toyon the day before, and now, with the main valley road as plain before him as a man could wish a road to be, he forsook it and came on blindly along a second road that the Echo Creek wagons had travelled last week for wood. And Wanda, riding down to the creek, met him when he had reached a state of perspiring despair.

"Say!" he called shrilly when, barely in earshot, he caught his first view of her. "Say, wait a minute, won't you?"

Wanda, smiling a little at the evident distress which gave her her first impression of the man, came on to meet him. She stopped Gypsy with a swift, gentle touch upon the reins, while he yanked his sweating horse about by pulling manfully at both reins held one in each hand.

"Say," was his next word of greeting, "ain't this the doggondest, peskiest wild man's land you ever shot a glimmer of your eye at? Gee, ain't it fierce, lady?"

Wanda's smile brightened in spite of her. He shook his head and pursed his underlip and mopped his reeking face.

"I'm just in a cold sweat all over," he confided ruefully. "What with the rubbing of this saddle on the outside,—an old pirate with eyes like a young sheep and whiskers like Santa Claus robbed me of twenty bucks for it back yonder in that jay town,—and my bones inside trying to poke through the skin, I'm just peeled like a seal whose skin some flash dame is wearing for a coat.

Say," with a groan as he shifted a little in the saddle which he blamed for his woes, "you don't live so awful far from here, do you?"

"No," she smiled. "Just across the valley."

"Nix on that!" he cried sharply, as if in sudden alarm. "They been talking that way to me ever since I got lost the eighty-second time. 'Down to a cross road,' they'd say, lying as would shame a second story man caught with the goods. 'Then turn to your right and go straight ahead and it's just a little piece.' I ain't ever hurt you, lady, and I wouldn't, not for a hundred dollars. But I'm awful sore being told it's just over yonder. How far is it, measured in something civilised, like blocks?"

He was the most anxiously earnest little man Wanda had ever seen, and the most dejectedly miserable. Still vastly amused she began to feel a little sorry for him. He was such a veritable babe in the wood for helplessness.

"Really, it isn't far," she assured him. "Just a trifle over three miles."

"Lord," he groaned, staring at her reproachfully. "The way you folks talk about distance out here makes my flesh creep. But, say, is that the nearest place?"

"Yes."

"Then can I go home with you, Miss? And will you scare up something for me to eat? I'm so starved I'd eat egg shells."

He was such a harmless looking, innocent, pitiable creature with his plaintive voice and childish eyes that her amusement turned to pity.

"If you are very hungry and tired," she suggested gently, "you can lunch with me now. I always bring something along to eat."

His eyes brightened and a smile set quick dimples in the round face. He released his bridle reins promptly, put his two hands on the horn of the saddle—Wanda noticed that they were hands like a girl's, soft and white with beautiful, tapering fingers and rosy nails—got a stiff leg over the cantle, wriggled over on his stomach and as his horse moved a little he fell off. For a moment he remained sitting.

"Birds was made to fly and fishes to swim," he remarked impersonally and philosophically. "Me, I'm going to walk after this. I ain't ever going to split myself in two over a horse again."

"You'll have to ride to the house."

"You don't know me, Miss. I'm Mr. Willie Dart, and when I make up my mind like I done just now it's final. I'll walk those three miles on foot, and when I can't walk no further I'll crawl, and when I can't crawl I'll lay down and die. But I'm through being a cowboy."

Thereupon he arose rheumatically, carefully dusted his gay checkered suit, gave much attention to the crease in his jaunty little hat, adjusted his bright blue tie, daintily tapped his cuffs back into his coat sleeves and bestowed a beaming, cherubic smile upon Wanda.

"Let's eat," he suggested.

She dismounted and spread out her luncheon upon the paper in which it had been wrapped, kneeling down on a grassy plot near the creek. Mr. Dart hovered over her in frank eagerness, giving vent to various chuckling sounds bespeaking deep satisfaction as he saw that there was cold chicken and ham, cheese and buttered bread. Then they ate, Wanda sparingly, pretending to have little appetite, Mr. Dart swiftly and joyously and noisily. And, with his mouth crammed full and his cheeks puffed out gopher-wise, he talked. He demanded her name and her father's business; he wanted to know what she was doing so far from home and if she wasn't afraid; he ascertained that buffaloes were extinct in this part of the West if they had ever been here which was to be doubted; he thrilled and drew closer to the girl upon learning that a bear had been shot near this spot; and, abruptly, he asked if she knew a guy named Shandon?

"Wayne Shandon?" she asked curiously.

"That's him. Red Head for sure, ain't he?"

She admitted that he was, hesitated a moment at his next question, and then answered it by saying that Mr. Shandon was a friend of her family.

"Good kid, ain't he?" he went on, a little flushed from his eating. "Friend of mine, too. We're great chums, me and Red. Ain't he ever told you about me, Willie Dart?"

"I don't think so. You have known him long?"

He poked into his mouth the last quarter of the sandwich in his left hand, secured a bit of cheese with his right, and answered:

"Long? Say, Wanda, I've known that boy since he was a kid! Me and him worked together and slept together and et together up in the Klondike all year back in ninety-six."

"Ninety-six?" she frowned. "Mr. Shandon wasn't in the Klondike in ninety-six! He was right here."

"Oh," admitted Mr. Dart easily, "I ain't sure it was ninety-six. Might have been ninety-seven. Funny he ain't ever told you about me. Never mentioned, did he, how we got into a snow drift one time and had to eat our dogs and I got him out final?"

"No," she said, wondering a little what sort of being he would prove to be if one came to know him. He did not look as though he had ever lived the rough life he mentioned so glibly; certainly his hands were not the hands of a frontiersman.

"Maybe it's because I made him promise not to talk about it," he went on carelessly. "The papers was full of it up there and I got kinda sore being made so much of. He's grateful though. But he hadn't ought to be. He more than squared the deal six months ago when we run up against one another in New York. It was this way:"

And asking no encouragement he plunged eagerly into his tale. It devolved from the first word that Red was sure a corker, a guy you could tie to until snowballs foregathered in a clime in which, according to popular fancy, they are an extreme rarity. He was on the dead level, he was at once a game kid and a red hot sport. Red had seen the name of his friend in a society sheet and had looked him up at the Astoria. Mr. Dart had been naturally overjoyed to renew acquaintance with an old pal. And as it happened Red was to step in between him and certain death.

Mr. Dart had been going it a bit and had got into a foreign set. He mentioned casually a couple of French dukes and a German prince with fat, puffy eyes. There were others of them. They had played cards together at one time and another and it seemed a general truth that foreigners were bad losers. Besides, one of the French dukes, a shiny man like a waiter in a cheap cafe, had a very lovely wife. Mr. Dart esteemed her with a snow white friendship. But the French Duke was jealous.

Mr. Dart's fine, white fingers gracefully annexed a piece of buttered bread and the tale went on. They had decoyed him to a dreary downtown haunt. They were all there, all armed with revolvers. In a moment it would be all night with Mr. Willie Dart. Enter Red, the game kid. A scene of thrilling unreality in which the game kid temporarily disabled or permanently crippled every man of the would-be assassins. Mr. Dart finished the tale and his bit of bread together, offering the thoughtful, concluding remark, that so much powder smoke in the close room had made him cough.

"You seem to be on very intimate terms with the foreign nobility," Wanda replied quietly, though she kept her dancing eyes away from him.

Willie Dart lifted his shoulders.

"Them rummies don't qualify for finals, when you come to know 'em, Wanda. Honest, they don't. I never got the mit of one of 'em in my fist it didn't feel like a dead fish. There ain't a one. Say! Didn't Red ever tell you about Helga?"

"Helga?" She shook her head. "Who is Helga?"

"The only decent piece of nobility I ever sat across the table from," enthusiastically. He had produced a pack of Little Soldier cigarettes and lighted one before resuming. "She's Roosian, is Helga; a Roosian Princess. Funny Red never told you about her. Gee, he's just like an oyster, that kid, ain't he? Here's the straight dope on that business; I know because I was along."

It seemed that Mr. Dart and Red had been two of a fashionable yachting party that had gone frisking down under the Palisades and out into the open sea. The Princess Helga, a sure enough stunner, take it from Mr. Dart, had the men all dippy from the crack of the gun to the break of the tape. He admitted with a sigh which absorbed a great deal of his cigarette smoke, which after an eloquent pause made pale exit through his nostrils, that he hadn't got over her effect on him yet.

Well, they were out beyond Sandy Hook, and the wind was blowing and the white foam flying and the yacht beating it down the coast like the mill tails of—like anything, you know. Suddenly there was a scream and the Princess Helga was overboard. The yacht passed her about a half mile before anybody thought about turning it around, they were all that excited. But Red, say he didn't lose his head two seconds, not him. Say, he was overboard like a shot, and he had gone down under the water and had come up with the Princess Helga in his arms. After that—

Well, Mr. Dart rather guessed, with another sigh and subsequent expulsion of cigarette smoke, that it was a pretty hard case. The Princess Helga hadn't looked at another man since.

Wanda having conceded merrily that Mr. Dart's tales were intensely interesting and marked by the ring of truth, was further informed concerning the private affairs of Mr. Dart himself. He

had taken the notion to come out and see his old friend; his one reason in the world for being here lay in that determination.

"I'm surprising him," he admitted complacently. "Red'll be clean tickled to death to see me. Most likely we'll go into business out here together. I'm looking for an invest—"

Suddenly he let out a wild scream, scrambled to his feet, and fled behind Wanda, his ruddy cheeks suddenly paling.

"My God!" he chattered. "Look at that thing!"

Wanda looked and saw what since a child she had called a "Snake-lizard," a very frightened snake-lizard at that, which with tail aloft was scampering wildly from near Dart's place at luncheon into the nearby thicket. Her own sudden fright that had been aroused by Dart's headlong dash and piercing yell gave way to a peal of laughter.

"Look here, Wanda," he said sharply. "On the level, that thing ain't deadly, is it? I been setting on it for half an hour, I know. It might have been biting me all the time, I'm so numb I wouldn't have felt it."

She assured him, chokingly, that there was no cause for alarm. Dart rubbed himself and brightened. But his face fell again as she went on to inform him that the creatures were so numerous that in his walk home he might encounter a dozen.

So it was that Mr. Willie Dart changed his mind and decided to ride the three miles across the valley.

CHAPTER XIII

SLEDGE HUME MAKES A CALL AND LAYS A WAGER

"Now, my erstwhile Noble Benefactor, brighten up and look happy. I've got some red, white and blue news for you. I like you first rate, I'm strong for the grub and I guess I can stand for the country being stood on edge. I've come to stay!"

The door had been flung open and Mr. Willie Dart came gaily into Wayne Shandon's bed room carrying a big book in his hands, trailing a long wisp of fragrant smoke from one of his host's cigars behind him. Shandon looked at him with a sober, thoughtful frown, and seemed in no way hilariously impressed with Mr. Dart's glad tidings.

Already the latter had been at the Bar L-M several days. During this time Shandon had not seen Wanda; he had come close to blows with Ruf Ettinger; he had been variously and grievously annoyed by Mr. Dart; certain other matters had gone wrong; and altogether he was in no pleasant mood.

"Look here, Dart," he replied savagely, kicking off his boot so hard that it struck against the far wall of the room, and continuing his undressing with a fierceness that brought a momentary speculative squint into Mr. Dart's innocent eyes. "What's your game, anyhow?"

"Game?" Willie Dart put a great deal of reproach into his tone. "Nix on that, Red, old sport. When a man travels three thousand miles in a damned stuffy car and then on top of that rides a horse like I did clean over the backbone of the universe, just through gratitude to his Noble Ben —"

"Oh, damn the gratitude," cried Shandon. "I'm tired of hearing of it. I most heartily wish that I'd let matters take their own course."

"Now," resumed Dart, again smilingly, having softly closed the door and made himself comfortable in a chair, "what's the use of pals getting off wrong with one another? You slipped up and got your tongue twisted when you said what's my game. What you'd ought to have said was what noble purpose is kicking around in my manly boosum. You don't seem to put any faith in me, Red."

Shandon's short laugh prefixed his short answer.

"Do you wonder I don't?"

Then Mr. Dart chuckled.

"Come right down to it, Red, I don't! But you wrong me. Gratitude, my Noble—"

"Call me that once more and I'll heave you through the window," snapped Shandon. "If you've got anything to say, say it. I'm going to bed."

"Don't mind me," Dart hastened to say. "It won't bother me at all. What I was going to say was this: Here I've come all the way from New York—"

"No doubt because you were run out!"

"Just through a sense of gratitude. What can I do to show that gratitude has been the only worry to keep my appetite down to capacity? I've been here a week, ain't I? Well, the first thing after I got rested up which has been about four days now, I begun thinking about that. And it come to me like this: Old Red's got troubles; he needs a friend that would live in a temperance town just to help him. Here's a place for Willie Dart to fit in and do some good!"

Shandon groaned.

"If you start in—"

"I've started already," beamed Dart. "I ain't had much time for fine work, yet, and I don't know the play quite as well as I might, but I've been planting little seeds of kindness promiscuous."

"What do you mean?" frowned Shandon.

"Now don't go to getting excited. I'm going to tell you, ain't I? First place, the day I got into these forests primeval, I run across a fairy that could be Mrs. Willie Dart in a minute if I wasn't sworn to single harness by my dad on his dying bed down in Argentine."

"Last time he died it was in Nova Scotia," remarked Shandon drily. "Go ahead."

"As I was saying she was fine and foxy," resumed Dart pleasantly. "We made up a little lunch and went out for a picnic, just her and me. Soon as we got to feeling like old friends and I found out she knew you, I said, 'Look here, Wanda—"

"What!" cried Shandon, bolt upright.

Mr. Willie Dart blew a playful puff of smoke at him and picked up the tale:

"I said, 'Look here, Wanda—'"

"Wanda who?" sharply.

"Leland, of course. Wanda Leland. Got it now? How am I ever going to get anything said if you keep butting in like that, Red? I said, 'Look here—'"

"You look here!" muttered Shandon. "I don't like to hear you talk about her at all. If you've got to do it, call her Miss Leland. Understand?"

"Aw, rats, Red. What's the use of that kind of talk between friends? She don't care."

"Well, I do. And I mean it."

"Oh, all right. Well, anyway, we was setting on a log together and we got to talking like fellers and girls do, you know. Good God, Red, quit your glaring at me like you was an old tomcat screwing yourself up to jump a mouse. I never kissed her even, I swear I didn't. I found out she knew you and I begun right then being a real friend. Say, Red, if you could have heard the fairy tales I dropped into that fair maiden's pearly ear!"

His dimples twinkled and danced and deepened upon his round face. Shandon, staring at him fearfully, demanded to be told what the fairy tales had consisted of. Willie Dart eagerly complied.

"I set right in watering your stock, old scout. I told her you were a hero and a guy a man could trust a gold watch to that didn't have any marks on it to prove who it belonged to. I begun by informing her how you came to my rescue when a hard fate had me on the embers of despair."

"You told her that?" in amazement.

"Oh, don't get alarmed. I set forth the account in such a way that while your part was not lessened my own was not exactly—"

"In other words you twisted it entirely out of shape," laughed the other. "You forgot to say that a detective nabbed you while you were picking my pocket and that I—"

Willie Dart raised a soft white hand.

"I showed her how you saved my bacon," he said easily. "What's the difference how you done it? Then, when I got through that and I could see she was thinking what a grand man you are and she never noticed it before, I slipped a card off a fresh deck and related your adventures with the Roosian princess."

The dimples that had fled as his host mentioned a certain word which Mr. Willie Dart did not like to hear now came back. Shandon stared at him wonderingly.

"What in the devil are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the Roosian princess," chuckled Dart. "I told Wanda all about her, what a nifty dame she is, you know, and how you saved her life and how she put her arms around your neck and cried and—"

"Good Lord," groaned Shandon. "I could wring your neck, Dart. What in the world made you lie to her like that?"

"This here is a prime cigar, Red. Better send for a fresh box, this one is drying up. Now, I'm going to tell you something: My mother was a fortune teller and maybe that's why it is, but anyway I can dope up what people are thinking lots of times. I hadn't any more than said Red Shandon to her than I got wise to that little girl's trouble. Say, Red, she's just naturally stuck on you! It's a fact! Now, when a woman's stuck on a guy, what's the way to make her go clean nuts over him? What's the answer? Why, just tell her about the other woman like I told Wanda about Princess Helga."

"Helga?" cried Shandon in sheer wonder. "What Helga?"

"The Roosian princess," beamed Willie Dart.

"Dart," very sternly. "You lie to me now and I'll wire the police of New York that you are here. I ought to do it anyway; I would have done it when you came if I hadn't been a fool and you hadn't filled me up with your lies until I was sorry for you. Why did you say Helga? Where did you learn that name? What Helga do you know?"

Dart hesitated briefly, his childlike eyes smiling frankly, the shrewd side of his strange brain very busy.

"When you took me up to your room that day in New York and threw some grub into me," he replied at last with apparent carelessness, "and left me for a minute, why I just sort of looked things over. There was a letter with Helga signed to it. The name's awful funny, ain't it? She is Roosian, ain't she?"

"What do you know about her?"

"Just that she was much obliged to you for the information you promised to send her about something or other. It ain't anything to send you up the river for, Red."

"What did you tell Miss Leland?"

"Miss Leland? Oh, Wanda, you mean." Mr. Dart repeated the tale he had told Wanda with the many fanciful embellishments which it seemed necessary for him to give to any story that he found it necessary to repeat.

"I sure enough boosted your game, Red. Say, kid, it worked for fair. You ought to have—"

Even after the threats which Wayne Shandon made to him that night Willie Dart stayed on. Shandon declared he would drive him off the place with a buggy whip, and Willie Dart said that he'd come back if he was chased away. Shandon mentioned the police of New York, and Dart asked him reproachfully if he delighted in wounding him in his most sensitive part; wanted to know if his Noble Benefactor was the sort to drive a man back into the mire he had just emerged from, to thwart all effort to lead a pure, sweet, rural existence. Finally Shandon contented himself by forbidding Dart to meddle in the future with anything not in any way a part of his own business; and nourished the secret hope that a few weeks of the humdrum of mountain life would tire this sparrow of the city gutters. Whereupon, when alone with his big book and a fresh cigar, Willie Dart soliloquised as follows:

"He's up against a good many things, poor old Red is. He's as bad in love with Wanda as she is with him. Her old man is soured on Red and is making the toboggan slide all bumpy. Then there's some sort of trouble with Ettinger. There's a deal on somewhere I ain't wise to, and Red ain't in on it. Wanda's old man is in on it, so's the Weak Sister, meaning Garth, so's a gent name of Sledgehammer Hume. I guess time's ripe for little Willie Dart to mix in and see what's what. He's a square kid, is Red, and I'm going to help him put his affairs in order."

And then making himself comfortable as he pondered in the biggest chair in the well furnished living room, he sighed, twisted his cigar a moment thoughtfully, sighed again, put his feet on the table and turned to the pages of the big book. His fancy was caught by numerous and attractive illustrations in a volume dealing with the mythology of the ancients, and he was soon convinced that he was acquiring a scholarly knowledge of the history of the old Greeks and Romans.

Wayne Shandon was distinctly surprised the next morning as he entered the corral to encounter Sledge Hume sitting a sweating horse and evidently in wait for him.

"You were looking for me?" he asked shortly. The last time he had spoken to Hume was to quarrel with him, and to be drawn into hot words with Arthur because of him. He made no pretence at making his tone more than coldly civil.

"Yes," returned the other as bluntly. "I rode over from old man Leland's on business."

Shandon frowned. His quick thought was that Martin, unwilling to communicate personally with him, had sent this envoy. With this idea in mind he said,

"If Mr. Leland has any business with me—"

Hume laughed his short, insolent laugh.

"I didn't say I came on his business," he said.

"I just stayed over there last night and came on this morning, early, to catch you before you left the house. It's my own business, Shandon. I'm not in the habit of taking other men's worries on my shoulders."

"What is it?"

"Just this!" coolly. "Whenever I hear of any money lying around loose it's as good as mine unless some other fellow beats me to it. You must have done a whole lot of talking; anyway word has gone all over the country, clean down to my place and beyond, that you're putting on a horse race. How about it?"

"I don't see just where you come in?"

"You will in a minute if you care to. I hear the race is to be pulled off the first thing in the spring, as soon as the snow's gone? How about it?"

"Correct."

"You're going to ride, of course?"

"I am."

"Little Saxon?"

"Yes."

Hume eased himself in the saddle and looked down at Shandon keenly. A little sneeringly he demanded,

"What are you going to make it? A little penny ante game?"

Shandon stared at him curiously. Hume laughed again under his gaze and said arrogantly, after the born manner of the man,

"If you'll make the stakes worth a man's time I'll make you hunt your hole, Shandon."

A little flush crept up into Shandon's cheeks and his eyes hardened. It would be so easy to quarrel again with this man; the very sight of him, supremely egotistical and contemptuous, stirred a natural dislike into something very close to positive hatred. But these days he was making it his business to hold himself in check, he was turning his back against the old headlong ways, and he said quietly,

"Make your proposition. I see you've got one to make."

"I'll ride you any race you like, anywhere you like and at any time; provided it's a gentleman's game and not penny ante."

"Done," answered Shandon promptly. Had he refused it would have been the first time in his life he had refused a wager offered as this one was. "Name the sum and if it's anything I can raise I'm satisfied. And," his eyes steely, "*I'll* name the sort of race!"

"Some one said that you were going to start things with a purse of five hundred," remarked Hume. "I don't do business on that scale. I'll lay you an even thousand."

"I'm pretty close up right now," was Shandon's answer. "I've spent a good bit lately and I don't want to sacrifice any more cattle. But—"

"Oh, well," laughed Hume, "it doesn't make any difference. I thought that you might have a little sporting blood, you know. You must have done a lot of talking, Shandon."

"—but," Shandon went on, his voice raised to cut into the other's jibe, "I can sell a few cows if necessary. And while I'm doing it it is just as easy to raise five thousand as one."

"Oho!" cried Hume. "Little Saxon is proving up, eh?"

"Little Saxon can beat his brother Endymion any day in the week in the sort of race we're going to run. It's going to be ten miles, across country, across the damndest country you ever saw, Sledge Hume! It's going to be a distance race and an endurance race. And since it's going to be here in the West it's going to be Western. I don't care if you run or don't run and I don't care if it is for five cents or for five thousand dollars."

There crept into Sledge Hume's cold eyes a look of such shrewdness that Shandon was struck by it then, and remembered it long afterward.

"When I go into a deal," was Hume's swift answer, "it's because there's something in it. You put up your five thousand if you're so cocksure, and put it up now and I'll cover it! With one thoroughly understood provision, Shandon. The man who comes in first at the end of that ten miles, be it you or me, gets the money. There's going to be no chance to get cold feet and pull out. If you don't ride at all, if you get scared and decide to get sick or break a leg to save five thousand, I ride alone and get it just the same. Remember I didn't ride over this morning for love of racing or for love of anything else; I saw a chance for some money, easy money."

"Draw up an agreement to that effect," answered Shandon, a darkening of his eyes showing that Hume's taunt had stung. "I'll sign it. Find a trustworthy man to hold stakes and I'll put up my five thousand within ten days after you put yours up. Is that satisfactory?"

Hume answered that it was, and named two or three men in El Toyon as possible stake holders. When he mentioned Charlie Granger, proprietor of the El Toyon hotel, Shandon said curtly,

"Charlie's all right. He's square."

So the matter was decided as coolly, and apparently with as much indifference, as if it had been a matter of no particular importance. Hume made no pretence of desiring to continue a conversation that would be a mere waste of time and words now that his business was done, and swinging his horse about raked it with his spurs and galloped back toward the Echo Creek. Wayne Shandon, suddenly a little thoughtful, turned and went to the stable. Little Saxon jerked up his head and looked at his master with glaring, untamed eyes.

"We've got to get busy, Little Saxon," he said, looking with critical eyes at the lithe, powerful, rebellious body.

"Say, Red! Ain't you on to his game?" Shandon had not noticed that Willie Dart was anywhere near, but was hardly surprised when the little man popped up, wild eyed and excited. "Once you get your cash down he's going to put you out of the running! That guy'd put ground glass in a baby's milk bottle for the price of a beer. Gee, Red. You sure enough do need a keeper!"

Which position Willie Dart was already seeking manfully to fill.

CHAPTER XIV

IN WANDA'S CAVE

Willie Dart's sunny nature seemed to grow ever brighter as the days wore on. Once or twice he sighed at Wayne Shandon's failure to respond to his levities; and when he felt particularly unappreciated he carried his dimpling personality to the bunk house where he was hailed with delight. When a flask that had come in with Long Steve, who had made a brief trip to the outer world, disappeared before that joyous gentleman had consumed half of the potent contents, and when later the empty flask was found in the covers of Emmet's bunk, Willie Dart looked on with sorrowful, innocent eyes while Steve and Emmet resorted to physical argument. When a game of crib was being played while half a dozen men looked on, and a portion of the deck vanished, only to turn up ten minutes later in the hip pocket of Tony Harris, who had not once been near the table and was most thoroughly mystified, no one thought of blaming the cheerful Mr. Dart. It was only when he offered privately to collect for Big Bill a debt of six bits long owing to him from Dave Platt that the real gift of those wonderful hands of his began to be at all apparent.

Then, too, the method of his progress over the range was another source of unfailing delight and unbounded admiration. He had ridden a horse to the Bar L-M, but no man of them ever saw his little legs astride a horse again. He found, back of the blacksmith shop, the wreck of an old cart which years ago had been used for breaking colts; he improvised shafts and seat; he discovered the encouraging fact that Old Bots, a shambling derelict who had lost an eye when Wayne Shandon was quite young, was gentle and trustworthy. After that, wherever he went abroad, and he travelled all over the countryside, he rode in the cart, steering Old Bots this way and that with much shouting, prodding and jerking of reins. And he drove where perhaps no man had ever driven before. His smiling confidence in Old Bots, in his rattling, creaking old cart, in

his own ability as a driver were all characteristic of his joyous optimism.

In the meantime Wayne Shandon had at last seen Wanda. His reasons for making no effort to see her immediately after his heated interview with Martin Leland were clear in his own mind; he expected to find that they had been equally as clear to her, and that she would have understood. But the Wanda he found one riotously brilliant morning was rather cool, distant, unapproachable.

He had ridden up on the cliffs which towered at the upper end of the Echo Creek ranch, from which he could look down the valley and see her when she left the house, as he felt confident that she would. He saw her when it was not yet nine o'clock. She was riding out across the valley toward the cliffs opposite at the north end of the valley, toward the cave she had found there. Shandon marked the course she was taking, swung his horse across a ridge and hastened to the meeting with her. He came upon her as she dismounted near the big cedar against the rocks.

"Wanda!" he called softly.

She turned toward him, her face paler, he thought, than it should be. He slipped from the saddle and came swiftly toward her, his eyes shining, his arms out. Then she raised her hand, stopping him.

"Good morning, Wayne," she said quietly.

"Wanda," he cried, a little perplexed. "What is it? Aren't you glad to see me?"

She smiled, put down the parcel she had been carrying, and perched upon a big broken boulder forcing her eyes to look merrily into his. And what she read in his look sent a quick, glad flutter into her heart. But she did not let him know it.

"Glad to see you?" she replied gaily. "Why, of course I am. But," teasingly, a little cruelly, "aren't you the least bit afraid?"

"Afraid of what?" he asked blankly.

"Of papa!" she retorted, her dimples playing because she meant to look as though she was quite a heart whole maiden, and because the very ring of his earnest voice swept away all the uncertainty that had come to her during these last days of waiting. "You are on his land, you know."

"Surely you don't imagine—" he began.

She laughed lightly.

"My dear Wayne, how should I know?"

"I don't understand you, Wanda," he said a little stiffly. "After what happened the other day —"

In spite of her a little glowing colour ran up into her cheeks.

"Goodness," she exclaimed, persisting in the part she had vowed many times a day she would play for him, "haven't you forgotten that? Really, after you'd had time to think about it didn't you have to laugh? Weren't we a couple of precious kidlets?"

For a moment he stared at her as though dazed. This was a Wanda he had never seen before; he did not know what to make of her. And then suddenly he put his head back, the gladness that had sung in his heart when first he rode to meet her surged back and he laughed the great, deep, happy laugh the girl knew so well.

"You little witch!" he cried gaily, as gaily as Wanda had spoken at first and more genuinely so. "You've just set out to plague me. And I'll show you how I treat little girls who tease!"

Without more ado he came close to the rock upon which she sat looking down at him with demure eyes, swept her off into his arms and kissed her before he put her down.

"Now, Wanda Witch," he said softly, his eyes laughing into hers. "Are you sorry? And do you love me so hard it almost hurts?"

"So," she said when at last he released her, not certain in her heart that she had held out quite long enough, "that is the way you treat little girls who tease, is it? All little girls who tease? The 'Roosian' princess, for instance?"

"The *what*?" he demanded, having for the moment forgotten Dart's wild tale.

"Helga," she told him quite as seriously as she could, rearranging her disturbed hair and meanwhile looking up at him with eyes that were beginning to defy her and smile.

