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Author: Ridgwell Cullum

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THE FORFEIT

by

RIDGWELL CULLUM

Author of

"The Night Riders," "The Way of The Strong," "The Trail of The Axe,"
Etc.

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THE FORFEIT

CHAPTER I

AT RAINBOW HILL VALLEY

A companionable silence prevailed in the room. At intervals it was broken, but only by the rustle of paper or the striking of a match. The heavy breathing, almost amounting to a snore, of one of the two men, and the inarticulate protests of a laboring "rocker" chair—these things were only a part of it.

The man at the table was deeply immersed in a miniature sea of calculations. His fair brows were drawn in deep concentration. Frequently he was at great pains to relight a pipe which contained nothing but charred remnants of tobacco and a moist, unsmokable mixture which afforded only a somewhat offensive taste and aroma.

The partner in this companionship overflowed an undersized "rocker," which withstood, with supreme heroism, the overwhelming forces of its invader. But its sufferings, under the rhythmic rise and fall imposed upon it, found expression at intervals, although they failed to inspire the least sympathy. The heedless giant's whole attention seemed to be absorbed in the personality and effort of his friend.

Finally the latter raised a pair of deep blue eyes. Following upon a sigh, he thrust his papers aside with a brusque movement of relief. Then he raised a hand to his broad forehead and smoothed his disheveled fair hair, which seemed to have undergone some upheaval as a result of the mental disturbance his efforts had inspired in the brain beneath. The handsome eyes smiled a reassuring smile into the rugged face of his friend.

"Well?" he enquired, without seeming to desire a reply.

"Wal?" echoed the gruff voice of the man in the rocker.

"It's done."

"So—I guessed."

The patient amusement in the twinkling eyes of the man in the rocker was good to see. There was confidence, too, in his regard of the younger man.

"Can we do it—sure?" he enquired, as the other remained silent.

"Without a worry."

"Then dope it out, boy. The easiest thing in the world is handin' out dollars on a right enterprise. I don't know nothin' better—except it is takin' 'em in on the same sort o' play."

Jeffrey Masters smiled more broadly into his friend's good-humored face.

"Five years back, handing out twenty thousand dollars would have given us a nightmare, even on a right proposition," he said. "It isn't that way now. Guess we'll sleep on this thing like new-born babes with our tanks filled right. Nat Williams is out to sell quick, and if we're bright, it's up to us to buy quick. For twenty thousand dollars," he proceeded, referring to his figures, "we get his house, barns, corrals, and all his rolling stock. His growing crops and machinery. The bunch of old cows and calves he's pleased to call his 'herds.' Also three teams of Shire-bred heavy draft horses, and six hundred and forty acres of first-class wheat land and grazing that only needs capital and hustle to set right on top. I don't guess it'll worry us any to hand it all it needs that way. This buy will join up my 'O——' territory with your 'T.T.' grazing, and will turn the combination into one of the finest ranching propositions west of Calthorpe, and one which even Montana needs to be proud of."

He leaned back in his chair with a certain air of satisfaction. But there was just a shade of anxiety, too, in the glance with which he favored his friend. However, he need have felt no misgivings. Bud Tristram had none. He understood the keen business brain underlying his friend's tumbled fair hair. Moreover, Jeff, who was only half the older man's age, was regarded with something like parental affection.

They had fought their way up together from obscure beginnings to their present affluence, as the owners of the "T.T." ranch and the "O——" ranch respectively. They had been partners in all but name. Now they contemplated a definite deed of that nature. It was a consummation which the older man had

looked forward to ever since he first lent a hand to his new and youthful neighbor. It was a consummation which Jeffrey, with acute foresight and honest purpose, had set himself to achieve. If the older man regarded him with almost parental affection, that regard was fully reciprocated. The business conference between them had for its purpose their mutual advantage, and both men were perfectly aware of the fact.

But the thought that slightly worried the younger man was the ease, the unconcern of his future partner's attitude. It disquieted him because it increased his responsibility. But long ago he had learned the generous nature of the Great Bud. Long ago he had realized his trusting simplicity. Now he would have preferred a keen cross-examination of his statement. But none was forthcoming, and he was forced to continue in face of the silent acceptance.

"Bud, old friend, I wish I could get you interested in—figures. And I guess they surely are interesting, when you apply them to our own concerns."

But Bud remained unmoved. He stretched himself in an ecstasy of ease, raising his great arms above his grizzled head in profound enjoyment of his bodily comfort.

He shook his head.

"Guess I know a steer. Guess I know grass when I see it. I wouldn't say there's a brand in Montana I ain't familiar with. But figgers—sums—they're hell. An' I don't guess I'm yearning for hell anyway. Figgers is a sort o' paradise to you. You're built that way. Say, I don't calc'late to rob you of a thing—not even paradise. We'll take your figgers as they stand."

Jeffrey Masters shook his head.

"They're right, sure. But it's no sort of way to talk business."

"Business talk always makes me sweat."

It was quite impossible. Jeffrey was growing impatient. A frown settled upon his broad brow, and the man in the rocker watched it with amused eyes.

Quite suddenly the younger man's impatience broke forth into verbal protest.

"Say, you make me mad. Was there ever such a feller looking for sharps to play him? How do you know I'm not out to beat you? Why, I could roll you for every dollar you possess without lying awake five minutes at night. It's not fair, Bud. It's not fair to me—to you—to your little Nan—"

"What's not fair to Nan?"

Bud's twinkling eyes shot round upon the open French window with an alertness scarcely to be expected in a man of such apparent mental indolence. Jeffrey's eyes cleared of their hot impatience as they sought a similar direction. The gaze of both men encountered the picture of a brown-eyed, brown-haired girl of exquisite proportions, standing framed in the open window. She was clad in a riding suit of light material, with a long-skirted coat which obviously concealed the divided skirt beneath. Her long, brown top boots were white with dust of the trail, and her vicious-looking Mexican spurs hung loosely upon her heels. Her eyes were bright with intelligence and good humor, and her pretty oval face smiled out from under the wide brim of an ample prairie hat.

Jeff began to laugh.

"It's your crazy old father, Nan," he cried. "Say, just look at him. Feast your eyes on him. Can you beat it? Here we are right up to our necks in an epoch-making business proposition and he don't concern himself two whoops. Was there ever such a bunch of simple trusting folly as is rolled up in that six feet three of good-hearted honesty? *That's* what's not fair to—Nan."

The girl came and laid a protecting hand upon the flannel-clad shoulders of her father. Just for a moment her laughing eyes gazed affectionately down upon the recumbent form of the only parent she possessed, and whom she idolized. He was stretched out luxuriously, his great be-chapped legs reaching to the table leg as a support to hold the rocker at a comfortable poise. His shirt sleeves were rolled up displaying a pair of arms like legs of mutton. The beadwork wristlets were held fixed in their position by the distended muscles beneath them. She was proud of him, this father who went through the world trusting human nature, and handling cattle as only an artist in his profession can handle them.

Then her dancing eyes sought the face of Jeffrey Masters. Her smile remained, but a subtle something crept into their depths as she surveyed it. It was the handsome, clean-cut face of a

purposeful man. There was a straight-forward directness in the gaze of his blue eyes. It was the face of a man who has no fear, physical or moral. It was almost too uncompromising in its fearlessness.

Nan knew its every line by heart. She had thought of it, dreamed of it, since the time when she had first realized that a woman's life is wholly incomplete without the care of a man upon her hands. Sometimes she had felt that Jeffrey Masters possessed depths which could never be fathomed. Depths of strength, of resource, and all those qualities which make for success. Sometimes she even went further, when her analytical faculties—which she possessed in an unusual degree—were most active. She felt that the possession of all these firm qualities had rather smothered, to an extent, the gentler emotions of the human nature in him. He was strong, passionate, with a conscience of an almost puritanical order, and somehow she felt that a little softening, a little leavening of human weakness would have been all to the good. But this understanding made no difference to her woman's regard, unless it were to strengthen it to a sort of gentle worship such as woman is always ready to yield to strength. It required no effort upon her part to picture this man in the heroic mould of a Spartan warrior.

"*That*," she replied, with a whimsical smile, "is a man, who most generally seems to fancy his own way of doing things." Then she shook her head as her arm slipped protectingly around the big man's bronzed neck. "I don't guess a woman's argument ever made a man see things different yet. What's he done, Jeff?"

Jeff laughed without humor.

"Done?" he exclaimed. Then, with a shake of the head: "It's not what he's done. Guess it's what he hasn't done, and what he don't seem to figure to do. I'd kind of raised a hope when I saw you in the window. But—well, it was only her father's daughter that came in, I guess."

Then he drew his papers toward him again, and glanced seriously at the figures.

"It's Nat's farm," he explained. "And it's the thing we've been waiting on years. We're getting it fixed right, and your Bud's just about as much help as a deaf mute at a talking bee. I hand him figgers, and—and he smiles, just smiles. I hand him facts, and—he keeps on smiling. It's the kind of smile you most generally see on a dog-tired feller's face when you hand him a funny story. He don't care a cuss anyway. He's figuring to hand Nat ten thousand dollars with no more kick than a government spending public money. He don't kick reasonably or unreasonably, and I'd gamble you a new hat he hasn't a notion what he's getting for it. It makes me feel like a 'hold-up,' and I say it's not fair to me—nor to himself—nor to—you."

Jeff was serious enough. In such affairs it would have been difficult to find him otherwise. Nan understood. These two men had long been her profound study. Her smiling regard remained unchanging while the man was talking. When he ceased she bent over her father in a caressing fashion.

"He'd lose his bet. He surely would, daddy dear, wouldn't he? But we really need to answer, don't we? He'd think we were both fools, else. He wouldn't like it either. Say, daddy, shall—shall I talk?"

Bud chuckled comfortably.

"I'd hate to stop you, Nan."

Nan smiled contentedly, and raised a pair of challenging eyes in the direction of the table.

"My daddy thinks I talk too much," she said. "But I s'pose that's my way—most girls talk when they get the chance—just the same as it's his way talking too little. But neither ways suggest a fool, Jeff. And anyway the only sort of fool you need to worry with is the fool who don't see and act in a way of his own. My daddy's acting in his own way, and I guess it isn't his way, working overtime with the band playing. If you're dead fixed on having a gamble, it's a new hat to a new and less smelly pipe than you're smoking now, that he knows the inside of this deal to the last cent's worth. But what's more, Jeff, he knows you, and knows you couldn't 'hold-up' a Sunday-school kiddie without going and telling its teacher first. And now the mail."

She left her father's side and moved to the table, a very picture of gentle decision and practice.

"Three for you, my daddy," she cried, dropping three letters on his chest, where his shirt gaped just below his neck. Then she turned about. "Only one for you, honest Jeff. Just one, and I've guessed at the writing till I'm sick."

Jeff was smiling up with frank amusement.

"Say, that's great. It's got you beat. Well," he added, as he picked up the letter, "I'll just keep you

right on guessing. Where's yours?"

The girl laughed merrily.

"Had mine. I don't guess any right-acting girl would sit easy in the saddle twelve miles without reading her mail. Say——" she paused. The smile had died out of her eyes. Jeff's expression had abruptly changed. He was regarding the address on his envelope with startled seriousness. Then she went on quickly: "Guess I'll wait till you're both through. I'll get right out an' off-saddle. Then for supper."

In the parlor the silence remained unbroken. It became unduly prolonged. Bud finished his mail. Jeff was still reading his. It was not a long letter. He had already read it twice through. Now he again turned back to its beginning.

Bud observed him closely. He saw the knitted brows. The curious set of the man's lips. His absorbed interest. Nor did he interrupt. He contented himself with that patient waiting which betrayed much of the solid strength of his character.

Presently Jeff looked up. But his eyes did not seek his friend. They were turned upon the open window, his gaze wandering out toward the distant hills, which marked the confines of Rainbow Hill Valley.

Still the other refrained from speech. Finally it was Jeff, himself, who broke the silence.

"Bud," he began, without withdrawing his gaze from the scene beyond the window, "it's a letter from Ronald. It's the second word I've had of him in—five years."

Bud nodded.

"The twin."

Jeff's gaze came slowly, thoughtfully back to Bud's face.

"Sure. We're twins."

An unusual softness crept into the eyes of the man at the table.

"I'm kind of wondering, Bud," he went on presently, "wondering if you get all that means—means to me. I don't know." He passed a hand slowly across his brow, as though to brush aside growing perplexities. "I don't seem to get all it means myself. No, I don't. The whole thing's so queer," he went on, with a nervous, restless movement in his chair. "It sort of seems crazy, too." He laughed meaninglessly. Then he suddenly leaned forward with flushed cheeks and hot eyes. "Bud, don't think me crazy, but—well, say, I'm only part of me without Ronny near. Oh, I don't guess that explains. But it's what I feel—and I can't just talk it right. You don't get it? No, of course you don't. I can see it in your eyes. You think I'm right for the foolish-house. Listen. Is it possible—is it ordinary reason that when twins are born, the nature of one normal child can be divided between the two, one having what the other feller lacks? There, that's how I feel about it. It's the way it is with Ronny and me. All that he is not, I am. I haven't one of his better features. Say, Bud, I'm a pretty cold sort of man. I'd have made a fair sort of Puritan if I'd been on earth a century or so ago. I've little enough humor. I don't care for play. I don't care for half the fun most folks see in life. I'd sooner work than eat. And Ronny—well, Ronny isn't just any of those things. He's just a boy, full of every sort of human notion that's opposite to mine. And I'm crazy for him. Say, Bud, I love him better than anything in life. If anything happened to that boy, why, I guess all that's worth while in me would die plumb out."

He paused. Bud's shrewd eyes remained studying the emotion-lit features of this usually unemotional man. He felt he was being admitted to a peep at a soul that was rarely, if ever, bared, and he wondered at the reason. Was it a calculated display, or was it the outlet for an emotion altogether too strong for the man's restraint? He inclined to the former belief.

"Nothin' *has* happened?" he enquired presently, in his direct fashion.

Jeff laughed without any visible sign of lightness.

"No," he said. Then with a deep sigh. "Thank God nothing has happened. But——"

"Then the trouble——?"

"The trouble? Say, Bud, try to get it all as I see it. It's difficult. The boy's away up trapping and shooting—for a living—somewhere in the Cathills. He's away there living on hard pan, while I'm here steadily traipsing on with you to a big pile. Remember he's my other—half. Do you know how I feel? No,

you can't. Say, he's as merry as I am—dour. He's as fond of life, and play, and the good things of the world as I'm indifferent to 'em. He's reckless—he's *weak*." Suddenly Jeff's eyes lit. A great passion seemed to surge through his whole body. "Bud, I want him here. I want to be always around to help him when he gets bumping into potholes. It's that weakness that sets me crazy when I think. He ain't made for the dreary grind of the life we live. That's why he cut it out when I came here. Well there's no grind for him now, and I want to have him come along and share in with me. That's why I'm talking now. From this moment on we're a great proposition in the ranching world, and I want Ronny to share in with me."

Bud nodded.

"I get it," he said. Then he added: "You're a great feller."

"Great! Cut it out, Bud," Jeff cried sharply. "It's my love for that other half of me that's talking. That merry bit of a—twin."

"An' you're sendin' for him?"

Jeff shrugged, and depression seemed suddenly to descend upon him.

"If I could fix it that way I don't guess I'd have opened my face to hand you all this. But I can't. He's in the Cathills, away a hundred and more miles northwest of us. That's all he says. He don't give a mail address. No, Bud, I'm going to hunt him out. I'm going to find him, and bring him back. I'll find him sure. We're just one mind an' one body, an'," he added thoughtfully, "I don't guess I'll need a detective bureau to locate him. If he was chasin' around the other end of the world I'd find him—sure. You see, he's the other half of me."

Bud nodded in sympathy, but made no verbal reply.

"See, Bud," Jeff went on, a moment later. "The spring round-up's through. We're going to fix this deed right away. When the attorneys have robbed us all they need, and Nat's handed over, there'll be a good month to haying. That month I'm going to spend in the Cathills. I'll be back for the hay."

The other eased himself in his rocker. Then for some moments no sound broke the silence of the room.

"It's been a heavy spring," Bud said at last.

Jeff nodded. His thoughts were away in the Cathills.

"Seems to me," Bud went on. "Work kind o' worries me some these times." He smiled. "Guess the wheels need the dope of leisure. Mebbe I ain't as young as you."

"No."

Jeff's attention was still wandering.

"Guess the Cathills is an a'mighty big piece o' country gropin' around in," Bud went on.

"Sure. A hell of a piece. But—it don't signify."

"No-o," Bud meditated. Then he added: "I was kind o' thinkin'."

"How?"

"Why, mebbe two folks chasin' up a pin in a bunch o' grass is li'ble to halve most o' the chances agin either of 'em jabbin' their hands on the business end of it."

"Two? You mean you're goin' to come along an' help find—Ronny?"

Jeff's eyes were expressing the thanks his lips withheld.

Bud excused himself.

"Them Cathills is plumb full of fur an' things. Say, I ain't handled a gun in weeks."

"Bud, you're——"

The door of the room was abruptly flung open and Jeff's words remained unspoken.

"Supper, folks!"

Nan's smiling eyes glanced from one to the other. She stood in the doorway compelling them. Besides, the memory of Jeff's letter was still with her, and she was anxious to observe its later effect. That which she now beheld was obviously satisfactory, and her smile deepened contentedly.

CHAPTER II

CONFLICTING CURRENTS

They were busy days in Orrville. But business rarely yielded outward display in its citizens. Men talked more. They perhaps moved about more—in their customary leisurely fashion. But any approach to bustle was as foreign to the rule of the township as it would be to a colony of aged snails in a cyclone.

It was the custom of Orrville to rise early and go to bed late. But this by no means implies any excessive activity. On the contrary. These spells of activity lasted just as long as their accomplishment required. In the interim its citizens returned to a slumber little less profound than that which supervened at night after the last roysterer had been ejected, by force, or persuasion, from the salubrious precincts of Ju Penrose's saloon.

Orrville was a ranching township in the northwestern corner of Montana lying roughly some twenty miles west of the foothills of the Cathill Mountains, which, in turn, formed a projecting spur of the main range of the Rockies.

Orrville was the township and Ju Penrose was the pioneer of its commerce. He was a man of keen instincts for commerce of his own especial brand, and rejoiced in a disreputable past. He possessed a thin, hooked nose of some dimensions, which never failed to cut a way for its owner into the shady secrets of his neighbors. He possessed a temper as amiable and mild as a spring lamb when the stream of prosperity and profit flowed his way, and as vitriolic as a she-wolf in winter, when that stream chanced to become diverted into a neighbor's direction.

He was considered a man of some importance in the place. But this was probably the result of the nature of his trade, which, in the eyes of the denizens of the neighborhood, certainly possessed an advantage over such stodgy callings as "dry goods." But besides the all-important thirst-quenching purpose of his establishment, it had become a sort of bureau for large and small transactions of a ranching nature, and a resort where every sort of card game could be freely indulged in, without regard for the limit of the stakes, and had thus gained for itself the subsidiary title amongst its clientele of "Ju's Poker Joint."

At the moment Ju's usually busy tongue was taking a well-earned rest, and his hawk-like visage was shrouded in a deep, contemplative repose. His always bloodshot eyes were speculative as he surveyed the smoke-laden scene from behind his shabby bar. The place was full of drinkers and gamblers. The hour was past midnight. And he was estimating silently the further spending possibilities of his customers, and consequently considering the advisability of closing down.

A group of three ranch hands leaned against the centre of the bar. Their glasses were empty and none of them seemed anxious to command their refilling. They were talking earnestly. And their voices were unusually modulated. Just beyond these a slight, good-looking man in chapps, with a face of particularly refined but somewhat debauched appearance, was obviously interested in their talk, although he took no part in it. On the other side of them, away at the far end of the bar, leaned a solitary, tough-looking drinker, who seemed to take no interest whatever in his surroundings. Every man in the place, the dozen or so occupying the card tables included, was fully armed in the customary fashion prevailing in this distant corner of the ranching world, and it would have needed no second thought to realize that these heavy, loaded weapons were not by any means intended for decorative purposes.

"Wal, anyways they're a long time fixin' things," observed one of the three at the centre of the bar, with a yawn that displayed a double row of gleaming white teeth. "The boss guessed I'd best wait around, so it ain't a heap o' use kickin'. I'll hev to wait till the durned committee's through, if it takes 'em sittin' as long us a hide-bound hen."

"It's allus that-a-way when folks gets on a committee racket, Curly," replied one of his friends with a sympathetic grin.

"That's just how, Dan," agreed the third. "Hot air. That's what it is. This tarnation Vigilance stunt sets folk whisperin' among 'emselves 'bout the hell goin' to be ladled out to all cattle thieves in general. Gives 'em visions of hangin'-bees, an' a sort o' firework display with guns an' things, an' when they hatched out, what's the result? Why, a waste o' hot air, an'—no checkens."

"T'so, Dan," agreed Curly, with easy decision. "The boss is too near relative of a fancy gentleman for to hand out the sort o' dope rustlers need. If us boys had the job we'd fix things quick. You'd see this bum gang kicking air at the end of a rope 'fore Ju, here, had time to dope out four fingers of rotgut at the expense of the house."

He leered across at the unsmiling face of the saloon-keeper. Ju permitted himself to be drawn.

"Nothin' doin', Curly." A solemn shake of the head set his walrus moustache flapping. Then he drew a cigar from a top vest pocket and bit the end through, brushing his moustache aside to discover a place in which to deposit it in his mouth. "I'd sure hate to dope out any rotgut on you boys. Y'see, I sure got your health at heart. I kind o' love you fellers to death. I'd hate to see you sufferin' at my hands. Guess I was raised Christian."

"Was you?"

Curly's sarcasm achieved the laugh intended, and, as a result of his satisfaction, he flung his last half-dollar on the dingy bar.

"Make that into three drops of liver souse, an' hand us a smile, Ju. Your face is sure killin' trade."

Ju rolled his cigar across his mouth under the curtain of moustache, lit it, and proceeded to push an uncorked bottle across to his customers.

"Guess it ain't a bad proposition handin' you boys a smile. Smiles allus happen easy on foolish faces. Seein' I ain't deaf I been listenin' to your talk, an' I ain't made up my mind if you're as bright as you're guessin', or if you're the suckers your talk makes you out. Seein' I don't usual take chances, I'll put my dollars on the sucker business. I've stood behind this darned old bar fer ten years, an' I guess for five of 'em I've listened to talk like yours—from fellers like you." He removed the bottle from which the three men had helped themselves to liberal "four fingers," and eyed their glasses askance. "Now, you're worritin' over this lousy Lightfoot gang. So was the others. So's everybody bin fer five years. An' fer five years this same lousy Lightfoot gang has just been helpin' 'emselves to the cattle on the ranches around here—liberal. Same as youse fellers have helped yourselves out o' this bottle. An', durin' that time, I ain't heard tell of one o' them boys who's been spoilin' to hang 'em all doin' a thing. Not a thing, 'cep' it's lap up whisky to keep up a supply o' hot air.

"Wal," he proceeded, in his biting fashion, as he thrust the bottle on the shelf and began wiping glasses with a towel that looked to be decomposing for want of soap, "them lousy rustlers is still running their play in the district jest wher', when, an' how they darn please. See? You, Curly, are kickin' because your boss Dug McFarlane is too much of a gentleman. Wal, if I know a man from a seam-squirrel, I'd sure say Dug's got more savee in his whiskers than you got dirt—which is some. If I got things right, this night's sittin's goin' to put paid to the Lightfoot gang's account. I'd be glad to say the same of one or two scores three bums have lately run up right here."

The offensiveness of his manner left the men quite undisturbed. The place would have been strange to them without it. They accepted it as part of the evening's entertainment. But the allusion to the Vigilance Committee's efforts brought them into attitudes of close attention. It drew the attention, too, of the cattleman with the refined features, and, equally, that of the tough-looking individual at the far end of the bar.

"What are they goin' to do?" demanded Dan urgently.

Ju puffed aggravatingly at his cigar.

"Do?" he echoed at last, gazing distantly at the card players across the room. "Why, what any bunch of savee should ha' done five years ago. Put out a great reward."

Curly snorted in disdain.

"See, I tho't it was to be a big play."

"You allus was bright," sneered Dan. "How's that goin' to fix the Lightfoot crowd?"

"How?" Ju's contempt always found an outlet in the echo of an opponent's interrogation. "Say, Dan, how old are you? Twenty?"

"That ain't nuthin' to you," the cowpuncher retorted, with a gesture of hot impatience.

"Ain't it? Wal, mebbe it ain't," Ju agreed imperturbably. "But y'see it takes years an' years gettin' the value o' dollars right. I allow ther's folks guesses dollars talks. Wal, I'm guessin' they just *holler*. Make the wad big enough and ther' ain't nuthin' you can't buy from a wheat binder to a royal princess with a crown o' jools. The only thing you're li'ble to have trouble over is the things Natur' fancies handin' you fer—nix. That an' hoss sense. That's pretty well the world to-day, no matter what the sky-pilots an' Sunday-school ma'ams dope out in their fancy literature. I know. You offer ten thousand dollars for the hangin' of Lightfoot's gang, an', I say right here, there ain't a feller in it from Lightfoot—if there is sech a feller—down, who wouldn't make a grab at that wad by givin' the rest of the crowd away. Makes you think, don't it? Sort o' worries them empty think tanks o' yours."

But Ju's satisfaction received an unexpected shaking.

"Some wind," observed the slim, lonely drinker, in the blandest fashion.

Ju was round on him in a flash, his walrus moustache bristling.

"I'm listening," he said, with a calmness which belied his attitude.

The other set his glass down on the counter with a bump.

"If you're listening," he said, "you have probably understood what I said. You're talking through a fog of cynicism which seems to obscure an otherwise fairly competent intellect. You've plundered so many innocents in your time by purveying an excessive quantity of bluestone disguised under the name of alcohol that your overweening conceit has entirely distorted your perspective till you fancy that your own dregs of human nature constitute the human nature of all the rest of the world, who would entirely resent being classed as your fellows. In a word you need physic, Ju."

The speaker laughed amiably, and his smile revealed the weakness which was pointed by the signs of debauchery in his good-looking face. Ju eyed him steadily. The offense of his words was mitigated by his manner, but Ju resented the laugh which went round the entire room at his expense.

"See here, Bob Whitstone," he began, abandoning his glass wiping and supporting himself on his counter, with his face offensively thrust in his opponent's direction, "I ain't got the langwidge you seem to have lapped up with your mother's milk. I don't guess any sucker paid a thousand dollars a year for my college eddication so I could come out here and grow a couple of old beeves and spend my leisure picklin' my food depot in a low down prairie saloon. Therefor' I'll ask you to excuse me if I talk in a kind o' langwidge the folks about here most gener'ly understan'. Guess you think you know some. Maybe you figger to know it all. Wal, get this. When you get back home jest stand in front of a fi' cent mirror, if you got one in your bum shanty, an' get a peek at your map, an' ask yourself—when you studied it well—if I couldn't buy you, body an' soul, fer two thousand dollars—cash. I'd sure hate slingin' mud at any feller's features, much less yours, who're a good customer to me, but you're comin' the highbrow, an' you got notions of honor still floatin' around in your flabby thinkin' department sech as was handed you by the guys who ran that thousand dollar college. Wal, ef you'll look at yourself honest, an' argue with yourself honest, you'll find them things is sure a shadder of the past which happened somew'eres before you tasted that first dose o' prairie poison which has since become a kind o' habit. It ain't no use in getting riled, Bob, it ain't no use in workin' overtime on that college dictionary o' yours to set me crawlin' around among the spit boxes. Fac's is fac's. Ken you hand me a list o' the things you—you who ain't got two spare cents to push into the mission box, an' who'd willingly sleep in a hog pen if it weren't for a dandy wife who'd got no more sense than to marry you—wouldn't do if I was to hand you out a roll of ten thousand dollars right now—cash? Tcha! You think. I know."

He turned away in a wave of contemptuous disgust. And as he did so a harsh voice from the other end of the bar held him up.

"What about me, Ju?"

The tough-looking prairie man made his demand with a laugh only a shade less harsh than his speaking voice.

Ju stood. His desperate, keen face was coldly still as he regarded the powerful frame of his challenger. Then his retort came swift and poignant.

"You, Sikkem? You'd allus *give* yourself away. Get me?"

The frigidity of the saloon-keeper's manner was over-powering. The man called Sikkem was unequal in words to such a challenge. A flush slowly dyed his lean cheeks, and an angry depression of the brows suggested something passionate and forceful. Just for a moment many eyes glanced in his direction. The saloon-keeper was steadily regarding him. There was no suggestion of anger in his attitude, merely cat-like watchfulness. Their eyes met. Then the cloud abruptly lifted from Sikkem's brow, and he laughed with unsmiling, black eyes. The saloon-keeper rinsed a glass and unconcernedly began to wipe it.

The incident was allowed to pass. But it was the termination of the discussion, a termination which left Ju victor, not because of the rightness of his views, but because there was no man in Orrville capable of joining issue with him in debate with any hope of success. Action rather than words was the prevailing feature with these people, and, in his way, Ju Penrose was equal, if not superior, not only in debate, but in the very method these people best understood.

A moment later Sikkem took his departure.

It was well past midnight when the last man turned out of Ju's bar. But the crowd had not yet scattered to their various homes. They were gathered in a small, excited cluster gazing up at a big notice pasted on the weather-boarding of the saloon-keeper's shack. Ju himself was standing in their midst, right in front of the notice, which had been indited in ink, evidently executed with a piece of flat wood. He was holding up a lantern, and every eye was carefully, and in many instances laboriously, studying the text inscribed.

It was a notice of reward. A reward of ten thousand dollars for information leading to the capture of the gang of cattle thieves known as the "Lightfoot gang." And it was signed by Dug McFarlane on behalf of the Orrville Rancher's Vigilance Committee.

"Guess Ju knowed after all," somebody observed, in a confidential tone to his neighbor.

But Ju's ears were as long and sharp as his tongue. He flashed round on the instant, his lantern lowered from the level of the notice board. There was a sort of cold triumph in his manner as his eyes fell upon the speaker.

"Know'd?" he cried sharply. "Ain't 'knowin' my business? Psha!" His contempt was withering. Then his manner changed back to the triumph which the notice had inspired. "Say, it's a great piece of money. It surely is some bunch. Ten thousand dollars! Gee! His game's up. Lightfoot's as good as kickin' his heels agin the breezes. He's played his hand, an'—lost."

And somehow no one seemed inclined to add to his statement. Nor, which was much more remarkable, contradict it. Now that these men had seen the notice with their own eyes the force of all Ju had so recently contended came home to them. There was not one amongst that little gathering who did not realize the extent of the odds militating against the rustlers. Ten thousand dollars! There was not a man present who did not feel the tremendous power of such a reward.

The gathering melted away slowly, and finally Bob Whitstone was left alone before the gleaming sheet of paper, with Ju standing in his doorway. The lantern was at his feet upon the sill. His hands were thrust in the tops of his shabby trousers. He was regarding the "gentleman" rancher meditatively, and his half burnt cigar glowed under the deep intake of his powerful lungs.

"It's a dandy bunch, Bob, eh?" he demanded presently, in an ironical tone. "Guess I'd come nigh sellin' my own father fer—ten thousand dollars. An' I don't calc'late I'd get nightmare neither." Then he drew a deep breath which suggested regret. "But—it ain't comin' my way. No. Not by a sight." Then, after a watchful pause, he continued: "I'm kind o' figgerin' whose way. Not mine, or—yours. Eh, Bob? We could do with it. Pity, ain't it?"

Bob turned. His eyes sought the face in the shadow of the doorway.

"I'm no descendant of Judas," he said coldly.

"No. But—Judas didn't sell a gang of murdering cattle rustlers. That ain't Judas money."

"Maybe. But it's blood money all the same."

"Mighty bad blood that oughter be spilt."

Bob turned away. His gaze wandered out westward. Then his eyes came slowly back to the man in the door-way.

"You thought I was talking hot air just now—about a man's price. You didn't like it. Well, when I find myself with a price I hope I shan't live to be paid it. That's all."

The man in the doorway shook his head. Then he spoke slowly, deliberately. And somehow much of the sharpness had gone out of his tone, and the hard glitter of his steely eyes had somehow become less pronounced.

"Oh, I guess I got your meanin' right, fer all yer thousand dollar langwidge. Sure, I took you right away. But—it don't signify a cuss anyways. Guess you was born a gentleman, Bob, which I wa'an't. An' because you was born an' raised that-a-way you'd surely like to kep right hold o' the notion that folks ken still act as though they'd been weaned on talk of honor an' sichlike. I sez kep a holt on that notion. Grip it tight, an' don't never let go on it. Grab it same as you would the feller that's yearnin' fer your scalp. If you lose your grip that tow-colored scalp of yours'll be raised sure, an' every penicious breeze that blows 'll get into your think depot and hand you every sort of mental disease ther' ain't physic enough in the world to cure. Guess that's plumb right. It don't cut no ice what I think. A feller like me jest thinks the way life happens to boost him. Y'see, I ain't had no thousand dollar eddication to make me see things any other ways. Life's a mighty tough proposition an' it can't be run on no schedule, an' each feller's got to travel the way he sees with his own two eyes. If he's got the spectacles of a thousand dollar eddication he's an a'mighty lucky feller, an' I'm guessin' they'll help him dodge a whole heap o' muck holes he'd otherwise bury his silly head in. So hang on, boy. Grip them darn fool notions so they ain't got a chance. If you let go—wal, you'll get a full-sized peek into a pretty fancy sort o' hell wher' ther' ain't any sort o' chance o' dopin' your visions out o' sight with Ju Penrose's belly wash. So long."

Ju picked up his lantern and turned back into his bar, closing and securing his door behind him. Then, with keen anticipation and enjoyment, he approached his till and proceeded to count his day's takings.

