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Calumet remained unshaken

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[Frontispiece: Calumet remained unshaken.]

THE BOSS OF THE LAZY Y

BY

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THE COMING OF THE LAW, THE TWO-GUN MAN, ETC.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
J. ALLEN ST. JOHN

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CHAPTER I

THE HOME-COMING OF CALUMET MARSTON

Shuffling down the long slope, its tired legs moving automatically, the drooping pony swerved a little and then came to a halt, trembling with fright. Startled out of his unpleasant ruminations, his lips tensing over his teeth in a savage snarl, Calumet Marston swayed uncertainly in the saddle, caught himself, crouched, and swung a heavy pistol to a menacing poise.

For an instant he hesitated, searching the immediate vicinity with rapid, intolerant glances. When his gaze finally focused on the object which had frightened his pony, he showed no surprise. Many times during the past two days had this incident occurred, and at no time had Calumet allowed the pony to follow its inclination to bolt or swerve from the trail. He held it steady now, pulling with a vicious hand on the reins.

Ten feet in front of the pony and squarely in the center of the trail a gigantic diamond-back rattler swayed and warned, its venomous, lidless eyes gleaming with hate. Calumet's snarl deepened, he dug a spur into the pony's left flank, and pulled sharply on the left rein. The pony lunged, swerved, and presented its right shoulder to the swaying reptile, its flesh quivering from excitement. Then the heavy revolver in Calumet's hand roared spitefully, there was a sudden threshing in the dust of the trail, and the huge rattler shuddered into a sinuous, twisting heap. For an instant Calumet watched it, and then, seeing that the wound he had inflicted was not mortal, he urged the pony forward and, leaning over a little, sent two more bullets into the body of the snake, severing its head from its body.

"Man's size," declared Calumet, his snarl relaxing. He sat erect and spoke to the pony:

"Get along, you damned fool! Scared of a side-winder!"

Relieved, deflating its lungs with a tremulous heave, and unmindful of Calumet's scorn, the pony gingerly returned to the trail. In thirty seconds it had resumed its drooping shuffle, in thirty seconds Calumet had returned to his unpleasant ruminations.

A mile up in the shimmering white of the desert sky an eagle swam on slow wing, shaping his winding course toward the timber clump that fringed a river. Besides the eagle, the pony, and Calumet, no living thing stirred in the desert or above it. In the shade of a rock, perhaps, lurked a lizard, in the filmy mesquite that drooped and curled in the stifling heat slid a rattler, in the shelter of the sagebrush the sage hen might have nestled her eggs in the hot sand. But these were fixtures. Calumet, his pony, and the eagle, were not. The eagle was Mexican; it had swung

its mile-wide circles many times to reach the point above the timber clump; it was migratory and alert with the hunger lust.

Calumet watched it with eyes that glowed bitterly and balefully. Half an hour later, when he reached the river and the pony clattered down the rocky slope, plunged its head deeply into the stream and drank with eager, silent draughts, Calumet swung himself crossways in the saddle, fumbled for a moment at his slicker, and drew out a battered tin cup. Leaning over, he filled the cup with water, tilted his head back and drank. The blur in the white sky caught his gaze and held it. His eyes mocked, his lips snarled.

"You damned greaser sneak!" he said. "Followed me fifty miles!" A flash of race hatred glinted his eyes. "I wouldn't let no damned greaser eagle get me, anyway!"

The pony had drunk its fill. Calumet returned the tin cup to the slicker and swung back into the saddle. Refreshed, the pony took the opposite slope with a rush, emerging from the river upon a high plateau studded with fir balsam and pine. Bringing the pony to a halt, Calumet turned in the saddle and looked somberly behind him.

For two days he had been fighting the desert, and now it lay in his rear, a mystic, dun-colored land of hot sandy waste and silence; brooding, menacing, holding out its threat of death—a vast natural basin breathing and pulsing with mystery, rimmed by remote mountains that seemed tenuous and thin behind the ever-changing misty films that spread from horizon to horizon.

The expression of Calumet's face was as hard and inscrutable as the desert itself; the latter's filmy haze did not more surely shut out the mysteries behind it than did Calumet's expression veil the emotions of his heart. He turned from the desert to face the plateau, from whose edge dropped a wide, tawny valley, luxuriant with bunch grass—a golden brown sweep that nestled between some hills, inviting, alluring. So sharp was the contrast between the desert and the valley, and so potent was its appeal to him, that the hard calm of his face threatened to soften. It was as though he had ridden out of a desolate, ages-old world where death mocked at life, into a new one in which life reigned supreme.

There was no change in Calumet's expression, however, though below him, spreading and dipping away into the interminable distance, slumbering in the glare of the afternoon sun, lay the land of his youth. He remembered it well and he sat for a long time looking at it, searching out familiar spots, reviving incidents with which those spots had been connected. During the days of his exile he had forgotten, but now it all came back to him; his brain was illumined and memories moved in it in orderly array—like a vast army passing in review. And he sat there on his pony, singling out the more important personages of the army—the officers, the guiding spirits of the invisible columns.

Five miles into the distance, at a point where the river doubled sharply, rose the roofs of several ranch buildings—his father's ranch, the Lazy Y. Upon the buildings Calumet's army of memories descended and he forgot the desert, the long ride, the bleak days of his exile, as he yielded to solemn introspection.

Yet, even now, the expression of his face did not change. A little longer he scanned the valley and then the army of memories marched out of his vision and he took up the reins and sent the pony forward. The little animal tossed its head impatiently, perhaps scenting food and companionship, but Calumet's heavy hand on the reins discouraged haste.

For Calumet was in no hurry. He had not yet worked out an explanation for the strange whim that had sent him home after an absence of thirteen years and he wanted time to study over it. His lips took on a satiric curl as he meditated, riding slowly down into the valley. It was inexplicable, mysterious, this notion of his to return to a father who had never taken any interest in him. He could not account for it. He had not been sent for, he had not sent word; he did not know why he had come. He had been in the Durango country when the mood had struck him, and without waiting to debate the wisdom of the move he had ridden in to headquarters, secured his time, and—well, here he was. He had pondered much in an effort to account for the whim, carefully considering all its phases, and he was still uncertain.

He knew he would receive no welcome; he knew he was not wanted. Had he felt a longing to revisit the old place? Perhaps it had been that. And yet, perhaps not, for he was here now, looking at it, living over the life of his youth, riding again through the long bunch grass, over the barren alkali flats, roaming again in the timber that fringed the river—going over it all again and nothing stirred in his heart—no pleasure, no joy, no satisfaction, no emotion whatever. If he felt any curiosity he was entirely unconscious of it; it was dormant if it existed at all. As he was able to consider her dispassionately he knew that he had not come to look at his mother's grave. She had been nothing to him, his heart did not beat a bit faster when he thought of her.

Then, why had he come? He did not know or care. Had he been a psychologist he might have attempted to frame reasons, building them from foundations of high-sounding phrases, but he was a materialist, and the science of mental phenomena had no place in his brain. Something had impelled him to come and here he was, and that was reason enough for him. And because he had no motive in coming he was taking his time. He figured on reaching the Lazy Y about dusk. He would see his father, perhaps quarrel with him, and then he would ride away, to return no more.

Strange as it may seem, the prospect of a quarrel with his father brought him a thrill of joy, the first emotion he had felt since beginning his homeward journey.

When he reached the bottom of the valley he urged his pony on a little way, pulling it to a halt on the flat, rock-strewn top of an isolated excrescence of earth surrounded by a sea of sagebrush, dried bunch grass, and sand. Dismounting he stretched his legs to disperse the saddle weariness. He stifled a yawn, lazily plunged a hand into a pocket of his trousers, produced tobacco and paper and rolled a cigarette. Lighting it he puffed slowly and deeply at it, exhaling the smoke lingeringly through his nostrils. Then he sat down on a rock, leaned an elbow in the sand, pulled his hat brim well down over his eyes and with the cigarette held loosely between his lips, gave himself over to retrospection.

It all came to him, as he sat there on the rock, his gaze on the basking valley, his thoughts centered on that youth which had been an abiding nightmare. The question was: What influence had made him a hardened, embittered, merciless demon of a man whose passions threatened always to wash away the dam of his self-control? A man whose evil nature caused other men to shun him; a man who scoffed at virtue; who saw no good in anything?

Not once during his voluntary exile had he applied his mind to the subject in the hope of stumbling on a solution. To be sure, he had had a slight glimmering of the truth; he had realized in a sort of vague, general way that he had not been treated fairly at home, but he had not been able to provide a definite and final explanation, perhaps because he had never considered it necessary. But his return home, the review of the army of memories, had brought him a solution —the solution. And he saw its ruthless logic.

He was what his parents had made him. Without being able to think it out in scientific terms he was able to expound the why of like. It was one of the inexorable rules of heredity. To his parents he owed everything and nothing. He reflected on this paradox until it became perfectly clear to him. They—his parents—had given him life, and that was all. He owed them thanks for that, or he would have owed them thanks if he considered his life to be worth anything. But he owed them nothing because they had spoiled the life they had given him, had spoiled it by depriving him of everything he had a right to expect from them—love, sympathy, decent treatment. They had given him instead, blows, kicks, curses, hatred. Hatred!

Yes, they had hated him; they had told him that; he was convinced of it. The reason for their hatred had always been a mystery to him and, for all he cared, would remain a mystery.

When he was fifteen his mother died. On the day when the neighbors laid her away in a quiet spot at the edge of the wood near the far end of the corral fence, he stood beside her body as it lay in the rough pine box which some of them had knocked together, looking at her for the last time. He was neither glad or sorry; he felt no emotion whatever. When one of the neighbors spoke to him, asking him if he felt no grief, he cursed and stormed out of the house. Later, after the neighbors departed, his father came upon him in the stable and beat him unmercifully. He came, dry-eyed, through the ordeal, raging inwardly, but silent. And that night, after his father had gone to bed, he stole stealthily out of the house, threw a saddle and bridle on his favorite pony and rode away. Such had been his youth.

That had been thirteen years ago. He was twenty-eight now and had changed a little—for the worse. During the days of his exile he had made no friends. He had found much experience, he had become self-reliant, sophisticated. There was about him an atmosphere of cold preparedness that discouraged encroachment on his privacy. Men did not trifle with him, because they feared him. Around Durango, where he had ridden for the Bar S outfit, it was known that he possessed Satanic cleverness with a six-shooter.

But if he was rapid with his weapons he made no boast of it. He was quiet in manner, unobtrusive. He was taciturn also, for he had been taught the value of silence by his parents, though in his narrowed glances men had been made to see a suggestion of action that was more eloquent than speech. He was a slumbering volcano of passion that might at any time become active and destroying.

Gazing now from under the brim of his hat at the desolate, silent world that swept away from the base of the hill on whose crest he sat, his lips curved with a slow, bitter sneer. During the time he had been on the hill he had lived over his life and he saw its bleakness, its emptiness, its mystery. This was his country. He had been born here; he had passed days, months, years, in this valley. He knew it, and hated it. He sneered as his gaze went out of the valley and sought the vast stretches of the flaming desert. He knew the desert, too; it had not changed. Riding through it yesterday and the day before he had been impressed with the somber grimness of it all, as he had been impressed many times before when watching it from this very hill. But it was no more somber than his own life had been; its brooding silence was no deeper than that which dwelt in his own heart; he reflected its spirit, its mystery was his. His life had been like—like the stretching waste of sky that yawned above the desert, as cold, hard, and unsympathetic.

He saw a shadow; looked upward to see the Mexican eagle winging its slow way overhead, and the sneer on his lips grew. It was a prophecy, perhaps. At least the sight of the bird gave him an opportunity to draw a swift and bitter comparison. He was like the eagle. Both he and the bird he detested were beset with a constitutional predisposition to rend and destroy. There was this

difference between them: The bird feasted on carrion, while he spent his life stifling generous impulses and tearing from his heart the noble ideals which his latent manhood persisted in erecting.

For two hours he sat on the hill, watching. He saw the sun sink slowly toward the remote mountains, saw it hang a golden rim on a barren peak; watched the shadows steal out over the foothills and stretch swiftly over the valley toward him. Mystery seemed to awaken and fill the world. The sky blazed with color—orange and gold and violet; a veil of rose and amethyst descended and stretched to the horizons, enveloping the mountains in a misty haze; purple shafts shot from distant canyons, mingling with the brighter colors—gleaming, shimmering, ever-changing. Over the desert the colors were even more wonderful, the mystery deeper, the lure more appealing. But Calumet made a grimace at it all, it seemed to mock him.

He rose from the rock, mounted his pony, and rode slowly down into the valley toward the Lazy Y ranch buildings.

He had been so busy with his thoughts that he had not noticed the absence of cattle in the valley—the valley had been a grazing ground for the Lazy Y stock during the days of his youth—and now, with a start, he noted it and halted his pony after reaching the level to look about him.

There was no sign of any cattle. But he reflected that perhaps a new range had been opened. Thirteen years is a long time, and many changes could have come during his absence.

He was about to urge his pony on again, when some impulse moved him to turn in the saddle and glance at the hill he had just vacated. At about the spot where he had sat—perhaps two hundred yards distant—he saw a man on a horse, sitting motionless in the saddle, looking at him.

Calumet wheeled his own pony and faced the man. The vari-colored glow from the distant mountains fell full upon the horseman, and with the instinct for attention to detail which had become habitual with Calumet, he noted that the rider was a big man; that he wore a cream-colored Stetson and a scarlet neckerchief. Even at that distance, so clear was the light, Calumet caught a vague impression of his features—his nose, especially, which was big, hawk-like.

Calumet yielded to a sudden wonder over the rider's appearance on the hill. He had not seen him; had not heard him before. Still, that was not strange, for he had become so absorbed in his thoughts while on the hill that he had paid very little attention to his surroundings except to associate them with his past.

The man, evidently, was a cowpuncher in the employ of his father; had probably seen him from the level of the valley and had ridden to the crest of the hill out of curiosity.

Another impulse moved Calumet. He decided to have a talk with the man in order to learn, if possible, something of the life his father had led during his absence. He kicked his pony in the ribs and rode toward the man, the animal traveling at a slow chop-trot.

For a moment the man watched him, still motionless. Then, as Calumet continued to approach him the man wheeled his horse and sent it clattering down the opposite side of the hill.

Calumet sneered, surprised, for the instant, at the man's action.

"Shy cuss," he said, grinning contemptuously. In the next instant, however, he yielded to a quick rage and sent his pony scurrying up the slope toward the crest of the hill.

When he reached the top the man was on the level, racing across a barren alkali flat at a speed which indicated that he was afflicted with something more than shyness.

Calumet halted on the crest of the hill and waved a hand derisively at the man, who was looking back over his shoulder as he rode.

"Slope, you locoed son-of-a-gun!" he yelled; "I didn't want to talk to you, anyway!"

The rider's answer was a strange one. He brought his horse to a dizzying stop, wheeled, drew a rifle from his saddle holster, raised it to his shoulder and took a snap shot at Calumet.

The latter, however, had observed the hostile movement, and had thrown himself out of the saddle. He struck the hard sand of the hill on all fours and stretched out flat, his face to the ground. He heard the bullet sing futilely past him; heard the sharp crack of the rifle, and peered down to see the man again running his horse across the level.

Calumet drew his pistol, but saw that the distance was too great for effective shooting, and savagely jammed the weapon back into the holster. He was in a black rage, but was aware of the absurdity of attempting to wage a battle in which the advantage lay entirely with the rifle, and so, with a grim smile on his face, he watched the progress of the man as he rode through the long grass and across the barren stretches of the level toward the hills that rimmed the southern horizon.

Promising himself that he would make a special effort to return the shot, Calumet finally wheeled his pony and rode down the hill toward the Lazy Y.

CHAPTER II

BETTY MEETS THE HEIR

An emotion which he did not trouble himself to define impelled Calumet to wheel his pony when he reached the far end of the corral fence and ride into the cottonwood where, thirteen years before, he had seen the last of his mother. No emotion moved him as he rode toward it, but when he came upon the grave he experienced a savage satisfaction because it had been sadly neglected. There was no headboard to mark the spot, no familiar mound of earth; only a sunken stretch, a pitiful little patch of sand, with a few weeds thrusting up out of it, nodding to the slight breeze and casting grotesque shadows in the somber twilight.

Calumet was not surprised. It was all as he had pictured it during those brief moments when he had allowed his mind to dwell on his past; its condition vindicated his previous conviction that his father would neglect it. Therefore, his satisfaction was not in finding the grave as it was, but in the knowledge that he had not misjudged his father. And though he had not loved his mother, the condition of the grave served to infuse him with a newer and more bitter hatred for the surviving parent. A deep rage and contempt slumbered within him as he urged his pony out of the wood toward the ranchhouse.

He was still in no hurry, and soon after leaving the edge of the wood he halted his pony and sat loosely in the saddle, gazing about him. When he observed that he might be seen from the ranchhouse he moved deep into the cottonwood and there, screened behind some nondescript brush, continued his examination.

The place was in a state of dilapidation, of approaching ruin. Desolation had set a heavy hand over it all. The buildings no more resembled those he had known than daylight resembles darkness. The stable, wherein he had received his last thrashing from his father, had sagged to one side, its roof seeming to bow to him in derision; the corral fence was down in several places, its rails in a state of decay, and within, two gaunt ponies drooped, seeming to lack the energy necessary to move them to take advantage of the opportunity for freedom so close at hand. They appeared to watch Calumet incuriously, apathetically.

Calumet felt strangely jubilant. A vindictive satisfaction and delight forced the blood through his veins a little faster, for, judging from the appearance of the buildings, misfortune must have descended upon his father. The thought brought a great peace to his soul; he even smiled when he saw that the bunkhouse, which had sheltered the many cowboys whom he had hated, seemed ready to topple to destruction. The smile grew when his gaze went to the windmill, to see its long arms motionless in the breeze, indicating its uselessness.

When he had concluded his examination he did not ride boldly toward the ranchhouse, but made a wide circuit through the wood, for he wanted to come upon his father in his own way and in his own time; wanted to surprise him. There was no use of turning his pony into the corral, for the animal had more life in him than the two forlorn beasts that were already there and would not stay in the corral when a breach in the fence offered freedom. Therefore, when Calumet reached the edge of the wood near the front of the house he dismounted and tied his pony to a tree.

A moment later he stood at the front door, filled with satisfaction to find it unbarred. Swinging it slowly open he entered, silently closing it behind him. He stood, a hand on the fastenings, gazing about him. He was in the room which his father had always used as an office. As he peered about in the gray dusk that had fallen, distinguishing familiar articles of furniture—a roll-top desk, several chairs, a sofa, some cheap prints on the wall—a nameless emotion smote him and his face paled a little, his jaws locked, his hands clenched. For again the army of memories was passing in review.

For a long time he stood at the door. Then he left it and walked to the desk, placing a hand on its top and hesitating. Doubtless his father was in another part of the house, possibly eating supper. He decided not to bother him at this moment and seated himself in a chair before the desk. There was plenty of time. His father would be as disagreeably surprised to meet him five minutes from now as he would were he to stalk into his presence at this moment.

Once in the chair, Calumet realized that he was tired, and he leaned back luxuriously, stretching his legs. The five minutes to which he had limited himself grew to ten and he still sat motionless, looking out of the window at the deepening dusk. The shadows in the wood near the house grew darker, and to Calumet's ears came the long-drawn, plaintive whine of a coyote, the croaking of frogs from the river, the hoot of an owl nearby. Other noises of the night reached him, but he did not hear them, for he had become lost in meditation.

What a home-coming!

Bitterness settled into the marrow of his bones. Here was ruin, desolation, darkness, for the returning prodigal. These were the things his father had given him. A murderous rage seized him, a lust to rend and destroy, and he sat erect in his chair, his muscles tensed, his blood rioting, his brain reeling. Had his father appeared before him at this minute it would have gone hard with him. He fought down an impulse to go in search of him and presently the mood passed, his muscles relaxed, and he stretched out again in the chair.

Producing tobacco and paper he rolled a cigarette, noting with a satisfied smile the steadiness of his hand. Once he had overheard a man telling another man that Calumet Marston had no nerves. He knew that; had known it. He knew also that this faculty of control made his passions more dangerous. But he reveled in his passions, the possession of them filled him with an ironic satisfaction—they were his heritage.

While he sat in the chair the blackness of the night enveloped him. He heard no sound from the other part of the house and he finally decided to find and confront his father. He stood erect, lit the cigarette and threw the match from him, accidentally striking his hand against the back of the chair on which he had been sitting. Yielding to a sudden, vicious anger, he kicked the chair out of the way, so that it slid along the rough floor a little distance and overturned with a crash. Calumet cursed. He was minded to take the chair up and hurl it down again, so vengeful was the temper he was in, but his second sober sense urged upon him the futility of attacking inanimate things and he contented himself with snarling at it. He stood silent for a moment, a hope in his heart that his father, alarmed over the sudden commotion, would come to investigate, and a wave of sardonic satisfaction swept over him when he finally heard a faint sound—a footstep in the distance.

His father had heard and was coming!

Calumet stood near the center of the room, undecided whether to make his presence known at once or to secrete himself and allow his father to search for him. He finally decided to stand where he was and let his father come upon him there, and he stood erect, puffing rapidly at the cigarette, which glowed like a firefly in the darkness.

The steps came nearer and Calumet heard a slight creak—the sound made by the dining-room door as it swung slowly open. A faint light filled the opening thus made in the doorway, and Calumet knew that his father had come without a light—that the faint glow came from a distance, possibly from the kitchen, just beyond the dining-room. The lighted space in the doorway grew wider until it extended to the full width of the doorway. And a man stood in it, rigid, erect, motionless.

Calumet stood in silent appreciation of the oddness of the situation—he had come like a thief in the night—until he remembered the cigarette in his mouth; that its light was betraying his position. He reached up, withdrew the cigarette, and held it concealed in the palm of his hand.

But he was the fraction of a second too late. His father had seen the light; was aware of his presence. Calumet saw a pistol glitter in his hand, heard his voice, a little hoarse, possibly from fear, give the faltering command:

"Hands up!"

Until now, Calumet had been filled with a savage enjoyment of the possibilities. He had counted on making his presence known at this juncture, anticipating much pleasure in the revelation of his father's surprise when he should discover that the intruder was his hated son. But in his eagerness to conceal the fire from the cigarette he burned the palm of the hand holding it. Instantly he succumbed to a furious rage. With a snarl he flung himself forward, grasping the man's pistol with his left hand and depressing the muzzle, at just the instant that it was discharged.

Calumet felt the sting of the powder in his face, and in a fury of resentment he brought his right hand up and clutched his father's throat. He had taken much pride in his ability to control his passions, but at this moment they were unleashed. When his father showed resistence, Calumet swung him free of the door, dragged him to the center of the room, where he threw him heavily to the floor, falling on top of him and jamming a knee savagely into the pit of his stomach. Perhaps he had desisted then had not the man struggled and fought back. His resistence made Calumet more furious. He pulled one hand free and attempted to secure the pistol, forcing the hand holding it viciously against the floor. The weapon was again discharged and Calumet became a raging demon. Twice he lifted the man's head and knocked it furiously against the floor, and each time he spoke, his voice a hoarse, throaty whisper:

"So, this is the way you greet your son, you damned maverick!" he said.

So engrossed was Calumet with his work of subduing the still struggling parent that he did not hear a slight sound behind him. But a flickering light came over his shoulder and shone fairly into the face of the man beneath him, and he saw that the man was not his father but an entire stranger!

He was not given time in which to express his surprise, for he heard a voice behind him and turned to see a young woman standing in the doorway, a candle in one hand, a forty-five Colt

clutched in the other, its muzzle gaping at him. The young woman's face was white, her eyes wide and brilliant, she swayed, but there was determination in her manner that could not be mistaken.

"Get up, or I will shoot you like a dog!" she said, in a queer, breathless voice.

"Get up, or I will shoot you like a dog!" she said

[Illustration: "Get up, or I will shoot you like a dog!" she said.]

Releasing his grip on the man's throat, Calumet swung around sideways and glared malevolently at the young woman. His anger was gone; there was no reason for it, now that he had discovered that the man was not his father. But the demon in him was not yet subdued, and he got to his feet, not because the young woman had ordered him to do so, but because he saw no reason to stay down. A cold, mocking smile replaced the malevolence on his face when, after reaching an erect position, he saw that the weapon in the young woman's hand had drooped until its muzzle was directed toward the floor at his feet. A forty-five caliber revolver, loaded, weighs about forty ounces, and this one looked so unwieldy and cumbersome, so entirely harmless in the young woman's slender hand, that her threat seemed absurd, even farcical. An ironical humor over the picture she made standing there moved Calumet.

"I reckon you ought to use two hands if you want to hold that gun proper, ma'am," he said.

The muzzle of the weapon wavered uncertainly; the young woman gasped. Apparently the lack of fear exhibited by the intruder shocked her. But she did not follow Calumet's suggestion, she merely stood and watched him warily, as the man whom he had attacked struggled dizzily to his feet, staggered weakly to a chair and half fell, half slipped into it, swaying oddly back and forth, gasping for breath, a grotesque figure.

The demon in Calumet slumbered—this situation was to his liking. He stepped back a pace, and when the young woman saw that he meditated no further mischief she lowered the pistol to her side. Then, moving cautiously, watching Calumet closely, she placed the candle on the floor in front of her. Again she stood erect, though she did not raise the pistol. Evidently she was regaining her composure, though Calumet observed that her free hand came up and grasped the dress over her bosom so tightly that the fabric was in danger of ripping. Her face, in the flickering light from the candle on the floor, was slightly in in the shadow, but Calumet could see that the color was coming back to her cheeks, and he took note of her, watching her with insolent intentness.

Of the expression in Calumet's eyes she apparently took no notice, but she was watching the man he had attacked, plainly concerned over his condition. And when at last she saw that he was suffering more from shock than from real injury she breathed a sigh of relief. Then she turned to Calumet.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded. She was breathing more easily, but her voice still

quivered, and the hand over her bosom moved with a quick, nervous motion.

"I reckon that's my business," returned Calumet. He had made a mistake, certainly, he knew that. It was apparent that his father had left the Lazy Y. At least, if he were anywhere about he was not able to come to investigate the commotion caused by the arrival of his son. Either he was sick or had disposed of the ranch, possibly, if the latter were the case, to the girl and the man. In the event of his father having sold the ranch it was plain that Calumet had no business here. He was an intruder—more, his attack on the man must convince both him and the girl that there had been a deeper significance to his visit. However, the explanation of the presence of the present occupants of the house did not bother Calumet, and he did not intend to set them right, for he was enjoying himself. Strife, danger, were here. Moreover, he had brought them, and he was in his element. His blood pulsed swiftly through his veins and he felt a strange exhilaration as he stepped slightly aside and rested a hand on the desk top, leering at the girl.

She returned his gaze and evidently divined something of what was in his mind, for her chin lifted a little in defiance. The flickering light from the candle fell on her hair, brown and wavy, and in a tumble of graceful disorder, and threw into bold relief the firm lines of her chin and throat. She was not beautiful, but she certainly merited the term "pretty," which formed on Calumet's lips as he gazed at her, though it remained unspoken. He gave her this tribute grudgingly, conscious of the deep impression she was making upon him. He had never seen a woman like her—for the reason, perhaps, that he had studiously avoided the good ones. Mere facial beauty would not have made this impression on him—it was something deeper, something more substantial and abiding. And, watching her, he suddenly knew what it was. There was in her eyes, back of the defiance that was in them now, an expression that told of sturdy honesty and virtue. These gave to her features a repose and calm that could not be disturbed, an unconscious dignity of character that excitement could not efface, and her gaze was unwavering as her eyes met his in a sharp, brief struggle. Brief, for Calumet's drooped. He felt the dominant personality of the girl and tried to escape its effect; looked at her with a snarl, writhing under her steady gaze, a slow red coming into his cheeks.

The silence between them lasted long. The man on the chair, swaying back and forth, began to recover his wits and his breath. He struggled to an erect position and gazed about him with blood-shot eyes, feeling his throat where Calumet's iron fingers had gripped it. Twice his lips moved in an effort to speak, but no, sound came from between them.

Under the girl's uncomfortable scrutiny, Calumet's thoughts became strangely incoherent, and he shifted uneasily, for he felt that she was measuring him, appraising him, valuing him. He saw slow-changing expressions in her eyes—defiance, scorn, and, finally, amused contempt. With the last expression he knew she had reached a decision, not flattering to him. He tried to show her by looking at her that he did not care what her opinion was, but his recreant eyes refused the issue and he knew that he was being worsted in a spiritual battle with the first strong feminine character he had met; that her personality was overpowering his in the first clash. With a last effort he forced his eyes to steadiness and succeeded in sneering at her, though he felt that somehow the sneer was ineffectual, puerile. And then she smiled at him, deliberately, with a disdain that maddened him and brought a dark flush to his face that reached to his temples. And then her voice taunted him:

"What a big, brave man you are?"

Twice her gaze roved over him from head to foot before her voice came again, and in the total stoppage of his thoughts he found it impossible to choose a word suitable to interrupt her.

"For you *think* you are a man, I suppose?" she added, her voice filled with a lashing scorn. "You wear a gun, you ride a horse, and you *look* like a man. But there the likeness ends. I suppose I ought to kill you—a beast like you has no business living. Fortunately, you haven't hurt grandpa very much. You may go now—go and tell Tom Taggart that he will have to try again!"

The sound of her voice broke the spell which her eyes had woven about Calumet's senses, and he stood erect, hooking his thumbs in his cartridge belt, unaffected by her tirade, his voice insolent.

"Why, ma'am," he said, mockingly, his voice an irritating drawl, "you cert'nly are some on the talk, for sure! Your folks sorta handed you the tongue for the family when you butted into this here world, didn't they? An' so that's your grandpa? I come pretty near hurtin' him an' you're some het up over it? But I reckon that if he has to set around an' listen to your palaver he'd be right glad to cash in. Shucks. I beg your pardon, ma'am. If it'll do you any good to know, I thought your poor grandpap was some one else. I was thinkin' it was a family affair, an' that I had a right to guzzle him. You see, I thought the ol' maverick was my father."

The girl started, the color slowly faded from her cheeks and she drew a long, tremulous breath.

"Then you," she said; "you are——" She hesitated and stared at him intensely, her free hand tightly clenched.

He bowed, derisively, discerning the sudden confusion that had overtaken her and making

the most of his opportunity to increase it.

"I'm Calumet Marston," he said, grinning.

The girl gasped. "Oh!" she said, weakly; "Oh!"

The huge pistol slipped out of her hand and thudded dully to the floor and she stood, holding tightly to the door jambs, her eyes fixed on Calumet with an expression that he could not analyze.

CHAPTER III

CALUMET'S GUARDIAN

A new silence fell; a silence pregnant with a premonition of renewed strife. Calumet felt it and the evil in him exulted. He left the desk and stepped close to the girl, deftly picking up the fallen pistol and placing it on the desk back of him, out of the girl's reach. She watched him, both hands pressed over her bosom, apparently still stunned over the revelation of his identity. There was mystery here, Calumet felt it and was determined to uncover it. He took up the chair that he had previously overturned and seated himself on it, facing the girl.

"Set down," he said, waving a hand toward another chair. In response to his invitation she moved toward the chair, hesitated when she reached it, apparently having nearly recovered her composure, though her face was pale and she watched him covertly, half fearfully. While she seated herself Calumet got out of his chair and took up the candle, placing it on the desk beside the pistol. This done, he busied himself with the rolling of a cigarette, working deliberately, an alert eye on the girl and her grandfather.

The latter had recovered and was sitting rigid in the chair, fear and wonder in his eyes as he watched Calumet. To him Calumet spoke when he had completed the rolling of the cigarette and was holding a flaring match to it. He took a tigerish amusement from the old man's plight.

"I reckon I come pretty near doin' for you, eh?" he said, grinning. "Well, there ain't no tellin' when a man will make a mistake." His gaze left the old man and was directed at the girl. "I reckon we'll clear things up a bit now, ma'am," he said. "What are you an' your grand-pap doin' at the Lazy Y?"

"We live here."

"Where's the old coyote which has been callin' himself my dad?"

A sudden change came over the girl; a vindictive satisfaction seemed to radiate from her. So it appeared to Calumet. In the flashing look she gave him he thought he could detect a knowledge of advantage, a consciousness of power, over him. Her voice emphasized this impression.

"Your father's dead," she returned, and watched him narrowly.

Calumet's eyelashes flickered once. Shock or emotion, this was all the evidence he gave of it. He puffed long and deeply at his cigarette and not for an instant did he remove his gaze from the girl's face, for he was studying her, watching for a recurrence of the subtle gleam that he had previously caught. But in the look that she now gave him there was nothing but amusement. Apparently she was enjoying him. Certainly she had entirely recovered from the shock he had caused her.

"Dead, eh?" he said. "When did he cash in?"

"A week ago today."

Calumet's eyelashes flickered again. Here was the explanation for that mysterious impulse which had moved him to return home. It was just a week ago that he had taken the notion and he had acted upon it immediately. He had heard of mental telepathy, and here was a working illustration of it. However, he gave no thought to its bearing on his presence at the Lazy Y beyond skeptically assuring himself that it was a mere coincidence. In any event, what did it matter? He was here; that was the main thing.

His thoughts had become momentarily introspective, and when his mental faculties returned to a realization of the present he saw that the girl was regarding him with an intense and wondering gaze. She had been studying him and when she saw him looking at her she turned her head. He experienced an unaccountable elation, though he kept his voice dryly sarcastic.

"I reckon the ol' fool asked for me?"

"Yes."

This time Calumet could not conceal his surprise; it was revealed in the skeptical, sneering, boring glance that he threw at the girl's face, now inscrutable. Her manner angered him.

"I reckon you're a liar," he said, with cold deliberation.

The girl reddened quickly; her hands clenched. But she did not look at him.

"Thank you," she returned, mockingly.

"What did he say?" he demanded gruffly, to conceal a slight embarrassment over her manner of receiving the insult.

Her chin lifted disdainfully. "You wouldn't believe a liar," she said coldly.

Again her spirit battled his. The dark flush spread over his face and he found that he could not meet her eyes; again the sheer, compelling strength of her personality routed the evilness in his heart. Involuntarily, his lips moved.

"I reckon I didn't mean just that," he said. And then, surprised that such words should come from him he looked up to see the hard calm of her face change to triumph.

The expression was swiftly transient. It baffled him, filling him with an impotent rage. But he watched her narrowly as she folded her hands in her lap and looked down at them.

"Your father expected you to come," she said quietly. "He prayed that you might return before he died. It seems that he felt he had treated you meanly and he wanted to tell you that he had repented."

A cynical wonder filled Calumet, and he laughed—a short, raucous staccato.

"How do you know?" he questioned.

"He told me."

Calumet considered her for a moment in silence and then his attention was directed to her grandfather, who had got to his feet and was walking unsteadily toward the dining-room door. He was a well-preserved man, appearing to be about sixty. That Calumet's attack had been a vicious one was apparent, for as the man reached the door he staggered and leaned weakly against the jambs. He made a grimace at Calumet and smiled weakly at the girl.

"I'm pretty well knocked out, Betty," he said. "My neck hurts, sorta. I'll send Bob in to keep you company."

The girl cast a sharp, eloquent glance at Calumet and smiled with straight lips.

"Don't bother to send Bob," she replied; "I am not afraid."

The grandfather went out, leaving the door open. While the girl stood listening to his retreating steps, Calumet considered her. She had said that she was not afraid of him—he believed her; her actions showed it. He said nothing until after her grandfather had vanished and his step was no longer heard, and then when she turned to him he said shortly:

"So your name's Betty. Betty what?"

"Clayton."

"An' your grandpap?"

"Malcolm Clayton."

"Who's Bob?"

"My brother."

"Any more Claytons around here?" he sneered.

"No."

"Well," he said with truculent insolence; "what in Sam Hill are you-all doin' at the Lazy Y, anyway?"

"I am coming to that presently," she returned, unruffled.

"Goin' to work your jaw again, I reckon?" he taunted.

The hard calm came again into her face as she looked at him, though behind it was that subtle quality that hinted of her possession of advantage. Her manner made plain to him that she

held some mysterious power over him, a power which she valued, even enjoyed, and he was nettled, baffled, and afflicted with a deep rage against her because of it. Dealing with a man he would have known what to do, but he felt strangely impotent in the presence of this girl, for she was not disturbed over his insults, and her quiet, direct glances affected him with a queer sensation of guilt, even embarrassed him.

"Well?" he prompted, after a silence.

"I am going to tell you about your father," she said.

"Make it short," he said gruffly.

"Five years ago," said the girl, ignoring the insolent suggestion; "my father and mother died. My father had been a big cattle owner," she added with a flash of pride. "He was very wealthy; he was educated, refined—a gentleman. We lived in Texas—lived well. I attended a university in the South. In my second year there I was called home suddenly. My father was ill from shock and disappointment. He had invested heavily in some northern enterprise—it will not interest you to know the nature of it—and had lost his entire fortune. His ranch property was involved and had to be sold. There was barely enough to satisfy the creditors. Father died and mother soon followed him. Grandfather, Bob, and I were left destitute. We left the ranch and took up a quarter section of land on the Nueces. We became nesters and were continually harassed by a big cattle owner nearby who wanted our range. We had to get out. Grandfather thought there might be an opportunity to take up some land in this territory. Bob was—well, Bob took mother's death so hard that we didn't want to stay in Texas any longer. The outlook wasn't bright. Bob was too young to work—"

"Lazy, I reckon," jeered Calumet.

The girl's eyes flashed with a swift, contemptuous resentment and her voice chilled. "Bob's leg was hurt," she said. She waited for an instant, watching the sneer on Calumet's face, and then went on firmly, as though she had decided not to let anything he said disturb her. "So when Grandfather proposed coming here I agreed. We took what few personal effects that were left us. We traveled for two months—"

"I ain't carin' to hear your family history," interrupted Calumet. "You started to tell me about my dad."

"We were following the river trail near here," the girl went on firmly, scorning to pay any attention to this insult; "when we heard shooting. I stayed with the wagon while grandfather went to investigate. We found two men—Tom Taggart and his son Neal—concealed in the cottonwood, trying to shoot your father, who was in the house. Your father had been wounded in the shoulder and it would not have been long before—"

"Who are the Taggarts?" questioned Calumet, his lips setting strangely.