As he remembered, as he thought of the things Dart had told her to "boost his game" he became for one of the rare times in his life just a trifle embarrassed. She must think him a fool

for letting that little cur yap all kind of nonsense into her ears, or the ears of any one who would listen. He flushed under her teasing eyes.

"I'm going to wring Willie Dart's little neck the first thing when I get home," he said. "Look here, Wanda—"

"Oho!" Her brows lifted and she looked at him speculatively. "So there really is a Helga, is there?"

But he was laughing again, again threatening to kiss her adorable red mouth if she did not behave and tell him all about herself.

"If you had really wanted to know couldn't you have ridden over sooner?" she asked.

Then he told her why he had stayed away, how he had wanted to see her every day, how he had thought that she would understand.

"Your father forbade me the ranch," he reminded her. "At first I thought that it would be impossible for me to bring myself to set foot upon property belonging to him. I thought of sending word to you by Garth, by Dart even, asking you to meet me somewhere, anywhere that I would not be trespassing. And, dear, even before I would ask you to meet me, if you still cared!" with mock seriousness, "I wanted time to fight things out with myself, a few days in which to see if there was not some way out better than this one. I hoped, even, that your father would change his mind, that he would be fair with me as it is his way to be. And then at last, when I could not wait any longer, I came. And now, my Wanda Witch, I am going to stay until you come and put both arms around my neck and admit that you love me so hard that you've been perfectly miserable since you saw me!"

"And Helga?" she insisted lightly but with just a hint of curiosity.

"If you go on that way much more," he assured her, "I'll say, 'Damn Helga!' Tell me about yourself."

There was much to tell and it came at last as they sat together under the cedar, oblivious of the world about them, careless of what might lie in the future for them. There was the story of her rides, the murder of a bear cub, the meeting with Willie Dart, and—

"And, first of all," she cried triumphantly, "the discovery of a wonderful secret."

She refused to tell him what it was until he obeyed her bidding. She sent him scouting to see that no human eye could spy upon them, and then she sent him climbing the cedar.

"What's this?" he rebelled. "At least tell me whether I'm supposed to gather an armful of clouds or wait until dark and bring down some stars."

"Go straight up until I tell you to stop," she laughed. "And be sure you don't fall."

"Would you care very much, Wanda?" he asked loverlike and foolishly.

"I should," she informed him, her eyes twinkling. "For I shall be climbing right under you."

"Oh, I know, then. We're going to heaven."

And up he went. Laughing, calling back and forward like two children, their hearts gay and surcharged with something sweeter than mere gaiety, they made their way steadily, he always above, she just below him and carrying the parcel done up in a newspaper.

"You might at least let me carry our baggage upon our journey," he offered more than once. But she insisted that this too was a part of the secret.

At last he came to the limb that lay out across the ledge of rock and would have kept on climbing, he was so busy looking down at the rosy face that was looking up at him. But she commanded him to use his eyes for something else than just to make love with, and he understood.

"You mean to say you've been up here before? That you've gone out across that sort of a bridge?" he exclaimed in amazement. "Aren't you afraid of anything in the world, Wanda?"

"Yes," she answered. "Yes, to both questions. I'm inclined to be afraid of spiders; I think that I'd be afraid of an alligator. And now the secret!"

"A cave," he cried. "Way up here! How in the world did you happen to find it?"

When he had crossed first and given his hand to her she came swiftly to his side, thanked him with a nod and set him to work.

"This is my own private estate," she told him. "No one enters my portals until he has been invited. You are not invited yet. In that seam in the rock you will find plenty of wood and dry

cones. If you'll put them at the doorway I'll let you know when you can come in. And, Wayne—"

"Yes?"

"No one knows of this place except we two. Keep behind the cedar, won't you, so that if any one should be about you won't be seen?"

Wayne gathered great armfuls of wood, piled cones conveniently, and in the meantime got no single glimpse of the interior of the cavern. For Wanda had slipped within, had drawn over the wide opening the screen of branches her own hands had made against the occasion, and was completely hidden by that and the curtain which reinforced it against a ray of light. He could hear her singing softly, happily as she went back and forth. At last her voice came to him, calling merrily.

"You may come in, Mr. Shandon. Don't bring the wood with you yet; just come to look and admire."

He thrust aside the screen, stepped through and his short exclamation amply repaid her for the many hours of preparation.

A dozen tall candles burned here and there, set into niches in the rough walls, gummed in their own grease to knobs of stone, their pointed flames standing still like fairy spear blades menacing the shadows which still clung to the lofty ceiling. Giving added light was a blazing fire of pine cones at the far side of the cave, near the mouth of the passage leading to the cleft where the water shot down. Strewn across the whole floor, masking its rough surface, were pine needles which, while they made a thick mat underfoot, filled the cave with their resinous tang. And there was another odour, agreeable, homelike. Shandon looked again at the fire; set on each side of a bed of coals were two flat stones, perched on the stones a battered, blackened old coffee pot.

"I called you a witch, didn't I, Wanda?"

"You might at least have called me a Fairy," she retorted, her eyes bright with the joy of a day-dream come true.

"Did you conjure this out of a broken eggshell with a wand? Is this how you got your name, Wanda?"

She took him on a tour of exploration, pointing out each little thing which she had already seen alone, which, when she had seen it had promised her a day like to-day when she could show it to him. They went down the sloping passageway and stood for a little while silently before the chasm with its din of falling waters. They speculated upon what might lie upon the farther side if a man could cross. They came back to the fire and Wayne was shown how the air drew through the cave so that the passageway at the back gave exit to the smoke. They had just a peep, for Wanda would allow him no more now, into a hidden recess not five steps from her fireplace where there were mysterious packages hinting that they might be bacon and butter and sugar and coffee. And then they came back to the screened entrance and stepped outside. Wanda held up her field glasses to him.

"Look out that way," she ordered him. "No, Goosy. Not at the trunk of the tree. Between those two branches yonder. What do you see?"

He adjusted the glasses while she watched his face. And he found the clearing about the Bar L-M headquarters, the buildings themselves set upon the knoll.

"It's wonderful," he cried. "Why, we could signal—"

"Wait a minute," she interrupted brightly. "This isn't your discovery, not a bit of it. It's all mine and I'm jealous of it. And I've thought it all out. Now, if you'll come inside we'll have a cup of coffee and a sandwich which you'll eat politely just as though you were hungry."

"I'm starved!"

"And I'll tell you *my* invention. First, though, while I serve luncheon you can be the hired man and bring in all your wood. I'm perfectly willing to be cook but I refuse to get my wood any longer."

When he had completed his task he came to her. She had poured two tin cups of coffee, sweetened and cooled with condensed milk, and upon a clean piece of bark served her sandwiches. And they sat on the floor upon heaped-up pine needles and she told him her plan.

There was an old spy glass at the Bar L-M, wasn't there? All right. Then his first duty when he got back home would be to spend a patient time locating with it her cedar and the cliffs back of it. To-morrow morning, early, she would be here—no, no. Not in the cave nor even upon the ledge outside; they must guard so carefully against their secret being lost; but upon the big boulder at the top of the cliff. She would have her field glasses. He could step out upon the front porch at the Bar L-M, and if any of the boys were about he could pretend to be looking idly at a herd of

cows somewhere, or at a hawk or at anything but at her. They could see each other quite distinctly.

"If it wasn't so far we could talk on our fingers!"

"Do I have to remind you again that this is my discovery, my invention?"

She tried so charmingly to be severe, and failed so delightfully that he assured her he was going to put down his coffee cup and come over and kiss her. But when she threatened that if he misbehaved she would not stir out of the house again for a week he sighed and finished his coffee and listened obediently.

"Suppose," she went on, "that you stood very still on your porch, both hands holding your spyglass? That would mean one thing. Suppose you leaned lazily against the door post? That would mean another. If you came down the steps, if you took off your hat, if you put on your hat, if you sat down on the bench, if you turned your back to me, if you lifted both arms above your head as if you were yawning and stretching, if you stooped to pick up something, if you stooped once, walked five steps and stooped again—don't you see that even with your whole outfit looking on we can say 'Good morning,' and 'Good night,' and anything else we choose to say? Isn't it splendid?"

For an hour they worked on what Wayne termed the Wanda-code. She had a pencil and tiny memorandum book and they made duplicate copies of their code of signals as they worked them out. Thus:

1. Standing straight, both hands up—I love you, dear, with my whole heart. (That was Wayne's contribution to the code, and he insisted that it be number one in the book.)

2. Leaning against a tree or post—I must see you immediately.

3. Removing hat—Be careful. We are being watched.

4. Turning back—Something has happened to prevent our meeting to-day.

5. Stooping once—That's all. Good bye.

And so on until there were no less than two dozen signals each with its meaning, each to carry across the miles a lover's message.

They agreed upon the exact time when every day their love would laugh at the miles separating them; an early hour when they had waited just long enough to give Wanda time to ride hither and the Bar L-M men time to have gone about the day's work. And if Wayne were not upon his porch then Wanda was to understand that he was already riding to meet her.

"But your mother," he said. "Doesn't she often go with you?"

"Not when I want to be alone," Wanda smiled back at him. "Mamma knows, Wayne."

"You have told her? Your father told her?"

"It isn't something that papa talks about, dear. I told. And, Wayne—"

Suddenly they ceased to be children playing and became very serious. For while the love brimming their young hearts had been like a fountain from which laughter bubbled up, still its song had not deafened their ears to the murmur of life about them. There were things to be told each other, questions to ask and answer, their own future to look soberly in the face.

Day after day Shandon had looked for word from Martin Leland, had counted on receiving from him an offer for the water to be employed in bringing fertility to Dry Valley. He told her of Ruf Ettinger and his counter scheme, how close he had come to being drawn into it; he wondered if something had happened to cause Leland and Hume to give up their proposition.

No, whatever this proposition was they had not given it up, Wanda was sure of that. Her father was away much of the time; she knew that he had been often in Dry Valley, that he had had some sort of dealings with Ruf Ettinger. She had heard him say to her mother last night that the man was a hog, that when offered an unheard of price for his land he had held out for something still better, and that Leland had broken off negotiations with him entirely. Yes, it must be the same proposition about which Ettinger had gone to Shandon. Strange that Garth had not told him anything. She knew that Garth regularly met her father and Sledge Hume; she knew that whatever the business was that had drawn Leland and Hume together had drawn Conway into it also.

That matter finally disposed of, left with the unsatisfactory conclusion that Garth had his own reasons for remaining silent, and that Shandon would soon hear from Leland, Wanda broached the other subject which had all along been the one cloud upon her happiness. Driven to the rim of her mind by her gayer moods it was still there, sinister and black upon the horizon.

"I should have told you the other day," she said slowly, "the day when we found so much else to talk of. You will understand why papa has refused to let you come to the house."

"What is it, Wanda?" he asked eagerly, hoping there would be a direct charge so that he might vindicate himself.

"Have you no idea, Wayne?" a little curiously. "Have you never had a suspicion of the reason that makes papa hate you so?"

"He disliked my father—"

"It is not that. Maybe that makes him the more ready to suspect you—" And then she blurted it out, a little defiantly, laying her hand softly upon his arm. "He thinks, he has thought all along, that you killed Arthur!"

He stared at her gravely, the shock of such a charge too great to be appreciated to its fullest extent in a moment.

"He thinks that I killed Arthur?" he repeated incredulously. And then, bitterly, "My God, Wanda. This is too horrible."

"Listen, Wayne. We must talk this over calmly and see what is to be done. You see papa has disliked you because he hated your father. Oh, it's unjust but it's so human! He has believed all the hard things men have said of you and they have said many. He knows that the day before Arthur was killed you and he quarrelled. Then you went away, you were gone a year and he didn't think that you would ever come back. You came back, you made me love you. Believing as he did, papa did the natural thing when he refused to let you come again."

"He had no right to believe it," he cried angrily. "I shall tell him so. I shall make him tell me of a single thread of the wildest circumstantial evidence to point to this hideous thing!"

"It will do no good," she said simply. "Nothing in the world can be done unless—oh, I have thought so much about this, Wayne—unless the real murderer can be found. Surely if you offered rewards, if you hired detectives, if you talked with MacKelvey—"

"Wanda," he interrupted, his voice at once stern and troubled. "Do you remember when you gave me the revolver that morning? I didn't explain to you, even you. I couldn't. If I went away and stayed so long, if I didn't remain here doing the thing you suggest, offering rewards, hiring detectives to hunt his murderer down, couldn't you guess why? You found the revolver that killed him."

"Wayne!"

"And the day Arthur and I rode into El Toyon I gave the thing to him. It was his own then. He shot himself. God knows why. I should have spoken then, I should have told MacKelvey, your father, every one. But I hated to, I hated the thought of it, of having people know that Arthur had committed suicide, of having men talk of it. I thought that there would be investigations, of course, but that they would die down. I knew that no man would be accused; it was my secret. I would keep it for Arthur's sake."

He broke off sharply, moved strongly by his own words that conjured up something he had striven manfully to shut out of his mind, strongly moving the girl who heard him. She watched him with piteous, sad eyes while he strode up and down, back and forth in the candle lighted cave. Suddenly he stopped, exclaiming bitterly,

"Your father thinks this of me. Who else? Does half the countryside believe me a murderer? Does Garth believe it? Does Hume? Does your mother?"

"I don't know what Garth and Sledge Hume think," she answered. "I do know about mamma. Wayne, even she was afraid at first, even mamma. But she knows you too well, dear. She says that you are the other Wayne Shandon, over and over; that you may have been a spendthrift and a brawler,—forgive me,—dear, but that you have always been an honest and manly man. She knows that we love each other, Wayne. She knows that I have expected to see you. Isn't that enough?"

"Next to you, Wanda, she is the sweetest woman in the world." He took the girl's hands in his and stood looking down at her gravely. "And you, you have never been afraid? You recognised the revolver, you brought it to me. Are you very sure—"

"Kiss me, Wayne," she said for answer.

And yet, when they parted lingeringly, the little cloud was still upon the horizon, the uneasy feeling of uncertainty upon them. If, at this late hour, he went to the sheriff and told the truth, what would be the result? Would it sound like the truth to MacKelvey? To Martin Leland?

CHAPTER XV

WILLIE DART PICKS A LOCK

The summer sped by like one long golden day under its rare blue sky; yet always upon the horizon was that single black cloud. Not until summer had gone its bright way and winter had come, locked the mountain passes and departed again, was the way to be made clear.

If Wayne Shandon could have had the opportunity to act at once when Wanda told him the reason of her father's open enmity he would have gone immediately in his headlong way to MacKelvey. He would have told the sheriff his own version of the tragedy; he would have recounted the finding of the revolver by Wanda, her giving it to him, his certainty that Arthur had taken his own life. But having promised Wanda to do nothing rashly, without again talking with her, having pondered deeply as he rode back to the Bar L-M and during the days which followed, he came to see sanely that for his own sake and for the sake of the girl he loved it would be better if he held his peace until time and thought brought clear vision.

He was already suspected by Martin Leland, perhaps by MacKelvey himself, perhaps by many men among whom he came and went. Would the story he had to tell lessen suspicion in any single breast? Would it not rather give the sheriff just such a bit of evidence as he had long been seeking?

Much alike in one great essential Wayne Shandon and Wanda Leland had hearts that were tuned to happiness. To such people it is easier to be gay than sad; the trouble, stern as it was, that had entered their lives so early was less than the brightness which dissipated all other troubles but that one. Good fortune had disclosed to them a meeting place as high as the waving treetops where no one's curious eye would penetrate; they could converse across the miles almost as people may call across a street; they could be together two or three times a week without their world knowing. These things gave wings to the summer.

They were busy days, clad in action, crowned with dreamings. Wanda's cave became a dainty bower for a fair lady. Across the cliffs, by tortuous trail, it was a scant five miles to the little mountain town of White Rock. Many a dim morning before the shadows lifted to the rising sun the trail had echoed to the clanging hoofs of Shandon's horse as he rode down and back, bringing a surprise for Wanda. A packhorse had brought in supplies, bought in Shandon's own reckless way, which when piled high against the rock walls made Wanda gasp and ask him if he thought that she was going to take in boarders. There were camp stools, there were rugs. A tiny sheetiron camp stove came one day, and when Wanda put her rosy face through the screen that Wayne had substituted for her old one, her nostrils were assailed by the odours of boiling coffee, frying bacon, sizzling apples and burning bread.

There were strings of onions, and potatoes popping out of their bag before the summer died; a side of bacon swung against a ham where Wayne had driven a dead branch into a crevice in the rocks; there was a table he had constructed rudely but securely; there were books on it; there were candles burning everywhere.

"Because," he had laughed at her surprise, "winter will come one of these days, and do you think that I'm not going to see you until it's gone again? Oh, I suppose I'll have to be down at the lower pastures with the stock, but I'll get up here now and again. Then when a fine day comes and you want a long ski ride, you'll know where to come, won't you, Wanda? Where a hot luncheon will be waiting for you? And, who knows," he whispered, "maybe we'll spend our honeymoon here sometime!"

Shandon at first had thought of going to Garth Conway, of asking him frankly what the deal was in which he and Sledge Hume and Mr. Leland were interested, and if they were counting upon needing the Bar L-M water as Ruf Ettinger had told him they were. But in this matter also had he altered his first quick decision. He had always liked Conway, at least, without thinking a great deal about it he supposed he had, for the very simple reason that they were cousins and had, in a way, grown up together. But on the other hand they were men essentially unlike, in no respect congenial. They had never been confidential; were they the only two men in the world it is doubtful if one would have carried his personal thoughts and emotions to the other. That little reserve which had always existed, scarcely noted by Wayne Shandon, was suddenly a wall between them. This was Conway's business; if he chose to keep it his secret from his cousin, Wayne Shandon was not the man to ask him to talk about it.

Moreover, perhaps even more important now than that consideration, there was another. Leland and Hume had at least been upon the point of going into this matter just before Arthur's death, and they had taken Arthur into their confidence. Perhaps he was to have been one of their corporation when one was formed. Now that Wayne owned the Bar L-M and the water, the logical thing for them to do was to come to him. They had brought Garth into the circle of their endeavour; they had ignored Shandon. A little hurt at the obvious significance of this Shandon shrugged his shoulders and resolved that when the first word was spoken it would not be by

himself.

And soon he came close to forgetting it. The incentive to bestir himself had at last come into his life and he was not loitering. Little by little, through long talks with Garth, with Big Bill and other men of his outfit, he came to have a grasp upon the work which should have been his a year before, and an interest in it. Only now for the first time did he take the trouble to learn the real meaning of resources and liabilities; to estimate profit and loss; to speculate upon success in the business which he found rather larger than he had suspected. He called a round-up to learn to the head how many steers and cows and calves carried the Bar L-M brand. He brought a quick look of surprise that was close to suspicion into Garth's eyes by asking casually just what sums had been taken in during the last year by sales of beef, how the money had been reinvested, if there was a surplus in the bank. He went into the matter of the wages of all of the men, and learned that Garth himself was drawing the same salary he had drawn under Arthur.

"Oh, I'm not thinking that you're holding out on me," he laughed at Garth's expression. "I've just begun thinking that it's about time I'm doing part of my own work. So everything you got out of the sales last year you slapped back into the business, buying more cattle?"

"I sent you four thousand, you remember," Garth reminded him.

"You don't quite get me, Garth. What's left of that four thousand wouldn't buy a sack of tobacco. We haven't banked any cash, have we?"

Even now Garth hesitated, Garth's way. Then he answered.

"Arthur left fifteen hundred in the bank. I haven't touched that, of course. If you haven't—"

"I didn't know it was there," laughed Wayne. "When I pulled out and gave you my power of attorney I let everything slide off my shoulders on to yours. Is that all?"

"I banked pretty heavily from sales," Garth went on. "Under my own name, as it saved trouble and I didn't know when you'd show up. I drew out again, for the men's wages, for a few improvements and running expenses, for the other cattle I bought. I've got the vouchers, if you want to see them."

"I don't want to see them."

"There is still something left," Garth said, his voice careless, his eyes glancing up at Shandon and down again. "It's still in my name. About four thousand."

"Good boy," cried Wayne. "That's going to save me some trouble. Will you give me a check for it, Garth?"

"It's yours," Garth replied, going to look for pass book and check book. But when he returned he could not refrain from asking, "What are you going to do with it, Wayne?"

"Double it!" laughed Shandon. "Bet it on a horse race, my boy! But look here," seriously. "I want only five thousand. Counting the other fifteen hundred there's something over that. You've been working like a dog for a year, drawing just foreman's wages while you've been taking the owner's responsibilities. I'm going to shove the other five hundred down your throat as the rest of the unpaid wages due you, or a bonus or whatever you like to call it."

And as Garth's momentary stupefaction was followed by what threatened to be very profuse thanks, Shandon fled to the stable and Little Saxon.

Already word of the race to be run in the springtime, in June when the snows would be gone, had travelled up and down the country. Sledge Hume's money was in the hands of Charlie Granger at El Toyon, and the order signed by him to turn over the five thousand dollars to the man who came in first, himself or Wayne Shandon, containing the clause which he had insisted upon, making it clear that if only one man entered the race he was to take the money.

Five thousand dollars wagered on a single race; Red Reckless and Sledge Hume riding; Endymion, who had already shown those who knew him that for beauty and speed and endurance he was the peer of his aristocratic, thoroughbred sire and dam; Little Saxon, whom men knew yet only as a wild hearted colt being tamed by a man who knew horses and who was willing to lay five thousand on him against his brother; the course a ten mile sweep of mountain and valley, of broken trail and grassy meadow, leading from the high lands to the east of Bar L-M and Echo Creek, ending at the Bar L-M corrals; this one event was enough to draw the attention of men up and down the cattle country, in the mining towns and lumber camps. Word of it went everywhere; letters came to Wayne Shandon from other men who had horses, who suggested this, that and the other race, who sought to find men to cover their bets.

It would be an all day meet; the Bar L-M outfit would entertain generously; there would be barbecued beef; every one was welcome; big wagons would be busy a week beforehand bringing in enough food for a small army. Any man had the opportunity of entering his own horse with these provisos: this was to be a Western race in all essentials; the horse must be Western, born and bred, the man who owned it must ride his own horse. There would be no professional

jockeys; there would be no bookmakers.

News of the race, before the winter had come, more than six months before the day set in June, had gone over the crest of the Sierra and appeared in the papers at Reno. It had flashed across telegraph wires to Sacramento; had been talk for a day in many a place where sporting men foregather in San Francisco. Men who had never heard of them before came to know of Sledge Hume and Wayne Shandon, of Endymion and Little Saxon. And still Little Saxon was but a half broken colt.

"It's all right," grunted Willie Dart to himself, kicking his heels from the top of the corral and watching his Noble Benefactor risking his life in the company of a great, belligerent red-bay horse. "It's all right, seeing I'm here. Suppose I wasn't, suppose I was still dodging cops on Broadway, then what? Then Sledgehammer Hume would put some death-on-rats in Hell Fire's hay, or pick Red off with a shot gun, and who cops onto the five thou? A man don't have to have a fortune teller for a mother to get wised up to that."

Little by little the proud spirited horse learned his lesson. He came to see that his destiny lay in the hands of the man who came out to him daily. He gave over trying to beat the man to death with his flying heels; he no longer sought to tear at him with bared teeth; he recognised that it was as futile to seek to hurl the man from his back as to break the strong cinch which held the saddle; that he might run until he killed himself, but that he could not run away from the man who rode him and laughed. He learned that in this world that had been so utterly free for him there was one single being who was his master in all things, whom he must obey. And, when obedience came, pleasure in that obedience followed, and trust and faith and love.

That year winter came in as it had not come to these mountains for twenty-seven years, early, unheralded and hard. The cattle and horses had not yet been moved down to the lower ranges when one day, in mid-afternoon, the air thickened, bursting black clouds drove up from the southwest, the forests rocked moaning and shuddering under the smashing impact of the sudden storm, the sun was lost in a darkness that grew impenetrable toward the time of dusk, and the skies opened to a downpour of rain. For upwards of an hour the great drops drove unceasingly into the dry ground while giant daggers of lightning stabbed at the earth that seemed to bellow its torment in reverberating roars. Then the slanting rain stopped as suddenly as it had begun, the wind went howling through the forests and was gone, and in the stillness which ushered in the true night the snow began.

All night it snowed, steadily, without cease. The morning dawned wanly on a white world; distant peaks and ridges were blotted out in the grey, snow filled air. Men who were careless yesterday became to-day filled with an activity which was swift and tireless. In candlelight and lamplight they dressed hurriedly and made speedy breakfasts. This storm might be nothing but a warning of winter; it might be the first day of a snowfall that would continue for two weeks. In any event it was high time to have the cattle on the run to the lower valleys.

"Two days of this," grunted Big Bill as he kicked his way viciously through the snow already over ankle deep on the way to the stable, "an' the passes'll be so choked up we can't whoop the cow brutes through 'em. An' me, I ain't hankerin' after totin' a bawlin' calf under each arm, nuther."

All day long, upon the Bar L-M and the Echo Creek, men were riding deep into the sheltered ravines, bringing out the stock, heading the stragglers westward down the valleys, gathering the different herds into one on each ranch to crowd them out of the belt of hard winter. Many men rode many miles that day, changing their horses at noon, making a hasty meal when they could, riding again.

Always before this year the herds of the Bar L-M had been pushed across the bridge or made to swim the river where it was wide and shallow, and driven across a corner of the Echo Creek ranch by the most direct route out. But this year Wayne Shandon briefly gave new orders, telling his men to keep on the Bar L-M property as long as they could, then to throw the herds across the ridge to the south and along a harder, longer trail to the county road ten miles further west. He offered no explanation, his men asked none. It was but another indication to them of the thing which was already no secret, that there was some sort of serious trouble between Wayne Shandon and Martin Leland.

Wayne and Garth intended to stay that night at the range house, being the last two men to leave, after attending to the countless little things which must be done about a ranch before it is abandoned to the winter and solitude. They planned to follow the rest of the Bar L-M outfit in the morning.

Even Martin Leland who usually moved his stock early had been caught unprepared. The fine weather preceding the storm had tricked him; he had not planned the drive until two weeks yet. He, too, having worked with his men all day, having ridden the first half dozen miles with them, came back to spend the night at his home.

That afternoon, while the men of both ranges were doing two days' work in one, Willie Dart

called upon Wanda. Mr. Dart made it a part of his business in life to be on good terms with every one. He ignored the contemptuous grunts of Wanda's father, and in speaking of him referred to him as, "My old pal, Mart." Martin tolerated him, Mrs. Leland was amused by him, Wanda welcomed him as coming from Wayne's home, as always a possible bearer of tidings from Wayne himself. And such he was to-day.

For there had been no time for signalling, the snow had veiled the cliffs across the miles, and Wayne must send word of his sudden necessary change of plans. So he entrusted a note to Mr. Dart, having first sealed it in its envelope and informed the carrier that if he pried into it the police in New York would learn by telegraph of the present whereabouts of Mr. Dart.

Wanda and Dart were alone in the big living room while Mrs. Leland was busied with Julia in making preparations within the house for the siege of winter. As she left the room Mr. Dart winked slyly at Wanda, tapped his breast pocket, winked the other eye and assumed the air of a man bearing secret and very mysterious messages. In due time he brought out the letter, the flap of the envelope showing so little sign of having been tampered with that it was not to be expected that the eager girl would note it. Mr. Dart afterwards admitted that he prided himself upon the appearance of that envelope, all things, including inclement weather, considered—and presented it with a whispered,

"Red wouldn't trust anybody with it but me. Say, he's some kid, ain't he, Wanda?"

Beaming on her like a cherub in checked suit and brilliant necktie, he approached a little nearer and whispered again,

"Me, I'll just mosey out on the porch while you flash your eyes over Red's handwrite. Delicacy's my other name, times like this."

Still beaming he winked again, still winking let himself silently out of the front door.

Considering that all Wayne Shandon had to write a letter about was to tell Wanda that he was hurrying out with the herds to-morrow, that when during the next few weeks he could get back he would signal with smoke from the cliffs above her cave, it must have taken him a long time to say it. Considering how little she had to read Wanda must have been very deliberate in reading Wayne's scrawl. At any rate, long before she had finished, Mr. Willie Dart had gone silently down the porch, peered in the kitchen window at Mrs. Leland and Julia, continued on to the door of Martin's study and let himself in. The door had been locked, at that, when Dart's beautiful fingers first touched it, and they had done what Mr. Dart himself termed "plying his profession."

"I ain't had a chance like this since I was three," Mr. Dart told himself contentedly. "Honest, I ain't. Now, if these nice old country gents think they can put over something with my old pal Red, and me not know just how they're figuring on the skinning party, they better wise up."

He closed the door silently, and any sound he made might have been that of a pin dropped on a thick carpet. He surveyed the room with eyes that missed nothing.

"I knew it," he smiled, as though at the sight of an old friend as he found the safe in the far corner of the room. "I heard your door shut the other day, old party, when I was chumming with Wanda and you and the rest of the combination was talking war talk. Not to waste time we'll begin with you."

It was an old safe, an old, old make and style, and Mr. Dart sighed and shook his head a little disappointedly as he knelt, brought out of his pockets a set of bright, new tools and set to work.

"Any time," he mused when the door swung open, "that they put a pal of mine out of the running they better get up-to-date."