* * * * *

Bob Whitstone unhitched his horse from Ju's tying post. He swung himself into the saddle and rode away,—away toward his outland home under the starlit roof of the plains. It was an almost nightly journey with him now, for the saloon habit had caught him in its toils, and was already holding him firmly.

His mood was not easy. He resented Ju Penrose. He resented all men of his type. He knew him for a crook. He believed he possessed no more conscience than any other habitual criminal. But his resentment was the weak echo of an upbringing which had never intended him for such association, and, in spite of it, the man's personality held him, and its strength dominated him.

His way took him out across an almost trackless waste of rich grass-land. Somewhere out there, hidden away at the foot of the Cathills, lay his homestead, and the wife for whom he had abandoned all that his birth had entitled him to. During the past two years he had learned truly all that he had sacrificed for the greatest of all dreams of youth.

But these things, for the moment, were not in his mind. Only Penrose. Ju Penrose, whom he had learned to detest and despise out of the educated mind that was his. The man's final homily was entirely lost upon Bob. Such was his temper that only the gross outrages against the precepts of his youth remained. He only heard the hateful, detestable cynicism, brutally expressed. It was something curious how he only took note of these things, and missed the rough solicitude of Ju's final admonishment. But he was young and weak, and a shadow of bitterness had entered his life, which, at his age, should have found no place in it.

The miles swept away under his horse's hoofs. Already the township, that sparse little oasis of shelter in a desert of grass-land, lay lost behind him in the depths of some hidden trough in the waves of the prairie ocean. The great yellow disc of the moon had cut the horizon and lit his tracks, but its light was still unrevealing and only added charm to the blaze of summer jewels which adorned the soft velvet of the heavens.

He glanced back. But almost instantly his eyes were turned again ahead. The night scene of these plains was too familiar to him to excite interest. To him there were simply miles intervening between him and the slumbers he was seeking. The prairie, for all its beauties, spelt toilsome days and bitter disappointment for him. Wherein then should be discovered its charms?

Again his mind settled itself upon the events of the evening. Price? Price? Every man, he had been told, had his price. Every man and woman. He uttered a sound. It might have been a laugh, but it lacked mirth. It startled his alert horse. It almost seemed to startle the quiet night itself. What was his price? All he knew about price was its payment. He had only been called upon to pay. And he had paid!

My God, he had paid! All that had been his. All the wealth, the comfort, the luxury and prospects which had been his in his wealthy father's home, had been the price he had paid for the right, which was the right of every man, to choose for himself, and to take to himself and to wife, the woman who seemed to him to be the one creature in the world who could yield him the happiness which alone was worth while.

This talk of a man's price only enraged him the more. He viciously detested Ju Penrose, and all such creatures who walked the world.

Well, the reward was out. Time would show. If it failed to find the Judas he would remind Ju. Oh, yes, he would remind him. He would wait his time for the reminder. He would wait till the saloon was full, and then—then he would open out his batteries. Men were of—

What was that?

He had pulled his horse up with a swift tightening of his hand. Now the beast stood with head erect, and pricked ears firmly thrust forward. Its head was turned southward, and the gush of its distended nostrils warned its rider that his question was shared by a creature whose instincts were even more acute, here, on the prairie, than those of its human master.

Bob bent down in the saddle the better to obtain the silhouette of the sky-line. The sound which had held him came up on the southern night breeze. It was a low murmur, or rumble, and, to his accustomed ears, it suggested the speeding of hoofs over the green clad earth. He waited for many moments, but the sound only increased. There was no doubt left in his mind now. None at all.

He sat up again and glanced swiftly about him. The moonlight had increased, and a silver sheen threw up the surrounding scene into indistinct relief. Beyond, to his right, he detected a small patch of scrub and spruce, and, without a second thought, he made for it.

A minute later he was out of the saddle beside his horse, screened from view of the plains by a belt of bush. He secured his horse and moved to the fringe of his shelter. Here he took up a position facing south, and his view of the plains beyond became uninterrupted.

He knew what was coming. Instinct warned him. Perhaps even it was the wish fathering his belief. He felt it was a certainty that the rustlers were out pursuing their depredations with their customary unchallenged daring. Who, he wondered, was the present victim, and what was the extent of the raid?

He had not long to wait. The sound grew. It lost its distant continuity and became broken into the distinct hoof beats of large numbers. Furthermore, by the sound of it, they would pass right across his front. He had been wise in seeking cover. Had he remained—

But speculation gave way before the interest of movement. Now the silhouette of the sky-line was dancing before his eyes. In the moonlight he could clearly make out the passing of a driven herd. It came on, losing itself in the shadows of a distant trough. Again it appeared. More distinct now. He whistled under his breath. They were coming from the direction of Dug McFarlane's and it was a large herd. They were traveling northwest, which would cut into the hills away to the north of his homestead. They—

But they were almost abreast of him now, and he heard the voices of men urging and cursing. Lower he dropped toward the earth the better to ascertain the numbers. But his estimate was uncertain. There were moments when the herd looked very large. There were moments when it looked less. He felt that a conservative estimate would be one hundred perhaps, and some eight or ten men driving them.

They were gone as they had come, lumbering rapidly, and as they passed northward the southern breeze carried the sound away. It died out quickly, and for minutes longer than was needed he stood listening, listening. Then, at last, he turned back to his horse.

In the two years of his sojourn on the land it was the first time he had witnessed the operation of the Lightfoot gang, and it left a deep impression upon his mind. A great resentment rose up in him. It was the natural temper of a man who is concerned, in however small a degree, in the cattle industry. And his anger urged him to a greater speed for home, and a greater sympathy for the man who was prepared to accept the Judas money offered for the lives of this gang of criminals.

CHAPTER III

TRAILING THE "BLACK TAIL"

The woman started. She threw up her head. Her wide eyes, wonderful and dark, searched the deep aisles of the shaded pine woods about her. Her hair hung loosely in a knot at the nape of her neck, and its intensely dark masses made an exquisite framing for the oval of the handsome face beneath the loose brim of wide prairie hat.

The stillness of these wooded slopes of the Cathills was profound. They possessed something of the solemnity belonging to the parent range of the Rockies beyond. For they were almost primeval. The woman might have belonged to them, her dark beauty so harmonized with its surroundings. Yet for all her coloring, for all the buckskin she wore for upper garment, there was nothing in her nature of the outlands which now claimed her. She was of the cities. She was bred and nurtured in the civilized places. The life about her was another life. It was crude and foreign to her. It claimed her by force of circumstance against every instinct and emotion.

Her searching ceased, and her eyes fixed their steady regard upon a gray-brown object moving amongst the myriad of black stanchions which supported the tousled roof of melancholy green foliage above her. With an almost imperceptible movement one buckskin clad arm reached slowly out toward the small sporting rifle which leaned against an adjacent tree-trunk. Her whole poise was tense and steady. There was in her attitude that hard decision which one associates only with the experienced hunter. There was almost too much decision in a woman so obviously young.

The weapon was drawn toward her. For one brief moment it was laid across her lap upon the paper-covered book she had been reading. Then its butt found its way to a resting place against her soft shoulder. Not for an instant had her gaze been diverted from the moving object. Now, however, her head inclined forward, and her warm cheek was laid against the cool butt. The sights of the weapon were brought up into line. The pressure of her forefinger was increased upon the trigger. There was a sharp report followed by a swift rush of scampering hoofs amongst the brittle pine cones and needles which carpeted the twilight woods. Then, in a flash, all the tense poise gave way to considered but rapid activity.

The woman sprang to her feet. She was tall and straight as a willow. Her rough canvas skirt was divided. Her buckskin shirt was fringed and beaded. She made a picture of active purpose that belied her femininity. In a moment she was in the saddle of the pony which had been dozing a few yards away. Her rifle was slung upon one shoulder, and her paper-covered book was thrust within the fastenings of her shirt. She was hot in pursuit of the small black-tailed deer which her shot had wounded.

Effie bent low in the saddle which she rode astride. Her well-accustomed pony twisted and turned, threading its way almost miraculously through the labyrinth of bald tree-trunks. These pot-hunts, which were of such frequent occurrence, were the recreation which alone made life tolerable to its mistress.

The woman saw only her quarry. For the rest she left the road to her pony. With slack reins she leaned forward, carrying her featherweight over the horn of the saddle. The woods meant nothing to her. The maze of tree-trunks as they sped by conveyed no threat of danger. She was concerned only with the obviously limping beast which was to provide venison for the pot for the next two weeks to come.

Her pony gained nothing upon the wounded deer. But it lost no distance either. The scene changed and changed again. The woods yielded to open grass, and again they merged into scattered scrub, through which it was difficult to track their quarry. Up hill, down dale, over hummock, through hollow. Once more through the dark aisles of aged pine woods. And always northward.

Time had no place in the woman's mind. Excitement, hope, doubt. These occupied her to the full. And above all purpose reigned.

Twice she drew up to within shot. But she refrained. She was herself as breathless as her quarry, and the shot would probably have been wasted. Besides, those pauses of the poor hunted beast carried their own significance to her practised mind. Its limping was sore, and now its stumblings were becoming more and more frequent.

They had passed an open stretch, a mere cup surrounded by sharp-rising, pine-clad hills. They entered woods on the northernmost slope, and began a climb so severe that pursuer and pursued were brought to a sheer scramble. The toil was terrific, but Effie's pony, bred of the tough prairie fibre, clawed up with indomitable courage and endurance. The deer kept its lead by desperate, agonizing

effort, and the woman knew that the summit would have exhausted its resources.

On they went, on and up, the pace of both ever slackening. One hundred yards only separated them now, and, with almost every stride, the distance was lessening. The summit was in sight. The pony was blowing hard. Effie urged him, and the vicious Mexican spurs found his flanks. There was no thought of sparing in the girl's mind. If the broncho failed her, then she must finish the chase on foot.

Another fifty yards or so and the deer would have reached the summit. Could she permit it? Dared she risk what lay beyond? If the open pine woods continued she might, but—what lay beyond?

Without further speculation she suddenly flung out of the saddle. Her decision was taken. She dared not risk that summit with her pony now rapidly failing. She must chance her own unsteadiness. The pursuit had been hard and breathless. Well, she must trust to her nerve.

She left her steaming pony and dropped on one knee. With all her mind and will concentrated she drew a deep breath as the rifle was raised to her shoulder. With a stern deliberation she leveled her sights and fired. The spent deer stood, and shook, and then gazed round. There was something dreadful in the appeal of its wistful attitude. For one second the woman closed her eyes. Then they opened, and their beauty was full of resolve. Again the rifle was at her shoulder. Again the sights were leveled. Again the weapon spat out its vicious pellet. This time the weapon was lowered for good, and the movement was inspired by the sight of the deer. It quietly dropped upon its knees and rolled over on its side.

Ten minutes later the body of the deer was securely lashed to the back of the saddle. There was no regret in the heart of the woman as her practised fingers secured the warm body. It was game. Fair game, brought down in open chase, and it would provide welcome change in the monotonous diet of her home. Besides, the spirit of the hunter gripped her soul. It was the only thing which made life endurable in these drab outlands.

At the summit of the hill she breathed a sigh of relief. Her judgment and decision were amply proved. Nor in any uncertain fashion. The woods ceased in a clean cut, such as is so frequently the case where the pine world reigns. And rearing blankly before her gaze stood a dense barrier of low and heavy green bush. It needed small enough imagination to realize the security which lay in its depths for so small a creature as a wounded deer.

For some thoughtful moments Effie gazed upon the barrier. Then she turned and surveyed her dejected pony. Again her decision was taken without hesitation. She stooped and set a pair of hobbles about the tired creature's pasterns, and, leaving him to his own devices, set off to ascertain her whereabouts.

* * * * *

But her movements were not without feminine curiosity, added to which was the businesslike desire to familiarize herself with every foot of the country within reach of her home. This was a break into new territory. Time was small enough object to her, and, besides, her pony needed time to recuperate from its leg weariness.

It required less than ten minutes, however, to banish every other thought from her mind and absorb it in amazement at her discovery. A brief battle with a dense and obstinate scrub found her standing in the centre of a wide sort of bridle path, scored with a dozen or so cattle tracks crowded with the spurs of driven cattle.

She stood gazing down at the signs everywhere about her in the loose sand, dumbfounded at the sight. She knew there was no homestead or ranch within miles of this region. Was she not bitterly aware that her own home marked the fringe of the cattle world in this direction?

Slowly there grew in the depths of her heart a feeling of apprehension. The stillness, the remoteness, the tremendous solitude, and yet—those tracks.

She stood intent and listening. Her ears were straining for a sound. But only there came to her the whispering breezes rustling the mournful foliage of the pine woods behind her. Her eyes were raised to the walls of scrub lining the roadway. They searched vainly for a sign. There was none. Simply the riot of nature about her, and, at her feet, those tracks.

She moved. Then swiftly she passed across to the western side of the roadway where the westering sun threw ample shadow. All unconsciously it seemed her movements became almost furtive, furtive and rapid. She passed down the bush-lined way, hugging the grassy edges to avoid leaving trace of her footsteps in the sand. Understanding was with her, and that understanding warned her of the jeopardy

in which she stood should her presence be advertised.

Thought, speculation and imagination were a-riot in her now. She was proceeding in the direction the broad cloven hoof marks indicated. What—lay beyond?

Many minutes passed. Breathless minutes of pulsing excitement for the woman who knew only monotony and the drudgery of an outland life. No womanish fears could deter her. She believed and hoped she was on the eve of a great discovery, and such was her reckless desire that nothing could deter her.

The aspect of the scrub changed. It became dotted with taller trees. The paler foliage of spruce reared itself, and, here and there, isolated clumps of towering pines threw shadows across her path. Then gaps broke up the continuity, but, even so, the view beyond to her left was cut off by remoter growths. Once or twice she hazarded her way into them in her search for information, but always she returned to the broad track of the footprints of driven cattle.

The pathway rose at a steep incline. It bent away to the right, and, in the distance, it seemed that it must converge upon the sharp cut edge of the great pine woods she had so recently left. With this conclusion came another. The track must terminate abruptly or it must pass back into the great pine bluff.

The end, however, was neither of these things. And it was far nearer than she had suspected. The path twisted back into the huge reverse of an S, and finished abruptly at the sharp edge of a wide deep valley.

It came upon her almost with a shock. The tracks had abruptly swung westward. She rounded the bend, and, in a moment, found herself gazing out over a wide valley from a dizzy height.

Her first feeling was that the drop was sheer, precipitate. Then realization superseded, and she flung herself full length upon the ground and pressed her way into the shelter of an adjacent bush. The path had not ended. It passed over the brink and continued its way zigzagging down the terrific slope to the valley below. It was this, and the sight of a distant spiral of smoke rising from below, which had flung her into the shelter of the friendly bush. Her risk had only been momentary, but even in that moment she had been silhouetted in full view of any chance gaze below.

She drew herself toward the edge of the drop. Just where she had flung herself it was clean and sheer, and the bush overhung. Thus she was left with a full view of the depths below. Her dark eyes dwelt upon the zigzagging path. She followed its downward course to the green plain. She tracked it across to the far side of the valley. Then she drew a sharp breath, and her eyes widened.

The telltale smoke rose from the heart of a woodland bluff, and near by a large herd of cattle was grazing, watched over by three mounted men whose horses were moving slowly over the bright green carpet of grass.

She lay quite still, regardless of all but those moving figures, and the dark green bluff. She was watching and waiting for she knew not what. Her heart was thumping in her bosom, and her breath came rapidly. There was no question in her mind. In a moment her whole life seemed to have changed. The day had dawned to a contemplation of the monotonous round of drudging routine, only to close with a thrill such as she had never dreamed could be hers.

The moments passed; rapid, poignant moments. The sun dipped lower toward the alabaster crests of distant mountain peaks. The peace of the scene suggested nothing of the turbulent thought a-riot behind her wide, dark eyes. What must be done? What could she do—a woman? She felt helpless—so helpless. And yet—

She raised herself upon her elbow and propped her soft cheek upon the palm of her hand. She must think—think. The chance of it all. It was so strange. There lay the secret revealed—the secret which every rancher in the district for years had sought to discover. There was the camp of the Lightfoot gang. She had discovered it, had discovered its approach. Everything—she, a woman.

What could she do with the secret? How could she— She thought of her husband. But somehow her enthusiasm lessened with the thought. But she needed him. Yes. There was no room for any doubt on that score. He must be roused, and convinced. He must be made to see the importance and significance of her discovery, and they must turn it to—

The crack of a rifle startled her. Almost on the instant the whistling, tearing of a bullet sounded in the bush to the left of her. Her glance was terrified as it turned in the direction. Then, in a moment, she was crouching lower as she searched the valley away over by the bluff.

In an instant her nerves strung tight. A group of men were standing just within its shadow, and the three horsemen, who had been riding round the cattle, were racing directly toward the foot of the pathway leading out of the valley. She must have been seen when she had stood at the opening. And now——

But there was not a second to lose. She sprang to a crouching position under the bush. Another shot rang viciously upon the still air. The bullet tore its way through the bush. This time it was still wider of her hiding place. But already she had begun her retreat—swiftly, and crouching low.

She reached the shelter of the barrier just as another bullet whistled overhead. Then she set off at a run.

And as she ran she calculated the chances. She had a big start, and the horsemen had to face the zigzag climb. If she made no mistakes there was little chance of their discovering her. They could never make that climb before she reached her pony.

She increased her pace. Her nerves were steadying. Strangely her control was wonderful. There was no real fear in her—only tension. Now as she ran down the open way her eyes were alert for every landmark, and her woodcraft was sufficiently practised to stand her in good stead. She recognized each feature in the path until she came to the point where she had first entered it. In a moment she was battling her way through the thick bush, and the tension she was laboring under took her through it in a fraction of the time her first traversing had been made. Her pony was standing within ten yards of the spot at which she had left him.

She breathed a great relief. In a moment she had unbuckled the hobbles on his forelegs. Then, with the habit of her life on the plains, she tightened the cinchas of the saddle. Then she replaced the bit in its mouth.

As she swung herself into the saddle the distant plod of hoofs pounding the cattle tracks reached her. For one instant she sat in doubt. Then, with a half-thought fear lest her hard pursuit of the wounded deer had left her tough broncho spent, she swung him about and vanished like a ghost into the gloomy depths of the woods.

CHAPTER IV

THE WEAKER VESSEL

The homestead rested upon the southern slope of a wood-crowned hill, which was merely one of a swarm of hills of lesser or greater magnitude. Westward, away in the distance, the silver sheen of the main mountain range still continued to reflect the rainbow tints of a radiant sunset.

It was a homestead to associate with hands less than 'prentice. There was neither imagination nor very definite purpose in its planning. It rather gave the impression of the driving of sheer necessity than the enthusiasm of effort toward the achievement of a heartily conceived purpose. Furthermore, it bore evident signs of a desire to escape as far as possible the burdens of the life it represented.

The squalid two-roomed house was sunk into the backing to the sloping hill. Its front and sides were of green logs and a mud plaster. Its roof was of a primitive thatch, held secure from winter storms by sapling logs lashed fast across it. The central doorway was filled by a rough-boarded door, and the apertures left for added light were covered with thin cotton material. They were left wide open in summer, and in winter only served to shut out the worst of the driven snows and most of the daylight.

The adjacent barn was of far greater extent, but of considerably less degree. Still, it was sufficiently weather-proof, which was all that could be reasonably hoped for by the toughened creatures, who found shelter beneath its crazy roof. Higher up the slope stood a couple of corrals of sorts. Their position was at the southern extremity of the woodland crown, their placing probably inspired by the adjacency of the material required for their construction.

Below the house stretched a sloping patch of growing wheat, perhaps about thirty acres in extent. This was the real business of the homestead, and, in spite of the crazy fencing of barbed wire about it, it looked to be richly flourishing.

For all the general ineffectiveness of the place, however, it was not without significance. For it gave

that human touch which at once breaks up the overpowering sensation which never fails to depress in the silent heart of Nature's immensity. It spoke of courage, too. The reckless courage of early youth, plunging for the first time into independence. Furthermore, it suggested something of the first great sacrifice which the hot tide of love, surging through youthful veins, is prepared to make for the object of its passionate regard. In any case it symbolized the irresistible progress of man's effort when pitted against the passive resistance of Nature's most fiercely rugged frontiers.

A wonderful harmonious peace reigned over the scene which was bathed in the light of a drooping sun. It was the chastened pastoral peace, than which there is no more perfect in the world. Cattle were grazing their way homeward; the cows bearing their burden of laden udders to yield it for the benefit and prosperity of the community; the steers lingering at the banks of the murmuring mountain stream, or standing knee-deep in its waters, their sleek sides sheathed in rolls of fat, only waiting to yield up their humble lives as their contribution to the insatiable demands of the dominant race.

Two or three horses stood adjacent to the doorway of the humble barn, patiently flickering their long, unkempt tails in a vain effort to ward off the attacks of swarming flies. A few chickens moved about drowsily, just outside the hutch which had been contrived for their nightly shelter. While stretched upon the dusty earth, side by side, lay two great rough-coated dogs slumbering their hours of watch and ward away in the shade, with the indifference of creatures whose vain hopes of battle have been all too long deferred.

All of a sudden there came a partial awakening.

Out of the west, down the slope of a neighboring hill came a figure on horseback. It was moving at a rapid gallop. The horses at the barn turned about and raised their heads watchfully. They whinnied at the approach. The two dogs were on their feet startled into alertness, vain hope rising once more in their fierce hearts. The hens cackled fussily at the prospect of their deferred evening meal. The last of the cattle ambled heavily from the water's edge. It was rather like the obscure movement of a mainspring, setting into motion even the remotest wheel of a mechanism.

Effie galloped up to the house. Nothing of the gentle waking her coming had inspired attracted her observation. Her handsome eyes were preoccupied, and their gaze wandered back over the way she had come, searching the distance with the minutest care. Finally she dismounted and off-saddled, turning her pony loose to follow the promptings of its own particular requirements. Then she set about releasing the carcass of the deer upon her saddle, and bore it away to a lean-to shed at the side of the house. Emerging therefrom she picked up her saddle and bridle and took them into the house. Then she took up her stand within the doorway and, once more, narrowly searched the surrounding hills with eyes as eager and doubtful as they were beautiful.

The calm of evening had settled once more upon the place. The peace of it all was superlative. It was peace to which Effie was something more than averse. She dreaded it. For all her two years of life in the meagre home her husband had provided her with, it required all her courage and fortitude to endure it. The hills haunted and oppressed her, and her only hope lay in the active prosecution of her work.

She breathed a profound sigh. There was relief in the expression of her face. The drooping corners of her mouth and the tight compression of her well-formed lips told their own story of her emotions. She had passed through an anxious time, and only now was she beginning to feel reassured.

Yes. All was well, she believed. She had lost her pursuers, thanks to the staunchness of her pony, and her knowledge of the country about her. With another sigh, but this time one of weariness, she left her doorway and moved over to the barn. There was still the dreary round of "chores" to which her life seemed dedicated.

* * * * *

A solitary horseman sat gazing out through a leafy barrier across the narrow valley of the little mountain stream. His eyes were fixed upon the dejected homestead on the slope of the hill beyond. He was be-chapped, and carried the usual complement of weapons at his waist. His horse was an unusually fine creature, and well up to the burden it was called upon to bear. Nor was that burden a light one, for the man was both massive and muscular.

The watchful eyes were deep set in a mahogany-hued setting. It was a hard face, brutal, and the eyes were narrow and cruel.

For a long time he sat there regarding the homestead. He beheld the graceful form of the woman as she moved swiftly about her work. Judging from his expression, which was by no means pleasant, two emotions were struggling for dominance. For some time doubt held chief place, but slowly it yielded to

some more animal emotion. Furthermore temptation was urging him, and more than once he lifted his reins, which became a sign of yielding.

But all these emotions finally passed. It was evident that some even stronger force was really governing him. For, with a sharp ejaculation that conveyed every feeling suggested by disappointment, he swung his horse about and galloped off in a southeasterly direction—toward Orrville.

It was past midnight. Effie, flushed with an unusual excitement, was gazing up into her husband's face. She was listening almost breathlessly to the story he was telling her. The little living-room, more than half kitchen, was bathed in the yellow light of a small tin kerosene lamp. For the time at least her surroundings, the poverty and drudgery of her life, were forgotten in the absorbing feelings consuming her.

"I tell you, Effie, I was scared—plumb scared when I saw what it was," Bob Whitstone ended up. "Guess we've known long enough the whole blamed countryside is haunted by cattle rustlers, but—that's the first time I've seen 'em, and I guess it's the first time any one's seen 'em at work. Say, I'm not yearning for the experience again."

But Effie had no interest beyond his story. His feelings on the matter of his experience were of no concern whatever at the moment. There were other things in her mind, things of far greater import. She returned to the rocker chair, which was the luxury of their home, and sat down. There was one thing only in Bob's story which mattered to her just now.

"Ten thousand dollars," she murmured. "*Ten thousand!* It's a—fortune."

Bob moved across to a rough shelf nailed upon the wall and picked up a pipe.

"A bit limited," he observed contemptuously, as poured some tobacco dust into the bowl.

"I was thinking of—ourselves."

The man ceased his operation to gaze swiftly down upon the gently swaying figure in the chair.

"What d'you mean, Effie?" he demanded sharply.

The girl's steady eyes were slowly raised in answer to the challenging tone. They met her husband's without a shadow of hesitation.

"It sounds like a fortune to me, who have not handled a dollar that I could spend without careful thought—for two years," she declared with warmth.

Bob completed the filling of his pipe. He did not answer for a few moments, but occupied himself by lighting it with a reeking sulphur match.

"That's a pretty hard remark," he said at last, emitting heavy clouds of smoke between his words.

"Is it? But—it's just plain facts."

"I s'pose it is."

The girl had permitted her gaze to wander. It passed from her husband's face to the deplorable surroundings which she had almost grown accustomed to, but which now stood out in her mind with an added sense of hopelessness. The lime-wash over the cracked and broken plaster which filled the gaps between the logs of the walls. The miserable furnishing, much of it of purely home manufacture, thrown up into hideous relief by the few tasteful knickknacks which had been wedding presents from her intimate friends and relatives in the east. The earthen floor, beaten hard and kept scrupulously swept by her own hands. The cook-stove in the corner, with its ill-set stovepipe passing out of a hole in the wall which had been crudely covered with tin to keep out the draughts in winter. The drooping ceiling of cotton material, which sagged in great billows under the thatch of the roof. It was all deplorable to a woman who had known the comfort of an almost luxurious girlhood. Into her eyes crept a curious light. It was half resentful, half triumphant. It was wholly absorbed.

"Suppose? There's no supposition," she cried bitterly. "I have had the experience of it all, the grind. Maybe you don't know what it is to a woman, a girl, to find herself cut off suddenly from all the little luxuries she has always been used to. I don't mean extravagances. Just the trifling refinements which count for so much in a young woman's life. The position is possible, so long as the hope remains of their return later, perhaps fourfold. But when that hope no longer exists—I guess there's nothing much else that's worth while."

The man continued to smoke on for some silent moments. Then, as the girl, too, remained silent, he glanced at her out of the corners of his eyes.

"You gave up a good deal for me—for this," he said in gentle protest. "But you did it with your eyes open—I mean, to the true facts of my position. Say, Effie, I didn't hold you up for this thing. I laid every card on the table. My father threatened us both, to our faces, if we persisted in marrying. Well, I guess we persisted, and he—why, he just handed us what he promised—the dollars that bought us this—farm. That was all. It was the last cent he figured to pass our way. You know all that, and you never squealed—then. You knew what was in store. I mean—this." He flung out one arm in a comprehensive gesture. "You guessed you'd grit enough to face it—with me. We hoped to win out." Then he smiled. "Say, I guess I haven't given up a thing—for you, eh? I haven't quit the home of millionaire father where my year's pocket money was more than the income of seventy per cent. of other folks! I, too, did it for this—and you. Won't you stick it for me?"

The man's appeal was spoken in low earnest tones. His eyes were gentle. But the girl kept hers studiously turned from his direction, and it was impossible for him to read that which lay behind them.

Again some silent moments passed. The girl was gently rocking herself. At last, however, she drew in her feet in a nervous, purposeful movement, and sat forward.

"Bob," she exclaimed, and now there were earnestness and kindness in the eyes that gazed up at the man, "it's no use for us to talk this way," she cried. "I began it, and I ought to be sorry—real sorry. But I'm not. I wouldn't have acted that way under ordinary circumstances. But it's different now, and it was your own talk made me. You sneered at that ten thousand dollars, which seems to be a fortune to me. Ten thousand dollars!" she breathed. "And we haven't ten dollars between us in this—house. Bob, it makes me mad when I think of it. You don't care. You don't worry. All you care for is to get away from it all—from me—and spend your time among the boys in Orrville. You've been away ever since dinner to-day, and now it's past midnight. Why? Why, when there's a hundred and one things to do around this wretched shanty? No—you undertake this thing, and then—spend every moment you can steal—yes, that's the word—steal, hanging around Ju Penrose's saloon. I'm left to fix things right here—to do the work which you have undertaken. Then you sneer when I see a fortune in that ten thousand dollars reward."

The girl's swift heat was not without effect. She had not intended to accuse in so straight a fashion. It was the result of long pent-up bitterness, which never needs more than a careless word to hurl into active expression. Bob's mild expression of contempt looked to be about to cost him dear.

A moody look not untouched with some sort of fear had crept into the man's eyes. Now he tried to smooth the threat of storm he saw looming. Furthermore, an uncomfortable feeling of his own guilt was possessing him.

"But what if it can be called a fortune, Effie?" he demanded swiftly. "It don't concern us. I don't guess it's liable to come our way."

"Why not?"

The girl's challenge came short and sharp, and her beautiful eyes were turned upon him full of cold regard.

The man was startled. He was even shocked.

"How?" he demanded. "I don't get you."

The girl sprang from her chair in a movement of suppressed excitement. She came toward him, her eyes shining. A glorious ruddy tint shone through the tanning of her fair cheeks. She was good to look at, and Bob felt the influence of her beauty at that moment just as he had felt it when, for her, he had first flung every worldly consideration to the four winds.

"Will you listen, Bob? Will you listen to me while I tell you all that's been churning around in my head ever since you told me of that reward? You must. You shall. I have lived through a sort of purgatory in these hills for too long not to make my voice heard now—now when there's a chance of making our lives more tolerable. Oh, I've had a day while you've been away. It's been a day such as in my craziest moments I've never even dreamed of. Bob, I've discovered what they've all been trying to discover for years. I've found Lightfoot's camp!"

"And then?"

The girl's enthusiasm left her husband caught in a wave of apprehension. He saw with a growing

sense of horror the meaning of that sudden revolt. This was displayed in his manner. Nor was Effie unobservant of it. Nor unresentful.

She shrugged her perfect shoulders with assumed unconcern.

"That reward—those ten thousand dollars are mine—ours—if I choose. And—I do choose."

There was no mistaking the firmness, the decision in her final words. They came deliberate and hard, and they roused the man to prompt and sharp denial.

"You—do—not."

He was no longer propped against the table. He was no longer gentle. He stood erect and angry, and their regard was eye to eye. But even so there was no disputing the woman's dominance of personality. The man's eyes, for all their anger, conveyed not a tithe of the other's decision. His whole attitude was subjective to the poise of the woman's beautiful head, her erect, sculptured shoulders. Her measuring eyes were full of a fine revolt. There was nothing comparable between them—except their anger.

"Who can stop me? You?"

The scornful challenge rang sharply through the little room. Then a silence fraught with intense moment followed upon its heels.

The man nodded. His movement was followed by Effie's mocking laugh.

Perhaps Bob realized the uselessness, the danger of retaining such an attitude. Perhaps his peculiar nature was unequal to the continuous effort the position called for. In a moment he seemed to shrink before those straight gazing eyes, and the light of purpose behind them. When he finally spoke a curious, almost pleading tone blended with the genuine horror in his words.

"No, no, Effie, you can't—you daren't!" he cried passionately. "Do you know what you're doing? Do you know what that reward means to you—to us? Look at your hands. They're clean, and soft, and white. Say, girl, that's blood money, blood money that'll surely stain them with a crimson you'll never wash off 'em all your life. It's blood money. Man's blood. Human blood. Just the same as runs through our veins. Oh, say, girl, I've no sort of use for rustlers. They're crooks, and maybe murderers. Guess they're everything you can think of, and a sight more. But they're men, and their blood's hot, warm blood the same as yours and mine. And you reckon to chaffer that blood for a price. You're going to sell it—for a price. You're going to do more. Yes. You're going to wreck a woman's conscience for life for those filthy, blood-soaked dollars. The price? Effie, things are mighty hard with us. Maybe they're harder with you than me. But I just can't believe we've dropped so low we can sell the life blood of even a—murderer. I can't believe it. I just can't. That's all. Tell 'em, Effie. Tell 'em all you know and have discovered if you will. Tell 'em in the cause of justice. But barter your soul and conscience for filthy blood money—I—bah! It makes me turn sick to think that way."

But Effie was in no mood to listen to the dictates of squeamish principles from a man who lacked the spirit and power—the will to raise her out of the mire of penury into which he had helped to plunge her. The hours of dreary, hopeless labor; the weeks and months of dismal and grinding poverty had sunk deeply into her soul. No price was too high to pay to escape these things. In a moment her reply was pouring forth in a passionate torrent.

"Blood money?" she cried. "Bob, you're crazier than I'd have thought. Where's the difference? I mean between handin' these folks over to justice for justice sake, and taking the reward the folks who're most to benefit by it are ready to hand out to me? Say, you can't talk that way, Bob. You can't just do it. Aren't the folks who carry out the justice in the land paid for it—from the biggest judge to the fellow who handles the levers of the electric chair? Doesn't the country hand out thousands of dollars every year for the punishment of offenders, whether it's for the shedding of their life blood, or merely their heart's blood in the cruel horrors of a penitentiary? Do you think I'm going to hand out my secret to a bunch of cattlemen for their benefit and profit, and reap no comfort from it for myself in the miserable life I'm condemned to endure? Your scruples are just crazy. They're worse. They're selfish. You'd rather see me drudging all the best moments of my life away, so you can lounge around Ju Penrose's saloon spending dollars you've no right to, than risk your peace of mind on an honest—yes, *honest*—transaction that's going to give me a little of the comfort that you haven't the grit to help me to yourself."