"They own a ranch near here—the Arrow. The motive behind their desire to kill your father makes another story which you shall hear some time if you have the patience," she said with jeering emphasis.

"I ain't particular."

The girl's lips straightened. "Grandfather helped your father drive the Taggarts away," she went on. "Your father was living here alone because several of his men had sought to betray him and he had discharged them all. Your father was wounded very badly and grandfather and I took care of him until he recovered. He liked us, wanted us to stay here, and we did."

"Pretty soft for a pair of poverty-stricken adventurers," commented Calumet.

The girl's voice was cold and distinct despite the insult.

"Your father liked me particularly well. A year ago he drew up a will giving me all his property and cutting you off without a cent. He gave me the will to keep for him."

"Fine!" was Calumet's dryly sarcastic comment.

"But I destroyed the will," went on the girl.

Calumet's expression changed to surprised wonder, then to mockery.

"You're locoed!" he declared. "Why didn't you take the property?"

"I didn't want it; it was yours."

Calumet forgot to sneer; his wonder and astonishment over the girl's ability to resist such a temptation were so great as to shock him to silence. She and her grandfather were dependants, abroad without means of support, and yet the girl had refused a legacy which she and her relative had undoubtedly earned. Such sturdy honesty surprised him, mystified him, and he was convinced that there must have been some other motive behind her refusal to become his father's

beneficiary. He watched her closely for a moment and then, thinking he had discovered the motive, he said in a voice of dry mockery:

"I reckon you didn't take it because there was nothin' to take."

"Besides the land and the buildings, he left about twenty thousand dollars in cash," she informed him quietly.

"Where is it?" demanded Calumet quickly.

Betty smiled. "That," she said dryly, "is what I want to talk to you about." Again the consciousness of advantage shone in her eyes. Calumet felt that it would be useless to question her and so he leaned back in his chair and regarded her saturninely.

"Soon after your father became afflicted with his last sickness," continued Betty; "he called me to him and took me into his confidence. He talked to me about you—about the way he had treated you. Both he and your mother had been, he said, victims of uncontrollable tempers, and were beset with elemental passions which he was certain had descended to you. In fact, because of the hatred your mother bore you—" She hesitated.

"Well, that too, belongs to the story which you will hear about Taggart when you have the patience," she continued. "But your father repented; he saw the injustice he had done you and wanted to repair it. He was certain, though, that this curse of temper was deep-seated in you and he wanted to drive it out. He felt that when you finally came home you would need reforming, and he did not want you to profit by his money until you forgave him. He had strange notions regarding your reformation; he declared he would not take your word for it, but would insist on a practical demonstration. When he had fully explained his ideas on the subject he made me swear that I would carry them out." She paused and looked at Calumet and he saw that the expression of advantage that had been in her eyes all along was no longer a subtle expression, but plain and unmistakable.

Calumet watched her intently, silently, his face a battleground for the emotions that rioted within him. The girl watched him with covert vigilance and he felt that she was enjoying him. And when finally she saw the rage die out of his eyes, saw the color come slowly back into his cheeks and his face become a hard, inscrutable mask, she knew that the coming struggle between them was to be a bitter one.

"So," he said, after a while; "I don't get the coin until I become a Sunday school scholar?"

"It is specified that you give a practical demonstration of reform in character. You must show that you forgive your father."

"You're goin' to be my guardian?"

"Your judge," corrected the girl.

"He's got all this in the will?"

"Yes, the last one he made."

"You don't reckon I could break that will?" he sneered.

"Try it," she mocked. "It has been probated in Las Vegas. The judge happens to be a friend of your father's and, I understand, sympathized with him."

"Clever, eh?" said Calumet, grinning crookedly.

"I am glad you think so," she taunted.

CHAPTER IV

CALUMET PLAYS BETTY'S GAME

The silence between Betty and Calumet continued so long that it grew oppressive. The night noises came to their ears through the closed door; a straggling moonbeam flittered through the branches of a tree in the wood near the ranchhouse, penetrated the window and threw a rapier-like shaft on Calumet's sneering face. Betty's eyes in the flickering glare of the candle light, were steady and unwavering as she vainly searched for any sign of emotion in the mask-like features of the man seated before her. She saw the mask break presently, and a cold, mirthless smile wreathe his lips.

"You make me sick," he said slowly. "If you'd had any sense you'd have told the old fool to go to hell! You're goin' to reform me? You're goin' to be my judge? You—you—you! Why you poor little sufferin' innocent, what business have you got here at all? What right have you got to be settin' there tellin' me that you're goin' to be my judge; that you're goin' to butt into my game at all? Where's the money?" he demanded, his voice hard and menacing.

"The money is hidden," she returned quietly.

"Where?"

"That is my business," she returned defiantly. "Where it is hidden no one but me knows. And I am not going to tell until the time comes. You are not going to scare me, either," she added confidently. "If you don't care to abide by your father's wishes you are at liberty to go—anywhere you please."

"Who'd get the money then?"

"You have a year in which to show that you forgive your father. If at the end of that time you have not forgiven him, or if you leave the ranch without agreeing to the provisions of the will, the entire property comes to me."

"I reckon you'd like to have me leave?" he sneered.

"That," she returned, unruffled, "is my business. But I don't mind telling you that I have no interest in the matter one way or another. You may leave if you like, but if you stay you will yield to your father's wishes if you are to receive the money and the property."

There was finality in her voice; he felt it and his face darkened with passion. A sneer replaced the mirthless grin on his lips, and when he got up and moved slowly toward Betty she sat motionless, for there was a repressed savagery in his movements that chilled her blood. He came and stood in front of her, towering over her; she saw that his hands were clenched, the fingers working. Twice she tried to look up at him, but each time her gaze stopped at his hands—they fascinated her. She tried to scream when she finally saw them come out toward her, but succeeded in emitting only a breathless gasp, for a broad, rough palm suddenly enclosed each of her cheeks and her head was forced slowly and resistlessly back until she found herself looking straight up at him.

"Why, you," he said, his voice vibrating with some strange passion, while he shook her head slowly from side to side as though he were resisting an impulse to throttle her; "why, you—you—" he repeated, his voice a sudden, tense whisper; "for two bits I'd—"

He hesitated, for she had recovered from her momentary physical and mental paralysis, roused by the awful threat in his voice and manner, and was fighting to free herself, clawing at his hands, kicking, squirming, but ineffectively, for his hands were like bands of steel. Finding resistance useless she sat rigid again, her eyes flashing impotent rage and scorn.

"Coward!" she said breathlessly.

For an instant longer he held her and then laughed and dropped his hands to his sides.

"Shucks," he said, his voice expressing disgust; "I reckon the old man knowed what he was doin' when he appointed you my guardian! A man can't fight a woman—like that!"

He walked to the chair upon which he had been sitting, turned it around so that its back was toward Betty, and straddled it, leaning his arms on its back and resting his chin on them.

"Well," he said, with a slow grin at her; "if it will do you any good to know, I've decided to stay here and let you practice on me. What's the first move?"

But his action had aroused her; she stood up and confronted him, her face flushed with shame and indignation.

"Leave this house!" she commanded, taking a step toward him and speaking rapidly and hoarsely, her voice quivering as though she had been running; "leave it instantly!" She stamped a foot to emphasize the order.

Calumet did not move. He watched her, a smile on his lips, his eyes narrowed. When she stamped her foot the smile grew to a short, amused laugh.

"Sorta riled, eh?" he jeered. "Well, go as far as you like—you're sure amusin'. But I don't reckon that I'll be leavin' here in a hurry. Didn't the old man tell you I could stay here a year? What's the use of me goin' now, just when you're goin' to start to reform me? Why," he finished, surveying her with interest; "I reckon the old man would be plumb tickled to see the way you're carryin' on—obeyin' his last wishes." He rested his head on his arms and laughed heartily.

He heard her step across the floor, and raised his head again, to look into the muzzle of the pistol he had laid on the desk. It was close to him, steady in her hands, and behind it her eyes were blazing with wrath and determination.

"Go!" she ordered sharply; "go now—this minute, or I will shoot you!"

He laughed recklessly into the muzzle of the weapon and then without visible excitement turned in his chair, reached out a swift hand, grasped the weapon by the barrel and depressed the menacing muzzle so that it pointed straight downward. Holding it thus in spite of her frantic efforts to wrench it free, he got to his feet and stood in front of her.

"Why, Betty," he jeered; "you're sure some excited." Seizing her other hand, he turned her around so that she faced him fairly, holding her with a grip so tight that she could not move.

"It's your game, ain't it?" he said mockingly. "Well, I'm playin' it with you. Somethin' seems to tell me that we're goin' to have a daisy time makin' a go of it."

He suddenly released her hands and stepped back, leaving her in possession of the pistol.

"Usin' it?" he questioned, drawling, nodding toward the weapon. Betty looked down at it, shuddered, and then with an expression of dread and horror reached out and laid it gingerly on the desk top.

The next instant Calumet stood alone, grinning widely at the door through which Betty had vanished. Listening, he heard her retreating steps, heard a distant door slam. He walked to the desk and looked at the pistol, then turned and surveyed the room with a speculative eye.

"She didn't even offer me a place to sleep," he said mockingly.

He stood for an instant longer, debating the situation. Then he crossed the floor, closed the dining-room door, fastened it securely and recrossing to the outside door stepped down from the porch and sought his pony. Ten minutes later he carried the saddle in, threw it on the floor, folded the saddle blanket and placed it on the sofa, closed the outside door, opened the window, snuffed out the candle, stretched himself out on the sofa and went to sleep.

CHAPTER V

THE FIRST LESSON

Shortly after daybreak the following morning Calumet turned over on his back, stretched lazily and opened his eyes. When a recollection of the events of the previous night forced themselves into his consciousness he scowled and sat erect, listening. From beyond the closed dining-room door came sundry sounds which told him that the Claytons were already astir. He heard the rattle of dishes, and the appetizing aroma of fried bacon filtered through the crevices in the battered door and assailed his nostrils.

He scowled again as he rose and stood looking down at his saddle. When beginning his homeward journey he had supplied himself with soda biscuit and jerked beef, but he had consumed the last of his food at noon the day before and the scent of the frying bacon aroused him to the realization that he was ravenously hungry. As he meditated upon the situation the scowl on his face changed to an appreciative grin. Now that he had decided to stay here he did not purpose to go hungry when there was food around.

Shouldering his saddle he left the office and proceeded to the stable, in which he had placed his pony the night before. He fed the animal from a pitiful supply of grain in a bin, and after slamming the door of the stable viciously, sneering at it as it resisted, he stalked to the ranchhouse.

There was a tin basin on a bench just outside the kitchen door. He poured it half full of water from a pail that sat on the porch floor, and washed his hands and face, noting, while engaged in his task, a clean towel hanging from a roller on the wall of the ranchhouse. While drying his face he heard voices from within, subdued, anxious. Completing his ablutions he stepped to the screen door, threw it open and stood on the threshold.

In the center of the kitchen stood a table covered with a white cloth on which were dishes filled with food from which arose promising odors. Beside a window in the opposite wall of the kitchen stood Malcolm Clayton. He was facing Calumet, and apparently had recovered from the encounter of the night before. But when he looked at Calumet he cringed as though in fear. Betty stood beside the table, facing Calumet also. But there was no fear in her attitude. She was erect, her hands resting on her hips, and when Calumet hesitated on the threshold she looked at him with a scornful half smile. Yielding to the satanic humor which had received its birth the night before when he had made his decision to remain at the Lazy Y, he returned Betty's smile with a derisive grin, walked to the table, pulled out a chair, and seated himself.

It was a deliberate and premeditated infringement of the proprieties, and Calumet

anticipated a storm of protest from Betty. But when he looked brazenly at her he saw her regarding him with a direct, disdainful gaze. He understood. She was surprised and indignant over the action, possibly shocked over his cool assumption, but she was not going to lose her composure.

"Well," he said, keenly enjoying the situation and determined to torment her further, "set down. I reckon we'll grub."

"Thank you," she mocked, with quick sarcasm; "I was wondering whether you would ask us. Grandpa," she added, turning to Malcolm, "won't you join us? Mr. Marston has been so polite and thoughtful that we certainly ought not to refuse his invitation."

She drew out a chair for Malcolm and stood beside it while he shuffled forward and hesitatingly slipped into it, watching Calumet furtively. Then she moved quietly and gracefully to another chair, directly opposite Calumet.

Her sarcasm had no perceptible effect on Calumet. Inwardly he was intensely satisfied. His action in seating himself at the table without invitation angered Betty, as he had intended it should.

"Some shocked, eh?" he said, helping himself to some bacon and fried potatoes, and passing them to her when he had finished with them.

"Shocked?" she returned calmly, unconcernedly supplying herself with food from the dishes she had taken from him, "Oh, my, no. You see, from what your father told me about you, I rather expected you to be a brute."

"Aw, Betty," came Malcolm's voice, raised in mild remonstrance; "you hadn't ought to—"

"If you please, grandpa," Betty interrupted him, and he subsided and glanced anxiously at Calumet, into whose face had come a dash of dark color. He swallowed a mouthful of bacon before he answered Betty.

"Then you ain't disappointed," he sneered.

She rested her hands on the table beside her plate, the knife and fork poised, and regarded him with a frank gaze.

"No, I am not disappointed. You quite meet my expectations. In fact," she went on, "I thought you would be much worse than you are. So far, if we except your attack on grandfather, you haven't exhibited any vicious traits. You are vain, though, and conceited, and like to bully people. But those are faults that can be corrected."

Calumet had to look twice at her before he could be certain that she was not mocking him.

"I reckon you're goin' to correct them?" he said, then.

She took a sip of coffee and placed the cup delicately down before she answered.

"Of course—if you are to stay here."

"How?" His lips were in an incredulous sneer.

"By showing you that you can't be conceited around me, and that you can't bully me. I suppose," she went on, leaning her elbows on the table and supporting her chin with her hands while she looked straight at him, "that when you came in here and took a seat without being invited, you imagined you were impressing some one with your importance. But you were not; you were merely acting the part of a vulgar boor. Or perhaps you had a vague idea that you were going to do as you please."

He placed his knife and fork down and looked at her. Her manner was irritating; her quiet, direct glances disconcerted him. He could not fail to see that he had signally failed in his effort to disturb her. In fact, it became very plain to him as he watched her that she was serenely conscious of her power over him, as a teacher is conscious of her authority over an unruly pupil, and that, like a teacher, she was quietly determined to be the victor.

The thought angered Calumet. There was in his mind a desire to humble her, to crush her, to break her spirit, to drag her down to his own level where he could fight her with his own weapons. He wanted to humiliate her, wanted to gloat over her, wanted above all to have her acknowledge his superiority, his authority, over her. Had he been able to do this at their first meeting he would have been satisfied; if he were able to do it now he would be pleased.

"It's none of your business what I thought," he said, leaning over the table and leering at her. "I'm goin' to run things to suit myself, an' if you an' your grandpap an' your brother don't like my style you can pull your freight, pronto. I'm goin' to boss this ranch. Do you get me?"

She seemed amused. "The Lazy Y," she said slowly, her eyes gleaming, "has need of something besides a boss. You have observed, I suppose, that it is slightly run down. Your father

purposely neglected it. Considerable money and work will be required to place it in condition where it can be bossed at all. I haven't any doubt," she added, surveying him critically, "that you will be able to supply the necessary labor. But what about the money? Are you well supplied with that?"

"Meaning to hint about the money the old man left, I reckon?"

"Of course. Understand that I have control of that, and you won't get a cent unless in my opinion you deserve it."

He glared savagely at her.

"Of course," she went on calmly, though there was triumph in her voice, "you can force us to leave the ranch. But I suspect that you won't try to do that, because if you did you would never get the money. I should go directly over to Las Vegas and petition to have your claim annulled. Then at the end of the year the money would be mine."

He stiffened with impotent rage as he took up his knife and fork again and resumed eating. He was disagreeably conscious that she held the advantage, for assuredly he had no intention of driving her from the ranch or of leaving it himself until he got his hands on the money. Besides, he thought he saw back of her unconcern over his probable course of action a secret desire for him to leave or to drive her away, and in the perversity of his heart he decided that both must stay. Something might occur to reveal the whereabouts of the money, or he could watch her, reasonably certain that one day her woman's curiosity would lead her to its hiding place. Plainly, in any event, he must bide his time. Though his decision to defer action was taken, his resentment did not abate; he could not conquer the deep rage in his heart against her because of her interference in his affairs, and when he suddenly looked up to see her watching him with a calm smile he made a grimace of hatred at her.

"I'll make you show your hand, you sufferin' fool!" he said. "If you was a man I'd make you tell me right now where that corn is, or I'd guzzle you till your tongue stuck out a yard. As it is, I reckon I've got to wait until you get damn good an' ready; got to wait until a measly, sneakin' woman—"

Her laugh interrupted him—low, disdainful, mocking.

"I think I know what you are going to say. You are going to tell me how I wormed my way into the good graces of your father and coaxed him to make me his beneficiary. It is your intention to be mean, to insult me, to try to bully me." Her eyes flashed as she leaned a little toward him. "Understand," she said; "your bluster won't have the slightest effect on me. I am not afraid of you. So swear and curse to your heart's content. As for bossing the ranch," she went on, her voice suddenly one of cold mockery, "what is there to boss? Some dilapidated buildings! Of course you may boss those, because they can't object. But you can't boss me, nor grandfather, nor Bob—because we won't let you!"

She walked away from the table and went to a door that led to another room, standing in the opening and looking back at Calumet, who still sat at the table, speechless with surprise.

"Go out and begin your bossing!" she jeered. "Very likely the buildings will begin to dance around at your bidding. With your admirable persuasive powers you ought to be able to do wonders with them in the matter of repairs. Try it, at least. But if they refuse to be repaired at your mere word, and you think something more substantial is needed, then come to me—perhaps I may help you."

She bowed mockingly and vanished into the other room, closing the door behind her, leaving Calumet glaring into his plate.

For a moment there was a painful silence, which Malcolm broke by clearing his throat, his gaze on the tablecloth.

"Sometimes I think Betty's a little fresh," he said, apologetically. "She's sorta sudden-like. She hadn't ought to—"

He looked up to see a malevolent scowl on Calumet's face, and he ducked by the narrowest of margins the heavy plate that flew from Calumet's hand. The plate struck the wall and was shattered to atoms. Malcolm crouched, in deadly fear of other missiles, but Calumet did not deign to notice him further, stalking out of the room and slamming the door behind him.

CHAPTER VI

"BOB"

Five minutes after leaving the kitchen of the ranchhouse Calumet stood beside the rotted rails of the corral fence near the stable, frowning, fully conscious that he had been worsted in the verbal battle just ended. He was filled with a disagreeable sense of impotence; he felt small, mean, cheap, and uncomfortable, and was oppressed with indecision. In short, he felt that he was not the same man who had ridden up to the Lazy Y ranchhouse at twilight the night before—in twelve hours a change had come over him. And Betty had wrought it. He knew that.

Had he only to do with Malcolm—or any man, for that matter—there would have been no doubt of his course. He would have hustled out Malcolm or any other man long before this, and there would have been an end to it. But Betty had made it quite plain to him that she did not purpose to leave, and, since he had had little experience with women, he was decidedly at a loss to discover a way to deal with her. That he could not rout her by force was certain, for he could not lay hands on a woman in violence, and he was by no means certain that he wanted her to leave, because if she did it was highly probable that he would never get his hands on the money his father had left. Of course he could search for the money, but there came to his mind now tales of treasure that had never been recovered, and he was reluctant to take any chances. On the other hand, he was facing the maddening prospect of living for a year under the eyes of a determined young woman who was to be the sole judge of his conduct. He was to become a probationer and Betty was to watch his every move.

He wondered, making a wry face at the thought, whether she intended to record his actions in a book, giving him marks of merit or demerit according as the whim struck her? In that case she had probably already placed a black mark against him, perhaps several.

He stood long beside the fence, considering the situation. It was odd to the point of unreality, but, no matter how odd, it was a situation that he must face, because he had already decided to stay and make an attempt to get the money. He certainly would not go away and leave it to Betty; he would not give her that satisfaction. Nor did he intend to be pliable clay in her hands, to become in the end a creature of her shaping. He would stay, but he would be himself, and he would make the Claytons rue the day they had interfered in his affairs.

Leaning on the top rail of the fence, his gaze roved over the sweep of valley, dull and cheerless in the early dawn, with a misty film rising up out of it to meet and mingle and evaporate in the far-flung colors of the slow-rising sun. Once his gaze concentrated on a spot in the distance. He detected movement, and watched, motionless, until he was certain. Half a mile it was to the spot—a low hill, crested with yucca, sagebrush, and octilla—and he saw the desert weeds move, observed a dark form slink out from them and stand for an instant on the skyline. Wolf or coyote, it was too far for him to be certain, but he watched it with a sneer until it slunk down into the tangle of sage, out of his sight.

He presently forgot the slinking figure; his thoughts returned to Betty. He did not like her, she irritated him. For a woman she was too assertive, too belligerent by half. Though considering her now, he was reluctantly compelled to admit that she was a forceful figure, and, reviewing the conversation he had had with her a few minutes before, the picture she had made standing in the doorway defying him, mocking him, rebuking him, he could not repress a thrill of grudging admiration.

For half an hour he stood at the corral fence. He rolled and smoked three cigarettes, his thoughts wrapped in memories of the past and revolving the problem of his future. Once Betty stood in the kitchen door for fully a minute, watching him speculatively, and twice old Malcolm passed him on the way to do some chore, eyeing him curiously. Calumet did not see either of them.

Nor did he observe that the slinking form which he had observed moving among the weeds on the distant hill in the valley had approached to within twenty yards of him, was crouching in a corner of the corral fence, watching him with blazing, blood-shot eyes, its dull gray hair bristling, its white fangs bared in a snarl.

It had been a long stalk, and the beast's jaws were slavering from exertion. It watched, crouching and panting, for a favorable moment to make the attack which it meditated.

It had seen Calumet from the hill and had dropped down to the level, keeping out of sight behind the sagebrush and the clumps of mesquite, crossing the open places on its belly, stealing upon him silently and cunningly. So cautious had been its approach that old Malcolm had not seen it when fifteen minutes before he had passed Calumet and had paused for a look at him. The beast had been in a far corner of the fence then, and had slunk close to the ground until Malcolm had passed. Nor had Malcolm seen it just a moment before when he had crossed the ranchhouse yard behind Calumet to go to the bunkhouse, where he was now. The instant Malcolm had disappeared within the bunkhouse, the beast had stolen to its present position.

The attack was swift and silent. Calumet was puffing abstractedly at a cigarette when he became aware of a rush of air as the gray shape flashed up from the ground. Calumet dodged involuntarily, throwing up an arm to fend off the shape, which catapulted past him, shoulder-high. The beast had aimed for his throat; his long fangs met the upthrust arm and sank into it, crunching it to the bone.

The force of the attack threw Calumet against the corral fence. The beast struck the ground beyond him noiselessly, its legs asprawl, its hair bristling from rage. Ten feet beyond Calumet the force of its attack carried it, and it whirled swiftly, to leap again.

But Calumet was not to be surprised the second time. Standing at the fence, his eyes ablaze with hatred and pain, he crouched. As the beast leaped Calumet's hand moved at his hip, his heavy six-shooter crashed spitefully, its roar reverberating among the buildings and startling the two gaunt horses in the corral to movement. The gray beast snarled, crumpled midway in its leap, and dropped at Calumet's feet. A dark patch on its chest just below the throat showed where the bullet had gone. But apparently the bullet had missed a vital spot, for the beast struggled to its feet, dragging itself toward Calumet, its fangs slashing impotently.

Calumet stepped back a pace, his face malignant with rage and hate, his eyes gleaming vengefully. He heard a scream from somewhere—a shrill protest in a voice which he did not recognize, but he paid no attention to it until he had deliberately emptied his six-shooter into the beast, putting the bullets where they would do the most good. When the weapon was emptied and the beast lay prone in the dust at his feet, its great jaws agape and dripping with blood-flecked foam, Calumet turned and looked up.

He saw Malcolm Clayton come out of the bunkhouse door, and noticed Betty running toward him from the ranchhouse. Betty's sleeves were rolled to the elbows, her apron fluttering the wind, and the thought struck Calumet that she must have been washing dishes when interrupted by the shooting. But it was not she who had screamed—he would have recognized her voice. Then he saw a huddled figure leaning against the corner of the stable nearest the ranchhouse; the figure of a boy of twelve or thirteen. He had a withered, mis-shapen leg—the right one; and under his right arm, partly supporting him, was a crude crutch. The boy was facing Calumet, and at the instant the latter saw him he looked up, his pale, thin face drawn and set, his eyes filled with an expression of reproach and horror.

He was not over fifteen feet distant from Calumet, and the latter watched him with a growing curiosity until Betty ran to him and folded him into her arms. Then Calumet began to reload his six-shooter, ignoring Malcolm, who had come close to him and was standing beside the corral fence, breathing heavily and trembling from excitement.

"It's Lonesome!" gasped Malcolm, his lips quivering as he looked at the beast; "Bob's Lonesome!"

Calumet flashed around at him, cursing savagely.

"What you gettin' at, you damned old gopher?" he sneered.

"It's Lonesome!" repeated Malcolm, his weather-lined face red with resentment and anger. He showed no fear of Calumet now, but came close to him and stood rigid, his hands clenched. "It's Lonesome!" he repeated shrilly; "Bob's Lonesome!" And then, seeing from the expression of Calumet's face that he did not comprehend, he added: "It's Bob's dog, Lonesome! Bob loved him so, an' now you've gone an' killed him—you—you hellhound! You—"

His quavering voice was cut short; once more his throat felt the terrible pressure of Calumet's iron fingers. For an instant he was held at arm's length, shaken savagely, and in the next he was flung with furious force against the corral fence, from whence he staggered and fell into a corner.

Calumet turned from him to confront Betty. Her eyes were ablaze, and one hand rested with unconscious affection on Bob's head as the boy stood looking down at the body of the dog, sobbing quietly. Betty was trying to keep her composure, but at her first words her voice trembled.

"So you've killed Lonesome," she said. Calumet had finished reloading his pistol, and he folded his arms over his chest, deliberately shielding the left, which Lonesome had bitten, thus hiding the red patches that showed on the shirt sleeve over the wound. He would not give Betty the satisfaction of seeing that he had been hurt.

"Lonesome," explained Betty, frigidly, "was a dog—he was Bob's dog. Bob loved him. I suppose you didn't know that—you couldn't have known. We believed him to be part wolf. Bob found him on the Lazette trail, where he had evidently been left behind, probably forgotten, by some traveler who had camped there. Bob brought him home and raised him. He has never been known to exhibit any vicious traits. You were born in the West," she went on, "and ought to be able to tell the difference between a dog and a wolf. Did you take Lonesome for a wolf?"

"I reckon," sneered Calumet, determined not to be lectured by her, "that I've got to give a reason for everything I do around here. Even to killin' a damn dog!"

"Then," she said with cold contempt, "you killed him in pure wantonness?"

It was plain to Calumet that she was badly hurt over the dog's death. Certainly, despite her cold composure, she must be filled with rage against him for killing the animal. He might now have exhibited his arm, to confound her with the evidence of his innocence of wantonness, and

very probably she would have been instantly remorseful. But he had no such intention; he was keenly alive to his opportunity to show her that he was answerable to no one for his conduct. He enjoyed her chagrin; he was moved to internal mirth over her impotent wrath; he took a savage delight in seeing her cringe from the evidence of his apparent brutality. He grinned at her.

"He's dead, ain't he?" he said. "An' I ain't makin' no excuses to you!"

She gave him a scornful glance and went over to Malcolm, who had clambered to his feet and was crouching, his face working with passion. At the instant Betty reached him he was clawing at his six-shooter, trying to drag it from the holster. But Betty's hand closed over his and he desisted.

"Not that, grandpa," she said quietly. "Shooting won't bring Lonesome back. Besides"—she turned toward Calumet and saw the cold grin on his face as his right hand dropped to his hip in silent preparation for Malcolm's menacing movement—"don't you see that he would shoot you as he shot Lonesome? He just can't help being a brute!"

She turned her back to Calumet and spoke in a low voice to her grandfather, smoothing his hair, patting his shoulders—calming him with all a woman's gentle artifices. And Calumet stood watching her, marveling at her self-control, feeling again that queer, thrilling sensation of reluctant admiration.

He had forgotten Bob. Betty had left the boy standing alone when she had gone over to Malcolm, and Bob had hobbled forward when Calumet had turned to follow the girl's movements, so that now he stood just behind Calumet. The latter became aware of the boy's presence when the latter seized his left hand from behind, and he turned with a snarl, his six-shooter half drawn, to confront the boy, whose grip on the hand had not been loosened. Calumet drew the hand fiercely away, overturning Bob so that he fell sprawling into the dust at his feet. The youngster was up again before Betty and Malcolm could reach him, hobbling toward Calumet, his thin face working from excitement, his big eyes alight over the discovery he had made.

"He didn't kill Lonesome because he is mean, Betty!" he shrilled; "I knew he didn't! Look at his arm, Betty! It's all bloody! Lonesome bit him!"

In spite of Calumet's efforts to avoid him, the boy again seized the arm, holding it out so that Betty and Malcolm could see the patches on the sleeve and the thin red streak that had crawled down over the back of his hand and was dripping from the finger tips.

Malcolm halted in his advance on Calumet and stealthily sheathed his weapon. Betty, too, had stopped, a sudden wave of color overspreading her face, the picture of embarrassment and astonishment.

"Why didn't you tell us?" she asked accusingly; "it would have saved—"

"Saved you from makin' a fool of yourself," interrupted Calumet. "You certainly did prove that I'm a mighty mean man," he added, mockingly. "I didn't tell you because it's none of your business. It's only a scratch, but I ain't lettin' no damned animal chaw me up an' get away with it." He drew the hand away from the boy and placed it behind him so that Betty could not look at it, which she had been doing until now, with wide, frightened eyes. She came forward when he placed the hand behind him, and stood close to him, determination in her manner.

"I want to see how badly you have been bitten," she said.

"Go finish washin' your dishes," he advised, with a sneer. "That's where you belong. Until you an' your bunch butted in with your palaver I was enjoyin' myself. You drive me plumb weary."

Betty faced him resolutely, though now there was contrition in her manner, in her voice. She spoke firmly.

"I am sorry for what I said to you before—about Lonesome. I thought you had killed him just to be mean, to hurt me. I will try to make amends. If you will come into the house I will dress your arm—it must be badly injured."

Calumet's lips curled, then straightened, and he looked down at her with steady hostility.

"I ain't got no truck with you at all," he said. "When I'm figgerin' on lettin' you paw over me I'll let you know." He turned shortly and walked over to the door of the stable, where he fumbled at the fastenings, presently swinging the door open and vanishing inside. Five minutes later, when he came out with the pony saddled and bridled, he found that Betty and Malcolm had gone. But Bob stood over the dead body of Lonesome, silently weeping.

For a moment, standing beside his pony, Calumet watched the boy, and as he stood a queer pallor overspread his face and his lips tightened oddly. For something in the boy's appearance, in the idea of his exhibition of grief over his dog, which Malcolm had said he loved, smote Calumet's heart. As he continued to watch, his set lips moved strangely, and his eyes glittered with a light that they had not yet known. Twice he started toward the boy, and twice he changed his mind and returned to his pony to continue his vigil. The boy was unaware of his presence.

The third time Calumet reached his side, and the big rough palm of his right hand was laid gently on the boy's head.

"I reckon I'm sorry, you damned little cuss," he said huskily as the youngster looked up into his face. "If I'd have knowed that he was your dog I'd have let him chaw my arm off before I'd have shot him."

The boy's eyes glowed with gratitude. Then they sought the body of Lonesome. When he looked up again Calumet was on his pony, riding slowly past the bunkhouse. The boy watched him until he rode far out into the valley.

CHAPTER VII

A PAGE FROM THE PAST

Darkness had fallen when Calumet returned to the Lazy Y. He had passed the day riding over the familiar ranges, returning to almost forgotten spots, reviving the life of his youth and finding the memories irksome. He was in no pleasant frame of mind when he rode in, and he disdained the use of the corral or the stable, staking his horse out in the pasture, remembering the scant supply of grain in the bin in the stable, and telling himself that "them two skates"—referring to the horses he had seen in the corral—"need it worse than Blackleg," his own pony.

After staking Blackleg out, he took the saddle and bridle from the animal and stalked toward the ranchhouse. A light burned on the kitchen table. He saw it from a distance and resisted an impulse to enter the house from the kitchen, walking, instead, around to the front, where he found the door to the office unbarred. He threw the saddle into a corner, lighted the candle that still stood on the desk where he had placed it the night before, and stood for a long time in its glare, examining the ragged gashes on his arm. Twice during the day he had washed the wounds with water secured from the river, binding the arm with a handkerchief; but he noted with a scowl that the arm was swollen and the wound inflamed. He finally rewound the bandage, tieing the ends securely. Then he stood erect beside the desk, listening and undecided.

No sound reached his ears. The Claytons, he assured himself, must have retired.

He walked over to the sofa and sat upon it, frowning. He was hungry, having been without food since morning, and he found himself wondering if he might not find food in the kitchen. Obeying an impulse, he got up from the sofa and went to the door through which Betty had entered the night before, noting that it was still barred as he had left it that morning. He carefully removed the fastenings and swung the door open, intending to go into the kitchen. He halted on the threshold, however, for beside a table in the dining room, in the feeble glare of a light that stood at her elbow, sat Betty, reading a book.

She looked up as the door opened, betraying no surprise, smiling mildly, and speaking as she might have spoken had she been addressing a friend.

"Won't you come in?"

She placed the book down, sticking a piece of paper between the leaves to mark her place, and stood up.

"I have been waiting for you. I heard you come in. I expected you for supper, and when you didn't come I saved yours. If you will come out into the kitchen I will get it for you."

Calumet did not move. Had Betty shown the slightest dismay or perturbation at sight of him he would not have hesitated an instant in walking past her to get the food which she had said was in the kitchen. But her easy unconcern, her cool assumption of proprietorship, aroused in him that obstinacy which the revelation of her power over him had brought into being. He did not purpose to allow her to lead him to anything.

"I don't reckon I'll grub," he said.

"Then of course you have been to Lazette," she returned. "You had dinner there."

"Look here," he said truculently; "does it make any difference to you where I've been or what I've done?"

"Perhaps it really doesn't make any difference," she answered calmly; "but of course I am interested. I don't want you to starve."

His face expressed disgust. "Holy smoke!" he said; "I reckon I ain't man enough to take care of myself!"

"I don't think that is the question. Can't we get at it in the proper spirit? You belong here; you have a right to be here. And I am here because your father wanted me to stay. I want you to feel that you are at home, and I don't want to be continually quarreling with you. Be mean and stubborn if you want to—I suppose you can't help that. But so long as conditions are as they are, let us try to make the best of them. Even if you don't like me, even if you resent my presence here, you can at least act more like a human being and less like a wild man. Why," she continued, with a dry laugh, "just now you spoke of being a man, and this morning after you killed Lonesome you acted like a big, over-grown boy. You had your arm hurt and refused to allow me to dress it. Did you think I wanted to poison you?"

"What I thought this morning is my business," returned Calumet gruffly. Betty's voice had been quietly conversational, but it had carried a subtle sting with its direct mockery, and Calumet felt again as he had felt the night before, like an unruly scholar being rebuked by his teacher. Last night, though, the situation had been a novel one; now the thought that she was laughing at him, taunting him, filled him with rage.

"Mebbe you'll be interested in knowin' what I think right now," he said. "It's this: you've got a bad case of swelled head. You're one of them kind of female critters which want to run things their own way. You're—"

Her laugh interrupted him. "We won't argue that again, if you please. If you remember, you had something to say on that subject last night, and I want you to know that I haven't the slightest desire to hear your opinion of me. Won't you sit down?" She invited again, motioning to a chair beside the table, opposite hers. "If you absolutely refuse to eat, I presume there is no help for it, though even if you had dinner in Lazette you must be hungry now, for a ride of twenty miles is a strict guarantee of appetite. Please sit down. There is something I want to give you, something your father left for you. He told me to have you read it as soon as you came."

She stood motionless until Calumet left the door and seated himself in the chair beside the table, and then she went out of the room; he could hear her steps on the stairs. She returned quickly and laid a bulky envelope on the table beside him.

"Here it is," she said.

As Calumet took up the envelope and tore it open she dropped into the other chair, took up her book, opened it, and settled herself to read. Calumet watched her covertly for a moment, and then gave his attention to the contents of the envelope.

There were a number of sheets of paper on which Calumet recognized his father's handwriting.

"MY SON:—Feeling that I am about to die, it is my desire to do what I can toward setting things right between us. Betty Clayton will tell you that I have repented of my treatment of you, but she cannot tell you how deep is the realization of the injury I have done you through my inhuman attitude toward you. I fear that I have ruined your character and that it may be too late to save you from those passions which, if not checked, will spoil your life.

"I know that children sometimes inherit the evil that has abided with their parents, and I am certain that you have inherited mine, because while you stayed at home I saw many evidences of it, aye, I used to delight in its manifestation. Toward the end of your stay at home I grew to hate you. But it was because of that woman. If ever there was an evil spirit in the guise of a human being, it was she. She—well, you will learn more of her later.

"I am going to try at this late day to repair the damage I did you. I have come to the conclusion that the surest way to do this is to force you to give me in death that respect and veneration which you refused me while I lived. You see that, in spite of my boasted repentance, I still have left a spark of satanic irony, and I do not expect you to believe me when I tell you that I have planned this for your own good. But it seems to me that if you can exhibit respect for the one who is directly responsible for your cursed passions you will be able to govern them on all occasions. That is my conviction, and if you do not agree with me there is no hope for you.

"Betty Clayton will tell you the conditions, and she will be your judge. I believe in Betty, and if you do not see that she is a true-blue girl you are more of a fool than I think you are."

At this point Calumet glanced sidelong at Betty, but she seemed engrossed in her book, and he resumed reading.