CHAPTER XVI

AND SOLVES A FASCINATING MYSTERY

Riding furiously with the fury of the storm as though swept onward with it, looking the very spirit of the wintry season that is made of black nights and cold, bright days, a woman was hastening upon a jaded horse toward the Echo Creek ranch house from the direction of El Toyon and the railroad. She rode well, sitting straight in the heavy saddle, and she rode hard. When the horse stumbled or floundered in the loose snow she jerked angrily at the reins and cut sharply with her riding whip.

She entered the yard and rode up to the porch while Wanda was still deep in Wayne's letter, while Dart was forming his lips to a soft, silent whistle over a document which had passed from a drawer of the safe into his caressing white fingers. The woman dismounted quickly but a little

stiffly as though from cold or fatigue, and fastening her horse's reins with numb, gloved fingers hastened up the steps to the living room door. She rapped loudly and Wanda, thinking that this was but a further evidence of the fact that one of Mr. Dart's names was Delicacy, called out, "Come in."

It was with a little start of surprise that Wanda saw her. A young woman, twenty-five perhaps, of that rare sort of personality that asserts itself in a flash. Exquisitely cloaked and furred, clad from tiny boots to cap in black, her hair black, her eyes large and luminous and black. Furs and cloak failed to hide the erect gracefulness of the slender form, the poise of which as well as the carriage of the head indicated an imperious disposition. The woman was undeniably beautiful, her loveliness the delicately featured, perfectly chiselled beauty that is called classic. The fur cap upon the small head was snow encrusted and sat upon her cold beauty like a coronet; under it the escaping tendrils of jet black hair were fashioned by the cold into a glistening mesh of silver threads.

"This is the Leland place, isn't it?" was her abrupt greeting.

"Yes," Wanda replied, not yet quite recovered from the surprise of the sudden vision.

"You are Wanda Leland, I suppose?" the cool, deep-throated voice went on as the black eyes flashed critically from the girl's face to her house dress, her pumps, the letter in her hands, her face again.

"Yes," Wanda repeated quietly. She disliked the little air this woman had about her, the subtle hint of patronage and superiority, but her natural wish to be hospitable to a stranger driven hither by the storm made her seek to ignore this first impression.

"I'm Claire Hazleton. I've just ridden in from El Toyon. My horse is done up, I'm afraid, or I shouldn't have troubled you."

Wanda's quick, ready smile flashed out at this and she came forward, putting out her hand.

"I'm glad that you did come," she said cordially. "You must be tired to death and simply frozen. If you'll come up to the fire and take off your things I'll make some tea or coffee."

Claire Hazleton's slim gloved hand accepted Wanda's, touching it lightly.

"You are too kind," she began formally. "If it wouldn't be too much bother—"

"Nonsense," laughed Wanda. "If you'll make yourself cozy at the fire I'll be back in a moment."

Hurrying out, Wanda had a glimpse of Willie Dart standing on the porch, his hands in his pockets, his big innocent eyes beaming approvingly at the snow and the sky and the world in general. As she went on her way to the kitchen, Mr. Dart, having in turn looked approvingly at her, shifted his gaze to the panting saddle horse standing with drooping head at the steps, and then, putting his hands under his coat tails, he returned to the living room. Claire Hazleton had just removed her outer wraps and was warming her hands at the fire. Mr. Dart, noticing the cluster of rings on her fingers, flapped his coat tails up and down and closed the door behind him with his elbow.

"Say," he began pleasantly, "it's fierce outside, ain't it? Talk about a slush party. Ain't this a ring tailed dandy?"

She turned upon him slowly and bestowed upon him a long stare, frankly curious. Then she laughed.

"It certainly is a ring tailed dandy," she admitted musically. "You aren't Mr. Leland, are you?"

Dart laughed too, his amusement apparently as genuine as hers, and entirely unabashed by the unconcealed appraisal of her glance at him.

"You're joshing," he retorted, coming closer so that while he could look at her he could turn his coat tails to the fire. "There's as much difference between me and my old pal Mart as there is between you and a picture of a little country girl picking buttercups."

"You don't think I look the part?" she smiled.

"You?" He favoured her with the full measure of his supreme impudence as he looked her over. "You're just built to play the queen's part in a tragedy show on Broadway. After the first night there'd be just one theatre doing business."

She frowned quickly, her eyes darkening as they had when she struck with her whip at her tired horse. Then she shrugged her shoulders and laughed again.

"You're very flattering," she said in a way which made Dart look at her sharply and which for a very brief time left him a little uncertain.

"Me?" he said. "You wrong me, lady. Honest you do. I'm sired by a gentleman who was a Baptist minister and who instilled in his only son if you lie once you'll do it some more and then you'll get caught. Say, seeing Wanda ain't here to do the knockdown stunt, I'm Dart, Mr. Willie Dart, to command."

He bobbed her a bow, accompanied the ceremony with a little flap of the coat tails, and all the while did not shift his round, inquisitive eyes from her face.

"Being acquainted now," he went on when a little pause assured him that she was not going to respond with an exchange of names, "just make yourself to home, won't you? I'll duck in and tell Wanda you're here. And," merely as an afterthought, "what name will I say, lady?"

"Don't bother," she replied coolly. "She knows I'm here."

"Does she? She hasn't been expecting you, has she?"

"No." Miss Hazleton's interest in the little man had evidently died a sudden death, and her one concern now seemed to get herself warm and dry.

"She's one great little kid, Wanda is, ain't she?" he ran on, totally unaffected by the significance of the young woman's back whose graceful curves were not lost to his admiring eyes.

"If you say so she must be," came the calm answer. "I never saw her before to-day."

"And you don't know old Mart?" She did not know Wanda, he surmised, she had wondered if he were Leland, then it must be Mrs. Leland she had come to see. "Say," he continued, "maybe Wanda couldn't find Mamma Leland! I'll just slip in and break the news. Gee, won't she be tickled to see you, you coming unexpected like this?"

"Really, Mr. Dart," she told him crisply, "you needn't take the trouble. Mrs. Leland wouldn't be the least bit glad to see me as she doesn't know me. And if you haven't discovered the fact already I might as well tell you that I am eminently capable of managing my own affairs."

Mr. Dart's silent whistle came very near being audible. But he answered in a voice which was meant to assure her that his sensitive nature had not been hurt and that his admiration had merely been stimulated.

"That's me," he said brightly. "Give me the dame every time that makes her own play and don't yell, 'Help' if she sticks a pin in her finger. Them doll-babies some guys go dippy over don't qualify for the finals with me."

But Mr. Dart was puzzled. She had ridden here through this storm, she had come all the way from El Toyon, for he had not been inattentive while he had been just outside the door before Wanda left the room, and she did not know a single person on the ranch. The very reason for her presence here was a challenge to Dart's peculiar temperament.

"Tell you what I'll do," he resumed, "I'll take that skate of yours down to the barn and throw some hay into him. He looks like it would do him good in case the shock don't undermine his system."

He made his hesitant way toward the door, his pride a little wounded at being defeated in the initial skirmish, his confident optimism looking forward eagerly to a more skilful attack. And then a word from Miss Hazleton brought him back to the charge.

"Don't trouble to take the saddle off," she said without turning. "I shall be riding on as soon as I have my tea."

Riding on? Where? The very course she had come pointed at one place.

"It's quite a ways to Red's," he said quickly. "You better take it easy and rest up a bit."

"Red's?" she condescended to ask.

"Sure. Shandon's, you know. You're headed for the Bar L-M, ain't you? Say, I'm going back that way myself pretty soon. Suppose you come along with me? I got a cart. It ain't much to look at but anyhow it beats pounding saddle leather. We can lead your skate, if you want to."

And rather to Dart's surprise she answered promptly,

"Thank you. That will be better. But in any case don't unsaddle. And when you come in will you bring the little bag strapped behind the saddle?"

Wanda returned then, bringing the tea and a hastily prepared lunch. Dart winked at her as he went out. He led the shivering horse at a trot to the barn.

"Now," he grunted in a mournful tone that spoke of disappointment and hinted at disgust, "wouldn't you think, to look at her, that dame had more stuff in her head than to do a trick like that?"

For the little black bag was locked and the key was gone, and the lock was a thing to make Mr. Dart sigh and shake his head as he had done over Martin's safe.

"I'll get so used to turning baby tricks," he mused, "I won't be able to do a real man's work. Well, it can't be helped when a man's putting in time in a place like this. Now, Lady Clamshell, we'll take a peep and see if your baggage—"

The bag was open, its contents rifled by slim, white fingers that seemed, each one, endowed with a brain of its own. In an incredibly short time various negligible feminine articles had been examined and replaced very carefully and exactly, a handkerchief without so much as a laundry mark, a silver vanity set with no monogram, and then came the reward to Mr. Dart's curiosity. It was a card case half filled with calling cards.

Mr. Dart did a thing he had rarely done in his life. He swore. He said:

"Well, I'll be damned!"

And being alone, speaking confidentially to himself, he may have meant it. He looked as though he did.

"You are very kind, Miss Leland," the new-comer was saying quietly. "I should like to accept your hospitality further. It has been a pleasure to meet you, I am sure. But you will infer from my being abroad at all at a time like this that my errand is urgent. I must be going immediately."

Mr. Dart came in at this juncture, his expression void of all emotion except a deep, unhidden admiration which embraced the two women, both of whom he felt honoured in including in the list of his friends.

"Miss Hazleton," began Wanda, "I didn't introduce you to Mr. Dart."

"He did," replied the other briefly.

"Sure," supplemented Dart. He handed the black bag to its owner and asked casually, "You're strong for hitting the pike right away?"

"If you are ready."

"Right-o, Miss Hazleton," he answered, pronouncing the name as though he enjoyed the sound of it. "I came over on some hurry-up business," with a sly look at Wanda that brought a little flush to her cheeks, "and I didn't unhook. Old Bots is pawing the earth and snorting his eagerness to help out. Say the word and we're off."

Involuntarily Wanda showed her surprise at the arrangement. It was the first word she had had of their way lying together.

"The lady's going over to the Bar L-M," Dart remarked as he observed Wanda's look. "She's a friend of Red's."

"Oh," said Wanda.

She strove immediately to act and speak as though there were nothing unusual in the situation. Miss Hazleton put on her coat and furs again without volunteering further information, while Dart hurried away for his own cart and her horse. Wanda accompanied them to the porch, saw them seated and starting and then returned to the house with a little hurt feeling in her heart which she knew was foolish but which she could not drive out. If Claire Hazleton and Wayne Shandon were upon such intimate terms that she made this trip to see him, it was a little strange that Wayne had never so much as mentioned her name to her.

"Wait a minute," cried Dart, jerking his horse up short before they had gone fifty yards from the house. "I forgot my gloves."

He shoved the reins into his companion's hands, jumped down and running back burst in bright faced and eager upon Wanda, startling her with the sudden unexpectedness of his return. With his finger upon his lips, his air surcharged with mystery, he came close to her.

"Have you wised up?" he whispered. "Got next to who the mysterious fairy is?"

"She's Miss Claire Hazleton," said Wanda a little stiffly and a bit puzzled.

"Rats!" grunted Mr. Dart putting much eloquence Into the monosyllable. "That's a bum monniker out of a French love story. It's the Roosian princess. It's Helga, that's who it is!"

He slipped a little engraved calling card into her hand, winked into her amazed eyes, drew a pair of gloves out of his hip pocket, crumpled them in his hand and hastened back to the cart.

Wanda stared a moment at the card. Then she flung it from her and with blazing eyes

watched the flames in the fireplace lick at it.

CHAPTER XVII

"WHERE'S THAT TWENTY-FIVE THOUSAND? WHAT'S THE ANSWER?"

The little clock in Wayne Shandon's room maintained stoutly in the face of the gathering gloom outside, in defiance of the lighted lamp upon the table, that it was still an hour before sunset. The snow was still falling steadily, thickly, swept here and there into shifting mounds, choking the mountain passes, robing trees and fence posts and buildings, each feathery flake adhering where it struck softly as though it had been a gummed wafer.

"Garth and I will have to get out to-morrow," Shandon muttered, drawing off his heavy coat and tossing it to the chair across the room, "or we'll have to beat it out on snowshoes—I wonder what's keeping Dart?"

There came a rap at the front door and Shandon, supposing that already his question was answered, called, "Come in."

"You never can tell what that little devil will do next," he grunted. "Snoop into a man's private business every time he gets the chance and then stand outside knocking at the door in a day like this. *Come in*."

Then, when the knocking came again, louder, insistent and imperative, he realised that there was the bare possibility that the thumb latch had caught and, crossing the room he jerked the door open.

"Is this Mr. Shandon?"

The cool, confident voice though a woman's was not Wanda's, and Shandon realised that he had been a fool to let his heart leap as it had when his eyes made out through the murkiness that it was a woman.

"Yes," he answered, wondering.

"May I come in?" she asked a little impatiently. "I have come a long way to see you."

Wondering more than ever he threw the door wide open, showed her the way into the living room and lighted a lamp. There was no fire in the room but she went quite naturally to the fireplace. He glanced at her sharply, knew that he had never seen her before for he would have remembered her, understood that she was a woman of the cities, and said,

"Are you very cold? Just a minute and I'll have a fire going. I came in only a moment before I heard your knock."

She did not speak until he had gathered an armful of wood from the box at the side of the fireplace and had flung it upon the blaze that a match had started from a bit of paper and some pitch pine. Nor did she seem in haste to speak even then when he stood across the hearth looking at her. But not for a second had her approving eyes left him; no opportunity had they lost to watch the man's face intently.

"Where did you come from in all this storm?" he asked curiously.

"Remotely, from New York. Immediately from El Toyen."

"Lord!" he ejaculated. "You must be dead. I'll get you something hot, some coffee. We haven't any tea, I'm afraid."

She laughed coolly, evidently quite at home with him.

"If a man came in, frozen stiff, would you offer him a cup of tea?"

"What do you mean?" He had started toward the kitchen, and stopped.

"I mean brandy, if you've got any. It would do me a lot of good. Wanda Leland just poured some tea down me and I didn't want to shock her."

Wayne stood frowning at her a moment, a question on his lips. Then he went to the kitchen and got a bottle and a glass. She had drawn a chair close up to the fire when he returned and was leaning back in it luxuriously, her feet thrust out to the blaze.

"Thanks," she said, taking the glass he handed her. "I am drinking to our better acquaintance."

She set the glass down upon the arm of her chair, half emptied, and smiled up at him.

"I want a good long talk if you can spare the time. Can you?"

"Of course," he said briefly.

"It is my particular desire that no one but yourself hears what I have to say."

"No one is here except Garth and myself. And Garth hasn't come in from the corrals yet."

"Excellent." Her black eyes flashed from him to the various rude appointments of the room, flashed back to him. "I am Helga Strawn," she said abruptly.

He repeated the name after her in surprise:

"Helga Strawn?"

"Yes. Perhaps you guess right away what has brought me West, to you first of all?"

"No," he said. "I don't think that I do."

"Then I'll tell you. That's what I am here for. Don't begin to think that I saw a picture of you somewhere and fell in love with it."

The finely chiselled lips, too faultlessly perfect at any time to be warmly womanly, were suddenly hard. Her eyes had become brilliant, twin spots of colour came into her cheeks.

"At least you remember my name?"

"Helga Strawn? Yes, I remember it. You learned from a mutual acquaintance that I was in New York some time ago. You wrote me then. You are a cousin of Sledge Hume."

"Not exactly a cousin," she corrected him. "I am not so proud of the relationship as to wish to make it closer than it is. But that does not matter. You remember also why I wrote you?"

"Yes. You said that yourself and Hume had inherited equal interests in the Dry Lands. That through letters Hume had persuaded you to sell your interest to him. After you had sold you began to think that he had japped you. You wanted to know from me what the property was actually worth."

"I am glad that you remember. You answered my letter. You told me that you had always considered the land hardly worth paying taxes on."

"Yes."

"If I asked you now, that same question, what would you say?"

He hesitated. The Dry Lands were no whit more valuable to-day than they had been last year. But if the scheme Hume was engineering went through it would be a different matter.

"You have already sold your interest, given the deed, haven't you, Miss Strawn? What difference does it make?" he asked bluntly.

"What if I have?" she countered coolly. "I am not the sort of woman, Mr. Shandon, to sit with my hands in my lap when a man has done a piece of sharp business with me. I needed the money and like a fool I sold to Hume. And now I know as well as I know anything that he didn't pay me a tenth of what the property was worth. Yes, I have given the deed. You think that I am a fool again to come clear across the continent upon a matter that went out of my hands a year ago!" She laughed, her laugh reminding him unpleasantly of the man of whom they were talking. "You see, you don't know me yet."

"I don't see just how I can be of service to you," he suggested.

"I'll try to be explicit. I have never had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Hume and yet I think that I could write a very correct character sketch of the gentleman. Egotism and selfishness, two things in most men, just one in Sledge Hume! He is shrewd and hard and his god is gold. Am I right?"

"Hume is hardly an intimate acquaintance of mine."

She laughed softly, twisting the brandy glass slowly in her white fingers.

"I know enough of the Hume blood," she said presently, "to make a close guess at the man's character. We are not related, even distantly, for nothing, Mr. Shandon. My mother was a Hume," she added coolly, her manner again reminding the man strangely of Hume himself. "You see, he chose the wrong woman when he cheated me. It's going to be diamond cut diamond now."

Shandon looked at the girl curiously, falling to see what mad hope she could have of regaining rights that were deeded away a year ago, falling as well to find a reason for her coming all these miles to make a confidant of him.

"I usually go about things in my own way," she said after one of her brief pauses. "What I have to say I'll say as it comes to me. In case your cousin Garth returns before I have done you can send him away upon any pretext you choose. Tell him we want to talk privately; that will do as well as anything. Smoke, if you want to," as she saw his eyes go to the mantelpiece where an old black pipe lay. "Maybe it will make you patient during my harangue."

Wayne got his pipe and, lighting it, sat upon the edge of the table looking down at her through the smoke.

"Six months ago," she went on, "I realised that Hume had underpaid me. Why?" She shrugged her shoulders. "I knew his breed. If he offers a dollar for a thing it's worth ten. I made investigations through an agent who came up to Dry Valley from San Francisco. He turned in his bill on time and that was about all. He was an ordinary man and consequently a fool. But, blind as a bat himself, he showed me a little light that set me thinking. A few days ago I came out myself." She snapped her fingers. "It didn't take me that long to get to the bottom of the whole thing."

"What thing?"

"The scheme Hume is promoting on the quiet to put water on the Dry Lands. The water is to come from your river. Are you in on the deal too?"

Her question was as sudden as a sword thrust.

"No," he answered.

"Have they made you an offer for the water right?"

"No."

"That's funny." She frowned thoughtfully at him a moment, saying in a barely audible tone as though she were thinking aloud, "You don't look as though you were lying. Well, you expect an offer, don't you?"

"Yes."

"And when it comes, coming from Hume, you realise that he'll offer a very small fraction of what it is worth to him?"

"I suppose so. That's business."

"And, above all things in the world, Sledge Hume is a business man! Well, I won't ask what you'd do when the offer came, as you'd say that it was none of my affair. I've seen Ruf Ettinger and learned all he knows."

He did not answer; he had suddenly resolved to see the drift of Helga Strawn's thoughts before he did a great deal of talking.

"I have learned," came another of her abrupt thrusts, "that you and Hume are about as friendly as a cat and a dog."

He merely looked at her enquiringly, drawing thoughtfully at his pipe. She smiled, turned from him back to the fire, settling a little more comfortably in her chair.

"Hume is a crook." She said it calmly, dispassionately, positively. "It is in his blood. He couldn't help it if he tried. He isn't the kind to try. The deal he put over with me may have been nothing but clever business. On the other hand, considering that I was a relative, considering that there was going to be plenty of boodle for everybody, some people might say that there was an element of dishonesty in it. But what I am getting at is that the man in unscrupulous. Now, he's in the biggest business deal of his life. Chances in that sort of thing for crooked work are many. Ergo, Mr. Shandon, it's a fair bet that starting with a crooked deal he has gone on playing a crooked game. Do you begin to see why I'm here?"

"Blackmail?" he said bluntly.

"Yes," she said coolly. "There's no use quarrelling over a name."

"If you imagine that I know anything about the man's private history—"

"You've quarrelled openly with him. Everybody knows about it. What was the reason for your quarrel?"

"Really, Miss Strawn—-"

"Why can't you talk to me as if I were a man?" she flared out at him, the sudden heat from a

woman who had been ice a moment ago taking him by surprise. "I'm not dragging my sex into this like a buckler to hide behind. Why can't you say it's none of my damned business, if you feel that way about it?"

"I shouldn't put it quite so strong," he replied. "If you will go on and show me how I can be of any service to you, anything in my line—"

"Consequently excluding blackmail!" she laughed, her mood like ice again. "When you quarrelled with Hume a year ago you called him a crook, didn't you?"

"Your investigations seem to have been made very painstakingly," he countered.

"For one of your reputation you are surprisingly noncommittal," she said. "Will you tell me this: So far as you know is there a woman in Sledge Hume's life?"

"So far as I know there is not. He doesn't impress me as the sort of man to lose either his heart or his head over a woman."

"That sort of man," she replied swiftly, "very often surprises people who think that they understand human nature, and don't! Now I come to one of my reasons in coming to see you. I saw you one day at the Grand Central Station with a friend of mine, a Mr. Maddox. I was uncertain whether he had pointed me out to you or not, told you who I was. Did he?"

"No. I should have remembered."

"Thank you. That's the first pretty thing you've said! Well, no harm is done in making sure. I'm making sure of every little point as I go along, Mr. Shandon. I didn't want there to be a possibility of any one here knowing who I am. It is my own business and I hope that I am not asking overmuch if I request you not to tell any one that I am Helga Strawn."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"If you don't want Hume to know you I most certainly shall not seek to find or take advantage of an opportunity to tell him."

"Thank you again. Now, for the other part of my business with you. You are in a position to stand pat and by just doing nothing smash Sledge Hume's little game all to flinders. He's counted on you, he's made sure in some way I don't know. But I am going to know before long. And I'm going to get Sledge Hume just where I want him! How? Wait and see. I'm going to get back the property he cheated me out of. How? I don't know and I don't care. And then—"

She rose swiftly, her eyes blazing, her head lifted triumphantly as though already she had met the success she had set out to find.

"And then, Wayne Shandon, you and I and Ruf Ettinger can take into our hands the thing that Sledge Hume has already half created for us! There is a fortune in it for every one of us."

"I've told Ruf Ettinger already—" he began.

The door opened suddenly and Mr. Dart came into the room.

"Say, Red," he began with an important air, "I want to see you a minute, private. Hazel will excuse us, won't you?" with a rare smile and an abbreviated bow after Mr. Dart's best manner.

"Hazel?" frowned Shandon.

"Sure," grinned Dart. "We got chummy as twins riding over, didn't we? Come on, Red. This here is urgent."

"It will have to wait, Dart. Miss—"

"Hazleton," prompted Helga.

"Sure," put in Dart. "Her uncle used to know my aunt in Poughkeepsie. Come on, Red."

"Dart," cried Shandon, "you get out! We are busy."

Dart went slowly back to the door, to the surprise of Shandon who knew so well the little man's tenacity.

"Oh, well," he said mournfully from across the room. "Only Wanda said—"

"You will excuse me a moment?" Wayne asked hurriedly. Dart, already outside was grinning broadly.

"What is it?" queried Shandon.

"Whatever it is it'll keep until we get where we can talk," was the dogged answer. "There's nobody in the bunk house. Come on."

He hastened down the steps, Wayne following him. Only when they were in the bunk house, the door closed, the lamp lighted, did Dart speak.

"First thing," he said abruptly, "Hazel's name begins with an H, but she spells it Helga!"

"You little weasel! Well, what about it? And what about Miss Leland?"

"Wanda's part will keep. Gee, Red, she's some swell dame, that Egyptian skirt, take it from me! She's got Macbeth's frau of the fairy tale faded to a finish, ain't she?"

"Look here, Dart ..."

"It's cold weather," interrupted Dart. "Keep your undershirt on, Red. When your brother Archie mortgaged the Bar L-M ..."

"What fool's nonsense are you talking, Dart?" demanded Shandon. "Arthur never mortgaged —"

"Uhuh. I thought you didn't know about it. Now I'm here to tell you something you ought to know. I guess the Weak Sister forgot to tell you about it. Archie mortgaged the Bar L-M, he socked a plaster worth twenty-five thousand dollars on it, *the day before somebody put him out*. Get that?"

Wayne stared at him wonderingly. Suddenly he shot out his two hands and gripped Dart's shoulders, jerking the little man toward him threateningly.

"What's your game, you little crook? You lie to me and I'll come so close to killing you we'll both be sorry."

"Listen to that now," sighed Dart. "When one pal tries to wise another up—"

"Talk fast," said Shandon sternly. "What are you talking about?"

"Give me a chance to breathe and I'll spit it out. Your brother mortgaged the outfit for twenty-five thousand. You never heard about it. Some guy who was wise croaked him. Where's the twenty-five thousand? What's the answer?"

"Good God!" muttered Shandon.

Dart, suddenly released, moved a little further away and smoothed his coat collar.

"The mortgage was held by a man I used to call a pal," he volunteered further. "I don't call him that any longer. I mean old Mart."

"Martin Leland! You mean to tell me that Martin Leland held a mortgage over the Bar L-M for twenty-five thousand dollars and that I never heard of it?"

"Yep," answered Dart lightly. "And three months ago he foreclosed. Funny, ain't it?"

"It's impossible. It's one of your fool lies, Dart."

"When I tell a lie, Red, I don't tell that kind. The whole thing was recorded nice and proper. All you got to do is go to the courthouse and look it up. I'd go for you, only the jail's in the basement and jails always give me a cold. Or, you can go ask the Weak Sister. He'll know about it. You gave him your power of attorney, didn't you? Oh, he'll know, all right."

The two men stared at each other fixedly, the eyes of one frowning and penetrating, those of the other round and innocent.

"I believe you are telling the truth," said Shandon slowly. "I don't see why you'd lie about a thing like this— How do you know anything about it?" he asked suddenly.

"How do I know Hazel's name is Helga?" smiled Dart. "There's tricks in every trade, Red."

"If this thing is true—"

"Go talk to the Weak Sister," said Dart briefly.

Wayne swung about and without reply went swiftly down toward the corrals. Suddenly he stopped and came back.

"You didn't tell me what Miss Leland said," he said shortly.

Dart laughed in great amusement.

"She didn't say anything. She's sore as a goat, though, Red. This Helga business sort of got on her nerves."

Then Shandon went hurriedly toward the corrals.

"Me," mused Dart, on his way to entertain Miss Helga Strawn during what might be a period of lonely waiting for her, "I'm almost chicken-hearted enough to feel sorry for the Weak Sister!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE TRUTH

"Garth!"

There was a peculiar sternness in Wayne Shandon's voice that made his cousin start in a way which, to Shandon's taut nerves, seemed instantly a sign of guilt. Conway finished the work he was doing, snapped the heavy padlock into the log chain, which fastened the double doors of the small building where odds and ends were stored during the winter, and came on through the snow, smiting his hands together to get the chilled blood running.

"Hello, Wayne," he answered. "What's up?"

"That's what I want to know," briefly. "What do you know about a mortgage on the Bar L-M?"

It was too dark for Shandon to see the other's face clearly. He noticed that Garth hesitated just a second before answering.

"What do you mean?" Conway's voice sought to be confident and failed. Shandon's fist snapped shut involuntarily. It was almost, he thought, as if Garth had answered him directly.

"I mean just this: Did you know that the Bar L-M was mortgaged to Martin Leland for twenty-five thousand dollars?"

Garth Conway would not have been himself but some very different man had there not been a considerable pause before he replied.

"Yes," he said at last, a little doggedly. "I knew it."

"Arthur mortgaged it the day he was killed? Or the day before?"

"Yes."

"And the mortgage was foreclosed three months ago?"

"Yes."

"And you never told me about it! Why?"

"I should have done so, I suppose," Garth said nervously. "But— Well, the first thing you hit out for the East. You weren't attending to business then, Wayne. You wrote me to take charge of everything, not to bother you with ranch affairs. You gave me a power of attorney—"

"I've been back half a year," said Shandon shortly. "I've been attending to business. Why haven't you told me?"

Conway drew back a quick step as though he feared from his cousin's harsh voice that physical violence would follow.

"I didn't think of it," he said weakly, and at the same time with a pitiful attempt at defiance.

"You lie!"

The words came distinctly enunciated, cold and hard, a little pause separating the two syllables so that each cut like a stab.

"Look here, Wayne," Garth said stiffly, "if you, who have never done a single thing seriously in your life want to get sore because I have neglected a matter of no pressing importance—"

"Good Lord!" cried Wayne. "No pressing importance! You'd handle my business for me, keep all knowledge of a foreclosure from me, until the year of redemption had passed? You'd let Martin Leland close me out, would you? You and Hume and Leland would take the water from the river. Good God! I never thought this sort of thing of you or Leland! You'd all get rich by smashing me, and then you, you two-faced little cur, would buy the Bar L-M back from Leland for nothing, with money you'd taken from Arthur and me! Why, you petit [Transcriber's note: petty?] larceny sneak, I don't know why I am talking with you instead of slapping your dirty face!"