The girl was carried away with the force of her own purpose and craving. Every word she said was meant from the bottom of her soul. There was not a shadow of yielding. She had no illusions. For two years her heart had been hardening to its present condition, and she would not give up one tittle of the

chance that now opened out before her hungry eyes.

Bob was clay in her hands. He was clay in any hands sufficiently dominating. He knew from the moment he had delivered his appeal, and he had heard only the tones of her reply, that it was he who must yield or complete irrevocably the barrier which had been steadily growing up between them. Just for a moment the weakly, obstinate thought had occurred of flinging everything to the winds and of denying her once more with all the force at his command. But the moment passed. It fled before the charm of her presence, and the memory of the loved which he was incapable of shutting out of his heart. He knew he was right, and she was utterly wrong. But he knew, equally well, from her words and attitude, that it was he who must give way, or——

He shook his head with a negative movement which Effie was quick enough to realize meant yielding. She wanted him to yield. It would simplify all her purpose. She desired that he should participate in the transaction.

"You'll regret it, Effie," he said, in his usual easy tones. "You'll regret it so you'll hate to think of this moment all the rest of your life. It's not you talking, my dear, it's just—the experience you've had to go through. Can't you see? You've never been like this before. And it isn't you. Say, I'd give my right hand it you'd quit the whole thing."

But the girl's resolution was unwavering.

"You—still refuse—to countenance it?" she demanded.

Again Bob shook his head. But now he moved away and struck a match to relight his pipe.

"No," he said. Then he slowly puffed out great clouds of smoke. "No, my dear, if you're bent on it." Then he moved to the cook-stove and supported one foot upon it.

"Say—you guess I'm selfish. You guess I haven't acted as I ought to help push our boat along. You reckon I've become a sort of saloon-loafing bum. Guess you sort of think I'm just about the limit. Well, maybe I'm nothing to shriek about. However, I've told you all I feel. I've told you what you're going to feel—later. Meanwhile it's up to me to help you all I know. Tell me the whole thing, and I'll do the business for you. I'll see Dug McFarlane for you, and fix things. But it's on one condition."

"What is it?"

Something of the coldness had passed from the girl's eyes. She was smiling because she had achieved her purpose.

"Why—just this. That I don't touch one single dollar of the price you're to receive for those poor devils' blood. That's all."

Just for a moment a dull flush surged up under the tan of the girl's cheeks, and her eyes sparkled ominously. Then she returned to her rocker with great deliberation.

"You're crazy, Bob," she said frigidly, but without any other display. "Still—just sit around, and—I'll tell you it all."

And while the man listened to the story of his wife's adventures his mind went back to the scene in Ju Penrose's saloon, and the denial he had flung so heatedly at that philosophic cynic.

CHAPTER V

THE HANGING BEE

Dug McFarlane was a picturesque creature. He was big in height and girth. He was also big in mind. And, which was much more important to the people of the Orrville ranching world, big in purse. He was grizzled and gray, and his eyes beamed out of a setting which was surely made for such beaming; a setting which possessed no sharp angles or disfiguring hollows, but only the healthy tissue of a well-nourished and wholesome-living man in middle life.

As he sat his horse, beside his station foreman, gazing out at the broken line of foothills which marked the approach to the barrier of mountains cutting against the blue, he seemed to display in his

bearing something of that dominating personality which few successful men are entirely without. All about them lay the heavy-railed corrals of a distant out-station. Just behind stood the rough shanty, which was the bunkhouse for the cowhands employed in this region. The doctor was still within, tending the grievously injured man who had been so badly wounded in the previous night's raid by the rustlers.

For the time Dug's beaming eyes were shadowed with a concern that was half angry and wholly depressed. They searched the rolling grass-land until the distance was swallowed up by the barrier of hills. He was seeking one reassuring glimpse of the black, hornless herd whose pastures these were. But only disappointment met him on every side. The beautiful, sleek, Aberdeen-Angus herd, which was his joy and pride, had vanished. They had gone, he knew. They had gone the same way that, during the last five years, hundreds of head of his stock had gone. It was the last straw.

"Say, Lew Hank," he said, in a voice of something approaching an emotion he possessed no other means of displaying, "it's beat me bad. It's beat me so bad I don't seem able to think right. We'd a hundred head running on this station. As fine a bunch as ever were bred from the old country's strain. I just feel that mad I could set right in to break things."

Then, after a long pause during which the station foreman waited silent:

"And only last night, while these guys was raising the mischief right here, I was setting around doping out big talk, and raising a mighty big wad for the round-up of the whole darnation gang. Can you beat it? I'm sore. Sore as hell. Say, tell it me again. I don't seem to have it clear."

He passed one great muscular hand across his moist forehead, and the gesture was rather one of helplessness.

Lew Hank regarded him with measuring eyes. He knew him so well. In the ten years and more he had worked for him he had studied his every mood. This phase in the great cattleman's character was something new, something rather startling. Dug's way was usually volcanic. It was hot and fierce for a while, generally to hollowed by a hearty laugh, rather like the passing of a summer storm. But this, in Lew's opinion, was a display of weakness. A sign he neither liked nor respected. The truth was Dug McFarlane had been hit in a direction of which his subordinate had no understanding. That herd of Aberdeen-Angus cattle had been his plaything. His hobby. He had been devoted to it in a way that would have been absurd to any one but a cattleman. Hank decided this unaccustomed weakness must be nipped in the bud.

"Say, boss, it ain't no use in squealin'," he grumbled, in the hard tones of a man who yields to no feelings of sympathy. His weather-stained face was set and ugly in its expression. "Wher's the use in it anyway?" he demanded. "Get a look around. There's miles of territory, an' all of it runs into them blamed hills. I got three boys with me. They're right boys, too. I don't guess there's a thing you or me could tell 'em 'bout their work. Not a thing. Day and night one of 'em's on grazin' guard. Them beasties ain't never left to trail off into the hills. Wal, I guess that's all we ken do—sure. Say, you can't hold up a gang of ten an' more toughs with a single gun in the dead, o' night, 'specially with a hole in your guts same as young Syme's had bored into his. I ain't ast once, nor twice, to hev them beasties run into the corrals o' nights, and fed hay, same as in winter. I've ast it fifty times. It's bin up to you, boss. So I say it's no use in squealin'."

Hank spat over his horse's shoulder, and his thin lips closed with a snap. He was a lean forceful prairieman who possessed, as he would himself have said, no parlor tricks. Dug McFarlane, for all his wealth, for all he had been elected president of the Western Union Cattle Breeders' Association three years in succession, was no more to him than any other employer who paid wages for work loyally performed.

Dug regarded his foreman with close attention. He ignored the man's rough manner. But, nevertheless, it was not without effect.

"And the other boys?"

"Was dead asleep in the bunkhouse—same as me. What 'ud you have? They ain't sheep dogs."

Dug took no umbrage.

"And they're out on the trail—right now?"

"Sure. Same as we should be, 'stead o' wastin' hot air around here. Say, I guess you're feelin' sore. But I don't guess your feelin's is a circumstance to mine, boss. You ain't bin beat to your face by this

lousy gang. I have. An' say, I'm yearnin'—jest gaspin'—to wipe out the score. I don't sort o' care a bit for your loss. That ain't my funeral. But they've beat me plumb out—same as if I was some sucker who ain't never roped an' branded a three-year-old steer since I was pupped. Are you comin' along? They struck out northwest. We got that, an' the boys is follerin' hard on their trail. It'll be better'n squealin' around here."

There could be no doubt about the man's feelings. They were displayed in every word he spoke. In every glance of his fierce eyes. Dug approved him. His manners were nothing. Lew was probably the most capable cattleman in his service.

He was about to follow his foreman who had swung his horse about to set off northward, when he abruptly flung out an arm, pointing.

"That one of your boys—coming in? Maybe—"

Lew screwed up his eyes in the sunlight. His rep came in a moment.

"Maybe—nuthin'. That ain't one of my boys." Then, after a brief, considering pause, in which he narrowly examined the distant horseman's outfit: "Sort o' rec'nize him, too. Likely he's that bum guy with the dandy wife way up on Butte Creek. Whitstone, ain't it? Feller with swell folks way down east, an' who guesses the on'y sort o' farmin' worth a cuss is done in Ju Penrose's saloon. That's him sure," he added, as the man drew nearer. Then he went on musingly. "I guess he's got a lot to dope out. Say, them guys must have passed near by his shanty."

Bob Whitstone reined his pony up with a jerk. He was on a mission that inspired no other emotion than that of repulsion and self-loathing. And these things found reflection in his good-looking face.

He glanced swiftly from one to the other as he confronted the burly rancher and his station foreman. The latter he did not know, nor was he interested in him. The man he had come to see was Dug McFarlane, who claimed from him, as he did from every man in the district, something in the nature of respect.

"Guess you'll remember me, sir," he began, in his easy, refined tones. "My name is Whitstone—Bob Whitstone. You granted me certain grazing rights awhile back. It was some two years ago. Maybe you'll remember. You did it to help me out. Anyway, I came over to see you this morning because—I must. If you can spare half an hour I want to see you privately. It's—important. You've been robbed last night, and—it's about them. The gang, I mean."

His pony was still blowing. Bob had ridden hard. He had first ridden into Orrville, and then followed the rancher out here. He was leaning over in the saddle lounging upon the horn of it. His eyes were gazing curiously, speculatively at the figure of the man who ruled the local cattle industry. He was calculating in his own way what might be the effect of the news he had to impart. What estimate this big man—and Bob knew him to be a big man—would have of him when he had told his news and claimed the—blood money? With each moment he shrank smaller and smaller in his own estimation.

Dug regarded him steadily.

"You've got news of them?"

Bob nodded, and glanced meaningly in the direction of Lew Hank.

"I've seen 'em. But—it's more than that."

The rancher turned quickly upon his foreman.

"Say, just get along into the shack there, and see how the Doc's making with young Syme. I need a talk with Whitstone."

It was not without obvious and resentful reluctance that Lew Hank withdrew. Even his hardihood, however, was unequal to resisting so direct an order from his chief.

The two men watched him out of earshot. Then Dug, with almost precipitate haste, turned back to his visitor.

"Now, sir, I'm ready to hear anything you need to tell me."

But Bob was thinking of Ju Penrose as he had thought of him many times since he had listened and yielded to Effie's appeal. Every man has his price. Bob knew now that he, like the rest, had his price. That price a woman had set for him. Ju was right—hatefully right. Well, he would now refuse to be robbed of one cent of it.

He looked up sharply as the other made his demand.

"You're offering ten thousand dollars reward for the capture of the Lightfoot gang, Mr. McFarlane?"

"That's so."

The rancher's regard had deepened. There was a curious light shining in his blue eyes. It was half speculative, half suggestive of growing excitement. It was wholly full of a burning interest.

"Say, I'd just like to know how I stand." Bob laughed that short hard laugh which bears no trace of mirth. "You see, I can put you wise. I can lead you right on to their camp so you can get 'em—while they're sleeping, or any other old way. Oh, yes, I'm ready to play my part right up to the limit. It don't matter a thing. I'm not just here to tell you about things. I'm here to lead you to that camp, and take a hand in the hanging when you get busy. You see, I'm a whole hogger. But I want to know how things stand about that ten thousand dollar reward. Do I get it? If I get shot up does my wife get it? And when it's paid, do you shout about it? Does the gang down Orrville way need to know who it was they forgot to hand the name of Judas to when he was christened? I don't care a cuss on my own account. It's——"

But Dug McFarlane broke in upon the bitter raillery. He had no thought for the man or his feelings, just for one moment it seemed to him that some sort of miracle had happened. And his every thought and feeling was absorbed in it. Here, after five years of vain effort, here, after five years of depredations which had almost threatened the cattle industry in the district with complete crippling, here was a man who could lead them to the raiders' hiding-place, could show them how the hanging they all so cordially desired could be brought about. It was stupendous. It was—yes, it was miraculous.

His first impulse had been to give way to the excitement which stirred him, but he restrained himself.

"Ten thousand dollars will be paid by me to the man, or his nominee, privately, if his information leads to the hanging of this gang. Say, boy, we ain't goin' to split hairs or play any low games on this lay out. I'm a rich man, an' ten thousand dollars ain't a circumstance so we break up this gang. If we only get one of 'em or part of 'em, the man who shows me their hiding-place, and leads me to it, that man—or his wife—gets my ten thousand dollars. You can have it in writing. But my word goes any old time. Now you can get busy and hand me the proposition."

The steady eyes, the emphatic tones of this big, straight-dealing rancher silenced the last doubt in Bob's lesser mind. He was out to do this dirty work with all his might in the interest of the woman who had inspired it. But he had scarcely been prepared for such simple methods as this man displayed. He had felt that it was for him to barter, to scheme, to secure the dollars Effie coveted. A deep sigh escaped him. It may have been relief. It may have been of regret that he must stand before so straight-dealing a personality claiming his thirty pieces of silver.

He passed one hand across his perspiring brow and thrust his prairie hat farther back upon his head. He would have preferred, however, to have drawn it down over his eyes to escape the searching gaze from the honest depths of the other's. Suddenly, with a gesture of impatience, he began to talk rapidly.

"It's no use, Mr. McFarlane, I hate this rotten work," he cried out. "I—I hate it so bad I could just rather bite my tongue out than tell you the things I've got to. It's rotten. I don't know—— Say, you don't know me, and I don't guess you care a curse anyway. But I was brought up in a city and taught to believe things were a deal better than I've lately come to think they are. Psha! These fellers have got to be hanged when and where we get them. But it hurts me bad to think that I've got to take dollars for handing you their lives. Oh, that don't tell you a thing either. You'd say I don't need to take 'em. But I do. I got to take those dollars, if they blister my hands and burn the bones inside 'em. I've got to have 'em, and I'd like to burn 'em, every blazing one. But I've got to have 'em. Say, I'll be paid on the nail when the job's done? If I get shot up the money'll be paid to my wife? Will you give me your word, sir? Your word of honor?"

"My word of honor."

"Say, then come right back with me to my shanty no, best not. We'll ride back to Orrville, and I'll hand you all I know as we go. I can quit you before we reach the township. Then you can hustle the crowd together and I'll be waiting ready at my shack to play my part—the dirty rotten Judas racket."

"Judas betrayed his—Master and Friend. Are these people your friends? Is Lightfoot your master?"

"Heavens! What d'you take me for—a rustler?"

"Then quit your crazy talk of Judas. Your duty's plumb clear. Your duty's to hand these folks, these bandits, into our hands. The money's a matter of—choice. I'll just hand my man a word or two, and we'll get back Orrville way."

* * * * *

It was past midnight when Bob took up a position squatting on the sill of his own doorway. Standing close behind him, leaning against the rough casing, Effie looked down upon his huddled figure. Her eyes were alight with a power of suppressed excitement. The blood was surging through her young veins, and every nerve was tense with the strain of waiting, of anticipation.

But her emotions were by no means shared by her husband. For all her beauty and woman's charm she was different, utterly different from him. She had been brought up to the understanding that she would have to make her own way in the world. All her parents had been able to do for her was to see that she was as fully equipped for the adventure of life as their limited means would permit. Those means would die when her chief parent died, and the style in which they had lived left no margin for saving.

So, with cool calculation, Effie had set about her life's effort. Nor had she considered herself unsuccessful in the first spreading of her maiden wings. A millionaire's son! It was a splendid match. It had met with the entire approval of her family.

Then had come disillusionment. A determined opposition from Bob's father. She had been urged to break off the engagement. She even intended to do so. But some how she had miscalculated the nature which her education had been powerless to eradicate. She realized at last when the demands of her campaign made themselves heard, that there was something she had hitherto completely ignored. There was the woman's heart of her. She had most absurdly fallen in love with this first stepping-stone toward the goal of her ambition. It was the absurd uncalculating love of extreme youth. But it was sufficiently impetuous to flout all the reason which her training and upbringing had been calculated to inspire her with.

The rest followed in natural sequence, and now, after two years of married penury, she was ready to seize any straw which chance flung in her way as a means of salving that ambition which she now saw, with more perfectly clear vision, was completely upon the rocks.

Now, in her mind, there were only three matters of concern. Would Dug McFarlane come? Would they succeed in capturing this Lightfoot gang? Would she get those ten thousand dollars, which appeared so vast a sum to eyes only accustomed to dwelling upon cents?

Bob was silent. His whole aspect seemed to have undergone a complete changes. He had returned to her with the story of his interview with Dug McFarlane. He had returned to her with the assurance that he had sold his conscience, his honor, at her bidding, and he hoped she was satisfied. Since then he had wrapped himself in a moody silence which had defied her utmost effort to break down.

The horses stood ready saddled in the barn. Effie was clad in her riding suit. As yet the moon had not risen to reduce the starlit magnificence of the velvet summer night sky. Nor was there any sound to warn them that the hours of suspense were nearly over.

Finally, Effie could endure the silence no longer. Her dark eyes were intently gazing down upon the bowed figure of the man. They were hard with every bitter woman's emotion. She was full of a fierce, hot resentment against the man who could so obstinately resist the spirit of her longing.

"Bob," she cried at last, all restraint completely giving way, "do you know what I could do just now more willingly than anything else in the world? I could thrust out my foot and spurn you with it as you might any surly cur which barred your way. I tell you I'm hot with every feeling of contempt for your crazy attitude. You dare to set yourself and your moral scruples between my welfare and the miserable life you've condemned me to. Your moral scruples. Were there ever such things? Morals? Ju Penrose's saloon day and night—for you. The sluttish drudgery of this wretched place for me. Then you dare to place your conscience before my—comfort."

"Do I?"

The man did not look up. His brooding eyes were on the sky-line to the southeast.

"I've done as you needed. I've arranged everything with the—hangman. You're going to touch those pleasant dollars. What more are you asking me?"

"What more? Yes, you've done these things because I've driven you to them. You? You'd rather see me sitting around here starving, a worn wreck of a woman, than lend a willing hand to bettering our lot. Oh, yes, you've done these things, and—I hate you for the way you've done them."

The man sat up. He shifted his position so that he could gaze up at the splendid creature standing over him.

"You don't hate me worse than I hate myself, Effie," he said with an exasperating lack of emotion. "Say, you feel like kicking me. You feel like treating me like a surly cur. Well, I guess you're welcome. I don't guess there's a thing you can do that way can hurt me worse than you've done already." Then he smiled. And his smile was more maddening to the woman than his words. "Don't worry a thing. You're going to get your dollars if there's anything I can do to help you, and when you've got 'em—why, if the merciful God we've both been brought up to believe in is all we believe Him, I shan't be around to watch you dirtying your hands with them."

Then with a swift, alert movement he raised a warning hand.

"H'sh!"

For some seconds they remained listening. Far away to the southeast a low murmuring note came over the low hills. The girl remained with eyes straining to pierce the starlit monotone. The man rose slowly from his seat. Finally he turned about and faced her, and his eyes smiled into hers.

"The hanging bee," he said.

CHAPTER VI

THE RAIDERS RAIDED

It was the gap where the screen of bush broke off, leaving the barren shoulder overlooking the valley. It was where the hard-beaten, converging cattle-paths hurled themselves over the brink to the wide depths below.

The stillness that prevailed was unbroken by a single night sound. Even the insect life seemed wrapped in a deep hush of somnolence. As yet the night scavengers had not emerged from their hidings to bay the silvery radiance of a moonlit night. The deep hush beneath the myriad of eyes of night was as beautiful as it was treacherous, for it only cloaked hot, stirring passions ready in a moment to break out into warring chaos.

Crouching low under the shelter of the screening bush three figures huddled closely. They were peering across the wide gulf, searching with eyes that only half read what lay before them in the starlight. Their gaze rested upon one definite spot whose shadowy outline was indicated by the outstretched arm of one of the party. It was a deep woodland bluff, leaning, as it seemed, for support against the far wall of the valley's western slope.

After some tense moments the straining eyes beheld the faintest glimmer of artificial light flickering in the depths of its silent heart. So faint was it, at the distance, that, for a while, doubt prevailed. Then conviction supervened as each of the watchers recorded his observation and a sigh of certitude made itself heard. The point of light was held by all. It was dwelt upon. It was the verification needed to convey absolute faith in the woman's tale miraculous.

Perhaps it was the light in some window of a secret abode. Perhaps it was the steady flicker of an unscreened camp-fire. Perhaps, even, it was the beam of some lantern carelessly set down and left alight. Whatever it was it was certainly of human agency, and human agency in these regions had only one interpretation for the minds of those who were watching from the high eastern wall of the valley.

Presently a woman's voice spoke in the hush of suppressed excitement. Her tone was full of an eagerness that hurled her words swiftly upon the still night air.

"That's where I marked them down," she whispered. "There—just there. Right where that light's shining. Somewhere in the heart of that bluff. There was a herd grazing out in front, with three mounted men guarding it. There's no mistake. It's a bee-line right across. And the men who fired up this way came out of those trees. It's steep down these paths. They sort of zigzag their way, but it's a

path any horse can make without danger. It just needs care. Once in the valley it's a stretch of sweet-grass without a bluff or a break of any sort. There's no slough either. It's just grass. One big flat of sweet-grass."

There was no reply from her companions. They were engrossed with the object of their straining scrutiny. Presently the woman went on again.

"This is where my work quits," she said. Then she withdrew her gaze and looked up at the dim outline of the big man nearest her. There was just a shade of eagerness in her manner now. "That's Lightfoot's camp, Mr. McFarlane," she assured. "I've done all that's needed. You see, I'm a woman, and I don't guess you need anything more from me. Shall I stop right here, or—get back to home?"

Bob Whitstone was watching his wife closely as she addressed herself to the rancher. He noted her tone, her evident anxiety now, and he understood. A curious repulsion surged through him. In the brief two years of his married life no such sensation had ever possessed him. But he recognized it. It was the breaking point. Effie no longer held place in his affections. He glanced up at McFarlane as his deep tones whispered in the silence.

"Yes, ma'am, get right back to home. There's no need for you to get mussed up with what's goin' to happen. It's man's work, not a woman's. Your husband's got my word. You'll find we aren't forgetful."

Then he drew back under cover, and moved away to where, scattered along the path, well sheltered from view, a large party of dismounted horsemen were awaiting his orders.

Effie turned to her husband.

"You're coming back with me, Bob?" she said, almost pleadingly. "It's a long way to home."

Bob's eyes gazed straight into hers. Even in the darkness Effie felt something of the coldness of his regard.

"Are you scared?" he demanded.

Effie shook her head.

"There's nothing to be scared at. But you've nothing to do with—the rest of it."

"Haven't I?"

"You're not going down there with them?"

There was a curious sharpness in the woman's whispering voice. Bob's cold regard remained unwavering.

"I'm leaving nothing to chance. You've got to get your wages. I'm going to see you get them. Yes, I'm going—down there."

A sudden fierce passion swept through the woman's heart. Hot words in retort surged to her lips. But they remained unuttered. A strong effort of restraint checked them. She turned away coldly, her eyes focussing once more upon the tiny point of light across the hollow.

"Guess you must do as you think," she said, with a shrug. And she remained with her back turned upon the man she was destined never to address again.

Bob moved away and joined the rest of the Vigilantes. They were already in the saddle. Dug McFarlane had given his final orders. In a moment Bob surveyed the scene in the dim light. Then he turned away to his own horse and sprang into the saddle.

McFarlane saw him and rode up.

"You coming along?" he enquired curiously.

"Sure."

"Good boy." Then he drew a deep breath. "Maybe there'll be an empty saddle or two before we've done. But I don't guess that'll need to worry us any. The man who 'passes in' to-night won't have any kick comin'. It's better that way—with your duty done."

"Yes."

The simple monosyllable was strangely expressive, but Dug McFarlane had no understanding of the

thought that prompted it. It would have been difficult indeed, even with understanding, to have probed the depths of feeling prompting it. But Whitstone was incapable of seeing the broader aspect of anything pertaining to himself. He saw only as his feelings dictated, without logic or reason of any sort. He was of that nature which leans for support upon prejudices absorbed in early youth. Principles inculcated through early environment and teaching. He was incapable of testing or questioning their verity. Robbed of them he was left floundering. And Effie, the woman whom he had married only out of hot, youthful human regard, had so robbed him.

Effie drew back. She pressed herself close into the bush as the cavalcade sought the path at the edge of the valley. She watched the burly leader vanish over the brink. Then, one by one, twenty-five others passed her in review, and were swallowed up by the depths below. She knew none of them personally, but she knew they were all ranchers and ranchmen of varying degree. She knew that each individual had at some time suffered at the hands of the rustlers. That deep in each heart was the craving for a vengeance which possessed small enough thought of justice in it. These men were Vigilantes. They were so called not from any desire to enforce law and order, but purely for their own self-defense, the defending of self-interests.

They impressed her not from any justice of motive, but from the merciless purpose upon which they were bent.

The last to pass over the brink was her husband, a slight figure, almost puny, amongst these hard prairie folk. Just for one weak moment she was on the point of raising a protesting voice. Just for one moment a womanly softening held her yielding. He was her husband, and memories crowded. But almost as they were born they died. Their place was once more taken by the recollection of the life she had been forced to endure for the sake of her first youthful passion. Her heart hardened. No impulse had driven her to her present actions. They were the result of a craving she was powerless to resist. Her husband must go his way. He must act as he saw fit. For herself she would not forego one tithe of the reward which she believed would help her to that comfort in life for which her soul yearned.

With the passing of the Vigilantes she moved clear of the bush. She would see this out. Home? She had no desire for her home. The night had no terrors for her. Nothing had terror for her, except the failure of these men.

She flung herself upon the ground and lay with wide eyes searching the remoteness of the valley beyond. Her impatience had developed into something almost feverish. She wanted a sign. She wanted assurance. But the world seemed so still, so entirely peaceful.

The moments pursued for her a sluggish course. The jeweled sky was an added regret. She desired light, light that she might witness the whole drama she hoped—yes, hoped—would be played out down there in the valley. A sort of dementia had taken possession of her. She had no thought of the blood to be poured out at her bidding. She thought nothing of the strong lives to be given up in sacrifice for her well-being. She thought only of herself, and all that the success of that night's affairs would mean to her.

But the dragging minutes extending upward of half an hour wore her fever down. And slowly depression replaced her more tense emotions. It all seemed so long in happening that failure began to loom, and to become a certainty.

It was too good to hope. Ten thousand dollars! The amount bulked in her mind. It grew greater and greater in its significance as delay thrust hope further and further from her thought. Again impatience grew, hot, angry impatience, and drove depression out. What were they doing down there? Why did they not surround the bluff? There were enough of them. Look! The light was still shining. It was the camp. Where that light shone the men lay in hiding. Well—it was simple. To her mind there was no need for—

The sound of a rifle shot split the air with significant abruptness. The sound banished the last of her half-angry causing. The moment had come. She raised herself up for no other reason than tense drawn suspense.

A second shot. Then a rattle of musketry which suggested general conflict. She drew a deep breath. Far away in the distance it seemed she heard a sharp cry. It was the final shriek of a human creature in the agony of a mortal wound. Then followed the sound of hoarse voices shouting.

For some moments nothing in the scene changed. The speck of light shone out twinkling and gleaming like some evil eye. For the rest—there remained the deep twilight marked by the myriads of summer stars.

But the cries of men, the trampling of speeding hoofs held her. The breathlessness of the whole thing

was upon her now, making it impossible to detach her regard from the main features.

The rattle of rifles had become almost incessant. And a few moments later a blaze of light shot up from the far side of the bluff. It grew, licking up the great, sun-dried, resinous pine wood with paralyzing rapidity. Another great sheet of flame soared upward further away to the right. Then another to the south. A fire trap had been set at the far side of the great bluff, and only the hither side remained open to those seeking shelter within it.

Effie's gaze was fascinated beyond her control. The Vigilantes had planned their coup deliberately and well. The air she was breathing began to reek with the pungent smell of burning. A light smoke haze began to flood the picture. Now she beheld moving figures in the lurid glow which backed the scene. They were horsemen. But whether or not they were the Vigilantes she could not be certain. They were racing across the open, and the crack of their rifles mingled with the spluttering crackle of the conflagration beyond.

Never for one moment did the woman withdraw her gaze. The spell of it all was almost painful. She knew that life and death were at grips down there in that cauldron of conflict. And though at moments shudders passed through her body, they were neither shudders of weakness nor womanish horror. Her only emotion was excitement, and her nerves were ready to respond in physical expression to every vision her eyes communicated to them.

An hour passed thus. The bluff was a furnace, roaring, booming. It lit the valley seemingly from end to end. The night shadows had been swept aside, and the scene lay spread out before her eyes. She saw dismounted riders moving about. She beheld one group; a number of men huddled together, held as though they were prisoners.

At last firing altogether ceased and the straggling horsemen began to reassemble in the vicinity of the chief group. Then, as the raging fire ate its way through to the hither side of the bluff, and turned the final barrier into a wall of fire, the whole party moved away down the valley with obvious signs of haste.

Effie gazed after them with widening eyes while the hot breath of the conflagration fanned her cheeks. She was wondering, speculating, and slowly the significance of their movements began to take hold of her.

At first she had thought that the movement was inspired by the overpowering heat of the forest fire. She had warned herself of the danger. The grass down there. The flying sparks. But almost in the same breath she realized that there was more, far more in that movement. The grass was far too green in the valley to form any real danger and the bluff was sufficiently isolated. No, there was more in it than the danger of fire.

She shivered, although the night air now possessed something of the temperature of a summer noon. All her excitement had passed. She had even forgotten for the time all that the doings of that night meant to her. She was thinking of the deliberate administration of justice as these men understood it. It was crude, deadly, and full of a painful horror, and now, now, in saner moments, she beheld the dawn of emotions which had come all too late. Whither were those men riding? Whither? And then? Ah—she shuddered, and her shudder was full of realization. For well she knew that the men she had seen grouped were living prisoners. Living prisoners. How long would they remain so? What would be their end?

CHAPTER VII

OUTLAND JUSTICE

The noon sun sweltered down through the rank vegetation of the narrow defile. The heat was almost too burdensome to endure. It was moist; it was dank with the reek of decaying matter. The way was a seemingly endless battle against odds. But the travelers were buoyed with the knowledge that it was a short cut, calculated to save them many hours and many miles.

Bud Tristram had pointed the way. Furthermore, he had urged Jeff to accept and endure the tortures and shortcomings which he knew they must face in the heart of this remote gulch.

Nor were his warnings unneeded, for Nature had set up no inconsiderable defenses. Here were swarms of over-grown mosquitoes of a peculiarly vicious type, which covered their horses' flanks in a gray horde, almost obliterating their original colors; and a bleeding mass resulted every time either man raised a hand to the back of his own neck to soothe the fierce irritation of the vicious attacks. Then the way itself. It was a narrow gorge almost completely occupied by the muddy bed and boggy shores of a drying mountain creek.

It was, in Jeff's own words, a "fierce journey." The heat left them drenched in perspiration, and wilting. The two packhorses fought for their very lives, often hock deep in a sucking mire. While the beasts, who bore the burden of their exacting masters, were driven to battle every inch of the way against a fiercely obstinate rampart of dense grown bush.

Mercifully the gorge was less than three miles in length. A greater distance must have left the nervous equine mind staggered, and helpless, and beaten. As it was nearly three hours of incessant struggle only served to pass the final barrier.

"Phew!"

Jeff Masters drew off his hat as they emerged upon the wide opening of a great valley. Then he flung himself out of the saddle and began to sweep the blood-inflated mosquitoes from his horse's flanks. Bud, with less haste, proceeded to do the same. Finally, both men walked round the weary beasts and examined the security of the packs on the led horses.

Bud pointed down the valley with one outstretched arm.

"We'll make that way," he said, his deep eyes dwelling almost affectionately upon the wide stretch of blue-tinted grass. "Guess we'll take the high land an' camp fer food."

Then he turned back to his horse and remounted. Jeff silently followed his example and they rode on.

For many minutes no word passed between them. Each was busy with his own particular thoughts. The deep look of friendly affection was still in Bud's eyes. Jeff was far less concerned with the wonderful scene slowly unfolding itself as they proceeded than with the purpose of his journey. He knew they had reached the central point from which they were to radiate their search of the labyrinth of hills. His mind was upon the wealth of possibility before them. The difficulties. Bud, for the time at least, was concerned only with that which his eyes beheld, and the memories of other days far, far back when he had possessed no greater responsibility than the quest of adventure, and his own safe delivery from the fruits of his unwisdom.

It was he who first broke the silence between them.

"Gee!" he exclaimed, with that curious note of appreciation which that ejaculation can assume. "It's big. Say, Jeff, it's big an' good to look on. Sort of makes you think, too, don't it? Jest get a peek that way. Them slopes." He indicated the western boundary of the valley rising up, up to great pine-crested heights. "A thousand—two thousand feet. And hills beyond. Big hills, with snows you couldn't melt anyhow. Over there, too." One great hand waved in the direction of the east. "Lesser hills. Lesser woods. But—man, it's fine! Then ahead. Miles an' miles of this queer blue grass which sets fat on cattle inches deep."