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"That is all I have to say on that subject. You will have to look to Betty for additions. By this time, if she has carried out my wishes, she has told you what you may expect. I have told her the

story which I am going to tell you, and I am certain that when you have finished it you will see that I am not entirely to blame. You will see, too, what havoc Tom Taggart has wrought in my life; why he has tried many times to kill me. Calumet, beware of the Taggarts! For the last five years they have been a constant menace to me; I have been forced to be on my guard against them day and night. They have hounded me, induced my men to betray me. In five years I have not slept soundly because of them. But I have foiled them. I am dying now, and that which they seek will be hidden until you fulfill the conditions which I impose on you. I know you are coming home—I can feel it—and I know that when you read what is to follow you will be eager to square my account with Tom Taggart.

"Before going any further, before you read my story, I want you to know that the cursed virago whom you saw buried in the cottonwood was not your real mother. Your mother died giving you birth, and her body lies in a quiet spot beside the Rio Pecos, at Twin Pine crossing, about ten miles north of the Texas border. God rest her."

Again Calumet glanced at Betty. She was reading, apparently unconscious of him, and without disturbing her Calumet laid down the finished page and took up another.

CHAPTER VIII

THE TOLTEC IDOL

"I was twenty-five when your mother died," this page began. "I had a little ranch in the Pecos valley near Twin Pine crossing, and I had just begun to taste prosperity. After your mother died things began to go wrong. It didn't take me long to conclude that she had been responsible for what success I had had, and that without her I couldn't hope to keep things together. I didn't try very hard; I'll admit that. I just gradually let go all holds and began to slip—began to drift back into the sort of company I'd kept before I met your mother. They were not bad fellows, you understand—just the rakehelly, reckless sort that keep hanging on to the edge of things and making a living by their wits. I'd come West without any definite idea of what I wanted to do, and I fell in with these men naturally and easily, because they were of my type.

"I had three intimates among them—a tall, clean-limbed fellow with the bluest and steadiest eyes I ever saw in a man, who called himself 'Nebraska'; a rangy Texan named Quint Taylor, who maintained that manual labor was a curse and quoted the Scriptures to prove it; and Tom Taggart. Tom and I were thick. I liked him, and he'd done things for me that seemed to prove that he thought a lot of me. He didn't like it a little bit when I married your mother—her name was Mary Lannon, and I'd got acquainted with her while riding for a few months for her father, who owned a ranch near Eagle Pass, close to the Rio Grande. She was white, boy, and so were her folks, and you can be proud of her. And if she had lived you could be proud of me—she'd have kept on making me a man.

"Taggart didn't like the idea of me getting hooked up. He didn't want to break up the old associations. He and the others hung around for a year, waiting for something to turn up, and when your mother died it wasn't long before I was back with them. I left you in care of Jane Connor—her husband, Dave, owned the Diamond Dot ranch, which adjoined mine.

"During the year the boys had been knocking around without me they'd fallen in with an Indian from Yucatan, from the tribe called the Toltecs. This Indian called himself Queza—he'd been exiled because he was too lazy to work. The boys got him drunk one night, and he blabbed everything he knew about his tribe—how rich it was; how they'd discovered a diamond mine, and that gold was so common that they used it to make household ornaments. His story got the boys excited and they pumped him dry. They found out where his tribe lived, how to get there, and all that.

"Queza told them that the diamonds wouldn't be hard to get, that there were altar idols and ornaments in a big cave which was hollowed out of the face of a rock cliff, and that there was a bridge over to it, and that the cave wasn't guarded because the tribe had a superstitious fear of the priests who had charge of the idols and things, and that the people didn't care for gold and diamonds, anyway, because they were so common.

"The boys had got all this out of Queza about a month before I sold out and joined them, and they'd rustled some money somewhere, and had everything fixed up to go to Yucatan to bring home some of that gold and diamonds. They wanted me to go along. I was in that frame of mind in which I didn't care much about what happened to me, and they didn't have to argue long. We dropped down the Rio Grande to a little place on the Gulf coast near where Brownsville is now. We bought a little boat from a fisherman—she wasn't more than thirty feet long and didn't look like she could stand much weather; but Nebraska, who'd told us that he'd done a little sailing on

the California coast when he was a lot younger than he was then, said she'd stand anything we was likely to get in the Gulf. So we stocked her with provisions and water to last a month or so, and Nebraska pointed her nose toward Yucatan.

"I didn't think then what a rank job it was that we were going to do, but it won't do me any harm in your eyes to say that after we'd got started and I began to realize what it all meant, I was ashamed. I felt like a sneak and a coward all through the deal, but I couldn't back out after I'd started, and so I went through with it.

"We run into a spell of bad weather and had to hug the coast mighty close, and it was two weeks before we pulled into Campeche Bay, on the northwest coast of Yucatan. We worked the boat about half a mile up a little creek four or five miles south of Campeche, and worked half a day hiding her, so that she'd be there when we got back. Then, taking what grub was left, we struck out for the interior. It won't be any use telling you about that journey—you couldn't imagine, and I couldn't begin to tell you, what a miserable, slow, tortuous affair it was. It gets hot in New Mexico, but we got a taste of hell in that Yucatan jungle. That country wasn't built for a white man.

"So I'm not going to try to tell you about the trip. We were tough and eager, and we stuck it out, traveling mostly by night, setting our course by the stars, about which I knew something. But we were a week going a hundred miles, and we were beginning to get into that frame of mind where we were noticing one another's faults and getting not a bit backward in talking about them, when one night at dusk we got a glimpse of the place we were looking for.

"Queza had called the place a town, and maybe that name fits it as well as another. It made me dizzy to look at it. We'd been climbing the slope of a mountain all afternoon—traveling in the daytime now, because we were getting near the end of our journey—Nebraska in the lead, the rest trailing him. We saw Nebraska stop and duck back into some brush. Then we all sneaked up to him and got our first look at the town.

"It looked to me as though the place had been made to hide in. The mountain dropped away below us, straight down about a hundred feet, a smooth rock wall. Another wall of rock joined it on the right, making a big L. There was a level that began at the two walls and extended both ways for probably half a mile, until it met the slope of the other side of the mountain. It was nothing but two shoulders, joined, on the top of the mountain.

"Just below us there was a break in the level—a wide gash about fifty feet across, so deep that we couldn't see the bottom. There was a ledge on our side about three or four feet wide, and a bridge stretched from it across the canyon. We decided that the bridge was the one Queza had told the boys about—it led to the cave where the treasure was kept. We laid there for an hour, watching. The buildings were all huddled together—a lot of flat, brown adobe houses. We could see the natives moving down among them, but none of us noticed anything unusual going on until Taggart calls our attention.

"'Did you notice?' he said.

"'Notice what?' we all answered.

"'That they're all women down there—I ain't seen a man!'

"That was a fact. There didn't seem to be a man anywhere about. We talked it over and concluded that we'd got there at a most advantageous time. We decided that the men were away, on a hunt, most probably, and after we'd watched a while longer we decided that we'd sneak down some way and go after the treasure about midnight. We figured they'd all be sleeping about that time. After dark they lit fires and sat around them.

"We watched until about eleven—until we saw that nearly all the fires had gone out—and then we sneaked down the slope of the mountain. We didn't make any noise; we were silent and slippery as ghosts as we made our way through the timber on the slope. It was slow work, though; the woods were full of tangled vines and prickly bushes, and we got clawed up considerable and had all we could do to keep from cussing out loud when a thorn or something would rip a cheek open. It was blacker than any night I've ever seen before or since; we couldn't see a foot ahead, and the sounds we heard in the woods didn't make us feel any too comfortable, for all we'd got used to living in the open. We knew, of course, that the sounds came from birds and bats and moths and such, but when a man is out on a job like that his nerves are not what they are at other times—every sound seems unusual and magnified. I didn't like so much silence from the village down below us—it seemed too quiet; and it appeared to me that the noises we heard in the woods were most too continuous to be caused by only us four. We went in single file, one man almost touching the other, to be sure we'd all stay together. I'd hear a bird go whizzing away at a distance, and it appeared to me that there was no call for it to light out with us two or three hundred feet away from it; and then there were queer noises which I couldn't just place as coming from birds. I don't know why I noticed these things, but I did, just the same, though I didn't say anything to the other boys, because they'd probably thought I was losing my nerve. And, besides, there wasn't time to talk.

"It took us more than an hour to reach the level where the village was, and it was long after

midnight when we, keeping in the shadow of the cliff, started toward the bridge over the canyon, which led to the cave where we thought we'd find the treasure.

"We'd got pretty near the bridge, Taggart and me in the lead, Nebraska and Taylor stringing along behind, when I heard a sudden scuffling and looked around. It wasn't so dark on the level as it had been in the woods, and I saw a dozen dark figures grouped around Nebraska and Taylor. The dark figures were all about us, and more were coming from the huts, all yelling like devils. And they were men, too; they'd been hiding in the huts; they'd discovered us the day before and suspected what we came for. I found that out later.

"Well, for a few minutes there was plenty of excitement. Taylor and Nebraska had got pretty well behind us, and the Toltecs had cut them off. Taggart showed yellow. I started back to help Nebraska and Taylor, who had their knives out—I could see them shining—when Taggart grabbed me.

"'Let's run for the bridge, you fool!' he said. 'It's every man for himself now!'

"While I was scuffling with Taggart, trying to get away from him and get back to the boys, a figure detached itself from the bunch around them and came flying toward us. It was a woman, I could see that in an instant. Taggart saw her coming, too; he must have known it was a woman, but he pulled out his knife, and when she came close enough to us he drove at her with it. He missed her because I shoved him away. He fell, and, while he was on the ground, the woman—or girl, because she wasn't more than eighteen or nineteen—grabbed me by the arm and jabbered to me in Spanish, of which I'd learned a little.

"'They're going to kill all of you!' she said. 'They've been watching you for two days. They left me to watch you yesterday. I don't want them to kill you—I like you! Come!'

"She pulled at me, trying to drag me toward the bridge. I didn't have any objections to her liking me as much as she pleased, for she was a beauty—I found that out afterward, of course; but though I couldn't see her face very well just them, I liked her voice and knew she must be good to look at. But I didn't like the idea of leaving the other boys, and told her so.

"'You'll all be killed, anyway,' she said, all excited. 'They might as well die now as later. They'll kill you, too, if you go back!'

"That was logic, all right, but I'd have gone back anyway if I hadn't heard Nebraska and Taylor working their guns just then. The Toltecs broke and scattered—some of them. Three or four of them couldn't after the boys began to shoot. Soon as the Toltecs broke away a little, Nebraska and Taylor made for where we stood. I saw them coming and told the girl to lead us. The three of us—the girl, Taggart, and me—got to the bridge, which was a light, flimsy, narrow affair made of two long, straight saplings lashed together with vines, with a couple of strips of bark for a bottom—and crossed it. Then we stood on the ledge in front of the mouth of the cave, watching Nebraska and Taylor. They were coming for all they were worth, shooting as they ran and keeping the bunch of Toltecs at a respectable distance, though the Toltecs were running parallel with them, trying to bring them down with arrows.

"Nebraska and Taylor made the bridge. They had got about half way over when a dozen or so of the Toltecs threw themselves at the end of the bridge which rested on the village side of the canyon, grabbed hold of it, and pulled it off the ledge on our side. I yelled to the boys and jumped for the end of the bridge. But I was too late. The bridge balanced for an instant, and then the end on which the boys were standing started to sink. Nebraska saw what was coming, off and jumped for the ledge on which we were standing. He missed it by five feet. There wasn't a sound from his lips as he shot down into the awful blackness of the canyon. I got sick and dizzy, but not so sick that I couldn't see what was happening to Taylor. Taylor didn't jump for the ledge. He turned like a cat and grabbed a rail of the bridge, trying to climb back to the level. He'd have made it, too, but the Toltecs wouldn't let him. They jabbed at him with their spears and arrows and threw knives at him. One of the knives struck him in the shoulder, and when I heard him scream I pulled my guns and began to shoot across the canyon. I hadn't thought of it before; there are times when a man's brain refuses to work like he'd like to have it. But the Toltecs didn't mind the shooting a little bit.

"Three or four of them got hit and backed away from the edge of the canyon, but there were enough others to do what they were trying to do, and they did it. I stood there, helpless, and saw them shove Taylor off the bridge with their spears. When he finally let go and went turning over and over down into the black hole, my whole insides fanned up into my throat. That sensation has never left me; I wake up nights seeing Taylor as he let go of the bridge, watching him sink, tumbling over and over into that black gash, and I get sick and dizzy just as I did that night.

"But just then I didn't have much of a chance to be sick long. While I was standing there wondering what to do I saw a Toltec priest come out of the cave. He had a spear in his hand and was sneaking up on Taggart—who stood there almost fainting from fright. There was murder in the priest's eyes; I saw it and bent my gun on him. The trigger snapped on dead cartridges, and I yanked out my knife. I'd have been too late, at that. But the girl saw the priest, and she dodged behind him and gave him a shove. He pitched out and went head first down into the canyon.

"The Toltecs on the other side were watching, and they saw the priest go. Until now they hadn't shot at us, probably afraid of hitting the girl, but when they saw her push the priest over the edge of the canyon they saw that her sympathies were with us, and they let drive at us with their arrows. We were all slightly wounded—not enough to mention—and we got back into the cave where their arrows couldn't reach us. Three or four times the Toltecs tried to swing the bridge back into position, but they couldn't make it because there was no one on our side to help them, and Taggart and me made things mighty unpleasant for them with our sixes. They finally went away and held a council of war, which seemed to leave them undecided. They evidently hadn't figured on the girl turning traitor. If she hadn't they'd have got me and Taggart in short order.

"We'd got where the treasure was, all right, but it was a mighty bad outlook for us. We were kind of anxious about the bridge, being afraid the Toltecs would get it back into place; but the girl, who called herself Ezela, showed us that getting the bridge back wasn't possible without help from our side. She said that the priest she'd dumped down into the canyon was the only one with the tribe at the time; the others had gone to a distant village. She said, too, that there was a secret passage from the cave; she'd discovered it, and no one but her and the priests knew anything about it, but that the Toltecs would send runners for the priests and we'd have to get out before they came, or they'd lay for us at the outlet.

"Well, we hustled. We felt bad about Nebraska and Taylor, and were determined not to leave without some of the treasure, and after Ezela showed us where it was I kept her busy talking while Taggart got about as much as he could carry. Ezela offered no objections; on the other hand, when Taggart came back she told me to get some of the treasure too. Taggart hadn't taken enough to miss; there were millions of dollars' worth of gold and diamonds in the room, where they'd raised a kind of an altar, and I had my choice.

"I took some of the gold, but what attracted me—not because it was pretty, but because I saw in a minute that it was valuable—was a hideous image about six inches high. I had had an idea all along that Queza had been lying about the diamonds, but when I saw the image I knew he'd told the truth. There were about a hundred diamonds on the image, stuck all around it, the image itself being gold. The diamonds ran from a carat to seven or eight carats, and there was no question about them being the real thing. I stuck the thing into a hip pocket, figuring that with the few other ornaments I had I would have plenty to carry. Then I went back to where Ezela and Taggart were waiting for me.

"Ezela led us through a long, narrow passage, down some steps to another passage, and pretty soon we were sneaking along this and I began to get a whiff of fresh air. In a little while we found ourselves on a narrow ledge in the canyon, about thirty or forty feet below the level where the bridge had been, and it was so dark down there that we couldn't see one another.

"Ezela whispered to us to follow her, and to be careful. We had to be careful, and after what had happened, crawling along that ledge wasn't the most cheerful job in the world. It would have been a ticklish thing to do in the daytime, but at night it was a thousand times worse. I kept thinking about poor Taylor and Nebraska, and there were times when I felt that I just had to yell and jump out into the black hole around us. Taggart showed it worse than me. It took us an hour to traverse that ledge. We'd strike a short turn where there wouldn't be more than six or eight inches of ledge between us and eternity, and we couldn't see a thing—I've thought since that maybe it was a good thing we couldn't. But we could feel the width of the ledge with our feet, and there were times when my legs shook under me like I had the ague. Taggart was pretty near collapse all the time. He kept mumbling to himself, making queer little throaty noises and grabbing at me. Two or three times I had to turn and talk to him, or he'd have let go all holds and jumped.

"We finally made solid ground, and it was a full hour before me or Taggart could get up after we'd sat down, we were that tuckered out. The girl didn't seem to mind it a bit; she told me she'd discovered the secret passage that way. She'd been nosing around the mountain one day and had crept along the edge, finding that it led to the treasure cave.

"There wasn't any time lost by us in getting away from that place. Ezela told us there wasn't any use hoping that Nebraska and Taylor were alive, because the canyon was over a thousand feet deep and there was a roaring river at the bottom. I don't like to think of that fall.

"Taggart objected to Ezela going with us, but I couldn't think of letting her stay to be punished by her tribe for what she'd done—they'd have burned her, sure, she said. Besides, I may as well tell the truth, I'd got to liking Ezela a good bit by this time. She was good to look at, and she'd been hanging around me, telling me that she wanted to go with us, and that she'd done what she had for my sake, because she liked me. All that sort of stuff plays on a man's vanity when it comes from a pretty girl, and it didn't take me long to decide that I was in love with her and that, aside from humane reasons, I ought to take her with me. So I took her.

"We reached the boat after a week of heart-breaking travel, and we hadn't got over two miles out in the bay when we saw that we hadn't left any too soon. A hundred or so Toltecs were on the beach, doing a war dance and waving their spears at us. We had a pretty close call of it for grub, but we made a little town on the gulf and stocked up, and then we headed for the mouth of the Rio Grande. We camped one night a week later on United States soil, and that night while I was

asleep Taggart tried to knife me. I'd showed Taggart the diamond image one day while Ezela was asleep in the boat, and he'd got greedy for it. Ezela screamed when she saw him getting close to me with the knife, and I woke in time to grab him before he got a chance to get the knife into me. He finally broke away, leaving all the treasure he'd brought except a little that he had in his pockets—he'd had a bundle of it strapped to his belt besides that—and I didn't see him again for four years.

"I took Ezela up the Pecos to the Connors', where I'd left you, bought a wagon and horses and a few things—bedding and grub and such stuff—and lit out for New Mexico. I figured that I had enough of the kind of friends I'd been keeping, and I didn't want to be ridiculed for tying up to an Indian girl—white folks don't like to see that. I came here and took up this land, figuring that I wouldn't be disturbed. I'd been here four years when Taggart came. I'd sold some of the treasure, but, for some reason which I've never been able to figure out, I kept the idol. I think I was afraid to try to sell it on account of the big diamonds in it.

"I gave Taggart the treasure he'd left behind the night he tried to knife me, but he wasn't satisfied; he wanted more, wanted me to sell the Toltec image and split with him. Of course I wouldn't do that because of the way he'd acted, and he swore to get it some day.

"He took up some land about fifteen miles down the river, and he's stayed there ever since. I've been afraid to go anywhere with the idol for fear he'd waylay me and get it. One day while I was away somewhere he came here and told Ezela about me having the idol. From that time on I led a life of hell. Ezela turned on me. She said I'd desecrated the altars of her tribe, and she kept harping to me about it until I got so I couldn't bear the sight of her.

"I discovered soon after we came here that I had been mistaken in thinking I had loved her—what I had thought was love was merely gratitude. My gratitude didn't last, of course, with her hounding me continually about the idol. Finally I discovered that she and Taggart were plotting against me. Of course, Taggart was after the image himself. He didn't care anything about her religious scruples, but he made her believe he sympathized with her, and made a fool of her. I tried to kill Taggart the day I found that out, but he got away, and after that he never traveled alone and I didn't get another chance. I ordered Ezela away, but she said she wouldn't go until she got the image. Many times I debated the idea of putting her out of the way, but there was always the knowledge in my mind that she had saved my life, and I hadn't the heart to do it.

"You know how we lived. My life was constantly in danger, and I became hardened, suspicious, brutal. You got the whole accumulation. Taggart and Ezela bribed my men to watch me. I had to discharge them. After Ezela died I thought Taggart would leave me alone. But he didn't—he wanted the image. One day he and his boy Neal came over and ambushed me. They shot me in the shoulder. I was in the house, defending myself as best I could, when Malcolm Clayton came. By this time Betty has told you the rest and you know just what you can expect from the Taggarts.

"That is the whole history of the Toltec idol. I am not proud of my part in the affair, but Tom Taggart must never have the idol. Remember that! I don't want him to have it! Neither do I want you to have it, or the money I leave, unless you can show that you forgive me. As I have said, I don't take your word for it—you must prove it.

"I know you are coming home, and I wish I could live to see you. But I know I won't. Don't be too hard on me. Your father,

"JAMES MARSTON."

CHAPTER IX

RESPONSIBILITY

For a long time after he had completed the reading of the letter, Calumet was silent, staring straight ahead of him. The information contained in the account of his father's adventures was soothing—the termagant who had presided over his boyhood destinies had not been his real mother, and his father had left him a score to settle. He already hated the Taggarts, not particularly because they were his father's enemies, but rather because Tom Taggart had been a traitor. He felt a contempt for him. He himself was mean and vicious—he knew that. But he had never betrayed a friend. It was better to have no friend than to have one and betray him. He looked around to see that Betty was still apparently absorbed in her book.

"Do you know what is in this letter?" he said.

She laid the book in her lap and nodded affirmatively.

"You opened it, I suppose?" he sneered.

"No," she returned, unmoved. "Your father read it to me."

"Kind of him, wasn't it? What do you think of it?"

"What I think isn't important. What do you think of it?"

"Nosey, eh?" he jeered. "If it won't inconvenience you any, I'll keep what I think of it to myself. But it's plain to me now that when you caught me tryin' to guzzle your granddad you thought I belonged to the Taggart bunch. You told me I'd have to try again—or somethin' like that. I reckon you thought I was after the idol?"

"Yes."

"Then the Taggarts have tried to get it since you've been here?"

"Many times."

"But you left the front door open the night I came," insinuated Calumet, his eyes glowing subtly. "That looks like you was invitin' someone to come in an' get the idol."

"We never bother much about barring the doors. Besides, I don't remember to have told you that the idol is in the house," she smiled.

He looked at her with a baffled sneer. "Foxy, ain't you?" He folded the letter and placed it into a pocket, she watching him silently. Her gaze fell on the injured arm; she saw the angry red streaks spreading from beneath the crude bandage and she got up, laying her book down and regarding him with determined eyes.

"Please come out into the kitchen with me," she said; "I am going to take care of your arm."

He looked up at her with a glance of cold mockery. "When did you get my permission to take care of it? It don't need any carin' for. An' if it did, I reckon to be able to do my own doctorin'."

She looked at him steadily and something in her gaze made him feel uncomfortable.

"Don't be silly," she said. She turned and went out into the kitchen. He could hear her working over the stove. He saw her cross the room with a tea kettle, fill it with water from a pail, return and place the kettle on the stove. He was determined that he would not allow her to dress the wound, but when ten minutes later she appeared in the kitchen door and told him she was ready, he got up and went reluctantly out.

She washed the arm, bathing the wound with a solution of water and some medicine which she poured from a bottle, and then bandaged it with some white cloth. Neither said anything until after she had delicately tied a string around the bandage to keep it in place, and then she stepped back and regarded her work with satisfaction.

"There," she said; "doesn't that feel better?"

"Some," he returned, grudgingly. He stood up and watched her while she spread a cloth partly over the table and placed some dishes and food upon it. He was hungry, and the sight of the food made him feel suddenly ravenous. He watched her covertly, noting her matter-of-fact movements. It was as though she had not the slightest idea that he would refuse to eat, and he felt certain that he could not refuse. She was making him feel uncomfortable again; that epithet, "silly," rankled in him and he did not want to hear her apply it to him again. But he would have risked it had she looked at him. She did not look at him. When she had finally arranged everything to suit her taste she turned her back and walked to the door of the dining-room.

"There is your supper," she said quietly. "I have fixed up your room for you—the room you occupied before you left home. I am going to leave the light burning in the dining-room—you might want to read your letter again. Blow the light out when you go to bed. Good night."

He grumbled an incoherent reply, turning his back to her. Her calm, unruffled acceptance of his incivility filled him with a cold resentment.

"What did you say?" she demanded of him from the door.

He turned sullenly. The light mockery in her voice stung him, shamed him—her eyes, dancing with mischief, held his.

"Good night," he said shortly.

"Good night," she said again. She laughed and vanished.

For an instant Calumet stood, scowling at the vacant doorway. Then he turned and went over to the table in the kitchen, looking down at the food and the dishes. She had compelled him to be civil. He gripped one end of the table cloth, and for an instant it seemed as though he meditated

dumping dishes and food upon the floor. Then he grinned, grimly amused, and sat in the chair before the table, taking up knife and fork.

Early as he arose the next morning, he found that Betty had been before him. He saw her standing on the rear porch when he went out to care for his horse, and she smiled and called a greeting to him, which he answered soberly.

For some reason which he could not explain he felt a little reluctance toward going into the kitchen for breakfast this morning. Yet he did go, though he waited outside until Betty came to the door and called him. He was pretending to be busy at his saddle, though he knew this was a pretext to cover his submission to her. He did not move toward the house until she vanished within it.

He was quiet during the meal, wondering at the change that had come over him, for he felt a strange resignation. He told himself that it was gratitude for her action in caring for his injured arm, and yet he watched her narrowly for any sign that would tell him that she was aware of his thoughts and was enjoying him. But he was able to determine nothing from her face, for though she smiled often there was nothing in her face at which he could take offense. She devoted much of her time and attention to Bob. And Bob talked to Calumet. There was something about the boy that attracted Calumet, and before the meal ended they were conversing companionably. But toward the conclusion of the meal, when in answer to something Bob said to him he smiled at the boy, he saw Betty looking at him with a glance of mingled astonishment and pleasure, he sobered and ceased talking. He didn't want to do anything to please Betty.

He was saddling Blackleg after breakfast, intending to go down the river a short distance, when he became aware that Betty was standing near him. Without a word she handed him a bulky envelope with his name written on it. He took it, tore open an end, and a piece of paper, enclosing several bills, slipped out. He shot a quick glance at Betty; she was looking at him unconcernedly. He counted the bills; there were ten one hundred dollar gold certificates.

"What's this for?" he demanded.

"Read the letter," she directed.

He unfolded the paper. It read:

"MY DEAR SON: The money in this envelope is to be used by you in buying material to be used to repair the ranchhouse. I have prepared an itemized list of the necessary materials, which Betty will give you. Your acceptance of the task imposed on you will indicate that you intend to fulfill my wishes. It will also mean that you seriously contemplate an attempt at reform. The fact that you receive this money shows that you are already making progress, for you would never get it if Betty thought you didn't deserve it, or were not worthy of a trial. I congratulate you.

"YOUR FATHER."

"Got it all framed up on me, eh?" said Calumet. "So you think I've made progress, an' that I'm goin' to do what you want me to do?"

"Your progress hasn't been startling," she said dryly. "But you *have* progressed. At least, you have shown some inclination to listen to reason. Here is the itemized list which your father speaks of." She passed over another paper, which Calumet scanned slowly and carefully. His gaze became fixed on the total at the bottom of the column of figures.

"It amounts to nine hundred and sixty dollars," he said, looking at her, a disgusted expression on his face. "Looks like the old fool was mighty careless with his money. Couldn't he have put down another item to cover that forty dollars?"

"I believe that margin was left purposely to take care of a possible advance in prices over those with which your father was familiar at the time he made out the list," she answered, smiling in appreciation of his perturbation.

"That's keepin' cases pretty close, ain't it?" he said. "Suppose I'd blow the whole business?"

"That would show that you could not be trusted. Your father left instructions which provide for that contingency."

"What are they?"

"I am not to tell."

"Clever, ain't it?" he said, looking at her with displeased, hostile eyes. She met his gaze with a calm half-smile which had in it that irritating quality of advantage that he had noticed before.

"I am glad you think it clever," she returned.

"It was your idea, I reckon?"

"I believe I did suggest it to your father. He was somewhat at a loss to know how to deal with you. He told me that he had some doubts about the scheme working; he said you would take it and 'blow' it in, as you said you might, but I disagreed with him. I was convinced that you would do the right thing."

"You had a lot of faith in me, didn't you?" he said, incredulously. "You believed in a man you'd never seen."

"Your father had a picture of you," she said, looking straight at him. "It was taken when you were fifteen, just before you left the ranch. It showed a boy with a cynical face and brooding, challenging eyes. But in spite of all that I thought I detected signs of promise in the face. I was certain that if you were managed right you could be reformed."

"You *were* certain," he said significantly. "What do you think now?"

"I haven't altered my opinion." Her gaze was steady and challenging. "Of course," she added, blushing faintly; "I believe I was a little surprised when you came and I saw that you had grown to be a man. You see, I had looked at your picture so often that I rather expected to see a boy when you came. I had forgotten those thirteen years. But it has been said that a man is merely a grown-up boy and there is much truth in that. Despite your gruff ways, your big voice, and your contemptible way of treating people, you are very much a boy. But I am still convinced that you are all right at heart. I think everybody is, and the good could be brought forward if someone would take enough interest in the subject."

"Then you take an interest in me?" said Calumet, grinning scornfully.

"Yes," she said frankly; "to the extent of wondering whether or not time will vindicate my judgment."

"Then you think I won't blow this coin?" he said, tapping the bills.

"I think you will spend it for the articles on the list I have given you."

He looked at her and she was certain there was indecision in the glance.

"Well," he said abruptly, turning from her; "mebbe I will an' mebbe I won't. But whatever I do with it will be done to suit myself. It won't be done to please you."

He mounted his pony and rode to the far end of the ranchhouse yard. When he turned in the saddle it was with the conviction that Betty would be standing there watching him. Somehow, he wished she would. But she was walking toward the ranchhouse, her back to him, and he made a grimace of disappointment as he urged his pony out into the valley.

CHAPTER X

NEW ACQUAINTANCES

Calumet had been in no hurry, though maintaining its steady chop-trot for most of the distance, Blackleg had set him down in Lazette in a little over two hours.

Something had happened to Calumet. He had carefully considered the phenomenon all the way over from the Lazy Y; he considered it now as he sat sideways in the saddle before the rough board front of the Red Dog Saloon. Betty had faith in him. That was the phenomenon—the unheard of miracle. No one else had ever had faith in him, and so it was a new experience and one that must be thoroughly pondered if he was to enjoy it. And that he was enjoying it was apparent. Though he faced the Red Dog Saloon he did not see it. He kept seeing Betty as she looked after she had given him the money. "I know you will do the right thing," she had said, or something very like that. It made no difference what her words had been. What she meant was that she had faith in him. And her eyes had said that she expected him to justify that faith.

But would he? He didn't know. For the first time in his life he was afflicted with indecision over the possession of money. In the old days—the Durango days—which now seemed to be far behind him, the thousand dollars in his pocket would have served to finance a brief holiday of license and drinking and reckless play with gambling devices. But now it was different—something within him had called—or was calling—a halt. He told himself that it was because he had a curiosity to follow this strange, freakish plan of Betty's to the end.

Some other emotion was calling just as strongly for him to do with the money as he had always done with money. And so indecision afflicted him. Humor likewise. He rarely felt in this

mood. Not for years had he felt like laughing. Was he the Calumet Marston who, a week before, had set out on his homeward journey filled with bitterness—looking for trouble? Had he been at the Lazy Y a day or a year? It was a day—two days—but it seemed more like the longer time. At least the time had wrought a change in him. It was ludicrous, farcical. In spite of his treatment of Betty she had faith in him! Wasn't that just like a woman? There was nothing logical in her. She had taken him on trust. The whole business was in the nature of a comedy and suddenly yielding to his feelings he straightened in the saddle and laughed uproariously.

He did not laugh long, and when he sobered down and with an effort brought his mind back to the present, he became aware of the Red Dog, saw a young cowpuncher seated on the board sidewalk in front of the building, his back resting against it, laughing in sympathy with him.

Calumet was disconcerted for a moment. His eyes narrowed truculently. But then, as the oddness of the situation struck him he laughed again. But this time as he laughed he took stock of the young cowpuncher, who was again laughing with him.

The puncher was young—very young; not more than twenty-one or two. There was a week's growth of beard on his face. A saddle reposed by his side. In spite of his laughter something about him spoke eloquently of trouble. Calumet felt a sudden interest in him. Any man who could laugh when the world was not doing well with him must be made of good stuff. But Calumet's interest was cynical and it brought a sneer to his lips as he ceased laughing and sat loosely in the saddle regarding the puncher.

"I reckon you ain't got no objections to tellin' me what you're laughin' at?" he said coldly.

"Mebbe you'd put me wise to the same thing," said the other. "I'm settin' here, puttin' in a heap of my time tryin' to figger out who got the most of the six months' wages which I had with me when I struck town yesterday—an' not makin' a hell of a lot of progress—when you mosey up here an' begin to laugh your fool head off. At nothin', so far's I can see. Well, that's what I was laughin' at. Ketch my drift?"

"Meanin' that I'm nothin', I reckon?"

"Meanin' that you was laughin' at it," said the puncher with a deprecatory smile. "I ain't lookin' for trouble—I'm it!"

Calumet's eyes twinkled. This was a very discerning young man. "Cleaned out, I reckon," he said. "You look old enough to *sabe* that playin' with a buzz saw is mild amusement compared with buckin' a gambler's game."

"Got singed yourself, I reckon," said the puncher wearily. "You know the signs. Well, you've hit it. They'd have got my saddle, too, only—only they didn't seem to want it. There's still charity in the world, after all—some guys don't want everything. So I'm considerin' the saddle a gift. It's likely, though, that they thought that if they left me the saddle I'd go right out an' rustle me another job an' earn some more coin an' come back an' hand that over, too. But they've got me wrong. Your little Dade Hallowell has swore off. He ain't never goin' to get the idea again that he's a simon-pure, dyed-in-the-wool card sharp."

"Another job? Then you're disconnected at present?"

"I'm free as the water. Ugh!" he shivered. "I couldn't even wash my face in it this mornin'. Water's a weak sister after last night." His expression changed. "I reckon you're in clover, though. Any man which can laugh to hisself as you was laughin', certainly ain't botherin' his head about much."

This quick turn of the conversation brought Calumet's thoughts back to Betty. "Looks is deceivin'," he said. "I've got a heap of burden on my mind. I've got a thousand dollars which is botherin' me considerable."

The puncher sat erect, his eyes bulging.

"You've got a thousand!" he said "Oh, Lordy! An' you're botherin' about it?"

"It ain't none of your business, of course," said Calumet. "An' I reckon I'm tellin' you about it so's you'll feel mean about losin' your own. But mebbe not. Mebbe I'm tellin' you about it because I've got somethin' else in mind. When I first seen you I was filled clear to the top with doubt. If you had my thousand what would you do with it?"

"Meanin' that if I had your thousand an' was in your place?"

"I reckon."

"That would depend," said the puncher, cautiously. "If I'd robbed a man, or held up a stage coach, or busted a bank, I'd be burnin' the breeze out of the country. But if I'd earned it honest I'd blow myself proper, beginnin' by settin' 'em up to a fool guy which had give all his coin to some card sharps yesterday."

"None of them things fill the bill," said Calumet. "This thousand was give to me by a woman.

I'm to buy things with it—horses, wagon, lumber, hardware, an' such truck."

"Shucks," said the puncher, disappointedly. Over his face settled a glum expression. "Then you ain't got no right to spend it—for anything but what she told you about. You'd be worse'n a thief to squander that money."

Calumet looked keenly at him. "I reckon you're more'n half right. You've settled a thing in my mind. If you're hangin' around here when I get through buyin' them things I'll be settin' them up to you. If I've got anything left." He abruptly broke off and urged his pony about, leaving the puncher to look after him speculatively.

Two hours later he returned, driving two horses which were hitched to a wagon of the "prairie-schooner" variety. The wagon was loaded with lumber and sundry kegs, boxes and packages. Calumet's pony trailed it.

The puncher was still where Calumet had left him—apparently he had not moved. But when he saw Calumet halt the horses in front of him and jump out of the wagon he got to his feet. He met Calumet's gaze with a sober, interested smile.

"That wagon of yours is speakin' mighty loud of work," he said. "Back in Texas I used to be counted uncommon clever with a saw an' hammer. If you can rassle them two statements around to look them in the face you can see what I'm drivin' at."

"What do you think you are worth to a man who ain't got no authority to do any hirin'?" said Calumet.

"Ain't you the boss?" said Dade, disappointedly.

"The boss is a woman. If you're wantin' to work you can come along. You'll have to take your chance. Otherwise—"

"I'll go you," said the puncher. He threw his saddle into the wagon. "You said somethin' about a drink," he added, "if you had anything left. I'm hopin'—"

Calumet hesitated.

"Just one," said Dade. "Mebbe two. Not more than three—or four. If your ranch is far—"

"Twenty miles."

"About two, then," suggested Dade. "You wouldn't feel satisfied to know that it was here an' you left it."

"Well, then, get a move on you," growled Calumet. He followed Dade into the Red Dog.

It was quiet in the barroom. Three men sat at a table near the center of the room, laughing and talking. They looked up with casual interest as Dade and Calumet entered, favored them with quick, appraising glances, and then resumed their talk and laughter. Behind the bar the proprietor waited, indolently watching.

"I'll take red-eye," said Dade; "the same that made me think I was a sure enough gambler last night. Did you ever notice," he added, turning to Calumet, who was filling his glass, "what a heap of confidence whisky will give a man? Take me, last night. Things was lookin' rosy. Them gamblers looked like plumb easy pickin'. The more whisky I drank the easier they looked, until—"

"Have another drink," invited the proprietor, for it was at one of his tables that Dade had played. His smile was bland and his manner suave and smooth. He shoved a bottle toward Dade. At the same time he looked with interest upon Calumet.

"Stranger here, I reckon?" he said. "I seen you loadin' a heap of stuff into your wagon. What's your ranch?"

"The Lazy Y."

The proprietor started and peered closer at Calumet. "That's old Marston's place, ain't it?" To Calumet's slow nod, he continued: "Betty Clayton's runnin' it now. They say old Marston was the meanest old coyote that ever—"

Calumet's gaze was level and direct, and the proprietor shrank under its cold malignance. Calumet leaned forward. "You're talkin' to the old coyote's son right now," he said. "An' you can speak right out loud in meetin' an' say that you was gassin' through your hat!"

The proprietor paled, then reddened. "I'm beggin' your pardon," he said. "I reckon—you see—there's been talk—"

"Sure," said Calumet. He smiled. It was the smile of reluctant tolerance. "Just talk," he added. "But it won't be healthy talk—hereafter."