"If you will talk reasonably—"

"Talk reasonably? You're damned right I will! Why did Arthur borrow twenty-five thousand dollars to begin with? What went with it? Who got it?"

"I don't know what he wanted it for," snapped Garth. "I don't know what went with it. I suppose the man who murdered him robbed him, too."

"You don't mean he had a sum like that with him in cash?"

"Yes. He insisted upon it. I was with Leland when the money was turned over."

"And you—*forgot*—to tell me that!"

Conway, though his lips moved, made no audible reply. Wayne stood staring at him a moment, his face white with passion. Suddenly he cried out in a voice shaking with fury as he lifted one hand high above his head and brought it smashing down into his open palm.

"Get off of the place!" he shouted. "Sneak back to Leland; go whimper about Sledge Hume's legs. Tell Leland that I said that you are a damned scoundrel and that he's another! Tell him that I said that I am going to make the whole thieving pack of you eat out of my hand before I let up on you. And now, for God's sake, go!"

He whirled and went back to the house with long strides. He flung wide the door, and as he came swiftly to the fireplace, his face still white and hard, he thrust out his hand to Helga Strawn, grasping hers as though it had been a man's.

"I'm with you," he said crisply. "I'll see Ruf Ettinger myself to-morrow."

Her eyes which had been frowning during Dart's latest attempt to be entertaining, grew suddenly brilliant, her cheeks flushed happily.

"Dart," Wayne, continued, turning to the little man who had begun nodding his head approvingly when Wayne's shoulder had struck the door and who was still nodding, "you've done me a good turn to-night. I'm not ungrateful. But Miss—"

"Hazleton," prompted Dart.

"—will have to be going right away and I want to talk with her alone."

"Sure," agreed Dart. "I'll get my book and go down to the bunk house. I'm reading a swell story about a guy named Jupiter and a skirt named—"

For the first and only time on record Willie Dart stopped his flow of words because of the look he saw on a man's face. He went out snatching his book from the table as he passed. On his way to the bunk house he stopped long enough to shake his head and rub his chin.

"I'm giving odds, ten to one," he reflected, "that the Weak Sister don't loaf around here all night counting snowflakes."

"Something has happened, Mr. Shandon," Helga said sharply.

Shandon laughed shortly and picked up his pipe.

"A great deal has happened," he told her. "I've been a fool and an overgrown baby long enough. Let's get down to business. You can't stay here all night."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"For want of a chaperon, I suppose? I'm not worried about what people say or think, Mr. Shandon. And, besides, there's no place to go."

"You can't stay, any way," he answered a little roughly. "You can get back to the Leland place. They'll keep you over night. Now, let's get this thing straight. You hope to get back your property from Hume?"

Swiftly their roles had changed; he was dominant now, he asked his question in a tone that demanded an answer and she gave the answer.

"Yes."

"How?"

"I can't tell you definitely. If you'll come to me in two weeks or a month I can tell you. For one thing, Hume is a man, I am a woman."

"You are going to try to make him fall in love with you?"

"Other men have done it," she said indifferently.

"Other men are not Sledge Hume. But that is your end of it. I am going to tie up Ruf Ettinger

and any other stragglers I can get my hands on. If you can get back the property we'll take you in. We'll form a company, we'll pool our interests. We'll force these other fellows to sell to us at our own figure, by the Lord! I've got the water!"

"If I could force Sledge Hume to sell his inherited interest to me," she cried, "if I could make him sell to me as I sold to him, for a wretched twenty-five thousand dollars—"

"What!" he broke in excitedly. "How much did Hume pay you?"

"Twenty-five thousand. Why?" curiously.

"*When*?"

"I remember the date exactly."

She told him. It was barely two weeks after the death of Arthur Shandon.

Sudden suspicion in Wayne Shandon's brain had sprung full grown into positive certainty.

"If you can't get your property back one way," was the last thing he said, "I can get it for you in another. Helga Strawn, you had better leave Sledge Hume to me."

CHAPTER XIX

SHANDON TAKES HIS STAND

Dart had been quite right concerning the actions of Garth Conway. It hardly required a clairvoyant mother for any man who knew both Conway and Wayne Shandon to predict the haste with which Conway saddled and left the Bar L-M, nor the direction he went.

"Old Mart's going to sleep restless to-night," mused Dart, to whom the adventures of a guy named Jupiter, and a skirt who shall be nameless, no longer appealed. "Them haymakers don't know enough to walk crooked and cover their tracks the same time. Now with Red on the war path, and me shaping his play right along—"

He grew deeply thoughtful over the delightful possibilities unfolding to his highly coloured imagination. There was going to be something doing now that would put an edge to this dull life. With what was equivalent to a lining up of forces and an open declaration of hostilities, with Red on the one hand pitted against the trio whom Dart called the Haymakers, with a murder mystery to untangle, a robbery to solve, and—not to be forgotten—Little Saxon guarded through the winter months so that a winning horserace could be run in the spring, Mr. Dart looked forward happily to a very busy time. Then there was the Dry Valley irrigation scheme of which his limited knowledge must be enlarged immediately, in order that he might "scrape up a few beans and get them down while the game was wide open." And there was Helga Strawn.

"I wouldn't have missed this here," said Mr. Dart solemnly, nodding his head at a picture in his book of a lady without arms or superfluous clothing, "not for the boodle of a U. S. senator."

He went to the bunk house door in time to see Garth riding out of the corral, his horse floundering awkwardly in the drifts that were steadily piling higher. Dart spat contemptuously.

"A measly little cur," he declared softly. "Crooked just because he ain't got the guts to go straight. Them's the worst kind. They get scared stiff and shoot you when you come in late, thinking you're a second-story artist, and then they're sorry. Chances are he's repenting right now and wishing he was dead and by morning he'll be doing the knife act some more."

While Dart meditated, planned and philosophised, Wayne Shandon prepared a quick meal for Helga Strawn.

"I know you're done up already," he said, "but it can't be helped. You've got to get back to the Echo Creek to-night, if for no other reason because it may be the last chance you'll have to get out at all."

"You mean the snow?"

"Yes. A horse can carry you through to-night; to-morrow, if this keeps up, the poor brute would have his work cut out to get through alone. If you'll help yourself and see that your clothes are good and dry I'll go out and get the horses ready."

"Horses? You are going with me?"

"No," he said emphatically. "I haven't been going to Mr. Leland's home for a long time. After

what I have learned to-night I suppose that I'll never go there again. I am going to send Dart with you."

"What have you learned?" she asked quickly. "You mean what I have told you?"

"No. It is something which I am afraid I can't talk about just yet, Miss Strawn. Now, if you will excuse me a minute?"

He went down to the stable, saw that both Helga's horse and Old Bots had a feeding of barley, and fed his own saddle animal.

"I'll have to fight my way out on webs tomorrow," he mused. "I can lead you until we get across the ridge where the snow will be lighter."

Then he went to Dart in the bunk house.

"Dart," he called abruptly, "you'd better come up to the house and get something to eat. Then you've got to get ready to ride."

"Ride?" demanded Dart, a little anxiously. "You mean me and Old Bots and the chariot?"

"You can't make it," Shandon told him positively. "I don't know how you managed to get back from the Echo Creek with the cart. You'll have to go on horseback now, whether you like it or not."

"Where am I going, Chief?"

"To the Leland's. Miss Hazleton is going back and I want you to go with her. You'd have to go in the morning anyway and it will be easier if you go right away. And I want you to do something for me."

"Love's little messenger again?" grinned Dart. "Gee, Red, I'm turning into a regular carrier pigeon."

"I am going to write a short note to Miss Leland," Shandon went on quietly. "I want you to give it to her to-night. And I don't want anybody to see you do it. Will you do that for me?"

"Did I ever turn a pal down?" reproachfully. "But, say, Red; I'm just healed up good from my ride in here last summer. Can't I walk?"

Shandon laughed and the two men hurried together back to the house. Helga, who was still eating, looked up at them with frank curiosity as they came in. Her eyes rested longest upon Dart; her contempt for him had passed or else she had resolved to hide it and appear friendly. Through the brief meal he strove constantly to be entertaining, and his little sallies which had formerly elicited nothing beyond her silent contempt now provoked her ready laughter.

"It ain't a little jolt of brandy that made the difference, either," Dart informed himself thoughtfully in the midst of an enthusiastic recital of the gallant way in which his pal, Red, had saved him from a horrible death in some wonderful land whose geographical location he failed to make perfectly clear. "She's wise I'm the gent with a noodle full of things she's dying to know. Red ain't told her what I told him. We're sure going to have an awful chummy time on our jingle bell party back to old Mart's."

And he went on with his tale until Wayne returning from the kitchen stopped him.

Shandon had written his note and gave it to Dart as the two men went out to saddle the horses. Ten minutes later Helga Strawn and her guide left the Bar L-M. During the long ride, although Dart seemed the most ingenuous of creatures, Helga Strawn obtained no satisfactory report of the news which he had brought and which had so obviously steeled Shandon's will.

An hour before they came to the Echo Creek the snow ceased abruptly and it began to rain.

When at last they reached the ranch house the girl was clinging wearily to the horn of her saddle, drenched to the skin, her face pinched and white and drawn from cold and the hardest day's physical work her woman's body had ever buffeted through. When Dart glanced at her in the lamplight of the living room he filed a swift mental note of the fact that what Helga Strawn set out to do she was very likely to accomplish. For her eyes, their brilliancy undimmed, their calculating penetration unaltered, told of a fighting spirit which no bodily fatigue could touch.

There had been only two lights burning in the house; one in Martin's private room from which came the voices of Garth Conway and Leland himself; one in Wanda's bedroom. But at Dart's knock both Wanda and her mother hastened to receive them, replenished the fireplace until it roared lustily in its deep throat, found warm, dry clothing and hot drinks, and made them comfortable for the night. If Wanda were "sore" as Dart had expressed it, she did not in any way give evidence of it.

"Them ginneys that go chasing off to climb the North Pole," was Dart's cheery comment as he reappeared from a brief absence in the kitchen, "ain't going to find me choking up the trail in

front of 'em. This here is good enough for me."

In the kitchen he had changed his own outer, soaked clothing for a suit of Martin's which Mrs. Leland had given him, and now the general effect of his appearance was that of a very small boy in a very large hat. But he had not forgotten to transfer Wayne's note with the transfer of garments. And when Wanda left the room presently for the sandwich Dart had requested he followed her, his coat and trousers seeming to flow about him and after him with a will of their own.

"Love and kisses from Red," he whispered, handing her the note.

And be it said to the credit of Mr. Willie Dart that, although he had been perfectly aware that there was a steaming kettle of water on the kitchen stove, his haste had been so great to deliver the message that he had not taken time to avail himself of the opportunity.

That night Wanda went quietly about her preparation for to-morrow. Her skis, gathering dust in the attic, were brought down, cleaned and given the thin coat of shellac which, drying by morning, would put them in shape. A glance outdoors showed her that it had stopped raining and was clear and cold. There would be a good crust formed during the night. Shandon's note, which she read more than once, ran:—

"Dear Wanda—Will you try to meet me at your cliff to-morrow? I have something which I must tell you.

"WAYNE."

All night, waking or sleeping, Wanda was restless and worried. She had guessed swiftly that the thing Wayne was going to tell her had something to do with Helga Strawn; it might also have something to do with Garth and Martin Leland. Garth had been strangely agitated when he burst into the house. Then he and her father were closeted for a long time in the study, their voices at times raised in what sounded like anger, at times lowered almost to whispers. She knew that Martin had gone out to the men's quarters, that Jim had saddled his horse and ridden away upon some errand which must have been born of Garth's coming. She felt that it all was in some way connected with Wayne Shandon and she was a little afraid.

In the morning, as Wanda made her early breakfast alone, a glance outside at the white world showed her that where there had been jagged rocks and logs strewn upon the hillsides, now there were only smooth mounds. Tree stumps and fences, their identity already lost, were hooded things that in another two days would be completely covered and hidden.

The girl buckled her arctics upon her warmly stockinged feet, drew her hood down over her ears, strapped on her skis and slipped on her mittens before she left the kitchen. From the back door which in summer was three feet above ground she pushed her way out upon the level snow. Then, through a white world of silence she moved quietly through the clear, crisp morning.

She arrived early at the cliffs, but already Shandon, although he had travelled further, was before her. For the last quarter of a mile she had travelled in the deeper tracks, which his broader skis and heavier weight had made. Already he had gone ahead of her up the great cedar, as she saw by the branches from which he had scraped the snow. And when she came to the top and peeped into the cave she saw him piling wood upon the fire he had blazing to welcome her.

"God bless you," he said tenderly. "You came."

"Of course I came," she answered. "Now tell me, Wayne. What is it?"

First he made her draw off her sweater and arctics and take the stool he placed at the fire for her.

"Wanda," he began, at last, "I've got something to tell you that's going to be hard telling. I have hoped all along that things would smooth themselves out for us, that in due time your father would come to see that neither he nor any other man has the right to stand in the way of our happiness. But now, dear, there is no hope of that. Matters are bad enough now, God knows. And they are going to get worse. Do you love me very much, Wanda?"

"You know that I do," she answered simply.

"So much that you could cleave to me through everything? Even when the unpleasantness which already exists between your father and me grows into positive, hard, open opposition? On my part as well as his?"

"Is it so bad as that, Wayne?" she asked, her eyes darkening a little.

"Yes," he answered bitterly. "It is worse than you know. You will find it as hard to believe as I found it."

"Tell me." She looked up at him bravely enough, but he knew how this thing hurt her, and how it was going to hurt her when he told everything. Hastily, to have it over with, he repeated Dart's story and told of the quarrel with Garth.

"I believe," he said slowly, "that Dart told me the truth throughout. I don't know how he found it out, but in part I know he was right. Arthur mortgaged the Bar L-M to your father for twenty-five thousand dollars. You know how I went away then, how I authorised Garth to act for me just as though he were the actual owner of the property. Dart says that three months ago the mortgage was foreclosed. That was just before I came home. I heard nothing of it. He swears that he saw the sheriff's certificate of sale to your father. In California law due notice must be served upon a man whose property is threatened with sale to satisfy the holder of the mortgage. From the date of that sale until a year later the original owner has what is termed a year of redemption during which, at any time, upon his paying the amount of the mortgage and all costs, he may regain his property. Do you follow me, Wanda?"

"Yes. Go on, Wayne."

"Had I not been away, had I not furthermore given to Garth my power of attorney, that first service of notice of foreclosure would have come to me. It came to Garth instead; it had to come to him. By his simply ignoring the matter, failing to appear in court or to be represented by a lawyer when the matter was called, he allowed the Bar L-M to be sold to pay the promissory note of twenty-five thousand given by Arthur to your father. Your father bought in the property himself. It is now his and not mine; it would become absolutely his, with clear title, if I should allow this year of redemption to pass without paying off the twenty-five thousand and costs. And that is certainly what would have happened if I had not learned of the whole wretched deal, through Dart, last night."

For a long time she did not answer. Even Wayne Shandon, who thought that he knew how the girl loved and venerated her father, could not guess how deeply this thing cut her. Presently, steadying her voice, she said:

"You are absolutely sure of this, Wayne?"

"No. Not in every detail. But in enough to make me more than ready to believe it, Wanda. Garth himself admitted the mortgage, and confessed that he had known of it all along from the day it was made, and said he knew that your father held it. Why didn't he tell me? Why didn't Mr. Leland tell me? Why have they gone on with their plan of irrigation without making me an offer for the water right without which their whole plan falls to pieces?"

"There is only one thing to do, Wayne. You must come back with me. We must go straight to papa and ask him."

"Wanda," he answered gently, "I have fought this out all night. I hope that never in our lives will there come a time when you ask me to do a thing that I cannot do. Will you try to see this from my point of view? My first thought was to go to your father and to ask him for an explanation, just as it is your first thought. But what good could it do? In a few days now I shall go to the court house in El Toyon. If there was a mortgage, as Dart swears and Garth himself admits, it will be on record there. If notice of foreclosure were properly served, and foreclosure were then made in default of my appearance, or because Garth did not go or send a representative, if the sheriff's certificate of sale was made, the whole transaction will have been placed on record. *If* all of this is true, Wanda, and I am very much afraid that it is, then, girl of mine, is there any reason in the world why I should go to Martin Leland with it?" His voice had hardened, and though he did not know it, Wanda had noticed the change in tone. "Can't you see," he went on deliberately, "that after the way I have been treated I have the right to expect your father to come to me if there is any explaining to do?"

"I can't believe it," she said faintly, though belief was already strong within her. "Why should my father do a thing like that? Do you know, Wayne, that you are accusing him of a very ugly thing?"

"Yes," he said, his tone suddenly gentle again. "I am sorry for you, Wanda. But can't you see that if this is true there is only one thing in the world for me to do?"

"But," and the question uppermost in her mind demanded repetition, "why should my father so soil his hands."

"Aren't there many reasons? If he really believes that I killed Arthur, if for lack of evidence or for some other reason he feels that the law cannot touch me, wouldn't he come to tell himself—"

"Oh," she cried impetuously, "that would be mean and cowardly! For him to tell himself that robbing you would be justifiable because he was punishing a man he deemed guilty! It would be braver, more like a man, to do it for the hot reason of hatred."

After the silence with which Wayne answered her it was Wanda who again spoke.

"Wayne," she asked quietly, "is this all you have to tell me?"

"No. I want you to understand what I am going to do, what I must do, if this is all true. It is what they have driven me to do, unless I prove myself to be what your father thinks me, a weak willed, worthless do-nothing. You don't want me to be that, Wanda?"

"No," she replied thoughtfully. "I want you to be a man."

"Then," he cried sharply, "there is man's work cut out for me! I have twenty-five thousand dollars and more to raise in a very short time. I have my reply to make to men who have used me as a fool! I have the water that the Dry Valley needs. I can go on with the thing which they have tried to do, I can whip them at their own game, playing mine open with the cards on the table. I can refuse to be the toad under the stone; I can make my fight to have my rights. Against opposition that has been underhanded I can offer opposition that is a man's answer to a challenge. It is they, not I, who began the trouble. Had Martin Leland come to me and asked for a water right, I should have given it to him freely as you know. Why, the woman who came to you last night—"

"Miss Hazleton?" she said very quietly, though the girl's heart was beating hard as she waited for his answer.

"Helga Strawn," he answered bluntly. "Hume's cousin."

Her smile, a little wistful but with a quick flash of gladness, surprised him. And he did not understand when she rose swiftly and came to him and put her arms round his neck.

"I am afraid that I have been naughty, Wayne," she whispered. "No, I'll tell you some other time. Tell me about her."

He told her Helga's vague plan, showed her the chance for him with Ettinger, Norfolk and the stragglers lined up with him.

"I love you, Wanda," he said suddenly at the end. "So much that what you want done is the thing that I must do. But you must see very clearly that the time has come when I must play the man's part or the weakling's."

"First you are going to be very sure? Sure that papa has done this?"

"Yes, dear."

"Then," she said, lifting her face to his, her eyes shining, "if you find it true I want you to do the man's part, Wayne. You knew that I would, didn't you, Wayne?"

"Yes," he whispered. "God bless you, yes."

"And, Wayne, dear—"

"Yes?"

"Do you think that Helga Strawn is very beautiful?"

Whereupon he laughed happily at her, and despite the cloud in their sky which had grown suddenly bigger and blacker so that the shadow of it lay across their lives, they were very gay together.

CHAPTER XX

HUME PLAYS A TRUMP

Before Wanda and Wayne had finished making merry over their little luncheon in the cave, each striving bravely to look at the future honestly and unafraid, to look upon the present contentedly, an event had happened that was already shaping their lives in a way which they could not foresee. Sledge Hume had come to the Echo Creek.

During the past night, shortly after the arrival of Garth Conway, Jim had ridden from the range house to the nearest village, something less than a dozen miles down the valley, with orders to telephone a message to Hume. The message, a mystery in itself to Jim, had been clear enough to the man to whom it was sent and had brought him hastening across the fifty miles lying between his ranch in the Dry Lands and the Echo Creek. In the darkness he had come on as far as he could, until the snow stopped him. He had spent the night at a house twenty miles from Leland's place and now, hours before he could reasonably have been expected, he entered Martin's study unceremoniously.

"So there's hell to pay," he said shortly by way of greeting. "The red headed fool has discovered something, has he?"

He flung off his coat and strode to the fireplace. Garth and Leland were together, had been together all morning, planning what was to be done. Hume stared at Leland frowningly and then slowly transferred his regard to Conway.

"I suppose your brains have been leaking out of your mouth again," he said contemptuously.

Garth, his agitation of last night having left him nervous and irritable, retorted hotly.

"Gentlemen," said Leland gravely, "may I remind you that this is hardly a time for personal recriminations? We are not here to quarrel with one another. I sent you word immediately, Mr. Hume, not because I saw any necessity for your coming here but that you might know what we have to expect at the earliest possible moment. Garth and myself have been talking it over—"

"Talking!" exploded Hume angrily. "Well, I didn't come to talk. There's going to be something besides a puling string of words now."

"If you have a suggestion—"

"You bet I have! I've been expecting just this thing ever since you began playing the game with Conway there as a stool pigeon. If we'd have sent him on a trip to Paris and paid his expenses we'd have saved trouble and money. Can I have a drink and something to eat? I'm half starved."

"Certainly. But your suggestion—"

"Is already working. I'm going to make it so hot for Red Shandon that he'll come to time the first show he gets. MacKelvey is on the jump and not over an hour or two behind me. It's time for trumps now, Leland."

Martin jerked his head up at MacKelvey's name and stared at Hume with keen, hard eyes.

"You're making a bold play, Mr. Hume."

"Well?" challenged Hume. "Isn't it high time for it? We might have bought the water from Shandon before and have been better off. You wouldn't stand for it; you had to gobble everything for nothing. We took the chance. It wasn't a bad gamble either, considering Shandon was away the first year and is a fool to boot. But you've lost on it. Now when you go to him and ask for the water he's going to laugh at you. But lock him up, charged with murder, make him believe that we can stretch his neck for him and he'll hang, or by God, he will come to time. Now I want a drink and something to eat. You and Conway can spend the day talking if you like; I've got a day's work cut out ahead of me."

"You're going with MacKelvey?"

Hume laughed and threw back his coat, showing the deputy sheriff's star under it.

"I had Mac swear me in six months ago," he answered. "Yes, I'm going with him."

Martin Leland rose and preceded Hume to the door.

"I shall ask my wife to see that you have something to eat right away," he said quietly. "First, Mr. Hume, I want you to know that Garth has not been doing any talking, as you have suspected."

Hume merely lifted his heavy shoulders.

"And," Leland added, a little more sharply, "I want you to know also that there is a woman here, a Miss Hazleton, whom we don't know anything about excepting that she went to Shandon's last night, and after her talk with him he rushed out to Garth demanding to be told about the mortgage. Just where she fits in I don't know. She might be anything from a chorus girl to a Reno widow."

"Oho," cried Hume, his brows suddenly drawn blackly. "He's getting a woman mixed up in his affairs, is he? That shows how much sense he has. Where is she now?"

"Here. She has asked to go out with us tomorrow."

Hume made no answer but shoving his hands into his pockets strode after Leland into the living room. He stopped at the door, a little startled by the vision which confronted him as Helga Strawn turned quickly from the window, where she had been frowning at the blinding glare of the snow without, and faced him.

She wore the clothes in which she had gone through the storm, but a hot iron had taken the wrinkles out and they fitted her superb figure admirably. Hume did not notice the clothes, he saw only the woman. She inclined her head just a little to her host, with no softening of the cold features. Upon Hume she bestowed a casual glance that came and went indifferently.

"Miss Hazleton," said Martin curtly, "this is Mr. Hume."

The eyes of the two men were keen upon her as the name was spoken. As Martin had said they did not know where this woman fitted in; it was their business to find out.

Again she bowed, very slightly. If she felt any flicker of interest, of surprise, that Hume was here, she did not betray it.

"How do you do, Mr. Hume?" was what she said, as indifferently as though in reality she had no interest in the man or knowledge of him.

Martin left the room and went to the kitchen in search of Mrs. Leland. Hume came to the window where Helga was standing.

"So you are a friend of Red Shandon's, are you?" he said bluntly.

"Am I?" The lift of her brows asked him very plainly what he meant by that and what business it was of his.

"Yes," he retorted a little warmly, perhaps for the mere reason that her very carriage hinted at a will ready to cross swords with his, and Sledge Hume was not a man to tolerate opposition in a woman. "You told him that the mortgage had been foreclosed."

"Did I?" coolly.

"And, if you care to know," he went on roughly, "you have thereby piled up a lot of trouble for your friend Shandon."

There was rare impudence in the laughter with which she answered him.

"I have a way of judging a man when I first see him," she said, her smile now flashing her amusement at him. "I didn't think that you were going to be as stupid as the rest."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," and she turned back to the window, "that what happens to Shandon or any other man in the world is absolutely immaterial so far as I am concerned. Please don't think that I'm a tender hearted little thing who is going to cry if you slap another man's face."

"You mean that you are not a friend of Shandon?" cynically.

"Your way of opening a conversation with a woman you have just met is charmingly unique! If you are trying to get something out of me you are going the wrong way about it, aren't you? You have already let out twice as much as I have!"

"Have I?"

"Yes. You have told me that there was a mortgage of which I knew nothing; that it has been concealed from Shandon; that he has learned about it; that it upsets your kettle of fish in some way; that you are going to make things hot for him because of it. All that is a good deal of information to give a stranger in less than a minute's time, don't you think, Mr. Hume?"

He laughed and yet his eyes hardened and narrowed upon her.

"You are welcome to what I have told you," he retorted. "It will be common talk in twenty-four hours."

She gave no sign of having heard. Her indifference vaguely irritated him.

"Look here, Miss Hazleton," he said significantly. "I'll tell you something else as long as I am pouring out my heart to you," a sneer under the words. "Before I'm done with Shandon he won't have a boot for his foot or a leg to walk on. And anybody who ties up with him is going to get smashed the same way!"

"It is very kind of you to warn me beforehand," she laughed softly. "The fact that I have no interest whatever in Mr. Shandon certainly should not lessen my gratitude to you, should it?"

"You want me to believe that?"

"Really there is only one thing which I do want you to believe," she said in return. "Just that it would be very strange if I should care one way or the other what you think. Isn't it perfectly glorious the way the sun strikes the snow?"

Helga Strawn's keen womanly perception had in no way misled her concerning her relative's nature. A compelling, masterful disposition like Sledge Hume's grows accustomed to having its way. She was coolly treating him as it was his role to treat others; and he did not like the change of roles. He realised that the conversation had come to an end. At the same time he knew that if he turned and left her, his usual way when all had been said, he would be taking his dismissal like a schoolboy. And he knew that as she looked out over the snow she would be smiling.

"I have heard," he went on stubbornly, "of a woman going to see Ettinger and Norfolk. It was you. Now you come to see Shandon. Do you think that I am fool enough to believe that you are not interested in the same thing I am?"

"Ah!" she said, turning swiftly. "But I did not say that I was not interested in the irrigation of Dry Valley. I am!"

"And," his old weapon, a sneer, coming back, "you are not interested in Shandon?"

"Not that much." She snapped her white fingers and Hume saw the sparkle of rings. "Shandon is a fool. So is Ettinger. I am not interested in fools." She paused a moment, her brilliant eyes meeting his. "Are you a fool like the rest, Sledge Hume?"

She puzzled him, this woman who should have been that weak, inefficient thing which Hume's conceit pictured all of her sex. He began to be a little more upon his guard in talking with her.

"No." He contented himself with the one word, only his eyes demanding an explanation.

"I don't think much of your associates," she informed him.

"You mean Leland?"

"He is bad enough. Garth Conway is worse. They are poor sort of men to swing a big deal."

"They are not swinging it," he said bluntly.

"You are?"

"Yes."

Again she paused, her tapering fingers drumming idly upon the glass through which once more she was looking out upon the shining snow.

"I was coming to talk with you anyway in a day or so," she said after a little. "I have fifty thousand dollars available. Can you use it?"

In spite of him he started. She spoke of the matter so coolly, so indifferently. And there had never been the time yet when Sledge Hume could not use fifty thousand dollars very readily.

"Go on," he said.

"I saw the other side first," she returned. "They have a bigger chance than you. But there is not a man among them. If you know what you are doing, if you know *how* to do it, you will make and they will break. I want to get in on the winning side. That's all."

"And if we can't make a place for you?"

"Then I'll make one for myself. I'll see the farmers again. I'll make them organise instead of bickering. I'll swing the controlling vote myself. If fifty thousand won't do it I'll put the rest in. And then we'll buy you and your crowd out or we'll sell you water or you'll go to pieces so badly that the sheriff will sell you out!"

Hume laughed. And yet he recognised swiftly that here was a woman to reckon with, that a fresh element had entered the game he was playing.

"You have a wonderful amount of confidence," he said.

"In myself," she retorted meaningly.

"I think," he said thoughtfully, passing over her remark without answer, "that I can make a place for you, if you've really got the money."

"I think that you can," she assured him.

And so Helga Strawn played the first card in the game with her relative, Sledge Hume.