His words ceased, but his eyes continued to feast, flooding the simple brain behind them with a joy which no words could describe. Presently he went on:

"Makes you feel A'mighty God's a pretty big feller, don't it? Guess He jest tumbles things around, an' sets up, an' levels down in a way that wouldn't mean a thing to brains like ours—till He's finished it all, and sort of swep' up tidy. Look at them colors, way up there to the west. Queer? Sure. Every sort o' blamed color in a tangle no earthly painter could set out. Ain't it a pictur'? It's jest a sort o' pictur' a painter feller's li'ble to spend most of his wholesome nights dreamin' about. An' when he wakes up, why, I don't guess he kin even think like it, an' he sure ain't a hell of a chance to paint that way anyhow. Say, d'you make it these things are, or is it jest something He sets in us makes us see 'em that way? He's big—He surely is. I'm glad I come along with you, Jeff, boy. Y' see, a feller sort o' sits around home, an' sees the same grass, an' brands the same steers, an' thinks the same thinks. Ther' ain't nothin' he don't know around home. He gets so life don't seem a thing, an' he jest feels he's running things so as he pleases. He sort o' fergets he's jest a part o' the scenery around. He fergets he's set in that scenery by an A'mighty big Hand, same as them all-fired m'squitters we just found, an' kind o' guesses he is that A'mighty Hand." He turned his deeply smiling eyes on his companion. "I don't often take on like this, Jeff," he apologized, "but the sight o' this place makes me want to shout an' get right out an' thank the good God He's seen fit to let me sit around an' live."

But Jeff had no means of simple expression such as Bud. He could never give verbal expression to the emotions locked away in his heart. Those who knew him regarded it as reserve, even hardness. Perhaps it was only that shyness which the strongest characters are often most prone to.

He ignored the older man's quaintly expressed feelings, and fastened upon the opening he had at last received, and which he had been seeking ever since it had become obvious that Bud's knowledge of the great Cathill range was almost phenomenal.

"You know these parts a heap," he observed.

"Know 'em?" Bud laughed in his deep-throated way, which was only another indication of his buoyant mood. "You'd know 'em, boy, if you'd had a father build up a big pelt trading post right in this valley, an' fer sixteen years o' your life you'd ridden, an' shot, an' hunted over this blue grass, and these hills, for nigh a range of fifty mile. Guess I know this territory same as you know the playgrounds o' the college that handed you your knowledge o' figgers. Know it? Say, you could dump me right down anywhere around here for fifty miles an' more, an' I'd travel straight here same as the birds fly." He laughed again. "When you said you'd the notion of huntin' out your brother, who was huntin' these hills, you give me the excuse I'd been yearnin' to find in years. I wanted to see these hills again. I wanted it bad. Guess I was jest crazy fer it. It didn't get me figgerin' long, either, to locate wher' we'd likely find that boy you're lookin' fer. Ther' ain't no better huntin' ground than around this valley. It's sort of untouched since my father died, an' I had to quit it and take to punchin' cattle. Then ther's that post he built. A dandy place, with nigh everything a pelt hunter needs fer his comfort. We're making for that post right now, an' when we make it I'm gessin' we ain't goin' to chase much farther to locate that twin brother of yours."

"But you never——"

Bud shook his great head, and stretched his ungainly legs with his stirrups thrust out wide.

"Sure I didn't tell you these things," he nodded, in simple, almost childlike enjoyment.

"I never—— Say, does Nan know you were—raised here?"

"Surely." Then Bud went on with an amused twinkle in his eyes. "But I guess Nan's like me. It ain't our way worryin' other folks with our troubles. You see, most folks ain't a heap o' time to listen to other folks' troubles. Most everybody's jest yearnin' to tell their own."

"Troubles?" Jeff smiled in his own peculiarly shadowy fashion. "You don't seem to figure this valley's any sort of trouble, nor its associations. But maybe there's a bone or two hidden around you don't figure to show me."

Bud remained silent for some moments. Then he gave way to another of his joyous, deep-throated laughs.

"No, sirree! Ther' ain't no troubles to this valley fer me. None. I got memories I wouldn't sell fer a farm. Them wer' days you didn't find trouble in nothin'. No. It's later on you see things diff'rent. Make good, an' you see troubles wher' there shouldn't be none. You an' me we're gessin' to make a pile o' dollars, so we could set up a palace on 5th Av'noo, New York, if we was yearnin' that-a-way. I don't reckon there's many fellers 'ud find trouble in such a play as that. Wal, I'd be willing enough to turn it all down, an' pitch camp right here among these hills, an' chase pelts for the few dollars needed to keep the wind from rattling my bones—'cep' fer Nan."

"Ah yes—Nan. There's Nan to think of. And Nan's more to you, Bud, than anything else in life. Say, your little girl's a bright jewel. I don't need to say a word about her value, eh? But some day you're going to lose her. And then?"

Bud's eyes came round upon him and for some moments encountered Jeff's steady regard. Then he looked away, and slowly all its simple delight dropped from the strong weather-tanned face, to be replaced by an almost painful dejection. Presently he turned again, and, in a moment, Jeff found an added interest in the wonderful scene that lay ahead of him.

"Nan's a fine, good gal," Bud declared, with simple earnestness. "Guess she's her mother over again—only she's jest Nan. Nan's more to me than all the dollars in creation, boy. Guess you're right. Oh, yes, you're right—sure." The man brushed aside the beads of sweat from his broad forehead. "An' Nan's goin' to do jest as she notions. She's goin' to live around her home as long as she feels that way. When she don't feel that way she's goin' to quit. When she feels like choosin' a man fer herself—why, I'm goin' to do all I know helpin' her that way. But it's goin' to be her choice, boy. An' when that time comes, why, I'll get right down on my knees an' pray A'mighty God he's the feller for her, an' the man I'm

hopin' she'll choose, an' that he wants her, same as she wants him."

Then he shook his head and a deep sigh escaped him.

"But I don't know. It don't seem to me reasonable. Y' see, the luck's run all my way so far, an' I don't guess you can keep on dealin' the cards without 'em gettin' right up an' handin' it you plenty—some time."

Jeff had no reply. Something warned him to keep silent. The older man in his earnest simplicity had opened out to him a vista which he felt he had no right to gaze upon.

As they jogged steadily along over the blue-green carpet, and the kaleidoscopic coloring of the distant slopes fell away behind them, his whole mental vision became occupied by the sweet picture of a brown-eyed, brown-haired girl. But he was regarding it without any lover's emotions. Rather was he regarding it as one who calmly appraises a beautiful jewel he does not covet. He was thinking of Nan as he had known her for some five years. From the days of her schoolgirlhood he had watched her develop into a grown woman full of all that was wholesome and winsome. She was her father over again, trustful, simple, fearless, and she was possessed of a whimsical philosophy quite beyond her years. Her beauty was undeniable, her gentle kindness was no less. But the memory of these things made no stirring within him. Nan was just a loyal little friend whom he loved and was ready to serve as he might love and help a sister, but regard of her broke off at that. So, as he rode, the pictures of her failed to hold him, and, finally, his roving gaze became caught and held by a sudden and striking anachronism in the scene about him.

He claimed Bud's attention with a gesture which roused him from his engrossing thought.

"Fire," he observed.

Bud's gaze became rivetted on the spot.

"Yes, it's fire—sure," he admitted.

It was a long way ahead. Only the trained eyes of prairiemen could have read the sign aright at such a distance. It was a break in the wonderful sea of varying shades of restful green. It was, to them, an ominous dead black patch which broke the sky-line with unmistakable skeleton arms.

It was the only remark upon the subject which passed between them, but as they rode on it occupied something more than a passing attention.

With Jeff his interest was mere curiosity. With Bud it was deeper and more significant. Had the younger man observed him he might have discovered a curious expression almost amounting to pain in the deep eyes which contemplated the blackened limbs where the fire had wrought its havoc.

As they drew nearer it became apparent that the havoc was even greater than they had first supposed. A wide patch of woodland, hundreds of acres in extent, whose upper limits were confined only by the summit of the valley's slope, where it cut the sky-line, had been completely burnt out. Nor was it possible to tell if even that limit was the extent of the disaster.

Bud suddenly reined in his horse as they came abreast of it, and his voice broke with painful sharpness upon the deathly stillness of the world about them.

"It's gone," he cried, with a note of deep distress and grievous disappointment. "It's burnt right out to a shell. Say——"

"What's gone?"

The older man glanced round. Then his troubled eyes sought the charred remains of the splendid pines once more.

"Why—the post." Then he pointed amongst the charred skeletons. "Get a peek right in ther'. See, Jeff. Them walls; them fallen logs. Burnt. Burnt right through to the heart of 'em. That's all that's left of the home that sheltered me for the first sixteen years of my life. Say, I'm sick—sick to death."

Jeff left his packhorse and moved forward amongst the blackened limbs. The reek of burnt wood hung heavily upon the air. He threaded his way carefully toward the charred remains of an extensive abode, now plainly visible amongst the black tree trunks.

It was a wide rambling structure, and, though burnt to cinders, much of its general shape, and the great logs which had formed its walls, still remained to testify to all it had been under the hands of those who had originally wrought there.

Jeff glanced back at the man he had left behind. He had not stirred. He sat in the saddle just gazing at the destruction. That was all. So he turned again to the ruins, and, dismounting, he proceeded on foot to explore.

They were eyes wide with repulsion and a certain horror that gazed down upon the object at Jeff's feet. It was the rotting, charred remains of a human figure. It was beyond recognition, except in so far as its human identity was concerned. The clothes were gone. The flesh was seared and shriveled. The process of incineration was almost complete.

After a few fascinated moments his eyes searched further along the remains of the old post wall. Another figure lay sprawling on the ground. Near by it a heavy pistol had fallen wide. A rifle, too, lay across the second body.

Every detail was swiftly absorbed by the man's keenly active brain. He stood back from the gutted precincts and gazed speculatively upon the picture. His imagination reconstructed something of what he believed must have occurred in the deep heart of these wrecked woodlands.

What of the fire? How had it been started? Was it the work of an incendiary? Had the heat of the summer sun wrought the mischief? Had the hut itself supplied the trouble? None of these questions offered real enlightenment through the answers he could supply. No. He saw the superheated furnace of the woods blazing, and he saw men struggling with all their might to save themselves, and some of their more precious belongings. The reckless daring of those two, perhaps at the last moment, returning to their shelter on one final journey to save some detail of their home. Then the awful penalty for their temerity. Perhaps overwhelmed by smoke. Death—hideous, appalling death. Death, a thousand times worse than that which, in the routine of their lives, it was their work to mete out to the valuable fur bearers which yielded them a means of existence.

A sudden question, not unaccompanied by fear, swept through his brain. It was a question inspired by the belief that these men were fur hunters. Who—who were they? He drew close up to each body in turn, seeking identity where none was discoverable. A sweat broke upon his temples. There was no sign in them. There was no human semblance except for outline.

"God! If it should be——"

His sentence remained incompleated. A dreadful fear had broken it off. He was gazing down upon the second body, in earnest, horrified contemplation. Then to his amazement he was answered by Bud's familiar voice.

"It ain't the boy we're chasin' up, Jeff," he said, with a deep assurance.

"How d'you know that?"

The demand was incisive, almost rough.

"These folks weren't pelt hunters. Not by a sight. I bin around."

Jeff had turned to the speaker, and a great relief shone in his eyes.

"What—who were they—then?" he asked sharply.

"Maybe it was a ranch—of sorts."

"Of sorts? You mean——?"

"Rustlers. Come right on out of here, an' I'll show you."

With gentle insistence he drew his friend away from the painfully fascinating spectacle which held so difficult a riddle. And presently they were again with their horses, which were grazing unconcernedly upon the sweet blue grass which the valley yielded so generously.

"Well?" There was almost impatience in Jeff's monosyllable.

For answer Bud pointed at a number of rough fences, uneven, crude, makeshift, some distance away.

"See them? Oh, yes, I guess they're corrals sure. But it don't take a feller who's lived all his life among cattle more'n five seconds to locate their meanin'. They're corrals set up in an a'mighty hurry by folks who hate work o' that sort anyway. An' I'd say, Jeff, cattlemen—real cattlemen—don't dump a

range down in the heart of the Cathills, not even fer this sweet-grass you can see around, when ther's the prairie jest outside. That is cattlemen who got no sort o' reason fer keepin' quit of the—open plains. Then ther's bin a big drive away north from here. Mebbe they wer' gettin' clear of this fire."

Under the influence of Bud's clear convictions all Jeff's fears vanished. He accepted the other's admittedly better understanding of these things all the more readily that he desired earnestly to dispel the last shadows of his momentary doubt.

"That's so," he agreed. Then he added: "But anyway, our camp's gone."

"Yes. We'll make camp some'ere else. Meanwhiles——"

"Yes?"

"We must follow up the trail."

There was irrevocable decision in the older cattleman's tone. And his words had the effect of startling the other.

"But—I don't see——"

"They're rustlers. Ther's their tracks clear as day. This is their hiding. Wal, I guess there's jest one thing to be done. It's our duty to track 'em down. Our duty to the cattle world, Jeff, boy."

"But what about—Ronald?"

Bud looked him squarely in the eyes.

"We're cattlemen first, Jeff. The other'll come later."

Jeff nodded, but there was a certain reluctance in his manner. His whole heart was set upon the search for his twin brother. He felt that his duty as a cattleman scarcely had the right to claim him at such a time. But the older man's manner made it difficult to protest, and, in deference to him, he felt it would be ungenerous to refuse. After all it only meant perhaps the delay of a day for his own projects.

"Then we'll feed and water right here, Bud," he said resignedly. "We can leave our pack ponies, and ride light. There's five hours of daylight yet."

"Yes, five hours good. Thanks, boy. Don't you worry a thing. We'll make this time good. We're goin' to find your Ronald—if he's anywheres around these Cathills."

* * * * *

The more concentrated the character, the more sure its power of moral endurance, so the more acute its suffering under adversity. Such penalties lie ambushed for the strong, as though in delight at the immensity of the suffering which can thereby be inflicted.

Such an ambush was awaiting Jeffrey Masters. It came with terrifying suddenness. Bud was on the lead. The great sea of blue grass had been beaten and crushed by the hoofs of a considerable herd. There was no difficulty, and the pace he made was rapid. But, even so, Bud's keen eyes never left the well-defined trail. He was reading it with an understanding which might well have seemed almost superhuman. And as he rode he communicated odd fragments of his reading to the man behind him.

"It's queer," he observed once, when they had covered nearly two miles of the track. "Ther's a great bunch of horsemen been over this. Kind o' seems to me as if ther' was as many horses as steers. They're headin' northeast, too."

Jeff's eyes were as close upon the trail as Bud's, only he read with less understanding.

"They seem leading out of the valley," he said. "Maybe there's another camp way up further."

Suddenly Bud drew rein, his great body lurching forward in the saddle as his horse "propped" itself to a standstill. Jeff's horse followed suit of its own accord.

"What's doing?"

Jeff's demand was accompanied by a keen look into the other's face.

Bud's eyes were wide with speculation.

"They've broke up—hereabouts," he cried. "More'n half the horses have cut out. Say, ther'," he went

on pointing away to the right. "That's the way they've took, clear across ther' to the east. The herd's gone on with jest a few boys to handle it. Say——"

"Look!"

A curious suppressed force rang in Jeff's exclamation. He was pointing at a bluff of wide-spreading sturdy trees that grew hard in against the eastern slope of the valley.

Bud followed the direction indicated, and that which he beheld robbed him of all inclination for further speech.

Long silent moments passed. Moments fraught with poignant, stirring emotions. Something painful was slowly creeping into the eyes of both men as they continued to regard this stout cluster of trees.

"Oaks."

The word was muttered.

Jeff vouchsafed no reply, but led the way toward them at a gallop.

They drew up almost in the shadow of the trees, at a point where three hideous things were hanging suspended by rawhide ropes. They were swaying gently, stirred almost imperceptibly under the pressure of the light breeze.

Bud sat stock still upon his horse. For a moment Jeff remained at his side. Then the latter stirred. He pressed his horse forward, urging it closer under the overhanging boughs. The animal moved willingly enough for a few yards. Then panic suddenly beset it. It shied. It reared and plunged. The fierce reminder of the spur was powerless to affect it beyond driving it to even more strenuous rebellion. The terror-stricken creature would not approach another step in the direction of those ominous swinging bodies.

Jeff finally leaped from the saddle and released his horse. It turned to bolt, but Bud reached its hanging reins and secured it. Then he sat still, observing the movements of his companion with strained, intent gaze.

Jeff passed under the great limbs of the tree. He cautiously approached the first of the hanging bodies. It was hideous. There was a bandage drawn tightly over the dead eyes, but its folds were powerless to disguise the rest of the contorted features. The head was tilted over on one side. Its flesh was ghastly, and deep discolorations blotched it from the neck up. The body was clad in the ordinary garb of the prairieman, with the loose waistcoat hanging open over a discolored cotton shirt, and the nether part of it sheathed in dirty moleskin trousers. The ankles were lashed securely together, and the arms firmly pinioned.

For some moments Jeff stared up at the dead man. His blue eyes were quite unsoftening. There was no real pity in him for the fate of a cattle thief. He understood only the justice of it from the point of view of the cattle grower. So his cold eyes gazed up at the horrid spectacle unflinchingly.

After some moments he passed on to the second body. The same conditions prevailed. A colored handkerchief concealed the glazed eyes, and the dropping jaw displayed the blackened cavity beyond the lips.

He moved away to the third. Its back was turned to him, and the bared head displayed a close mass of fair curling hair. In this instance the bandage over the eyes had fallen from its place, and lay lodged against the raw hide rope about the dead man's neck. He moved round quickly. In a moment he was facing the dreadful dead features.

He stood there without a sound. But his eyes had changed from their cold regard to a horror unspeakable. Once his lips parted, and there was an automatic effort to moisten them with a parching tongue. He swallowed with a visible effort. But no other movement came from him.

The moments passed. Hideous, dreadful moments of an agony that was displayed in the drawn lines which had suddenly taken possession of his strong features. It was the face of a man whose soul is seared with the blasting fury of a hell from the sight of which he is powerless to withdraw his terrified gaze. He knew nothing but the agony which smote through his every sense. The world about him, the place, even the hideous swaying remains of a once joyous life that confronted him. He was blind, blind to it all, crushed beneath a burden of agony which left him stupefied. His twin brother Ronald was there before him, a dreadful, dead thing, hanged for a—cattle thief.

Bud gazed from the dead to the living. His deep eyes were full of an understanding which required no words. There was that about the dead, distorted face which was unmistakable. One look into the dreadful eyes of the living had told him all he needed.

He, too, stood silently contemplating the swaying figure. But it was only for a moment. Then he moved swiftly, actively. As he moved he drew a sheath knife from his belt.

He reached up. The steel of the knife gleamed. The next moment the dead thing was in his arms.

A low fierce cry suddenly broke the silence of those dreadful shades.

"Leave him! Don't dare, or—I'll kill you!"

Bud's head turned, and the muzzle of a gun touched his cheek. The blazing eyes behind it shone like coals of fire as they glared into his.

But the great Bud's purpose was stronger than the madness of the other's agony.

"Put up your gun, Jeff," he said, in a deep gentle voice. "We're jest goin' to hide this poor boy wher' the eyes o' men an' beasts can't see him. We're jest goin' to hide him away wher' mebbe the good God'll watch over him, an' help him, an' surely will forgive him. You ken jest help me, boy, to locate the place, an' when we find it we'll sort o' seal it up, an' you ken hide the key away in your heart so no one'll ever find it. Are you goin' to help, Jeff?"

For answer the gun was abruptly withdrawn. Then Bud saw the stricken man's hand dash across his eyes, and, as it passed, he realized the moisture of tears upon the back of it.

CHAPTER VIII

JEFF CLOSES THE BOOK

Ju Penrose was a mild sort of sun-worshipper. But he confined his regard to the single blessings of light and warmth. Some of his deity's idiosyncrasies were by no means blessings in his estimation. He blamed the sun for the flies. He blamed it that it made necessary the adoption of light cotton shirts, which required frequent washing. He, furthermore, blamed it for the temperature of drinks in summer time, in a place where no ice was procurable. This he regarded as wholly unfair. Then, too, possessing something of an artistic eye, he failed to appreciate the necessity for changing the delicate hues of nature in spring to a monotonous summer tone by the overbearing process of continuing its spring blessing *ad nauseam*. And as for winter, it was perfectly ridiculous to turn off its "hot" tap when it was most needed. Yes, there were moments when he certainly felt that he could order matters far more pleasantly if he were given a free hand.

Still, just now winter was a long way off. So that did not trouble him greatly as he lounged in his doorway, and reposefully contemplated the ruddy noonday light which was endeavoring to lend picturesqueness to a scene which, he assured himself, was an "everlastin' disgrace an' stain on the lousy pretensions of a museum of bum human intellec's." He was referring to the rest of the buildings which comprised the township, as apart from his own "hotel." The word "saloon" had been struck out of his vocabulary, except for use in scornful depreciation of all other enterprises of a character similar to his own.

Just now he was chewing the cud, and, incidentally, a wad of tobacco, of a partial peace. He felt that the recent break up of the Lightfoot gang, so successfully achieved through the agency of hangings and shootings, should certainly contribute to his advantage. He argued that the long-endured threat against Orrville removed, money should automatically become easier, and, consequently, a considerable vista of his own personal prosperity opened out before his practical imagination.

Yes, Ju was undoubtedly experiencing a certain mild satisfaction. But somehow his ointment was not without taint. He detected a fly in it. And he hated flies—even in ointment.

To understand Ju's feelings clearly one must appreciate the fact that he loved dollars better than anything else in the world. And something he hated with equal fervor was to see their flow diverted into any other channel than that of his own pocket. Ten thousand of these delectable pieces of highly engraved treasure had definitely flowed into some pocket unknown, as a result of the Lightfoot gang

episode. The whole transaction he felt was wicked, absolutely wicked. What right had any ten thousand dollars to drift into any unknown pocket? Known, yes. That was legitimate. It always left an enterprising individual the sporting chance of dipping a hand into it. But the other was an outrage against commercialism. Why, if that sort of thing became the general practice, "how," he asked himself, "was an honest trader to live?"

The enquiry was the result of extreme nervous irritation, and he scratched at the roots of his beard in a genuine physical trouble of that nature.

He was so engrossed upon his meditations that he entirely failed to observe some mounted strangers debouch upon the market-place from the western end of the township. Nor was it until they obstructed his view that he awoke to their presence. Then he became aware of two men on two horses, leading two pack ponies.

He scrutinized them narrowly without shifting his position, and, long before they reached him, he decided they were strangers.

They dismounted in silence and without haste. They went round their horses and loosened cinchas. Then they tied the four beasts to the tie-posts in front of the saloon.

They approached the saloon-keeper. The larger of the two surveyed the unmoved Ju with steady eyes. Then he greeted him in deep, easy tones.

"Howdy," he said. "You run this shanty?"

The reflection upon his business house was not lost upon its proprietor.

"Guess I'm boss of this—hotel."

"Ah—hotel." Bud's gaze wandered over the simple structure. It settled for a moment upon a certain display of debris, bottles, cases, kegs, lying tumbled at an angle of the building. Then it came back to Ju's hard face, and, in passing, it swept over the weather-boarding of the structure which was plastered thick with paint to rescue it from the ravages of drip from the shingle roof to which there was no guttering. "Then I guess we'll get a drink."

By a curious movement Ju seemed to fall back from his position and become swallowed up by the cavity behind him. And Bud and his companion moved forward in his wake.

The place was entirely empty of all but the reek of stale tobacco, and the curious, pungent odor of alcohol. The two customers lounged against the shabby bar in that attitude which bespoke saddle weariness. Ju stood ready to carry out their orders, his busy, enquiring mind searching for an indication of the strangers' identity.

"Rye?" he suggested amiably, testing, in his own fashion, their quality.

But these men displayed no enthusiasm.

"Got any lager?" demanded Bud. "A long lager, right off the ice."

"Ice?" There was every sort of emotion in the echo of the word as the saloon-keeper glanced vengefully across at a window through which the sun was pouring. "Guess we don't grow ice around these parts, 'cep' when we don't need it, an' I don't guess the railroad's discovered they hatched Orrville out yet. We got lager in soak, an' lager by the keg, down in a cool celler. Ef these things ain't to your notion I don't guess you need the lager I kep."

"We'll have the bottled stuff in soak. Long."

"Ther's jest one size. Ef that don't suit, guess you best duplicate."

There was no offense in Ju's manner. It was just his cold way of placing facts before his customers, when they were strangers.

He uncorked the bottles and set them beside the long glasses, and waited while Bud poured his out. Then he accepted the price and made change. Jeff silently poured out his and raised it to his lips.

"How, Bud."

"How."

The two men drank and set down their half-emptied glasses.

The sharp ears of the saloon-keeper had caught the name "Bud," and he now stood racking his fertile brains to place it. But the stranger's identity entirely escaped him.

"Been times around here, ain't ther'?" Bud remarked casually.

And Ju promptly seized the opportunity.

"Times? Sure. Say, I guess you don't belong around. Jest passin' thro'?"

Bud nodded. Jeff had moved off toward the window, where he stood gazing out. The saloon-keeper's gaze followed him.

"Why, yes. We're passin' through," returned Bud, without hesitation. "You see, we belong down south in the 'T.T.' an' 'O——' country."

"That so?" Ju reached a box of cigars and thrust them at the new customer. "Smoke?" he enquired. His generosity was by no means uncalculated.

Bud helped himself, and in response to Ju's "Your friend?" he called across to Jeff at the window. But Jeff shook his head, and the saloon-keeper was given an opportunity of studying his set features, and the premature lines he saw graven upon them. He withdrew the box and turned his attention to the more amenable Bud.

"It's a swell country down your ways," he observed cordially. Then he added, "You ain't been cussed with a gang o' toughs raidin' stock, neither, same as we have fer the last fi' years. But they're out. Oh, yes, they're sure out. Yes, siree, you guessed right. Ther's sure been some play around here. As neat a hangin' as I've see in thirty-five year tryin' to figger out the sort o' sense stewin' in the think tanks o' the crazy guys who live in cities an' make up po'try about grass. Mebbe you've heard all the play?"

Bud shook his head. He drank up his lager, and took the opportunity of glancing over his glass at Jeff's back. Then he set his glass down and ordered another bottle for both of them.

"No," he observed. "I ain't heard much. I heard there's been some hangin'. The Lightfoot gang, eh? Seems to me I've heard talk of 'em down our way. So you boys here got in on 'em?"

Ju set the two fresh bottles on the counter while Bud lit his cigar.

"That's so," he said with appreciation, and propped his folded arms upon the bar. "It sort o' come sudden, too." He smiled faintly. "It come as I said it would right here in this bar. The boys was settin' around sousing, an' pushin' round the cyards, an' the Vigilante Committee was settin' on a pow-wow. I was tellin' 'em ef the folks had the sense of a blind louse they'd dope out a reward, an' make it big. I guessed they'd get the gang quick that way. Y'see, it don't matter who it is, folks is all after dollars—if there's only enough of 'em. Life's jest made up of two sorts o' guys, the fellers with dollars an' them without. Wal, I guess it's a sort o' play goes right on all the time. You just raise hell around till you get 'em, the other fellers raise hell till you ain't. It's a sort o' give and take, though I reckon the taking seems to be the general scheme adopted. That's how it comes Lightfoot an' his gang got a nasty kink in most o' their necks. It's them dollars. Some wise guy around here jest took himself by the neck and squeezed out a present of ten thousand dollars to the feller who'd sell up Lightfoot's good-will an' business. What happened? Why, it took jest about twenty-four hours for the transaction to be put through. Say, ever hear tell of a time when ther' wa'an't some feller waiting ready to grab on to ten thousand dollars? No, sir. You never did. No, nor no one else, 'cep' he spent the whole of his life in the foolish house."

"Some one betrayed 'em—for ten thousand dollars?"

Bud's question came with a sharp edge to it.

"Don't guess 'betray's' the word, mister. It was jest a commercial transaction. You jest need to get a right understanding of them things. When I got something to sell, an' you're yearnin' to dope out the dollars for it—say ten thousand of 'em—why, I don't guess there's anything else to it but a straight business proposition."

"So you netted the ten thousand?" enquired Bud, in his simplest fashion.

"Me? Gee! Say, if them ten thousand dollars had wafted my way I'd have set this city crazy drunk fer a week. No, sir," he added, with a coldly gloomy shake of the head. "That's jest about the pain I'm sufferin' right now. Some mighty slick aleck's helped hissself to them dollars, an' I don't know who—nor does anybody else, 'cep' him who paid 'em."

Bud realized the man's shameless earnestness, but passed it by. He was seeking information. It was what he and Jeff had come for. The manner of this man was coldly callous, and he knew that every word he uttered was a lash applied to the bruised soul of the man by the window. Irresistible sympathy made him turn about.

"Here's your lager, Jeff," he said, in his easiest fashion. He had no desire that Ju should be made aware of the trouble that Jeff was laboring under.

Jeff replied at once. His readiness and even cheerfulness of manner surprised Bud. But it relieved him as well.

"Bully!" he cried, as he came back to the bar. "I was just gettin' a look around at the—city." He turned to Ju with his shadowy smile which almost broke Bud's heart. "Quite a place, eh?"

"Place? Wal, it's got points I allow. So's hell ef you kin look at it right." Ju lit a cigar and hid nearly half of it in his capacious mouth. "I'd say," he went on, with a certain satisfaction, "ther's more mush-headed souses in this lay out to the square yard than I've ever heard tell of in any other city. Ef it wa'an't that way I couldn't see myself wastin' a valuable life lookin' at grass, hearin' talk of grass, smellin' grass, an' durned nigh eatin' grass. I tell you right here it takes me countin' my legs twice a day to keep me from the delusion I got four, an' every time I got to shake my head at some haf soused bum who's needin' credit I'm scared to death my blamed ears'll start right in flappin'. Why, yes, I guess it's some place—if you don't know no other."

Bud was eager to get to the end of the task he had assumed for his friend. He wanted the facts, all the facts as far as they were available, of the terrible enactments in that valley of his early youth.

"An' who antied the price?" he demanded.

"Who? Why, the President of the Western Union Cattle Breeders' Association—Dug McFarlane."

"And you don't know who—accepted it?"

It was Jeff who put the question, and Bud, looking on, saw the steely gleam that lit the man's eyes as he spoke.

But Ju's amiability was passing. He was getting tired of a subject which dealt with another man's profit. He rolled his cigar across his mouth.

"Here. Guess I best tell you the yarn as we know it. Y'see," he added regretfully, "we ain't learned a heap 'cep' jest the racket of it. Dug set up the reward overnight. Next night twenty-five of the boys rode out with him to the hills. Ther' was some guy with 'em leadin'. But none of the boys come up with him. He rode with Dug. We've all guessed, but I don't reckon we know, or'll ever know. You see, he got shot up they say by Lightfoot himself. However, it don't signify. I got my notions 'bout it, an' anyway I guess they're jest my own. The boys guess it was one of the gang itself. Mebbe it was. Can't rightly say. After they'd located the camp they set out to surround it. It was in a bluff. The scrap started right away, an' there was a deal o' shootin'. One or two o' the boys got shot up bad. Then some one fired the bluff, an' burned 'em right out like a crowd of gophers. After that the scrap came good an' plenty, an' it seems to've lasted nigh an hour. Anyways, they got three of 'em. They shot up several others, an' not more than three got clear away."

"An' what about Lightfoot?" It was Bud who spoke. His voice was changed from its usual deep tone. It was sharp, and almost impatient.

"They got him," said Ju, with a delight so evident that Bud felt like killing him for it. "Oh, yes, they got him, sure. A dandy gent with his blue eyes an' curly, tow hair. They don't guess that's his right name tho'. But it don't signify. He was the boss all right, all right, an' they took him, an' hanged him with the other two, right out of hand. Gee, I'd have give a deal to have seen——"

"We'll have to be pushing on now, Bud."

Jeff spoke with his head bent, examining the face of his gold timepiece. Bud glanced at him. He could see the ghastly hue of the averted features, and his answer came on the instant.

"You git the ponies cinched up, Jeff," he said quickly. "I'll be right with you."

Ju watched Jeff hurry out of the bar. Then his eyes came searchingly back to Bud's grimly set face.

"Kind o' seems in a hurry, don't he?" he demanded, with a curious look in his hard eyes. "Looks sick,

too. Say, I didn't git his name right. Mebbe he's traveling around incog.—ain't that the word?"

There was no mistaking the suggestion in the man's half-smiling, half-sneering manner. The ranchman understood it only too well. He understood most of the ways and expressions of the men of the prairie. The hot blood surged under his calm exterior. His gray eyes, so accustomed to smiling, snapped dangerously. But his reply came with the same ease which he had displayed most of the time.

"Wal, I don't guess ther's no myst'ry 'bout either of us, which you kind o' seem you'd like to think. Jeff Masters of the 'O—'s' is well enough known to most folks, who got any sort o' knowledge of these parts. An' ther's quite a few folks around here, including Dug McFarlane, li'ble to remember the name of Bud Tristram, of the 'T.T.'s.' But you're sure right in guessin' he's in a hurry to quit. Ther's some places, an' some folks, it ain't good to see a heap of. Ther's fellers with minds like sinks, an' others with natures like rattlers. Neither of them things is as wholesome as a Sunday-school, I allow. Jeff ain't yearnin' to explore no sinks, human or any other. An' I've generally noticed his favorite pastime is killin' rattlers. So it's jest about the only thing to do—quit this saloon, same as I'm goin' to do. But say, 'fore I go I'd jest like to hand you this. Justice is justice, an' we all need to take our dope when it comes our way. But ther' ain't no right on this blamed earth fer any feller to whoop it up at another feller's misdoins, an' his ultimate undoin'. An' you kin take it how you fancy when I say only the heart of a louse could feel that-a-way—an' that's about the lowest I know how to hand you."

Bud's eyes were shining dangerously. They were squarely looking into the hard face of the saloon-keeper. Not the movement of an eyelid escaped him. He literally seemed to devour the unwholesome picture confronting him. The aggressive chin beard, the continual mastication of the cigar which protruded from the corner of the mouth. There was deadly fury lurking behind Ju's cruel eyes. But the looked-for physical display was withheld, and Bud finally turned and walked slowly out of the bar.