"Have another drink," invited the proprietor, and he pulled a handkerchief from a pocket and wiped the sudden perspiration from his forehead. Then he retreated to the far end of the bar, from whence he tried to appear unconcerned.

Dade finished his drink and set the glass down. But he was visibly excited.

"Betty Clayton," he said, looking sharply at Calumet. "Has she got a granddad named Malcolm Clayton, an' a brother Bob?"

"That's her." Calumet returned Dade's sharp glance. "What's eatin' you? Know her? Know Bob? Know Malcolm?"

"Know them!" said Dade. "Why, man, they was neighbors of mine in Texas!"

Calumet's eyes narrowed. A pulse of some strong emotion was revealed in his face, but it was instantly subdued. "That's joyful news—for you. So you know her? It's likely she'll be glad to see you."

Dade was mystified by his tone. "I reckon I ain't gettin' this thing just right," he said. "You told me Betty was runnin' the ranch, an' you tell this man that you're the son of the man that owns it. I don't see—"

Calumet smiled saturninely. "Take another drink," he advised. He shoved the bottle toward Dade. "This is your fourth. Then we'll be hittin' the breeze to the Lazy Y. Betty'll be lonesome without me." He laughed raucously, filled his glass and drank its contents. Then he turned from the bar and walked toward the door. Half way to it, Dade following him, he halted, for the voice of a man who sat at a table reached him.

"Aw, Taggart," it said loudly, "you're crowdin' the ante a little, ain't you?" The speaker laughed. "They tell me that Betty Clayton ain't no man's fool. An' here you say—" The rest of it was drowned in a laugh that followed, the other two men joining the speaker.

"Stuck on me, I tell you!" said another voice, and Calumet, half turned toward the table, saw the speaker's face. It was the face of an egotist—the vain, sensuous visage of a man in whom the animal instincts predominated—the face of the rider that Calumet had seen on the hill in the valley on the day of his return—the face of the man who had shot at him. The man was good-looking in a coarse, vulgar way, and dissipated, gross, self-sufficient. Calumet's eyes narrowed with dislike as he looked at him. There was interest in his glance, too, for this was his father's enemy—his enemy. But after the first look his face became inscrutable. He turned to see Dade standing beside him. Dade was rigid, pale; his body was in a half-crouch and there was an expression of cold malignance on his face. Quickly Calumet placed both hands on the young man's shoulders and shoved him back against the bar, thrusting his own body between him and Taggart.

"Easy there," he warned in a whisper. "He's my meat."

Dade caught the mirthless smile on his lips and looked at him curiously, his attitude still belligerent.

"He's talkin' about Betty, the damned skunk!" he objected. His voice was a low, throaty whisper and it did not carry to the table where the three men sat.

"He was sure talkin' about her," said Calumet inexpressively. "An' I'll admit that any man who talks that way about a woman is what you've called him. But it's my funeral," he added, his voice suddenly cold and hard, "an' you ain't buttin' in, whatever happens. Buy yourself another drink," he suggested; "you look flustered. I'm havin' a talk with Taggart."

He left Dade standing at the bar looking at him wonderingly, and made his way slowly to the table where Taggart sat. Taggart was drinking when Calumet reached his side, and Dade stood tense, awaiting the expected clash.

But none came. Calumet's grin as he nodded to Taggart was almost friendly, and his voice was soft, even—almost gentle.

"I heard one of these man call you Taggart," he said. "I reckon you're from the Arrow?"

Taggart leaned back in his chair and insolently surveyed his questioner. What he saw in Calumet's face made his own pale a little.

"I'm Taggart," he said shortly—"Neal Taggart. What you wantin' of me?"

Calumet smiled. "Nothin' much," he said. "I thought mebbe you'd like to know me. We're neighbors, you know. I'm Marston—Calumet Marston, of the Lazy Y."

The color receded entirely from Taggart's face, leaving it with a queer pallor. He abruptly shoved back his chair and stood, his eyes alert and fearful as his right hand stole slowly toward the butt of the pistol at his hip. Calumet's right hand did not seem to move, but before Taggart could get his weapon free of its holster he saw the sombre muzzle of a forty-five frowning at him

from Calumet's hip and he quickly drew his own hand away—empty.

"Shucks," Calumet's voice came slowly into the silence that had fallen—slowly and softly and with apparently genuine deprecation. "If I'd known that you was goin' to get that excited I'd have broke the news different. I don't know what you're gettin' at, trying to drag your gun out that way. I was hopin' we'd be friends. We ought to, you know, bein' neighbors."

"Friends?" Taggart stepped back a pace and looked at Calumet incredulously, his eyes searching for signs of insincerity. He saw no such signs, for if Calumet had emotion at this minute it was too deep to be uncovered with a glance. But he knew from Taggart's perturbation that the latter knew him to be the man he had shot at that day in the valley.

Obviously, he had not then had any suspicion as to his identity—his surprise showed that he had not. And his half-fearful, puzzled looks at Calumet indicated to the latter that he was wondering whether Calumet recognized him as the man who had done the shooting.

Calumet's smile was cordial, inviting, even slightly ingratiating, and watching him closely Taggart was convinced that he was not recognized. Also he was certain that Calumet could not have learned anything of the trouble between their parents. Yet Betty knew, and if Betty hadn't told him there must be something between them—dislike or greed on Betty's part—and a smile appeared on his face as he remembered that he had heard his father say that Calumet had been vicious and unmanageable in his youth. He must be at odds with Betty.

And Betty—well, a shyster lawyer in Las Vegas had told Taggart something about a will which old Marston had made, in which Betty had been named as beneficiary of the property in case Calumet failed to agree to certain specifications, and Taggart was ready to believe that Betty would not hesitate to bring about an open clash with Calumet in order to gain control of the ranch. This thought filled Taggart with a savage exultation. He and his father had made very little progress in their past attacks on the Lazy Y, and if it were possible to set Calumet against Betty there might come an opportunity to drive a wedge which would make an opening—the opening they had long sought for. At all events he would have considered himself a fool if he failed to take advantage of this opportunity to ingratiate himself into the good nature of this man.

"Well, that's right, I reckon," he said. "There ain't no reason that I know of why we shouldn't be friends. I'm right glad to see you." He stuck out his right hand, but it appeared that Calumet did not notice it, for he laughed as he replaced the pistol in its holster.

"Same here," he said. "If you're passin' the Lazy Y any time, drop in an' visit. I'm fixin' her up a few—enough so's I can live in the old shack."

Taggart had noted with a lowering frown Calumet's omission of the proffered handshake, but the cordial good nature of the smile on the latter's face was unmistakable, and he grinned in reply.

"I'll sure do that," he said.

"I'll be right glad to have you," said Calumet. "Come tomorrow—in the afternoon—any time."

"You reckonin' on bein' the boss now?" questioned Taggart.

Some emotion flickered Calumet's eyelashes. "You've said somethin'," he returned; "nobody's runnin' me." He turned and walked to Dade, who had been watching him with wrath and astonishment.

"Drinkin'?" suggested Taggart. "Have a drink, old man," he said, with celluloid good fellowship.

Calumet turned with a grin. "Me an' my friend has got to the end of our capacity," he said. "He's workin' for me an I ain't settin' him a bad example. The next time, if you're in the humor, I'll be glad to drink all you can buy." He waved a hand behind him, with the other he was pushing Dade before him toward the door. "So-long," he said, as he and Dade went out.

Taggart laughed as he turned to his companions, who had said nothing during the conversation.

"Friends!" he said; "he's green an' due for a shock!"

Either Taggart or the proprietor had made a mistake in their estimate of Calumet. For at the instant Taggart had sneered at Calumet to his friends, the bartender, who had come in while Taggart and Calumet had been talking, leaned over to listen to the proprietor.

"In Taggart's place," said the proprietor, "I'd be mighty careful of that man. Friend, eh? Well, mebbe. But you noticed that he didn't offer to shake hands with Taggart. An' he wouldn't drink. Reached his capacity! He had four in here. Sober as a judge! Did you notice his eyes? They fair made me shiver when he looked at me when I was talkin' about his old man. I'm goin' to be damn careful about my palaver after this. Friend! Well, if I wasn't his friend I'd be damn careful not to rile him!"

Outside Dade halted, white hot with rage.

"I reckon I ain't got no job with you, you white-livered—"

The muzzle of Calumet's forty-five, magically produced, it seemed, so quickly did it show in his hand, was making an icy ring against Dade's throat, and the words, the epithet for which he had hesitated, remained unspoken. Metallic, venomous and filled with a threat of death came Calumet's voice.

"You sufferin' fool!" he said, the words writhing through his lips, his eyes blazing. "It's my game, do you hear? An' if you gas another word about it I'll tear you apart!"

"He was blackguardin' Betty," objected Dade, his face ashen, but his spirit still undaunted. "He was blackguardin' her an' you made friends with him. I'd have salivated him if I'd thought you wasn't goin' to. I'm goin' back there now an'—"

Calumet stepped back a pace and cocked his six-shooter. "I reckon I can't make you understand that it's my game," he said coldly. "Walk backwards when you go in," he directed; "I don't want to plug you in the back."

Dade started and looked intently at Calumet. "You mean that it ain't ended between you an' him?" he demanded.

"Some people would have tumbled to that long ago," jeered Calumet. "But kids—kids take longer to *sabe* a thing. I'm glad you're over it," he added. He sheathed his pistol. "I reckon we'll be goin'," he said. "Betty'll begin to believe I'm lost."

Dade followed him to the wagon, meekly enough now that he had received unmistakable proof that Taggart was Calumet's "game," and shortly afterward the wagon pulled out of Lazette and struck the trail toward the Lazy Y.

CHAPTER XI

PROGRESS

Calumet had some thoughts on the subject but they were all inchoate and unsatisfying. He got only one conclusion out of them—that for some mysterious reason he had surrendered to Betty and was going to work to repair the ranchhouse.

On the morning following his visit to Lazette he sat on a piece of heavy timber which he and Dade had lifted a few minutes before to some saw-horses preparatory to framing. Armed with a scratch awl and a square Dade was at the other end of the timber, his hat shoved back from his forehead while he ran his fingers through his hair as though pondering some weighty problem. Watching him, Calumet suffered a recurrence of that vague disquiet which had moved him the night before when he had listened to the cordial greeting which Betty had given the young man. Old friendship had been between the two and somehow it had disturbed Calumet. He did not know why. He didn't like Betty, but at the same time every smile that she had given Dade the night before had caused some strange emotion to grip him. And he liked Dade, too. He couldn't understand that, either.

He had never been friendly with any man. But something about Dade appealed to him; he felt tolerant toward him, was mildly interested in him. He thought it was because Dade was boyish and impulsive. Whatever it was, he knew of its existence. It was not a deep feeling; it was like the emotion that moves a large animal to permit a smaller one to remain near it—a grudging tolerance which may develop into sincere friendship or at a flash turn into a furious hatred. And so Dade's security depended entirely upon how he conducted himself. If he kept out of Calumet's way, all well and good. But if he interfered with him, if, for instance, he became too friendly with Betty, there would come an end to Calumet's tolerance.

And so there was a glint of speculative distrust in Calumet's eyes as he sat and watched Dade ponder. Calumet was in no good humor. He felt like baiting Dade.

"What you clawin' your head that way for?" he suddenly demanded as Dade continued to puzzle over his problem.

Dade grinned. "I'm goin' to halve these sills together. But I'm wantin' to make sure that the halves will be made reverse, so's they'll fit. An' I don't seem to be able to fix it clear in my mind."

"You was braggin' some on bein' a carpenter."

"I reckon I wasn't doin' no braggin'," denied Dade, reddening a little.

Calumet fixed a hostile eye on him. "Braggin' goes," he said shortly. "If you'd said you was a barber, now, no one would expect you to fit any sills together. But when you say you've done carpenter work that makes it different. You ought to *sabe* sills."

Dade laid his square and scratch awl down on the piece of timber and deliberately seated himself on the saw-horse beside it. He looked defiantly at Calumet. A change had come over him from the day before—the slight deference in his manner had become succeeded by something unyielding and hard.

"Let's get on an understandin'," he said. "You can't go to pickin' on me." And he looked fairly into Calumet's eyes over the length of the timber.

"I'm gassin' to suit myself," said Calumet; "if that don't size up right to you you can pull your freight."

"You're a false alarm," said Dade bluntly; "you drive me plumb weary."

Before his voice had died away Calumet's hand had flashed to his pistol butt. Why he did not draw the weapon was a mystery known only to himself. It might have been because Dade had not moved. Calumet's lips had tensed over his teeth in a savage snarl; they still held the snarl when he spoke.

"You'll swallow that," he said. "Do you *sabe* my idea?"

"Nary swallow," declared Dade. "False alarm goes. I've got you sized up right."

Calumet's six-shooter came out. His eyes, blazing with a wanton fire, met Dade's and held them. The youngster's lips whitened, but his eyes did not waver. Death twitched at Calumet's finger. There was a long silence. And then Dade spoke.

"Usin' it?" he said.

Into Calumet's blazing eyes came a slow glint of doubt, of reluctant admiration. His lashes flickered, the blaze died down, he squinted, a cold, amused smile succeeded the snarl. He laughed shortly, looked at the pistol, and then slowly jammed it back into the holster.

"You're too good to lose," he said. "I'm savin' you for another time."

"Thanks," said Dade dryly, though the ashen face of him showed how well he realized his narrow escape. "I reckon we understand each other now. I can see by the way you yanked out your gun just now and by the way you got the drop on Taggart yesterday, that you're some on the shoot. But I ain't none scared of you. An' now I'm tellin' you why I said you're a false alarm. I was talkin' to Betty last night. She's read up a bit, an' I'm parrotin' what she said about you because it's what I think, too. Your cosmos is all ego. That's what Betty said. Brought down to cases, what that means is that you've got a bad case of swelled head. So far as you're concerned there's only one person in the world. That's you. Nobody else counts. You've been thinkin' about yourself so much that you can't find time to think about anybody else. There's other people in the world as good as you—better. Betty's one of them. She's a good girl an' you an' me'll hitch all right as long as you don't go to bullyin' her. I reckon that's all."

"Meanin' that you'll let me hang around as long as I'm good," sneered Calumet in a dangerously soft voice. He was trying to work himself into a rage, but the effort was futile. Something in Dade's quiet, matter-of-fact voice had a dulling, cooling effect on him. Besides, he knew that an attack on Dade would be resented by Betty, and he felt a strange reluctance toward further antagonizing her. "You Texas folks are sure clever at workin' your jaws," he sneered, when Dade did not answer. "But I reckon that lets you out. When I'm lookin' for advice from women an' kids mebbe I'll call on you an' Betty, but if I don't you'll understand that I'm followin' my own trail. You've got away with one call because—well, because I was fool enough to let you. Mebbe another time I won't feel so foolish."

There were few words spoken between them during the following hours of the morning, though several times Dade caught Calumet watching him with a puzzled, amused smile in which there was a sort of slumbering ferocity. By the middle of the morning the front of the ranchhouse had been raised with the assistance of jacks, the old rotted sills taken out and new ones substituted. About an hour before noon, while Calumet, in woolen shirt and overalls, his face dirty, his hair tousled, and his temper none too good, was wedging the sill tight against the studding above it, he became aware of Betty standing near him. She nodded toward the sill.

"That makes an improvement already," she said.

"Ye-es?" he said, with an irritating drawl.

There was a silence; she stood, regarding his back, a faint smile on her face.

"I want to compliment you on your judgment of horses," she persisted, in an attempt to make him talk; "the ones you bought are fine."

Calumet drove a wedge home viciously. But he did not answer.

"I've been checking up your other purchases," she went on; "and I find that you followed the list I gave you faithfully."

He turned and looked up. "Look here," he said; "I got what you wanted, didn't I? There's no use of gettin' mush headed about it. I'd have blowed the money just as quick, if I'd wanted to."

"But you didn't."

"Because you didn't want me to, I reckon?" he sneered.

"No. Because you wanted to be fair."

He had not known what sort of an answer he had expected from her, but the one he got embarrassed him. He felt a reluctant pleasure over the knowledge that she had faith in him, but mingling with this was a rage against himself over his surrender. When she turned from him and walked over to Dade, speaking to him in a low voice, he could not have told which affected him most, his rage against himself or his disappointment over her abrupt leave-taking. She irritated him, but somehow he got a certain pleasure out of that irritation—which was a wholly unsatisfying and mystifying paradox. He covertly watched Dade during her talk with him and discovered that he did not like the way the young man looked at her; he was entirely too familiar even if he was a friend of the family. He saw, too, that Betty seemed to be an entirely different person when talking to Dade. For one thing she seemed natural, which she didn't seem when talking to him. Until he saw her talking with Dade he had been able to see nothing in her manner but restraint and stiff formality, but figuratively, when in Dade's presence she seemed to melt—she was gracious, smiling, cordial.

Betty's attitude toward him during the noon meal puzzled him much. Some subtle change had come over her. Several times he surprised her looking at him, and at these times he was certain there was approval in her glances, though perhaps the approval was mingled with something else—speculation, he thought.

But whatever it was, he had not seen it before. Had he known that Dade had told her about the incident of the Red Dog Saloon he would have understood, for she was wondering—as Dade had wondered—why he had pretended to make friends with Taggart, why he had asked the Arrow man to visit the Lazy Y that afternoon.

After dinner Calumet went out again to his work, apparently carefree and unconcerned, if we are to omit those thoughts in which Dade and Betty figured, Dade watched him with much curiosity, for the incident of the day before was still vivid in his mind, and if there had been. mystery in Calumet's action in inviting Taggart to the Lazy Y there had been no mystery in the words he had spoken outside the Red Dog Saloon immediately afterward: "It's my game, do you hear?"

But along toward the middle of the afternoon Dade became so interested that he forgot all about Taggart, and was only reminded of him when looking up momentarily he saw Calumet sitting on a pile of timber near the ranchhouse, leaning lazily forward, his elbows resting on his knees, his chin on his hands, gazing speculatively into the afternoon haze. Dade noted that he was looking southward, and he turned and followed his gaze to see, far out in the valley, a horseman approaching.

Dade had turned stealthily and thought his movement had been unobserved by Calumet, and he started when the latter slowly remarked:

"Well, he's comin', after all. I was thinkin' he wouldn't."

"That's him, all right, I reckon," returned Dade. He shot a glance at Calumet's face—it was expressionless.

There was a silence until Taggart reached the low hill in the valley where on the day following his coming to the Lazy Y Calumet had seen Lonesome, before the dog had begun the stalk that had ended in its death. Then Calumet turned to Dade, a derisive light in his eyes.

"Do you reckon Betty will be glad to see him?"

"I don't reckon you done just right in askin' him here after what he said in the Red Dog," returned Dade.

Calumet seemed amused. "Shucks, you're a kid yet," he said. He ignored Dade, giving his attention to Taggart, who was now near the bunkhouse.

Taggart's coming was attended with interest by Malcolm, who, hearing hoofbeats in the ranchhouse yard came to the door of the bunkhouse where he had been doing some small task; by Bob, who hobbled out of the stable door, his eyes wide; and by Betty, who, forewarned of the visit by Dade, had come out upon the porch and had been watching his approach.

Dade was interested also, betraying his interest by covertly eyeing Taggart as he drew his pony to a halt. But apparently Calumet's interest was largely negative, for he did not move from

his position, merely glancing at Taggart as the latter halted his pony, grinning mildly at him and speaking to him in a slow drawl.

"Get off your cayuse an' visit," he invited.

Taggart's smile was wide as he dismounted. He did not seem to look at the others particularly, not even deigning a glance at Dade, but his gaze fell on Betty with an insolent boldness that brought a flush to that young lady's face. There was a challenge in the look he gave her. He dismounted and bowed mockingly to her, sweeping his hat from his head with a movement so derisive that it made Dade longingly finger his pistol butt.

Calumet still sat on the pile of lumber. His smile was engaging even if, as it seemed to Dade, it was a trifle shallow. But now Calumet slowly got to his feet. He stood erect, yawned, and stretched himself. Then turning, his back to Taggart, who had come close to him, he looked at Betty, steadily, intently, with a command showing so plainly in his eyes that the girl involuntarily started.

"Betty," he said slowly; "come here."

She went toward him, scarcely knowing why, yet remotely conscious of something in his eyes that warned her that she must not refuse—a cold, sinister gleam that hinted of approaching trouble. She walked to a point near him and stood looking at him wonderingly. And now for the first time since the beginning of their acquaintance she became aware of a quiet indomitability in his character, the existence of which she had suspected all along without having actually sensed it. She saw now why men feared him. In his attitude, outwardly calm, but suggesting in some subtle way the imminence of deadly violence; in his eyes, steady and cold, but with something cruel and bitter and passionate slumbering deep in them; in the set of his head and the thrust of his chin, there was a threat—nay, more—a promise of volcanic action; of ruthless, destroying anger.

Taggart, apparently, saw nothing of these things. He looked again at Betty, his heavy face wreathed in an insolent half-smile. She saw the look and instantly flushed and stiffened. But it appeared that Calumet noticed nothing of her agitation or of Taggart's insulting glance. He stood a little to one side of Taggart, and he spoke slowly and distinctly:

"Taggart," he said; "meet my boss, Betty Clayton." He smiled grimly at the consternation in Betty's face, at the black rage in Dade's.

"I have already had the honor of meeting Mr. Taggart," said Betty coldly. "If that is what you —" She caught a glance from Calumet and subsided.

Taggart was deeply amused; he guffawed loudly.

"That's rich," he said. "Why, man, I've knowed her ever since she's been here. Me an' her's pretty well acquainted. In fact—"

"Well, now; that's odd," cut in Calumet dryly.

"What is?" questioned Taggart quickly, noting his tone.

"That I didn't remember," said Calumet.

"Remember what?" inquired Taggart.

"That I heard you gassin' about Betty to your Red Dog friends. You rattled it off pretty glibly. You ought to remember what you said. I'm wantin' you to repeat it while she's watchin' you. That's why I wanted you to come over here."

"Why—" began Taggart. Then he hesitated, an embarrassed, incredulous light in his shifting eyes. He looked from one to the other, not seeming to entirely comprehend the significance of the command, and then he saw the gleam in Betty's eyes, the derisive enjoyment in Dade's, the implacable glint in Calumet's, knowledge burst upon him in a sudden, sickening flood and his face paled. He looked at Calumet, the look of a trapped animal.

"Get goin'!" said the latter; "we're all waitin'."

Taggart cursed profanely, stepping back a pace and reaching for his pistol. But as in the Red Dog, Calumet was before him. Again his right hand moved with the barely perceptible motion, and his six-shooter was covering Taggart. The latter quickly withdrew his own hand, it was empty. And in response to an abrupt movement of Calumet's hand it went upward, the other following it instantly. Watchful, alert, Calumet stepped forward, plucked Taggart's pistol from its holster, threw it a dozen feet from him, swiftly passed a hand over Taggart's shirt and waistband and then stepped back.

"You've got a minute," he said. "Sixty seconds to decide whether you'd rather die with your boots on or get to talkin'. Take your time, for there won't be any arguin' afterward."

Taggart looked into Calumet's eyes. What he saw there seemed to decide him. "I reckon it's

your trick," he said; "I'll talk."

"Get goin'."

"I said I'd made love to her."

A half-sneer wreathed Calumet's face. "I reckon that covers the ground pretty well. You didn't say it that way, but we won't have you repeat the exact words; they ain't fit to hear. The point is, did you tell the truth?"

"No," said Taggart. He did not look at Betty and his face was scarlet.

"So you lied, eh? Lied about a woman! There's only one place for that kind of a man. Crawl an' tell her you're a snake!"

Taggart had partly recovered his composure.

"Guess again," he sneered. "You're buttin' in where—"

Calumet dropped his pistol and took a quick step. With a swish his right hand went forward to Taggart's face, one hundred and eighty pounds of vengeful, malignant muscle behind it. There was the dull, strange sound of impacting bone and flesh. Taggart's head shot backward, he crumpled oddly, his legs wabbled and doubled under him and he sank in his tracks, sprawling on his hands and knees in the sand.

For an instant he remained in this position, then he threw himself forward, groping for the pistol Calumet had dropped. Calumet's booted foot struck his wrist, and with a bellow of rage and pain he got to his feet and rushed headlong at his assailant. Calumet advanced a step to meet him. His right fist shot out again; it caught Taggart fairly in the mouth and he sank down once more. He landed as before, on his hands and knees, and for an instant he stayed in that position, his head hanging between his arms and swaying limply from side to side. Then with an inarticulate grunt he plunged forward and lay face downward in the sand.

Calumet stood watching him. He felt Betty's hand on his arm, laid there restrainingly, but he shook her viciously off, telling her to "mind her own business." Malcolm had come forward; he stood behind Betty. Dade had not moved, though a savage satisfaction had come into his eyes. Bob stood in front of the stable door, trembling from excitement. But besides Betty, none of them attempted to interfere, and there was a queer silence when Taggart finally got to his feet.

He stood for an instant, glaring around at them all, and then his gaze at last centered on Calumet. Calumet silently motioned toward Betty.

In response to the movement, Taggart's lips moved. "I'm apologizin'," he said. He turned to his horse. After he had climbed into the saddle he looked around at Calumet. He sneered through his swollen lips.

"You'll be gettin' what I owe you," he threatened.

"I'm your friend," jeered Calumet. "I've been your friend since the day you tried to bore me with a rifle bullet out there in the valley—the day I come here—after runnin' like a coyote from the daylight. I've got an idea what you was hangin' around for that day—I've got the same idea now. You're tryin' to locate that heathen idol. You're wastin' your time. You're doin' more—you're runnin' a heap of risk. For what you've just got is only a sample of what you'll get if you stray over onto my range again. That goes for the sneakin' thief you call your father, or any of your damned crowd."

He stood, slouching a little, watching Taggart until the latter rode well out into the valley. Then without a word he walked over to the sill upon which he had been working before the arrival of Taggart, seized a hammer, and began to drive wedges wherever they were necessary.

Presently he heard a voice behind him, and he turned to confront Betty.

"I heard what you said to Taggart, of course, about him trying to shoot you. I didn't know that. He deserved punishment for it. But I am sure that part of the punishment you dealt him was administered because of the way he talked about me. If that is so, I wish to thank you."

"You might as well save your breath," he said gruffly; "I didn't do it for you."

She laughed. "Then why didn't you choose another place to call him to account?"

He did not answer, driving another wedge home with an extra vicious blow.

She watched him in silence for an instant, and then, with a laugh which might have meant amusement or something akin to it, she turned and walked to the house.

CHAPTER XII

A PEACE OFFERING

If there was one trait in Betty's character that bothered Calumet more than another, it was her frankness. More than once during the days that followed Neal Taggart's visit Calumet was made to feel the absence of guile in her treatment of him. The glances she gave him were as straightforward and direct as her words, and it became plain to him that with her there were no mental reservations. Her attitude toward him had not changed; she still dealt with him as the school teacher deals with the unruly scholar—with a personal aloofness that promised an ever-widening gulf if he persisted in defying her authority. Calumet got this impression and it grew on him; it was disconcerting, irritating, and he tried hard to shake it off, to no avail.

He had considered carefully the impulse which had moved him to entice Taggart to the Lazy Y, and was convinced that it had been aroused through a desire to take some step to avenge his father. He told himself that if in the action there had been any desire to champion Betty he had not been conscious of it. It angered him to think that she should presume to imagine such a thing. And yet he had felt a throb of emotion when she had thanked him—a reluctant, savage, resentful satisfaction which later changed to amusement. If she believed he had thrashed Taggart in defense of her, let her continue to believe that. It made no difference one way or another. But he would take good care to see that she should have no occasion to thank him again. She did not interfere with the work, which went steadily on. The ranchhouse began to take on a prosperous appearance. Within a week after the beginning of the work the sills were all in, the rotted bottoms of the studding had been replaced, and the outside walls patched up. During the next week the old porches were torn down and new ones built in their places. At the end of the third week the roof had been repaired, and then there were some odds and ends that had to be looked to, so that the fourth week was nearly gone when Dade and Calumet cleared up the débris. It was Dade who, in spite of Calumet's remonstrances, went inside to announce the news to Betty, and she came out with him and looked the work over with a critical, though approving, eye. Calumet was watching her, and when she had concluded her inspection she turned to him with a smile.

"Tomorrow you can go to Lazette and get some paint," she said.

"Want it done up in style, eh?"

"Of course," she returned; "why not?"

"That's it," he growled; "why not? You don't have to do the work."

She laughed. "I should dislike to think you are lazy."

He flushed. "I reckon I ain't none lazy." He could think of nothing else to say. Her voice had a taunt in it; her attack was direct and merciless. She looked at Dade, whose face was red with some emotion, but she spoke to Calumet.

"I don't think you ought to complain about the work," she said. "You were to do it alone, but on my own responsibility I gave you Dade."

"Pitied me, I reckon," he sneered.

"Yes." Her gaze was steady. "I pity you in more ways than one."

"When did you think I needed any pity?" he demanded truculently, angered.

"Oh," she said, in pretended surprise, "you are in one of your moods again! Well, I am not going to quarrel with you." She turned abruptly and entered the house, and Calumet fell to kicking savagely into a hummock with the toe of his boot. As in every clash he had had with her yet, he emerged feeling like a reproved school boy. What made it worse was that he was beginning to feel that there was no justification for his rage against her. As in the present case, he had been the aggressor and deserved all the scorn she had heaped upon him. But the rage was with him, nevertheless, perhaps the more poignant because he felt its impotency. He looked around at Dade. That young man was trying to appear unconscious of the embarrassing predicament of his fellow workman. He endeavored to lighten the load for him.

"She certainly does talk straight to the point," he said. "But I reckon she don't mean more'n half of it."

Calumet shot a malignant look at him. "Who in hell is askin' for *your* opinion?" he demanded.

The paint, however, was secured, Calumet making the trip to Lazette for it. He returned after dark, and Bob, who was sitting in the kitchen where Betty was washing the dishes, hobbled out to greet him. Bob had been outside only a few minutes when Betty heard his voice, raised joyously. She went to a rear window, but the darkness outside was impenetrable and she could see nothing. Presently, though, she heard Bob's step on the porch, and almost instantly he appeared, holding in his arm a three-month-old puppy of doubtful breed. He radiated delight.

"Calumet brought it!" he said, in answer to Betty's quick interrogation. "He said it was to take the place of Lonesome. I reckon he ain't so bad, after all—is he Betty?"

Betty patted the puppy's head, leaning over so that Bob did not see the strange light in her eyes.

"He's nice," she said.

"Who?" said Bob, quickly—"Calumet?"

Betty rose, her face flushing. "No," she said sharply; "the puppy."

Bob looked at her twice before he said, in a slightly disappointed voice, "Uh-huh."

When Calumet came into the kitchen half an hour later, having stabled his horses and washed his face and hands from the basin he found on the porch, he found his supper set out on the table; but Betty was nowhere to be seen.

"Where's Betty?" he demanded of Bob, who was romping delightedly with the new dog, which showed its appreciation of its new friend by yelping joyously.

"I reckon she's gone to bed," returned the young man.

For a few minutes Calumet stood near the door, watching the dog and the boy. Several times he looked toward the other doors, disappointment revealed in his eyes. Was he to take Betty's departure before his arrival as an indication that she had fled from him? He had seen her when she had pressed her face to the window some time before, and it now appeared to him that she had deliberately left the room to avoid meeting him. He frowned and walked to the table, looking down at the food. She had thought of him, at any rate.

He sat at the table and took several bites of food before he spoke again.

"Betty see the pup?" he asked.

"Yep."

"Like him?"

"Yep."

He hesitated, while Bob looked at him, intent for more questions. He had liked Calumet from the first, despite the killing of Lonesome. He could not forget the gruff words of consolation that had been spoken by Calumet on that occasion—they had been sincere, at any rate—his boy's heart knew that. He worshiped Calumet since he had given him the dog. And so he wanted to talk.

"She patted him on the head," he said.

"Just what did she say?" inquired Calumet.

"She said he was nice."

"Them the exact words?"

"Yep."

There was a silence again, while Calumet chewed meditatively at his food. Bob suspended play with the puppy to watch him.

"Well," said Calumet finally, "that shows just what a woman knows about dogs—or anything. He ain't none nice, not at all, takin' dogs as dogs. He's nothin' but a fool yellow mongrel."

Bob contemplated his benefactor, sourly at first, for already he and the dog were friends, and thus Calumet's derogatory words were in the nature of a base slander. But he reasoned that all was not well between Betty and Calumet, and therefore perhaps Calumet had not meant them in exactly that spirit.

"Well," he said at last, "I like him a lot, anyway."

"What's that?" said Calumet, startled. He had forgotten about the dog. He had been wondering if Betty had gone to bed, or whether she was in the sitting room, reading, as she was accustomed to doing. A light came through the sitting room door, and Calumet had been watching it, momentarily expecting to see Betty's shadow. "What's that?" he repeated. "You like him, anyway? Why?"

"Because you gave him to me," said Bob, blushing at the admission.

Calumet looked at him, sourly at first; and then, with a crafty grin on his face as he watched the sitting room door, he raised his voice so that if Betty were in the sitting room she could not

help hearing it.

"Well," he said, "you like him because I gave him to you, eh? Shucks. I reckon that ain't the reason Betty likes him."

Apparently Bob had no answer to make to this, for he kept silent. But Calumet saw a shadow cross the sitting room floor, and presently he heard a light footstep on the stairs. He smiled and went on eating.

CHAPTER XIII

SUSPICION

"If the repairs on the ranchhouse were not finished by this time you would not be reading this," began a letter drawn from a tightly sealed envelope Betty had given Calumet after he and Dade had completed the painting. Supper had been over for some time, but the dishes had not yet been cleared away, and when Betty had handed Calumet the letter he had shoved the tablecloth back to make room for his elbows while he read. Bob had gone to bed; Malcolm and Dade were somewhere outside. Calumet had started to go with them, but had remained when Betty had told him quietly that she wanted to talk to him on a matter of importance. She sat opposite him now, unconcernedly balancing a knife on the edge of a coffee cup, while she waited for him to finish reading the letter.

"Therefore," continued the letter, "by this time your heart must have softened a little toward me. I am certain of this, for I know that, in spite of your other weaknesses, that cupidity and greed have no place in your mental make-up. I know, too, that you are no fool, and by this time you must have digested my first letter, and if you have you are not blaming me as much as you did in the beginning.

"I have talked this over with Betty, and she is of the opinion that as you have thus far obeyed my wishes you should be permitted to have a free hand henceforth, for she insists that perhaps by this time the restraint she has put on you will have resulted in you hating her, and in that case she says she will not care to remain here any longer. But as I have said, I do not think you are a fool, and nobody but a fool could hate Betty. So I have persuaded her that even if you should come to look upon her in that light she owes it to me to stay until the conditions are fulfilled.

"It is my own hope that by this time you have made friends with her. Perhaps—I am not going to offer you any advice, but Betty is a jewel, and you might do worse. You probably will if you haven't sense enough to take her—if you can get her. I have given her your picture, and she likes you in spite of the reputation I have given you. She says you have good eyes. Now, if a girl once gets in that mood there's no end of the things she won't do for a man. And the man would be an ingrate if he didn't try to live up to her specifications after he found that out. That's why I am telling you. Faith made a certain disciple walk on the water, and lack of it caused the same one to sink. Do a little thinking just here. If you do you are safe, and if you don't you are not worth saving.

"This is all about Betty. Whatever happens, I think she will be a match for you.

"Betty will give you another thousand dollars. With it you will fix up the corrals, the bunkhouse, and the stable.

"Perhaps you will want to know why I have not so much faith in you as Betty has. It is because one day a man from the Durango country stopped here for a day. He told me he knew you—that you were cold-blooded and a hard case. Then I knew you hadn't improved after leaving home. And so you must continue to do Betty's will, and mine. Do you doubt this is for your own good?

"YOUR FATHER."

When Calumet folded the letter and placed it in a pocket, he leaned his arms on the table again and regarded Betty intently.

"Do you know what is in this letter?" he said, tapping the pocket into which he had placed it.

"No."

"There is something missing from the letter, ain't there?"

"Yes," she returned; "a thousand dollars." She passed it over to him. As before, there were

ten one-hundred-dollar bills.

His eyes flashed with mocking triumph. "If you don't know what is in this letter—if you didn't read it—how do you know that I am to have this money?" he said.

She silently passed over another envelope and watched him with a smile of quiet contempt as he removed the contents and read:

"BETTY:—Give Calumet a thousand dollars when you turn over letter number three to him.

"JAMES MARSTON."

Calumet looked at the envelope; Betty's name was on the face of it. The triumph in his eyes was succeeded by embarrassment. He looked up to see Betty's amused gaze on him.

"Well?" she questioned.

"Most women would have read it," he said. He got up and went outside, leaving her to look after him, not knowing whether he had meant to compliment her or not.

He found Dade and Malcolm standing near the stable. There was a brilliant moon. At Dade's invitation they all went down to the bunkhouse. In spite of the dilapidated appearance of its exterior, the interior of the building was in comparatively good condition—due to the continual tinkering of Malcolm, who liked to spend his idle hours there—and Malcolm lighted a candle, placed it on the rough table, took a deck of cards from the shelf, and the three played "pitch" for two hours. At the end of that time Malcolm said he was going to bed. Dade signified that he intended doing likewise. He occupied half of Calumet's bed. Since the day following the clash with Dade, Calumet had insisted on this.

"Just to show you that what you said ain't botherin' me a heap," he had told Dade. "You're still yearlin' and need some one to keep an eye on you, so's some careless son of a gun won't herd-ride you."

That Dade accepted this in the spirit in which it was spoken made it possible for them to bunk together in amity. If Dade had "sized up" Calumet, the latter had made no mistake in Dade.

Dade snuffed out the candle and followed Malcolm out. The latter went immediately to the ranchhouse, but Dade lingered until Calumet stepped down from the door of the bunkhouse.

"Bed suits me," suggested Dade. "Comin'?"

"I'm smokin' a cigarette first," said Calumet. "Mebbe two," he added as an afterthought.

He watched Malcolm go in; saw the light from the lamp on the table in the kitchen flare its light out through the kitchen door as Dade entered; heard the door close. The lamp still burned after he had seen Dade's shadow vanish, and he knew that Dade had gone upstairs. Dade had left the light burning for him.