The sheriff, armed with a warrant for the arrest of Wayne Shandon, and accompanied by two deputies arrived at the Echo Creek a little before noon. They had left their horses at the same ranch house where Hume had stayed last night, coming on up the valley on snowshoes. They went immediately to Martin's study, from there to the dining room, then back to the study. Martin, Hume and Garth Conway remained with them, their voices coming in a low drone to the three women in the other part of the house. The nervousness and anxiety of both Mrs. Leland and Julia did not escape the sharp eyes of Helga Strawn.

"Hume is beginning his dirty work," she mused. "A trumped up charge of some kind to get

Shandon out of the way for a while."

"I got your message," MacKelvey told Hume half angrily. "And I got busy because it's my sworn duty, not because I hankered after the job. Your man in El Toyon swore out the warrant as you said he would. But it looks damn' funny to me that if you fellows believe that Shandon killed his brother you had to wait until now to say so. And you can take my word for it I'd have taken my time about getting here if I hadn't known that Mr. Leland was with you in the matter."

A little after noon, the sheriff with his men left for the Bar L-M. Garth assured them that Wayne could hardly get away before the late afternoon or the following morning, for the reason that when he left the ranch there had been a number of things yet to do before the place was closed up for the winter. MacKelvey and one of the men with him went on webs; Hume and the other man on skis.

A hundred yards from the house they came upon Willie Dart. He had travelled thus far on a pair of skis which he had found in the attic, had struggled manfully but hopelessly to manage the narrow strips of wood which pigeon toed and tripped him or interfered with each other behind him, refusing the parallelism to which Mr. Dart strove wildly to restrain them. He had fallen when they reached him and was standing to his waist in the snow, his face red, the perspiration trickling down his cheeks.

"Oho!" laughed Hume loudly. "So you were on your way to warn him, were you?"

"You big boob, you!" shrieked Dart. "Get down and I'll shove your face in for you!"

So they left him to struggle his way back to the house, Hume's laughter booming back above the shrill imprecations of the little man. There were tears, genuine tears in Willie Dart's eyes.

CHAPTER XXI

THE SHORT CUT

Wanda Leland, her lithe body bending gracefully and easily as she drove her light skis over the glistening crust of the snow, shot down the last long slope in a sort of ecstasy inspired by the exhiliration of silent speed and the crisp brightness of the early afternoon. Stooping forward a little she took the short leap across the three foot wide gulch at the base of the knoll upon which the house stood, and laughed aloud as she landed and with gathered impetus sped a score of feet up the knoll itself.

She had left Wayne happy in the two things which mattered: He loved her even as she loved him; he was a strong man and a true. There was still sadness in her breast but it was but a sunspot in the great glory of her happiness. But now suddenly, even while her lips curved redly to her gay laughter, was the gladness to go out of her.

She saw Willie Dart upon the porch, saw him start towards her in an eagerness little less than frantic. He fairly hurled himself from the steps into the deep snow, floundered helplessly, and progressing by hard fought inches came on to meet her. As her skis, running up hill, came slowly to a stop she watched him with amused eyes. But when she saw his face, twisted with despair, she grew suddenly afraid.

"They've gone to arrest Red!" he wailed. "The sheriff and Hume and two other guys. Where is he?"

"He has gone back to the Bar L-M," she answered swiftly. "What do you mean?"

"I mean them crooks have gone to arrest him for murder," he called to her. "They left nearly an hour ago. It's a skin game of the worst kind. They want him tied up so they can work some sneaking gag and rob him of his land. Hume wants him where he can't ride a race in the spring so he'll grab Red's five thousand. The money's already up. God knows what else they've got up their dirty sleeves."

For one dizzy moment the girl grew faint with fear. And when that moment passed she saw clearly that as matters stood Wayne Shandon had a man's work ahead of him. Thrown into jail, charged with so serious a crime as fratricide, with Hume, and perhaps her own father, doing everything in the world that they could do to hamper him, he would be carrying a handicap to break the back of a man's hope.

"They mustn't do this thing!" she cried passionately, the eyes that had been tender a moment ago growing fierce. "Does my father know this?"

"Sure," grunted Dart disgustedly. "He's one of the combine."

"And they left an hour ago?"

"Seems like a million years. It must be awful close to an hour. Say, Wanda, I tried, honest to God, I did—"

She did not hear. She had turned away from him and was staring at the long billowing sweep of snow lying between her and those men who had gone to arrest Wayne Shandon. She saw the broken imprints of the Canadian snowshoes, the smooth tracks of the skis, and demanded sharply:

"Which men wore the webs?"

"Them tennis racket things? MacKelvey and one of his thieves."

He looked at her wonderingly. What difference did that make? But Wanda took no time for explanations. She was thinking swiftly that MacKelvey would be the man to make the arrest, that the others would accommodate their gait to his, that upon a crust like this the Canadian shoes could make no such speed as a pair of skis.

"Tell mamma, no one else, where I have gone," she cried.

And, swinging about, she took the side of the knoll in a long sweep, shot down into a hollow, rose upon the far side, crossed the trail that the four men had made, seemed to Mr. Dart's staring eyes to be balancing a moment upon a line where snow and sky met and then was gone from him, dropping out of sight into the wilderness of snow.

"She's some game little kid," he moaned, shaking his head and making a slow retreat back to the house. "But with them cutthroats an hour ahead of her, she ain't got a show. Poor old Red."

But Wanda's heart was beating steadily now, her muscles were obeying the calm command of her will, and she was telling herself resolutely that she did have a chance. MacKelvey and Hume and the others would see no imperative need for a wild burst of speed; they would travel swiftly but they would not know that she was moving more swiftly behind them. Up and down hill they would go step by step while she, following the way she knew so well, the trails she had followed winter after winter, would find the long slopes down which she would shoot like a flash of light. It was more than possible that they would take over two hours in making the trip; she must make it in less than an hour.

"If I had only come home half an hour sooner," she cried as she fought her oblique way up a ridge she must top, "I could have laughed at them. God be with me and I'll laugh at them yet!"

She was going too fast; she came to the crest of the ridge panting, her heart beating wildly, her body shaking. She sought to relax her muscles as she took the long racing ride down upon the far side. She went more slowly as she climbed the next ridge. She was thinking coolly now, she saw the need both of speed and of a conservation of energy. She felt no fatigue from the trip of the forenoon; she had rested long at the cave with Wayne; and yet she knew that unless she saved her strength she would be unfit for the last burst of speed at the end.

She did not follow the track the four men had left. She knew these woods too well to lose a precious yard now. Where they had turned here and there to avoid thick clumps of firs the girl, looking far ahead, economised strength and shortened distances.

"I *must* get there first," she cried over and over again. "If these men will do the sort of thing Wayne says that they have done, if they will stop at nothing to gain their ends, what hope has he if they arrest him and charge him with Arthur's murder? There will be evidence, they will make evidence, and he will be in jail where he can not help himself."

Once she heard a faint cracking sound under her feet and her heart stopped. If a ski had broken now— But it was only a dead brush, snow covered, and one of the lifeless twigs had snapped. She became more careful of the way, wary of being tricked by the blinding snow that appeared level when there were mounds and hollows that might have broken a ski had she been careless and unlucky. The sudden hideous fancy leaped out upon her that the breaking of a ski now might mean the death of a man, the only man in the world for her.

At last, from the crest of the highest ridge, the one from which each year she took her favourite ride down to the river, she caught sight of the little party that menaced Wayne Shandon's liberty. The men had been making better time than she had let herself believe they would; evidently MacKelvey wanted to get the thing over with, to get back to the Echo Creek that night. Beyond them, straight ahead, was the bridge.

"I can't do it! I can't do it!" she cried aloud, her voice broken with hopelessness.

Even as she hesitated, poising upon the top of the rise, one of the men far ahead turned and saw her. It was Sledge Hume. She saw his quick gesture; she almost fancied that she could hear his laugh. He would know why she followed them. He would be mocking her. Oh, how she hated the man then!

"They will leave one of the deputies at the bridge," she thought in despair. "He won't let me across. Oh, God, if there were only another crossing!"

There was another crossing; a snowshoe rabbit had shown it to her. He had sought to leap it just to save the little flame of life in the tiny furred breast. He had gone to his death valiantly, but he had shown her the place, the short cut, the way that was full of menace and yet that was possible.

Her face whitened; she hesitated just a fraction of a second, balancing. Now the men were following the wide crescent of the curve which would lead them to the bridge. There was another course lying straight between the two tips of that crescent, and a great gap filled with the thunder of raging water against crags that were like the horrible teeth of a monster, broke the short cut in two.

Again Hume had turned; she noted even across the distance the contemptuous carriage of his big body and she knew that he was laughing. And again, as though it were already just before her, she fancied that she saw the chasm of the river.

"It is Wayne's ruin, it maybe Wayne's death, if they take him now!"

It seemed to her that it had not been her voice, that whispered the words. It seemed that they had come to her from the air, that some one else had spoken them. And as, hesitating no longer, she stooped forward and sped down the long slope, she swerved still further from the track the four men had made, heading straight to the river above them, opposite the Bar L-M ranch house, straight toward the only way that was left her.

She had made up her mind. She was resolute now and yet she was frightened. In a little while the roar of the river smote her ears and it seemed at once to call to her and jeer at her. She fancied that it was like Hume's voice, mocking her. She remembered just how the banks fell straight down to the whirlpools; she remembered again the splash of the falling snow when she had come so close to her death. The very feeling that had gripped her then, like ice against the beatings of her heart, gripped her now. She was as one in a nightmare, drawn on, rushing on to the peril from which she shrank.

She lost sight of Hume and the rest as she left the straight, cleared roadway and the trees came between her and them.

"They're all the same," Sledge Hume was laughing as he turned and waited a moment for MacKelvey to come up with him. "I never saw a woman yet who wasn't willing to tackle the impossible in a flash and then go to pieces with hysterics in the middle of the job."

On, gathering speed with the flinging of each yard behind her, her polished skis singing as they leaped downward, hardly seeming to touch the brittle crust of snow underfoot, standing erect that she might see far ahead and turn in time for a mound that spoke of a boulder, Wanda was rushing on toward the river. Its shouting voices, like the voices of many giant things In brutal laughter, swelled and thundered ever more distinct, ever more jeering. It seemed to her that there were ten thousand Sledge Humes taunting her, sneering at the blind recklessness of a mere woman. She knew that the blood had crept out of her face and that she was afraid. And she knew that there is one thing in the world, God-created, that is greater, stronger than fear.

"I have leaped distances greater than that before," she told herself stubbornly.

"With certain death dragging at you if you missed?" the rude laughter of the river through its rocky way taunted her.

Her skis were running slowly again; she had come to the level land once more. She must make a little turn to avoid the thick grove through which she had gone slowly last year after the rabbit. She must turn upstream a little too. There were ten minutes of driving one ski after the other, then the steep climb of another ridge, the last ridge lying between her and the river. She climbed it swiftly, stubbornly and unhesitatingly.

"If Wayne were coming to me would he hesitate?" she asked herself angrily. "Because I am not a man am I a coward? Shall I fail him the first time in our lives that he has need of me? Is a woman like that a fit thing to be a strong man's wife?"

At the top of this last climb she paused. She was not afraid now. The colour had come back into her face, her blood was running steadily. She might be going to her death. Was death then so great a thing? Was it as great as her love?

"If I were afraid now," she told herself quietly, "I should know that I do not love Wayne as other women have loved other men. Then I should not deserve to live to love him weakly."

From here she could not see MacKelvey, Hume and the others. She knew that by this time

they would have crossed the bridge. Then she tried not to think of them. Briefly she studied the steep sloping sweep of the snow, trying to mark the way she must go. She found the spot the rabbit had chosen, the narrowest place with the far bank three or four feet lower than the near bank. Frowningly seeking the detail of a sheet of glaring white which seemed without mound or hollow but which she knew was full of uneven ridges and sinks, she made out at last such a ridge lying parallel to the river's edge and close to it. A log had fallen there; she remembered having seen it in the summer. With the little hollow this side, with the short upward slope that would give her a natural take-off, she would make it help her.

She would strike this low up-sloping mound in a moment when she swept down upon it from the crest of the ridge upon which she now stood; she would take the tiny dip in a fraction of a second too brief to have a name; she would rise, leaping as she rose—

The supreme moment came.

She loosened the band about her waist, breathing deeply. She bent her slender body this way and that, straightening up, stooping, twisting from side to side. She felt that every individual muscle must be made ready, keyed up to the work that was to be done in a flying moment. She must be steady, she must be sure. Not a fibre of her being must weaken or tremble or be uncertain.

"Dear God," she whispered, "make me strong and worthy and unafraid."

Then she lifted her hands a little, holding them out from her sides, her fingers outstretched, her arms taking the place of the pole she had tossed away. Her skis clung to the snow. She slipped the right foot back and forth, making sure that it had gathered none of the feathery stuff that lay just under the thin crust. When it ran smoothly she tested the left ski. And then slowly she stooped forward, her hands still out. She felt a little stir, knew that she was moving, just barely moving. She stooped further forward now, quickly. The shifting of her weight had its instantaneous effect. The slow, scarcely perceptible moving was changed into a smooth glide that grew in a yard to a swiftly accelerating speed. Then she straightened up, balancing with taut muscles, rushing downward.

Now she was flying as a bird flies that skims the snow. Only the little whine of the ski song over the crust, the flying particles from before the upturned ends, a dust of diamonds, told that the speeding body was not in reality defying gravity, scorning the earth beneath. The pitch steepened before her, the skis rose and dipped over the little uneven places, the air cut at her face, stung her eyes. Half way down, when the skis struck a little mound from which she dared not try to swerve, she in sober truth flew, not touching the crust again for five or six feet. She landed easily, crouching a little, tensing her already taut muscles, steadying herself, plunging onward at a speed that was like an eagle's dip. And then another second, another and she heard the whine of the air about her ears, saw the black gulf from which the roar of the river boomed up at her and her skis rose to the take-off she had chosen.

As never before in all her life did the girl's will call upon the muscles of her body. Her hands far out now, like the still pinions of some strange being of a strange white world, her lithe body as tense as wire, she gathered her strength, felt her body rising as the skis slipped up the short slope of the mound, knew that in one flying second there lay both success and death. At the very instant, when, had she let herself go, she would be slipping down to the water that was grinding at the rocks, she leaped.

Higher and higher she rose in the air, carried onward, upward by the impetus of her wild race and by the slight aid of her take-off had given her. Higher yet and further out although it seemed to her still heart that her body was hanging motionless, that it was the earth leaping beneath her, flying backward, rushing away, hurling the chasm of the river under her. She did not look down; it might have meant death to look down. She kept her eyes fastened now upon the far bank, the place where she sought to land, where she must throw herself forward to avoid slipping back.

And yet she saw the black gulf under her. It was too black, too wide, too full of shrieking menace for her not to see it even while she did not look at it. She was hanging still in air, it was rushing at her, there was an instant filled with eternity. And then, Wayne's name upon her lips, she had described the great arc, she had struck six feet from the treacherous margin on the far side, her skis were running smoothly under her, at first swiftly, then slowly, and a glad cry of thankfulness broke from her lips.

She had not even fallen, she did not have to hurl herself prone to clutch at the snow with her fingers. She sped on, came slowly to a standstill and then her heart leaping, her blood racing, her eyes bright and wet she was over the ridge and speeding forward again, the roar of the river lost to her ears, the form of a man bringing a horse out of a snow surrounded barn in her eyes.

He cried out as he saw her racing across the snow to him, cried out in wonder. He dropped his horse's rope and turned to meet her. She saw that he was still on his skis, saw too that not a thousand yards beyond the house four men were coming on swiftly.

"Wanda!"

"Wayne." She had come close enough to call now and lifted her voice clearly. "MacKelvey and Hume and two more men are there, right there. They are going to arrest you for Arthur's murder. They mean to keep you shut up in jail until they ruin you. They will make evidence to hang you. You must go, go quick."

He swung about quickly, caught sight of the four men who had seen Wanda and who were lessening the distance by quick strides. His face blackened to a great anger. Then he turned back to her and his face flushed with a great happiness. For in the man as in the woman love was stronger than fear or hatred.

"You golden hearted, wonderful woman!" he cried softly. He reached out his arms as she swept by and gathered her into them. He kissed her softly. And then, swiftly, he turned away.

"After a few days, come to the cave," he said eagerly. "If I let them take me now it would mean more than my ruin, more than my death, Wanda. They won't take me. When a man is arrested for Arthur's murder it is going to be the right man."

And striking out mightily, steadily he left her, driving his straight way toward the broken country of the upper end of the valley.

When they came to where she lay, Hume first, they found Wanda Leland very still and white, motionless save for the little sobs shaking her. Hume's anger broke out into a wordy fury. He shook his fist at her prostrate body and cursed. But he did not sneer. There was too deep a wonder in his heart. He knew, they all knew, what it meant to have done what she had done. And MacKelvey, a hard man robbed by her of his prey, took off his hat and lifted her gently and said simply, and in full reverence:

"By God!"

CHAPTER XXII

THE FUGITIVE

"You are no longer daughter of mine!" cried Martin Leland sternly in the first heat of his anger. "You have turned against your own blood like a traitress. You have forsaken your father to ally yourself with a drunken brawler, a man so sunken in depravity that he has murdered his own brother for mere money. You have shamed yourself and your mother and me. You have bared your heart for the world to look at and laugh at, that men may link your name and the name of a common fugitive from justice. You would be held up to less shame had you merely uncovered your body and gone out naked for men to jeer at!"

Wanda, lying white and lax upon the couch near the fireplace, suddenly dropped her mother's hand and sprang to her feet, her body quivering with a quick anger that leaped out to meet her father's.

"Papa!" Her head was thrown up in defiant pride, her vibrant voice, her blazing eyes were as hard as his own. "I won't listen to such things, not even from you. They are untrue. You say that Wayne ran away because he is guilty and a coward. You know better than that! He is not a fugitive from justice; he is forced by the things you have done to become a fugitive from injustice and persecution. Oh, how can you stand there and denounce him after you have set your hand against him as you have? Or don't you think that I know how you and the rest have sought to rob him and ruin him!"

"What!" stormed Leland. "Is the girl mad?"

"No, I am not mad," she flung back at him hotly, all facts and considerations swept away before the rush of her furious indignation except the one vital matter that she was fighting for a thing as dear as her lover's life. "You can find no name too bad for him, just because you hate him! You have always hated him just because he is his father's son. You and his own cousin, two men whom he has trusted, have tricked him and betrayed him. You have hidden from him all knowledge of the mortgage you held upon the Bar L-M. Even now you are trying to steal his ranch from him. Wayne has never done a thing so vile as that in all his life. Oh! I am ashamed."

Her voice grew harsh in her throat; her face was no longer white, two spots of anger burned in her cheeks. She broke off panting, her eyes growing harder, brighter as they challenged his.

"Martin," cried Mrs. Leland, coming swiftly to the girl's side. "Be careful."

"Careful!" shouted Leland, his face red with his fury. "When one of my blood loses her last

shred of decency, when she takes up with a low, dissolute unprincipled Shandon? The worst of a bad lot. May God curse him, may God curse her if she clings to him!"

"You have never spoken to me like this before," cried Wanda passionately. "You will never do it again."

"Listen to me," thundered Leland, his heavier voice drowning the girl's words. "If your father does a thing which your untrained, woman's brain cannot rightly understand are you the one to judge and condemn him? Because a lying Shandon has cast his cursed spell over your romantic fancies are you to leap to these ridiculous conclusions? Am I the man to do a dishonourable thing? Ask other men out in the world where my dealings are an open book. Ask your mother. If, to you, who have gone hungering for lies to a man amply competent to tell them to you, it has seemed that I have done a mean thing for selfish purposes is it your place to judge me? Listen, I tell you. I have known for a year and a half that Wayne Shandon murdered his brother and robbed the dead body. I have seen, although all men know this fact as well as I do, that he has been trickster enough to cover his bloody tracks; that it would be hard to convict him in court. I have seen that it lay within my power, that it has become my duty, to punish him in another way. Not a thing have I done that is not just, that the law courts will not sanction. And yet, when I had wrested from him the thing his red hands took with his brother's life, I should have punished him a little as he deserves. Is a man like him deserving of any other treatment?"

"How do you know all this?" she demanded, all that dormant fierceness of the female heart Hashing from the depths to the surface. "Did you see him kill Arthur?"

"Don't be a fool," he retorted.

"Or were you over ready to believe because you hated him, and because the tool you would lay your hand to would not only punish him but enrich you? And you call me traitress!"

For a moment Martin Leland, his face convulsed, his hands clenched, his great body towering over her, looked as though he were going to strike her down. Then, without a word, he left the room and returned swiftly to the study where MacKelvey and Hume were waiting for him.

Wanda stood looking after him, her body stiff and erect, her face lifted, her eyes unchanging. Her mother laid a quick hand upon the girl's arm. Then, suddenly the tired body relaxed, the flaming spirit softened, and Wanda, white and trembling, dropped sobbing upon the couch.

"Wanda, Wanda," whispered her mother softly, kneeling and putting her hands gently upon the shaking shoulders. "I am sorry. And yet, Wanda, I am proud of what my daughter has done to-day."

The mother heart comforted. And even before the storm of sobs, shaken from the girl by strained and jangling nerves, had ceased, Mrs. Leland was trying to make excuses for her husband.

"He has just been blinded by hate," she said bravely. "Some day he will see the light."

"Gee," commented Willie Dart, outside the door, resuming his pacing up and down upon the front porch. "If Red turns that girl down I'll marry her myself!"

Had Martin Leland's iron nature asked such a thing as sympathy it would have received little satisfaction from the interview that night in his study. MacKelvey's greeting to him was, "Martin, that girl of yours is a wonder! There's not a man in the country would have tackled the thing she did to-day."

"Pshaw," grunted Hume, his sneering manner having come back to him with his growing displeasure. "It was simple enough for all of its spectacular staging."

"Was it?" MacKelvey asked sharply. "I'll bet you five hundred dollars, Mr. Hume, that you're not the man to do it!"

Hume lifted his shoulders for answer and kicked viciously at the andirons on the hearth.

"So you let him get clean away?" demanded Martin, flinging himself into his chair at the table and glowering at MacKelvey. "Why didn't you follow him up?"

"Because I wasn't a fool. Wouldn't I cut a pretty picture slipping around on a pair of sticks trying to catch up with the strongest ski man in the county! He'd double up on me every mile. And with the night coming on I'd stand a great chance finding him, wouldn't I?"

"What are you going to do about it then?"

MacKelvey spat thoughtfully at the fire.

"I'm going to nab him the first chance I get. And I'm not in the habit of carrying a warrant around in my pocket until I wear it out, either."

"You are going out after him in the morning?"

MacKelvey again attacked the fire with more thoughtfulness, truer precision than before.

"Nope. I'm going back to El Toyon while I can get out. There's about ten feet more snow due in the next two weeks, Martin."

"So," cried Hume. "That's the way you serve a warrant, is it? You are going to let the man get away if he wants to, and he has shown us already how he feels about that! You are going to let him slip down to Mexico or work up to the Canadian line."

"Easy, Mr. Hume," said MacKelvey slowly. "I've been sheriff in this county for seventeen years. Name me the name of any man who's been wanted and who hasn't been brought in. If I stuck here, running around like a rabbit in the snow, Shandon would have the chance to get out, if he wanted it. And I don't believe that he does want it. But if I'm back in El Toyon to-morrow with the wires busy there won't be a hole in the web for a blue bottle to buzz through. He can't eat snow, you know. I'll put a man up here to see he don't slip back to the Bar L-M. And I don't say I won't go myself or send Johnson and Crawford out in the morning to try and pick up his tracks if it don't snow during the night and cover them up."

But long before midnight it came on to snow again, so heavily that they all knew that a fresh ski track would not have lasted an hour. Early the next morning Leland, Garth Conway, Sledge Hume and MacKelvey with his deputies went out of the valley upon skis or snow shoes. Helga Strawn went with them, shrugging her shoulders at Leland's blunt assurance that it would be a good ten miles of hard work before they could expect to take to the horses waiting beyond the heavy snow line.

Mr. Dart did not go with them. He had settled that fact for himself very positively before going to bed the night before.

"In the first place," he decided, "Red might need me to smuggle him some grub or something and I got to be on hand. In the second place I had enough trying to ride two slippery sticks yesterday. Split myself in two for ten miles on a pair of devil's toboggans? Thanks awfully. I'll stay here and split stovewood for Julia."

"Where's Dart?" demanded Leland when the men were pushing back their chairs from the breakfast table.

Nobody knew. He had not been seen since last evening. Julia, hastily returning from quest of him, brought back word that he was in bed and that she was afraid that he was unwell. She had heard him groaning.

"The little fool is faking," cried Martin, ready this morning to fly into a rage over trifles. "Does he think I'm going to have him sticking around the place all winter?"

He flung himself from the table and went heavily up the stairs to Dart's room in the attic.

"Come out of that," he said roughly, throwing the door open. "We are going to start right away. You'd better get some breakfast in a hurry if you want any."

"Breakfast?" moaned Dart weakly. "Good God, Mart. Don't say breakfast to me or I'll die."

"What's the matter?" asked Martin roughly and suspiciously. "You weren't sick last night."

He came closer to the huddled figure. Dart's hands were shaking, his face was as white as a sheet.

"It came on sudden," he said faintly. "I—I've had it before. I—I think I'm dying this time. Has Mamma Leland got a Bible?"

Suddenly, before Leland's astonished eyes, the little man began a violent retching and vomiting. Leland went back down the stairs, swearing, and sent Julia with word to Mrs. Leland that Dart was really sick.

Dart got out of bed, his legs trembling under him, and crept to the window, peering out cautiously. Only when he had seen the party leave the house upon skis and webs did he go back to his bed, snatch a bit of plug cut chewing tobacco out from under his pillow and hurl it venemously into the snow.

"A man that will chew that stuff for fun," he groaned creeping back into bed, "ain't safe to have around. Good God, I wonder if I am dying? I might have took too much!"

Thus it happened that almost at the very beginning of the hard winter Wayne Shandon was a hunted man, forewarned that his hunters would spare neither unsleeping vigilance nor expense to secure his arrest and conviction. During the first night and the first day he never went far from the Bar L-M range house. From behind a screen of timber less than a quarter of a mile from his pursuers he had watched them turn back towards the Echo Creek. The darkness was already dimming the landscape but he could count the figures, five of them, with the horse Wanda had insisted that MacKelvey bring out with them. As they went toward the bridge he came down toward them, moving swiftly among the trees, keeping well out of sight.

He knew he would be doing the thing upon which MacKelvey would not count. Besides it was sheer madness to think of spending the night without shelter of any kind and he did not dare go immediately to Wanda's cave. Already he had come to think of that place, high above the treetops and as safely hidden as if it were below the earth's surface, as a place of refuge. If he went there now they would track him to-morrow—unless it snowed. He must wait somewhere until the snow came to wipe out the track he would leave behind him.

He entered the house by the back door, got his rifle and a belt of cartridges, made into a compact pack such blankets, tobacco, coffee, sugar, salt and condensed foods as he could carry. The cave was already well stocked but he could not guess now how long he must lie hidden there. He had no time to decide upon the course ahead of him beyond the immediate future. He knew only that he must not let them take him until he had done the work he would be unable to do from the inside of a jail. He was preparing carefully for such needs as he could foresee.

He slept that night in his own bed, waking at each little noise, ready to spring up fully dressed and armed, prepared equally for defence or a hasty retreat. Going to the window shortly after midnight he saw that the snow was falling heavily. He made a hasty cold meal, then strapped on his pack, took up his rifle and left the house. Now was the time to go to the cave; the snow might cease by morning.

In the darkness he deemed it wiser to go down by the bridge than to attempt the steeper passage beyond the head of the lake. They would not be out in this sort of night watching for him; they would not know where to expect him. And even if he came within twenty paces of a man his swift, silent passage in the dark would be unnoticed.

To a man knowing the broken range country a whit less intimately than Shandon knew it, the trip that night down to the bridge, across it, across the Leland ranch and to the cliffs where the cave was would have been a sheer impossibility. The storm, howling and snatching at him, would have taken the heart out of a man less grimly determined than he had grown to be. The snow, while it befriended him, covering his trail in the rear, drove its shifting wall of opposition across his way in front. The darkness tricked him and baffled him again and again. But still, head down and dogged, he pushed on, certain always of his general direction, confident of being under the cliffs in the first faint glow of the new day.

It was an endless night, torturous with cold and uncertainty. But at last, before the day broke, he made his heavy way up the great cedar, climbing perilously with numbed hands. He knew that if his pursuers came here now they would see where he had knocked the thick pads of snow from the wide horizontal branches. But he knew, too, that before they could arrive the steadily falling snow would have hidden the signs he had left behind him. And at last, wearily, he threw himself down before a crackling fire, and went to sleep.

For upwards of two weeks his life was like that of a rat in a cellar. Silence, monotony, darkness, loneliness. Already the snowfall was as great as that of most winters. He could guess that by this time the fences about Wanda's home were hidden under a smooth covering that thickened day by day, night after night. When he looked out from the screen across his doorway he saw that the smaller trees were blotted out and reckoned that upon the level floor of the valley the snow lay ten feet deep. Now and again, when he went out in the early dawn or the last glimmering light of dusk for wood or for a break in the monotony that was horrible in itself to a man of his type, he saw how the winter was piling higher and higher its white heaps along the cliffs above. He spent hours on the cliffs, working his way slowly upward along the seam in the rocks which he discovered led out above, digging with his hands for dead branches to replenish his dwindling stock of firewood. He must choose days for this when the snow so thickened the air that a man within shouting distance could not have seen him.