* * * * *

It was some minutes since a word had passed between the two men. Jeff had nothing to say, and Bud's sympathy was too deep for words. He was waiting for the younger man to fight his battle to its logical end. He knew, only too well, all that Jeff had suffered since the moment of that gruesome discovery in the Cathills valley. It had been no figure of speech when Jeff had described his twin brother as part of himself. The shock the man had received was, to Bud's mind, as though his heart had been torn asunder. Hanged as a cattle thief! Was there anything more dire, more terrible in the imagination of man than to suddenly find that his well-loved brother, twin body of his own, was a cattle thief, possibly a murderer, and had been hanged by his fellow-men? It was a thought to leave the simple Bud staggered. And for the victim of the shock it might well mean the mental breaking point.

Jeff was fighting out his battle with an almost super-human courage. Bud knew that. It was written in every detail of his attitude. In the straining of his blue eyes, in the deep knitting of his fair strong brows, in the painful lines ploughing deeper and deeper about his mouth, and the set of his strong jaws.

No. There was no thought of breaking in upon the boy's black moments of suffering. He must fight his own battle now, once and for all. When victory had been achieved, then perhaps his sympathy might become helpful. But till then nothing but the necessities of their journey must be allowed to intrude between them.

So they rode over the southern trail. The noontide sun scorched the parching earth with a blistering heat, drinking up the last moisture which the tall prairie grass sought to secrete at its attenuated roots. The world about them was unchanged. Every scene was similar in its characteristics to all that which had become their lives. Yet Bud knew that for one of them, at least, the whole of life, and everything pertaining to it, had been completely and terribly distorted.

But the character of Jeffrey Masters was stronger and fiercer than Bud knew. For all his suffering there was no yielding in him. There had been moments when his soul had cried out in agony. There had been moments when the hideousness of his weak brother's fall had driven him to the verge of madness. But with each yielding to suffering had come a rally of passionate force that would not be overborne, and gradually mastery supervened.

Ten miles out of Orrville on the homeward journey Bud received his first intimation that the battle was waning. It came almost as a shock. They had passed a long stretch of flat grass-land, and were breasting an incline. Jeff, on the lead, had reined his horse down to a walk. In a moment they were riding abreast, with Bud's pack pony in between them. Jeff turned his bloodshot eyes upon his friend, then they turned again to the trail.

"There's nothing now, Bud, but to get ahead with all our plans and schemes," he said. "We must drive ahead without any looking back. There's still things in life, I guess, that's worth while, and I'd say not

the least of 'em is—work."

He paused. He had been gazing straight ahead to disguise his effort. Now he turned and looked into the face of his friend, and thrust his hat back on his head.

"It's been tough, Bud. So tough I don't know how I got through. Guess I shouldn't have without you. You see, Bud, you never said a thing, and—and that saved me. Guess I'm sort of tired now. Tired of thinking, tired of—everything. But it's over, and now I sort of feel I've got to get busy, or I'll forget how to play the man. I don't guess I'll ever hope to forget. No, I don't want to forget. I couldn't, just as I couldn't forget that there's some one in the world took ten thousand dollars as the price of Ronny's poor foolish life. Oh, it's pretty bad," he sighed wearily. "But—I've closed the book, Bud, and please God I'll never open it again."

CHAPTER IX

FOUR YEARS LATER

Nan Tristram smiled to herself as she sat in the comfortable rocker before the open French window which gave on to the wide wooden balcony beyond. The view she had was one of considerable charm, for Aston's Hotel was situated facing one end of Maple Avenue, looking straight down its length, which was at once the principal and most beautiful thoroughfare in the picturesque western city of Calthorpe.

But her smile had nothing to do with anything the prospect yielded her. Its beauties were undeniable; she had admitted them to herself many times. But she knew them with that intimacy which robs things of their first absorbing charm. The wide-spreading maple trees, which so softened down the cold beauty of the large stone-fronted residences lining the avenue, were always a source of soothing influence in the excited delight of a visit to this busy and flourishing city. Then the vista of lofty hills beyond the far limits of the town, with their purpling tints, their broken facets, their dimly defined woodland belts, they made such a wonderful backing to the civilized foreground.

Nan Tristram loved the place. For her, full of the dreams of youth, Calthorpe was the hub of all that suggested life and gaiety. It was the one city she knew. It was the holiday resort of the girl born and bred to the arduous, and sometimes monotonous life of the plains.

But it was, in reality, a place of even greater significance. Nan saw it only as it appealed to her ardent fancy. But Calthorpe was a flourishing and buoyant city of "live" people, who were fully aware of its favorable possibilities as the centre of the richest agricultural region in the whole of the State of Montana.

It was overflowing with prosperity. The ranching community, and the rich grain growers for miles around, poured their wealth into it, and sought its light-hearted life for the amusement of their families and themselves. Its social life was the life of the country, and to take part in it needed the qualification of many acres, or much stock, a bank balance that required no careful scrutiny, and a temperament calculated to absorb readily the joy of living.

It was something of this joy of living which was stirring now, lighting the girl's soft brown eyes with that tender whimsical smile which was never very far from them. She was resting after the early excitements of the day. It was her twenty-second birthday, and, in consequence, with so devoted a father, a day of no small importance. She had been warned by that solicitous parent to "go—an' have a sleep, so you don't peter right out when the fun gets good an' plenty." But Nan had no use for sleep just now. She had no use for anything that might rob her of one moment of the delight and excitement of the Calthorpe Cattle Week, as it was called. Therefore she undutifully abandoned herself to a pleasurable review of events whilst waiting for the next act in the day's play to begin.

And what a review it made in her understanding of the life about her. It was four years since her father and Jeff Masters had signed their partnership, and she knew that to-day, on the second day of *the week*, the triumph of the great "Obar" Ranch, which her father and Jeffrey Masters had so laboriously and patiently built up, was to be completed. Now, even while she sat there gazing from her window at the panorama of life passing up and down the broad expanse of Maple Avenue, the Council of the Western Union Cattle Breeders' Association was sitting for its annual conference and election of officers. And had she not already been confidentially warned that Jeff was to be the forthcoming year's president?

It was the crowning event in the long dreamed dreams of the two men whom she frankly admitted to herself were nearest and dearest to her. Why should she not admit it? Her father? Ah, yes, her father was the most perfect, kindly, sympathetic father that ever lived. And Jeff? A warm thrill swept through her heart and set it beating tumultuously. Jeff was her whole sum and substance of life itself.

Well enough she knew that no other bond than that of friendship existed between them; that no word had ever passed between them which might not have passed in the daily intercourse between brother and sister. But this did not cause her to shrink from the admission. Jeff was her whole horizon in life. There was no detail of her focus which was not occupied by the image of the man whom she regarded as the genius of their fortunes.

There were moments enough when she realized with something akin to dismay that Jeff and she *were* friends. But her gentle humor always served her at such moments. And there was always the lukewarm consolation that there was no other woman who had even a similar claim. Therefore she hugged her secret to herself, and only gazed upon it in such moments of happy dreaming as the present.

And just now they were happy moments. How could it be otherwise in a girl so healthy, and with such a depth of human feeling and with such a capacity for sheer enjoyment of the simple pleasures which came her way? What an evening yet confronted her in this brief week of holiday from the claims of the green-brown plains of summer. She must be ready at seven o'clock for the reception at the City Hall. She had a new gown for that particular event, which had, amongst others, been bought in New York. It had cost one hundred and thirty dollars, an unthinkable price it had seemed, but dismissed as something too paltry to be considered by the open-handed ranchman whom she claimed as father.

She was to assist Jeff and her father in receiving the guests, who would represent all the heads of their cattle world, and their friends, and their wives, and their daughters. And after that the banquet, which, since the inauguration of the Association, had always taken place, here at Aston's Hotel.

There would be speeches. Jeff would speak, and her father—no, she hoped he wouldn't speak. Her smile deepened. He had such a way of saying just what came into his funny, simple old head, and such a curious vocabulary. Then, after the banquet, the—Ball!

The girl emitted a deep ecstatic sigh. The ball! It was the crowning glory, and—she had a beautiful new gown for each event. It was a ravishing thought. Perhaps a mere man may be forgiven his lack of imagination in his appreciation of such perfect, unutterable delight. But Nan had no cloud to obscure her sun. The labor of dressing afresh, three times in one evening without a maid, except the questionable assistance of a hotel chambermaid, had no terrors for her—none whatever.

Her day-dreaming was interrupted by an immoderate thump on the door. She turned her head at once, her pretty dancing eyes alight with expectancy.

"That you, Dad?" she called.

"Sure, Nan." Then came a fumbling at the door handle.

"You can come right in," the girl cried, without moving from her chair.

The door was thrust open, and the sunburnt face with its shock of curling iron gray hair and whiskers appeared round it. The deep-set eyes surveyed the room, and took on a look of deep concern.

"Say, Nan," he cried, "you'll never git fixed in time. I jest give you the limit of time before I got around. You see, I didn't fancy you not gettin' a good slep."

The girl shook her pretty head and smiled as she observed the careful toilet she felt sure her father had spent the whole afternoon upon. She sprang from her chair and surveyed him critically, with her head judiciously poised on one side, and her pretty ripe lips slightly pursed.

"Everything's bully but that bow tie," she declared, after a considering pause. "Just come right here and I'll fix it. Say, Dad, I envy you men. Was there ever a nicer looking suit for men than evening clothes? I'm—kind of proud of my Daddy, with his wide chest and good figure. And that white waistcoat. My, but you don't look as if you'd ever branded a calf in your life. It's only your dear handsome face gives you away, and—and the backs of your hands."

Nan laughed as she retied the tie to her satisfaction, the fashion in which a girl loves to see a bow tied. The man submitted meekly, but with concern for her final remark.

"But I scrubbed 'em both—sore," he declared anxiously.

"I don't mean they're dirty, Daddy," the girl laughed. "Was there ever such a simple, simple soul? It's

the wholesome mahogany tan which the wind and the sun have dyed them. Say, there, get a peek at yourself in that glass." She thrust him toward a wall mirror. "It's not girls only who need a mirror, when a man is good to look at, Daddy, is it? Honest? It doesn't make you hate yourself, nor feel foolish. I guess there's men folks who'd have you think that way, but if I know anything they'd hate to be without a mirror when they're fixing themselves for a party where there's to be some nice looking women, and where they're to be something better than just a 'stray' blown in."

Bud laughed at the rapid flow of the girl's banter. But he had by no means forgotten his own concern.

"But, say, Nan, you hain't got time for foolin' around. You surely hain't. It's haf after five, an' we're due at the City Hall seven, sharp. Y'see, you ain't like us fellers who don't need no fixin' to speak of. An' you're helpin' us to receive the folks——"

Nan's delighted laugh rippled through the pleasant room.

"Oh, my Daddy," she cried, with wide, accusing eyes, "you're the best laugh in a month." Then she held up one admonishing finger before her dancing eyes. "Now the truth. What was the minute you started to make yourself—pretty?"

She sat herself upon a table before him with the evident purpose of enjoying to the full the delighted feelings of the moment.

Bud eyed her steadily. He knew he was to be cornered. Nor would it be for the first time. The relation between these two was that of a delightful companionship in which the frequent measuring of wit held no inconsiderable place amidst a deep abiding affection.

"Say—a touch of the north wind around, Nan, eh?" he smiled.

"Never mind the north wind, Daddy," Nan laughed. "Just when? That's what I need to know now."

The man's fingers sought his crisply curling hair.

"No, no," cried Nan, in pretended alarm, "Guess you're going to undo an hour's work that way."

Bud dropped his hand in real dismay.

"Guess I plumb forgot. Wal, say, since you got to know, I'd say it must ha' bin right after din—I mean luncheon. You see, I'd——"

"Ah, say three o'clock." Nan leaned forward, her pretty face supported on the knuckles of her clasped hands, her elbows resting upon her knees. "Oh, Daddy—and you aren't due at the party till seven. Four hours. Four valuable hours sitting around in your dandy new suit of evening clothes. Vanity. Pure vanity. We're all the same, men who *don't* need—fixing, and women who *do*. Only you men won't admit it. Women do. They surely do. Any woman's ready to admit she'd rather look nicer than any other woman than be all sorts of a girl other ways. And though they don't ever reckon to admit it, men just feel that way, too. Oh, I guess I know. The boys are just yearning for the girls to think there's nothing but big 'thinks' moving around in their well-greased heads. And they'd hate a girl who got the notion they had time to stand around gawking in a mirror to see their clothes set right, or study the look they're going to pour into the china blue eyes of some tow-headed bundle who knows his bank wad down to the last cent."

She sighed heavily, but her eyes were literally dancing.

"But it's kind of nice that boys act that way," she went on. "It does give a girl a chance to think him all sorts of a god for—a while. Say, if she knew things just as they are, where'd she find that scrap of romance which makes life all sunshine and storm clouds, instead of the monotonous gray it really is?"

She pointed at the snowy bed laden with the precious costumes she must use before the night was out.

"Say, wouldn't it be just awful if every girl knew that the man she'd—marked down for her own, worried around with things like that before every party he was to take her to, same as she does? I guess she'll learn it all later when she marries him, and has two folks to worry for instead of one. But, meanwhile, she just dreams that he's dreaming those 'big thinks' that's going, some time, to set a dreaming world wide awake to the mighty 'thinks' she dreams into her beau's head."

Then she began to laugh, and the infection of it caught her father, who gurgled heavily in chorus.

"Say, wouldn't it be a real circus if a big, strong man had to act the same as us poor women? I mean when we're scheming to stir up a sensation in the hearts of men, and in the envy depot of other girls,

when we enter the portals of a swell social gathering. Now Jeff. Say, my Daddy, can you see him sort of mincing across the floor," she cried, springing from her seat and pantomiming across the room, "smiling, and smirking and bowing, this way and that, all done up in fancy bows, and sheeny satins, and—and with combs in his sleek hair to hold it in place, and with a jeweled tiara set on top of it? And then—yes, just a teeny tiny touch of powder on his nose? My word!"

A happy chorus of laughter rang through the room as she returned to her seat, Bud's coming in great unrestrained gusts. They were like two irresponsible children rather than father and daughter.

"Oh, dear. And you, too," laughed Nan. "We can't leave you out of the picture. Being of more mature years I guess you'd sweep in—that's the way—sweep in gowned—at your age you don't dance around in 'frocks'—in something swell, and rich, and of sober hue. Oh, dear, oh, dear. Guess we'd have to match your mahogany face. Wine color, eh? No 'cute little bows for you. Just beads and bugles, whatever they are. But we'd let you play around with some tinted mixing of powder for your nose, or—or we'd sure spoil the picture to death. My, I'd die laughing."

Bud's amusement threatened to burst the white bonds which held his vast neck.

"Oh, quit it, Nan," he cried, with his beaming face rapidly purpling. Then he struggled for seriousness. "I didn't get around to listen to your foolin', child." Then he bestirred himself to a great display of parental admonishment. "Now, see right here, Nan, I'll get back in an hour. Maybe Jeff's fixin' himself the way you said. I can't jest say. But anyways he's the big feller to-night, an' it's up to you to worry out so you can be a credit to him, an' me, an' the 'Obar.'" Then he came across to her and took her affectionately by the shoulders, and gazed down into her face with twinkling, kindly eyes. "Say, you got more to work on than most gals. You sure have, Nan. Yep. Your poor ma was a pictur', an' you're a pictur'. An' I ain't goin' to say which of you had claim for the best framing. Anyway, what you have in your pretty face you owe to the dear woman who never had a chance of the framing you can have. So jest remember it, Nan—and thank her."

Nan's eyes had completely sobered at the mention of her dead mother, whom she scarcely remembered, and earnestness and affection replaced all her mirth.

"Maybe I owe it her," she said, suddenly releasing herself from the heavy hands, and rising from her seat. Then she reached up and slipped her soft arms about the man's neck. "And what do I owe to you? Nothing? Ah, my Daddy, I guess you can shake your funny head till you muss up its contents to an addle. I'll not forget what I owe my momma, and just thank her all I know, but I'm thanking you too—just as hard."

She tiptoed until she was able to kiss him on the cheek. Then her ready smile broke out afresh, and she gently pushed him toward the door.

"Who is it wasting my time? There," she cried, as she opened the door, and her father vanished through it, "get right out, and don't you dare come back for an hour."

The ranchman's laugh echoed down the corridor as he moved away. Then Nan, practical and sober once more, closed the door and rang for the chambermaid.

* * * * *

Whatever success could be claimed for the men who had founded and built up the "Obar" Ranch, and it was more than considerable, the triumph of that night was in no small measure to the credit of Nan Tristram.

But when it was all over, when the last of the three beautiful gowns had been tucked tenderly away in the drawers which were their temporary home, and Nan was left to the night solitude in which to go over once more in her secret thoughts each keenly vivid detail of the kaleidoscopic play of events as they had swept past her during the evening, they found her soberly wondering if, after all, the anticipated delight had been realized. Was it possible in all that unquestioned success there had been no delight, no real enjoyment at all? It seemed impossible. It was impossible, and she tried to put the thought out of her mind. But it refused to be banished. It returned again—and again, and, in desperation, not untouched with panic, she assured herself that she was tired—very tired, and this silly feeling was the result. Then, too, her humor was summoned, and it warned her of the quantity of ice cream she had devoured at the ball. It told her her digestion had suffered in consequence. And this she thought was a pity, because she loved ice cream.

But humor was swept aside by a far keener emotion. She scorned the idea of indigestion. She had no pain *there*. But there was pain, a silly ache about her heart which robbed her of all desire for sleep.

She tried to console herself by recalling her father's quaintly expressed admiration of her, when he first beheld her in her new and costly gown. What was it?

"Why, say, Nan, when I look at you I sort o' feel as if two fellers had bin at work fixin' you, a po't an' a painter, Seems as if they'd set their mushy heads together, an' each had doped out what the other couldn't, till ther' ain't a thing left fer the fancy of plain mule-headed sort o' bussocks like me."

Curious as his method of expression had been she had understood and thrilled with delight. But almost at once her thoughts flew on to much later when she was gliding through the dancing crowd at the ball. His eyes had followed her everywhere. But there was a change in their expression. To her it was a complete change. To her the simple approval had been replaced by a gleam of sympathetic concern. But this was after—after the first cloud had settled upon her hope of unalloyed enjoyment. Perhaps the look had not been there at all. Perhaps it was simply her own feelings finding reflection for her where none existed.

She became impatient with herself and grasped at the memory of Jeff's greeting when she had first appeared in the hotel parlor, equipped for the reception.

He had not said much. But that was always Jeff's way. But there had been his quick smile of unusual satisfaction. And the words of greeting had sprung quite spontaneously to his lips.

"Say, Nan, you're—you're just great."

The hesitation in the middle of it had told her even more than his smiling admiration. It was almost like—and she thrilled as she thought it—a gasp for breath.

She strove hard to support herself with these memories, out even as she considered them her mind passed on to the reception, and that stupid ache supervened once more. Instantly her focus narrowed down. There were only two figures in it. The rest merely provided a setting for these two. All the lights, the decorations, the beautiful costumes and smiling faces, these became an indistinct blurr, leaving the image of Mrs. Elvine van Blooren and a man standing vividly out.

What a wonderful, wonderful picture of radiant womanhood Mrs. Van Blooren had made! Even in her trouble Nan was generous. The woman was beautiful in a way that poor Nan had only dreamed of. The Madonna-like features, calm, perfect. The dark hair, superb in the simplicity of its dressing. She remembered that at the first glance it had suggested to her the sheen of a cloudless summer night. And her gown, and her figure. The gown must have cost—ah, Nan could not appraise its cost. She had had insufficient experience. Her own maximum had been reached only now, and the sum seemed to her as paltry as her father had made it appear. The one certainty that remained with her, however, was that the taste displayed in Mrs. Van Blooren's gown had placed it beyond such a thing as mere material value.

And then her heart had seemed to stand still. It appeared that Jeff, who was talking to some other people, and she had become aware of Mrs. Van Blooren's presence at the same moment. For when Nan glanced in his direction he was gazing fixedly at the newcomer with a look in his steady blue eyes which she had never beheld in them before. Oh, yes, there had been no mistaking that look. She knew she was not clever, but she was a woman, and no woman could ever mistake such a look in the eyes of a man.

But worse was to follow. There was a respite for her in the activities of the reception. For Jeff was as busily occupied as she was. Then, too, at the banquet she had ample time to recover from the shock. But the ball came, and they were both released from their duties, and everybody was left free to dance as only the western people love to dance.

It was then that her bitter cup was filled to overflowing. Jeff danced six times with Mrs. Van Blooren. Six times, and one supper extra, while she had to content herself with a miserable two dances with the one man who, to her stood out foremost among all men.

It was during the long hours of that dreary ball that she had encountered her father's curious regard, and now she wondered if he had seen what she had seen. If he had understood as she understood.

Nan wanted to cry. As she lay there on her snowy bed, restless, and wakeful, and troubled, there were certainly moments when her tired eyes filled with tears. But she did not, would not cry. She smiled to herself, and even laughed. She ridiculed herself and made jest of her absurd pretensions. She told herself a hundred times she had no claim upon Jeff. He was free to do as he chose, to dance all night with any Mrs. Van Blooren.

But when, at last, the first beam of daylight penetrated the light material of the window blinds, and

slowly flooded the room, it found Nan in a troubled sleep with two great unshed tears slowly welling in the corners of her eyes, and ready to fall heavily and sadly down the perfect moulding of her softly rounded cheeks.

CHAPTER X

THE POLO CLUB RACES

The race-track at Calthorpe was a matter of no small pride to its citizens. Any western city could possess broad and beautiful avenues. Any city might well boast hotels of six, eight, or even ten floors, and express elevators, and things of that sort. A cathedral was not unknown even, and electric surface cars. But a race-track—a recognized race-track—which was included in the official western circuit of race meetings, was certainly a matter for more than ordinary pride.

Such regard was undoubtedly meted out to it, and as a corollary there were prophets in the city who foresaw the later development of a Country Club, with a golf course, and the provision for every other outdoor sport under its luxurious administration. Those who could afford such luxuries pretended to look upon these things as indispensable, and those who couldn't regarded them with simple pride, and lived in the glamour of their reflected glory, and told each other how such things should be administered.

Such developments, however, were for the future. The race-track existed, and, amongst its many other delights, it supplied the cranks with a text for frequent sermons.

It was set in a luxurious woodland dip, well beyond the town limits, and occupied a small flat of rich grass through which a mountain creek wound its ridiculously tortuous course. Thus it was provided with the natural resources demanded by a steeplechase course as well as the "flat."

It was a toy which the wealth of the neighborhood had been poured out upon with no niggard hand, till it found itself possessed of a miniature grand stand, a paddock and loose boxes, for the use of many a pony whose normal days were spent roaming wild upon the plains. Then there was the Polo Club House and ground, where many of the city's social functions were held. The whole thing was as pretentious as money could make it, and in due proportion it was attractive to the minds of those who believed themselves leaders in their social world.

Nan Tristram understood all this and smiled at it, just as she understood that to absent oneself from the Polo Club Races in Cattle Week would be to send in one's resignation from the exclusive social circles to which she belonged, a position quite unthinkable for one who sought only the mild excitements which pertain to early youth.

The noon following the ball, and all the disturbed moments which it inspired, found Nan on the way to the Polo Club Races. Her party was riding, and it was an extensive party. There were some twenty and more saddles. Luncheon had been sent on ahead, catered for by Aston's Hotel at Jeffrey Masters' expense, one of the many social duties which his election to the Presidency of the Western Union Cattle Breeders' Association entitled him to undertake during the Cattle Week.

It was a gay party, mostly made up of young and prosperous ranchmen, and the girls belonging to their little world. Nor among them could have been found any one more brightly debonair and attractive than Nan Tristram.

There was never a sign about her of the disquieting thoughts of overnight. Such things might never have been. Her eyes, so soft and brown, were sparkling with that joy of life which never fails in its attraction even for the most serious mind. She sat her brown mare astride with the easy grace of a born horsewoman. Her equipment lacked no detail in its comparison with that of the other women. Bud's warning on this point had fallen upon willing and attentive ears when he had handed the girl a signed blank check. And the old man had found ample reward for his generosity in the rivalry amongst the men for his "gal's" escort.

The only shadow which fell across his enjoyment had occurred when he beheld Jeff leading the cavalcade at the side of Mrs. Van Blooren. But in Nan's case it seemed to give not the smallest qualm. Her one single purpose seemed to be to obtain a maximum of enjoyment at the side of young Bill Dugdale, a college-bred youth of more than ordinary repute as a prosperous cattleman.

The day was fresh for midsummer. The sky was ruffled with great billowing white summer clouds, and a cool northwest breeze was coming off the mountain tops. The whole world about them was assuming that tawny green of the ripening season, and the trail was sufficiently dusty for its abandonment in favor of the bordering grass. But if midsummer reigned over Nature, Spring, fresh, radiant Spring was in the hearts of those seeking the mild excitement of Calthorpe's race-track.

Nan and young Dugdale laughed and chattered their way in the wake of the several couples ahead. Dugdale's desire to please was more than evident. And Nan was at no time difficult. Just now she seemed to enter into the spirit of everything with a zest which sent the man's hopes soaring skyward.

Once only during the brief ride did the girl give the least sign that her interest lay on anything but her good-looking escort. It was at a moment when Dugdale was pointing out to her the humorous inspiration of his own registered cattle brand.

"You see, 'B.B.' don't sound much of a scream, Miss Tristram," he said, in great seriousness. "I don't guess it's likely to set you falling out of your saddle in one wild hysterical whoop of unrestrained mirth. Course I'm known by it, same as you're known by the 'Obar,' but some of the language the boys fix to my brand 'ud set a Baptist minister hollerin' help. Say, I can't hand you it all. I just can't, that's all. 'Bill's Bughouse' is sort of skimmed milk to pea soup. Then there's 'Bill's Boneyard.' That wouldn't offend any one but my foreman. 'Busy Bee' kind of hands me a credit I don't guess I'm entitled to. But there's others smack of the intelligence of badly raised hogs." Then he laughed. "The truth is, when I first pitched camp on Lime Creek I wasn't as wise to things ranching as a Sunday-school committee. I lived mostly on beans an' bacon, and when the boys fell in at night, why, I don't guess there was much beside beans and bacon to keep 'em from falling into a state of coma on my blankets. It generally fixed them right, and I'm bound to say they never seemed to find they couldn't sit a saddle after it. Yes, and hit the trail for fifty miles, if there was fresh meat at the end of it. I sort of got known around as 'Beans and Bacon.' Then it was abbreviated to B.B. And so when I registered my brand it just seemed natural to set down B.B."

Nan's laugh was very genuine. Dugdale's ingenuous manner always pleased her.

"You hadn't learned prairie hospitality," she said. "You surely were committing a grave offense."

The man was full of pretended penitence.

"I don't guess that needed *learning!*" he said, with a wry smile. "The boys just handed it to me same as a parson hands a heart-to-heart talk on things you're hatin' to hear about. Oh, I was put wise quick. But when you've got just about ten thousand dollars that's telling you you're all sorts of a fool, and you're yearning for 'em to believe you're a twin brother to Pierpont Morgan, why, you don't feel your hide's made of gossamer, and don't care a cuss if folks start right in to hammer tacks into it for shoe leather."

"And the dollars? You convinced them?" Nan's eyes were full of humor.

"Convinced 'em?" The man's eyes opened wide. "Say, Miss Tristram, it was a mighty big argument. Oh, yes, and I guess there were times when we come near bein' such bad friends that I wanted to hand 'em right on to the nearest saloon-keeper I could find. But in the end I won. Oh, I won. I just told 'em right out what I thought of 'em, and their parents, and their ancestors, and their forthcoming progeny, and—that, seemed to fix things. They got civil then. Sort of raised their hats, and—got busy. You'd be astonished if you saw the way they hatched out—after that. You see," he added whimsically, "there's just about only one way of makin' life act the way you need it. Set your back teeth into the seat of things, and—hang on."

But Nan's reply was slow in coming, and her usually ready laugh was not in evidence. His final remark had brought very near the surface all those feelings and thoughts she had striven so hard to bury where they could no longer offend. It seemed to the man that her eyes had grown unnecessarily serious. But then he did not know that there was any unusual interest for her in the fact that Jeff Masters was escorting Mrs. Van Blooren.

When she did speak it was with her gaze fixed upon the couple ahead.

"Yes, that's it," she said. "Hang on. Hang on with every ounce of courage and strength you've got. And if you've got to go under, why, I guess it's best done with a smile, eh?" Quite abruptly she indicated the woman in front. "I do think she's real beautiful, don't you?"

"Who?" The man had no concern for anybody at that moment but the girl at his side.

"Who? Say, aren't you just foolish. I was thinking of Mrs. Van

Blooren."

The man laughed.

"I surely am," he declared. "And I've won prizes for thought-reading at parlor games, too."

They both laughed. Then Nan went on with a persistence which was quite lost upon the thought-reader.

"Who is she? Mrs. Van Blooren?" she demanded.

"Why, you met her, sure?" Then the man added with some significance: "She's riding with Jeff Masters."

"Oh, yes. I've met her. I met her last night, and I've seen her many times before." Then she added with a shadow of coldness in her manner: "But she doesn't belong to the cattle folk."

The man's eyes were following the direction of Nan's.

"No-o," he said seriously. "Guess I'm not wise. They say her husband was a rancher—before he acted foolish an' died."

Nan's laugh came readily.

"That's bright. I don't guess he started running cattle—after."

Dugdale chuckled explosively.

"Who's to say?" he cried. Then he went on with enthusiasm: "Say, wouldn't it be bully to think of? Just get a thought of it. Flapping around with elegant store wings, rounding up golden steers trimmed with fancy halos, and with jeweled eyes. Branding calves of silver with flaming irons and turning 'em out to feed on a pasture of purple grass with emeralds and sapphires for blossoms all growing around. And then——"

"Think again. Say, your taste's just—cheap. But we're talking of Mrs. Van Blooren."

"I'm sorry. Why, I guess she's daughter to the Carruthers's. John D. Carruthers. He was principal at St. Bude's College. Pensioned. Guess it's five years since she handed us boys the G. B. and hooked up with a white-gilled hoodlum from down East. He got around here with a wad he'd raised from his father. Can't say who his father was. Folks guessed he was some millionaire. I don't just know the rights of it. Anyway, he left her well enough fixed. Gee! Fancy a feller acting that way—dying, with a wife like that. Wonder what sort of mush he kept in his thinking depot? I'd say folks with sense have to live on the chances fools can't just kick to death. Anyway, seeing she's started right in to set her wings rustling again I guess some feller with hoss sense'll be getting busy. They'd make a swell couple," he added with a grin. "Jeff's a good-looker."

Nan nodded.

But she made no answer. Had the man been less concerned with his match-making suggestions he must have observed the effect of his careless words. Nan had paled under the pretty tanning of her rounded cheeks. She was hurt, hurt beyond words, and though she could willingly have cried out she was forced to smother her feelings. The panic of the moment passed, however, and, with a great effort, she was able to give her suggestion its proper value. But somehow, for the rest of the ride, it seemed to her that the sun was less bright, the wind even had become chilly, and altogether there was a curious, enervating world-weariness hanging over everything.

By the time they reached the race-track she felt in her simple heart she ought to apologize for having spoiled her escort's ride. But the inclination was only the result of her depression. She even told herself, with a gleam of humor, that if she attempted it she would have to burst into tears.

However, the later excitement of the racing helped to revive Nan's drooping spirits. The scene was irresistible. The atmosphere. The happy buoyant enjoyment on every side could not long be denied whatever the troubles awaiting more sober moments. There were the sleek and glossy horses. There were the brilliant colors of the jockey's silks. There was the babel of excited voices, the shouting as the horses rushed down the picturesque "straight." Then the betting. The lurching. The sun. The blessed sun and gracious woodland slopes shutting in this happy playground of men and women become children again at the touch of pleasure's magic wand. No, for all her anxiety, Nan had no power to withstand the charm and delirium of it all. And, for a while, she flung herself into it with an abandon

which matched the most reckless.

Twice she found herself in financial difficulties through reckless betting, and twice the open-handed Bud had to come to her assistance. Each time his comment was characteristic, and Nan laughed at him with the irresponsibility of a child who tastes the delight of gambling for the first time.

"Say, little gal," Bud admonished her, the second time he unrolled his "wad" of bills. "Makin' dollars on a race-track's jest about as easy as makin' ice-cream. Ther's jest one way of doing it. Ast yourself which hoss you're craziest to dope out your money on, an' when you're plumb sure then get right along an' bet on the other feller. Meanwhiles think in dollars an' play in cents."

And Nan's answer reflected her feelings of the moment.

"You can't play in cents, my Daddy, when it's time to play in dollars. You never know when the time's coming along when even cents are denied you."

Then before the worshipping parent could add to his advice the girl darted off with her hands full of outspread bills seeking the pool rooms.

She had seen the horses cantering over to the post for the half-mile dash. It was a race for legitimate cow-ponies and she knew Jeff's "Sassafras" was running in it. She meant to bet on Jeff's horse. It mattered nothing to her what other horses were running. She knew little enough of their claims. She had one thought in life. Anything to do with Jeff Masters, anything of his was good enough for her to gamble on—even with her life. This was the real, all unconscious Nan. It was not in her to give half measure. She had no idea of what she was doing. She had no subtlety or calculation of anything where her love was concerned. She would back Jeff to the limit, and stand or fall by it. It was the simple loyalty and devotion which only a woman can yield.

On her way to the pool room she encountered Jeff himself, and, in the excitement of the moment, clasping her money in both hands, she thrust them out toward him.

"Say, Jeff," she cried, "I'm just crazy. The horses have gone right out to the start now, and—and I'm gasping to put my dollars on Sassafras."

The man's quiet smile was good to see. And Nan warmed under its influence. This was the Jeff she had known so long and loved so well. There was no other woman near to have provoked that smile. It was hers. She felt it was all hers, and her eyes shone up into the depths of blue she so loved.

"Why, Nan, I just hate to disappoint you," he said, in a gentle fashion. "But you'll surely be crazy to back my plug with Tommy Cleveden's 'Jack Rabbit' in the race. It's a cinch for him. It is so."

Nan laughed a glad buoyant laugh.