Alone, Calumet rolled the cigarette he had promised himself, lit it, and then, in the flood of moonlight, walked slowly around the bunkhouse, estimating the material and work that would be necessary to repair it. Then, puffing at his cigarette, he made a round of the corral fence. It was a long trip, and he stopped twice to roll new cigarettes before he circled it. Then he examined the stable. This finished, he stepped over to the corral fence, leaned his arms on the top rail, and, in the moonlight that came over his shoulder, reread his father's letter, making out the picturesque chirography with difficulty.

As during the first days of his return, when he had watched the army of memories pass in review, he lingered over them now, and, to his surprise, discovered that he felt some little regret over his own conduct in those days preceding his leave-taking. To be sure, he had been only a boy at that time, but he had been a man since, and the cold light of reason should have shown him that there must have been cause for his father's brutal treatment of him—if indeed it had been brutal. In fact, if he had acted in his youth as he had acted since reaching maturity, there was small reason to wonder that he had received blows. Boys needed to be reprimanded, punished, and perhaps he had deserved all he had received.

The tone of his father's letters was distinctly sorrowful. Remorse, sincere remorse, had afflicted him. His father had been wronged, misled, betrayed, and humiliated by the Taggarts, and as Calumet stood beside the corral fence he found that all his rage—the bitter, malignant hatred which had once been in his heart against his father—had vanished, that it had been succeeded by an emotion that was new to him—pity. An hour, two hours, passed before he turned and walked toward the ranchhouse. His lips were grim and white, tell-tale signs of a new resolve, as he stepped softly upon the rear porch, stealthily opened the kitchen door, and let himself in. He halted at the table on which stood the kerosene lamp, looking at the chair in which he had

been sitting some hours before talking to Betty, blinking at the chair in which she had sat, summoning into his mind the picture she had made when he had voiced his suspicions about her knowledge of the contents of the letter she had given him. "Nobody but a fool could hate Betty," the letter had read. And at the instant he had read the words he had known that he didn't hate her. But he was a fool, just the same; he was a fool for treating her as he did—as Dade had said. He had known that all along; he knew that was the reason why he had curbed his rage when it would have driven him to commit some rash action. He had been a fool, but had he let himself go he would have been a bigger one.

Betty had appraised him correctly—"sized him up," in Dade's idiomatic phraseology—and knew that his vicious impulses were surface ones that had been acquired and not inherited, as he had thought. And he was strangely pleased.

He looked once around the room, noting the spotless cleanliness of it before he blew out the light. And then he stepped across the floor and into the dining-room, tip-toeing toward the stairs, that he might awaken no one. But he halted in amazement when he reached a point near the center of the room, for he saw, under the threshold of the door that led from the dining-room to his father's office, a weak, flickering beam of light.

The door was tightly closed. He knew from the fact that no light shone through it except from the space between the bottom of it and the threshold that it was barred, for he had locked the door during the time he was repairing the house, and had satisfied himself that it could not be tightly closed unless barred. Someone was in the room, too. He heard the scuffle of a foot, the sound of a chair scraping on the floor. He stood rigid in the darkness of the dining-room, straining his ears to catch another sound.

For a long time he could hear only muffled undertones which, while they told him that there were two or more persons in the room, gave him no clue to their identity. And then, as he moved closer to the door, he caught a laugh, low, but clear and musical.

It was Betty's! He had heard it often when she had been talking to Dade; she had never laughed in that voice when talking to him!

He halted in his approach toward the door, watching the light under it, listening intently, afflicted with indecision. At first he felt only a natural curiosity over the situation, but as he continued to stand there he began to feel a growing desire to know who Betty was talking to. To be sure, Betty had a right to talk to whom she pleased, but this talk behind a barred door had an appearance of secrecy. And since he knew of no occasion for secrecy, the thing took on an element of mystery which irritated him. He smiled grimly in the darkness, and with infinite care sat down on the floor and removed his boots. Then he stole noiselessly over to the door and placed an ear against it.

Almost instantly he heard a man's voice. He did not recognize it, but the words were sufficiently clear and distinct. There was amusement in them.

"So you're stringin' him along all right, then?" said the voice. "I've got to hand it to you—you're some clever."

"I am merely following instructions." This in Betty's voice.

The man chuckled. "He's a hard case. I expected he'd have you all fired out by this time."

Betty laughed. "He is improving right along," she said. "He brought Bob another dog to replace Lonesome. I felt sorry for him that night."

"Well," said the man, "I'm glad he's learnin'. I reckon he's some impatient to find out where the idol is?"

"Rather," said Betty. "And he wanted the money right away."

The man laughed. "Well," he said, "keep stringin' him along until we get ready to lift the idol from its hidin' place. I've been thinkin' that it'd be a good idea to take the durn thing over to Las Vegas an' sell it. The money we'd get for it would be safer in the bank than the idol where it is. An' we could take it out when we get ready."

"No," said Betty firmly; "we will leave the idol where it is. No one but me knows, and I certainly will not tell."

"You're the boss," said the man. He laughed again, and then both voices became inaudible to Calumet.

A cold, deadly rage seized Calumet. Betty was deceiving him, trifling with him. Some plan that she had in mind with reference to him was working smoothly and well, so successfully that her confederate—for certainly the man in the room with her must be that—was distinctly pleased. Betty, to use the man's words, was "stringing" him. In other words, she was making a fool of him!

Those half-formed good resolutions which Calumet had made a few minutes before entering

the house had fled long ago; he snarled now as he realized what a fool he had been for making them. Betty had been leading him on. He had been under the spell of her influence; he had been allowing her to shape his character to her will; he was, or had been, in danger of becoming a puppet which she could control by merely pulling some strings. She had been working on his better nature with selfish aims.

Who was the man? Malcolm? Dade? He thought not; the voice sounded strangely like Neal Taggart's. This suspicion enraged him, and he stepped back, intending to hurl himself against the door in an effort to smash it in. But he hesitated, leered cunningly at the door, and then softly and swiftly made his way upstairs.

He went first to his own room, for he half suspected that it might be Dade who was downstairs with Betty, and if it was— Well, just now he remembered vividly how Dade had defied him, and he made a mental vow that if it were Dade who was with Betty the young man would leave the Lazy Y before dawn quite suddenly. But it was not Dade. Dade was in bed, snoring, stretched out comfortably.

Calumet slipped out of the room and went to Malcolm's. Both Bob and Malcolm were sound asleep. He hesitated for an instant, and then made his way slowly downstairs. Again he listened at the door. Betty and the man were still talking.

Calumet found his boots. He decided not to put them on until he got to the kitchen door, for he was determined to go around the outside of the house and lay in wait for Betty's confederate, and he did not want to make any sound that would scare him off. He was proceeding stealthily, directing his course through the darkness by a stream of moonlight that came in through one of the kitchen windows, and had almost reached the kitchen door when his feet struck an obstruction—something soft and yielding.

There was a sudden scurrying, a sharp, terrified yelp.

Calumet cursed. It was Bob's pup. The animal planted himself in the stream of moonlight that came in through the window, facing Calumet and emitting a series of short, high-pitched, resentful barks.

There was humor in this situation, but Calumet did not see it. He heard a cry of surprise from the direction of the dining-room, and he turned just in time to see the office door closing on a flood of light.

With savage energy and haste, he pulled on his boots, darted out of the house, ran across the rear porch, leaped down, and ran around the nearest corner of the house. As he ran he jerked his pistol from its holster.

When he got to the front of the house he bounded to the door of the office and threw it violently open, expecting to surprise Betty and her confederate. He was confronted by a dense blackness. He dodged back, fearing a trap, and then lighted a match and held it around the corner of one of the door jambs. After the match was burning well he threw it into the room and then peered after it. There came no reply to this challenge, and so he strode in boldly, lighting another match.

The room was empty.

He saw how it was. Betty and the man had heard the barking of the dog and had suspected the presence of an eavesdropper. The man had fled. Probably by this time Betty was in her room. Calumet went out upon the porch, leaped off, and ran around the house in a direction opposite that which had marked his course when coming toward the front, covering the ground with long, swift strides. He reasoned that as he had seen no one leave the house from the other side or the front, whoever had been with Betty had made his escape in this direction, and he drew a breath of satisfaction when, approaching some underbrush near the kitchen, he saw outlined in the moonlight the figure of a man on a horse.

The latter had evidently just mounted, for at the instant Calumet saw him he had just settled into the saddle, one foot searching for a stirrup. He was about seventy-five feet distant, and he turned at about the instant that Calumet saw him. That instant was enough for Calumet, for as the man turned his face was bathed for a fraction of a second in the moonlight, and Calumet recognized him. It was Neal Taggart.

Calumet halted. His six-shooter roared at the exact second that the man buried his spurs in the flanks of his horse and threw himself forward upon its neck.

The bullet must have missed him only by a narrow margin, but it did miss, for he made no sign of injury. His instant action in throwing himself forward had undoubtedly saved his life. Calumet swung the pistol over his head and brought it down to a quick level, whipping another shot after the fleeing rider. But evidently the latter had anticipated the action, for as he rode he jumped his horse from one side to another, and as the distance was already great, and growing greater, he made an elusive target.

Calumet saw his failure and stood silent, watching until Taggart was well out into the valley,

riding hard, a cloud of dust enveloping him. A yell reached Calumet from the distance—derisive, defiant, mocking. Calumet cursed then, giving voice to his rage and disappointment.

He went glumly around to the front of the house and closed the door to the office. When he stepped off the porch, afterward, intending to go around the way he had come in order to enter the house, he heard a voice above him, and turned to see Dade, his head sticking out of an upstairs window, his hair in disorder, his eyes bulging, a forty-five gleaming in his hand. Back of him, his head over Dade's shoulder, stood Malcolm, and Bob's thin face showed between the two.

At another window, one of the front ones, was Betty. Of the four who were watching him, Betty seemed the least excited; it seemed to Calumet as he looked at her that there was some amusement in her eyes.

"Lordy!" said Dade as Calumet looked up at him, "how you scairt me! Was it you shootin'? An' what in thunder was you shootin' *at*?"

"A snake," said Calumet in a voice loud enough for Betty to hear.

"A snake! Holy smoke!" growled Dade in disgust. "Wakin' people up at this time of the night because you wanted to shoot at a measly snake. Tomorrow we'll lay off for an hour or so an' I'll take you where you can shoot 'em to your heart's content. But, for the love of Pete, quit shootin' at 'em when a guy's asleep."

Calumet looked up sardonically, not at Dade, but at Betty. "Was you all asleep?" he inquired in a voice of cold mockery. Even at that distance he saw Betty redden, and he laughed shortly.

"A foxy snake," he said; "one of them kind which goes roamin' around at night. Lookin' for a mate, mebbe." He turned abruptly, with a last sneering look at Betty, and made his way around the house.

CHAPTER XIV

JEALOUSY

Dade was asleep when Calumet got into bed, and he was still asleep when Calumet awoke the next morning. Calumet descended to the kitchen. When he opened the kitchen door Bob's dog ran between his legs and received a kick that sent him, whining with pain and surprise, off the porch.

Dominating everything in Calumet's mind this morning was the bitter conviction that Betty had deceived him. There had been ground for Taggart's talk in the Red Dog—he saw that now. Taggart and Betty were leagued against him. When he had brought Taggart face to face with Betty that morning more than a month ago the Arrow man had pretended insolence toward Betty in order to allay any suspicion that Calumet might have concerning the real relations between them. It had been done cleverly, too, so cleverly that it had convinced him. When he remembered the cold, disdainful treatment that Betty had accorded Taggart that afternoon, he almost smiled—though the smile was not good to see. He had championed her—he knew now that it had been a serious championship—and by doing so he had exposed himself to ridicule; to Betty's and Taggart's secret humor.

He discovered an explanation for Betty's conduct while he fed and watered Blackleg. It was all perfectly plain to him. Neither Betty nor Taggart had expected him to return to the Lazy Y. Betty's actions on the night of his arrival proved that. She had exhibited emotion entirely out of reason. Undoubtedly she and Taggart had expected to wait the year specified in the will, certain that he would not appear to claim the money or the idol, or they might have planned to leave before he could return. But since he had surprised them by returning unexpectedly, it followed that they must reconstruct their plans; they would have to make it impossible for him to comply with his father's wishes. They could easily do that, or thought they could, by making life at the ranch unbearable for him. That, he was convinced, was the reason that Betty had adopted her cold, severe, and contemptuous attitude toward him. She expected he would find her nagging and bossing intolerable, that he would leave in a rage and allow her and Taggart to come into possession of the property. Neither she nor Taggart would dare make off with the money and the idol as long as he was at the ranch, for they would fear his vengeance.

He thought his manner had already forced Betty to give him his father's letters and admit the existence of the idol—she had been afraid to lie to him about them. And so Betty was "stringing" him along, as Taggart had suggested, until he completed the repairs on the buildings, until he had the ranch in such shape that it might be worked, and then at the end of the year Betty would tell him that his reformation had not been accomplished, and she and Taggart would take legal possession.

But if that was their plan they were mistaken in their man. Until he had worked out this solution of the situation he had determined to leave. Betty's deceit had disgusted him. But now, though there were faults in the structure of the solution he had worked out, he was certain that they intended working along those lines, and he was now equally determined to stay and see the thing out.

Of course, Taggart was trying to make a fool of Betty—that was all too evident. A man who has serious intentions—honorable intentions—toward a girl does not talk about her to his friends as Taggart had talked. Taggart did not care for her; he was merely planning to gain her confidence that he might gain possession of the money and the idol. The very fact that he was meeting Betty secretly proved that she had not given him the treasure. Perhaps she had doubts of him and was delaying. Yes, that was the explanation. Well, he would see that Taggart would never get the treasure.

He went in to breakfast and watched Betty covertly during the meal. She was trying to appear unconcerned, but it was plain to see that her unconcern was too deep to be genuine, and it moved Calumet to malevolent sarcasm.

"Nothin' is botherin' you this mornin', I reckon?" he said to her once when he caught her looking at him. "Clear conscience, eh?" he added as she flushed.

"What should bother me?" she asked, looking straight at him.

"I was thinkin' that mebbe the racket I was makin' tryin' to kill that snake might have bothered—"

To his surprise, she pressed her lips tightly together, and he could see mirth in her eyes—mocking mirth.

"You are talking in riddles," she said quietly.

So then she was going to deny it? Wrath rose in him.

"Riddles, eh?" he said. "Well, riddles—"

"That reptile was sure botherin' you a heap," cut in Dade; and Calumet shot a quick glance at him, wondering whether he, also, was a party to the plot to "string" him.

He thought he detected gratitude in Betty's eyes as she smiled at Dade, but he was not certain. He said no more on the subject—then. But shortly after the conclusion of the meal he contrived to come upon Betty outside the house. She was hanging a dish towel from a line that stretched from a corner of the porch to the stable.

Looking at her as he approached, he was conscious that there was something more than rage in his heart against her for her duplicity; there was a gnawing disappointment and regret. It was as though he was losing something he valued. But he put this emotion away from him as he faced her.

"You're damn slick," he said; "slicker than I thought you was. But I ain't lettin' you think that you're stringin' me like you thought you was." He put vicious and significant emphasis on the word, and when he saw her start he knew she divined that he had overheard the conversation between her and Taggart.

Her face flushed. "You were listening, then," she said with cold contempt.

"I ain't ashamed of it, either," he shot back. "When a man's dealin' with crooks like—" He hesitated, and then gave a venomous accent to the words—"like you an' Taggart, he can't be over-scrupulous. I was sure listenin'. I heard Taggart ask you if you was still stringin' me. If it hadn't been for that new pup which I just brought Bob I'd have done what I was goin'—"

He stopped talking and looked sharply at her, for a change had come over her. In her eyes was that expression of conscious advantage which he had noticed many times before. She seemed to be making a great effort to suppress some emotion, and was succeeding, too, for when she spoke her voice was low and well controlled.

"So you heard Taggart talking to me?" she mocked, mirth in her eyes. "And you shot at him? Is that it? Well, what of it? I do not have to account to you for my actions!"

He laughed. "Nothin' of it, I reckon. But if you're stuck on him, why don't you come out in the open, instead of sneakin' around? You made it pretty strong the day I smashed his face for talkin' about you. I reckon he had some grounds."

He was talking now to hurt her; there was a savage desire in his heart to goad her to anger.

But he did not succeed. Her face paled a little at his brutal words, at the insult they implied, and she became a little rigid, her lips stiffening. But suddenly she smiled, mockingly, with irritating unconcern.

"If I didn't know that you hate me as you do I should be inclined to think that you are jealous. Are you?"

He straightened in astonishment. Her manner was not that of the woman who is caught doing something dishonorable; it was the calm poise of sturdy honesty at bay. But while he was mystified, he was not convinced. She had hit the mark, he knew, but he laughed harshly.

"Jealous!" he said; "jealous of you? I reckon you've got a good opinion of yourself! You make me sick. I just want to put you wise a few. You don't need to try to pull off any of that sweet innocence stuff on me any more. You're deep an' slick, but I've sized you up. You made a monkey of the old man; you made him think like you're tryin' to make me think, that you're sacrificin' yourself.

"You soft-soaped him into smearin' a heap of mush into his letters to me. It's likely you wrote them yourself. An' you hoodwinked him into givin' you the money an' the idol so's you an' Taggart could divvy up after you put me out of the runnin'. Goin' to reform me! I reckon if I was an angel I'd have to have a recommendation from the Lord before you'd agree that I'd reformed. You couldn't be pried loose from that coin with a crow-bar!"

He turned from her, baffled, for it was apparent from the expression of mirth deep in her eyes that his attack had made no impression on her.

Calumet went to the stable and threw a bridle on Blackleg. While he was placing the saddle on the animal he hesitated and stood regarding it with indecision. He had intended to refuse to accept Betty's orders in the future; had decided that he would do no more work on the buildings. But he was not the Calumet of old, who did things to suit himself, in defiance to the opinions and wishes of other people. Betty had thrown a spell over him; he discovered that in spite of his discovery he felt like accommodating his movements to her desires. It was a mystery that maddened him; he seemed to be losing his grip on himself, and, though he fought against it, he found that he dreaded her disapproval, her sarcasm, and her taunts.

It seemed to him puerile, ridiculous, to think of refusing to continue with the work he had started. As long as he was going to stay at the Lazy Y he might as well keep on. Betty would surely laugh at him if he refused to go on. He fought it out and took a long time to it, but he finally pulled the saddle from Blackleg and hitched the two horses to the wagon. When he drove out of the ranchhouse yard he saw Betty watching him from one of the kitchen windows. He felt like cursing her, but did not.

"I reckon," he said as he curled the lash of the whip viciously over the shoulders of the horses, "that she's got me locoed. Well," he cogitated, "any woman's liable to stampede a man, an' I ain't the first guy that's had his doubts whether he's a coyote or a lion after he's been herd-rode by a petticoat. I'm waitin' her out. But Taggart—" The frown on his face indicated that his intentions toward the latter were perfectly clear.

CHAPTER XV

A MEETING IN THE RED DOG

Of the good resolutions that Calumet had made since the night before, when he had re-read his father's letter in the moonlight while standing beside the corral fence, none had survived. Black, vicious thoughts filled his mind as he drove toward Lazette. When the wagon reached the crest of a slope about a mile out of town, Calumet halted the horses and rolled a cigarette, a sullen look in his eyes, unrelieved by the prospect before him.

By no stretch of the imagination could Lazette be called attractive. It lay forlorn and dismal at the foot of the slope, its forty or more buildings dingy, unpainted, ugly, scattered along the one street as though waiting for the encompassing desolation to engulf them. Two serpentine lines of steel, glistening in the sunlight, came from some mysterious distance across the dead level of alkali, touched the edge of town where rose a little red wooden station and a water tank of the same color, and then bent away toward some barren hills, where they vanished.

Calumet proceeded down the slope, halting at the lumber yard, where he left his wagon and orders for the material he wanted. Across the street from the lumber yard was a building on which was a sign: "The Chance Saloon." Toward this Calumet went after leaving his wagon. He hesitated for an instant on the sidewalk, and a voice, seeming to come from nowhere in particular, whispered in his ear:

"Neal Taggart's layin' for you!"

When Calumet wheeled, his six-shooter was in his hand. At his shoulder, having evidently

followed him from across the street, stood a man. He was lean-faced, hardy-looking, with a strong, determined jaw and steady, alert eyes. He was apparently about fifty years of age. He grinned at Calumet's belligerent motion.

"Hearin' me?" he said to Calumet's cold, inquiring glance.

The latter's eyes glowed. "Layin' for me, eh? Thanks." He looked curiously at the other. "Who are you?" he said.

"I'm Dave Toban, the sheriff." He threw back one side of his vest and revealed a small silver star.

"Correct," said Calumet; "how you knowin' me?"

"Knowed your dad," said the sheriff. "You look a heap like him. Besides," he added as his eyes twinkled, "there ain't no one else in this section doin' any buildin' now."

"I'm sure much obliged for your interest," said Calumet. "An' so Taggart's lookin' for me?"

"Been in town a week," continued the sheriff. "Been makin' his brags what he's goin' to do to you. Says you wheedled him into comin' over to the Lazy Y an' then beat him up. Got Denver Ed with him."

Calumet's eyes narrowed. "I know him," he said.

"Gun-fighter, ain't he?" questioned the sheriff.

"Yep." Calumet's eyelashes flickered; he smiled with straight lips. "Drinkin'?" he invited.

"Wouldn't do," grinned the sheriff. "Publicly, I ain't takin' no side. Privately, I'm feelin' different. Knowed your dad. Taggart's bad medicine for this section. Different with you."

"How different?"

"Straight up. Anybody that lives around Betty Clayton's got to be."

Calumet looked at him with a crooked smile. "I reckon," he said, "that you don't know any more about women than I do. So-long," he added. He went into the "Chance" saloon, leaving the sheriff looking after him with a queer smile.

Ten minutes later when Calumet came out of the saloon the sheriff was nowhere in sight.

Calumet went over to where his wagon stood and, concealed behind it, took a six-shooter from under his shirt at the waistband and placed it carefully in a sling under the right side of his vest. Then he removed the cartridges from the weapon in the holster at his hip, smiling mirthlessly as he replaced it in the holster and made his way up the street.

With apparent carelessness, though keeping an alert eye about him, he went the rounds of the saloons. Before he had visited half of them there was an air of suppressed excitement in the manner of Lazette's citizens, and knowledge of his errand went before him. In the saloons that he entered men made way for him, looking at him with interest as he peered with impersonal intentness at them, or, standing in doorways, they watched him in silence as he departed, and then fell to talking in whispers. He knew what was happening—Lazette had heard what Taggart had been saying about him, and was keeping aloof, giving him a clear field.

Presently he entered the Red Dog.

There were a dozen men here, drinking, playing cards, gambling. The talk died away as he entered; men sat silently at the tables, seeming to look at their cards, but in reality watching him covertly. Other men got up from their chairs and walked, with apparent unconcern, away from the center of the room, so that when Calumet carelessly tossed a coin on the bar in payment for a drink which he ordered, only three men remained at the bar with him.

He had taken quick note of these men. They were Neal Taggart; a tall, lanky, unprepossessing man with a truculent eye rimmed by lashless lids, and with a drooping mustache which almost concealed the cruel curve of his lips, whom he knew as Denver Ed—having met him several times in the Durango country; and a medium-sized stranger whom he knew as Garvey. The latter was dark-complexioned, with a hook nose and a loose-lipped mouth.

Calumet did not appear to notice them. He poured his glass full and lifted it, preparatory to drinking. Before it reached his lips he became aware of a movement among the three men—Garvey had left them and was standing beside him.

"Have that on me," said Garvey, silkily, to Calumet.

Calumet surveyed him with a glance of mild interest. He set his glass down, and the other silently motioned to the bartender for another.

"Stranger here, I reckon?" said Garvey as he poured his whiskey. "Where's your ranch?"

"The Lazy Y," said Calumet.

The other filled his glass. "Here's how," he said, and tilted it toward his lips. Calumet did likewise. If he felt the man's hand on the butt of the six-shooter at his hip, he gave no indication of it. Nor did he seem to exhibit any surprise or concern when, after drinking and setting the glass down, he looked around to see that Garvey had drawn the weapon out and was examining it with apparently casual interest.

This action on the part of Garvey was unethical and dangerous, and there were men among the dozen in the room who looked sneeringly at Calumet, or to one another whispered the significant words, "greenhorn" and "tenderfoot." Others, to whom the proprietor had spoken concerning Calumet, looked at him in surprise. Still others merely stared at Garvey and Calumet, unable to account for the latter's mild submission to this unallowed liberty. The proprietor alone, remembering a certain gleam in Calumet's eyes on a former occasion, looked at him now and saw deep in his eyes a slumbering counterpart to it, and discreetly retired to the far end of the bar, where there was a whiskey barrel in front of him.

But Calumet seemed unconcerned.

"Some gun," remarked Garvey. It was strange, though, that he was not looking at the weapon at all, or he might have seen the empty chambers. He was looking at Calumet, and it was apparent that his interest in the weapon was negative.

"Yes, some," agreed Calumet. He swung around and faced the man, leaning his left arm carelessly on the bar.

At that instant Denver Ed sauntered over and joined them. He looked once at Calumet, and then his gaze went to Garvey as he spoke.

"Friend of yourn?" he questioned. There was marked deference in the manner of Garvey. He politely backed away, shifting his position so that Denver Ed faced Calumet at a distance of several feet, with no obstruction between them.

Calumet's eyes met Denver's, and he answered the latter's question, Garvey having apparently withdrawn from the conversation.

"Friend of *his*?" sneered Calumet, grinning shallowly. "I reckon not; I'm pickin' my company."

Denver Ed did not answer at once. He moved a little toward Calumet and shoved his right hip forward, so that the butt of his six-shooter was invitingly near. Then, with his hands folded peacefully over his chest, he spoke:

"You do," he said, "you mangy ———!"

There was a stir among the onlookers as the vile epithet was applied. Calumet's right hand went swiftly forward and his fingers closed around the butt of the weapon at Denver Ed's hip. The gun came out with a jerk and lay in Calumet's hand. Calumet began to pull the trigger. The dull, metallic impact of the hammer against empty chambers was the only result.

Denver Ed grinned malignantly as his right hand stole into his vest. There was a flash of metal as he drew the concealed gun, but before its muzzle could be trained on Calumet the latter pressed the empty weapon in his own hand against the one that Denver Ed was attempting to draw, blocking its egress; while in Calumet's left hand the six-shooter which he had concealed under his own vest roared spitefully within a foot of Denver Ed's chest.

Many in the room saw the expression of surprise in Denver Ed's eye as he pitched forward in a heap at Calumet's feet. There were others who saw Garvey raise the six-shooter which he had drawn from Calumet's holster. All heard the hammer click impotently on the empty chambers; saw Calumet's own weapon flash around and cover Garvey; saw the flame-spurt and watched Garvey crumple and sink.

There was a dead silence. Taggart had not moved. Calumet's gaze went from the two fallen men and rested on his father's enemy.

"Didn't work," he jeered. "They missed connections, didn't they? You'll get yours if you ain't out of town by sundown. Layin' for me for a week, eh? You sufferin' sneak, thinkin' I was born yesterday!" He ignored Taggart and looked coolly around at his audience, not a man of which had moved. He saw the sheriff standing near the door, and it was to him that he spoke.

"Frame-up," he said in short, sharp accents. "Back Durango way Denver an' the little guy pulled it off regular. Little man gets your gun. Denver gets you riled. Sticks his hip out so's you'll grab his gun. You do. Gun's empty. But you don't know it, an' you try to perforate Denver. Then he pulls another gun an' salivates you. Self-defense." He looked around with a cold grin. "Planted an empty on him myself," he said. "The little guy fell for it. So did Denver. I reckon that's all. You wantin' me for this?" he inquired of the sheriff. "You'll find me at the Lazy Y. Taggart—" He

hesitated and looked around. Taggart was nowhere to be seen. "Sloped," added Calumet, with a laugh.

"I don't reckon I'll want you," said Toban. "Clear case of self-defense. I reckon most everybody saw the play. Some raw."

Several men had moved; one of them was peering at the faces of Denver and Garvey. He now looked up at the sheriff.

"Nothing botherin' them any more," he said.

Calumet stepped over to Denver's confederate and took up the pistol from the floor near him, replacing it in his holster. By this time the crowd in the saloon was standing near the two gunmen, commenting gravely or humorously, according to its whim.

"Surprise party for him," suggested one, pointing to Denver.

"Didn't tickle him a heap, though," said another. "Seemed plumb shocked an' disappointed, if you noticed his face."

"Slick," said another, pointing to Calumet, who had turned his back and was walking toward the door; "cool as ice water."

Sudden death had no terrors for these men; there was no inclination in their minds to blame Calumet, and so they watched with admiration for his poise as he stepped out through the door.

"Taggart'll be gettin' his," said a man.

"Not tonight," laughed another. "I seen him hittin' the breeze out. An' sundown's quite a considerable distance away yet, too."

CHAPTER XVI

THE AMBUSH

If Calumet had any regret over the outcome of his adventure in the Red Dog, it was that Neal Taggart had given him no opportunity to square the account between them. Calumet had lingered in town until dusk, for he had given his word and would not break it, and then, it being certain that his enemy had decided not to accept the challenge, he hitched his horses and just after dusk pulled out for the Lazy Y. Something had been added to the debt of hatred which he owed the Taggarts.

As he drove through the darkening land he yielded to a deep satisfaction. He had struck one blow, a sudden and decisive one, and, though it had not landed on either of the Taggarts, it had at least shown them what they might expect. He intended to deliver other blows, and he was rather glad now that he had not been so weak as to allow Betty's dictatorial attitude to drive him from the ranch, for in that case he would never have discovered the plot to cheat him of his heritage—would not have been in a position to bring discomfiture and confusion upon them all. That was what he was determined to do. There was no plan in his mind; he was merely going to keep his eyes open, and when opportunity came he was going to take advantage of it.

The darkness deepened as he drove. When he reached the crest of the slope from which that morning he had looked down upon Lazette, the wagon entered a stretch of broken country through which the horses made slow progress. After traversing this section he encountered a flat, dull plain of sand, hard and smooth, which the horses appreciated, for they traveled rapidly, straining willingly in the harness.

It was about nine o'clock when the moon rose, a pale yellow disk above the hills that rimmed the valley of the Lazy Y, and Calumet welcomed it with a smile, lighting a cigarette and leaning back comfortably in the seat, with the reins held between his knees.

He presently thought of his weapons, drawing them out and reloading them. They recalled the incident of the Red Dog, and for a long time his thoughts dwelt on it, straight, grim lines in his face.

He wondered what Betty would say when she heard of it. Would it affect her future relations with Taggart? His thoughts were still of Betty when the wagon careened out of the level and began to crawl up a slope that led through some hills. The trail grew hazardous, and the horses were forced to proceed slowly. It was near midnight when the wagon dipped into a little gully about a mile and a half from the ranchhouse. Calumet halted the horses at the bottom of the gully, allowing them to drink from the shallow stream that trickled on its way to meet the river

which passed through the wood near the ranchhouse.

After the animals had drunk their fill he urged them on again, for he was weary of the ride and anxious to have it over with. It was a long pull, however, and the horses made hard work of it, so that when they reached the crest of the rise they halted of their own accord and stood with their legs braced, breathing heavily.

Calumet waited patiently. He was anxious to get to the Lazy Y, but his sympathy was with the horses. He rolled and lighted another cigarette, holding the match concealed in the palm of his hand so that the breeze might not extinguish it.

Sitting thus, a premonition of danger oppressed him with such force and suddenness that it caused him to throw himself quickly backward. At the exact instant that his back struck the lumber piled behind him he heard the sharp, vicious crack of a rifle, and a bullet thudded dully into one of the wooden stanchions of the wagon frame at the edge of the seat. Another report followed it quickly, and Calumet flung himself headlong toward the rear of the wagon, where he lay for a brief instant, alert, rigid, too full of rage for utterance.

But he was not too angry to think. The shots, he knew, had come from the left of the wagon. They had been too close for comfort, and whoever had shot at him was a good enough marksman, although, he thought, with a bitter grin, a trifle too slow of movement to do any damage to him.

His present position was precarious and he did not stay long in it. Close to the side of the wagon—the side opposite that from which the shots had come—was a shallow gully, deep enough to conceal himself in and fringed at the rear by several big boulders. It was an ideal position and Calumet did not hesitate to take advantage of it. Dropping from the rear of the wagon, he made a leap for the gully, landing in its bottom upon all fours. He heard a crash, and a bullet flattened itself against one of the rocks above his head.

"He ain't so slow, after all," he admitted grudgingly, referring to the concealed marksman.

He kneeled in the gully and looked cautiously over its edge. The wagon was directly in front of him; part of one of the rear wheels was in his line of vision. The horses were standing quietly, undisturbed by the shots. He resolved to keep them where they were, and, exercising the greatest care, he found a good-sized rock and stuck it under the front of the rear wheel nearest him, thus blocking the wagon against them should they become restless.

The moon was at his back, and he grinned with satisfaction as he noted that the rocks behind him threw a deep shadow into the gully. He could not help thinking that his enemy, whoever he was, had not made a happy selection of a spot for an ambuscade, for the moonlight's glare revealed every rock on the other side of the wagon, and the few trees in the wood behind the rocks were far too slender to provide shelter for a man of ordinary size. Calumet chuckled grimly as, with his head slightly above the edge of the gully and concealed behind the felloes of the wagon wheel, he made an examination of the rocks beyond the wagon.

There were four of the rocks which were of sufficient size to afford concealment for a man. They varied in size and were ranged along the side of the trail in an irregular line. All were about a hundred feet distant.

The smaller one, he decided, was not to be considered, though he looked suspiciously at it before making his decision. Its neighbor was larger, though he reasoned that if he were to make a selection for an ambuscade he would not choose that one either. The other two rocks were almost the same size and he watched them warily. To the right and left of these rocks was a clear space, flat and open, with not a tree or a bush large enough to conceal danger such as he was in search of. The slope up which he had just driven the horses was likewise free from obstruction, so that if his enemy was behind any of the rocks he was doomed to stay there or offer himself as a target for Calumet's pistol.

"Wise, I reckon," he sneered. "Figgered to plug me while the horses was restin', knowin' I'd have to breathe them about here. Thought one shot would get me. Missed his reckonin'. Must be a mite peeved by this time."

His gaze became intent again, but this time it was directed to some underbrush about two hundred yards distant, back of the rocks. With some difficulty he could make out the shape of a horse standing well back in the brush, and again he grinned.

"That's why he took that side," he said. "There's no place on this side where he could hide his horse. It's plumb simple."

From where he kneeled began another slope that descended to the Lazy Y valley. It dipped gently down into the wood in front of the house, where he had hitched his horse on the night of his home-coming, and between the trees he could see a light flickering. The light came from the kitchen window of the ranch-house; Betty had left it burning for him, expecting him to return shortly after dusk. The house was not more than a mile distant and he wondered at the hardihood of his enemy in planning to ambush him so close to his home. He reflected, though, that it was not likely that the shots could be heard from the house, for the spot on which the wagon stood was several hundred feet above the level of the valley, and then there was the intervening wood,

which would dull whatever sound might float in that direction.

Who could his assailant be? Why, it was Taggart, of course. Taggart had left town hours before him, he was a coward, and shooting from ambush is a coward's game.

Calumet's blood leaped a little faster in his veins. He would settle for good with Neal Taggart. But he did not move except to draw one of his six-shooters and push its muzzle over the edge of the gully. He shoved his arm slowly forward so that it lay extended along the ground the barrel of the pistol resting on the felloes of the wheel.

In this position he remained for half an hour. No sound broke the strained stillness of the place. The horses had sagged forward, their heads hanging, their legs braced. There was no cloud in the sky and the clear light of the moon poured down in a yellow flood. Calumet's task would have been easier if he could have told which of the four rocks concealed his enemy. As it was he was compelled to watch them all.

But presently, at the edge of one of the two larger rocks, the one nearest the slope, he detected movement. A round object a foot in diameter, came slowly into view from behind the rock, propelled by an unseen force. It was shoved out about three quarters of its width, so that it overlapped the big rock beside it, leaving an aperture between the two of perhaps three or four inches. While Calumet watched a rifle barrel was stuck into this aperture. Calumet waited until the muzzle of the rifle became steady and then he took quick aim at the spot and pulled the trigger of his six-shooter, ducking his head below the edge of the gully as his weapon crashed.

He heard a laugh, mocking, discordant, followed by a voice—Taggart's voice.

"Clean miss," it said. "You're nervous."

"Like you was in town today," jeered Calumet.

"Then you know me?" returned Taggart. "I ain't admittin' that I was any nervous."

"Scared of the dark, then," said Calumet. "You left town a whole lot punctual."

"Well," sneered Taggart; "mebbe I ain't much on the shoot. I don't play any man's game but my own."

"You're right," mocked Calumet; "you don't play no man's game. A man's game—"

He raised his head a trifle and a bullet sang past it, flattened itself against the rock behind him, cutting short his speech and his humor at the same instant. The gully was fully fifty feet long and he dropped on his hands and knees and crawled to the upper end of it, away from the slope. He saw one of Taggart's feet projecting from behind the rock and he brought his six-shooter to a poise. The foot moved and disappeared. Catching a glimpse of the rifle barrel coming into view around the edge of the rock, Calumet sank back into the gully. Fifteen minutes later when he again cautiously raised his head above the level there was no sign of Taggart. He dropped down into the gully again and scrambled to the other end of it, raising his head again. He saw Taggart, twenty-five feet behind the rock, backing away toward the wood where his horse stood, crouching, watchful, endeavoring to keep the rock between him and Calumet while he retreated. Altogether, he was fully a hundred and twenty-five feet away at the moment Calumet caught sight of him, and he was looking toward the end of the gully that Calumet had just vacated. Calumet stood erect and snapped a shot at him, though the distance was so great that he had little expectation of doing any damage.

But Taggart staggered, dropped his rifle and dove headlong toward the rock. In an instant he had resumed his position behind it, and Calumet could tell from the rapidity of his movements that he had not been hit. He saw the rifle lying where it had fallen, and he was meditating a quick rush toward the rock when he saw Taggart's hand come out and grasp the stock of the weapon, dragging it back to him. Calumet whipped a bullet at the hand, but the only result was a small dust cloud beside it.