Two weeks, and Wanda did not come to him. Two weeks of inactivity, of waiting, the hardest trial in the world for a man tingling with energy, with his work calling to him through every moment of his waking hours. He had planned that work, going over and over his plans, every step. He knew just what he should do—when Wanda came.

He could not know why she did not come. He began to fear that she had left the valley. Then, when he assured himself that she would not have gone without a word he began to fear that she was ill; that the day when she took the short cut had been too much for any woman's endurance.

But she was not ill, he was certain of that. During the two weeks there were only two days when the air cleared enough for him to see the Leland house. The first came when he had been in

hiding three days; the other two days later. Both times Wanda had come out upon the porch where with the spy-glass in the cave he could see her plainly. She had signalled him, using the first few signals of that code they had made together so merrily. She lifted both hands up to her face and he knew that her heart was repeating his words, "I love you, dear, with my whole heart." She loitered on the porch in apparent carelessness, but as eager as the man watching her, yearning for her, she had lifted her hood lightly from her head, flashing the message across the miles: "Be careful. We are being watched." She turned her back and stood for a long time looking in at the open living room door: "Something has happened to prevent our meeting to-day."

Several times during the two clear days she repeated her signals. But for more than a week afterward he had no sight of her. He did not know, he could only guess vaguely at the truth. One of MacKelvey's men had come back to the Echo Creek, unexpected by Wanda and Mrs. Leland, and while he was apparently concerned only in making frequent trips toward the Bar L-M, Wanda had the uneasy feeling that she was never long out of his sight.

But at length Wanda risked coming to him, choosing a time when the danger was least. Johnson, the deputy sheriff, had said in the morning that he was going to take a run over to the Bar L-M, to look things over. It was by no means the first time he had said this, and the girl felt that he had no particular reason to suspect her to-day. It was still snowing, not too heavily for one to venture out, but steadily enough to obliterate ski tracks entirely in less than an hour. Johnson left the house, and a little later Wanda set forth, her preparations swiftly made. Johnson was out of sight. She drove on swiftly to a hilltop due east of the house from which she would be able to see him before he came to the bridge.

She waited anxiously there until she saw him, pushing steadily onward. One sharp glance at the way she had come showed her that unless Johnson returned very much faster than he had gone out there would be no sign to tell him where she had gone. And then, her eyes suddenly brighter than they had been for many a day, she hastened on, still eastward, not daring even now to turn directly toward the cliffs until she had passed into the deeper forest.

It was like bringing new life to Wayne Shandon. He swept the girl up hungrily into his arms, crying out softly as she came through the snow blocked entrance to the cave. And she, when he brought a candle and her eyes caught sight of his face, bearded and worn, must shut her lips tight and fight hard to keep back the tears.

It was only a brief half hour allowed them, leaving them both happier and sadder at the parting. But she had brought the few little things she could smuggle out to him, had assured herself from a close examination of his store that he was in no danger of freezing or starving; and he had entrusted to her the carrying out of the work he had hit upon.

"I have scribbled a letter in your little note book, dear. It is to Brisbane, a lawyer in San Francisco. He is a friend of mine and I can trust him. It tells him everything, about the mortgage and the foreclosure, about the trouble I am in. He's the man to advise us now. There's not a keener criminal lawyer in the State. I'm going to give him my power of attorney. I'll take chances on slipping down to the city, somehow, if it's necessary. Or I can get down into White Rock at night, meet him there, and get back here before morning. The letter tells him, too, that I am dead certain that Sledge Hume is the man the law wants; it explains why, and authorises him to hire a detective agency to run Hume down. Dear heart of mine, you are too brave to be afraid for me now. You will get this letter out somehow? You will get it to Brisbane for me? Once he is at work things are going to right themselves. A man can't kill another and rob him of twenty-five thousand dollars and not leave some sort of a trail behind him. Then there is another message. I have not written it. Can you get word to Big Bill to keep a close watch on Little Saxon? I'll ride him in the spring."

"And you, Wayne? You can't stay here all winter!"

"I can, if there is anything to be gained by it. But we'll wait until we hear from Brisbane. He'll find the evidence we want, dear. And until then hadn't you rather think of me waiting here than lying in jail?"

When she left him to take a devious way home the tears lay glistening upon her cheek until the snow, beating in her face, washed them away.

CHAPTER XXIII

HELGA STRAWN PLAYS THE GAME

The winter which had begun unusually early, battled fiercely for eight weeks in the mountain fastnesses, and went down in grumbling defeat before an early spring. And, as the stern face of the Sierra was hidden under the snow that robed the higher peaks in royal ermine and drifted

sixty feet in the deeper cañons, so was the vital thing in the lives of Wayne Shandon and Wanda Leland covered by silence and secrecy. Each day was tense and eager to them; to the world whose prying eyes could not penetrate through the barricade of winter it was as though those lives were stagnating.

Wanda delivered Wayne's letter safely and promptly to Brisbane, the San Francisco lawyer. She took her mother into the secret, she told her mother everything now, for the close companionship of last winter had borne its fruit of warm sympathy, and the two women went out of the valley, ostensibly to spend a few weeks shopping and visiting in San Francisco. The letter never left the girl's person until, in a private room, it was placed in the hands of Brisbane.

Brisbane's wise old eyes looked at her shrewdly from behind the mask of his clean shaven face, the greatest poker face, men said, that had ever gone its inscrutable way up and down the city of fogs and wet winds. He had asked his few questions in an absent-minded sort of fashion which disappointed and distressed the girl. He evinced not a whit more interest than he would have done in watching a stranger stamp the mud off his feet, or, for that matter, than he would have shown had the roof broken into flames over his head. But he took the case.

Upon a storm filled night, as black as ebony, Brisbane met Wayne Shandon in White Rock. A man lived there, whom Shandon could trust, an old friend of his father, and at his house the meeting was held with little difficulty or danger. In less than two hours Brisbane had put himself in possession of all the facts which Shandon could give him that bore upon the matter in hand. There was the germ of a case against Hume he admitted, but it would have to grow considerably to be worth anything to a jury. Yes, the crooked work in the foreclosure of the mortgage would help a little; not much though. He would attend to the mortgage, taking Shandon's note for the amount, and would see that it was paid off immediately. As to advising Shandon as to the best thing to do now, the lawyer smiled one of his rare, noncommittal smiles.

"By avoiding arrest in the first place," he said drily, "you put yourself in wrong with any jury in the world. But you've done it already. I can't see now that it makes much difference whether you go and give yourself up or whether you keep on the dodge. If you prefer this sort of thing to a nice warm jail, why suit yourself my boy!"

He would see further that the shrewdest detective in the City was fully instructed and put on the case immediately. Finally he gave Shandon a letter from Wanda in which she promised to return to the valley as soon as possible, shook hands as warmly as his absent minded manner would permit and went to bed.

Through the winter the various threads of men's destinies, golden and black, gay and sombre, too fine for human eye to see, too strong for human might to break, were being woven into the intricate pattern of life and fate. Though miles lay between the many men whose lives were unalterably mingled, though each man went selfishly or unselfishly about his own pursuits, although each fashioned daily his life for the day, still the mills of God were grinding, the looms were weaving, and grist and kernel, warp and woof found their way from the individual existences into the scheme of the whole.

Dart had left with Mrs. Leland and Wanda and made a straight line to Big Bill and Little Saxon. He made it his own special business in life to see that no knockout stuff was slipped into the horse's oats, that no slippery gent got the show to put Little Saxon out of the game. He even took the precaution to partition off a tiny room for himself in the hay loft above Little Saxon's stall, where he spent the nights dozing and snatching up the ancient shot gun down the muzzle of which his enthusiastic fingers had rammed enough buck shot to explode the piece and blow himself as well as any unhappy intruder into that land from which there is no return.

Big Bill, acting foreman now, took upon himself the unremitting work of making the racehorse fit. Nearly as good a man as Shandon with animals, he continued through the winter the task that had been little more than begun. The fact that the man who had first proposed the races which were to be run off in the Spring, was a fugitive, accused of a grave crime, had aroused much sensational talk and newspaper babble, but it had increased rather than lessened interest and new entries were being daily arranged. Big Bill assured those who cared to ask that the race would be run, that Shandon would have come in and been cleared of any charges against him long before June, and that there would be no change in plans. And though he sometimes doubted the statement he made so bluntly he let no single day pass without adding to Little Saxon's education.

MacKelvey was taciturn. But he was not the man to give up a quest once begun. He grew irritable under the sting of Sledge Hume's sneers and Martin Leland's regular weekly enquiries; but he pushed his work tirelessly. As is always the case when the law wants a fugitive there were many conflicting and empty reports, that would have aided had they been true but which only hampered since they were not. A report that Wayne Shandon had been seen boarding a train in Reno was followed three days later by two other rumours, one claiming that he was on a ranch just out of San Jose, the other that he had been recognised ten days ago in Los Angeles. Each report with the vaguest hint of truth in it MacKelvey hunted down doggedly, and the wires into El Toyon from both directions were kept busy. It was the opinion of many people that Shandon had long ago made good his escape and had gone abroad; it was held by many a mild mannered man or timid old maid that he was even now the head of a lawless gang terrorising whatever near or

distant city or countryside the most lurid headlines came from; not a few people shook their heads and prophesied that when the Spring thaw came the body of a reckless, blood tainted monster would be found where it had been hurled in desperation from a high cliff. The sheriff's own personal opinion, known only to the sheriff, perhaps came as close to the truth as any man's.

Of all the men and women who knew him, perhaps none evinced less concern in Wayne Shandon's fate than Helga Strawn. She had something else to do. Looking ahead far and carefully, doing nothing hastily, planning and shaping her way, with Sledge Hume and her lost interest in the Dry Lands always looming large in the foreground of her thoughts, she was already supplying her quota of grist to the great invisible mills. She bought, upon her own initiative, a small farm just on the edge of Hume's land, investing ten thousand dollars in it, and came there to live. She bought conservatively at twenty dollars an acre. If the project, now involved in uncertainty, were perfected her land would be worth from two to five times what she had paid for it. On the other hand, if nothing came of the campaign for irrigation, it was always worth twenty dollars. It was Helga Strawn's way to play safe.

She saw much of Sledge Hume. Or rather she allowed Sledge Hume to see much of her. The same thing with a variation, and that variation important in the woman's shrewd eyes. Hume had no means of knowing how much money she possessed, but he did know that she had paid out ten thousand dollars in cash. He knew also that she was a woman. In his eyes, never clearsighted from the mote of conceit and the dust of arrogant superiority, a woman was a fool. He needed money, he wanted money, her money as well as another's. He had gone far already in the project that would make him a rich man if it succeeded; he was going further. If litigation now were to raise its long wall against him he meant to surmount the wall or tunnel under it. He had gone too far to stop; his money was invested; he wanted more money to invest with it.

While he made the woman his study she coolly dissected his character, not satisfied with the composite, both patient and shrewd in her analysis. While he sought to read her, handicapped by his prejudice, she spelled the letters of the man's soul.

She came to see, after the first few days, that Hume's one working theory of life was that of the survival of the fittest. Eminently fit himself, capable physically in strong, clean body, mentally in cool, calculating, single purposed brain, morally in a code of ethics which resolved all considerations to his working theory of life, he looked down upon other lives than his own from the passionless heights of a supreme impudence. In most things he was unusually frank, bluntly honest. Wanting no man to give him a place in the world which he felt thoroughly competent to secure for himself, he curried favour nowhere, fawned upon no one. Frankly satisfied with himself as he had made himself, he had no desire, seeing no need, to pretend to be other than he was. Egotism, approximating the absolute, made him careless, even contemptuous, of the opinion of others. His mental attitude might perhaps be likened to that of the colossally mad man of Europe, the only man of whom he was ever known to speak in words of approval. "I and God did this thing!" the Emperor had said. So Hume might have said, "I and the rest of the world."

The free stride of his activities was not restricted by any form of what he would have called squeamishness. The means were incidental, intrinsically negligible; he justified them by the end for which he strove. That end was unvarying. From this grew the man's power, such as it was.

That end took him, in moments which otherwise would have been empty, to Helga Strawn. She had made her little home cosy and comfortable, the living room almost luxurious. She wore rare gowns, painstakingly chosen; she kept him waiting when he called; she received him with indifference. She seemed to grow as frank with him as he with her, and often enough the frankness was genuine. She told him coolly at the outset that she knew he would swindle her out of her money if he got the chance and that he was not going to get the chance. She informed him that she did not trust him but that that need make no difference in their relations; if she became convinced that the project were safe she would go into it as deeply as any one.

She treated Sledge Hume very much as he treated the rest of the world; and she noted with keen relish that her treatment irritated him. She already knew the man well enough to be sure that he would come again the sooner, and more frequently, to force her by the very dominance of his virile personality to see him as he saw himself, in a word as her superior.

As only a very clever woman could have done she drew him out to talk about himself, about his motives. She listened always in apparent cool indifference, always in keen, hard interest under the surface she chose to wear. She never forgot that she had sold to him for twenty-five thousand dollars property for which she would not now accept twice that amount and which he would not relinquish for such a sum. She never forgot that, legally, she had no hope of regaining it. But there would be a way, when she came to know the man utterly, when she came to feel out every nerve of his moral being. She tried to make him talk freely about himself by the one method which must remain infallible as long as Sledge Hume was Sledge Hume, by cool criticism of him.

One day as they idled in her living room she told him abruptly that he was the most selfish man she had ever known. Her smile, as near a sneer as a smile may be and not become unlovely, the tapping of her French slipper, did not cease during his rather lengthy rejoinder.

"Selfish?" he had answered roughly. "Of course I am. Who isn't? You mean that I am the only man you know who isn't afraid to say so! All creation is selfish; selfishness is the keynote of

progress, of evolution, of any sort of success. It begins with the lowest forms of life where each single celled unit takes what it needs for its own good; it is the thing which keeps life in the four footed world; it is the highest concern of the priest who while he pretends to serve mere man and a mythological Saviour never loses sight of his own reward at the end of it. It is the basic principle underlying all religion; take out of it the personal, selfish consideration, 'Be good and you can go to Heaven! be bad and go to Hell!' and your whole religion falls to pieces. Take selfishness out of the world and the world will stagnate and rot."

"I have never heard you wax so eloquent in your own defence!"

"I am not defending myself, I am explaining. I am showing you the difference between yourself and me. I see things as they are; you look at them obliquely. You wouldn't admit it, but you are as selfish as I am."

"The difference is that you are the more honest?"

"Both with myself and the world, yes."

"You pride yourself on your honesty?"

"I don't take the trouble to dissimulate."

"You have never done anything which you have kept hidden?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I have never found it necessary to make the world my father confessor."

"Do you wish me to regard you as what people call an honest man, Mr. Hume? Aren't you telling me that to put money in your own pocket you would do what people call a dishonourable act?"

"You are the only woman I have ever met who has any claim to brains," he answered, paying the compliment in his blunt, rough fashion. "Don't you know me well enough to realise that I don't ask people to set my standards for me? Don't you know a man, when you see him, big enough to set his own standards?"

She came to see that the man was not without a rough hewn sort of greatness, that in his way as he had said, he was a big man. He bred in her strange, dual emotions. In the beginning she had felt for him only the cold hatred of which the woman was thoroughly capable; gradually and begrudgingly she began to feel an equally cold admiration for the strength of the man. She told herself that that admiration was utterly impersonal, that it arose from the fact that Hume was in reality stronger than other men she knew, that it was possible for her to acknowledge it because she did have brains, as he had said. It was an admiration which, she judged coolly, need in no way lessen her hatred for him, which rather would intensify it.

Throughout the winter she strove with single purpose to slip into the man's confidence. Having recognised Hume's peculiar strength, having sought his weaknesses, knowing that he was no man's or woman's fool, she did not make a fool of herself by giving him an inkling of her intentions. When she was most interested it was her role to appear most indifferent; here was the one vulnerable point her searching fingers had found in the shell of his egoism. Indifference piqued him.

It was as though she had gathered three armies and hurled them at him. From the centre she attacked with indifference, striving to draw his attention from other points. She massed two distinct flanking movements stealthily. Upon one side she brought to bear upon a keen brain a brain as keen; upon the other she calmly deployed the charm of her regal beauty. The man had seemed a machine, emotionless. But since he was human, since blood, Hume blood though it was, ran through his veins, he must have emotions like other men. They might be hidden, they might be of stunted, pale growth. In one case she would uncover them, in another she would develop. Already she admired him as a vital, compelling force. She would make him admire a similar force In her; she would make him admire the physical perfection of her. She was a woman, she was amply endowed with brain and instinct and beauty. And she was far too shrewd to overlook a single weapon which lay at her hand.

The eternal looms were weaving, the warp of her being, the woof of his being were drawn into the intricate pattern of human destiny. Smiles and tears, hopes and fears, emotions of which a man is unconscious, ambitions and failures, achievements—all go into the invisible fabric. Already Sledge Hume and Helga Strawn had come to find something to admire in each other. The short sight of a clever man and a clever woman could not discern what lay at the end. And the end was rushing upon them with tremendous speed.

CHAPTER XXIV

UNDER THE SURFACE

Early in January there arrived in El Toyon a gentleman with a scrubbing brush moustache, a pleasant, portly personality, a pair of twinkling black eyes, a seemingly limitless amount of leisure, discriminating taste for liquors and cigars, a fountain pen and a check book. The name he wrote upon the hotel register was Edward Kinsell. He disabused the mind of the proprietor, Charlie Granger, by assuring him that he was not a drummer. In his genial way he was quite ready to tell all about himself. He was an old bachelor, counting upon becoming the husband of a great little woman just as soon as the courts had disposed of the present incumbent. He had been rolling down the rocky trail at a pretty swift gait in town, and his doctor had warned him that the lady In question would have been set free and would no doubt have chosen and elected another life partner before Mr. Kinsell found his way to the church unless he took up the simple life.

So Mr. Kinsell, having availed himself for a week or two of Charlie Granger's hospitality, found at last a vine twined cottage not too far from the hotel kitchen and barroom, and leased it forthwith. He played many games of poker, apparently possessed of a rare ability to play good hands badly and poor hands well so that while he generally lost he lost but little; he took up sleighing with great delight, usually taking a small boy along with him to drive; he amused himself writing daily letters or picture postcards to the great little woman; he became a friend of all the dogs in town; he bought drinks for the village vagabonds; altogether he disported himself harmlessly and pleasantly quite as a portly old bachelor with a scrubbing brush moustache should do while seeking rejuvenation and awaiting a decree. He was always upon the verge of entering some local project which he never entered. He made more friends in the six months of his stay—he left in June,—than any other man in El Toyon had made in a year.

He dined with the preacher and talked infant psychology with the teacher; he bet Charlie Granger ten dollars on a dog-fight over which he waxed red faced and enthusiastic; he got himself catalogued by the saloon loungers as a hot sport; he evinced a warm interest in the country races to be run in the Spring. In that connection he learned that Granger held stakes amounting to ten thousand dollars on a single race that would never be run; he was informed that the money was already as good as Sledge Hume's. He became interested in Hume and in Red Reckless; he even went to the length of travelling into the Dry Lands to get a squint at Endymion, and then sought out Big Bill and studied Little Saxon's good points. Everything in the world seemed to interest Edward Kinsell.

The winter slipped by and the herds went back to the mountain ranges. The Lelands were again at the Echo Creek. Time and a natural strong affection had cooled the heat of passion in father and daughter. Love and consanguinity narrowed the breach which lay between them, although the rupture, if it ever healed completely, would leave its scar. Each nature came to make certain allowances for the other; their intercourse, though not intimate, was amicable. Neither made any reference before the other to Wayne Shandon. And, as naturally as this condition arose, Wanda and her mother drew closer together.

Upon the Bar L-M Big Bill was competent, hard working foreman. He still hoped for the impossible, he still obeyed orders and sought tirelessly to make Little Saxon all that Shandon could have done. Willie Dart, growing as time wore on hollow eyed from his nocturnal vigils, slept in a hay loft with a shot gun perilously near his eager right hand.

Shandon was yet in the mountains, his headquarters Wanda's cave. It seemed at times to his impatient desires that Brisbane was doing nothing; that just the evidence he himself had told the lawyer that night in White Rock should have led long before now to the arrest of Sledge Hume. But he refused to brood over it, telling himself doggedly that if Brisbane were doing nothing there was nothing to be done. He knew his man. And already Shandon had found an occupation which was to keep him busy and far from unhappy day and night.

News of the outside world came to him in the few meetings with Wanda which were bright highlights in his life. She dared not come too often for MacKelvey himself or one of his deputies was a frequent and unheralded guest at Leland's. But she came when she could, meeting him below the cliffs, her camera serving as her reason for going into the forests, bringing him books, little delicacies surreptitiously prepared by her own hands, a newspaper now and then rescued from Julia's wood box, prints of the pictures she had taken. Wanda still saw Dart frequently, and from his gossiping lips brought word of what occurred upon the Bar L-M. Garth Conway, she had not seen. Her father heard from him by post, saw him now and then in the outside world; she did not know what Conway was doing but imagined that he was keeping in touch with Leland for the sake of the irrigation scheme which seemed a still born failure.

Through Wanda and Dart a meeting between Shandon and Big Bill was arranged. The two men met after dark near the head of Laughter Lake; Shandon gave his detailed orders to his foreman, assuring him that Brisbane was at work upon the case and that before long word would come from him for the fugitive to give himself up; there would be a quick preliminary hearing and he would be released. Shandon's optimism glowed into warmer life with the warming of the spring sun. Little Saxon must be kept in condition; arrangements must be made for the open handed welcome and hospitality to be afforded the crowds that would come up for the races in

June. There would be much for Big Bill to superintend: choice beeves must be brought up for the barbecue; a rude platform must be constructed for the dance which was to conclude the day of festivity. In every detail Big Bill took his orders gravely and obeyed them to the letter.

In another matter Big Bill had long ago acted, having been informed in the early winter of Shandon's wishes. Ettinger was told that sooner or later the man whose property controlled the upper waters of the river flowing from Laughter Lake would come back. When he did return he was going to do just the thing Ettinger himself had suggested. Ettinger was to hold out, and induce the others to hold out with him if he could. And, since Leland was stubborn, since the whole matter was in the air just now, Ettinger saw nothing better to do than accept the tip which Big Bill gave him. A similar message went to Helga Strawn.

May came in, radiant and glowing, and men from many miles away visited the Bar L-M to look over the course upon which the race meet was to be held. MacKelvey spent weary days and nights driving his relentless quest; Sledge Hume seemed sullenly idle; Helga Strawn coolly Indifferent to the world about her; and still Wayne Shandon received no encouraging word from Brisbane. May ran through half its allotted days of thaw and bursting seeds; the day for the race was less than a month away, and still Shandon clung to his solitudes, wondering, beginning to doubt.

And then one day he had a visitor.

It was after sunset. He had been out all day, upon the higher table land where he had set rudely constructed traps for rabbits. He had returned in the early dusk, finding his way down the fissure from the rocks above to his cave. And as he made his fire and began the preparations for his evening meal, he heard a very discreet cough at the entrance of the cave.

The cough was repeated, and then there entered the cavern a portly, pleasant looking gentleman with a scrubbing brush moustache.

"Howdy-do, Mr. Shandon?" he said genially, removing his hat to mop his moist forehead and then coming closer to extend his hand. "I was passing and thought I'd drop in."

Shandon who had been squatting by the fire got to his feet and stared.

"Well?" he demanded sharply. He fully expected to hear other voices in a moment, MacKelvey's voice, perhaps Sledge Hume's.

"My card," smiled the genial gentleman pleasantly. "One of my various cards, rather." He extended it, adding, "I thought I'd run in and bring you a handful of cigars. You must be in sad need of them, eh?"

The card explained that its owner was Mr. Edward Kinsell. The name meant nothing to Shandon and he said so bluntly.

"To be sure," acknowledged Mr. Kinsell. He extended the other hand with the cigars, took a stool by the fire, crossed his knees and added drily, "I've been on the lay, though, for pretty close to six months. Great chap, Brisbane, isn't he? By the way here is a note from him."

The note, dated several months earlier, simply stated that Edward Kinsell could be depended upon to do all that any man could in the matter of gathering up the evidence he was being paid by Shandon to get. Shandon's eyes, suddenly bright, an eager note in his voice, he shot out his hand warmly, and cried,

"You have found something?"

"My dear Mr. Shandon," smiled Kinsell, "I have found out so many things that it's a wonder I don't have a continual headache. You'll pardon my not having called upon you sooner? I have really been so busy—"

"You knew where to find me all the time?" incredulously.

Kinsell nodded and smiled approvingly as Wayne lighted a cigar.

"Of course. I always make it a point to be in a position to get into close touch with my principal in case of urgent need."

"Then there is urgent need now?" eagerly. "You have got the deadwood on Hume?"

"Not exactly. But I've got the old kettle boiling and she's due to bubble over most any old time."

"For God's sake," cried Shandon, "tell me something. I didn't know that you were at work even, I don't know a thing that has happened, that is happening."

"And quite naturally you are interested? Just so." Kinsell very carefully placed the finger tips of one hand against those of the other, apparently giving his whole attention to the action. "Let me see. Presently, in a few weeks at most, I'll be putting in a little bill and you'll want to know

what I've been doing to earn my money. That's businesslike and proper. In most matters to be thorough, Mr. Shandon, one must begin at the beginning. In my business it is different; I have to begin in the middle and go back to a point before the beginning. Having availed myself of Mr. Brisbane's knowledge of the subject it became up to me to do one thing: find the man who, before your brother's murder, was in a position to be benefitted by the commission of the crime, or the man with a strong emotional reason for committing it."

He paused, looking thoughtfully at the steep pitched roof his fingers had constructed, shifted quick, measuring glance at Shandon and turned his attention again to his fingers.

"There are three men," he resumed, "who occupy positions demanding investigation. First, you. Your brother's heir, a man with a hot temper, a man who had recently quarrelled with the murdered man; you would benefit financially, you had the reputation of generally needing money, you had the name of being a reckless, headlong sort of devil. Second, Sledge Hume. A man as smooth running as a machine ordinarily, cool headed, emotionless. But investigation shows that he had knowledge of the fact that your brother was carrying on his person the twenty-five thousand dollars; research also discloses there are times when the man's nature changes, when he flies into a towering rage that might well become violent; and finally, we have found that shortly after the crime he paid the sum of twenty-five thousand dollars to Helga Strawn for her interest in the Dry Lands. Third, there is Martin Leland."

"Martin Leland!" cried Shandon.

Kinsell nodded thoughtfully.

"Martin Leland is the man who advanced the money," he said drily. "He has shown himself in the matter of the mortgage and foreclosure a man to be reckoned with. You see all three men mentioned were in positions to have previous knowledge that your brother was in possession of that sum of money; all three were in positions to menace his life for merely sordid reasons; and, strangely enough, all three were men whose tempers are such that in a moment of rage, in a hot quarrel, they might have committed such a crime. Six months ago, Mr. Shandon, I think that it would have gone very hard with you at a trial. The concensus of opinion was pretty strong against you. Making a fugitive of yourself made matters worse. But since then I think things have changed. There are many men who, having learned of the deal Leland and Hume tried to put over on you, have come to look upon them as crooks, and are willing to suspect either of them of having killed Arthur Shandon."

"But Martin Leland suspected," muttered Shandon. "It seems—"

"Exactly," smiled Kinsell. "It seems rather like the finger of God, doesn't it? Now we'll go on. I have learned that Sledge Hume bought Helga Strawn's interest in the Dry Lands about two weeks after the murder. At that time Hume had something like five thousand dollars in the bank. I have had the record of the deed looked up. The deed is noncommittal in the matter in which I was interested. Like so many documents of its nature it says merely that in consideration of the sum of ten dollars, the receipt of which is herein acknowledged, and so forth, Helga Strawn deeded the property to Hume. That's common enough. All right. Next, I find that Hume doesn't take the world into his confidence ordinarily but that he has been free enough to tell a good many people sneeringly that a woman is a fool and that he bought from a woman for five thousand dollars. I find that the five thousand dollars in his bank had been drawn out, a draft for that amount having been sent to Helga Strawn, New York. That looked all right, didn't it? But then you told Brisbane that Helga Strawn told you that Hume had paid her twenty-five thousand. Eh?"

"Yes," Shandon returned. "Have you asked her?"

Kinsell laughed softly.

"I don't do business that way. Usually in this sort of a game if you want to catch nice fat lies fish with question marks for hooks. She is one of the cleverest women I ever knew, is Helga Strawn, almost as clever as Jeanette Compton. Quite as clever, perhaps, but Jeanette has the bulge on her in that she's got her eyes on Helga all the time that Helga has her eyes on Hume."

"Who's Jeanette Compton?"

"She's Helga Strawn's new maid. The old one quit; bribed her myself. You'll find the item in the bill later on. Also Jeanette Compton is the finest little girl on our staff."

"And you're watching Helga Strawn too?"