"Jack Rabbit?" she echoed scornfully. "Why, he points the toe. Guess he'd outrun Sassafras if he kept his feet, but he'll never do it. He'll peck. Then he'll change his stride. No, Jeff. Sassafras goes with me."

The smile in the man's eyes faded out. He hated the thought of Nan losing her money on what he considered a foolish bet. His practical mind could not see under her purpose.

"Say, Nan, just don't you do it," he said persuasively. "We aren't. We're backing Jack Rabbit for a big roll."

"We?"

"Mrs. Van Blooren and me."

Jeff's manner was quite unconcerned. At that instant he had no thought of anything but to dissuade Nan from throwing her money away uselessly. And Nan. Her eyes never wavered for an instant in their regard. Their warmth of expression remained. Yet it was a cruel blow. Perhaps the cruelest that could have been inflicted at such a moment. Jeff had inflicted it—Jeff of all men.

She smiled up at him. Oh, how she smiled. Her eyes shone like two superb brown diamonds as she forced her money upon him with even greater determination.

"Take it, Jeff. Take it," she cried urgently. "Say, if you never, never do another thing for me—ever. Take it, and, why, I guess every cent of it says Sassafras wins. Sassafras is your pony, Jeff, and I'd back him if he'd only three legs and a fence post." Then just the smallest gleam of the woman peeped through. "Maybe Mrs. Van Blooren's a pretty bright woman. But I guess I'm wise to horses."

Jeff hurried away. There was no time to waste. The horses had already assembled at the start. Nan

watched him go with eyes that had lost their last gleam of sunshine. The mask she had set up before the man had completely fallen. Jeff was—was betting for Mrs. Van Blooren! He was betting with her! Maybe even they were pooling their bets! Oh!

For some moments she stood alone where Jeff had left her. Everybody had rushed to the fence of the enclosure, crowding to witness the race. Nan seemed to have forgotten it. It was Bud's voice that finally claimed her, and she tried to pull her scattered faculties together.

She reached Bud's side amongst the crowd, and the old man's shrewd eyes searched her troubled face.

"What's amiss, Nan?" he demanded, in a tone almost brusque.

And the girl responded with a wistful smile.

"Why, Daddy, I've bet all your money on Jeff's Sassafras, and—and I want him to win more than anything—anything in the world."

Bud's reply was lost in the sudden shout that went up. It was the start. Some one made way for Nan, and gently pushed her to a place against the railings. The winning-post was directly in front of her. The full breadth of the track was in her view. She gazed out with eyes that were very near tears. She saw a vista of green and many figures moving beyond the track. She heard the hoarse cries of men, whose desires exceeded their veracity as they shouted the progress of the race. But nothing of what she heard or beheld conveyed anything to her. Her heart was aching once more, and her thoughts were heavily oppressed, and all the joy of the day had suddenly been banished.

Then of a sudden came that greatest of all tonics. That irresistible sensation so powerfully stimulating that no trouble can resist it. The racing horses leaped into her view, and the disjointed shouts welded into one steady roar. Nan was caught in the tide of it all. The blood seemed to rush to her head like full rich wine. She added her light cries to the general tumult.

"Sassafras! Sassafras!" she cried, with eyes blind to all but the indistinct cluster of the straining horses.

Then in her ears rang a cry:

"A hundred dollars Jack Rabbit! A thousand! Jack Rabbit! Jack Rabbit!"

It was like a douche of cold water. The girl's heart sank. She felt, she knew that Jack Rabbit had won. Then into her ears poured a babel of voices. The roar had died out, and the crowd were waiting for the numbers to go up.

Nan had no further interest. She turned to seek her father. He was there, not far behind her, and she pushed her way toward him. She smiled bravely as she came up, but the pathos of it was lost on Bud. He was craning, and his eyes were on the number board. He did not even see her.

"I'm—I'm sort of tired, Daddy," she began.

But Bud held up his hand. There was a rattle at the number board. Nan understood. She waited. Then it seemed as if the crowd had timed itself for one unanimous shout.

"Sassafras!"

It came with a sort of electric thrill for the girl. In one wild moment all her shadows seemed to clear.

"Sassafras!" she cried.

And her father's deep gray eyes beamed down upon her

"You've sure guessed right, little gal," he said. "An' I—hope it was dollar time."

At that instant Jeff thrust his way through the crowd, and the warmth of his smile flooded the girl's heart with happiness.

"Say, Nan," he cried, holding out his hand with an enthusiasm that was hardly to be expected in one who has lost, "you got us all beat a mile. You surely have. Sassafras. My old Sassafras. Say, who'd 'a' thought it?" Nan's hand remained clasped in his, and she seemed to have no desire to withdraw it. Jeff looked round into Bud's face. "Do you know what she's won? Do you, Nan?" he went on to the girl again.

Nan laughed. It was all she wanted to do.

"Not a notion, Jeff. I handed you all Daddy gave me. How much was it, Daddy?"

"Five hundred."

Nan's eyes widened in alarm.

"Five hundred? And I bet it all on—Sassafras!"

"And you've won nearly five thousand," cried Jeff, stirred completely out of himself at the girl's success.

"I—I must have been—crazy," she declared, in an awed voice.

Bud laughed, but his eyes were full of a sympathy that had no meaning for the others.

"Not crazy, little Nan. Jest good grit. Guess Jeff didn't see the pool waitin' around for him to pick up. Wal, guess ther's a heap o' folk like him. You played right out for a win, an' you won—by a head."

CHAPTER XI

ELVINE VAN BLOOREN

It was the last day of the Cattle Week. A week which, for at least three people, was fraught with something in the nature of epoch-making events. All that the simple heart of Nan Tristram had looked forward to, yearned for, had been denied her from the first moment she had beheld that unmistakable lightening up of Jeff's eyes on his meeting with Elvine van Blooren. It had been a revelation of dread. Her own secret hopes had been set shaking to their very foundations. And from that moment on, during the rest of the week, brick by brick the whole edifice of them had been set tumbling. By the last day nothing but a pile of debris remained.

Holiday! It had been a good deal less than holiday. She had looked forward to one all too brief succession of days of delight. Jeff, who had been honored by his fellows in the world which was theirs. Jeff, the leader in the great industry which absorbed them all. Jeff, the man by his very temperament marked out for a worldly success only bounded by the limitations of his personal ambitions. She had been so proud of him. She had been so thankful to be allowed to share in his triumphs. She had shared in them, too—up till that meeting with Elvine van Blooren at the reception. After that—ah, well, there had been very little after for Nan.

And the man himself. Four days had sufficed to reduce Jeff's feelings to a condition of love-sickness such as is best associated with extreme youth. Furthermore its hold upon him was deeper, more lasting by reason of the innate strength of his character.

As for Elvine van Blooren it would be less easy to say. Her beauty was of a darkly reticent order. Hers was the face, the eyes, the manner yielding up few secrets. She rarely imparted confidence even to her mother. And a woman who denies her mother rarely yields confidence to any other human creature.

Perhaps in her case, however, she had good reason. Mrs. John D. Carruthers, who possessed a simple erudite professor for a husband, a man who possessed no worldly ambitions of any sort, and who readily accepted his pension from the trustees of St. Bude's College at the earliest date, so that he might devote all his riper years to the prosecution of his passion for classical research, was a painful example of worldliness, and a woman who regarded position and wealth before all things. There was little enough sympathy between mother and daughter. Mrs. John D. Carruthers only saw in Elvine's unusual beauty an asset in her schemes of advancement. While Elvine displayed a cold disregard for the older woman's efforts, and went her own way.

Elvine was strong, even as Jeffrey Masters was strong. But while the man's strength lay in the single purpose of achievement, Elvine looked for the ease and luxury which life could legitimately afford her. Elvine and her mother possessed far too much in common ever to have sympathy for one another.

It was this very attitude which inspired an acrimonious half hour in the somewhat pretentious parlor

on Maple Avenue just before Jeff was to pay his farewell call at the close of the Cattle Week.

Elvine was occupied with a small note-book on the pages of which there were many figures. With a small gold pencil she was working out sums, which, apparently, were solely for her own edification. She communicated nothing to her mother, who covertly glanced over at her from the fancy work she was engaged upon at the far side of the room.

The room was such as might be found in any of the better middle-class houses in a western city. Its furnishing was a trifle ornate. Comfortable chairs predominated, and their woodwork shone with an extreme lustre, or were equally aggressive in their modern fictitious Mission House style. The carpet and rugs were broadly floral and bright. There was altogether a modernity about the character of it which decidedly belonged to the gray-haired showiness of the wife of John Carruthers. For all that, there was nothing absolutely untasteful about Elvine's surroundings. The daughter would never have permitted such a thing. It was only modern, extremely modern. That type of modern which belongs to those homes where money is a careful consideration.

At last Elvine closed her note-book and returned it to the rather large pocketbook which was lying in her lap. Her fine eyes were half smiling, and a faint tinge of color deepened her perfect cheeks. She sighed.

"We didn't do so badly at the races, Momma," she said, more for her own satisfaction than her mother's information. "Guess I've got most all of it in and—I'm satisfied."

"Maybe you are, my dear," came the ungracious response.

Her mother was bending over her work, nor did she trouble to raise her eyes in her daughter's direction.

"That sounds as if somebody else wasn't."

Elvine raised a pair of beautifully rounded arms above her head and rested the back of her neck upon her clasped hands.

The gray head was lifted sharply. A pair of brilliant black eyes shot a disapproving glance across the room. Then the mother continued her work, shaking her head emphatically.

"What's the use of a few dollars? He's going back to his ranch to-morrow, and—nothing's happened."

There was something crude, almost brutal in the manner of it. There was something which on a woman's lips might well have revolted any man. But it was an attitude to which the daughter was used. Besides, it saved her any qualms she might otherwise have had in pursuing her own way under the shelter of her mother's roof.

"I really can't see what you've to complain of, Momma," Elvine laughed, without any display of mirth. "I guess if you wanted to marry a man you'd leave him about as much chance as he'd have with a wildcat." Then her smile died out. "Anyway it doesn't seem to be a matter for other folk to concern themselves with. I'm not a child."

"No. But you're going to throw away the chance of a lifetime if you don't act right now. Why, girl, Jeff Masters is the pick of the whole bunch of cattlemen around this district. He's going to be one of the cattle kings of the country, or I don't guess I know a thing. He's right here to your hand, and as tame as a lap-dog. To-morrow he's off again to the ranch, and that girl of his partner's will have him to herself for a year. Why, you're crazy to let him go. Four years you've lived here since—since——"

"I wish you'd stop worrying, Momma—and," the girl added with unconcealed resentment, "get on with your knitting."

Elvine had risen to her feet. She moved swiftly over to the window which gave on to a wide stoop, the roof of which was supported on well-built rag stone columns. She was more angry than her words admitted. Her fine eyes were sparkling, her delicately penciled brows were slightly knitted.

She made a handsome picture. Her wealth of dark hair was carefully dressed, but with the usual consummate simplicity. Her figure was superb, with all the ripeness of maturity, but without the smallest inclination toward any gross development. She was statuesque, with all the perfect cunning of Nature's art. She was a woman to find favor in any eyes, man's or woman's, and to perform that dual feat was a test which few women could hope to survive.

The mother's reply came sharply and without yielding.

"It's just four years since you came back to home. Five or more since you first married. Anyway, you've sat around here for four years having a good time without a thought of the future. You're spending your money, which didn't amount to——"

The girl flashed round.

"I won't tolerate it. I just won't, Momma," she cried, with an energy which brought the other's eyes swiftly to her face. "You've talked of four years wasted, but you don't say a word of the other year, the fifth. It's taken me all that time to—forget what your judgment might have saved me from. Oh, yes. You know it just as well as I do. Don't blind yourself. I was foolish then, I thought I was in love, and it was the moment when the advice of a woman worth having might have helped me. You urged me in my folly to marry then, the same as you're urging me now. You saw everything you hoped for in that marriage, and you let me plunge myself into a living hell without a single qualm. The result. Oh, I've tried to forget. But I can't I haven't forgotten. I never shall forget. But I've learned. I certainly have. I've learned to think wholly for myself—of myself. I don't need advice now. I don't need a thing. You'll never see things my way, and I don't fancy to see them yours. I shall marry. And when I marry again I promise you I'll marry right, and," she laughed bitterly, "I guess I'll hand you the rake off which you're looking for. But," she went on, with a swift, ruthless candor which stung even the worldly heart of the older woman, "I'll make no experimental practice. I'll marry the man I want to, first because I like him, and second, because he's a right man, and can hand me the life I need. Maybe that's pretty hard sounding, but I tell you, Momma, it's nothing to the hardness that makes you talk the way you do. Anyway, I want you to get it fixed in your mind right now I'm no priceless gem in a jewelry store that you're going to sell at the price you figure. I'll dispose of myself when, and to whom, I choose, and my motives will be my own. Now we'll quit it, once for all. Jeffrey Masters is coming right along down the sidewalk."

The mother's black eyes snapped angrily.

"Very well," she exclaimed sharply. "See to it you make good. Your father's pension isn't even sufficient for two, and your own money is limited. Meanwhile, don't forget the Tristram girl's just as pretty as a picture."

But Elvine's exasperation had passed. There was a slight softening in her eyes as they surveyed the handsome, elaborately dressed gray head and the careful toilet of her unlovely mother. She understood the bitter carping of this disappointed woman. Her spirit soared far beyond the lot of the wife of a pensioned school-teacher. She knew, too, that somewhere, lost in some dim recess of a coldly calculating nature, there was a tiny, glowing spot which burned wholly for her.

There was an unusual softness in her tone when she replied.

"But she needs framing, Momma," she said lightly. "And anyway, a girl who lives more or less on the premises with a man for five years or so, and hasn't married him—well, I guess she never will."

* * * * *

The whole method of Jeff's life was rapidity of thought and swift execution supported by a perfect genius for clear thinking. It was these characteristics which had lifted him so rapidly in the world of cattle he had made his own. It was these which had shown him the possibilities of the now great Obar Ranch.

It might have been claimed for him that he lacked many of the lovable weaknesses of human nature. It might have been said that he was hard, cold. Yet such was his passionate ambition beneath a cool, deliberate exterior that it would have been foolish to believe that his outward display was the real man. He was perhaps a powerfully controlled fire, but the hot tide ran strong within him, and the right torch at the right moment might easily stir the depths of him and bring their fiery display to the surface.

Bud knew him. Bud understood something of the deep human tide flowing through his strong veins. Once he had seen that tide at the surface, and it had left an impression not easily forgettable. Nan, too, was not without understanding of him. But hers was the understanding of her sex for an idol she had set up in her heart. Her knowledge of his shortcomings and his best characteristics was perhaps the reflection of her feelings for him, feelings which make it possible for a woman to endow any object of her profound regard with the virtues she would have it possess. To her there was nothing of the iron, relentless, purposeful soul about him. He was just "Honest Jeff," as she loved to call him. A creature full of kindly thought for others as well as strong in his own personal attitude toward life.

For himself Jeff knew nothing of the emotions lying dormant within him until some chance happening stirred them from their slumbers and sent them pulsating through his senses. He accepted the tide of life as he found it, and only on his journey, swimming down its many currents, he endeavored by skilful

pilotsip to avoid the shoals, and seek the beneficent backwaters so that his muscles and courage might be strengthened for the completion of the task he had still before him.

Elvine van Blooren had held the right torch at their first meeting during the Cattle Week. One look into her beautiful eyes had set his soul aflame, as all the years of his life spent in association with Nan Tristram had failed to do. Did she only know it, the first waltz with him at the subsequent ball had completely made her mistress of his destiny.

Again with his rapid, clear-thinking mind he had not only promptly admitted this truth to himself, but he reveled in the enchantment of the thought it inspired. He desired it. He regretted only that fortune had so long denied him the contemplation of such delights. He felt he had never before lived. He had merely existed, something more than a physical and mental machine, something less than a man.

Something of all this stimulated his sensations during that ostensible farewell call upon the woman who had inspired the change. And, as his hungry eyes dwelt upon her great beauty, he became a prey to an impulse that was irresistible. Why should this be a farewell? Why should there ever be a farewell between them? There could be none. Then, to his support came that steady determination which never failed him in crises. There should be no farewell.

He was clad in sober conventional garb. There was only the bronzing upon his fair brow and firm cheeks to suggest the open air life that was his. His slim, powerful figure was full of an ease which caught and held, and pleased Elvine van Blooren's fancy, and awoke in her more material mind something of the dreams which had driven her almost unthinkingly into the arms of her first husband. His fine blue eyes were alight with possibilities which came near to overbalancing the calculations of her mature mind. But, even so, she felt that the ground was so safe under her feet that, even with the background of the past ever in her memory, she could safely indulge her warmth of fancy to its full.

They were alone in the little modern parlor. At another time Jeff must have observed its atmosphere without enthusiasm, just now he welcomed it. It represented the intimate background of a beautiful woman's life. This was the shrine of the goddess whom he had set up for his own worship. Again there was no half measure.

They were talking in that intimate fashion which belongs to the period when a man and a woman have made up their minds that there remains no obstacle to the admission of mutual regard.

"It's just wonderful to have done it all in so short a time," Elvine said in her low even tones.

Jeff had been talking of the Obar Ranch which was more precious to him than a schoolboy's first big achievement in the playing fields. He had been talking of it, not in the spirit of vain glory, but out of the deep affection of a strong heart for the child of his own creation.

"Oh, I guess it would have been wonderful with any other feller for a partner than Bud Tristram," Jeff responded promptly. "As an enterprise, why, I guess it's my thought. As a success, it's Bud's genius for setting cattle prospering. Say, you can't handle a wide proposition right by reckoning up figures and fixing deeds of sale and partnership. I allow you need to do some thinking that way. But when it's all figgered right, why, the real practical man needs to get busy or the figgers aren't worth the ink an' paper you've used to make 'em. Bud's the feller of the Obars. I just sit around and talk wise when he needs talk, which I don't guess is frequent."

Jeff's smile was genuine. There was no false modesty that made him place the credit of the Obar's success at Bud's door. The credit was Bud's. He knew it. And, with frank honesty, was only too ready to admit it, and even advertise it.

Elvine nodded. Her dark eyes were warmly returning his smile.

"I like that," she said simply. And she meant it.

The blood mounted to the man's brow. He felt that he had forced her to make the admission, and regarded his act with some shame.

"Say, don't feel you've got to say that," he said earnestly. "You mustn't just think I'm asking your applause. These are simple facts which I can't deny. I'd like to feel the sun just rises and sets around my work, but if I did I'd be the same sort of fool as those Pharisee fellers in the Bible. Bud's a bully feller, and I'll owe him more than I can ever hand him back just as long as I live."

Elvine was comparing this man's big generosity with her understanding of most of the men she had ever known. She was thinking, too, of days long since passed, and events which even a wide distance of time had not succeeded in rendering mellow.

She sighed. Somehow "Honest Jeff" was hurting her in a way she would never have believed any man could hurt her—now.

"This Bud Tristram's daughter—Nan. She's a pretty creature," Elvine went on, feeling their topic needed changing.

Jeff's smile deepened.

"She's pretty—right through to her soul," came his prompt and earnest response.

Elvine's eyes observed him closely. She laughed in a challenging fashion.

"And she is still her father's daughter?"

Jeff flushed. Her meaning could not be mistaken. His impulse was to speak out of the depth of a strong abiding regard for his friend's "little gal." But he rejected the impulse. Time and his own desires were pressing.

"Oh, I guess she'll marry some fellow some day. Maybe he'll be good enough—"

"And more than likely he won't." Elvine's reply was emphatic. She suddenly sat forward in the deep rocker, and a great earnestness shone in her eyes. "I tell you no woman in this life has a right to be as 'pretty' as you believe her to be," she said with intense bitterness. "If I had my way every girl would be taught to reason for herself on those things in life which make for her well-being. I'd make her think that way before everything else. To me it is the direst cruelty of Providence that we should be left to become the prey of our own emotions, and at the mercy of any man of whatever quality who can sufficiently stir them. Maybe you do not agree to that. But just think of the awful position that every wretched, physically feeble woman stands in in the life about her. I tell you no girl on her own resources has much better than a dog's chance of getting through life without disaster. Our emotions are the most absurdly foolish type it is possible to think of. I guess we can do things with our normal reason which would shame a whole asylum of crazy folk who can't be let run around free. Oh, I'd like to know her better, to tell her, to warn her. I don't guess I've ever done good in the world, but I'd like to. If I could save one of my sex from some of the pitfalls lying around, maybe I'd feel I'd been some use."

"Why not know her better? Say, Nan's no end of a good sort. She'd be real glad."

Jeff's invitation sounded lame, even to himself. But he was struggling under an emotion that made words difficult.

Elvine laughed.

"Would she? I wonder."

Then she hurried on lest her observation should be interpreted.

"And you're going to quit our city to-morrow for your wonderful ranch. I guess the Cattle Week's liable to bore folks who've real work in the world—like you. It's just a week of show, and glitter, and ceremony, all those things which have no real place in the world of things that matter. But there, after all, I wonder what are the things that matter. And do they matter anyway? We have no guide. We're just left to grope around and search for ourselves, and every folk's ideas are different from every other folk's. I'm restless. I sort of feel there's so much to be done in the world—if we only knew how, and what."

The half-bantering manner of the woman did not disguise her earnestness. Jeff shook his head.

"Guess I can't say. Guess none of us can—rightly. But why not come around to the ranch and see things? See if you can worry out an answer. See if you think the work we're doing matters. It certainly does matter to me, to us. But in the world. I don't know. Just now I sort of feel it don't. Just now I'm wondering whether I'll go back there to-morrow. What do you say?"

"I? How can I say?"

Jeff laughed.

"I don't guess there's a thing easier." His eyes were shining as he took in the girl's dark beauty. "Seems to me I'm beginning to wonder about the things that matter myself. It's been a bully week. The sort of week some folks would write about in their secret diary. Guess I don't keep a secret diary—except somewhere right in here." He tapped his breast. "I don't seem to feel I've ever had such a time, or ever will again, unless—"

"Unless?" Elvine was caught in the mood of the moment. This man was exercising a fascination over her which had nothing to do with the calculations she had laid down for the guidance of her sex.

"Why, unless I add another week to it."

"D'you think you could duplicate it then?"

"That just depends on—you."

Elvine rose from her chair and moved toward the window. Jeff, too, left his chair. He stood tall and straight—waiting.

Her back was turned to him.

"It is not for me to say," she replied without turning.

"Why not?"

"Your work—in the world."

"Can wait. There's always—Bud Tristram."

Suddenly Elvine turned about. Her eyes were smiling, and full of a light which had not lived in them for several years. There was not a shadow of calculation in them now.

She held out her hand in token of dismissal.

"We had some fine rides—together," she said.

"My horses are still here."

"And—the dances. They were—very pleasant."

"Maybe they can be danced—again."

"Good-bye," she said, her beautiful hand lingering in his for a moment.

"For the present," Jeff added with decision.

Then he mechanically glanced at his timepiece. His "farewell" call had lasted over two hours. But even so it had been all too short for him.

CHAPTER XII

THE TEMPERING

Bud was packing in his rooms at Aston's Hotel. It was late at night. Late as it was, however, he had only left Nan, engaged at a similar occupation, less than half an hour ago. He had sat talking to her, and watching her with eyes of deep concern while, with infinite care, she bestowed those beautiful gowns which mean so much in a woman's life.

His visit to her had not been one of mere companionship. It had been inspired by a sympathy he had no other means of displaying. He had talked to her; by every means in his power he had endeavored to interest her in reminiscence of the week's doings. She listened patiently, almost submissively, for she understood the promptings of his endeavor. But she was too deeply plunged in her own discouragement to display real interest, and it had required every ounce of courage she possessed to prevent herself falling to weeping.

Nor was Bud at fault for a moment. He recognized the trouble lurking in the sweet brown eyes. And with all his might he pretended not to see. So, when his last effort to cheer had proved unavailing, he took his departure under the excuse of his own packing.

He knew. Of course he knew. Had he not watched the progress of events throughout the week? Had he not seen for himself how Jeff's fancy had been caught? And she was very beautiful, this town-bred woman, beautiful with that healthy, downy complexion which Bud found did not fit with his idea of city

"raised" women. He almost felt he hated her, yet he knew he had no right to his antagonism. Jeff was unpledged, he was free. No woman had any claim on him. Not even Nan. Poor Nan. He had hoped to give her seven long days of unalloyed delight. He had only given her seven days of bitter disappointment and disillusion.

He set about his packing with furious zest. In a moment, it seemed, his room was in a state of chaos. And all the while, as he bundled garments together and flung them into his grips, his busy thought went on in the only direction in which it seemed capable of moving just now.

His mind had gone back to the days before their visit to Calthorpe. He remembered the delighted anticipation which Nan had displayed. Her displays of happy affection for himself in the midst of her own great looking forward. The ravishing hours she had spent in choosing patterns of material, and styles of gown. He remembered the bright sparkling eyes shining, it seemed to him, at all times. That wonderful looking forward. Oh, the holiday of it had been nothing. There was only one thing, one thought, which had inspired the child. It was Jeff. It was a week that was to see honor done him, and she—she was to join in honoring him. Jeff was the whole hub about which her happiness revolved.

He was pained. He was angry. And the vision of Elvine van Blooren's dark beauty haunted him. He admitted it—her beauty. And for all his disquiet, his bitter feeling, he found it impossible to blame the man.

Yes, for all his exasperation. For all he regarded Jeff as a "fool man," he was just enough to remember that Nan was his own little daughter, a pretty prairie girl, with nothing of the showy attraction of this city woman. Then Jeff's attitude toward her. It had never been more than the sheerest friendliness. He reflected bitterly, even, that they might have been simply brother and sister. While the dream of his life was some day to be able to pour out the wealth he was storing up into the out-stretched palms of their children.

Well, it was a dream. And now it had come tumbling about his feet, and it almost looked to him as if poor little Nan's heart was to be buried beneath the debris.

He flung his evening suit, which Nan had so much admired, into the gaping jaws of a large leather grip, with a disregard that more than illustrated his feelings. Then he strove to close the grip tucking in the projecting oddments of silk-lined cloth without the least consideration for their well-being. He felt he never wanted to wear such things again, never wanted even to see them. He and Nan belonged to the prairie, not to a city. That was good enough for them. What was the use—?

But his reflections were interrupted by the abrupt appearance of Jeff himself. Bud looked up as the door was unceremoniously thrust open, and his regard was quite unshaken by the depths of his feelings. It displayed a mute question, however.

Jeff began at once.

"I saw the light through your transom, Bud, so I just came right in."

Jeff was a shade paler than usual. There was a look of some doubt in his blue eyes. And his manner hinted at a decision taken. A decision that had not been arrived at without some considerable exercise of mind.

Slowly, as he regarded him, all Bud's bitterness subsided. If Nan were his daughter, this man was almost a son to him.

"Say, old friend, I'm—I'm not going back home with you to-morrow," Jeff went on. He stirred with a suggestion of nervousness, and then flung himself upon the old man's littered-up bed. "I just can't, an' that's a fact. I want to stop around here for a while. I got to."

He paused as though awaiting an answer, but none was forthcoming. Only was there that steady regard from the man beyond the still open grip.

Bud was not thinking of the announcement. Jeff was certainly a "good-looker," and he was beginning to understand something of the attraction he must have for a woman like Elvine van Blooren. He was slim and muscular, with a keen face of decision and strength. Then, was he not on the rising wave which must ever appeal to the maturer mind of a widow, however young? His disappointment rose again and threatened to find expression. But he thrust it aside and struggled to remember only his regard for the man.

"D'you mind?" Jeff's question came nervously.

Did he mind? It was a weak question. Coming from Jeff it sounded foolish. Bud smiled, and his quiet

sense of humor saved him from himself.

"Why, if you feel that way I don't guess you need worry a thing, Jeff." Then he added: "Guess Nan an' me'll get right along home. But it don't need to cut no ice. I take it you're askin' me to fix things right at the Obars till you get around. That so?"

Jeff nodded. He was feeling that he was doing something mean, even brutal. He knew that what he contemplated must result in the bitterest disappointment to his old friend. He had well enough known throughout their partnership Bud's yearning desire that he should marry Nan. Well, such a course was unthinkable now. Somehow it had never seemed really possible. He was troubled, grievously troubled, but he was determined now to act in the only honest way. He was determined that Bud should know the truth—at all costs.

"I'd be thankful to you, Bud."

"You don't need to say a word. It's fixed."

For some moments no other word was spoken. There was awkwardness. But it was with Jeff alone. He feared the result of what he must tell.

"You're—packing?" he said presently.

Bud sat himself heavily into a rocker.

"Yep. Lestways I don't guess Nan 'ud call it that way." He raked his curly iron-gray hair with his strong fingers, and gazed ruefully at the chaos.

"Maybe I can help some."

Bud shook his head, and his smile was good.

"Guess one darn fool's enough playin' this game. When're you coming along to—home?"

"Maybe a week."

The reply was prompt.

"An'—you'll bring her along with you?"

The eyes of the two men met. Each was reading the other like an open book.

Jeff shook his head. Somehow there was nothing absurd to him in Bud's suggestion. There was nothing startling even in the probing of his secret with so much directness.

"I haven't asked her—yet."

Then it was that the big heart of the friend, who was almost a father, made itself apparent.

"But you're goin' to, Jeff. An' she's goin' to take you. Say, Jeff, she's one lucky woman."

In a moment the tide of the younger man's feelings was set flowing. In a moment the egoism of the lover made a generous nature forget all else but the passion that absorbed him. In a moment the thought that this man was Nan's father, and that the dearest wish of his life was that he, Jeff, should marry his daughter, was forgotten.

"Lucky? But you got it wrong, Bud," Jeff cried, sitting erect, his face flushed with the passionate stirring of Ills strong heart. "It's I who'll be lucky, if she don't turn me down. Man, I'm not worth the dust on her shoes. I'm not fit to lackey for her. Nor—nor is any other feller. Say, Bud," he went on, leaning impressively forward, his eyes shining with his passion, "I'm just crazy to death for her. And—and I can't just help it. I'd go through hell's flames for her, man, I'd—"

"Say, boy, don't worry that-a-way. Jest marry her instead," Bud broke in with his gentlest smile. "You're all sorts of a boy, Jeff, and I don't figger you got call to talk about the dust of any woman's shoes. But I guess ther's times when it's good fer a man to feel he ain't as big as he's told. Anyways, you get right ahead, and leave me to the Obars. I ain't goin' to fail you now, any more than any other time." Then he rumbled his stubbly hair again, and it was an action that suggested heavy thought. "Say," he went on, a moment later, his eyes looking squarely into the face of the other, "we're hittin' the trail good an' early to-morrow. Guess you best let me say 'good-bye' to Nan for you. That so?"

Jeff nodded. He understood. And somehow the bigness of this man made him almost despise himself.

"Then I guess I'll get right on with my—packin'."

They were standing on the stoop of Aston's Hotel. In front of them the broad Avenue opened out with its central walk, between an aisle of wide-spreading maple trees bathed in the early morning sun. A spring wagon was already moving away, piled up with baggage. The saddle horses were ready, held by one of the hotel servants. Nan, in her riding costume, was waiting while her father exchanged a few parting words with the hotel manager.

"Guess you're right. It's been a darn good week this year. The best in my memory. I'd say the Conference was a heap better attended, an' the weather's been just great. We got through a deal o' legislation, too. Guess things are goin' to hum, with the Obars at the head of 'em this year. Our big play is to be dealin' with rustlers. We got a hell of a piece o' leeway to make up. Four years ago we guessed we'd got 'em fixed where we wanted 'em. But they hatched out since like a brood o' wolf cubs. So long."

"Mr. Masters is stopping on for a while," the manager observed, with that intimate touch which he always practiced with his more influential customers of the cattle world.

"Why, yes." Bud's eyes were watching Nan as she mounted her pony, carefully held by a solicitous barn-hand. Under other circumstances the man's attention would have afforded him amusement. Just now he was regretting the manager's remark. "Y'see, ther's a deal to fix. Seein' he's president this year, why, I guess it's up to him to kep his ladle busy in the soup."

He moved off the stoop and took his horse from the waiting man. He swung himself into the saddle with an agility which belied his years.

He waved one great hand in response to the manager's deferential bow, and turned his horse away. In a moment Bud and Nan were riding side by side down the wide Avenue.

It was a long time before either attempted to break the silence between them. They had even reached the outskirts of the city before Nan broached the subject from which her father admittedly shrank.

"I'm glad Jeff didn't get up to see us off," she said imply. Then she laughed softly. "Y'see, Daddy, there's times for most things; and 'good-byes' in the early morning are a bit like cold baths in winter."

Bud eyed his daughter with a quick sidelong glance, and then continued his survey of the trail ahead as it lifted over a gentle grassy slope. They were passing the last houses of the town, and ahead lay the tawny fields which made the country one of the greatest pastures in the world.

"Ther'd been no sort o' sense his turning out around sun-up to see us folks off. It ain't goin' to be weeks before he gets back home."

"No."

Nan's smile remained, and Bud, for all his avoidance of it, was aware that was so. It was a smile that cut him to the heart, and yet he was simple man enough to find relief in it.

"There'll be a deal for him to fix before he gets back home," Nan went on.

She spoke in the earnest fashion of deep consideration. Bud glanced round at her again, steadying his powerful horse to permit her pony to push its nose ahead. Her manner had startled him. But he refrained from the folly of replying. He had that in his mind to impart the thought of which nearly broke his heart. But it must be told, and by him. And a passionate desire to lighten the blow made him watch desperately for the best opportunity.

But he was dealing with a nature stronger, deeper, more honest and clear-sighted than he knew. He was dealing with a woman who could sacrifice all to the well-being and happiness of those she loved. With Nan self held a particularly subservient place to every other emotion. And when it did manage to obtrude itself it was her way to fight her battle alone, at a time when no prying eyes were there to witness her sufferings. To the daylight she presented a pair of sweet brown smiling eyes, and lips as full, and ripe, and firm as though no shadow of doubt and unhappiness had ever crossed her path.