"In a hurry, Taggart?" he jeered. "Aw, don't be. This is the most fun I've had since I've been back in the valley. An' you want to spoil it by hittin' the breeze. Hang around a while till I get my hand in. I reckon you ain't hurt?" he added, putting a little anxiety into his voice.

"Hurt nothin'," growled Taggart. "You hit the stock of the rifle."

"I reckon that wouldn't be accounted bad shootin' at a hundred an' twenty-five feet," said Calumet. "If you hadn't had the rifle in the way you'd have got it plumb in your bread-basket. But don't be down-hearted; that ain't nothin' to what I can do when I get my hand in. I ain't had no practice."

He had an immense advantage over Taggart. The latter was compelled to remain concealed behind his rock, while Calumet had the freedom of the gully. He did not anticipate that Taggart would again attempt to retreat in the same way, nor did he think that he would risk charging him, for he would not be certain at what point in the gully he would be likely to find his enemy and thus a charge would probably result disastrously for him.

Taggart was apparently satisfied of the watchfulness of Calumet, for he stayed discreetly behind his rock. Twice during the next hour his rifle cracked when he caught a glimpse of Calumet's head, and each time he knew he had missed, for Calumet's laugh followed the reports. Once, after a long interval of silence, thinking that Calumet was at the other end of the gully, he moved the small rock which he had pushed beyond the edge of the large one, using his rifle barrel as a prod. A bullet from Calumet's pistol struck the rock, glanced from it and seared the back of his hand, bringing a curse to his lips.

"Told you so," came Calumet's voice. "I hope it ain't nothin' serious. But I'm gettin' my hand in."

This odd duel continued with long lapses of silence while the moon grew to a disk of pale, liquid silver in the west, enduring through the bleak, chill time preceding the end of night, finally fading and disappearing as the far eastern distance began to glow with the gray light of dawn.

Calumet's cold humor had not survived the night. He patrolled the gully during the slow-dragging hours of the early morning with a growing caution and determination, his lips setting always into harder lines, his eyes beginning to blaze with a ferocity that promised ill for Taggart.

Shortly after dawn, kneeling in the gully at the end toward the ranchhouse, he heard the wagon move. He looked up to see that the horses had started, evidently with the intention of completing their delayed journey to the stable, where they would find the food and water which they no doubt craved. As the wagon bumped over the obstruction which Calumet had placed in front of the rear wheel, he was on the verge of shouting to the horses to halt, but thought better of it, watching them in silence as they made their way slowly down the slope.

It took them a long time to reach the level of the valley, and then they passed slowly through the wood, going as steadily as though there was a driver on the seat behind them, and finally they turned into the ranchhouse yard and came to a halt near the kitchen door.

Calumet watched them until they came to a stop and then he went to the opposite end of the gully, peeping above it in order to learn of the whereabouts of Taggart. He saw no signs of him and returned to the other end of the gully.

Taggart, he suspected, could not see where the wagon had gone and no doubt was filled with curiosity. Neither could Taggart see the ranchhouse, for there were intervening hills and the slope itself was a ridge which effectually shut off Taggart's view. But neither hills or ridge were in Calumet's line of vision. Kneeling in the gully he watched the wagon. Presently he saw Betty come out and stand on the porch. She looked at the wagon for a moment and then went toward it —Calumet could see her peer around the canvas side at the seat. After a moment she left the wagon and walked to the stable, looking within. Then she took a turn around the ranchhouse yard, stopping at the bunkhouse and looking over the corral fence. She returned to the wagon and stood beside it as though pondering. Calumet grinned in amusement. She was wondering what had become of him. His grin was cut short by the crash of Taggart's rifle and he dodged down, realizing that in his curiosity to see what Betty was doing he had inadvertently exposed himself. A hole in his shirt sleeve near the shoulder testified to his narrow escape.

His rage against Taggart was furious and with a grimace at him he turned again to the ranchhouse. Betty had left the wagon and had walked several steps toward him, standing rigid, shading her eyes with her hands. Apparently she had heard the report of the rifle and was wondering what it meant. At that instant Calumet looked over the edge of the gully to see Taggart shoving the muzzle of his rifle around the side of the rock. Its report mingled with the roar of Calumet's pistol.

Taggart yelled with pain and rage and flopped back out of sight, while Calumet laid an investigating hand on his left shoulder, which felt as though it had been seared by a red-hot iron.

He kneeled in the gully and tore the cloth away. The wound was a slight one and he sneered at it. He made his way to the other end of the gully, expecting that Taggart, if injured only slightly, might again attempt a retreat, but he did not see him and came back to the end nearest the ranchhouse. Then he saw Betty running toward him, carrying a rifle.

At this evidence of meditated interference in his affairs a new rage afflicted Calumet. He motioned violently for her to keep away, and when he saw Dade run out of the house after her, also with a rifle in hand, he motioned again. But it was evident that they took his motions to mean that they were not to approach him in that direction, for they changed their course and swung around toward the rocks at his rear.

Furious at their obstinacy, or lack of perception, Calumet watched their approach with glowering glances. When they came near enough for him to make himself heard he yelled savagely at them.

"Get out of here, you damned fools!" he said; "do you want to get hurt?"

They continued to come on in spite of this warning, but when they reached the foot of the little slope that led to the ridge at the edge of which was Calumet's gully, they halted, looking up at Calumet inquiringly. The ridge towered above their heads, and so they were in no danger, but

Betty halted only for a moment and then continued to approach until she stood on the ridge, exposed to Taggart's fire. But, of course, Taggart would not fire at her.

"What's wrong?" she demanded of Calumet; "what were you shooting at?"

"Friend of yours," he said brusquely.

"Who?"

"Neal Taggart. We've been picnicin' all night."

Her face flooded with color, but paled instantly. Calumet thought there was reproach in the glance she threw at him, but he did not have time to make certain, for at the instant she looked at him she darted toward a rock about ten feet distant, no doubt intending to conceal herself behind it.

Calumet watched her. When she gained the shelter of the rock she was about to kneel in some fringing mesquite at its base when she heard Calumet yell at her. She turned, hesitating in the act of kneeling, and looked at Calumet. His face was ashen. His heavy pistol pointed in her direction; it seemed that its muzzle menaced her. She straightened, anger in her eyes, as the weapon crashed.

Her knees shook, she covered her face with her hands to shut out the reeling world, for she thought that in his rage he was shooting at her. But in the next instant she felt his arms around her; she was squeezed until she thought her bones were being crushed, and in the same instant she was lifted, swung clear of the ground and set suddenly down again. She opened her eyes, her whole body trembling with wrath, to look at Calumet, within a foot of her. But he was not looking at her; his gaze was fixed with sardonic satisfaction upon a huge rattler which was writhing in the throes of death at the base of the rock where she had been about to kneel. Its head had been partly severed from its body and while she looked Calumet's pistol roared again and its destruction was completed.

She was suddenly faint; the world reeled again. But the sensation passed quickly and she saw Calumet standing close to her, looking at her with grim disapprobation. Apparently he had forgotten his danger in his excitement over hers.

"I told you not to come here," he said.

But a startled light leaped into her eyes at the words. Calumet swung around as he saw her rifle swing to her shoulder. He saw Taggart near the edge of the wood, two hundred yards away, kneeling, his rifle leveled at them. He yelled to Betty but she did not heed him. Taggart's bullet sang over his head as the gun in Betty's hands crashed. Taggart stood quickly erect, his rifle dropped from his hands as he ran, staggering from side to side, to his horse. He mounted and fled, his pony running desperately, accompanied by the music of a rifle that suddenly began popping on the other side of Calumet—Dade's. But the distance was great, the target elusive, and Dade's bullets sang futilely.

They watched Taggart until he vanished, his pony running steadily along a far level, and then Betty turned to see Calumet looking at her with a twisted, puzzled smile.

"You plugged him, I reckon," he said, nodding toward the vast distance into which his enemy was disappearing. "Why, it's plumb ridiculous. If my girl would plug me that way, I'd sure feel—"

His meaning was plain, though he did not finish. She looked at him straight in the eyes though her face was crimson and her lips trembled a little.

"You are a brute!" she said. Turning swiftly she began to descend the slope toward the ranchhouse.

Calumet stood looking after her for a moment, his face working with various emotions that struggled for expression. Then, ignoring Dade, who stood near him, plainly puzzled over this enigma, he walked over to the edge of the wood where Taggart's rifle lay, picked it up and made his way to the ranchhouse.

CHAPTER XVII

MORE PROGRESS

A strange thing was happening to Calumet. His character was in the process of remaking. Slowly and surely Betty's good influence was making itself felt. This in spite of his knowledge of her secret meeting with Neal Taggart. To be sure, so far as his actions were concerned, he was

the Calumet of old, a man of violent temper and vicious impulses, but there were growing governors that were continually slowing his passions, strange, new thoughts that were thrusting themselves insistently before him. He was strangely uncertain of his attitude toward Betty, disturbed over his feelings toward her. Despite his knowledge of her secret meeting with Taggart, with a full consciousness of all the rage against her which that knowledge aroused in him, he liked her. At the same time, he despised her. She was not honest. He had no respect for any woman who would sneak as she had sneaked. She was two-faced; she was trying to cheat him out of his heritage. She had deceived his father, she was trying to deceive him. She was unworthy of any admiration whatever, but whenever he looked at her, whenever she was near him, he was conscious of a longing that he could not fight down.

And there was Dade. He often watched Dade while they were working together on the bunkhouse in the days following the incident of the ambush by Taggart. The feeling that came over him at these times was indescribable and disquieting, as was his emotion whenever Dade smiled at him. He had never experienced the deep, stirring spirit of comradeship, the unselfish affection which sometimes unites the hearts of men; he had had no "chum" during his youth. But this feeling that came over him whenever he looked at Dade was strangely like that which he had for his horse, Blackleg. It was deeper, perhaps, and disturbed him more, yet it was the same. At the same time, it was different. But he could not tell why. He liked to have Dade around him, and one day when the latter went to Lazette on some errand for Betty he felt queerly depressed and lonesome. That same night when Dade drove into the ranchhouse yard Calumet had smiled at him, and a little later when Dade had told Betty about it he had added:

"When I seen him grin at me that cordial, I come near fallin' off my horse. I was that flustered! Why, Betty, he's comin' around! The durn cuss likes me!"

"Do you like him?" inquired Betty.

"Sure. Why, shucks! There ain't nothin' wrong with him exceptin' his grouch. When he works that off so's it won't come back any more he'll be plumb man, an' don't you forget it!"

There was no mistaking Calumet's feeling toward Bob. He pitied the youngster. He allowed him to ride Blackleg. He braided him a half-sized lariat. He carried him long distances on his back and waited upon him at the table. Bob became his champion; the boy worshiped him.

Betty was not unaware of all this, and yet she continued to hold herself aloof from Calumet. She did not treat him indifferently, she merely kept him at a distance. Several times when he spoke to her about Neal Taggart she left him without answering, and so he knew that she resented the implication that he had expressed on the morning following the night on which he had discovered her talking in the office.

It was nearly three weeks after the killing of Denver and his confederate that the details of the story reached Betty's ears, and Calumet was as indifferent to her expressions of horror—though it was a horror not unmixed with a queer note of satisfaction, over which he wondered—as he was to Dade's words of congratulation: "You're sure livin' up to your reputation of bein' a slick man with the six!"

Nor did Calumet inquire who had brought the news. But when one day a roaming puncher brought word from the Arrow that "young Taggart is around ag'in after monkeyin' with the wrong end of a gun," he showed interest. He was anxious to settle the question which had been in his mind since the morning of the shooting. It was this: had Betty meant to hit Taggart when she had shot at him? He thought not; she had pretended hostility in order to mislead him. But if that had been her plan she had failed to fool him, for he watched unceasingly, and many nights when Betty thought him asleep he was secreted in the wood near the ranchhouse. He increased his vigilance after receiving word that Taggart had not been badly injured. More, he rarely allowed Betty to get out of his sight, for he was determined to defeat the plan to rob him.

However, the days passed and Taggart did not put in an appearance. Time removes the sting from many hurts and even jealousy's pangs are assuaged by the flight of days. And so after a while Calumet's vigilance relaxed, and he began to think that he had scared Taggart away. He noted with satisfaction that Betty seemed to treat him less coldly, and he felt a pulse of delight over the thought that perhaps she had repented and had really tried to hit Taggart that morning.

Once he seized upon this idea he could not dispel it. More, it grew on him, became a foundation upon which he built a structure of defense for Betty. Taggart had been trying to deceive her. She had discovered his intentions and had broken with him. Perhaps she had seen the injustice of her actions. He began to wish he had treated her a little less cruelly, a little more civilly, began to wish that he had yielded to those good impulses which he had felt occasionally of late. His attitude toward Betty became almost gentle, and there were times when she watched him with wondering curiosity, as though not quite understanding the change that had come in him.

But Dade understood. He had "sized" Calumet "up" in those first days and his judgment had been unerring, as it was now when Betty asked his opinion.

"He's beginnin' to use his brain box," he told her. "He's been a little shy an' backward, not

knowin' what to expect, an' makin' friend's bein' a little new to him. But he's the goods at bottom, an' he's sighted a goal which he's thinkin' to make one of these days."

"A goal?" said she, puzzled.

"Aw, you female critters is deep ones," grinned Dade, "an' all smeared over with honey an' innocence. You're the goal he's after. An' I'm bettin' he'll get you."

Her face reddened, and she looked at him plainly indignant.

"He is a brute," she said.

"Most all men is brutes if you scratch them deep enough," drawled Dade. "The trouble with Calumet is that he's never had a chance to spread on the soft stuff. He's the plain, unvarnished, dyed-in-the-wool, original man. There's a word fits him, if I could think of it." He looked at her inquiringly.

"Primitive, I think you mean," she said.

"That's it—primitive. That's him. He's the rough material; nobody's ever helped him to get into shape. A lot of folks pride themselves on what they call culture, forgettin' that it wasn't in them when they came into the world, that it growed on them after they got here, was put there by trainin' an' example. Not that I'm ag'in culture; it's a mighty fine thing to have hangin' around a man. But if a man ain't got it an' still measures up to man's size, he's goin' to be a humdinger when he gets all the culture that's comin' to him. Mebbe Calumet'll never get it. But he's losin' his grouch, an' if you—"

"When do you think you will finish repairing the corral?" interrupted Betty.

Dade grinned. "Tomorrow, I reckon," he said.

CHAPTER XVIII

ANOTHER PEACE OFFERING

Dade's prediction that the corral would be completed the next day was fulfilled. It was a large enclosure, covering several acres, for in the Lazy Y's prosperous days there had been a great many cattle to care for, and a roomy corral is a convenience always arranged for by an experienced cattleman. But it yawned emptily for more than a week following its completion.

During that time there had been little to do. Dade and Malcolm had passed several days tinkering at the stable and the bunkhouse; Bob, at Calumet's suggestion, was engaged in the humane task of erecting a kennel for the new dog—which had grown large and ungainly, though still retaining the admiration of his owner; and Calumet spent much of his time roaming around the country on Blackleg.

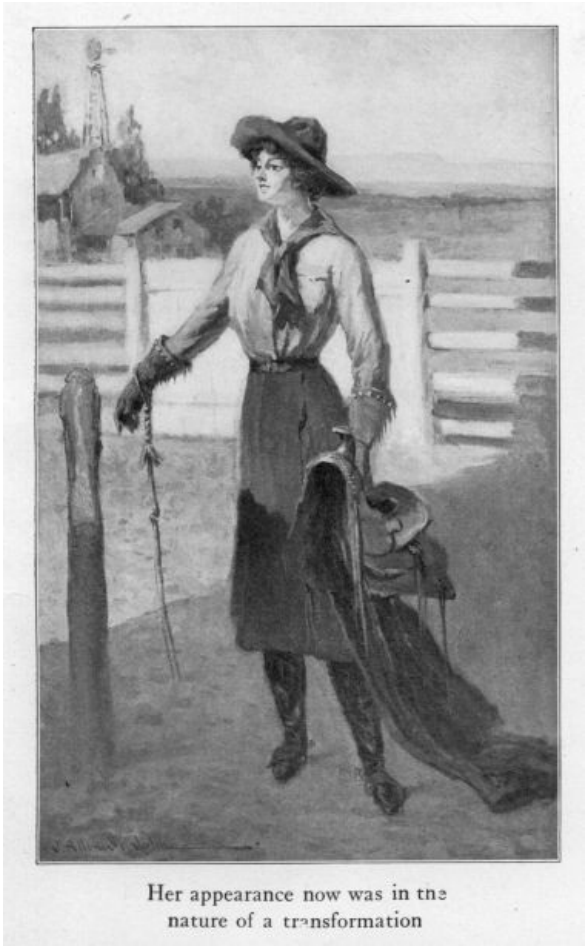
"Killin' time," he told Dade.

But it was plain to Dade, as it was to Betty, who had spoken but little to him in a week, that Calumet was filled with speculation and impatience over the temporary inaction. The work of repairing the buildings was all done. There was nothing now to do except to await the appearance of some cattle. The repair work had all been done to that end, and it was inevitable that Betty must be considering some arrangement for the procuring of cattle, but for a week she had said nothing and Calumet did not question her.

But on the Monday morning following the period of inaction, Calumet noted at the breakfast table that Betty seemed unusually eager to have the meal over. As he was leaving the table she told him she wanted to speak to him after her housework was done, and he went outside, where he lingered, watching Dade and Malcolm and Bob.

About an hour or so later Betty came out. Calumet was standing at the corral fence near the stable when she stepped down from the porch, and he gave a gasp of astonishment and then stood perfectly still, looking at her.

For the Betty that he saw was not the Betty he had grown accustomed to seeing. Not once during the time he had been at the Lazy Y had he seen her except in a house dress and her appearance now was in the nature of a transformation.



Her appearance now was in the nature of a transformation

[Illustration: Her appearance now was in the nature of a transformation.]

She was arrayed in a riding habit of brown corduroy which consisted of a divided skirt—a "doubled-barreled" one in the sarcastic phraseology of the male cowpuncher, who affects to despise such an article of feminine apparel—a brown woolen blouse with a low collar, above which she had sensibly tied a neckerchief to keep the sun and sand from blistering her neck; and a black felt hat with a wide brim. On her hands were a pair of silver-spangled leather gauntlets; encasing her feet were a pair of high-topped, high-heeled riding boots, ornamented with a pair of long-roweled Mexican spurs, mounted with silver. She was carrying a saddle which was also bedecked and bespangled with silver.

Illumination came instantly to Calumet. These things—the saddle, the riding habit, the spurs—were material possessions that connected her with the past. They were her personal belongings, kept and treasured from the more prosperous days of her earlier life.

At the first look he had felt a mean impulse to ridicule her because of them, but this impulse was succeeded instantly by a queer feeling of pity for her, and he kept silent.

But even had he ridiculed her, his ridicule would have been merely a mask behind which he could have hidden his surprise and admiration, for though her riding habit suggested things effete and eastern, which are always to be condemned on general principles, it certainly did fit her well, was becoming, neat, and in it she made a figure whose attractions were not to be denied.

She knew how to wear her clothes, too, he noted that instantly. She was at home in them; she graced them, gave them a subtle hint of quality that carried far and sank deep. As she came toward him he observed that her cheeks were a trifle flushed, her eyes a little brighter than usual, but for all that she was at ease and natural.

She stopped in front of him and smiled.

"Do you mind going over to the Diamond K with me this morning?" she asked.

"What for?" he said gruffly, reddening as he thought she might see the admiration which was slumbering in his eyes.

"To buy some cattle," she returned. "Kelton, of the Diamond K, hasn't been fortunate this season. Little Darby has been dry nearly all of the time and there has been little good grass on his range. In the first place, he had too much stock, even if conditions were right. I have heard that Kelton offered to pay the Taggarts for the use of part of their grass, but they have never been friends and the Taggarts wanted to charge him an outrageous price for the privilege. Therefore, Kelton is anxious to get rid of some of his stock. We need cattle and we can get them

from him at a reasonable figure. He has some white Herefords that I would like to get."

He cleared his throat and hesitated, frowning.

"Why don't you take Dade—or Malcolm?" he suggested.

She looked straight at him. "Don't be priggish," she said. "Dade and Malcolm have nothing to do with the running of this ranch. I want you to go with me, because I am going to buy some cattle and I want you to confirm the deal."

He laughed. "Do you reckon you need to go at all?" he said. "I figure to know cattle some myself, an' I wouldn't let Kelton hornswoggle me."

She straightened, her chin lifting a little. "Well," she said slowly, "if that is the way you feel, I presume I shall have to go alone. I had thought, though, that the prospective owner of the Lazy Y might have enough interest in his property to put aside his likes and dislikes long enough to care for his own interests. Also," she added, "where I came from, no man would be ungentlemanly enough to refuse to accompany a lady anywhere she might ask him to go."

The flush on his face grew. But he refused to become disconcerted. "I reckon to be as much of a gentleman as any Texas guy," he said. "But I expect, though," he added; "to prove that to you I'll have to trail along after you."

"Of course," she said, the corners of her mouth dimpling a little.

He went down to the corral, roped the most gentle and best appearing one of the two horses he had bought in Lazette, caught up his own horse, Blackleg, and brought them to the stable, where he saddled and bridled them. Before putting the bridle on her horse, however, he found an opportunity to work off part of the resentment which had accumulated in him over her reference to his conduct.

After adjusting the saddle, paying particular attention to the cinches, he straightened and looked at her.

"Do you reckon to have a bridle that belongs to that right pretty saddle an' suit of yourn?" he asked.

She cast a swift glance about her and blushed. "Oh," she said; "I have forgotten it! It is in my room!"

"I reckon I'd get it if I was thinkin' of goin' ridin'," he said. "Some folks seem to think that when you're ridin' a horse a bridle is right handy."

"Well," she said, smiling at him as she went out the stable door; "it has been a long time since I have had these things on, and perhaps I was a little nervous."

At this reference to her past the pulse of pity which he had felt for her before again shot over him. He had seen a quick sadness in her eyes, lurking behind the smile.

"I reckon you've been stayin' in the house too much," he said gruffly.

She hesitated, going out of the door, to look back at him, astonishment and something more subtle glinting her eyes. He saw it and frowned.

"It's twelve miles to the Diamond K," he suggested; "an' twelve back. If you're figgerin' on ridin' that distance an' takin' time between to look at any cattle mebbe you'd better get a move on."

She was out of the door before he had ceased speaking and in an incredibly short time was back, a little breathless, her face flushed as though she had been running.

He put the bridle on her horse, led it out, and condescended to hold the stirrup for her, a service which she acknowledged with a flashing smile that brought a reluctant grin to his face.

Then, swinging into his own saddle, he urged Blackleg after her, for she had not waited for him, riding down past the ranchhouse and out into the little stretch of plain that reached to the river.

They rode steadily, talking little, for Calumet deliberately kept a considerable distance between them, thus showing her that though courtesy had forced him to accompany her it could not demand that he should also become a mark at which she could direct conversation.

It was noon when they came in sight of the Diamond K ranch buildings. They were on a wide plain near the river and what grass there was was sun-scorched and rustled dryly under the tread of their horses' hoofs. Then Calumet added a word to the few that he had already spoken during the ride.

"I reckon Kelton must have been loco to try to raise cattle in a God-forsaken hole like this," he

said with a sneer.

"That he was foolish enough to do so will result to our advantage," she replied.

"Meanin' what?"

"That we will be able to buy what cattle we want more cheaply than we would were Kelton's range what it should be," she returned, watching his face.

He looked at her vindictively. "You're one of them kind of humans that like to take advantage of a man's misfortune," he said.

"That is all in the viewpoint," she defended. "I didn't bring misfortune to Kelton. And I consider that in buying his cattle I am doing him a favor. I am not gloating over the opportunity—it is merely business."

"Why didn't you offer Kelton the Lazy Y range?" he said with a twisting grin.

She could not keep the triumph out of her voice. "I did," she answered. "He wouldn't take it because he didn't like you—doesn't like you. He told me that he knew you when you were a boy and you weren't exactly his style."

Thus eliminated as a conversationalist, and defeated in his effort to cast discredit upon her, Calumet maintained a sneering silence.

But when they rode up to the Diamond K ranchhouse, he flung a parting word at her.

"I reckon you can go an' talk cattle to your man, Kelton," he said. "I'm afraid that if he goes gassin' to me I'll smash his face in."

He rode back to the horse corral, which they had passed, to look again at a horse inside which had attracted his attention.

The animal was glossy black except for a little patch of white above the right fore-fetlock; he was tall, rangy, clean-limbed, high-spirited, and as Calumet sat in the saddle near the corral gate watching him he trotted impudently up to the bars and looked him over. Then, after a moment, satisfying his curiosity, he wheeled, slashed at the gate with both hoofs, and with a snort, that in the horse language might have meant contempt or derision, cavorted away.

Calumet's admiring glance followed him. He sat in the saddle for half an hour, eyeing the horse critically, and at the end of that time, noting that Betty had returned to the ranchhouse with Kelton, probably having looked at some of the stock she had come to see—Calumet had observed on his approach that the cattle corral was well filled with white Herefords—he wheeled Blackleg and rode over to them.

"Mr. Kelton has offered me four hundred head of cattle at a reasonable figure," Betty told him on his approach. "All that remains is for you to confirm it."

"I reckon you're the boss," said Calumet. He looked at Kelton, and evidently his fear that he would "smash" the tatter's face had vanished—perhaps in a desire to possess the black horse, which had seized him.

"I reckon you ain't sellin' that black horse?" he said.

"Cheap," said Kelton quickly.

"How cheap?"

"Fifty dollars."

"I reckon he's my horse," said Calumet. "The boss of the Lazy Y will pay for him when she hands you the coin for your cattle." He scrutinized Kelton's face closely, having caught a note in his voice which had interested him. "Why you wantin' to get rid of the black?" he questioned.

"He ain't been rode," said Kelton; "he won't be rode. You can back out of that sale now, if you like. But I'm tellin' you the gospel truth. There ain't no man in the Territory can ride him. Miskell, my regular bronc-buster, is the slickest man that ever forked a horse, an' he's layin' down in the bunkhouse right now, nursin' a leg which that black devil busted last week. An' men is worth more to me than horses right now. I reckon," he finished, eyeing Calumet with a certain vindictiveness, which had undoubtedly lasted over from his acquaintance with the latter in the old days; "that you ain't a heap smart at breakin' broncs, an' you won't want the black now."

"I'm reckonin' on ridin' him back to the Lazy Y," said Calumet.

Kelton grinned incredulously, and Betty looked swiftly at Calumet. For an instant she had half feared that this declaration had been made in a spirit of bravado, and she was prepared to be disagreeably disappointed in Calumet. She told herself when she saw his face, however, that she ought to have known better, for whatever his other shortcomings she had never heard him boast.

And that he was not boasting now was plainly evident, both to her and Kelton. His declaration had been merely a calm announcement of a deliberate purpose. He was as natural now as he had been all along. She saw Kelton's expression change—saw the incredulity go out of it, observed his face whiten a little.

But his former vindictiveness remained. "I reckon if you want to be a damn fool I ain't interferin'. But I've warned you, an' it's your funeral."

Calumet did not reply, contenting himself with grinning. He swung down from Blackleg, removed the saddle and bridle from the animal, and holding the latter by the forelock turned to Betty.

"I'd like you to ride Blackleg home. He's your horse now. Kelton will lend you a halter to lead that skate you're on. While he's gettin' the halter I'll put your saddle on Blackleg—if you'll get off."

Betty dismounted and the change was made. She had admired Blackleg—she was in love with him now that he belonged to her, but she was afflicted with a sudden speechlessness over the abruptness with which he had made the gift. She wanted to thank him, but she felt it was not time. Besides, he had not waited for her thanks. He had placed the halter on the horse she had ridden to the Diamond K, had looked on saturninely while Kelton had helped her into the saddle, and had then carried his own saddle to a point near the outside of the corral fence, laying the bridle beside it. Then he uncoiled the braided hair lariat that hung at the pommel of the saddle and walked to the corral gate.

With a little pulse of joy over her possession of the splendid animal under her, and an impulse of curiosity, she urged him to the corral fence and sat in the saddle, a little white of face, watching Calumet.

The black horse was alone in the corral and as Calumet entered and closed the gate behind him, not fastening it, the black came toward him with mincing steps, its ears laid back.

Calumet continued to approach him. The black backed away slowly until Calumet was within fifty feet of him—it seemed to Betty that the horse knew from previous experience the length of a rope—and then with a snort of defiance it wheeled and raced to the opposite end of the corral.

"Watch the gate!" called Calumet to Kelton.

He continued to approach the black. The beast retreated along the fence, stepping high, watching Calumet over its shoulder. Plainly, it divined Calumet's intention—which was to crowd it into a corner—and when almost there it halted suddenly, made a feint to pass to Calumet's left, wheeled just as suddenly and plunged back to his right.

The ruse did not work. Calumet had been holding his rope low, with seeming carelessness, but as the black whipped past he gave the rope a quick flirt. Like a sudden snake it darted sinuously out, the loop opened, rose, settled around the black's neck, tightened; the end in Calumet's hand was flipped in a half hitch around a snubbing post nearby, and the black tumbled headlong into the dust of the corral, striking with a force that brought a grunt from him.

For an instant he lay still. And in that instant Calumet was at his side. While advancing toward the black, he had taken off his neckerchief, and now he deftly knotted it around the black's head, covering its eyes. A moment later he was leading it, unprotesting, out of the corral gate.

He halted near the fence and looked at Betty, who was watching critically, though with a tenseness in her attitude that brought a fugitive smile to Calumet's lips.

"I reckon you'd better move a way an' give this here animal plenty of room," he said. "If he's as much horse as Kelton says he is he'll want a heap of it."

He waited until in obedience to his suggestion Betty had withdrawn to a safe distance toward the ranchhouse. Then with Kelton holding the black's head he placed the saddle on, then the bridle, working with a sure swiftness that brought an admiring glint into Betty's eyes. Then he deliberately coiled his rope and fastened it to the pommel of the saddle, taking extra care with it. This done he turned with a cold grin to Kelton, nodding his head shortly.

Kelton pulled the neckerchief from the black's eyes, let go of its head, and scurried to the top of the corral fence. Before he could reach it Calumet had vaulted into the saddle, and before the black could realize what had happened, his feet were in the stirrups.

For an instant the Black stood, its legs trembling, the muscles under its glossy coat quivering, its ears laid flat, its nostrils distended, its mouth open, its eyes wild and bloodshot. Then, tensed for movement, but uncertain, waiting a brief instant before yielding to the thousand impulses that flashed over him, he felt the rowels of Calumet's spurs as they were driven viciously into his sides.

He sprang wildly upward, screaming with the sudden pain, and came down, his legs asprawl,

surprised, enraged, outraged. Alighting, he instantly lunged—forward, sideways, with an eccentric movement which he felt must dislodge the tormentor on his back. It was futile, attended with punishment, for again the sharp spurs sank in, were jammed into his sides, held there—rolling, biting points of steel that hurt him terribly.

He halted for a moment, to gather his wits and his strength, for his former experiences with this strange type of creature who clung so tenaciously to his back had taught him that he must use all his craft, all his strength, to dislodge him. To his relief, the spurs ceased to bite. But he was not misled. There was that moment near the corral fence when he had not moved, but still the spurs had sunk in anyway. He would make certain this time that the creature with the spurs would not have another opportunity to use them. And, gathering himself for a supreme effort, he lunged again, shunting himself off toward a stretch of plain back of the ranchhouse, bounding like a ball, his back arched, his head between his forelegs, coming down from each rise with his hoofs bunched so that they might have all landed in a dinner plate.

It was fruitless. Calumet remained unshaken, tenacious as ever. The black caught his breath again, and for the next five minutes practiced his whole category of tricks, and in addition some that he invented in the stress of the time.

To Betty, watching from her distance, it seemed that he must certainly unseat Calumet. She had watched bucking horses before, but never had her interest in the antics of one been so intense; never had she been so desperately eager for a rider's victory; never had she felt so breathlessly fearful of one's defeat. For, glancing from the corners of her eyes at Kelton, she saw a scornful, mocking smile on his face. He was wishing, hoping, that the black would throw Calumet.

At the risk of danger from the black's hoofs she urged Blackleg forward to a more advantageous position. As she brought him to a halt, she heard Kelton beside her.

"Some sunfisher, that black," he remarked.

She turned on him fiercely. "Keep still, can't you!" she said.

Kelton reddened; she did not see his face though, for she was watching Calumet and the black.

The outlaw had not ceased his efforts. On the contrary, it appeared that he was just beginning to warm to his work. Screaming with rage and hate he sprang forward at a dead run, propelling himself with the speed of a bullet for a hundred yards, only to come to a dizzying, terrifying stop; standing on his hind legs; pawing furiously at the air with his forehoofs; tearing impotently at the bit with his teeth, slashing with terrific force in the fury of his endeavor.

Calumet's hat had come off during the first series of bucks. The grin that had been on his face when he had got into the saddle back near the corral fence was gone, had been superseded by a grimness that Betty could see even from the distance from which she watched. He was a rider though, she saw that—had seen it from the first. She had seen many cowboy breakers of wild horses; she knew the confident bearing of them; the quickness with which they adjusted their muscles to the eccentric movements of the horse under them, anticipating their every action, so far as anyone was able to anticipate the actions of a rage-maddened demon who has only one desire, to kill or maim its rider, and she knew that Calumet was an expert. He was cool, first of all, in spite of his grimness; he kept his temper, he was absolutely without fear; he was implacable, inexorable in his determination to conquer. Somehow the battle between horse and man, as it raged up and down before her, sometimes shifting to the far end of the level, sometimes coming so near that she could see the expression of Calumet's face plainly, seemed to be a contest between kindred spirits. The analogy, perhaps, might not have been perceived by anyone less intimately acquainted with Calumet, or by anyone who understood a horse less, but she saw it, and knowing Calumet's innate savagery, his primal stubbornness, his passions, the naked soul of the man, she began to feel that the black was waging a hopeless struggle. He could never win unless some accident happened.

And they were very near her when it seemed that an accident did happen.

The black, his tongue now hanging out, the foam that issued from his mouth flecked with blood; his sides in a lather; his flanks moist and torn from the cruel spur-points: seemed to be losing his cunning and to be trusting entirely to his strength and yielding to his rage. She could hear his breath coming shrilly as he tore past her; the whites of his eyes white no longer, but red with the murder lust. It seemed to her that he must divine that defeat was imminent, and in a transport of despair he was determined to stake all on a last reckless move.

As he flashed past her she looked at Calumet also. His face was pale; there was a splotch of blood on his lips which told of an internal hemorrhage brought on by the terrific jarring that he had received, but in his eyes was an expression of unalterable resolve; the grim, cold, immutable calm of purpose. Oh, he would win, she knew. Nothing but death could defeat him. That was his nature—his character. There was no alternative. He saw none, would admit none. He found time, as he went past her, to grin at her, and the grin, though a trifle wan, contained much of its old mockery and contempt of her judgment of him.

The black raced on for a hundred yards, and what ensued might have been an accident, or it might have been the deliberate result of the black's latest trick. He came to a sudden stop, rose on his hind legs and threw himself backward, toppling, rigid, upon his back to the ground.

As he rose for the fall Calumet slipped out of the saddle and leaped sideways to escape being crushed. He succeeded in this effort, but as he leaped the spur on his right heel caught in the hollow of the black's hip near the flank, the foot refused to come free, it caught, jammed, and Calumet fell heavily beside the horse, luckily a little to one side, so that the black lay prone beside him.

Betty's scream was sharp and shrill. But no one heard it—at least Kelton seemed not to hear, for he was watching Calumet, his eyes wide, his face white; nor did Calumet seem to hear, for he was sitting on the ground, trying to work his foot out of the stirrup. Twice, as he worked with the foot, Betty saw the black strike at him with its hoofs, and once a hoof missed his head by the narrowest of margins.

But the foot was free at last, and Calumet rose. He still held the reins in his hands, and now, as he got to his feet, he jerked out the quirt that he wore at his waist and lashed the black, vigorously, savagely.

The beast rose, snorting with rage and pain, still unsubdued. His hind legs had not yet straightened when Calumet was again in the saddle. The black screamed, with a voice almost human in its shrillness, and leaped despairingly forward, shaking its head from side to side as Calumet drove the spurs deep into its sides. It ran another hundred yards, half-heartedly, the spring gone out of its stride; then wheeled and came back, bucking doggedly, clumsily, to a point within fifty feet of where Betty sat on Blackleg. Then, as it bucked again, it came down with its forelegs unjointed, and rolled over on its side, with Calumet's right leg beneath it.

The black was tired and lay with its neck outstretched on the ground, breathing heavily, its sides heaving. Calumet also, was not averse to a rest and had straightened and lay, an arm under his head, waiting.

Betty smiled, for though he appeared to be in a position which might result in a crushed leg or foot, she knew that he was in no danger, because the heavy ox-bow stirrup afforded protection for his foot, while the wide seat of the saddle kept the upper part of his leg from injury. She had seen the cowboys roll under their horses in this manner many times, deliberately—it saved them the strenuous work of alighting and remounting. They had done it, too, for the opportunity it afforded them to rest and to hurl impolite verbiage at their horses.

But Calumet was silent. She rode a little closer to him, to look at him, and when his eyes met hers; she saw that his spirit was in no way touched; that his job of subduing the black was not yet finished and that he purposed to finish it.

"We're goin' in a minute," he said to her, his voice a little husky. "I'd thank you to bring my hat. I don't reckon you'll be able to keep up with us, but I reckon you'll excuse me for runnin' away from you."

He had scarcely finished speaking before the black struggled to rise. Calumet helped him by keeping a loose rein and lifting his own body. And when the black swung over and got to its feet, Calumet settled firmly into the saddle and instantly jammed his spurs home into its flanks. The black reared, snorted, came down and began to run desperately across the level, desiring nothing so much now as to do the bidding of the will which he had discovered to be superior to his own.

Betty watched in silence as horse and rider went over the level, traveling in a dust cloud, and when they began to fade she turned to Kelton. The latter was crestfallen, glum.

"Shucks," he said; "if I'd have thought he'd break the black devil he wouldn't have got him for twice fifty dollars. He's sure a slick, don't-give-a-damn buster."

Betty smiled mysteriously and went to look for Calumet's hat. Then, riding Blackleg and leading the other horse, she went toward the Lazy Y.