"With both of Jeanette's bright little eyes, all the time. To go on: we've found through our men in New York that fifteen days after the death of your brother, Helga Strawn placed on deposit in her bank in New York two drafts. One for five thousand dollars, one for twenty thousand. We have found that after Sledge Hume had drawn his five thousand here he was out of the country for two days. We have questioned every bank, Wells Fargo office and post office within a day's range of El Toyon. Last week I got what I wanted from a bank in Reno. A man, evidently a mining man, claiming to be in town from a strike in Tonopah, deposited twenty-five thousand dollars at the Merchants' and Citizens' Bank. It was in cash. The depositor gave his name as—what do you guess?"

Shandon looked at him blankly. Kinsell smiled and said abruptly,

"He gave his name as Wayne Shandon. How does that strike you? It all happened while you were going East with your brother's body; I believe that it occurred while your train was being held up a few minutes in Reno."

Shandon's bewilderment seemed to please Kinsell. He chuckled softly, and then, his face growing thoughtful again, he went on.

"You'll remember that the train is scheduled to stop for fifteen minutes in Reno? Well, the man made his deposit, and ten minutes later he came back, said that his plans had changed, that he was going to take the train with a friend he had seen on board, and asked to have his money back. It was given to him, at his request, in twenty-five bank notes of the thousand dollar denomination. He signed for them, writing your name, excusing an almost illegible signature by the need of haste and by a finger tied up as though it were badly hurt. So much for what the cashier of the Merchants' and Citizens' Bank of Reno knows about it."

"It was Hume?"

"From evidence so far given it might have been Hume or you! All right. The man with the big roll of bills went out with the train. He might have gone on to New York; he might have dropped off at Sparks and taken the next train back in half an hour. He might have got back to Sacramento the next morning. We find the rather interesting fact that in Sacramento a man, giving his name as Arnold Wentworth paid to Wells Fargo and Company the sum of twenty thousand dollars in bills of a thousand dollars each for an order payable to Helga Strawn in New York. Now do you see where Helga Strawn comes in?"

Shandon, merely puzzled, shook his head at the bright eyes suddenly turned upon him.

"Assuming," went on Kinsell, "that it was Hume and not yourself who made that deposit at the Reno bank, don't you see that as things stand he has piled up a pretty piece of evidence against you? You might have done just that thing, deposited the money while the train waited, became alarmed at something, and gone back for it. I wonder if a cashier, after two years' time, would remember the features of a stranger so that he could say whether it was you or Hume? All right. Next, there's Helga Strawn. If she'd talk, if she'd tell us that she had a draft of five thousand and a Wells Fargo order for twenty thousand, that Hume had sent one and had explained that a friend would send the other, we'd have Mr. Hume in a certain place that men don't like to think of."

"Make her tell!" cried Shandon.

Kinsell arched his brows.

"She's out here for blackmail, isn't she? Let her understand what conditions are, and what's a clever woman's clever play? She'd go to Hume and say, 'Look here, Mr. Hume. I can crook my little finger and swing you off into space at the end of a rope. Or I can keep still and you can stand pat.' I fancy she'd do that. And she'd get her Dry Lands back."

"She can't be as bad as that!"

"Can't she? Wait until you have a talk with Jeanette Compton."

"It all depends upon Helga Strawn, then? There is a deadlock until you can get her to talk?"

"By no means. I'm just making a sort of unofficial report, you understand. I wanted you to know that while some people suspect you and some suspect Leland we are going ahead and getting the cards into our own hands. And I wanted to ask you what you thought of that mining proposition on the old McIntosh property? It's adjacent to yours, isn't it? Just the other side of Laughter Lake?"

"The McIntosh property, yes. The ridge rising on the other side of the lake is my boundary line. I hadn't heard of any mining being done there."

"No? Well, it seems a mining concern has found something. At any rate men are at work, a tunnel has been driven into the base of the ridge, and—I wonder what would happen if a charge of dynamite went off in due time and blew a hole right through, into the lake?"

"Good heaven!" cried Shandon angrily. "You mean that Hume and Leland are actually trying to steal my water?"

"I don't think Leland is in on this," replied Kinsell quietly. "He doesn't seem to me to be *quite* the crook Hume is."

"But," muttered Shandon, "if they once tear the side of that mountain out—"

"The milk will be spilt so badly that it cannot be put back into the pan? And the mining company, a Chicago firm, I believe, at any rate a crowd of men hired by a Chicago man, will claim that they were on their territory all of the time; that not one of their men, but some man hired by

you, put in the charges that did the damage. It's a bold play, but then when it's make or break with a man he hasn't much picking and choosing to do."

"It won't take me long to get there," said Shandon grimly. "And I'm getting tired of this thing."

"But, surely," smiled Kinsell, "you don't object to having Hume pay for a part of the work you'll have to do soon or late, do you? Let him go ahead. Just before they get ready to do the real damage, we'll slap a little injunction on them."

"But how will we know?"

"That's all right. One of their foremen is drawing wages from you right now. You'll find a lot of interesting things in the expense account I put in, Mr. Shandon."

CHAPTER XXV

RED RECKLESS ON LITTLE SAXON

"I tell you, Hume, I don't like it. It's a piece of damned highway robbery and I'm rotten sorry I ever got mixed up in it."

Charlie Granger, stake holder of ten thousand dollars, cut viciously at the June grass with his riding quirt and snapped his words out bluntly as he came striding up to Hume. The latter stood, booted and spurred, among a group of men who had travelled across ten miles of broken country to this, the stipulated starting place of the race in which Hume and Shandon had months ago been the sole entries. Hume carelessly good natured, indifferent as usual, openly gratified over a bit of sharp work, merely laughed.

"You might as well hand over the money now, Charlie," he retorted without turning, his steely eyes brightening as they rested upon his mount, Endymion, who was fretting at the restraint imposed upon him by the man at his head. "The agreement took care of just such a matter as this; if only one man rides he gets the money."

Among the knot of men upon the little, pine fringed knoll, were Big Bill, Dart, MacKelvey and half a dozen of the curious from El Toyon and the mountain ranches. Hume's retort was taken in silence. But there was not a man who smiled or who did not think as Granger had spoken. Long ago, when it had first gone abroad that Wayne Shandon was promoting these races, the one essential thing he had planned had been thoroughly understood to be fair play, square dealing, straight racing. These were fair minded men, and although there was more than one among them who believed the fugitive guilty of the crime imputed to him, there was none who did not see the rank injustice of what was going to happen. The feature race of the day would be stolen. And they knew at whose instigation it was that Wayne Shandon was not here to-day.

It was early afternoon and already a number of the events had been run off before a clamorous, enthusiastic crowd of five hundred men and women. The Bar L-M at the surly orders of Big Bill had been turned into a place breathing welcome and revelry. Tents had been pitched under the big pines, making a white city gay with bunting and flags that would accommodate many visitors during the night; tables that had been constructed out in the open staggered under the load of provisions the wagons had brought from the nearest town; a platform for dancing later was already the playground of laughing children and frisking dogs.

The shorter races had taken place upon the flats below the range house, down toward the bridge. Under the glowing June sun, through the crisp air, with blue sky above and green grass underfoot, the contesting horses, each ridden by its owner, had shot by the brief lived village of tents, thundered past the platform where the judges sat, cheered and shrieked at by men and women. There had been races of half a mile, of a mile, of two miles. And now, as the hour appointed drew close, people began to forget that they had come to a race course, and to remember that their entertainment, open handedly given, came from a man who was a fugitive from justice and who was going to be robbed under their eyes of five thousand dollars. That strange thing, public sentiment, swerved abruptly. There were many men there that day who shook their heads and spoke in low voices, mentioning Sledge Hume's name.

"If Shandon could be tried by a jury picked from this crowd," meditated Edward Kinsell, "he'd go scot free in ten minutes!"

What this small group of men had to do upon the knoll ten miles from the Bar L-M was done perfunctorily and in gloom. Little by little, man by man, they drew away from Hume, leaving him standing alone. They looked at his horse, by long odds the finest animal they had seen this day, and from Endymion they looked to his master. Now and then a quick glance went to Big Bill. He

said no word. His face was black with a wrath that seemed to choke him.

The starter, Dick Venable of White Rock, looked at his watch and this time did not return it to his pocket.

"It's two minutes of one," he said, his voice snapping out hard and curt. "This race is scheduled to start at one o'clock. All ready, Mr. Hume?"

"All ready," laughed Hume. He stepped to Endymion's head, jerked off the halter and swung up into the saddle.

"All ready, Shandon?"

Again Hume laughed. Dick Venable waited a moment and snapped his watch shut.

"My job's to start this race if there's one man here to run it," he said. "Shandon isn't here. It isn't my job to express any opinions. The first horse, ridden by either Sledge Hume or Wayne Shandon, to cross that line as a start and to break the tape by the platform at the Bar L-M wins the money. When I fire a gun you're off, Hume. Ready!"

The men began to turn away. Hume sat erect on his horse, coldly indifferent to the opinion these men held of him. He moved so that he held Endymion's restless head over the line marked by Venable's boot.

"All right, Charlie?" Venable asked of Granger.

"All right," grunted Granger. "And wrong as hell. Get it over with."

Venable raised his arm, his revolver high above his head. The bystanders swung up to their horses' backs. Two miles away another little group of men with field glasses were upon a ridge from which they could see the start, from which they in turn could signal the word to the crowd at the Bar L-M.

"Go!" said Venable listlessly.

There was a little puff of white smoke, the crack of a revolver, and Hume, laughing again, struck in his spurs and rode swiftly down the long slope. The men upon the ridge two miles off, as listless as Venable had been, ran up a big white sheet to flutter from a dead pine. This was the signal that the race was on, and that just one man was riding.

Suddenly Willie Dart was galvanized into excited action. He ran to Dick Venable, grasped him by the arm with both shaking hands, thrusting up a red face, and whispered eagerly. Venable started, stared at him and demanded sharply:

"*What's that*!"

But Dart had fled wildly to Jimmie Denbigh, the second starter and had whispered the same words to him. Denbigh stared as Venable had done and then with swift, long strides returned from his horse to Venable's side, close to the starting line.

Big Bill had mounted and was riding away, his eyes on the ground, refusing to follow the figure of a man he had come to hate most thoroughly. MacKelvey had gone to his horse and was jerking loose its tie rope. Dart was now close to MacKelvey's side.

Venable and Denbigh, conversing swiftly in undertones, looked blankly at each other, then at Dart's noncommittal back.

"The biggest little liar," began Venable disgustedly—

Hume was already a quarter of a mile on his way, riding on at a rocking gallop, a little eager, as was his way, to have the money waiting for him in his possession. But suddenly he turned abruptly in his saddle. There had come to him a great shout, the clamour of men's voices.

From the fringe of trees just back of the knoll, not a hundred yards from where MacKelvey and Dart stood, a great red bay horse shot from the thick shadows into the bright sunlight, floating mane and tall spun silk that flashed out like shimmering gold. And the same sunlight splashed like fire on the red, red hair of the man sitting straight in the saddle come at this late hour to ride his race at his own meet.

"Good God, it's Red Reckless!" boomed a startled voice.

Little Saxon cleared the fallen log in his way and as men swung hastily to their horses or drew back from before him he came on, running like a great, gaunt greyhound. Many voices were lifted, shouting. MacKelvey heard and understood. He shoved his foot into its stirrup and as he leaped into the saddle his revolver jumped out into his hand.

"I call upon you to give yourself up!" he shouted. "Stop, Red, or I shoot this time!"

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[Illustration: "I call upon you to give yourself up!" he shouted. "Stop, Red, or I shoot this time!"]

Dart held a trimmed branch in his hand and as MacKelvey called Dart struck. The blow fell heavily upon the sheriff's wrist. MacKelvey cursed, wheeled his horse and without heeding Dart shouted again to Shandon.

Venable and Denbigh, forewarned by Dart's quick whispered words, had their eyes upon Shandon. They ran to the line that marked the start and stood, one at each end of it, their eyes bright, their hands pointing so that Shandon's start should be fair. And Shandon, tossing back his head as he rode, rushed down towards them, shot between them, turned down the knoll after Hume.

The gun in MacKelvey's hand spat flame and lead. The bullet, aimed high, hissed above Shandon's head.

"Stop!" cried the sheriff lustily, driving his spurs into his own horse's sides and dashing across the line between Venable and Denbigh. "By God, Red, I'll kill you!"

"Give him a chance, man!" bellowed Big Bill, his voice shaking, his face red. "Look at that damned cur Hume."

Hume had seen and again had turned, was bending over his horse's neck, using his spurs in the first start of his surprise. The men over yonder had an inkling of what was happening and their glasses were turned steadily upon the knoll.

Shandon without turning, laughed aloud, all the relief after months of hiding breaking out into laughter that was utterly unlike the sound that had come so short a time ago from Hume's contemptuous lips. It was a great, boyish, carefree, reckless laugh that made men wonder.

"Next time, Mac," he shouted back. "Ten to one you can't catch me before I beat Hume to it!"

Almost in his own words of many months ago Big Bill was muttering softly,

"God! What a pair of them!"

More than a quarter of a mile away Sledge Hume, his jaws hard set, his eyes burning ominously, was racing on, saving his horse a little now. Down the knoll drove Red Shandon, rushing on his race with a handicap in front and a revolver spitting its menace behind. Fifty yards after him, his face as hard as Hume's, came MacKelvey, thundering along on his big rawboned

sorrel, the sheriff whom men already criticised for not making an arrest.

Upon the ridge where the signal men were, the levelled glasses were dropped as another square of white ran up the dead pine to carry its word that the race was now a two man race. The fifty yards between MacKelvey and Shandon lengthened as Shandon was forced to put Little Saxon to his best. For MacKelvey was shooting as he rode and he was not shooting for fun; there was no man in the county who wasted less lead than its sheriff.

Suddenly the knoll was deserted. Even Willie Dart had scrambled to his horse, even he was chasing along wildly, oblivious of the steep pitch, of a more than likely fall. To Big Bill's voice had joined other voices, shouting to MacKelvey to give the man a chance. But MacKelvey did not listen.

They tried to push their horses between him and the man it was his sworn duty to bring into court. But MacKelvey kept to the fore, realising that they would try to do just this thing. He raised himself in his stirrups and as his hand went up he fired for the third time. The cry that burst out after the shot was full of anger, for every one had seen Red Shandon suddenly crumple in his saddle. But Little Saxon, running as he had never run before, toward the trees that were thickening in front of him, swerved off to the left and was lost to the eyes of the men sixty and seventy-five yards behind. There the hammering of his hoofs came back to them from the hard ground of another ridge.

"If you've killed him," grunted Big Bill into MacKelvey's ear as his horse came abreast of the sheriff's, "you might as well make a clean-up and get me, too."

But in a moment they again caught sight of Little Saxon through the trees, and they saw that Wayne Shandon was still in the saddle, sitting bolt upright, that he had shifted his reins to his right hand, that his left arm was swinging grotesquely at his side.

"I got him," grunted MacKelvey.

Already, with close to ten miles ahead of him, with Hume still a quarter of a mile to the fore, Wayne Shandon's face had turned white, his shirt was slowly turning red. The bullet from the heavy calibre revolver MacKelvey used had struck in the shoulder.

"He's swerved out of his course," was MacKelvey's next thought. "He is losing ground right now. I'll cut him off before he can get to the bridge."

In the moment that the impact of the bullet made Shandon crumple and reel and clutch at his saddle horn, he went dizzy, almost blind with the shock. In that moment Little Saxon feeling the reins drop upon his neck, turned out to the left, striking for an open clearing. He should have turned to the right as a thicket of chaparral lay in front now, and there was no turning back. So, when Shandon's right hand shut down tight upon the reins, gathering them up, there was but one thing to do, turn still further to the left, skirt the thicket, try to turn to the right again upon the further side. He was losing ground and he knew it; but it was early in the race.

"They've handicapped us, Little Saxon," he said through set teeth. "But we'll show them a race yet."

Ten miles of broken country, of hard riding, and the blood was hot on the man's side and back while every leap of his horse shot him through with pain. Ten miles and Endymion, Little Saxon's full brother, would be half a mile ahead before the thicket was circled.

"After all Hume wins!" cursed Big Bill.

"It ain't fair! It ain't fair!" Dart's tremulous voice was shrieking from far in the rear. "That big boob—"

"There's ten miles of it, Little Saxon," Shandon was muttering over and over. "And the race isn't run yet. You won't let Endymion beat you, Little Saxon! You won't let Sledge Hume—"

He cut sharply through the outer edge of the thicket and Little Saxon's lean body, leaping like a greyhound's, lifted and glinted over the ragged bushes. He swung to the right again, and saw MacKelvey, Big Bill riding at his side, cutting across a little hollow to intercept him. And again, with no alternative, he turned his horse out of the course, and kept on up the higher land to his left.

Now Hume was lost to him; MacKelvey and the others dropped out of sight; and he was riding his race alone. He knew that Little Saxon could stand up under all that a horse could endure; but he knew, too, that no horse that was ever foaled could keep up such a mad pace for ten miles, that the gallant brute's heart would burst with five miles of it. He tightened his reins a little, forcing the horse against its will to slacken speed.

Now he bent in the saddle, easing his body as well as he could, trying not to feel the pain that grew steadily in his shoulder. The lower branches of the trees through which he sped whipped at him and he did not feel them. Far ahead he saw two squares of white fluttering high against the blue of the sky, and he knew the message that they carried across the miles. He thought of how

he and Wanda had signalled, how she would be at the Bar L-M with the rest, how she would understand what those two signals meant. For he had not told her, he had told no one but Dart who had brought Little Saxon to him last night, and who, later, had told the starters at the last moment. Shandon had realised that there would be danger in this mad act of his and that had she known beforehand Wanda would have been frightened.

Again, a mile further on, he tried to swing back into the cleared course that would bring him the shortest way to the bridge. Again he saw that MacKelvey had anticipated this, and was coming close to killing his own horse to cut him off. And, his eyes growing black, the fear of the end of the race came upon him. Had he done this wild thing for nothing then? Was it but to be proof to the men who called him fool that fool he was? He bent his head and loosened his reins.

He knew that, far ahead of him, Sledge Hume was riding the easier way, that he was working down from the more broken rangeland, that he was steadily nearing the bridge in the straightest line. He knew that MacKelvey had a rifle strapped to his saddle and that long before now the rifle would be in MacKelvey's hands. He knew that at the end of the race Wanda Leland, her heart beating madly for him, was waiting.

"Can't you do it, Little Saxon?" he whispered. "For her sake, can't you do it?"

Mile after mile slipped away behind him, the course was half run, and he had not come down into the road which led to the Bar L-M. He knew that he was losing at every jump the great hearted horse made under him; he knew that it was not Little Saxon's fault as he had never known until now what speed and strength lay in that wonderful body. Who's fault, then? Hume was beating him, Hume would be at the finish laughing, waiting for him to come in—

"You've got to do it, Little Saxon," he cried softly, his voice pleading. "Why, we can't let Hume —"

He broke off suddenly, his eyes filling with light. He had seen the way—and it was Wanda who had shown it to him.

"Steady, Saxon," he said, his own voice steady, confident, determined. "We'll do it, little horse. Let Hume beat us to the Bridge; *we'll take the short cut*!"

From the Bar L-M grounds a faint cry went up as scores of lifted field glasses made out the figure of one man riding strongly toward the bridge. It was Hume, Hume alone, riding as Hume rode, well and erect. There was the hammer of Endymion's hoofs as they rattled against the heavy planking, and then—

"Look! Look! Oh, my God! Look!"

It was a woman's voice, a hysterical little woman from Reno, crying out, terror-stricken. Her arm had shot out; her finger was pointing toward the chasm of the river.

Then the shout that swept up about the Bar L-M was no longer faint. The voices of women were drowned in the deep roar of men's shouts. Wanda, her hands convulsively going to her breast, her face as white as death, moved her lips, making no sound. But her soul spoke and prayed, prayed to God not to let her mad lover do this mad thing. What was a race, what was defeat!

Wayne Shandon, riding as straight as Hume now, his hair flashing its red at them, his face strangely white,—some one cried that he was afraid,—had come to the short cut. His eyes leaving the way in front of him for a swift second saw the form of a girl standing out from the crowd and failed to see the crowd that was watching him, for the instant forgetful of Sledge Hume riding on his spurs, sweeping on across the bridge that rocked under him. Then Shandon's eyes came back to the black gulf where a white snowshoe rabbit had found death, which a white maiden had leaped for his sake.

"We can do it, Little Saxon," he said gently. "We can do it for Wanda, can't we? She'd hate to see us beaten by Hume. For Wanda, Little Saxon. Now!"

The roar of the water smote upon Little Saxon's ears, the deep chasm seemed a live and evil thing snapping at him. But he rushed on toward it, he felt his master's hand, he heard his master talking to him, and he had learned to love and trust his master. He swept on, down the slope, gathering speed at each great bounding leap, racing as few have seen a horse run, sensing the end of the race, sniffing victory with quivering flaring nostrils. He felt the sudden slackening of his reins as Shandon whispered, "Now!"; he knew that his master had put his life into his horse's keeping; knew that he was loved and trusted in this final moment even as he gave his own love and trust; and gathering the great, iron muscles of his great iron body, he leaped.

He leaped, flinging his body recklessly. Upon his back Wayne Shandon, sitting very still and tense and erect, his eyes upon the form of a girl, his life in Little Saxon's keeping, had essayed the thing that no one had expected even Red Reckless to do. The white froth of the water flashed under them, the jagged rocks menaced, the boom of the river deafened them. As he had leaped

before, that first day when Shandon and Big Bill had come upon him, Little Saxon leaped now. And as he landed his hind feet sent a rattle of stones down into the hungering gulf below.

There had been a silence as of death. Now there was a shout that drowned the roar of the river robbed of its prey. Men yelled and threw their arms up and yelled again.

On came Endymion carrying Sledge Hume who had at last understood and who now was riding with bloody spurs and a quirt that cut in swift vicious blows at his horse's sweating hide.

On came Little Saxon, snorting his defiance to his brother, Red Reckless sitting straight in the saddle, his spurs clean.

Quick hands had run the taut string across the end of the course. Two big horses carrying two big men shot across it. But the breast of one had struck a dozen lengths ahead of the other, and through the echoing babel the judge's voice was lost as he shouted:

"Wayne Shandon on Little Saxon wins!"

CHAPTER XXVI

THE LAUGHTER OF HELGA STRAWN

"Will you tell your mistress," Sledge Hume commanded, "that I want to speak with her immediately? Immediately, do you hear?"

The capable looking maid favoured him with swift, keen scrutiny, noticed that Endymion, tied to the gate post, was sweating and dust covered, saw that Hume was dusty from riding and that his eyes were full of purpose, and went upon her errand. Hume stalked into the living room where he had grown to be so much at home, and driving his hands into his pockets stood frowning out of the window through which the warm fragrant June air came in from the sunny fields.

With the determination in his eyes there was the unhidden, black anger that had not been absent from them during the man's waking hours for a week. The spirit under the hard shell of a cool indifference had been touched, and was raw and quivering beneath the lashes his fate had brought upon him. On the day of the races he had lost five thousand dollars that he could ill afford to lose, and with it counted that he had lost another five thousand which he had told himself had always been as good as his. He had shown men that he was a bad loser, by flying into an ungovernable rage that vented its fury upon Endymion until savage voices cried to him to hold his quirt or he would be jerked from the saddle. He had seen that the slow turning tables were turning at last. He had seen Wayne Shandon, the man always in his way, white and fainting from sheer loss of blood, turn smiling and give himself up to the sheriff. He had seen Red Shandon the hero of a crowd that went wild over him; had heard even MacKelvey's rough voice crying bluntly, "There's a man for you!"

But anger and hatred, swelling venemously in his heart, had only hardened him, making him the more determined. He did not doubt, he did not fear. Not enough had happened to undermine the man's cold, dominating strength, to alter the essential fact in his mind that he was Hume and that people who strove against him were fools doomed to defeat. But before he heard the silken rustle of Helga Strawn's approach there was to come to him a new sign of the future that was rushing down upon him.

As usual Helga kept him waiting. He tapped at the window with a hand that he jerked impatiently from his pocket; he turned, thinking that he heard her steps; he walked back and forth in the room. And thus it happened that his eyes fell upon a large sheet of paper lying upon the table, his own name typed in capitals across the top. His frowning eyes read the few lines swiftly:

"Your tunnel is already one hundred and fifty-three feet upon Shandon property. That is far enough."

There was no signature.

A child has an instinctive fear of the dark; the thing a man does not understand brings from the obscurity of the unknown a certain, vague dread. Who had written this thing? There was no answer. Why? No answer. How did it come here, who could have known that Hume would see it here? No answer. It was as though a warning, taking form from the invisible air had fallen from the air before his startled eyes.

He swept up the paper, crumpling it in his fingers. He had not heard Helga Strawn, did not know that she was in the room until she spoke quietly.

"Is fate relenting? Or are you still playing the losing game?"

He swung upon her sharply. His eyes, glittering and hard, met hers softly luminous. He had never seen the woman so radiantly, regally beautiful, perhaps because he had never seen her so keenly alive as she was to-day. Although his brain was riotous with other things he could not fail to note the superb carriage, the rich gown daringly fashionable, the warm whiteness of arms and throat, the finely chiselled red lips that were unsmiling.

"The losing game?" he cried, coming swiftly toward her, stopping only when his tall form towered over her. "By God, no! I have lost a trick here, a trick there. A man counts upon that sort of thing. That little shrimp Conway is scared of his life and is for pulling out. I'm glad of it. He'll sell to me before he'll go to Shandon. Let Leland pull out, too. We'll take him over. I'm going to win, I tell you, Claire Hazleton! We're going to win, you and I. Win big!"

There was no change in her cool eyes. She swept by him, not turning out an inch to pass, her skirts brushing him, and dropped idly into her chair. He followed, and stood over her again.

"Shandon is going to be acquitted," she said. "You know that. He'll be set free in ten days. Then what?"

"Then we'll take him in with us. We'll get the water and that's all we want any way you put it. Inside six months we'll be subdividing and getting our money back."

She laughed.

"So you think that Shandon will jump at the chance to go into any sort of partnership with you?"

"We'll make him," crisply. "He has retained Brisbane, the biggest, highest priced criminal lawyer this side the Rockies. He has cleared up his mortgage but he's had to mortgage again to do it. He's in debt up to his eyes. We'll make him a proposition that will show him the way to clear himself. I tell you, Claire, he'll have to do it."

"You say *we*," she reminded him, lifting her white shoulders.

"And I mean you and I," he returned bluntly. "I've come here to do some straight talking." There leaped up into his eyes a light she had never seen there until now, a quick colour ran into his cheeks. "I want you to marry me, Claire."

Perhaps the woman's pulse quickened. Certainly no change in her expression, no quiver of a muscle, no deepened breathing told that a supreme moment had come into her life, a moment she had long and unceasingly striven for.

"Do you?" she asked indifferently. "Why?"

"Because," he cried, "you are like no other woman in all the world. Because the things that I want are the things that you want. Because we should be a man and a woman, mated, to take our places in the world and hold them. Where there is man's work I can do it; where there is woman's work you can do it. We are young; in ten years' time we can rise to whatever we care to set our eyes upon. Why do I want you? Just because in brain and in body you are the woman in the world fitted to occupy the place that shall be my wife's."

"Other men have asked me to marry them," she said coolly. "I think that all of them have said something about love."

"And I love you," he told her. "A man cannot come to care for a woman without her knowing it. I don't come to you bleating about a breaking heart, because you are no fool and I am no fool. If you were the kind to care about a lot of sentimental rot you wouldn't be the woman you are, you wouldn't be the woman I'd want. I'd be good to you. I'd give you the power that a beautiful woman with a strong, rich husband can come to have in San Francisco, in New York, in London if you like. When I rise you'll rise with me. I'll have men know that my wife shall have the place, above the heads of their wives, that she wants. And I'll be proud of you!"

Then he got his answer as seldom a woman has answered a man. She lifted her eyes to his, she put back her head with the tossing regal gesture he knew so well, her lips parted slowly—and she laughed. Laughed at him in a sudden mirth of leaping scorn, that was hard and cruel, that mocked and sneered at him, that took supreme toll of the supreme moment. Laughed as she saw the light quiver and die in his eyes, as the colour faded from his cheeks and ran back red.

"Love me!" she cried scornfully. "You'd be proud of me! Why? When you answered you forgot to tell the truth, Mr. Hume. Because you need me, because you are beaten now and must come hiding a whimper under big words, come to a woman who holds you so in the hollow of her hand that she can break you so utterly that your own overweening conceit cannot find the fragments with the microscope of a distorted vanity! Love me as you'd love any other fine thing just because it was yours. Because you'd use me, because you see that such a wife as I could be would be but a stone for you to stand on to climb up a little higher. And you think that of all men in the world I should choose a man like *you* for husband?"

She jeered openly at him, disdaining to see the red anger flaring in his eyes. She remembered the reason that had brought her to him in the beginning and a savage gladness in her rejoiced at finding the victory all that she had yearned for. Her dominant blood was seething to the surface. And it was Hume blood.