She went on rapidly, speaking as though the matter under consideration were fully accepted between them.

"It's queer how things fix themselves the way you don't guess," she said reflectively. "Just one week, and they're changed around in a way that makes you wonder if you aren't dreaming. It's sort of like the Indian summer, isn't it? There's the beautiful light of the full sun on colors that set you 'most crazy with

delight. Pictures that make you feel Providence is just the biggest painter ever set brush to canvas. Then, with a shiver of wind from the north, down the leaves tumble, and right on top of 'em comes the snow, and then you're moving around in a sort of crystal fairy web, and wonder when you'll wake up. A week ago Jeff didn't even know her; she wasn't in the world so far as he knew. Now he's going to marry her."

Nan stated the fact without a tremor of voice, without a shadow of hesitation. The sunny smile was entirely without a cloud. Her father stared down at her from his superior height with eyes wide with astonishment and something of alarm.

"Say, did Jeff tell you?" he asked sharply.

Nan shook her head.

"Then how in hell d'you know it all? Say——"

"How d'you know anything that affects you here, Daddy?" the girl retorted, gently indicating her soft rounded bosom with one gauntleted hand.

Then her smile broke out again, and the man's trouble was further increased.

"Y'see, I don't mind saying things to you. You're my Daddy and Momma all rolled into one. And there's sure a heap of you for two," she smiled up at him. "Maybe you don't always say all the things you feel, but it don't keep me guessing long. You'd a heap of terr'ble, terr'ble things on your mind to say to me on this ride. Oh, and they weighed heavy. Your poor worried face had lost all its smile, and your eyes just looked as if you'd been lying awake nights an' nights, an' you'd seen every sort of nightmare ever thought of in the world of dreams. It made me kind of sorry, and I just couldn't wait for you to make that big talk you figgered on."

Bud was gazing far out ahead at the brilliant sky-line where the crests of grass-land cut the line in perfect undulations. Nan's gently drawn sigh was like the stab of a knife in his heart. His feelings at that moment were too deep for words. And so the girl went on in a voice that struck fresh chords of sympathy in the soul of the man who idolized her.

"It seems to me, my Daddy, that we often think things that a great big Someone don't guess are good for us to think. We sort of set up hopes we've no right to. An' when we do, why, we've got to be handed our lessons. Sometimes the lesson is pretty tough, sometimes I don't guess it's a deal worse than a pin-prick. Anyway, lessons aren't joyous things at best, not even pin-pricks. Well, if folks are right they'll just learn their lessons all they can without kicking, and if they get a hunch on, why, I don't figger it's likely to make 'em harder. I've been learning my lesson a whole week now, and, yes, I've got it right. Oh, I've had to work. It hasn't been easy. And somehow, my Daddy, all these lovely, lovely gowns, and the thought of the generous hands that gave them to me, have helped me to learn quicker, and—better."

She paused again. Their horses were ambling leisurely along over the sandy trail. They moved together, side by side, in a closeness of companionship which perhaps symbolized that of their riders.

"I jest don't know what to say, Nan. I surely don't," Bud lumbered at last with a half-bewildered drawing together of his heavy brows. "It don't seem I ken even think right—about it."

Nan gazed up into his big troubled face with the frank eyes that looked wholly untroubled.

"Don't try, my Daddy. Guess I've done all that's necessary that way. Maybe I know just how you're feeling, because I know how I'm feeling. God's been good to me all my years. He's given me a Daddy who's the best in the world. A Daddy who's taught me by his own example how to be strong and fight the little battles I guess it's meant for us to fight. Oh, I won't say it hasn't hurt," she went on, with a catch in her voice. "You see, I loved Jeff. I love him now, and I'll go right on loving him to the end. And it's because I love him I want to help him now—and always. You won't think me a fool girl, my Daddy, will you, but—but—I won't hate Elvine van Blooren. I'm—I'm going to try so hard to like her, and—and anyway, with all my might, I'm going to help them both. D'you guess Jeff would let me get his house ready for—his wife?"

The father's reply came with a violence which he calculated should conceal an emotion which his manhood forbade, but which only helped to reveal it the more surely to the clear eyes of the girl at his side.

"Hell take the bunch—the whole of 'em!" he cried fiercely. Then he added weakly: "You're nigh breakin' my heart all to pieces."

But Nan's smile suddenly became radiant, as she turned her brown eyes away from the spectacle of her father's trouble to the distant horizon ahead.

She shook her head.

"No, my Daddy. I allow it feels that way just now. I've felt that way, too. But it's just God's tempering. And when it's through, why I guess our hearts'll be made of good metal, strong and steady to do the work He'd have us do. And that's just all we can ask, isn't it?"

CHAPTER XIII

THE NEWS

Nan rode up to the veranda of the ranch house and sprang lightly from the saddle. Her pony's flanks were caked with sweat. The days now, as they approached July, were blistering, and the work of the great ranch was heavy for everybody. Nan had constituted herself Jeff's substitute during his absence, and performed his share of the labor with a skill and efficiency which astonished even her father.

She was a little weary just now. The heat was trying. Four weeks of continuous effort, four weeks of day-long saddle work, superintending the distant out-stations, the pasture fencing, the re-branding, which never seemed to come to an end, the hundred and one little duties which always cropped up unexpectedly; these things, in conjunction with the intense heat and the constant trouble which she held safely screened behind her smiling eyes, were not without effect upon her, although display was only permitted when no other eyes were present to witness her weakness.

It was the ranch house dinner time. Bud was due, as was the return of the men who belonged to the home station.

Nan released the cinchas of her saddle and removed her pony's bridle. Then, with a sharp pat upon the creature's quarters, she sent it strolling off toward the open pasture, in which the windmill pump kept the string of watering tubs ready for the thirsty world about it.

She watched the animal as it flung itself down for a roll. Its ungainly, thrusting legs held her interest. Then, as it scrambled to its feet and shook itself, and headed for the water, she seated herself in a low wicker chair and wiped the dust from her long riding boots with the silk handkerchief she wore loosely tied about her neck. A few moments later her brown eyes were gazing fixedly out at the shimmer of heat which hovered low over the distant horizon.

She was meditating deeply, her tired body yielding to the greater activity of her thought. The scene was lost to her. Her gaze sped beyond the maze of corrals, and the more distant patchwork of fenced pastures to the western boundary of her beloved Rainbow Hill Valley. There was nothing but grass, endless grass, until the purple line of the wood-clad mountains was reached. And here it was that her regard found a resting place. But even so she was unaware of it, for her thoughts were miles away in another direction.

Her courage had reaped its natural harvest. Her labors had yielded her a peace of mind which at one time had seemed impossible. She could reflect calmly now, if not without a world of regret and sadness. Just now, in the brief interval of waiting for her father for their midday meal, her relaxed body permitted her thoughts to wander toward the city where Jeff was still held captive by toils she herself had been unable to weave about him.

She had had her desire. She had pressed her less willing father into her service, and through him she had obtained the right to see that Jeff's house was made ready. It had been a labor of love in its highest sense, for not one single detail of her efforts but had been a fresh laceration of her loyal soul. In her mind it was never possible to shut out the memory that everything that was for Jeff was also for a woman who had plucked the only fruit she had ever coveted with her whole heart. There had been moments of reward, however, a reward which perhaps a lesser spirit might never have known. It was the passionate satisfaction that her hands, her love, were able to minister to the well-being of the man she loved, for all that another woman occupied her place in his heart.

Feelings such as these filled her heart now. They had so filled it that morning during her hour of superintending the work of the builders engaged upon the reconstruction of Jeff's house. This was

nearly completed, and somehow she felt when all the preparations were finished the last support must be banished forever. Then there would be nothing left her but to watch, perhaps from afar, the happiness of the other woman basking in the love for which she would willingly have given her life.

There were moments when her spirit furiously rebelled, when she felt that the sacrifice was too great, when the limits of human endurance forbade submission to her lot. They were moments when mad jealousy rose up and threatened her bulwark of spiritual resistance. And at such time her battle was furious and hard, and she emerged therefrom scarred and suffering, but with a spirit unbroken and even strengthened.

Then her pride, a small gentle thing, added its quota to her support. No one should pity her, no one should ever, ever know anything of the sufferings she endured. No, not even her beloved father. So her smile, even her ready laughter, was enlisted in her support, and the manner of her discussion of the work on Jeff's house was an education in courageous acting.

But her father remained wholly undeceived. He saw with a vision rendered doubly acute by perfect sympathy. He read through every smile to the tears lying behind it. He noted the change in the tone of the laugh. He missed nothing of the painful abstraction at odd moments when Nan believed she was wholly unobserved. Nor did he misinterpret the language these things expressed. But for all his heart bled for the girl—and in his moments of solitude he bitterly cursed the woman who had robbed him of a son, and heaped every scathing epithet of his rough vocabulary upon the head of the man himself—he gave no sign that the fair world about them concealed shadowed corners, or that the life which was theirs was not one triumph of eternal delight. Thus was Nan helped, all unconscious of the help so given. So she was able to play the part her courage and gentleness of spirit had assigned to her.

Presently a horseman came within sight, out of the northwest. It was the direction of Jeff's ranch house. A moment of deliberate scrutiny revealed the man's identity. It was Lal Hobhouse, second foreman of the Obar, the man who, before the amalgamation, was Jeff's foreman.

Nan wondered what was bringing him in at this hour. Usually his visits to their headquarters were made in the evening when the work of the day was completed.

The man rode up and found Nan interestedly waiting to receive him. There was a touch of anxiety in her tone as she greeted him.

"No trouble, Lal?" she demanded, as the man reined up his pony. The direct manner of the girl was largely the result of her new responsibilities.

Lal Hobhouse was a lean-faced specimen of sun-dried manhood. His appearance suggested all wires and indifference to the nicenesses of life. His long moustache drooped mournfully below his square chin. And his fierce black eyes were full of a violent heat, rendered more savage for its bottling up during his long ride.

"Trouble?" Then he exploded with a furious oath, and his volcanic temper drowned the sunburn of his cheek under a living heat. "Them rustlers. Them lousy bums," he cried almost choking. "That bunch o' yearlings—Shorthorn yearlings, Miss. Thirty of 'em—picked right out of the bush corrals where we'd got 'em for re-brandin'. Say, Bud—your father, Miss," he corrected himself. "He ain't around?"

But Nan's interest was in the work of the rustlers. Not in his final inquiry. Her pretty eyes were wide and hard with the anger his news had inspired.

"The Shorthorn yearlings, Lal?" she demanded. "Our prize stock?"

"Sure, Miss. Them. That's them. God blister their filthy carkises! May they stew in hell!"

He spat over his horse's shoulder as though to emphasize his furious disgust. But his forcefulness was displeasing.

"Guess you best off-saddle," Nan said coolly. "Father'll be along right now. You'll need food. Say, what boys you got out there?" she inquired as the man slipped out of the saddle and began to unfasten the cinchas.

"Why, just the same four damn fools, an'—Sikkem."

"And they're following up the trail?"

"Sure." The man flung off the saddle and his horse mouched away.

"Psha!" he cried, turning his fierce eyes upon Nan. "What's the use anyway?" His gesture was one of helpless disgust. "They're out. Bin out since daylight. An' I guess they've as much chance roundin' that crowd up as they would huntin' bugs in a hundred acre pasture. Sikkem's about the brightest. But he ain't no sort o' good after a bunch of rustlers. I wouldn't trust him with a dead mule o' mine anyway. The boss hangs to him as if he was the on'y blamed cowpuncher east o' the mountains because he's handy. I don't like him, Miss, an'— Say, how did them rustlers know 'bout them calves? Ther's two hundred head o' beeves out there, an' they passed 'em right over fer the Shorthorns."

The man's argument and distrust of the man Sikkem made a deep impression on Nan. She had listened to some of the latter before. But Jeff's predilection for the dark-faced half Greaser had left her sceptical of Lal's opinion. Now, however, she was seriously impressed.

At that moment Bud himself rode up at a gallop, and behind him rode four of the home station boys. The pace at which he came was unusual, and Nan's troubled eyes promptly sought his face.

Instantly her greeting died upon her lips, which tightened ominously. His usually steady gray eyes were hot and fierce, and his face was set. The comfortable lines about his mouth were drawn hard and deep. She needed no word to tell her that further trouble was abroad.

He scarcely waited for his horse to come to a halt. He was out of the saddle in a moment, and his great figure towered before the foreman, whom he took in with an angry stare.

"What's brought you in?" he demanded, with a dangerous calm. Then the calm broke before his storm of feeling. "Don't tell me ther's trouble around your layout, too," he cried, without waiting for reply. Then he turned on Nan, who was still on the veranda. "Say, Nan, they done it. The rotten swines have done it. They shot 'Jock' up!"

"The Highland bull?" Nan gasped.

"Yes. That's it." Bud laughed furiously. "That bull I imported last fall for three thousand dollars," he went on, turning back to the foreman. "They shot him up and drove off his twenty-five cows from the Coyote Bluff pastures. Dirty spite an' meanness. The white-livered scum!" Then with a fierce oath the usually even-tempered Bud hurled his wrath upon the waiting man. "Gorl darn it, you're standin' around like a barbed wire fence post. What in hell's brought you around now? What they done your way?"

His manner roused the foreman to a soreness he wasn't slow in showing.

"Jest thirty Shorthorn yearlings," he said without any attempt to soften the blow. "Jest thirty—prize stock."

The announcement had an unlooked-for effect. Where Nan expected another furious display Bud remained silent. His eyes were wide as they stared into the foreman's. But no word came. Then, after a few moments, he began to laugh and Nan understood. She felt it was either that, or—her father would break something.

"Well, I go plumb to hell!" he cried at last. And Nan felt relieved at the sound of his voice.

The next moment Lal Hobhouse was pouring out his story with a redundant selection from his choicest vocabulary of abusive epithet, which was impartially divided between the rustlers and the cowhands under his charge. Nan waited patiently, her eyes studying her father's face. But whatever his feelings he permitted them no further display, and, at the conclusion of the story, instead of offering comment, or reverting to his own discoveries, he turned to his daughter with a smile.

"Food on, Nan?" he inquired, in his easy way. "Guess I'm needin' food—pretty bad. Maybe we'll feel better after."

Then he turned to the men who stood around.

"Git on down to the bunkhouse an' feed, boys. One o' you grab my plug. After, we'll get around out with Lal here. I—"

He broke off as Nan darted away down the veranda. The mail man had just clattered up to the front of the house, and she had gone to meet him.

Bud passed his horse on to one of the men, and, with heavy strides, clanking with the rattle of his heavy Mexican spurs, his leather chapps creaking as he moved, he mounted the veranda and made his way into the house.

Nan entered the parlor with her hands full of mail. The meal was laid ready, and a colored girl was setting the chairs in their places.

"I'll jest get a clean up, Nan," her father said, without a single trace of his recent display. "Guess I'm full of dust."

He passed through the little room like some overwhelming mammoth. He seemed altogether too vast for the small home, which had never grown with his other worldly possessions. Nan watched him go. Then she laid the mail down on a side table and began to sort it out.

There were a number of letters for Jeff. These she set carefully aside in a pile by themselves for redirection. There were several addressed in girlish hands to herself. For Bud there were only a few. She glanced over the superscription of each. One or two were easily recognized business letters. There was a paper, however, addressed in Jeff's hand, and a letter of considerable bulk. These were what she had been looking for. She pushed the bunkhouse mail aside, and regarded reflectively the outer covering of Jeff's letter to her father.

It was not the first he had received from Jeff during the four weeks since their return home. But its bulk this time was out of the ordinary, and the carefully folded news sheet was more than interesting. It awakened every doubt, every fear to which she had been a prey.

The rapid beating of her heart left her with a choking sensation. Vivid imagination was at work, and she was reading in fancy under those covers that which, sooner or later, she knew she must read in fact.

These were bad moments for the girl, moments which found her again struggling with that self which left her little enough peace. Perhaps the struggle lasted five minutes. Perhaps less. At any rate it seemed an eternity to Nan before the hired girl announced the meal.

Nan sighed as she moved from the side table on which the mail was spread out.

"Give father a call," she said, and took up a position at the open French window.

Her back was turned when Bud responded to the summons. The cold sluice he had just indulged in seemed to have entirely restored his equanimity. His voice came cheerily.

"Guess we best set in, little gal," he said, moving to his place at the table. "We'll need to get busy after."

Nan turned. She watched Maimie deposit the hot dishes. Then, when the girl had withdrawn, she took her place opposite her father.

"There's a deal of mail for Jeff," she said, as she sat down. "There's some for you, too, Daddy. There's a letter and—a newspaper. Maybe you'd feel like reading them right away. Guess there won't be time after."

With all her might she struggled for indifference. With all her might she desired that her father should miss the fears which prompted her. But she only succeeded in telling him of them in every word she spoke.

Bud agreed readily. He rose and fetched his letter—and the newspaper which Nan so feared.

Nan went on with her food. Her father tore open the covering of the letter. She was watching him covertly and silently whilst he read page after page. She was searching for confirmation of her worst fears. She was torturing herself.

Bud's dissimulation was never great. Nan watched the play of his expression. There was no smile. As the silent moments passed his brow became heavier. The furrow deepened between his eyes, and once there came that rather helpless raising of his hand to his forehead. Then, too, she observed the compression of his lips, and the occasional dilation of his nostrils. Each observation carried conviction, and the weight upon her heart grew almost insupportable.

Finally he laid the letter down and went on with his meal. But he did not even glance at the wrapped newspaper.

In self-defense Nan was forced to break the silence. If it had remained she felt she must scream. Instead she smiled over at him, and indicated the newspaper.

"The *Calthorpe Times*, isn't it?" she said without a tremor.

"Can't say."

The harsh tone was intended to convey indifference.

"Won't you open it?" she asked. "Maybe Jeff's marked a piece."

Then Bud gave a display such as Nan had never witnessed in him before.

"Say, ain't we never to get food a feller ken eat?" he cried. "That nigger slut needs firin' right away. Guess she couldn't cook a dry hash on a round-up. I'm quittin'. This stew 'ud choke a she-wolf."

His eyes were hot. He thrust his plate away from him and pushed back his chair. But Nan's calmness defeated his almost childlike subterfuge.

"Say, my Daddy, you don't need to quit. Sure," she added, a pathetic smile lighting her brown eyes, "I guess the stew's pretty good to any hungry folks, and Maimie's just the dandiest cook anywhere around."

She paused. Bud stood yearning for five minutes of unrestrained blasphemy as he read the understanding lying behind her words.

"I don't guess it's the food worrying, or Maimie's cooking," Nan went on, almost at once. "It's your letter. Maybe there's a heap of things in it you aren't yearning to hand over to me." A sigh escaped her. "Will I tell you of them? Maybe one'll be sufficient. It's the one worrying you most. It's—it's his marriage. It's fixed. The date—I mean."

Then she pointed at the unopened paper.

"Likely it's in that. And that's why he's sent it. Shall I see?"

She reached out and picked up the offending packet, and, with a swift movement, ripped the fastening open with one finger. Without a word she unfolded the sheet, seeking a marked passage. It was there, as she knew it would be. It was found in a twinkling. No one could have missed it. Heavy ink outlined it in the column of "City Chatter," and she read the paragraph aloud without a tremor of voice. Her deliberateness nearly drove the ranchman to distraction.

"The friends of Mrs. John D. Carruthers will be interested to learn that the marriage of her daughter, Mrs. Elvine van Blooren, widow of the late Robert van Blooren, to Jeffrey Masters, of the celebrated 'Obar' Ranch, and this year's President of the Western Union Cattle Breeders' Association, is to be solemnized at the Church of St. Mary in this city on August 4th next. The Rev. Claude I. Carston, M. A., will——"

There was more of it, much more, referring in the usual local journalistic fashion to the "happy event," and dwelling upon the important "social standing" of the bride and bridegroom. But Nan read no further then. There was no need to. Was not the completeness of her disaster contained in those lines? The courage of the front she displayed before the sympathetic eyes of her father was superlative.

There was just a pause. It was the tragic pause under a staggering blow. Then she forced a smile into the brave eyes, which never for a moment fell before the other's regard.

"There! There, my Daddy," she said, with a studied calm which did not conceal the dry-throated swallow which accompanied the words. "I guess it was how I thought. You were scared. Scared to tell me." She shook her head. "It's—it's not very brave, is it? I wonder why you were scared? You needn't have been. Folks don't need to be scared of—anything. What you need most is just to—to grit your teeth and—die hard."

Her manner was becoming abstracted. It seemed as if she were addressing herself, warning herself, and fighting down a weakness which was threatening to overwhelm her.

Presently she went on, while the man stood by utterly robbed of the power to comfort her:

"August the fourth," she murmured. "August—that's six weeks from now. Six weeks of—sunshine and—and warmth. When the harvest's ripening, and all the world's just—glad. And he'll be glad, and—and happy, too. Yes, Jeff will be very, very happy because—she's going to make him happy."

Quite suddenly she started up from her chair. A dreadful panic had leaped to her eyes. The delicious,

healthy color had been swept from her pretty downy cheeks. The corners of her sweet mouth were drooping, and her hands were held out in a gesture of despairing appeal.

"Daddy, Daddy, he will—he will be happy, won't he?" she cried. "I—I just need him to be happy, more—yes, more than anything in the world. Sure, sure, she'll make him happy? Oh, if she doesn't!"

Still the man looked on, a helpless spectator of the girl's suffering. Nor did it seem that his own was any less. But Nan seemed to realize the weakness in her momentary display. Her hands dropped to her side. There was even a visible effort in the manner in which she strove for self-mastery. Her smooth brow puckered in an intense frown, and, to Bud, it almost seemed that she was literally clenching her teeth to hold back the passionate distress which was seeking to find expression.

After a moment something of full self-possession seemed to return to her. She smiled. But it was a smile that lacked conviction. A smile that almost broke her father's heart.

"Tell me, Daddy," she pleaded. "Do you think—he'd—he'd have me be a—a bridesmaid? Would it sort of help him any?" she hurried on. "You see, I—I want him to be real happy. I want him to feel that we just love him, and that—that—we're just glad for him, and—and nothing in the world else matters—to anybody. I'm so——"

There was a little catch of breath. The words she would have spoken died upon her lips. She reeled. Every vestige of color left her pretty face, and her eyes half closed. Just for one weak instant her hands groped behind her for the chair. Then, the next, Bud was at her side, and one strong arm was supporting her.

"Don't, Nan!" he cried, in his heavy cumbersome way. And the sound of his deep voice alone served to ward off the encroachment of that final weakness which, in spite of all her courage, the girl was at last compelled to yield to.

Bud drew her to him, and one hand smoothed her pretty brown hair with rough tenderness. For a moment her head rested against his broad bosom. Then a deep sigh came, and Nan looked up, smiling into the steady gray eyes gazing down at her, through a mist of welling tears.

"My dear—dear old Daddy," she murmured, as the tears finally overflowed and slowly rolled down her cheeks.

CHAPTER XIV

THE KNOCKING ON THE DOOR

It seemed like the hand of Destiny that Elvine van Blooren should wander across the path of Jeffrey Masters at a moment when all the fruits of his ambition seemed to be falling into his outspread-hands. It was surely the work of Fate that instant recognition of her desirability leaped in his heart, so that some six weeks later they should set out on their life's journey together on the eastward bound mail train, which bore, in its foremost van, the mails for the world outside, gathered in from every district in the region of Calthorpe.

Their happiness was perfect. In six weeks' time the metamorphosis in the woman had been as complete as it was in the case of the man.

For the man it seemed that life had opened out an entirely new vista. He had warmed under the influence of his new passion. The angles in his character seemed to have softened. Achievement had receded into its due proportion in his focus. The world had become peopled with warm living creatures whose strivings were now a source of sympathy to him. Life no longer moved about him detached, unappealing.

So with the woman. Elvine van Blooren's past was her own. Whatever it was she hugged it to herself, and the very process of doing so had helped to harden her.

But she possessed fires she had wilfully hidden, even from herself. For four years she had lived a life of desperate calculation against all those things she most dreaded, till she felt she had converted herself into a machine free from all trammeling emotions, equipped solely to execute the purpose she had set her mind on.

These fires were awakened early. Their awakening had been all unknown to her. Yet she had admitted them when she had warned her mother that she intended to "like" the man she ultimately married. All subconsciously she had "liked" Jeffrey Masters from their first formal meeting. Further acquaintance had deepened her liking. The keen eyes possessed strong qualities of appeal. The decision of his clean-cut face suggested all that strength which appealed to her.

The culmination was reached long before the appointed day of their wedding. It came at the moment he definitely asked her to become his wife. It had been a moment to her than which she had dreamed of nothing more sublime. The flood-gates had been literally forced open before a tide of sudden passion, which left her gasping, and something incredulous. Where was all the result of her years of hard calculation? Where was that machine upon which she had gazed with so much confident pride? It had only served her just so long as was required to realize that Jeffrey Masters was sufficiently desirable to fulfil the purposes of the life she had marked out for herself. Then, the primitive woman in her had abandoned herself to the glowing fires burning deep within her young heart.

Thus the bond held them both through delicious days, which so little time before had seemed impossible to either. Thus the time drew on toward the golden day of consummation. And with each passing day firmer and firmer, more and more irresistible, grew the ties under which they were held.

As the local press had foreshadowed, the event of their marriage proved of primary social importance. All Calthorpe speeded them upon their life's journey, and the east-bound mail bore them away with the echo of cheery farewells, and every other form of speeding, dying pleasantly away behind them. So, too, the snake-like string of coaches bore the burden of Destiny in the great uninteresting, padlocked baskets and bags which contained the mail.

The days of the honeymoon had been carefully thought out by Elvine. Her wishes had been supreme. Toronto was their first destination. A city whose bright, pleasant life appealed to her more, perhaps, even than any of the great cities of the greater world.

Perfect happiness was theirs from the moment of their departure eastward. No cloud drifted in sight during their first day in the great hotel from which they intended to view the life of Toronto. Then came the second morning, and the—mail.

They occupied a suite of rooms upon the first floor of the hotel. It overlooked the wide portico which supported a deep balcony devoted to their sole use. Jeff was alone in the luxurious sitting-room when the mail was brought in by a waiter. He was glancing down the morning paper while he waited for Elvine, who was preparing for a morning round of the stores.

His attention for the news he read was less than scant. It is doubtful if he read more than the headlines, and these only with partial understanding. His mind was upon the beautiful woman in the adjacent apartment arraying herself with all the arts of a woman in love for the benefit of the man whose regard is alone worth while.

His eyes were smiling unconsciously; something of the keenness of his whole expression had become lost under their new expression. Dressed in the simple garb of civilization he had little about him, beyond the intense sunburn of his face, to remind one of the urgent young ranchman who had first planned the combination which was to develop into the famous Obar Ranch.

At the arrival of the mail he flung his paper aside. Then he picked up each letter in turn, examined the address, and set aside, in a separate pile, those addressed to his wife. Of his own there were only four, and, of these, only the one addressed in Bud's cumbersome handwriting interested him seriously.

Before opening it he pierced and lit a cigar. He felt that from its bulk the letter must contain important reports from the ranch, and, coming at such a time, would need the steadying influence of a cigar to enable him to give them the consideration necessary.

He lounged back in the big chair and leisurely tore open the envelope.

The door communicating with the principal bedroom opened noiselessly. Elvine entered the sitting-room, accompanied by that delightful rustle of silk which is quite irresistible to male ears. At all times a beautiful woman, just now she was incomparable.

A joy of life lit every feature, endowing her with an animation of expression unrecognizable in her a few short weeks ago. There was a melting lustre in her dark eyes, a gentleness in the smiling corners of her irresistible mouth. Her cheeks, even, seemed to have gained an added softness of contour. While the masses of dark hair revealed beneath her hat shone with the burnish of the raven's wing.

Her husband had turned on the instant. His cigar was flung aside. A moment later he was on his feet, and his arms, full of vital impulse, came near to destroying the perfection of her toilet.

The woman made no protest under the embrace. It told her so many things she wanted to know. It told her of the love she now so frankly desired. It told her, too, that the efforts on her toilet had not been ill-spent.

Presently Jeff stood back, holding her at arm's length, while his hungry eyes devoured every feature of the face that had taught him so much of the real meaning of life.

"Splendid—just splendid!" he exclaimed.

"My—gown?"

The smile was enticing. The man laughed out of the buoyancy of his heart.

"No—you!" he cried, leaning forward for the embrace she had invited.

A moment later he stood back again, and Elvine's eyes fell upon the mail lying upon the table.

"Some for me?" she inquired, moving toward it.

Jeff nodded. Then his smile died out. His gaze had fallen upon his own open letter. It was lying upon the table near the pile set aside for his wife, just where he had flung it down at the moment of her entrance.

"Quite a few," he said.

The unsmiling nature of his response had caught Elvine's attention. But she picked up her letters and glanced hastily through them.

A moment later her eyes came back to his face.

"Aren't you going to finish yours?" she inquired.

She was seeking the meaning of that suddenly banished smile.

It was almost with eagerness that the man caught at the opportunity.

"It's from Bud, and—I guess it's important. I've only two or three pages more."

He picked the letter up and sorted the sheets into order. Elvine watched him. She wanted to ask a dozen questions. But she put none of them.

"He's your partner," was all she said.

"Yep," he nodded, with his eyes on the pages.

Then Elvine voiced something of her real feelings of the moment.

"I just hate mail," she said, with what seemed unnecessary force, as she began to draw on her gloves. "It always worries me to death. I think it scares me. Makes me think of death, or disaster, or—or bills and things." She laughed. "Maybe it's my pessimistic nature makes me feel that way. When things are all sunshiny and fine, why, it kind of feels to me there are clouds around. Nasty, mean, hateful shadows lurking, full of—"

"Hell for some one, eh?"

There was a wry twist to the man's lips as he smiled his reply.

"Guess that's how it is with mine," he went on. "I'll just read these pages, and then we'll get going. Eh?"

The woman's watchful eye smiled assent and she continued to draw her gloves on. But her observation of him seemed to gather intensity the moment he became absorbed in the clumsy, unskilled handwriting.

The last vestige of his smile had gone. His fair brows had knitted in a troubled frown. He seemed to read eagerly but intently, absorbed to an unusual degree.

She realized the seriousness of that letter. And for some curious reason alarm supervened. He had spoken of it easily, but his manner of reading denied his spoken word.

The silent moments irked her. The rustle of the paper in his hands. A feeling of foreboding grew, a feeling she knew was foolish, but which at the same time was irresistible. She found herself speculating as to the contents of the letter. She strove to review all the possibilities which the great Obar Ranch could offer for disaster. And her mind drifted back over years to a memory that gave her not a shadow of comfort.

The last button of her gloves had been secured when the refolding of the letter came. Jeff deliberately, but abstractedly, returned it to its cover. His smile was scarcely a happy one when he finally looked up.

"I'm through, sweetheart," he said. "Shall we—?"

But Elvine's feelings would no longer be denied.

"Serious as all that?" she demanded. The next moment she would have given worlds to have been able to recall the words.

"I'm afraid it is—in a way."

Elvine had no option but to continue the subject. She spoke with real feeling.

"May I know, dear?" she appealed. "You see, Jeff, things often read worse than they are. Maybe I can help. I've a clearer head than you'd guess."

The man's cheeks flushed. He had distressed her, frightened her, and the thought of it annoyed him. He stepped toward her, his hands outheld. She responded, and her hands were caught in his firm warm clasp.

"Say, I'm just sorry. I surely am. Guess I've no sort of right scaring you. Anyway, there's nothing to be scared about. Just a bunch of rustlers—"

"Cattle thieves?"

The woman's whole expression had become transformed. The announcement had shocked her out of her self-possession. Her smile had fled. Her eyes were wide, and their dark depths were full of a horror that seemed quite uncalled for. Even her cheeks had lost their delicate bloom. Her gaze was held fast by the man's steady regard. It was almost a fascinated stare held under some powerful hypnotic influence.

The man was at a loss. But he promptly claimed the fault to himself.

"Don't just worry a thing, Evie," he cried, in real distress. "It don't amount to anything. And anyway you don't need to worry. We can deal with it. I best tell you right away. You see, it's their second play since I've been from home. Bud's feeling sore. First it was a great imported bull they shot up while they ran off his cows, and a dandy bunch of yearling prize stock. Now—now it's a swell bunch of fifty beeves that had been fattening for the buyers. The loss don't hurt. Oh, no, it's not that."

He paused. Somehow their hands fell apart, and, to the woman, now recovering herself, it was as though some shadow had thrust itself between them. She waited, vaguely troubled. Somehow speech for the moment had become impossible to her. She was thinking, thinking far back amidst scenes she had no desire to recall.

Her husband went on. His manner had lost all the contrition he had displayed at alarming her. It was abstracted. He too seemed to be thinking deeply, far away amidst scenes which afforded him only the deepest pain.

"I've just thought," he said. Then he raised one strong hand and passed it across his broad forehead. He drew a profound sigh. "Say, I wonder," he went on reflectively. "It's things Bud's said in his yarn. Suspicions. They brought up all sorts of queer things to my mind."

The smile he essayed was a hopeless failure. Then, in a moment, all doubt seemed to pass away and he spoke with quick, keen decision.

"I'll have to tell you, Evie. You'd sort of made me forget. These days have been the happiest I've ever known, and you've made 'em so. That's how I forgot to tell you of things I guess you ought to know."

But the woman before him had no desire for his present mood. She smilingly shook her head in a decided negative. The last thing she desired was anything in the nature of a confidence.

"Is there any need—now?" she asked. Then she smiled. "The stores are waiting."

But she had yet to learn the real character of the man whom she had married. She had yet to understand the meaning of the simple sobriquet "Honest Jeff," which Nan Tristram had long since bestowed upon him. He was not the man to be turned from a decision once taken. The decision on this occasion was arrived at through the depth of the passionate devotion which controlled his every thought. His love for Elvine made his purpose only the more irrevocable.