It was dusk when she arrived, to be greeted by Dade and Bob. She saw the black horse in the corral and she knew that Calumet had won the victory, for the black's head dropped dejectedly and she had never seen an animal that seemed less spirited. It did not surprise her to find that Calumet looked tired, and when she came down stairs from changing her dress and got supper for them all, she did not mention the incident of the breaking of the black. Nor would he talk, though she was intensely curious as to the motive which had prompted him to make her a present of Blackleg. Was it an indication that he was feeling more friendly to her, or had he merely grown tired of Blackleg?

The answer came to her late that night, after Calumet had retired. Betty and Dade were in the kitchen; Malcolm and Bob were in the sitting-room. Betty had taken Dade into her confidence and had related to him the happenings of the day—so far as she could without acquainting him with the state of her feelings toward Calumet.

"So he can ride some?" commented Dade, after she had told him about the black. "I reckon

he'd bust that horse or break his neck. But he was in bad shape when he rode in—almost fell out of the saddle, an' staggered scandalous when he walked. All in. Didn't make a whimper, though. Clear grit. He grinned at me when he turned the black into the corral.

"'Does that cayuse look busted?' he said.

"I allowed he had that appearance, an' he laughed.

"'I've give Betty Blackleg,' he said. 'I've got tired of him.'"

Betty's disappointment showed in her eyes; she had suspected that Calumet had had another reason. She had hoped—

"I reckon, though, that that wasn't his real reason," continued Dade; "he wasn't showin' all of his hand there."

"What makes you think that?" asked Betty, trying not to blush.

"Well," said Dade, "I was walkin' round the stable a while ago, just nosin' around without any purpose, an' walkin' slow. When I got to the corner, not makin' any noise, I saw Calumet standin' in front of the stable door, talkin'. There was nobody around him—nothin' but Blackleg, an' so I reckon he was talkin' to Blackleg. Sure enough he was. He puts his head up against Blackleg's head, an' he said, soft an' low, kinda:

"'Blackleg,' he said; 'I've give you away. I hated like poison to do it, but I reckon Betty'll look a heap better on you than she does on that skate she rode today. Damn that black devil!' he said, 'I wouldn't have took the job of breakin' him for any other woman in the world.'

"I come away then," concluded Dade; "for somehow I didn't want him to know there was anybody around to hear him."

Betty got up quickly and went out on the porch. She stood there, looking out into the darkness for a long, long time, and presently Dade grew tired of waiting for her and went to his room.

CHAPTER XIX

A TRAGEDY IN THE TIMBER GROVE

The black was undoubtedly broken. His subsequent actions proved that. He did not become docile by any means, but he was tractable, which is to say that he did as he was bidden with a minimum of urging; he was intelligent, divining, and learned quickly. Also, he respected his conqueror. If Dade or Malcolm came near him he gave unmistakable evidence of hostility; he even shied at sight of Betty, who was his most sincere admirer, for had not his coming to the Lazy Y been attended with a sentiment not the less satisfying because concealed?

But the black suffered Calumet's advances, his authority, his autocratic commands, with a patience that indicated that his subjugation was to be complete and lasting.

When, toward the middle of the week, Kelton's men—two bepistoled, capable punchers—drove the cattle comprising the Lazy Y purchase into the valley, Calumet immediately set to work to train the black to observe the various niceties of the etiquette of cow-punching. He soon learned, that when the rope whistled past his ears he was to watch its progress, and if its loop encircled a neck or a leg he was to brace himself for the inevitable shock. If the loop failed—which it rarely did—he discovered that he was to note at which particular steer it had been hurled, and was to follow that steer's progress, no matter where it went, until the rope went true. He discovered that it was imperative for him to stand without moving when his master trailed the reins over his head; he early learned that the bit was a terrible instrument of torture, and that it were better to answer to the pressure of Calumet's knee than to be subjected to the pain it caused him.

He was taught these things, and many more, while the work of rebranding the Diamond K cattle went forward.

This work was no sinecure. Dade and Malcolm, and even Bob, assisted in it—Malcolm and Bob attending to the heating of the branding irons while Calumet roped the steers and dragged them to the fire where Dade pressed the white-hot irons to their hips. But the work was done finally, and the cattle turned out into the valley.

On the night that saw the finish of the branding, Calumet, Dade, and Malcolm retired early. Betty and Bob remained in the kitchen for some time, but finally they, too, went to bed.

At one second before midnight Calumet was sleeping soundly—as soundly as it is possible for a man to sleep who has been working out of doors and is physically tired. At exactly midnight he was wide awake, lying on his back, looking with unblinking eyes at the ceiling, all his senses aroused and alert, his nerves and muscles at a tension.

He did not know what had awakened him, though he was convinced that it had been something strange and unusual. It had happened to him before; several times when cattle had stampeded; once when a Mexican freighter at a cow camp had rose in the night to slip his knife into a puncher with whom he had had trouble during the day. Incidentally, except for Calumet, the Mexican would have made his escape. It had happened to him again when a band of horse thieves had attempted to run off some stock; it had never happened unless something unusual was going on. And so he was certain that something unusual was going on now, and he lay still, looking around him, to make sure that what was happening was not happening in his room. He turned his head and looked at Dade. That young man was breathing heavily and regularly. He turned toward the door of the room. The door was closed. A flood of moonlight entered the window; objects in the room were clearly distinguishable, and nothing seemed wrong here. But something was wrong—he was certain of that. And so he got carefully out of bed and looked out of the window, listening, peering intently in all directions within the limits of his vision. No sound greeted his ears, no moving object caught his gaze. But he was not satisfied.

He put on his clothes, buckled his cartridge belt around his waist, took his six-shooter from beneath his pillow, and stuck it into the holster, and in his stockinged feet opened the door of the room and stepped out into the hall. He was of the opinion that something had gone wrong with the horses, and he intended to make the rounds of the stable and corrals to satisfy his curiosity. Strangely, he did not think of the possibility of Betty meeting Taggart again, until he had reached the bottom of the stairs. Even then he was half-way across the dining-room, stepping carefully and noiselessly for fear he might awaken someone, when he glanced back with a sudden suspicion, toward the door of the office. As in that other time there shone a streak of light through the crevice between the bottom of the door and the threshold.

He stood still, his muscles contracting, his lips curling, a black, jealous anger in his heart. Taggart was there again.

But he would not escape this time. He would take care to make no noise which would scare him away. He listened at the door, but he heard no voices. They were in there, though, he could distinguish slight movements. He left the door and stole softly up the stairs to his room, getting his boots and carrying them in his hand. As before, he intended putting them on at the kitchen door. But Bob's dog would not betray him this time, for since the other accident he had contrived to persuade Bob to keep the dog outside at night. Nor would there occur any other accident—he would take care of that. And so it took him a long time to descend the stairs and make his way to the kitchen door. Once outside, he drew on his boots and stole silently and swiftly to the front door of the house.

To his astonishment, when he arrived at the door, there was no light, no sound to indicate that anybody was in the room. He tried the door—it was barred. He stepped to the window. If there was a light within it would show through the cracks and holes in the shade, for the latter was old and well worn.

But no light appeared. If there was anyone inside they must have heard him in spite of his carefulness, and had put out the light. He cursed. He could not watch both the back and the front door, but he could watch the outside of the house, could go a little distance away from it and thus see anybody who would leave it.

He walked away toward the timber clump, looking around him. As his gaze swept the wood near the river he caught a glimpse of a horse and rider as they passed through a clearing and went slowly away from him.

They had tricked him again! Probably by this time Betty was in her room, laughing at him. Taggart was laughing, too, no doubt. The thought maddened him. He cursed bitterly as he ran to the stable. He was inside in a flash, saddling Blackleg, jamming a bit into his mouth. He would follow Taggart to the Arrow, to hell—anywhere, but he would catch him. Blackleg could do it; he would make him do it, if he killed him in the end.

In three minutes Blackleg shot out of the stable door—a flash in the night. The swift turn that was required of him he made on his hind legs, and then, with a plunge and a snort of delight, he was away over the level toward the wood.

Calumet guided Blackleg toward the spot where he had seen the rider, certain that he could not have gone far during the interval that had elapsed, but when he reached the spot there was no sign of a horse and rider in any direction.

For an instant only Calumet halted Blackleg, and then he spurred him down the river trail. One mile, two, three, he rode at a breakneck pace, and then suddenly he was out of the timber and facing a plain that stretched into an interminable distance. The trail lay straight and clear; there was no sign of a horse and rider on it. Taggart had not come in this direction, though in this direction lay the Arrow.

He wheeled Blackleg and, with glowering eyes and straightened lips, rode him back the way he had come, halting often and peering into shadows. By the time he arrived at the spot where he had first seen the horse and rider he had become convinced that Taggart had secreted himself until he had passed him and had then ridden over the back trail, later to return to the Arrow by a circuitous route.

Calumet determined to cut across the country and intercept him, and he drove the spurs into Blackleg and raced him through the wood. His trail took him into a section which led to the slope which the horses drawing the wagon had taken on the night of the ambush. He was tearing through this when he broke through the edge of a clearing about a quarter of a mile from the ranchhouse. At about the center of the clearing Blackleg came to a jarring, dizzying stop, rearing high on his hind legs. When he came down he whinnied and backed, and, peering over his shoulder to see what had frightened him, Calumet saw the body of a man lying at the edge of a mesquite clump.

With his six-shooter in hand, Calumet dismounted and walked to the man. The latter was prone in the dust, on his face, and as Calumet leaned over him the better to peer into his face—for he thought the man might be Taggart—he heard a groan escape his lips. Sheathing his weapon, Calumet turned the man over on his back. Another groan escaped him; his eyes opened, though they closed again immediately. It was not Taggart.

"Got me," he said. He groaned again.

"Who got you?" Calumet bent over to catch the reply. None came; the man had lost consciousness.

Calumet stood up and looked around. He could see nothing of the rider for whom he was searching. He could not leave this wounded man to pursue his search for Taggart; there might be something he could do for the man.

But he left the man's side for an instant while he looked around him. Some dense undergrowth rose on his right, black shadows surrounding it, and he walked along its edge, his forty-five in hand, trying to peer into it. He saw nothing, heard nothing. Then, catching another groan from the man, he returned to him. The man's eyes were open; they gleamed brightly and wildly.

"Got me," he said as he saw Calumet.

"Who got you?" repeated Calumet.

"Telza."

"Telza?" Calumet bent over him again; the name sounded foreign. "Talk sense," he said shortly; "who's Telza?"

"A Toltec Indian," said the man. "He's been hangin' around here—for a month. Around the Arrow, too. Mebbe two months. Nobody knows. He's like a shadow. Now you see him an' now you don't," he added with a grim attempt at a joke. "Taggart's had me trailin' him, lookin' for a diagram he's got."

"Diagram of what?" demanded Calumet. His interest was intense. A Toltec! Telza was of the race from whom his father and Taggart had stolen the idol. He leaned closer to the man.

"Are Telza an' Taggart friends?" he asked.

"Friends!" The man's weak laugh was full of scorn. "Taggart's stringin' him. Telza's lookin' for an idol—all gold an' diamonds, an' such. Worth thousands. Taggart set Telza on Betty Clayton." The man choked; his breath came thickly; red stained his lips. "Hell!" he said, "what you chinnin' me for? Get that damned toad-sticker out of me, can't you. It's in my side, near the back—I can't reach it."

Calumet felt where the man indicated, and his hand struck the handle of a knife. It had a large, queerly-shaped handle and a long, thin blade like a stiletto. It had been driven into the man's left side just under the fleshy part of the shoulder, and it was plain that its point had found a vital spot—probably through the lung and near the heart, for the man was limp and helpless, his breath coughed in his throat, and it was certain that he had not many minutes to live. Calumet carefully withdrew the weapon, and the man settled back with a sigh of relief.

"You're Marston, ain't you?" he said, slowly and painfully, gasping with every breath. "I've heard the Taggart's talk about you. Old Tom's developed a yellow streak in his old age an' he's leavin' all his dirty work to Neal. Neal's got a yellow streak, too, for that matter, but he's young an' ain't got no sense. I reckon I'm goin' somewhere now, an' so I can say what I like. Taggart ain't no friend of mine—neither of them. They've played me dirt—more than once. My name's Al Sharp. You know that Tom Taggart was as deep in that idol business as your dad was. He told me. But he's got Telza soft-soaped into thinkin' that Betty Clayton's folks snaked it from Telza's people. Taggart's got evidence that your dad planted the idol around here somewheres—seems to know that your dad drawed a diagram of the place an' left it with Betty. He set Telza to huntin'

for it. Telza got it tonight—it was hid somewhere. I was with him—waitin' for him. If he got the diagram I was to knife him and take it away from him. Taggart an' his dad is somewhere around here—I was to meet them down the river a piece. Telza double-crossed me; tried to sneak over here an' hunt the idol himself. I found him—he had the diagram. I tried to get it from him—he stuck his toad-sticker in me, … the little copper-skinned devil. He—" He hesitated and choked, raising himself as though to get a long breath. But a dark flood again stained his lips, he strangled and stretched out limply.

Calumet turned him over on his back and covered his face with a handkerchief. Then he stood up, looking around at the edge of the clearing. Ten feet in front of him, curled around the edge of a bit of sagebrush, was a dirty white object. He walked over, kicked the sagebrush violently, that a concealed rattler might not spring on him, and took up the object. It was a piece of paper about six inches square, and in the dim moonlight Calumet could see that it contained writing of some sort and a crude sketch. He looked closer at it, saw a spot marked "Idol is here," and then folded it quickly and placed it, crumpled into a ball, into a pocket of his trousers.

He was now certain that Taggart had been merely deceiving Betty; there had been no other significance to his visits. The visits were merely part of a plan to get possession of the idol. While he had been talking to Betty in the office tonight Telza had stolen the diagram.

There was more than triumph in Calumet's eyes as he turned his pony—there was joy and savage exultation. The idol was his; he would get the money, too. After that he would drive Betty and all of them—

But would he? A curious indecision mingled with his other emotions at this thought. His face grew serious. Lately he was developing a vacillating will; whenever he meditated any action with regard to Betty he had an inclination to defer it. He postponed a decision now; he would think it over again. Before he made up his mind on that question he wanted to enjoy her discomfiture and confusion over the loss of the diagram.

He had lost all thought of pursuing Taggart. Sharp had said that Taggart was somewhere in the vicinity, but it was just possible that Sharp had been so deeply engaged with Telza about the time Taggart had made his escape that he had not seen him. There was time for him to settle with Taggart.

He took up the bridle rein, wheeled, placed one foot into the stirrup, intending to mount, when he became aware of a shadow looming near him. He pulled the foot out of the stirrup, dropped the reins with the same movement, and turned in a flash.

Neal Taggart, sitting on a horse at the edge of the clearing, not over twenty feet from him, was looking at him from behind the muzzle of a six-shooter. At a trifling distance from Taggart was another man, also bestride a horse. A rifle was at this man's shoulder; his cheek was nuzzling its stock, and Calumet saw that the weapon was aimed at his chest.

He rapidly noted the positions of the two, estimated the distance, decided that the risk of resistance was too great, and slowly raised his hands above his head.

"Surprise party, eh?" he said. "Well," he added in a self-accusing voice, "I reckon I was dreamin' some."

Neal Taggart dismounted, moving quickly aside so that the man with the rifle had an unobstructed view of Calumet. He went close to the latter.

"So it's you, eh?" he said. "We saw you tearin' up an' down the river trail, when we was back in the timber a piece. Racin' your fool head off. Nothin' in sight. Saw you come in here ten minutes ago. What you doin' here?"

"Exercisin'," said Calumet; "takin' my midnight constitutional." He looked at the man with the rifle.

The latter was hatless. Long gray hair, unkempt, touched his shoulders; a white beard, scraggly, dirty, hid all of his face except the beak-like, awry nose. Beady, viciously glowing eyes gleamed out of the grotesque mask.

"Who's your friend?" questioned Calumet, with a derisive grin. "If I was a sheep-man now, I'd try an' find time, next shearin'—"

"My father," growled Neal.

"Excuse me," said Calumet with a short laugh, though his eyes shone with a sudden hardness; "I thought it was a—"

"You're Calumet Marston, I reckon," interrupted the bearded man. "You're an impertinent pup, like your father was. Get his guns!" he commanded gruffly.

Neal hesitated and then took a step toward Calumet. The latter crouched, his eyes narrowing to glittering pin points. In his attitude was a threat, a menace, of volcanic, destroying action.

Neal stopped a step off, uncertain.

Calumet's lips sneered. "Take my guns, eh?" he said. "Reach out an' grab them. But say your prayers before you do—you an' that sufferin' monolith with the underbrush scattered all over his mug. Come an' take them!" He jeered as he saw Neal Taggart's face whiten. "Hell!" he added as he saw the elder Taggart make a negative motion toward his son, "you ain't got no clear thoughts just at this minute, eh?"

"We ain't aimin' to force trouble," growled the older man. "We're just curious, that's what. Also, there's a chance that we can settle this thing peaceable. We want to palaver. If you'll give your word that there won't be no gun-play until after the peace meetin' is over, you can take your hands down."

"No shootin' goes right now," agreed Calumet. "But after this peace meetin'—"

"We ought to come to terms," said Taggart, placing his rifle in the saddle holster as Calumet's hands came down. "There hadn't ought to be any bad blood between us. Me an' your dad was a heap friendly until we had a fallin' out over that she-devil which he lived with—Ezela." There was an insincere grin on his face.

It was plain to Calumet that the elder Taggart had some ulterior motive in suggesting a peace conference. He noted that while Taggart talked his eyes kept roving around the clearing as though in search of something. That something, Calumet divined, was Sharp and Telza. He suspected that Calumet had seen Telza and Sharp, or one of them, enter the clearing, and had followed them. Neal had said that they had seen Calumet when he had been racing up and down the river trail; they had suspected he had been after Sharp or Telza, and had followed him. No doubt they were afflicted with a great curiosity. They were playing for time in order to discover his errand.

"I reckon we'll get along without mushin'," suggested Calumet. "What terms are you talkin' about?"

Taggart climbed down from his pony and stood beside it.

"Half-an'-half on the idol," he said. "That's square, ain't it?" He looked at Calumet with the beginning of a bland smile, which instantly faded and turned into a grimace of fear as he found himself looking into the gaping muzzles of Calumet's pistols, which had appeared with magic ease and quickness.

"I'm runnin' a little surprise party of my own," declared Calumet. "Was you thinkin' I was fool enough to go to gassin' with you, trustin' that you wouldn't take your chance to perforate me? You've got another guess comin'."

The disappointed gleam in Taggart's eyes showed that such had been his intention. "There wasn't to be no shootin' until after we'd held our peace meetin'," he complained.

"Correct," said Calumet. "But the peace meetin' is now over. Get your sky-hooks clawin' at the clouds!" he warned coldly as Neal hesitated. When both had raised their hands above their heads he deftly plucked their weapons from their holsters. Then, alert and watchful, he drew the elder Taggart's rifle from its sling on the saddle and threw it a dozen feet away.

"Now just step over to that bunch of mesquite," he ordered; "there's somethin' there that I want to show you."

In obedience to his command they went forward. Both came to a halt when around the edge of the mesquite clump they saw the dead body of Sharp, with the handkerchief over his face. Neither recognized the man until Calumet drew the handkerchief away, and then both started back.

"Know him, eh?" said Calumet, watching them narrowly. "Well, he done his duty—done what you wanted him to do. But your man, Telza, double-crossed him—knifed him." He took up the rapier-like blade that he had drawn from Sharp's side and held it before their eyes. Again they started, and Calumet laughed.

"Know the knife, too!" he jeered. "An' after what you've done you've got the nerve to ask me to divvy with you."

The elder Taggart was the first to recover his composure.

"Telza?" he said. "Why, I reckon you've got me; there ain't no one of that name—"

But Calumet was close to him, his eyes blazing. "Shut your dirty mouth, or I'll tear you apart!" he threatened. "You're a liar, an' you know it. Sharp told me about you settin' the Toltec on Betty. I know the rest. I know you tried to make a monkey out of my dad, you damned old ossified scarecrow! If you open your trap again, I'll just naturally pulverize you! I reckon that's all I've got to say to you."

He walked over to Neal, and the latter shrank from the bitter malignance of his gaze.

"Can you tell me why I ain't lettin' daylight through you?" he said as he shoved the muzzle of his six-shooter deep into Neal's stomach, holding it there with savage steadiness as he leaned forward and looked into the other's eyes. "It's because I ain't a sneak an' a murderer. I ain't ambushin' nobody. I've done some killin' in my time, but I ain't never plugged no man who didn't have the same chance I had. I'm givin' you a chance."

He drew out one of the weapons he had taken from the two men, holding it by the muzzle and thrusting it under Neal's nose. The terrible, suppressed rage in his eyes caused a shiver to run over Neal, his face turned a dull white, his eyes stared fearfully. He made no move to grasp the weapon.

"I ain't fightin'," he said with trembling lips.

Calumet reversed the gun and stepped back, laughing harshly, without mirth.

"Of course you ain't fightin'," he said. "That's the reason it's goin' to be hard for me to kill you. I'd feel like a cur if I was to perforate you now—you or your scarecrow dad. But I'm tellin' you this: You've sneaked around the Lazy Y for the last time. I'm layin' for you after this, an' if I ketch you maverickin' around here again I'll perforate you so plenty that it'll make you dizzy. That's all. Get out of here before I change my mind!"

Shrinking from his awe-inspiring wrath, they retreated from him, watching him fearfully as they backed toward their horses. They had almost reached them when Calumet's voice brought them to a halt.

His lips were wreathed in a cold grin, his eyes alight with a satanic humor. But the rage had gone from his voice; it was mocking, derisive.

"Goin' to ride?" he said. "Oh, don't! Them horses look dead tired. Leave them here; they need a rest. Besides, a man can't do any thinkin' to amount to anything when he's forkin' a horse, an' I reckon you two coyotes will be doin' a heap of thinkin' on your way back to the Arrow."

"Good Lord!" said the elder Taggart; "you don't mean that? Why, it's fifteen miles to the Arrow!"

"Shucks," said Calumet; "so it is! An' it's after midnight, too. But you wouldn't want them poor, respectable critters to be gallivantin' around at this time of the night, when they ought to be in bed dreamin' of the horse-heaven which they're goin' to one of these days when the Taggarts don't own them any more. You can send a man over after them when you get back, an' if they want to go home, why, I'll let them." His voice changed again; it rang with a menacing command.

"Walkin' is good!" he said; "get goin'! You've got three minutes to get to that bend in the trail over by the crick. It's about half a mile. I'm turnin' my back. If I see you when I turn around I'm workin' that rifle there."

There was a silence which might have lasted a second. Only this small space of time was required by the Taggarts to convince them that Calumet was in deadly earnest. Then, with Neal leading, they began to run toward the bend in the trail.

Shortly Calumet turned. The Taggarts had almost reached the bend, and while he watched they vanished behind it.

Calumet picked up the rifle which he had taken from the elder Taggart, mounted his horse, and drove the Taggart animals into the corral. He decided that he would keep them there for an hour or so, to give the Taggarts time to get well on their way toward the Arrow. Had he turned them loose immediately they no doubt would have overtaken their masters before the latter had gone very far.

Remounting, Calumet rode to the bend in the trail. He carried Taggart's rifle. About a mile out on the plain that stretched away toward the Arrow he saw the two men. They seemed to be walking rapidly.

Calumet returned to the ranchhouse, got a pick and shovel, and went back to the timber clump. An hour later he was again at the corral. He led the Taggart horses out, took them to the bend in the trail, and turned them loose, for he anticipated that the Taggarts would make a complaint to the sheriff about them, and if they were found in the Lazy Y corral trouble would be sure to result.

He watched them until they were well on their way toward the Arrow, and then he returned to the ranchhouse and went to bed. No one had heard him, he told himself with a grin as he stretched out on the bed beside Dade to sleep the hour that would elapse before daylight.

CHAPTER XX

BETTY TALKS FRANKLY

Betty, however, had not been asleep. After seeking her room she had heard the rapid beat of hoofs, and, looking out of her window, she had seen Calumet when he had raced from the ranchhouse in search of Taggart. Still watching at the window, she had seen him returning; saw him disappear into the timber clump.

Some time later she had observed the Taggarts emerge and run as though their lives depended on haste. She watched Calumet as he rode by her window to take the two horses to the corral, stared at him with fascinated eyes, holding her breath with horror as he walked from the ranchhouse to the timber clump with the pick and shovel on his shoulder; stood at the window with a great fear gripping her until he came back, still carrying the pick and shovel; watched him as he released the Taggart horses, drove them to the bend in the trail, and returned to the house. His movements had been stealthy, but she heard him when he came into the house and mounted the stairs. Then she heard him no more.

But a great dread was upon her. What meant that journey to the timber clump with the pick and shovel, and what had been done there during the hour that he had remained there? The idol she knew, was buried in a clearing in the timber clump; she did not know just where, for she had looked at the diagram only once, when Calumet's father had shown it to her. She had a superstitious dread of the idol and would not, under any circumstances, have examined the diagram again. But she did not connect Calumet's visit to the timber clump with the diagram, for the latter was concealed in a safe place, under a board in the closet that led off her room; she had looked at it only once since Calumet had returned, and that only hastily, to make sure that it was still there, and she was certain that Calumet had no knowledge of its whereabouts.

Could Calumet have— She pressed her hands tightly over her breast at this thought. She did not want to think that! But he had a violent temper, and there were those men in Lazette, Denver and the other man, whom he had— She shuddered. That must be the explanation for his strange actions. But still she had heard no shot, and there was a chance that the diagram—

Tremblingly she made her way to the closet and removed the loose board. A tin box met her eyes, the box in which she had placed the diagram, and she lifted the box out, her fingers shaking as she fumbled at the fastening and raised the lid.

The box was empty.

For a long time she sat there looking at it, anger and resentment fighting within her for the mastery.

Of course, the idol really belonged to Calumet; she would have given it to him in time, but that thought did not lessen her resentment against him. Somehow, though, she was conscious of a feeling of gratefulness that his visit to the timber clump had no significance beyond the recovery of the idol, and, despite his offense against her privacy, she began after a while to view the matter with greater calm. And though she did not close her eyes during the remainder of the night, lying on her back in bed and wondering how he had discovered the hiding place of the diagram, she came downstairs shortly after daylight and proceeded calmly about her duties.

She managed, though, to be near the kitchen door when Calumet came down, and, without appearing to do so, she watched his face closely as he prepared himself for breakfast. But without result. If he had gained possession of the idol his face did not betray him. But once during the meal she looked up unexpectedly, to see him looking at her with amused, speculative eyes. Then she knew he was gloating over her.

With an appearance of grave concern, and not a little well-simulated excitement, she approached him during the morning where he was working at the corral fence. She was determined to discover the truth.

"I have some bad news for you," she said.

"Shucks," he returned, with a grin that almost disarmed her; "you don't say!"

"Yes," she continued. "When your father left his other papers with me he also left a diagram of a place in the timber clump where the idol is hidden. Some time yesterday the diagram was stolen."

"You don't say?" he said.

His voice had not been convincing enough; there had been a note of mockery in it, and she knew he was guilty of the theft.

She looked at him fairly. "You took it," she accused.

"I didn't take it," he denied, returning her gaze. "But I've got it. What are you goin' to do about it?"

"Nothing," she replied. "But do you think that was a gentleman's action—to enter my room, to search it—even for something that belonged to you?"

"No gentleman took it," he grinned; "therefore it couldn't have been me. I told you I had it; I didn't take it."

"Who did, then?"

"Do you know Telza?"

"Telza?"

"Toltec," he said; "a Toltec from Yucatan. He got it yesterday—last night—while you was gassin' to your friend, Neal Taggart."

She started, recollection filling her eyes. "A Toltec!" she said in an awed voice. "I have heard that they are fanatics where their religion is concerned; your father told me that his—that woman—Ezela—told him. She said that the tribe would never give up the search for the idol. He laughed at her; he laughed at me when he told me about it." She drew a deep breath. "And so one of them has come," she said. "I thought I heard a noise upstairs last night," she added. "It must have been then."

"An'," he jeered, "you was so busy about that time that you couldn't go to investigate. That's how you guarded it—how you filled your trust."

She gazed fixedly at him and his gaze dropped. "You are determined to continue your insults," she said coldly.

He reddened. "I reckon you deserve them," he said sneeringly. "Taggart's makin' a fool of you. I heard him palaverin' to you last night. I followed him, but lost him. Then I got into the clearin' in the timber. I run into a man named Al Sharp, who'd been knifed by the Toltec. Him an' the Toltec had been detailed by Taggart to get the diagram. Sharp said Taggart knowed my dad had drawed one. Telza got it last night while you was talkin' to Taggart. Frame-up. Sharp tried to take it away from Telza, an' Telza knifed him. Sharp's dead. I buried him last night. Telza dropped the diagram. I got it. I reckon Telza has sloped. Then I met Taggart an' his dad. They reckoned they didn't like my company overmuch an' they walked home. Didn't even wait to take their horses."

She drew a breath which sounded strangely like relief.

"Well," she said; "it was fortunate that you happened to be there to get the idol."

"Yes," he drawled, with a suspicious grin; "I reckon you feel a whole lot like congratulatin' me."

"I do," she said. "Of course you were not to have the idol just yet, but it is better for you to have it before the time than that the Taggarts should get hold of it."

"Do you know where the idol is hid?" he asked.

She told him no, that she had never consulted the diagram.

"I reckon," he said, looking into her steady eyes, "that you're tellin' the truth. In that case it will be safe where it is, for a while. I'll be lookin' it up when I get hold of the money."

Her chin raised triumphantly. "You will not get that so easily," she said. "But," she added, interestedly, "now that you know where the idol is, why don't you get it and convert it into cash?"

He reddened and eyed her with a decidedly crestfallen air. "I ain't so much stuck on monkeyin' with them religious things," he admitted.

Again a doubt arose in his mind concerning her relations with Neal Taggart. The fact that she had not divulged the hiding place of the idol to him was proof that if he had been trying to deceive her he had not succeeded. This thought filled him with a sudden elation.

"Lately," he said, "it begins to look as though you was gettin' some sense. You're gettin' reasonable. I reckon you'll be a bang-up girl, give you time."

Her lips curled, but there was a flash of something in her eyes that he could not analyze. But he was sure that it wasn't anger or disapproval. Neither was it scorn. It seemed to him that it might have been mockery, mingled with satisfaction. Certainly there was mockery in her voice when she answered him.

"Indeed!" she said. "I presume I am to take that as a compliment?"

"But you will be a fool if you cotton up to Neal Taggart," he continued, paying no attention to her question. "I know men. Taggart's a no good fourflusher, an' no woman can be anything if she takes up with him."

She looked at him with a dazzling smile. In the smile were those qualities that he had noticed during his other conversations with her when he had accused her of meeting Taggart secretly—mirth, tempered with doubt. Also, just now there was enjoyment.

"I feel flattered to think that you are taking that much interest in me," she said. "But when I am in need of someone to lay down rules of conduct for me I shall let you know. At present I feel quite competent to take care of myself. But if you are very much worried, I don't mind telling you that I have not 'cottoned up' to Neal Taggart."

"What you meetin' him for, then?" he asked suspiciously.

"I have not met Neal Taggart since the day you made him apologize to me," she said slowly.

"Who are you meetin', then?" he demanded.

She looked straight at him. "I cannot answer that," she said.

His lips curled with disbelief, and her cheeks flushed a little.

"Can't you trust anybody?" she said.

"Why," she continued as he kept silent, "don't you think that if I had intended, as you said once before, to cheat you, to take *anything* that belongs to you, that I could have done so long ago? I had the diagram; I could have kept the idol, the money, the ranch. What could you have done; what could you do now? Don't you think it is about time for you to realize that you are hurting no one but yourself by harboring such black, dismal thoughts. Nobody is trying to cheat you—except probably the Taggarts. Everybody here is trying their best to be friendly to you, trying to aid in making those reforms which your father mentioned. Dade likes you; Bob loves you. And even my grandfather said the other day that you are not a bad fellow. You have been making progress, more than I expected you to make. But you must make more."

The mirth had died out of her eyes; she was deeply in earnest. Calumet could see that, and the knowledge kept him silent, hushed the half-formed sarcastic replies that were on his lips, made his suspicions seem brutal, preposterous, ridiculous. There was much feeling in her voice; he was astonished and awed at the change in her; he had not seen her like this before. Her reserve was gone, the disdain with it; there was naked sincerity in her glowing eyes, in her words, in her manner. He watched her, fascinated, as she continued:

"I think you can see now that if I had wanted to be dishonest you could not have stopped me. My honesty proven, what must have been my motive in staying here to take your insults, to submit to your boorishness? I will tell you; you may believe me or not, as you please. I was grateful to your father. I gave him my promise. He wanted me to make a man of you.

"When you first came here, and I saw what a burden I had assumed, I was afraid. But I saw that you did not intend to take advantage of me; that you weren't like a good many men—brutes who prey on unprotected women; that only your temper was wanton. And instead of fearing you I began to pity you. I saw promise in you; you had manly impulses, but you hadn't had your chance. I had faith in you. To a certain extent you have justified that faith. You have shown flashes of goodness of heart; you have exhibited generous, manly sympathies—to everybody but me. But I do not care [there was a suspicious moisture in her eyes and a queer tightening of the lips that gave the lie to this declaration] how you treat me. I intend to keep my promise to your father, no matter what you do. But I want to make you understand that I am not the kind of woman you take me to be—that I am not being made a fool of by Neal Taggart—or by any man!"

Calumet did not reply; the effect of this passionate defense of herself on him was deep and poignant, and words would not come to his lips. Truth had spoken to him—he knew it. At a stroke she had subdued him, humbled him. It was as though a light had suddenly been turned on him, showing him the mean, despicable side of him, contrasting it with the little good which had come into being—good which had been placed there, fostered, and cultivated into promise. Then the light had been as suddenly turned off, leaving him with a gnawing, impotent longing to be what she wanted him to be. Involuntarily, he took his hat off to her and bowed respectfully. Then he reached a swift hand into an inner pocket of his vest and withdrew it, holding out a paper to her. She took it and looked wonderingly at it. It was the diagram of the clearing in the timber clump showing where the idol was buried.

Her face paled, for she knew that his action in restoring the diagram to her was his tribute to her honesty, an evidence of his trust in her, despite his uttered suspicions. Also, it was his surrender.

She looked up, intending to thank him. He was walking away, and did not look around at her call.

CHAPTER XXI

HIS FATHER'S FRIEND

Betty did not see Calumet again that day, and only at mealtime on the day following. He had nothing to say to her at these times, though it was plain from the expression on his face when she covertly looked at him that he was thinking deeply. She hoped this were true; it was a good sign. On the morning of the third day he saddled the black horse and rode away, telling Bob, who happened to be near him when he departed, that he was going to Lazette.

It was fully two hours after supper when he returned. Malcolm, Dade, and Bob had gone to bed. In the kitchen, sitting beside the table, on which was a spotlessly clean tablecloth, with dishes set for one—she had saved Calumet's supper, and it was steaming in the warming-closet of the stove—Betty sat. She was mending Bob's stockings, and thinking of her life during the past few months—and Calumet. And when she heard the black come into the ranchhouse yard—she knew the black's gait already—she trembled a little, put aside her mending, and went to the window.

The moon threw a white light in the yard, and she saw Calumet dismount. When he did not turn the black into the corral, hitching him, instead, to one of the rails, without even removing the saddle, she suspected that something unusual had happened.

She was certain of it when she heard Calumet cross the porch with a rapid step, and if in her certainty there had been the slightest doubt, it disappeared when he opened the kitchen door.

He looked tired; he had evidently ridden hard, for the alkali dust was thick on his clothing; he was breathing fast, his eyes were burning with some deep emotion, his lips were grim and hard.

He closed the door and stood with his back against it, looking at her. Something had wrought a wonderful change in him. He was not the Calumet she had known—brutal, vicious, domineering, sneering; though he was laboring under some great excitement, suppressing it, so that to an eye less keen than hers it might have seemed that he had been undergoing some great physical exertion and was just recovering from it. It seemed to her that he had found himself; that that regeneration for which she had hoped had come—had taken place between the time he had left that morning and now.

She did not know that it had been a mighty struggle of three days' duration; that the transformation had been a slow, tortuous thing to him. She only knew that a great change had come over him; that, in spite of the evident strain which was upon him, there was something gentle, respectful, considerate, in his face, back of Its exterior hardness—a slumbering, triumphant something that made an instant appeal to her, lighting her eyes, coloring her face, making her heart beat with an unaccountable gladness.

"Oh," she said; "what has happened to you?"

"Nothin'," he answered, with a grave smile. "That is, nothin'—yet. Except that I've found out what a fool I've been. But I've found it out too late."

"No," she said, reaching the quick conclusion that he meant it was too late for him to complete his reformation; "it is never too late."

"I think I know what you mean," he answered. "But you've got it wrong. It's somethin' else. I've got to get out of here—got to hit the breeze out of the country. The sheriff is after me."

She took a step backward. "What for?" she asked breathlessly.

"For killin' Al Sharp."

"Al Sharp!" she exclaimed, staring at him in amazement. "Why, you told me that an Indian named Telza killed him!"

"That's what Sharp told me. The Taggarts claim I done it. They've swore out a warrant. I got wind of it an' I'm gettin' out. There's no use tryin' to fight the law in a case like this."

"But you didn't kill him!" she cried, stiffening defiantly. "You said you didn't, and I know you wouldn't lie. They can't prove that you did it!"

He laughed. "You're the only one that would believe me. Do you reckon I could prove that I didn't do it? There's two against one. The evidence is against me. The Taggarts found me in the clearing with Sharp. I had the knife. No one else was around. I buried Sharp. The Taggarts will swear against me. Where's my chance?"

She was silent, and he laughed again. "They've got me, I reckon—the Taggarts have. I fancied I was secure. I didn't think they'd try to pull off anything like this. Shows how much dependence a man can put in anything. They don't look like they had sense enough to think of such a thing."

He stepped away from the door and went to the table, looking down at the dishes she had set

out for him, then at her, with a regretful smile which brought a quick pang to her.

"Shucks," he said, more to himself than to her; "if this had happened three months ago I'd have been plumb amused, an' I'd have had a heap of fun with somebody before it could be got over with. Somehow, it don't seem to be so damned funny now.