"Listen to me a minute," she cried sharply as he was about to speak. "You've come for straight talk to-day, you say. Let us have it then. You have gone your way boastfully, arrogantly, unscrupulously and it has been the fool's way. You are playing the losing game and it isn't even in you to lose like a man. You have stared at the glitter of gold so long that you have gone blind looking at it. Your own infallibility has loomed so large before you that you have lost your sanity. I say listen to me!" her voice ringing with its command. "I am going to tell you something. I am going to tell you why I came to you, why I suffered you day after day to come to me. And what I came for I am going to get. You are going to give it to me!"

She had sprung to her feet, twin spots of colour upon her white cheeks, her eyes blazing.

"You told me that you had paid five thousand dollars to Helga Strawn for her interest in the Dry Lands! Liar! You paid her twenty-five thousand!"

"Well?" he snarled harshly. "What of it?"

"You laughed about it. You said that she was a fool like most women. Like all women, was what you thought! And women were made just for you to tread upon and sneer at. You did not know that I knew a great deal more about Helga Strawn than you ever guessed!"

"You—know—Helga—Strawn!"

The words beat at her like stinging, separate blows. And now it had come into his eyes, the thing that had never been there, the thing that would never die out of the man's soul while life clung to him,—fear.

"I know you, to the last spot you think you've covered up," she ran on swiftly. "So well that I know I am about to stir you into one of your mad fits of rage. And I am not afraid to do it. You'd kill me if you dared, but you won't dare. For after all I think that in your braggadocio way you are a coward, Sledge Hume."

"You cat!" he flung at her with an attempt at his old manner.

"I have two men working out yonder," she said coolly. "If I called to them—" She shrugged her shoulders. "I want to tell you all that you are hungering to know even while you are afraid to hear it. Helga Strawn got your check for five thousand dollars. She got, also, a Wells Fargo order from Sacramento for twenty thousand. Sent by a fictitious Arnold Wentworth. Ah!"

For he had cried out sharply, his face was dead white, his eyes were filled with horror. His premonition had come.

"Who committed the crime you charged Wayne Shandon with?" she demanded fearlessly. "Who killed Arthur Shandon and robbed him of twenty-five thousand dollars? If Helga Strawn came into court and told all that she knows do you realise what a jury would say about it?"

"The things you are saying are lies," he cried back at her, driving his hands into his pockets that she might not see that they were shaking.

He stared after her in wonder as she went swiftly to the table and unlocked a drawer. He wondered more as she snatched out a folded paper and brought it to him.

"Sign that," she said curtly. "Get it witnessed before a notary and send it to me and Helga Strawn will forget what she knows."

A glance showed him the significance of the document. It was a deed, properly drawn, needing but his own signature to return to Helga Strawn the lands he had bought from her.

"So," he sneered, "you are trying a little blackmail, are you? You are a spy and Helga Strawn's agent, I suppose?"

Again she laughed at him.

"I attend to my own business, my dear cousin," her voice very like his. "If you hadn't been a fool you'd have known that I was Helga Strawn six months ago. Blackmail? Call it what you like. It is your one chance to save your neck. I know that in one of your mad fits of anger you killed Arthur Shandon. I know that you took his money. And I am not the only one in the country who knows or suspects it. Your chance is slim enough as it is, Mr. Hume. Don't make it worse."

Blow after blow until the man set his muscles like iron to keep his body from shaking as his soul shook. This was the greatest shock of all because it struck at the keynote of his nature, this knowledge that a woman had tricked him, that she had played with him, that now she held him as she said so bluntly, in the hollow of her hand.

"You traitress!" he cried hoarsely. "You miserable traitress!"

And Helga Strawn laughed.

"It will take you a couple of hours to ride into El Toyon," she said. "That will give you time to think it over. If you decide to sign the deed and send it to me to-night I'll do my part. If I don't get the deed to-night I'll go into town in the morning for a talk with the district attorney. I think I've got you where I want you, Mr. Hume."

The things which Hume said to her she accepted indifferently. She had never known that a man could find such words to utter to a woman. When she has listened long enough she turned and went out of the room, going upstairs and standing by her window where she could see him as he went out. As she saw him striding down the walk toward his horse, jamming the deed into his pocket as he went, her eyes suddenly grew wet, and she stamped her foot angrily.

"Of all men living I hate you most!" she cried passionately. And then, softly, more softly than any one had ever heard her speak, "And you come closer to being a man than any man I ever knew. I wonder—"

The fury within him demanding some sort of expression found it in the swift stride that carried him blindly down the walk. He came almost at a run to his horse. Endymion, mindful of the unprovoked blows and tearing spurs of a week ago, distrustful, afraid, whirled, rearing and plunging, and broke the reins that had been tossed over the post. Hume, venting upon a trifle the wrath that seethed within him, shouted angrily, cursing the horse that dashed by him.

The horse, seeing his way through the gate shut off, turned and dashed around the house, seeking a break in the yard fence. Hume ran after him, still cursing. The two men who were working in the yard lay down their rakes and shovels and came up. The three of them cornered the frightened brute. But when Hume, his hand outstretched for the dangling, broken rein, came within half a dozen feet, Endymion, snorting his fear, plunged by him, racing into another corner.

Again they closed about him, again he plunged through, mad with fear, making the madness in Sledge Hume a speechless, raging fury. A third time they tried, and as the big horse shot by Hume's temper mastered him as it had mastered him once before.

"God damn you!" he shouted wildly. "Take that!"

As he shouted he jerked his revolver from his pocket and fired. Fired, saw the big animal stagger and fired again.

He went to the stable for one of Helga's horses. His hands were shaking as he saddled and got the bit into the animal's mouth. With no look behind him he mounted, spurred out into the road and galloped off toward El Toyon.

Helga Strawn from her window coolly ordered the two men to put the wounded horse out of his misery and to drag him where she could not see him, But her eyes did not tarry with them, did not leave the big bulk of Sledge Hume until it had disappeared around a bend In the road. Then she went to her mirror and stood looking at herself with large, luminous eyes.

"I wonder," she whispered, "if he did love me, after all?"

She could never know. She knew that she could never know. And she went and threw herself, face down, on her bed.

CHAPTER XXVII

HUME RIDES THE ONE OPEN TRAIL

Hard driven, conscious of a compelling force more dominant than the strong will of a man, Sledge Hume rode the one trail open to him. It was as though the deeds of his life were now grown tangible separate squares of rock cemented into sheer walls rising about him, narrowing, forcing him into the one way open.

He rode into El Toyon and signed the deed before a notary. He returned it by a boy to Helga Strawn, and by the same messenger he sent back her horse. From the stable he hired another animal, and with no friendly word to man, woman or child, struck out for the Echo Creek. As he rode by the court house he looked at it curiously. Wayne Shandon was there, was spending his brief time in jail very much as an honoured guest. He would come out in a few days and then—then MacKelvey would be looking for another man—

Hume turned and rode back into town, going this time to the bank. Explaining briefly that he

expected to turn a big deal and would need the ready cash, he drew out all but a few dollars of his emergency fund. His lips were tight pressed, his eyes hard, as he rode by the jail again and out into the county road. The sight of MacKelvey at an open window talking with Brisbane and Edward Kinsell, made him frown blackly. Little things had come to be full of significance.

It was nearly fifty miles to Martin Leland's. But Hume had ridden early to Helga Strawn and now had a strong, fresh horse under him. Looking at his watch, he saw that it was not yet half past nine. He could make it by half past four or five, riding hard. And he was in the mood for hard riding.

Very few times did he stop on the long way. Once he paused at a little road house for a pound of cheese and some bread; once at a certain crossing where a broad trail crossed Echo Creek. He sat here a moment, motionless, staring out across the little valley lying warm under the afternoon sun, his eyes running up and down along the course of the stream.

Raking his spurs against his horse's sweat-dripping sides he rode on. In half an hour he threw himself from the saddle at Leland's house.

He heard the sound of singing within, a girl's voice lilting wordlessly, happily, bespeaking a heart that was brimming with the pure joy of life and love. Striding to Leland's office he flung the door open. In a moment, answering his impatient rap, Martin entered.

"I've come to talk business," Hume said, flinging himself into a chair. "What's doing?"

"What do you mean, Mr. Hume?" Leland asked gravely.

"I want to know where you stand. Conway's strong for pulling out, eh?"

"I told you all that he wrote me."

"What have you done about it?"

"Nothing."

"You're going to buy him out?"

"No."

"Damn it!" cried Hume irritably. "Don't make me pump at you like a dry well! You know what I'm driving at. If Shandon goes clear where are you and I coming out?"

"Mr. Hume," returned the old man heavily, "I'm glad you came, for I was coming to you. Shandon is going clear. I've talked with his lawyer, I've talked with Kinsell—"

"What's Kinsell got to do with it?"

"Kinsell is a detective sent up here by Brisbane to work up the case. Also, I have talked with Wayne Shandon." This came slowly, with an evident effort, but it came calmly. "Shandon will go free because he is not the man who killed Arthur Shandon."

"You're swapping horses, eh?" sneered Hume.

"Perhaps not exactly. But I have gone to him and told him that I had allowed myself to think of him as a murderer for the illogical but none the less potent reason that I hated his father. And I apologised to him, having no other amends to make."

"Cut the sentimental drivel short," cut in Hume unpleasantly. "Have you gone over to his side of the deal? Are you throwing me down and tying up with him?"

"No." Leland threw out his hands in a wide gesture. "I am done with the whole thing."

"And what happens to me! Here I am in up to my neck and you go and chuck the thing. Do you think I'll stand for the double cross like that?"

"Hume," cried Leland sharply, "I don't want to quarrel with you. I am quitting because I am ashamed of the things I have already done. I tried to blind myself by thinking that I was usurping the prerogative of God, in telling myself that it was my duty to punish. Now I am ashamed, I tell you. And not a second too soon can you understand and the world know that you and I are in no way interested in each other. I have learned since I saw you that you were going on with a matter which I can have nothing to do with."

"What's that?"

"I refer to the way in which you are seeking to tunnel from the McIntosh property into Shandon's, to take the water whether or no. That may be in your mind a bold stroke of business. I can't countenance that sort of thing."

"Ho! How you've taken the robe of righteousness upon your shoulders! And after trying to steal Shandon's ranch from him on a mortgage!"

Martin made no reply. Not once during the conversation did his eyes light with anger; not for a moment was the underlying shadow of sadness gone from them. He was holding a strong rein upon himself. He was judging himself now; he was passing judgment upon no other man.

Hume, glancing at him quickly, curiously, felt that he knew what Leland was thinking. Then his mind came back abruptly to his own interests.

"So you don't know what Conway is going to do?"

"I have advised him to sell to Shandon and to give Shandon the time he wants to make his payments."

"And you will sell to Shandon too?"

"I think not. My holdings are too heavy for him to swing. No, I am going to give them away."

"Not to him!"

"No, not to him. He wouldn't accept them. To my daughter—for her wedding present. And I pray God that they will bring her more happiness than they have brought me."

Hume's big fist came smashing down upon the table.

"By God, you've got to buy me out! I'm ruined, ruined, I tell you, if you and Conway drop me now."

"I'll do it." The calm words surprised Hume who had expected a blunt refusal. "Upon one consideration. Namely that you sell to me at the figure which you paid. I am willing to play fair and I think that that is fair. It leaves you where you started. It leaves me where I started except that I shall have been spending a good many thousands for Wanda's wedding present."

Hume, his brows knitted, rose to his feet and strode back and forth in the room, trying to look his problem squarely in the face. Failure confronted him, and failure was more hideous to him than the shame, dishonour, disgrace, which would accompany it. In a flash that left his face drawn he saw himself as he had never seen himself before.

He went to the window looking out into the fields over which the afternoon sun was dropping low. He wanted to think; and he did not want Martin Leland to see his face. He heard Wanda singing happily. Her voice was not like Helga's, and yet, tinkling through it he seemed to hear Helga's cool laughter.

"I'm tired out," he said abruptly, coming back to Leland. "Let me have a bed. We'll settle it in the morning."

Leland looked at him curiously. This was unlike Sledge Hume's usual way. But, offering no remark he showed Hume his room.

It was far into the night before Hume's tired body found the rest of deep sleep. It was long after sunrise when he awoke. It had been a man's voice that jarred upon his ears even in sleep, that finally brought him to his elbow with a start.

Slipping out of bed he stepped quickly to his window. There were three horses in the yard, saddled, sweaty and dusty. MacKelvey's heavy voice came to him again from Leland's study.

He dressed swiftly, his eyes glittering. Spinning the cylinder of his revolver, he shoved it into his pocket and into another pocket thrust the thick pad of bank notes which had been under his pillow during the night. Then he went back to the window.

He could hear Julia in the kitchen. He could hear Leland's voice now, now MacKelvey's, then another man's. Was it Johnson's?

"That cursed woman," he muttered bitterly. "She double crossed me after all. God! I was a fool!"

He did not hesitate. Kinsell was a detective, who had been in Shandon's hire for six months. A hundred little things that had been trifles at the time came back to him now to whisper that Kinsell had known a long time. And Helga had given them the rest of the evidence they lacked. Helga, a woman, had tricked him, had deceived him, had made him love her in the only way love was possible to this man, and then had laughed at him and doublecrossed him.

Making no sound he slipped out of the window, and stooping low so that from no other window could he be seen, he ran around to the back of the house. A glance at the saddled horses in the yard showed him that their legs were shaking, that they were done up from a hard ride. He moved on, further from the house, dodging behind a tree, stopping to listen, to peer out, hearing the maddening beat, beat, beat of his own heart. He must have a horse and then as Wayne Shandon had done, he could disappear into this wilderness of rocks and trees, hide for weeks or months, and at last get out of the country. Flight lay before him; his quickened senses told him

what lay behind unless he fled now and swiftly.

"MacKelvey's a fool at best," he grunted, snatching at a ray of hope. "Once I get on a horse—"

He was taking a chance but he had to take chances. Making a short circuit he ran at last, still stooping as he ran. He came safely to the stable, selected a powerful looking horse, threw on the saddle with hasty hands. The bit was troublesome, the horse, with head lifted high, fought against it with big square teeth clenched. But at last the job was done and Hume rode out at the side door, his spurs in his hand, not taking time to buckle them on.

He began to think that his luck was with him now. He rode slowly at first, afraid of the noise of his horse's hoofs. A quick glance behind showed him the three horses in the yard, no man or woman in sight.

Which way? There was scant time for reflection. It was time for inspiration, for the flash of instinct. He felt the pad of bank notes safe in his pocket. He would ride straight to the Bar L-M, cross the bridge, turn out from the range buildings, reach the upper end of the valley. He would cross over the ridge to where his hirelings were tunnelling. There was a man among them who was not afraid of the law, a man who would help him, who would go to hell for the half of that sheaf of paper.

He buckled on his spurs and drove them into his horse's sides.

In the study MacKelvey was saying:

"I dunno. We may have some trouble. Brisbane has gotten an injunction all right, but that crowd of Hume's looks like a bad one. I have sent two men on ahead to the Bar L-M. Been deputies of mine on more than one hard job. By the way, talking of Hume, seen him lately?"

"Yes," Martin answered. "He's here now. In bed. He stayed last night with me. Do you want to see him?"

"Nothing urgent. I wanted to ask him if he wants to sell Endymion. Shandon wants to buy him back."

Hume, riding furiously, pushed on through the forest, keeping a course parallel to the road, near enough to see any one who might be riding there, far enough to conceal his horse and himself behind a grove or ridge. So at last he came to a knoll from which he could look down upon the bridge, not over a quarter of a mile away. There were two men there, sitting their horses idly and yet seeming to the man's distorted imagination to be watching every shadow flickering through the woods. He jerked his horse to a quivering standstill.

He had recognised one of the horses, a great wire limbed pinto. It was a horse familiar in El Toyon, one of MacKelvey's string.

"Damn him," snarled Hume, his eyes flashing like bright steel.

From behind a fringe of trees he watched the two deputies. They made no move to go on. Ten minutes he waited, ten minutes of precious time. Twice he felt that their eyes had found him out, twice he called himself a fool. Five minutes more and then, from behind him, he heard the pounding of hoofs.

"It's MacKelvey and the rest," he told himself angrily. "They've got me like a trapped rat. Damn them. Damn that traitress!"

He dipped his spurs and shot down a knoll, hoping to be out of sight, to wait until they had passed, then to double on his trail. But his luck had deserted him. He did not know the woods here, he lost ground in going about a rocky pile of earth, and MacKelvey caught sight of him.

"Hume!" came the big voice. "Hold on!"

"*Hold on*!"

It was as though the world, filled with shouting voices, was calling behind him. Like an undertone through it the cool laughter of a woman.

He drove his spurs deeper, he swung his snorting beast about, he raised his quirt striking mightily with it, and rushed on. Where? It did not matter. Anywhere except toward the men in front, anywhere as long as it was away from the men behind. He heard MacKelvey call again, more loudly, he saw the sheriff wave his arm at him, and he rode on, his head down now, careless of where he went so that the way led him farther, farther from what lay behind.

Suddenly, booming in his ears, came the roar of the river. On, his leaping horse carried him, stumbling, threatening to unseat its rider, plunging on. The roar of the river grew louder; again

there were ten thousand voices shouting, clamouring, yelling at him. He topped a last ridge here and looking down saw the black chasm of the river, the steep banks.

"If I only had Endymion! God! If I only had Endymion."

He jerked savagely at his reins, stopping his horse. As he looked back and saw that MacKelvey and Johnson and another man were riding toward him. He glanced again at the deep chasm of the river. A quick shudder swept through him and left him steady, whitefaced, cold.

"Hume!" shouted MacKelvey.

Then Hume's spurs drank blood again, once more his frightened horse was leaping under him, plunging down toward the river. Louder and louder yelled the many voices, mocking, jeering, calling, echoing away into titanic laughter. And through it all, like the fine note of a violin through the pulsing of an orchestra, sounded the cool music of a woman's laughter.

"Curse her!" shrieked Hume. "Curse them all. A fool girl did this, a fool Shandon did it—"

Like a missile from a giant's catapult he rushed down the steep slope; MacKelvey, from the ridge watched him and wondered. He saw that the man had shaken his reins loose, that his horse had almost reached the verge of the chasm, that as the animal was ready to gather his great muscles for the leap the reins had tightened a little, spasmodically, as though the rider's nerve had failed him. And then that they loosened again as though he had seen it was too late or had regained his nerve.

The horse leaped far out, struck the opposite bank, seemed to hang there a brief second, straining, balancing, and then with its rider dropped backward.

The roar of the water boomed on like the clamouring of a world of voices; through it ran a finer note like the cool laughter of a woman; and upon Sledge Hume's white face, as he lay still upon a jagged stone before the current swept him away, the little drops of spray were like a woman's tears.

CHAPTER XXVIII

"IT IS HOME!"

To those who loved the sensational in and about El Toyon the trial of Wayne Shandon was a disappointment. Never had the courthouse been more crowded, never had the setting been more stimulating to their highly coloured imaginations. Red Reckless, looking to their eyes picturesquely pale from his confinement and the sheriff's bullet; Brisbane with his poker table face and his reputation; Edward Kinsell, whose smiling manner no longer concealed the glamour which clung about so distinguished a detective; Martin Leland apparently older, less stern, his eyes gentler; Mrs. Leland, confident and happy from her talk with Shandon's attorney; Wanda, her eyes very bright, her cheeks flushed, her heart yearning, hoping, praying and a little afraid; Helga Strawn, now known by her own name, and linked by rumour with the man who had paid the penalty for the crime of which he had accused Wayne Shandon, her manner cool, aloof; even Willie Dart, whom everybody knew and who in some strange way had come to be looked upon as a special detective, imported a year ago by the counsel for the defence.

The district attorney's argument was cool, dispassionate, perfunctory. He showed no interest in securing a conviction for the very simple reason that he felt none. Brisbane was a further, deeper disappointment. He failed to live up to the reputation that had preceded him. He constantly studied his watch and a time-table during the argument of the prosecution and when it was done audibly asked the district attorney concerning the best train out of El Toyon. He said what he had to say to the jury in less than half an hour. When charged by the judge the jury filed out with grave faces only to file back in five minutes smilingly.

"Not guilty, your honour!"

Since the principals had seemed to put little fervour into the occasion the good people of El Toyon supplied the deficit. Amid great shouting and cheering Wayne Shandon made his smiling, hand-shaking way down through his friends, coming straight to the girl whose eyes were the happiest eyes that he had ever seen, shining through a mist of tears.

There was no hesitation now as Martin Leland put out his hand.

"I wronged you, Shandon," he said simply. "And I think that I knew it all the time. It hasn't made me happy. I hope that you will accept my congratulations."

"Thank you," answered Shandon. And he locked Leland's hand heartily in his own.

Mrs. Leland had her motherly greeting to make and said it happily. Nor did she use unnecessary words. In a moment she had slipped her arm through her husband's and was moving with him through the surging crowd, leaving Wayne with Wanda.

"Say, Red!" Mr. Dart, struggling valiantly with the crush, red faced and triumphant, was screaming up into Shandon's face. "Some business, ain't it, pal? Shake! Shake, Wanda! Where's old Mart? Good old scout after all, ain't he? I want to go squeeze his flipper; I want to go squeeze everybody's flipper. I want to go get drunk. Honest I do, Red!"

Big Bill shoved a great, hard hand by Dart's shoulder, gripping Shandon's. He didn't say anything, but his tightening hand, his flashing eyes were eloquent.

Only when they had passed out into the courthouse yard, Wanda and Wayne side by side, and had been left behind by the hat-tossing, clamorous crowd, hastening out into the street, did Wanda speak.

"I am so happy, Wayne," she whispered. "Doesn't it seem as though life were just beginning all over this morning?"

"Like just beginning!" he answered softly, drawing her arm tight, tight to his side. "With you, Wanda."

There came a bright morning with the sun just blinking genially above the tree tops, with the warm glory of the full summer in the air, and under Wanda's window a voice calling softly. She had been asleep; she was not certain that she had not been dreaming—

But the call came again, still softly, still ringing with a note which sent a flutter into her breast.

"Awake at last?" and Wayne was laughing happily. "Ten minutes to dress, my sleepy miss, and meet me at the stable. I'm going to saddle Gypsy."

She heard him hurry away, and for a little she lay still, smiling.

He caught her up into his arms, as she came down the path, kissed her, told her not to ask questions and helped her into the saddle. He swung up to Little Saxon's back and together they rode out into the forest through the brightening morning.

"Wayne," she said when he had done nothing but look at her and drive the colour higher and higher into her cheeks. "Where are we going?"

"Can't you guess?" he teased her.

They were riding toward the north, toward the cliffs standing up about Echo Creek Valley, toward the cave.

"Wayne," she said again, a little sadly, "I was going to tell you the other day, but you were in such a hurry— You are not going to the cave?"

"Why not?" he asked lightly.

"I can't go there any more," she answered quickly. "I had come to love it so, it was so entirely ours, dear. And now, I saw it the last time I rode that way, there's a sign on the cliffs, 'No Hunting Allowed.' I asked papa. He has sold all that side of the valley, the cliffs and the flats beyond to some man in the city."

Shandon laughed.

"What's the odds?" as lightly as before. "Come right down to it, Wanda, the cave has served its purpose, hasn't it? And, if you'd been shut up in it like a prison, I wonder if you'd have any sentiment for it left? Let's make the horses run a bit. I feel like a gallop, don't you?"

She bent forward in the saddle hurriedly, hiding her face from him. How should a man care for the little things which mean so much to a girl?

But still they rode toward the cliffs. The sign was there, a black and white monstrosity which hurt her but which seemed merely to interest Shandon. He insisted on riding closer. And when, too proud to show him all that she felt, she came with him to the big cedar, he dismounted and put out his hands to her.

"Let's go up," he said lightly. "Just for fun."

She refused, and he insisted. And at last they climbed up.

Wayne was upon the ledge of rock before her, his eyes filled with a love that shone sparklingly, laughingly into her troubled ones. She began to wonder—

She turned swiftly toward the entrance of the cave. There was a door now made of great rough hewn slabs of wood. Wayne slipped his arm about her and drew her close to it.

"Will you open it?" he whispered.

"Wayne!" wonderingly, seeking to understand.

He took her hand in his, laid it for a moment upon his lips, then put her fingers against the great door.

"Open it, dear," he told her.

Slowly the heavy, wide portal swung back to her touch. Her heart beating madly, she scarce knew why, her step at once eager and hesitant, she stepped by him. And he, close behind her, laughed softly at her little cry, the one moment amply repaying the man for six months of labour.

Now she understood everything; now her heart stood still and then throbbed with a wonderful joy. And she turned and threw her arms about his neck, crying softly: "Wayne! It is home!"

For the darkness which she had expected in the cavern's deep interior had fled before the softly brilliant light that bathed it rosily, that came from she did not yet know where. She saw a deep throated fireplace, built of big granite blocks, a monster log blazing and roaring mightily in it, the flames leaping up the rock chimney, drawn upward and back into the sloping passage where the draft of air had in the old days carried away the smoke from her rude stove. And she guessed who had made the fireplace, piling stone on stone.

She saw a table, rustic, heavy, with legs of twisted cedar branches, with books upon it, with a vase made of a hollowed out, gnarled limb and choked with its great armful of valley flowers. She saw a chair that patient, loving hands had made from what the winter-locked forest had provided, seat and back covered with deerskin cushions, a chair that opened its arms to her as though, still keeping its identity as a part of her woodland, it were welcoming her to a world where love's heart beat close to nature's. She saw that the hard floor had disappeared under freshly strewn pine needles and under the two big bear skin rugs which sprawled mightily before the table and before the fireplace. She saw another chair, Wayne's chair it was going to be, because it was such a monster.

She could only gasp as her dancing eyes tried to see everything at once—flowers everywhere, hiding the walls, breathing perfume from the corners, drooping from the ceiling.

"But the light!" she cried, wonderingly. "It is like day."

Then at last she saw how everywhere in the high ceiling he had chiselled out deep inverted bowls, and in each cup-like cavity nothing in the world other than a glowing electric bulb was shining, flooding the room with a soft glow.

"And you did all of this yourself? While you were alone here in the winter?"

His eyes were like hers, his own face flushed with the happiness of the hour.

"I didn't make the bulbs," he laughed. "It's taken me a week playing electrician to get the wires up, the dynamo running back there under the water fall. Do you like it?"

She did not answer. She had no time to answer, she was so busy trying the two chairs, inhaling the fragrance of the flowers, admiring the fireplace, examining the reading lamp which hung over the table and which he had constructed of wood, chosen for beauty of natural colour and grain, the opaque sides shutting out the light which fell straight down upon an open book.

Only now did she realise that the cave seemed smaller. There was a partition running across it, a wide door standing ajar. He followed her as she ran to it.

"My bedroom," he warned her. "I won't swear to its tidiness."

Here again was the soft glow of electric lights cunningly concealed with nowhere a hint of the wires that ran in deeply chiseled grooves; here was a wide couch, a bit of the woodland, as were the chairs and table, the rough bark still upon the woodwork, cushions and coverlet of bearskin; here a smaller table, a smaller chair.

"It's wonderful, you wonderful Wayne!" she cried delightedly.

But he had his arm about her again and was leading her toward the fireplace, to it, through another door which opened to the passage leading to the chasm where the water leaped down toward the bowels of the earth. The door flung open, the passage filled with light and a fresh surprise.

Across the chasm were logs as large as one man could handle, hewn so that they lay close together, so that their upper surface made a level floor. Wanda and Shandon crossed, hearing the water shouting under them. And here, where Wanda had never been before, they came upon—

"The kitchen!" she cried. "A real kitchen!"

With a real stove, only that it was made of slabs and squares of granite, a real kitchen table only that it was made from rough pine and cedar, with the bark still on it; and very real dishes. Most of all the real fragrance of coffee just boiling over. Wanda ran to retrieve it and Wayne went on ahead of her. In a moment he called.

All new to her, the short climb upward along a flight of steps cut in the rock, the little winding way up which she ran eagerly, the narrow rock platform, the door against which he stood.

"First," he commanded gaily, "turn and look back."

She turned. Looking down she saw the kitchen; looking outward she saw a great cut through the cliffs where they seemed to fall apart in a steep sided ravine, and through this she looked out and down over her forests.

"The view from My Lady's bedroom," he laughed. "And now My Lady's bedroom, itself."

He threw open the door, standing aside to watch her pass.

A tiny rudely squared chamber, all in white. Countless warm, furry pelts of the snowshoe rabbits he had trapped during the winter, made a white carpet underfoot; a couch unlike the other in that this was fashioned entirely of white pine, the smooth surfaces polished and glistening under their many coats of shellac, a coverlet of countless other white rabbit skins stitched together; a little dressing table of glistening white pine, with a real mirror reflecting two flushed happy faces, and on the floor a big white bearskin.

"And you did it all, every bit, yourself!"

That was the thought that flooded the caves for her with a light more softly radiant than the glow of innumerable electric bulbs; the thought which hid the little flaws in stone and woodwork and gave a gleam to them that no mere shellac and white wood could have done.

They went back to the living room to stand, silent for a little, before the fireplace. They watched the flames shoot upward through little sprays and clusters of fiery sparks. Their hands crept together, clinging close. Slowly their eyes came away from the fire and sought each the other's. And she saw what he saw, a love that is eternal and that understands.

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