"It's your fault, too," he went on, regarding her with a direct, level gaze. "Not that you got me into this mix-up, you understand—you're not to blame for a thing—but it's your fault that it don't seem funny to me. You've made me see things different."

"I am so sorry," she said, standing pale and rigid before him.

"Sorry that I'm seein' things different?" he said. "No?" at her quick, reproachful negative. "Well, then, sorry that this had to happen. Well, I'm sorry, too. You see," he added, the color reaching his face, "it struck me while I was ridin' over here that I wasn't goin' to be exactly tickled over leavin'. It's been seemin' like home to me for—well, for a longer time than I would have admitted three days ago, when I had that talk with you. Or, rather," he corrected, with a smile, "when you had that talk with me. There's a difference, ain't there? Anyways, there's a lot of things that I wouldn't have admitted three days ago. But I've got sense now—I've got a new viewpoint. An' somehow, what I'm goin' to tell you don't seem to come hard. Because it's the truth, I reckon. I've knowed it right along, but kept holdin' it back.

"Dade had me sized up right. He said I was a false alarm; that I'd been thinkin' of myself too much; that I'd forgot that there was other people in the world. He was right; I'd forgot that other people had feelings. But if he hadn't told me that them was your views I'd have salivated him. But I couldn't blame him for repeatin' things you'd said, because about that time I'd begun to do some thinkin' myself.

"In the first place, I found that I wasn't a whole lot proud of myself for guzzlin' your grandad, but I'd made a mistake an' I wasn't goin' to give you a chance to crow over me. I expect there's a lot of people do that, but they're on the wrong trail—it don't bring no peace to a man's mind. Then, I thought you was like all the rest of the women I'd known, an' when I found out that you wasn't, I thought you had the swelled head an' I figgered to take you down a peg. When I couldn't do that it made me sore. It made me feel some cheap when you showed me you trusted me, with me treatin' you like I did; but if it's any satisfaction to you, I'm tellin' you that all the time I was treatin' you mean I felt like kickin' myself.

"I reckon that's all. Don't get the idea that I'm doin' any mushin'. It's just the plain truth, an' I've had to tell you. That's why I came over here—I wanted to square things with you before I leave. I reckon if I'd stay here you'd never know how I feel about it."

She was staring at the floor, her face crimson, an emotion of deep gratitude and satisfaction filling her, though mingled with it was a queer sensation of regret. Her judgment of him had been vindicated; she had known all along that this moment would come, but, now that it had come, it was not as she had pictured it—there was discord where there should be harmony; something was lacking to make the situation perfect—he was going away.

She stood nervously tapping the floor with the toe of her shoe, hardly hearing his last words, almost forgetting that he was in the room until she saw his hand extended toward her. Then she looked up at him. There was a grave smile on his face.

"I reckon you'll shake hands with me," he said, "just to show that you ain't holdin' much against me. Well, that right," he said when she hesitated; "I don't deserve it."

Her hand went out; he looked at it, with a start, and then seized it quickly in both of his, squeezed it hard, his eyes aflame. He dropped it as quickly, and turned to the door, saying: "You're a brave little girl."

She stood silent until his hands were on the fastenings of the door.

"Wait!" she said. She attempted to smile, but some emotion stiffened her lips, stifling it. "You haven't had your supper," she said; "won't you eat if I get it ready?"

"No time," he said. "The law don't advertise its movements, as a usual thing, an' Toban's liable to be here any minute. An'," he added, a glint of the old hardness in his eyes, "I ain't lettin' him take me. It's only twenty miles to the line, an' the way I'm intendin' to travel I'll be over it before Toban can ketch me. I don't want him to ketch me—he was a friend of my dad's, an' puttin' him out of business wouldn't help me none."

"Will you be safe, then?" she asked fearfully.

"I reckon. But I won't be stoppin' at the line. I'm through here; there's nothin' here to hold me. I reckon I'll never come back this way. Shucks!" he added, leaving the door and coming back a little way into the room; "I expect I'm excited. I come near forgettin'. It's about the idol an' the money an' the ranch. I don't want any of them. They're yours. You've earned them an' you deserve them. Go to Las Vegas an' petition the court to turn the property over to you; tell the judge I flunked on the specifications."

"I don't want your property," she said in a strange voice.

"You've got to take it," he returned, with a quick look at her. "Here"—he drew a piece of paper and a short pencil from an inside pocket of his vest, and, walking to the table, wrote quickly, giving her the paper.

"I herewith renounce all claim to my father's property," it read; "I refuse the conditions of the will."

It was signed with his name. While he stood watching her, she tore the paper to small bits, scattering them on the floor.

"I think," she said, regarding him fixedly, "that you are not exactly chivalrous in leaving me this way; that you are more concerned over your own safety than over mine. What do you suppose will happen when the Taggarts discover that you have gone and that I am here alone?"

His eyes glinted with hatred. "The Taggarts," he laughed. "Did you think I was going to let them off so easy? I'm charged with one murder, ain't I? Well, after tonight there won't be any Taggarts to bother anybody."

"You mean to—" Her eyes widened with horror.

"I reckon," he said. "Did you think I was runnin' away without squarin' things with them?" There was a threat of death in his cold laugh.

While she stood with clenched hands, evidently moved by the threat in his manner and words, he said "So-long," shortly, and swung the door open.

She followed three or four steps, again calling upon him to "wait." He turned in the doorway and went slowly back to her. She was nervous, breathless, and he looked wonderingly at her.

"Wait just a minute," she said; "I have something to give you."

She darted into the sitting-room; he could hear her running up the stairs. She was gone a long time, so long a time that he grew impatient and paced the floor with long, hasty strides. He was certain that it was fully five minutes before she reappeared, and then her manner was more nervous than ever.

"You act," he said suspiciously, "as though you wanted to keep me here."

"No, no," she denied breathlessly, her eyes bright and her cheeks aflame. "How can you think that? I have brought you some money; you will need it." She had a leather bag in her hands, and she seized it by the bottom and turned out its contents—a score or more of twenty-dollar gold pieces.

"Take them," she said as he hesitated. And, not waiting for him to act, she began to gather them up. She was nervous, though, and dropped many of them several times, so that he felt that time would have been gained if she had not touched them. He returned them to the bag, with her help, and placed the bag in a pocket of his trousers. Then once more he said good-by to her.

This time, however, she stood between him and the door, and when he tried to step around her she changed her position so as to be always in front of him.

"Tell me where you are going?" she said.

"What do you want to know for?" he demanded.

"Just because," she said; "because I want to know."

His eyes lighted with a deep fire as he looked at her. She was very close to him; he felt her warm breath; saw her bosom heave rapidly, and a strange intoxication seized him.

"Shall I tell you?" he said, with sudden hoarseness, as though asking himself the question. He grasped her by the shoulders and looked closely at her, his eyes boring, probing, as though searching for some evidence of duplicity in hers. For an instant his gaze held. Then he laughed, softly, self-accusingly.

"I thought you was stringin' me—just for a minute," he said. "But you're true blue, an' I'll tell you. I'm goin' first to the Arrow to hand the Taggarts their pass-out checks. Then I'm hittin' the breeze to Durango. If you ever want me, send for me there, an' I'll come back to you, sheriff or no sheriff."

She put out a hand to detain him, but he seized it and pressed it to her side, the other with it. Then his arms went around her shoulders, she was crushed against him, and his lips met hers.

Then she was suddenly released, and he was at the door.

"Good-by," he said as he stood in the opening, the glare of light from the lamp showing his

face, pale, the eyes illumined with a fire that she had never seen in them; "I'm sorry it has to end this way—I was hopin' for somethin' different. You've made me almost a man."

Then the door closed and he was gone. She stood by the table for a few minutes, holding tightly to it for support, her eyes wide from excitement.

"Oh," she said, "if I could only have kept him here a few minutes longer!"

She walked to the door and stood in the opening, shading her eyes with her hands. He had not been gone long, but already he was riding the river trail; she saw him outlined in the moonlight, leaning a little forward in the saddle, the black running with a long, swift, sure stride. She watched them until a bend in the trail shut them from view, and then with a sob she bowed her head in her arms.

CHAPTER XXII

NEAL TAGGART VISITS

When a little later Betty heard hoof-beats in the ranchhouse yard—the sounds of a horseman making a leisurely approach—she left the door and went out upon the porch.

She knew who the horseman was; she had seen him from the window of her room when she had gone upstairs to get the money for Calumet. More than once she had seen the sheriff coming over the hill—the same hill upon which Calumet and Neal Taggart had fought their duel—and she recognized the familiar figure. On his previous visits to the ranchhouse, however, Toban had left his horse in the timber clump near the house. She was not surprised, though, to hear him coming into the ranchhouse yard tonight, for his errand now was different.

Toban had evidently intended to hitch his pony to the corral fence, for it was toward it that he was directing the animal, when he caught sight of Betty on the porch and rode up beside her.

"What's up?" he inquired, leaning over in the saddle and peering closely at her; "you look flustered. Where's Marston?"

"Gone," she told him.

He straightened. "Gone where?" he demanded.

"Away—forever," she said weakly. "He heard you were after him for—for killing that man Sharp—and he left."

Toban cursed. "So he got wind of it, did he? The Taggarts must have gassed about it. Marston told you, did he? Why didn't you keep him here? He didn't kill Sharp!"

"I know it," she said; "he told me he didn't, and I believed him. He said you had a warrant for his arrest; that you were coming for him, and I was afraid that if you met him out on the range somewhere there would be shooting. I knew if I could keep him here until you came you would be able to fix it up some way—to prove his innocence. I was so glad, when I ran upstairs to get some money for him and looked out of the window. For you were coming. But he wouldn't stay."

Toban dismounted and stood in front of her, his eyes probing into hers. "I've got evidence that he didn't kill Sharp," he said; "I saw the whole deal. But I reckon," he added, a subtle gleam in his eyes, "that it's just as well that he's gone—he was a heap of trouble while he was here, anyway, wasn't he?"

"No," she said quickly, defiantly; "he—" She broke off and looked at him with wide eyes. "Oh," she said with a quavering laugh; "you are poking fun at me. You liked him, too; you told me you did!"

"I reckon I like him," said Toban, his lips grimming; "I like him well enough not to let him pull his freight on account of the Taggarts. Why, damn it!" he added explosively; "I was his father's friend, an' I ain't seein' him lose everything he's got here when he's innocent. Which way did he go?"

There was a wild hope in her eyes; she was breathing fast. "Oh," she said; "are you going after him? He went to the Arrow—first. He told me he was going to kill the Taggarts. Then he is going to get out of the Territory. Oh, Toban, catch him—please! I—"

Toban laughed. "I ain't been blind, girl," he said; "the talks I've had with you in old Marston's office have wised me up to how things stand between you an' him. I'll ketch him, don't worry about that. That black horse of his is some horse, but he ain't got nothin' on my old dust-thrower,

an' I reckon that in fifteen miles—"

He was climbing into the saddle while talking, and at his last word he gave the spurs to his horse, a strong, clean-limbed bay, and was away in a cloud of dust.

Betty watched him, her hands clasped over her breast, her body rigid and tense, her eyes straining, until she saw him vanish around the bend in the trail; and then for a long time she stood on the porch, scanning the distant horizon, in the hope that she might again see Toban and be assured that nothing had happened to him. And when at last she saw a speck moving swiftly along a distant rise, she murmured a prayer and went into the house.

When she closed the kitchen door and stood against it, looking around the room, she was afflicted with a depressing sense of loss, and she realized fully how Calumet had grown into her life, and what it would mean to her if she lost him. He had been mean, cruel, and vicious, but he had awakened at last to a sense of his shortcomings; he was like a boy who had had no training, who had grown wild and ungovernable, but who, before it had become too late, had awakened to the futility, the absurdity, the falseness of it all, and was determined to begin anew. And she felt —as she had felt all along—even when she had seen him at his worst—that she must mother him, must help him to build up a new structure of self, must lift him, must give him what the world had so far denied him—his chance. And she sat at the table and leaned her head in her arms and prayed that Toban might overtake him before he reached the Arrow. For she did not want him to come back to her with the stain of their blood on his hands.

She was startled while sitting at the table, for she heard a sound from the sitting-room, and she got up to investigate. But it was only Bob, who, hearing the sounds made by Toban and herself, had come to investigate. She urged him to return to his room and to bed, and kissed him when he started up the stairs, so warmly that he looked at her in surprise.

She returned to the kitchen, sitting at the table and watching the clock. A half hour had elapsed since Toban's departure when she heard the faint beat of hoofs in the distance, and with wildly beating heart got up and went out on the porch.

For a moment she could not determine the direction from which the sounds came, but presently she saw a rider approaching from the direction of the river, and she stepped down from the porch and advanced to meet him. She feared at first that it was Toban returning alone, and she halted and stood with clenched hands, but as the rider came closer she saw it was not Toban but an entire stranger. She retreated to the porch and watched his approach.

He was a cowboy and he rode up to the edge of the porch confidently, calling to her when he came close enough to make himself heard.

"My name's Miller," he said, taking his hat off and showing her the face of a man of thirty —"Harvey Miller. Me an' my side-kicker was drivin' a bunch of Three Bar beeves to Lazette an' we was fools enough to run afoul of that quicksand at Double Fork, about five miles down the crick. We've bogged down about forty head an' I've come for help. You got any men around here?"

"Oh," she said; "how careless you were! Didn't you know the quicksand was there?"

"I ain't been runnin' this range a whole lot," said the puncher uneasily; "but I reckon even then I ought to be able to nose out a quicksand. But I didn't, an' there's forty beeves that's goin' to cow-heaven pretty soon if somethin' ain't done. If you've got any men around here which could give us a lift, we'd be pleased to thank you."

"Of course," she said. "Wait!"

She went into the house and to the stairs where she called to Dade and Malcolm, and presently, rubbing their eyes, the two came down. They were eager to assist the puncher in his trouble and without delay they caught up the two horses that Calumet had bought soon after his coming to the ranch, saddled and bridled them and rode out of the yard.

The unfortunate puncher did not wait for them. When they had announced their intention of helping him, he had told them that he would ride on ahead to help his partner, leaving them to follow as soon as they could.

"I reckon you know where it is," was his parting word to them. "Double Fork. I reckon I'll know it again when I see it," he added, grimly joking.

Betty watched Dade and Malcolm as they rode away. From the porch she could follow their movements until they traveled about a mile of the distance toward Double Fork. She saw them vanish into the wood, and when she could see them no longer she turned and went into the house.

She went to the chair in which she had previously been sitting, resting her arms on the table, but she was too nervous, too excited, to sit and she presently got up and stood, looking anxiously at the face of the clock on a shelf in a corner.

Toban had been gone a full hour, and she wondered if by this time he had overtaken Calumet, or whether Calumet was racing ahead of him on his way to execute vengeance upon the Taggarts. She was praying mutely that Toban might overtake him before this could happen when she heard a slight sound behind her and turned swiftly to see Neal Taggart standing in the doorway, grinning at her.

The room darkened before her eyes as she swayed weakly and caught at the table to support herself, and when she finally regained control of herself she forced herself to stand erect. There was a great fear in her heart, but she fought it down and faced Taggart with some semblance of dignity and composure.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded; "what do you want?"

Taggart's face wore an evil smile. Before answering her he fastened the door behind him, left it and went to the sitting-room door, peered quickly into the room and swung the door shut, barring it. Betty stood beside the table, watching him with a sort of fascination, a little color now in her face, though she lacked the power to speak or to interfere with Taggart's movements.

When he had barred the sitting-room door he came and stood beside the table, and there was a repulsive, insulting leer on his face as he looked down at her.

"Do you know what I came here for?" he said.

"No," she answered.

He reached out suddenly and grasped her hands, pulling her roughly over to him. She gave a startled cry and then stood silent before him, slender and white, a subdued little figure dwarfed by his huge bulk, seemingly helpless.

"I'll tell you," he said, the strange hoarseness of deep passion in his voice. "Me an' my dad are leavin' the country tonight. We sold the Arrow today, an' by this time tomorrow we'll be among the missin' in this section of the country. But there's some things to be done before we pull our freight. You think you've been damned slick about the idol—you an' that mule-kickin' shorthorn, Calumet Marston! But we've fooled you," he continued with a short, ugly laugh; "fooled you clean! Mebbe you know this, an' mebbe you don't. But I'm tellin' you. We set Telza, the Toltec, an' Sharp to get the diagram of the place where the idol is. They didn't get it because the clearin' ain't dug up any. Telza knifed Sharp an' he's sloped, likely figgerin' that this country ain't healthy for him any more. You've got the diagram an' I want it. I'm goin' to get it if I have to kill you to get it! Understand!

"You've got no chance," he sneered, as she looked around the room furtively, hopelessly. "We framed up a murder charge on Calumet and we've been in the timber since dark waitin' for the sheriff to come an' get him. We saw him hit the breeze toward the Arrow, an' we saw the sheriff go after him. Neither of them can be back here for hours yet, an' when they do get back I'll have done what I've set out to do."

He laughed again, harshly, triumphantly. "Dade an' Malcolm bothered me a bit until I thought of sendin' Harvey Miller here with that fairy tale about the forty beeves bogged down in Double Fork, but I reckon now—"

She gasped, comprehending the trap he had set for her, and his grip on her hands tightened.

"Dade an' Malcolm can't get back for an hour yet," he gloated, "an' by that time we'll be miles away." His voice changed from mockery to savage determination. "I want that diagram, an' I want it right now, or I'll tear you to pieces. Do you understand? I'll beat you up so's your own mother wouldn't know you." His grip tightened on her arms, they were twisted until she screamed with agony.

In this extremity her thoughts went to Calumet; she remembered vividly what he had said about the idol when she had asked him why he did not get it and convert it into cash. "I ain't so much stuck on monkeyin' with them religious things," he had said. And she was certain that if Calumet knew of her danger he would not have had her hesitate an instant in relinquishing the diagram to Taggart.

The idol had brought him nothing but evil, anyway, and she was certain that Calumet would not mourn its loss, even if Taggart were to be the gainer by it, if its possession were to entail punishment, death, perhaps, to her.

"Wait!" she cried as Taggart gave her arms an extra vicious twitch; "you may have it!"

He released her with a greedy, satisfied grin and stood crouching and alert while she turned her back to him and fumbled in her bodice, where she had kept the diagram since the discovery of its former hiding place by Telza.

She turned presently and gave him the paper, and he seized it eagerly and examined it, gloating over it.

"That's it," he said; "that's the clearing!"

She was holding her arms, where he had squeezed them, her face flushed with rage at the indignity he had offered her. She stood rigid, defiant.

"If that is all you came for, you may go," she said; "go instantly!"

He jammed the paper into his pocket and grinned at her.

"It ain't all," he said. "I owe you somethin' for the way you've treated me. I'm goin' to pay it. You've been too much of a lady to talk to me, but you'll live here with that—"

He reached suddenly out and seized her hands again, attempting to throw an arm around her. She evaded the arm and wrenched herself free, slipping past him and darting to the other side of the table. He stood opposite her, his hands on the table as he leaned toward her, grinning at her, brutally and bestially, and pausing so as to prolong his enjoyment of her predicament.

"I'll get you, damn you!" he said; "I've got the time and you can't get out." He seized the kerosene lamp on the table and walking backward, placed it on a shelf at the side of the wall near the stove. Then with a chuckle of satisfaction and mockery he again went to the table seizing its edge in his hands and shoving it against her so that she was forced to retreat from its advance.

She divined instantly that he intended to force her against one of the walls and thus corner her, and she opposed her strength to his, pushing with all her power against the table in an effort to retard its advance.

It was to no purpose, for he was a strong man and his passions were aroused, and in spite of her brave struggle the table continued to move and she to retreat before it.

"Oh!" she said, in a panic of fear and dread, her face flushed, her eyes wide and bright, her breath coming in great panting sobs; "Oh! you beast! You beast!"

He did not answer. His eyes were burning with a wanton fire, they glowed with the fierce, fell purpose of animal desire; he breathed shrilly, rapidly, gaspingly, though the strength that he had been compelled to use to overmatch hers had not been great.

She did not succeed in retarding the advance of the table, but she did succeed in directing its course a little, so that instead of backing her against the wall, as he no doubt intended to do, she brought up finally against the stove in the corner.

There was a fire in the stove—she had kept it going to keep Calumet's supper warm—and when she felt her body against it she reached around and secured a flat iron. The handle burned her hand, but she lifted it and hurled it with all her force at his head. He dodged, laughing derisively. She seized another and threw it, and this he dodged also. She was reaching for the teakettle when he shoved the table aside and lunged at her, and she dropped the kettle with a scream of horror and slipped around the stove to the wall near the sitting-room door, reaching the latter and trying frantically to unbar it.

She heard Bob's voice on the other side of the door; he was calling, "Betty! Betty!" in shrill, scared accents, and when Taggart leaped at her, seizing her by the shoulders as she worked with the fastenings of the door, she screamed to Bob to get the rifle from Malcolm's room, directing him to go out the front way, go around to the kitchen and shoot Taggart through one of the windows.

How long she struggled with Taggart there by the door she did not know. It might have been an hour or merely a minute. But she fought him, clawing at his face with her hands, biting him, kicking him. And she remembered that he was getting the better of her, that his breath was in her face and that he was dragging her toward the lamp on the shelf, evidently intending to extinguish it—that he had almost reached it, was, indeed, reaching a hand out to grasp it, when there came a flash from the window, the crash of breaking glass, and the roar of an exploding firearm.

She also remembered thinking that Bob had taken a desperate chance in shooting at Taggart when she was so close to him, and she had a vivid recollection of Taggart releasing her and staggering back without uttering a sound. She caught a glimpse of his face as he sank to the floor; there was a gaping hole in his forehead and his eyes were set and staring with an expression of awful horror and astonishment. Then the kitchen darkened, she felt the floor rising to meet her, and she knew no more.

CHAPTER XXIII

The first sound that Betty heard when consciousness began to return to her was a loud pounding at the kitchen door.

She had fallen to the floor just beneath the shelf on which the lamp sat, and she raised herself on an elbow and looked around. At first she did not remember what had happened, and then she saw Taggart, lying face upward on the floor near her, the frightful hole in his forehead, and she shuddered as recollection in a sickening flood came to her. Bob, dear Bob, had not failed her.

She got up, trembling a little, breathing a prayer of thankfulness, shrinking from the Thing that lay on the floor at her feet with its horror-stricken eyes staring straight up at the ceiling, making her way to the kitchen door, for the pounding had grown louder and more insistent, and she could hear a voice calling hoarsely to her.

But it did not seem to be Bob's voice; it was deeper and more resonant, and vibrated clearly, strongly, and with passion. It was strangely familiar, though, and she shook a little with a nameless anxiety and anticipation as she fumbled at the fastenings of the door and swung it open.

It was not Bob, but Calumet, who stepped in. One of his heavy pistols was in his right hand; with the left he had helped her to swing the door open, and he stood, for the first brief instant following his entrance, his arms extended, gazing sharply at Taggart. Then, quickly, apparently satisfied that he need have no concern for his enemy, he turned to Betty, placed both hands on her shoulders—the heavy pistol in his right resting on her—she felt the warmth of the barrel as it touched the thin material of her dress and knew then that it had been he who had fired the shot that had been the undoing of her assailant—and holding her away from him a little peered searchingly at her.

Calumet stepped in

[Illustration: Calumet stepped in.]

His face was pale, his lips stiff and white, and his eyes were alight with the wanton fire that she had seen in them many times, though now there was something added to their expression—concern and thankfulness.

"God!" he said, after a little space, during which she looked at him with shining eyes. She no longer gave any thought to Taggart; the struggle with him was an already fading nightmare in her recollection; he had been eliminated, destroyed, by the man who stood before her—by the man whose presence in the kitchen now stirred her to an emotion that she had never before experienced—by the man who had come back to her. And that was all that she had cared for—that he would come back.

With a short laugh he released her and stepped over to where Taggart lay, looking down at him with a cold, satisfied smile.

"I reckon you won't bother nobody any more," he said.

He turned to Betty, the pale stiffness of his lips softening a little as she smiled at him.

"I want to thank you," he said, "for sendin' Toban after me. He caught me. I wasn't ridin' so fast an' I heard him comin'. I knowed who it was, an' stopped to have it out with him. He yelled that he didn't want me; that you'd sent him after me. We met Dade an' Malcolm—we'd passed Double Fork an' nothin' was bogged down. So we knowed somebody'd framed somethin' up. I come on ahead." He grinned. "Toban's been braggin' some about his horse, but I reckon that don't go any more. That black horse can run." He indicated Taggart. "I reckon he come here just to bother you," he said.

She told him about the diagram and he started, stepping quickly to where Taggart lay, searching in his pockets until he found the paper.

Then he went to the door. Standing in it, he looked as he had looked that day when he had humiliated Neal Taggart in her presence. The gentleness which she had seen in him some hours before—and which she had welcomed—had disappeared; his lips had become stiff and pale again, his eyes were narrowed and brilliant with the old destroying fire. She grew rigid and drew a deep, quivering breath, for she saw that the pistol was still in his hand.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I reckon old Taggart will still be waitin' in the timber grove," he said with a short, grim laugh. "They've bothered me enough. I'm goin' to send him where I sent his coyote son."

At that word she was close to him, her hands on his shoulders.

"Don't!" she pleaded; "please don't!" She shuddered and cast a quick, shrinking glance at the man on the floor. "There has been enough trouble tonight," she said. "You stay here!" she commanded, trying to pull him away from the door, but not succeeding.

He seized her face with his hands in much the same manner in which he had seized it in his father's office on the night of his return to the Lazy Y—she felt the cold stock of the pistol against her cheek and shuddered again. A new light had leaped into his eyes—the suspicion that she had seen there many times before.

"Are you wantin' old Taggart to get away with the idol?" he demanded.

"He can't!" she denied. "He hasn't the diagram, has he? You have just put it in your pocket!"

A quick embarrassment swept over him; he dropped his hands from her face. "I reckon that's right," he admitted. "But I'm goin' to' send him over the divide, idol or no idol."

"He won't be in the timber grove," she persisted; "he must have heard the shooting and he wouldn't stay."

"I reckon he won't be able to run away from that black horse," he laughed. "I'll ketch him before he gets very far."

"You shan't go!" she declared, making a gesture of impotence. "Don't you see?" she added. "It isn't Taggart that I care about—it's you. I don't want you to be shot—killed. I won't have it! If Taggart hasn't gone by this time he will be hidden somewhere over there and when he sees you he will shoot you!"

"Well," he said, watching her face with a curious smile; "I'm takin' a look, anyway." In spite of her efforts to prevent him he stepped over the threshold. She was about to follow him when she saw him wheel swiftly, his pistol at a poise as his gaze fell upon something outside the ranchhouse. And then she saw him smile.

"It's Bob," he said; "with a rifle." And he helped the boy, white of face and trembling, though with the light of stern resolution in his eyes, into the kitchen.

"Bob'll watch you," he said; "so's nothin' will happen to you. Besides—" he leaned forward in a listening attitude; "Toban an' the boys are comin'. I reckon what I'm goin' to do won't take me long—if Taggart's in the timber."

He stepped down and vanished around the corner of the ranchhouse.

He had scarcely gone before there was a clatter of hoofs in the ranchhouse yard, a horse dashed up to the edge of the porch, came to a sliding halt and the lank figure of Toban appeared before the door in which Betty was standing.

He looked at her, noted her white face, and peered over her shoulder at Bob, with the rifle, at Taggart on the floor.

"Holy smoke!" he said; "what's happened?"

She told him quickly, in short, brief sentences; her eyes glowing with fear. He tried to squeeze past her to get into the kitchen, but she prevented him, blocking the doorway, pushing hysterically against him with her hands.

"Calumet has gone to the timber grove—to the clearing—to look for Tom Taggart. Taggart will ambush him, will kill him! I don't want him killed! Go to him, Toban—get him to come back!"

"Shucks," said Toban, grinning; "I reckon you don't need to worry none. If Taggart's over in the timber an' he sees Calumet he'll just naturally forget he's got a gun. But if it'll ease your mind any, I'll go after him. Damn his hide, anyway!" he chuckled. "I was braggin' up my cayuse to him, an' after we met Dade an' Malcolm he run plumb away from me. Ride! Holy smoke!"

He crossed the porch, leaped into the saddle and disappeared amid a clatter of hoofs.

Betty stood rigid in the doorway, listening—dreading to hear that which she expected to hear —the sound of a pistol shot which would tell her that Calumet and Taggart had met.

But no sound reached her ears from the direction of the timber grove. She heard another sound presently—the faint beat of hoofs that grew more distinct each second. It was Dade and Malcolm coming, she knew, and when they finally rode up and Dade flung himself from the saddle and darted to her side she was paler than at any time since her first surprise of the night.

Again she was forced to tell her story. And after it was finished, and she had watched Dade and Malcolm carry Neal Taggart from the room, she went over to where Bob sat, took him by the shoulder and led him to one of the kitchen windows, and there, holding him close to her, her face white, she stared with dreading, anxious eyes through the glass toward the timber clump. She would have gone out to see for herself, but she knew that she could do nothing. If he did not come back she knew that she would not want to stay at the Lazy Y any longer; she knew that without him—

She no longer weighed him in the balances of her affection as she stood there by the window, she did not critically array his good qualities against the bad. She had passed that point now. She merely wanted him. That was all—she just wanted him. And when at last she saw him coming; heard his voice, she hugged Bob closer to her, and with her face against his sobbed silently.

A few minutes after he left the ranchhouse Calumet was in the clearing in the timber grove, standing over the body of a man who lay face upward beside a freshly-dug hole at the edge of a mesquite clump. He was still standing there when a few minutes later Toban came clattering up on his horse. The sheriff dismounted and stood beside him.

Calumet gave Toban one look and then spoke shortly:

"Taggart," he said.

"Lord!" said Toban, in an awed voice; "what in blazes did you do to him? I didn't hear no shootin'! Is he dead?"

Both kneeled over the prone figure and Calumet pointed to the haft of a knife that was buried deep in the body near the heart.

"Telza's," said Calumet, as he examined the handle. "I dropped it here the other night; the night Sharp was killed."

"Correct," said Toban; "I saw you drop it." He smiled at the quick, inquiring glance Calumet gave him.

"I was comin' through here after tendin' to some business an' I saw Telza knife Sharp. I piled onto Telza an' beat him up a little. Lordy, how that little copper-skinned devil did fight! But I squelched him. I heard some one comin', thought it was one of Taggarts, an' dragged Telza behind that scrub brush over there. I saw you come, but I wasn't figgerin' on makin' any explanations for my bein' around the Lazy Y at that time of the night, an' besides I saw the Taggarts sneakin' up on you. While they was gassin' to you I had one knee on Telza's windpipe an' my rifle pointin' in the general direction of the Taggarts, figgerin' that if they tried to start anything I'd beat them to it. But as it turned out it wasn't necessary. I sure appreciated your tender-heartedness toward them poor dumb brutes of the Taggarts.

"After you set the Taggarts to walkin' home, I took Telza to Lazette an' locked him up for murderin' Sharp."

"I reckon, then," said Calumet, a puzzled frown wrinkling his forehead as he looked from Taggart to the freshly dug hole; "that somebody else killed Taggart. It was someone who knew where the idol was, too—he'd been diggin' for it."

"I reckon you've got me," said Toban. "Sharp an' Telza an' you an' Betty is the only one's that

ever saw the diagram. I saw you pick it up from where Telza dropped it when I was maulin' him. I know you didn't do any diggin' for the idol; I know Betty wouldn't; an' Sharp's dead, an' Telza's in jail—"

There was a clatter of hoofs from the direction of the ranchhouse. Both men turned to confront a horseman who was coming rapidly toward them, and as he came closer Toban cried out in surprise:

"Ed Bernse!" he said; "what in thunder are you doin' here?"

"Trailin' a jail breaker!" said the latter. "That copper-skinned weazel we had in there slipped out some way. He stole a horse an' come in this direction. Got an hour's start of me!"

Calumet laughed shortly and turned to the new-made excavation, making a thorough examination of it.

At its bottom was a square impression, a mold such as would be left by the removal of a box. Calumet stood up and grinned at Toban.

"The idol's gone," he said. "Telza's got it. You go back to Lazette," he said to Bernse, "an' tell the man who owns the horse that Calumet Marston will be glad to pay for it—he's that damned glad he's got rid of the idol."

Followed by Bernse, Calumet and Toban returned to the ranchhouse. When they neared it they were met by Dade and Malcolm, bearing between them the body of Neal Taggart. Calumet directed them to the clearing, telling them briefly what they would find there, and then, with Toban and Bernse, continued on to the ranchhouse.

Bernse hesitated at the door. "I reckon I'll be lightin' out for town," he said to the sheriff.

"Wait," said the sheriff; "I'll be goin' that way myself, directly."

Calumet had preceded Toban. As the latter was speaking to Bernse, Calumet stood before Betty, who, with Bob, had moved to the sitting-room door and was standing, pale, her eyes moist and brilliant with the depth of her emotions.

Briefly, he told her what he had found in the clearing.

"And the idol's gone," he concluded. "Telza's got it."

"Thank God!" she exclaimed, devoutly.

"I reckon," came Toban's voice, as he stepped across the kitchen floor toward them, "that we'd better bring this here idol business to an end. Mebbe it's bothered you folks a heap, but it's had me sorta uneasy, too." He grinned at Betty. "Mebbe you'd better show him his dad's last letter," he suggested. "I reckon it'll let me out of this deal. An' I'm sure wantin' to go back home."

Betty vanished into the sitting-room in an instant, and presently returned bearing an envelope of the shape and size which had contained all of the elder Marston's previous communications to Calumet. She passed it over to the latter and she and the sheriff watched him while he read.

"MY DEAR SON: If you receive this you will understand that by this time Betty is satisfied that you have qualified for your heritage. I thank you and wish I were there to shake your hand, to look into your eyes and tell you how glad I am for your sake.

"As soon as you have your affairs in shape I want you to marry Betty—if she will have you. I think she will, for she is in love with your picture.

"By this time you will know that I didn't leave Betty alone to cope with the Taggarts. If Dave Toban has kept his word—and I know he has—he has visited the Lazy Y pretty often. I didn't want you to know that he was back of Betty, and so I have told him to visit her secretly. He will give you what money is left in the bank at Las Vegas—we thought it would be safer over there.

"I want to thank you again. God bless you.

"Your father,
"JAMES MARSTON."

Calumet slowly folded the letter and placed it into a pocket. He looked at Toban, a glint of reproach in his eyes.

"So, it was you that I kept hearin' in the office—nights," he said.

"I reckon," said Toban. He looked at Betty and grinned.

Calumet also looked at her. His face was sober.

"I reckon I've been some fool," he said. "But I was more than a fool when I thought—"

"I didn't blame you much for that," smiled Betty. "You see, both times you heard us talking it happened that Taggart was somewhere in the vicinity, and—"

"Well," interrupted Toban with a grin; "I reckon you two will be able to get along without any outside interference, now."

They both watched in silence as he went to the door and stepped outside. He halted and looked at them, whereat they both reddened. Then he grinned widely and was gone.

Betty stood at one side of the sitting-room door, Calumet at the other. Both were in the kitchen. Bob, also, was in the kitchen, though Calumet and Betty did not see him; so it appeared to Bob. Having some recollection of a certain light in Betty's eyes on the night that Calumet had brought home the puppy, Bob's wisdom impelled him to compare it with the light that was in them now, and he suspected—he knew—

And so, very gently, very quietly, with infinite care and patience, lest they become aware of his presence, he edged toward the kitchen door, his rifle in hand. Still they did not seem to notice him, and so he passed through the door, into the dining-room, backed to the stairs, and so left them.

The silence between Betty and Calumet continued, and they still stood where they had stood when Bob had stolen away, for they heard sounds outside that warned them of the approach of Dade and Malcolm.

But it seemed they did not see Dade and Malcolm stop at one of the kitchen windows, and certainly they did not hear the whispered conversation that was carried on between the two.

"Shucks," said Dade; "it begins to look like Cal an' Betty's quarrel is—"

"I reckon we won't go in," decided Malcolm; "not right now. Mebbe in an hour, or so. Let's go down to the bunkhouse and play a little pitch."

They were all alone now. And Love had not been blind to the stealthy activities that had been carried on around it.

Betty turned her head and looked at Calumet. He smiled at her—it was the smile of a man who has won a battle with something more than the material things; it was the smile of a man who has conquered self—the smile of the ruler who knows the weakness of the citadel he has taken and plans its strengthening. It was the smile of the master who realizes the potent influence of the ally who has aided in his exaltation and who meditates reward through the simple method of bestowing upon the ally without reservation that citadel which she has helped to take and which, needless to say, she prizes. But it was something more, too, that smile. It was the smile of the mere Man—the man, repentant, humble, petitioning to the woman he has selected as his mate.

"I reckon," he said; "that they all thought we wanted to be alone."

But the ally was not prepared for this precipitate bestowal of reward, and as she blushed and looked down at the toe of her shoe, sticking out from beneath the hem of her skirt, she looked little like a person who had conducted a bitter war for the master who stood near her.

"Oh," she said; "did you hear them?"

"I reckon I heard them," he said. He went closer to her. "They're wise—Dade an' Malcolm. Bob, too. Wiser than me. But I'm gettin' sense, an' I'll come pretty close to bein' a man—give me time. All I need is a boss. An' if you—"

"I reckon," said Dade, stretching himself an hour later, "that we'll turn in. That brandin' today, an' that ridin' tonight has bushed me—kinda."

Malcolm agreed and they stepped to the bunkhouse door.

The moonlight threw a mellow glare upon the porch of the ranchhouse near the kitchen door. It bathed in its effulgent flood two figures, the boss and the master, who were sitting close together—very close together—on the porch.

The two figures came into instant focus in Dade's vision. He stepped back with a amused growl and gave place to Malcolm, who also looked.

Silently they went back into the bunkhouse.

"I reckon," suggested Dade, from the darkness, "that if we're figgerin' to go to bed we'll have

to bunk right here. There's no tellin' when them two will get through mushin'. An' it's been too hard a tussle for them to have us disturbin' them now."

From the porch there came a low protest from the ally.

"Don't, Cal," she said; "don't you see that Dade and Malcolm are watching us?"

"Jealous, I guess," he laughed. "Well, let them watch. I reckon, if they're around here for any time, after this, they'll see me kissin' you plenty more."

THE END

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