"I think they had best wait a shade longer," he said with a shadowy smile. "You see, Evie, I kind of figure there's things that matter more than just gathering in the fancy goods money'll buy—even for you. Guess I owe you most everything a man can give, the same as you feel toward me. That's how marriage—marriage like ours—seems to me. As far as I can make it there's not going to be a thing on my conscience toward you. I'd have told you this before, only—only you just drove it right out of my head with the sight of your beautiful face, the sound of your voice, which I just love, and the thought that you—you were to be my wife. You see," he went on simply, "I hadn't room in my head for anything else."

His manner was so firmly gentle that Elvine's protest melted before it. After all it was very sweet, and—and— She drew a chair forward and sat down. But her smile hid her real feelings. Confidences, confessions, even from a husband, were repugnant to her.

Jeff remained standing. He gazed for a few silent moments in the direction of the open window. The expression of his blue eyes suggested a deep, searching introspection. He might have been searching for an opening. Again, he might simply have been reviewing scenes which stirred his innermost soul with their horror and pain.

At last, however, Elvine made a half impatient movement. Instantly the blue eyes turned in her direction, and their expression startled her. They were full of a stony, passionless regard. Not for her, but inspired by the thought behind them. She shivered under their gaze and their impression upon her was never afterward obliterated.

"It's four years past now," he began, in a voice she scarcely recognized. "These rustlers brought it all back to me. Say, Evie, I had a twin brother, Ronald. Maybe that won't convey much. I sort of loved him—better than myself. That's all. He was a bit queer. I mean he just didn't care a heap for running along the main trail of things. He was apt to get all mussed up running around byways. Well, when Bud and I fixed up the Obar partnership, I was just crazy to hunt Ronny down, and hand him a share. Bud's a great feller, and I told him. I knew whereabouts the boy had staked out, and, figuring we'd earned a vacation, Bud and I set out to round him up, and hand him a piece which I guessed would keep him with me the rest of his life."

He paused. He drew a deep breath, and his eyes, hard as marble, had turned again in the direction of the window.

Elvine was held even against herself. The expression of his eyes, even more than the curious sharpness of his voice, troubled her, alarmed her.

"I'm not going to yarn more than necessary," he went on after a moment. "There isn't any need. I just want to give you the deadly facts. As I said, I knew his layout, where he was—supposed to be trapping pelts. Supposed. Bud had been raised in the district, so he acted scout. He made the location and found him. D'you know how?"

There was a restrained fierceness in the sharp demand.

The woman shook her head. Any word would have seemed out of place.

"Hanging by the neck to the bough of a tree."

"Jeff, don't!" the woman gasped.

But now there was a smile in the man's eyes. It was a terrible smile which drove every vestige of color from his wife's cheeks.

"I had to tell you," he cried harshly. "They hanged him for a cattle thief. He was one. Oh, yes. He was one. That's why I had to tell you."

The woman's eyes were wide with a sudden terror to which the man remained oblivious.

"But you said——"

"I said he was pelt hunting. So he'd told me. So I believed. But he wasn't. Say, he was a cattle rustler running a big gang who'd played hell with the district. He'd been running it for nigh five years. He'd

beaten 'em to a mush, all that time, till a reward was offered. A reward of ten thousand dollars. That fixed him. There was some one knew wanted that reward, and—got it."

There was a sudden movement in the room. Elvine had abruptly risen from her chair. She moved away. She crossed to the window, and stood with her back turned, and so had thrust herself into her husband's focus.

"It's—it's a terrible—dreadful story," came her faltering comment.

"Terrible? Dreadful?" The man emitted a sound that might have been a laugh. A shudder passed down the woman's back as it fell upon her ears. "But it's nothing to the reality, Evie. Oh, I've no sympathy for his crimes. I hate rustlers like the poison they are. But he was twin to me, and I loved him. It made no difference to me. You see, he was part of me. Now—now I only hope the good God'll let me come up with the man who took the price of his blood. For four years I've dreamed that way, and I guess it don't matter if it's fifty more. I'll never change. There's some one, somewhere, who's lower down than the worst cattle rustler ever lived."

There was no response as the man ceased speaking. Elvine had not stirred from her place at the window. The moments passed. Swift, poignant moments, in which two people were enduring an agony of recollection.

The man's relentless expression never changed. His eyes were gazing straight ahead. And though his vision was obstructed by the perfect contours of his wife's figure, he was gazing through her, and beyond her, upon a scene which had for its central interest the suspended figure of a man with his head lolling forward and sideways, and his dead eyes bulging from their sockets.

Elvine never stirred. Her gaze was upon the crowded thoroughfare beyond. But like her husband, she was gazing through and beyond. She was watching the tongues of flame as they licked up the resinous trunks and foliage of a great pine bluff.

At length it was the woman's voice broke the silence.

"Where—where did this all happen?"

The question was the verbal expression of a despairing hope. The voice, however, was steady.

"In the Cathills."

"The Lightfoot gang?"

"Yes. That's what he called it. You knew of them?"

There was a slight movement of the woman's shoulders. It was the faintest possible shrug.

"Everybody in Calthorpe heard of them."

Then she turned and faced him. The mask with which she confronted him was perfect. Her dark beauty was unimpaired by a sign of emotion. Even her cheeks had returned to their customary delicate bloom. Her eyes shone with a world of sympathy as she came toward him.

"Jeff, don't think of it all—now, dear. It's too, too dreadful. Guess I was wrong to let you tell me. I certainly was. It's past. It's done with. Nothing can ever bring him back to you. To dwell upon it, to think and feel that way, will only serve to embitter your life. Say, try, Jeff. I'll help you, dear. I will. Sure. Sure. Won't you try, for—my sake?"

The man took her hands in his. He drew her toward him. The strained expression of his eyes melted before her perfect beauty.

"I'll try, Evie," he said, without conviction. Then he kissed her.

After a while she looked up.

"And the stores, Jeff?"

The man smiled down in response.

"Sure—the stores."

CHAPTER XV

THE HOME-COMING

Six weeks of all she had ever hoped for, dreamed of, in the lean years of heart starvation. The complete devotion of a strong man, a man who held a place in the world she knew. Every luxury wealth could purchase at her disposal, even to satiation. Her every whim ministered to, and even anticipated. This was something of the ripe fruit literally heaped into Elvine's lap. She had longed for it, schemed for it, and Providence had permitted all her efforts complete success.

Now, with those six weeks behind her, she gazed upon the balance-sheet. She looked for the balance of happiness. To her horror it was blotted out, smudged out of all recognition. Oh, yes, the figures had been entered, but now they were completely obscured.

It was the last stage of her journey to her new home. It was a journey being made in the saddle. Their baggage, a large number of trunks loaded with the precious gleanings from the great stores during the honeymoon, had been sent on ahead by wagon. There was nothing, so far as could be seen, to rob the home-coming of its proper sense of delight. Yet delight was more than far off. Elvine was a prey to a hopelessness which nothing seemed able to relieve.

Summer was not yet over, although the signs of the coming fall were by no means lacking. The hard trail, like some carefully set out terra-cotta ribbon upon a field of tawny green, took them through a region of busy harvesting. The tractors and threshers were busily engaged in many directions. Great stacks of straw testified to the ample harvest in progress. Fall ploughing had already begun, and high-wheeled wagons bore their burden of produce toward the distant elevators. Then, too, human freight passed them, happy, smiling freight of old and young, whose sun-scorched faces reflected something of the joy of life and general prosperity prevailing.

A radiant sun looked down upon the scenes through which they passed. It was the wonderful ripening God almost worshipped of these people who lived by the fruits of the earth. Jeffrey Masters understood it all, and reveled in the pleasant senses it stirred. For he, too, lived by the fruits of the earth, although his harvest was garnered in the flesh of creature kind.

Elvine looked on with eyes that beheld but saw nothing of that which inspired her husband. Remembrance claimed her. Too well she remembered. And gladly would she have shut out such sights altogether, for more and more surely they crushed her already depressed spirits to a depth from which it seemed impossible to raise them.

Nor was her beautiful face without some reflection of this. Her smile was ready for the man at her side. She laughed and talked in a manner so care-free that he could never have suspected. But in repose, when no eyes were upon her, a lurking, hunted dread peered furtively out of her dark eyes, and the fine-drawn lines gathered about her shapely lips, and seriously marred the serenity of their youthful contours.

She had one purpose now, one only. It was to ward off the blow which she knew might fall at any moment when she reached her new home. The threat of it was with her always. It drove her to panic in the dark of night. It left her watchful and fearful in the light of day. At all times the memory of her husband's words dinned through her brain like the haunt of some sickening melody.

"Now I only hope the good God'll let me come up with the man who took the price of his blood."

It had been spoken coldly. It had been spoken with an intensity of bitterness that left an impression as hard as flint. The tone had set her shuddering. Then the look in those cold blue eyes when at last she had turned confronting them. No, there had been no mercy in them. No mercy, she told herself, for—anybody.

At that moment she had known that the earth could hold no future peace for her. She felt that Fate had passed sentence on her, and she was powerless to stay its execution. Her husband demanded vengeance upon the man who had accepted the price of his brother's blood.

For the moment she had been stunned. Then had risen up in her a desperate courage. She would fight. She would fight for herself, she would fight for the love which all unbidden, all undesired, had come to her. Then, in the end, if defeat should overtake her, she would, yes, she could, submit to the punishment his hand should mete out to her.

Strangely, from that moment her love for this man seemed to increase a thousandfold. He grew in her

heart a towering colossus of worship. The primitive in her bowed down before his image ready to yield to his lightest word, while, by every art, she was ready to cajole and foster his love.

It was all she knew, understood. It was the woman in her who possessed no other weapons of defense. She loved him, she desired him, then nothing was too small to cling to with the wild hope of the drowning. When the day came that he should turn and rend her soul she could submit. But until that day she would cling to every straw that offered.

While the scenes through which they were passing preoccupied the man, the silence of the wide plains left Elvine to her fears. The great breadth of the world about her added to her hopelessness. And after a silence which had become unduly protracted, she took refuge in talk for which she had no real desire.

"It's beautiful, but—oppressive," she said, and the words were the inspiration of genuine thought.

But the man was like one who has spent a world of love and devotion upon carving a beautiful setting and is now about to complete his work by securing in place the crowning jewel. He had no room for any feeling of oppression. He shook his head.

"Say, Evie," he cried, "I just can't allow you the word 'oppressive.' I just can't. Look—look right out there toward the hills we're making. Take the colors as they heap up to the distance. Every shade, I guess, from green to purple. It makes me feel good. It gives me room to stretch myself. It sort o' sweeps away a whole heap of fusty city smells, and gives us something a deal more worth breathing. It's a man's place. And it's full of man's work. Guess Providence got busy an' set it all out for us. Providence guessed we'd have to use it. But Providence didn't just guess how far crazy human nature really was. She didn't foresee we'd gather around in the musty dump-holes we call cities. She didn't figure on our tastes for the flesh-pots, and the indulgence of the senses she'd handed us. But then Providence knows her power to fix us right when she feels that way." Then he spread out his arms with an inexpressible suggestion of longing. "Say, I'm crazy—plumb crazy to get the first peek at that dandy home I've had fixed for you."

The woman's eyes sought her husband's with a smile that was a caress.

"You're good to me, Jeff," she said. Then she added: "So good." Her smile deepened. "You'd hand me the world with—with a fence around it, if I asked. Why? Why are you like that?"

It was the love in her seeking reassurance. Nor was she disappointed.

"Why?" The man laughed. And the sound of it was good to hear. It was deep, and seemed to come from the depths of his soul. His blue eyes shone with a world of devotion. "Guess I love you—just that," he said. Then he pointed at the distant hills. "I can't tell you all I feel, Elvie," he said, "but get those hills. See them. There, that peak, sitting right up over its fellows, with a cap of snow on it I don't guess the sun could ever melt. That's thousands of feet up. I'd say man's foot was never set there, nor bird's, nor animal's either. Well, if that peak was a throne it 'ud give you pleasure to occupy, why, I guess I'd just go the limit to have you sit there."

Elvine was gazing at the mountain crest, but she was not thinking of it. She was thinking of the love which the extravagant words expressed, and she was wondering at the bigness of it. She was caught in its power, and it thrilled her with an even greater appreciation of her danger. What would be the result upon such a nature as this man's when—he knew?

"I believe you would," she said, her eyes coming back to the strong, flushed face. Then she added: "Now."

"Now?"

There was a quick lifting in the man's fair brows. There was incredulity in his tone. To him it seemed impossible, the implied doubt in her final word.

"I don't change easy, Elvie," he protested. "I kind of get things hard. It's my way, and it's no doing of mine. Life's a full-sized proposition, and I don't guess we can see far through it. But I can't imagine a thing that could come before you in my thoughts."

"I'd like to think that. I'd like to feel that," Elvine returned. She was smiling up into his eyes. "You see, Jeff, I was kind of thinking. We're young now. We've been together just six weeks. Maybe you'll get used to me later. Men do get used to women till they become sort of part of the furniture. Oh, I guess their love goes right on, but—but they wouldn't feel like starting in to fence in the North Pole, or—or hitch up Niagara to their wife's buggy just because she fancied that way. Say, Jeff, when I lose your

love I just lose everything in the world. You—you won't ever let me lose it, will you?"

Jeff shook his head, and smiled in the confidence of feelings.

"Don't ever talk that way. Don't ever think like that," he urged her. Then, as their horses ambled side by side up the last gentle incline before they dropped down to the great plain of the Rainbow Hill Valley, which was the setting of the Obar Ranch, he drew nearer and reached out one arm and gently encircled her waist. "Guess you're feeling like me just now, Evie. Do you know what I mean? We're getting home. Home—yours and mine. Well, say, that home is in my mind now, and it's full to the brim of thoughts of you. You're in it—everywhere. You're part of it. You're just part of me. I can't see any future without you. It don't seem to me there could be any. I don't doubt. I guess the thought of it don't scare me a thing. Maybe with you it's different. Maybe you're scared such happiness can't last. But I tell you it can—it will. You're with me now and always, and I can't see a shadow that could come between us."

"None? No, none, none!"

The woman forced conviction into her final denial, and, for a moment, she permitted herself to yield to the reassuring embrace. Then she started up and released herself.

"Oh, Jeff!" she cried. "I just pray all the time that nothing shall ever rob me of your love. Night and day I pray that way. If I were to lose you, I—I think nothing else would much matter."

The man smiled with supreme confidence. They had reached the top of the hill, and he set his horse into a canter.

"You're just going to live right on—for me, sweetheart," he cried. "Be yourself. Just yourself. The frank, honest woman I know and love. If ever the shadows you fear come to worry us, they'll have to be of your own creating. We have nothing to fear from the future, nothing at all. We'll just drive right on down the clear trail of life. It's only in the byways there's any ugly dumps. Look!" He suddenly flung out one arm, pointing ahead where the great Obar plains rolled away toward the hills below them. "That's the ranch. There. That one there is Bud's homestead, and the other to the right's your—our home. Say, it's good to see—mighty good!"

Nan gazed upon the result of her labors and decided that it was good. Bud was observing her in his unobtrusive way. They were together in the new parlor of the home which Jeff had had reconstructed under Nan's most careful supervision.

The girl had put forth her greatest effort, greater even than she herself realized, for it had been inspired by a desire that Jeff and his wife should never realize the pain and bitter disappointment she had endured.

Now, as she surveyed each detail in her final tour of inspection, she convinced herself that nothing, nothing she could think of had been forgotten. Even the city-bred Elvine could find no fault with any detail of it.

She and Bud were standing side by side rather like two children gazing in awed wonder at some undreamed of splendor suddenly discovered in a familiar playground, every square foot of which they had believed themselves familiar with.

"I—don't think I've forgotten a thing," Nan said, in a tone subdued by her weight of responsibility.

"Not a thing," agreed Bud, with a perfect disregard for any consequences his statement might have.

He was utterly unchanged. He had made no preparation to receive the bride and bridegroom in their home. He was just the cattleman nothing could change him from. His gray flannel shirt was agape over his sunburned chest. His leather chaps creaked as he moved, his vicious spurs clanked. Then, too, the curling iron-gray hair of his bared head was innocent of all extra combing. With Nan it was different. She had striven to rid herself of every sign of the prairie to which she belonged. She was dressed with consummate care. Every jealous feeling of the woman in her had cried out for her rights, and those rights were that her successful rival should be unable to sneer at or pity her.

The result was a delightful picture that filled Bud's heart with admiration. And for perhaps the thousandth time he silently anathematized the blind folly of the man who had wilfully cast his eyes in another direction.

Nan seated herself in one of the luxuriously inviting armchairs, while Bud insinuated his huge form

on to the polished surface of a large central table.

"You know, Daddy, I sort of feel like a feller who's guessed the right answer to a question he hadn't a notion of. Maybe you won't get just how I mean." The smile in her pretty eyes changed to a deep seriousness. "You know when I was a little teeny girl all mud and overall, that never could keep me within measurable distance of being clean, you used to talk to me just as if you were speaking your thoughts aloud. Guess it was about the time poor Momma died, or maybe soon after. I kind of remember you were squatting Indian fashion on the veranda of our shack, I'd been busy in the hopes of drowning myself in a half dry mud hole, and had mostly succeeded in absorbing more of the dirt than seemed good for a single meal. Guess I must have started to cry, and you'd reached out and grabbed me, and fetched me up on your lap, and were handing me a few words you reckoned to cheer me up with. Do you remember them, my Daddy? I don't guess you do. I didn't till a while later, and then I didn't figure out their meaning till I went to school. You said, 'Tears is only for kiddies an' grown women. Kiddies mostly cry because they don't understand, an' grown women because they do. Anyway, neither of 'em need to cry, if they only get busy an' think a while. Ther' ain't a thing in this life calls for a tear from a living soul, not even a stomachful of moist mud, 'cos, you see, ther's Someone who fixes everything the way it should go, an' it's the right way. So we'll jest give you a dose of physic to help boost the show along.'" She glanced round her with smiling eyes at the tastefully arrayed furnishings of the parlor. "This has been the dose of physic I gave myself, and—and I feel better for it. I had the mud, and, why, the tears came just as they did before. Maybe if I'd been able to think right I wouldn't have shed them. But I just couldn't think right then. But I've thought since, and the physic's helped me. Do—do you think he'll like it all?"

The contemplative gaze of her father was full of gentle amusement.

"Sure he will—if he ain't changed any."

Nan shook her head.

"Jeff couldn't change. Even marriage couldn't change Jeff. You see, Jeff's got notions of life which are just part of him. Maybe he'll soften some in ways and things, but his notions'll remain, and they'll stand right out in all he does."

But Bud remained without conviction.

"A good woman can set a big man hunting a halo," he said. "An' I allow he's li'ble to find it, if she don't weaken in her play. But a bad woman—why, I guess a bad woman can send him down quicker than most things in life, once she tucks herself into a corner of his life depot."

"But Jeff would never fall in love with a bad woman." Nan protested swiftly, an odd little pucker of anxiety gathering between her brows. "I—I'm sure his wife's a good woman."

"An' I ain't any sort o' reason to think diff'rent."

"But you do think—that way."

Nan's understanding of her father was wide. It could scarcely have been otherwise, since he had been her sole companion for so many years.

But Bud was to be drawn no further.

"Ther' ain't no accounting fer how folks think when they ain't out on a joy trip," he grumbled, as he moved across to the open window, and stood gazing out over the trail from the northeast. Then all further discussion was abandoned in a small wave of excitement. He was pointing down the trail.

"Say, they're coming right along now. An'—"

But Nan was at his side. Something of the color had faded out of her cheeks, and she clung to her father's arm as she gazed along the narrow winding road. Her breath was coming rapidly. For all her courage, now that the moment of great trial had arrived, she felt very weak, very helpless.

Bud understood. He released his arm from her nervous clasp, and placed it gently about her shoulders. "It's Jeff setting the gait," he said. "I'd say he's crazy to get home." Then he added as though to himself: "Guess I'd as lief seen her on the lead."

But Nan gave no heed to his words. The soul of the girl was in her eyes, which were full of a deep terror and yearning. She had schooled herself for this meeting How she had schooled herself! And now it seemed beyond her powers to live up to that schooling.

Never for a moment did she withdraw her gaze. It was held fascinated, perhaps against her will. They came on, riding at an almost racing gallop, and finally drew up with their horses fighting against the restraining bits.

Bud and Nan were on the veranda. Bud's attitude was one of almost shy reserve. Nan was smiling a welcome such as a moment before would have seemed quite impossible. But her schooling had finally triumphed in the crisis, and her loyalty to her generous love had vanquished every baser feeling. It was her hands which clasped those of the city woman before she sprang lightly from the saddle. It was her steady voice spoke the first words of welcome.

"Say, you sure must be tired with your journey," she said. "Come right in to—your new home."

Bud had averted his eyes the moment she began to speak. He could not witness that greeting. His courage was unequal to it. Instead he greeted Jeff in his own fashion, as though nothing unusual had occurred.

"Nan's got everything through for you same as you asked. After you've eaten, why, I guess we'll need to make some talk. Things have been moving, boy. Guess we'll need to get busy."

Nan had taken Elvine into the house, and one of the barn-hands was waiting to take the horses. Jeff leaped from the saddle. Once in the company of his partner, with all the atmosphere of the world to which he belonged about him, all the excitement of his home-coming seemed to drop from him. He even seemed to have forgotten that this was the final great event of his new life—the bringing of his bride to the home he had prepared for her. But Nan's estimate of him was right. Jeff's was a nature that could not be changed, even by his marriage. His love, his marriage, Elvine; these things were, in reality, merely episodes. Delightful episodes. Before all things his work claimed him.

"You mean the—rustlers?"

The two men were facing each other on the wide veranda. The trailing wild cucumber vines tempered the blaze of sunlight and left the atmosphere of the veranda cool. Jeff mopped the beads of perspiration from his forehead under his wide hat, which had been thrust back on his head.

"That's so." Bud's eyes were following the horses as they moved away in the wake of the barn-hand.

"It's pretty bad?"

"An' gettin' worse."

Bud's eyes came back to his partner's face. They gazed steadily into it.

"Can't you tell me—now? Evie's in there with Nan," he added significantly.

Bud shook his head.

"It's a big yarn, an' needs time. But——" He paused, searching the other's face.

"Go right on."

Jeff read through the pause. He waited, his lips firmly set.

Bud cleared his throat.

"I've got to say these things later if I don't say 'em now, Jeff, boy. What I need to tell 'll make you sore, an' I don't guess it's the best sort o' welcome making you sore at your home-comin'. It's the worst of the yarn anyway, an' I kind o' feel it's best spitting out the worst right away. We're up against a gang, a slick gang, organized right, same as——"

He hesitated. But the younger man seemed to have no similar scruples.

"The gang my brother ran."

Bud nodded.

"Some of 'em got clear away—that time."

"And you figure after giving things time to get forgotten they've gathered up a crowd of toughs and started in on this district?"

"It seems that way."

"How?"

"System," Bud declared sharply. "They're takin' a steady toll of us, an' other folks in the district. We trailed 'em to the hills, an'—lost 'em. Say, if we don't handle 'em it means—"

"Something like ruin for the—Obar."

Jeff's manner was shorn of any equivocation. He spoke with almost ruthless force, but the coldness of tone was incomparable with the steely light in his blue eyes.

After a moment's silence he turned away. He stood looking back over the trail he had just left, and Bud regarded his keen profile, waiting. He felt there was nothing more for him to say at the moment.

At last the other turned in his quick, decided fashion as the sound of the women's voices reached them from within the parlor.

"Will you stop and eat with us?" he asked bluntly.

Bud shook his head.

"Not now, Jeff, boy. This is your home-coming."

"Yes. Well, I'll get around your place to-morrow morning, Bud. We can make big talk then."

CHAPTER XVI

THE RANCHMAN

The cool night breeze died out under the increasing heat of the early sun. Away to the west gossamer melted upon the hillsides. The mountain tops stood out under their eternal snows, above the lower cloud belts. The summer dews on thirsty foliage dried up before their mission was completed. But the wide prairie world stood up refreshed to withstand the day's heat yet to come.

Elvine Masters was on the veranda of her new home gazing after the receding figure of her husband, who had just left her to discuss with his partner those vital things which they had touched upon at the moment of his arrival yesterday.

Everywhere about her the busy life of the ranch was stirring. Inside the house the maids were at work garnishing the home which Nan had already left spotless. The corrals, which stood out from the shelter of a wood bluff, were claiming attention from several cow-hands. Sounds reached her from the region of the bunkhouse, away to the right. Then at the barns, and other ranch buildings, the voices of men implied the work that was going forward in their region. Away in the distance isolated horsemen were moving about in the apparently aimless fashion of all fence riders, while, dotted about, small bands of cattle proceeded leisurely with the endless task of endeavoring to satisfy the craving of insatiable appetites.

The woman's farewell smile had left her eyes cold as she surveyed the scene. There was no sign of the expressed delight with which she had followed Nan at her first inspection of her new home. The recollection of it had even left her. Only a certain sense of the irony of it all occupied her. That, and a painful wonder as to when the dread under which she labored would materialize into the shattering of every hope within her heart.

Presently a "hand" appeared leading a saddle horse. He was a youngster, a "barn-hand" who only worked around cattle in times of pressure. But he possessed all the air of a cowpuncher, which he ultimately purposed to become. Elvine watched his leisurely approach, and remembered the days when she would have saddled her own pony.

The boy displayed no sign of deference. He stood before her chewing a straw with all the unconcern of his kind, his arm linked through the reins, and his hands thrust into the tops of his trousers. He was probably not more than thirteen years of age, but he possessed all the independence bred in the calling of the cattle world.

Elvine broke in upon his meditative curiosity as he surveyed the new mistress of the ranch.

"What's your name, boy?" she demanded, in a tone of authority.

But the youngster was not to be startled out of his leisurely regard. An amiable smile upon his unclean face was the preliminary result of the question.

"Pete, ma'am," he replied after a moment. "An' around this bum lay-out I mostly reckon to have to do the stunts other folks don't notion."

"Chore boy?"

"Wal, mebbe that's how I figger on the pay roll. I allow I ain't allus called that way."

The smile had left his eyes. He was talking with the frank candor of one unused to being taken notice of. There was a deep curiosity in the look with which he surveyed her. He had already been told that the boss's wife was a "swell piece," and his youthful mind was eager to verify the opinion.

"How do they call you then?" Elvine took the reins and threw them back over the horse's head, and examined the cinching of the saddle with the touch of experience.

"Mostly a 'mule-headed bussock,' ma'am. Sometimes I allow they change it to 'slap-sided hoboe,' or somethin' more fancy. But that's jest the ignorant bums that ain't got no more learnin' than'll let 'em lose their cents reg'lar at 'draw.' Ther's others who don't jest use langwidge—only their feet. Then ther's the foreman, Lal Hobhouse. Mebbe you ain't acquainted yet—you bein' new around these parts. He's a fine bully feller till he gits mad. Then he's mean, ma'am. Guess he's most as mean as a skunk. He needs watching if you want to get on a racket. I don't guess he ever luffed in his life. Not even at a cirkis. Yep. He's a holy terror when he's mad. He cowhided me t'other day so I ain't sat right in a week. If he was to start in to fix you that way, why——"

"I don't guess he'll cowhide me," said Elvine quickly, as she swung herself into the saddle. "I'm not likely go on a racket." Then she leaned forward over the horn of the saddle, and smiled down into the unclean face gawking up at her. "How'd you fancy looking after my horses and saddle and things? I mean just look after them for me, and nothing else?"

The boy's eyes lit.

"Bully!" he cried eagerly. "That way I wouldn't have to wash lousy clothes for the bunkhouse. Would I? Then they wouldn't be able to fire rocks at me when I sassed 'em. Bully!"

"I'll speak to Lal Hobhouse about it."

The hope died out of the boy's eyes.

"You won't tell him wot I said, ma'am?" he pleaded. "You see, I was jest settin' you wise, you bein' new around here. It ain't friendly not to put folks wise, is it? He's a bully feller sure, ma'am, an' I ain't got a word agin him. I hain't reely. I wouldn't 'a' sed a word if I'd tho't——"

"Don't you worry, boy," Elvine cried, as she turned her horse about. "I wouldn't give you away. I wouldn't give anybody away—now. You see, you never know how things of that sort can come back on you."

The obvious relief in the boy's dirty face was more than sufficient to bring back the smile to Elvine's eyes, which, for the moment, had become almost painfully serious. But as she rode away leaving the boy gawking after her she quickly returned to the mood which had only been broken by the interlude.

It was an interlude not easily forgotten, however. It had brought home to her a fresh revelation. And it had come in the boy's final appeal not to give him away. A fierce sense of shame surged through her heart. It communicated itself to her eyes, and displayed itself further in the deep flush on her beautiful cheeks. Yet its reason must have remained obscure to any observer.

She rode on urging her pony to a gait which set him reaching at his bit. She sat her saddle in a fashion which belonged solely to the prairie. The long stirrups and straight limb. The lightness, and that indescribable something which suggests the single personality of horse and rider.

She had no intention of returning to the ranch house until the noonday meal, and meanwhile it was her purpose to explore something of the vast domain which her husband controlled.

It was curious that her purpose should lead her thus. For somehow all sense of delight in these possessions had passed from her. At one time the thought of his thousands upon thousands of acres had filled her with a world of desire, and pride that she was to share in them. But not now. With every furlong she covered her mood depressed, and her sense of dread increased. She felt as though she

were surveying from a great distance the details of the prize she had coveted, but the possession of which was denied her. This—this was the wealth her husband had bestowed upon her, she told herself bitterly, and some greater power, some fatalistic power, purposed to snatch it from her before it reached her hands.

She rode straight for the rising land of the foothills. It almost seemed as though she were drawn thither by some magnetic influence. She had formed no definite decision to travel that way. Perhaps it was the result of a subconscious realization of the monotony of the rolling tawny grass-land on the flat. The distant view of grazing cattle failed to break it. The occasional station shack and corral. The hills rose up in sharp contrast and great variety. There were the woodland bluffs. There were little trickling streams. There was that sense of the wild beyond. Perhaps it was all this. Or perhaps it was the call of a memory, which drew her beyond her power of resistance.

She had long since left all beaten trails, and her way took her over the wiry growth of seeding grass. She had arrived at the bank of a narrow reed-grown creek, which meandered placidly in the deeps of a trough between two waves of grass-land. It had been her intention to cross it, but the marshy nature of its bed deterred her. So she rode on until the rising ground abruptly mounted and merged into the two great hills which formed the portals through which the stream had found an outlet from its mountain prison to the freedom of the plains beyond.

For a moment she paused at the edge of a woodland bluff which mounted the slope to her right, and crowned the hillock with a thatch of dark green pine foliage. She gazed up with questioning eyes. And the familiarity of the tattered foliage left her without enthusiasm for its beauty. Then she gazed ahead along the course of the stream. And it was obvious that she was in some doubt as to whether she should still proceed.

After a moment of deep consideration she lifted her reins and her horse moved forward. Then, suddenly, he was still again, held with a tightened rein. The soft but rapid plod of galloping hoofs came out of the distance. It was coming toward her from the hills, and an unaccountable but overwhelming desire to beat a hasty retreat took possession of her.

But the action never matured. She was still facing the hills when a horseman emerged from a narrow pathway which split up converging bluffs. He was riding at a great pace, and was heading straight for the bank of the river where she had paused.

Elvine remained where she was. She made no effort either to proceed or retreat. Somehow curiosity had caught her up and left her with no other emotion. She regarded the stranger with searching eyes. At the moment his features were too indistinct to obtain an impression. But his general appearance left nothing to question. He was a cow-hand without a doubt. His open shirt and loose waistcoat, his chapps, and the plaited rawhide rope which hung from the horn of his saddle. These were sufficient evidence. But for the rest, the wide flapping brim of his hat left her no estimate of the face beneath it.

He came on. He even swerved his horse on one side as though to pass her without pausing. Elvine's pony stirred restlessly in a desire to join the stranger. Then, in a flash, the whole position was changed. The man reined up his horse with a heavy "yank" which almost flung it on its haunches, and a pair of fierce black eyes were staring into the woman's face with a light of startled recognition shining in their depths.

"You!" he cried, without any other form of greeting. And into the word he flung a world of harsh meaning.

Elvine's reply was a blank stare, which had in it not a fraction of the recognition he displayed. Not for an instant did her regard waver. It was full of a haughty displeasure at the nature of the greeting. Nor did she deign reply.

The man sat for a moment as though incredulous. Then he thrust his hat back from his head, displaying the brutal ugliness of his face. Elvine observed the coarse moustache, the lean cheeks, the low forehead and vicious eyes. The lips were hidden behind their curtain of hair.

"Say, kind o' fergotten—ain't yer?" he demanded. Then the woman's perfectly fitting riding suit seemed to attract his attention. "Gee," he exclaimed, "wher' you get that dandy rig?" But even as he spoke a change in his expression came when he recognized the horse Elvine was riding. Suddenly he raised one hand and smoothed the tangle of moustache with a downward gesture. It was a gesture implying complete lack of comprehension. "Well, I'm darned!"

"You'll be more than that if you don't pass on to your work, whatever that may be."

The coldness of the woman's tone matched the light in her dark eyes.

Every ounce of her courage had been summoned to meet the situation.

But the man displayed not the slightest regard for the threat. The incredulity of his expression changed. And the change was subtle. It was perfectly apparent, however, to the woman. And she nerved herself for what was to come. An evil smile grew in the piercing black eyes, as the man regarded the beauty which, with him, was a long stored up memory.

"Say, when d'you quit Orrville way?" he cried derisively. "Maybe you hadn't a heap o' use for it when your man, Bob, got shot up. Maybe you didn't need to stop around after you got your hands on the dollars I guess he left lying around. Say, it beats hell meetin' you this way."

But Elvine was no longer laboring under the shock of the encounter. She had no longer any thought of the remoteness of the spot, or the obviously brutish man with whom she was confronted. She set about dealing with the situation with a desperate courage. "I don't know if you're mad, or only—drunk," she said, with icy sharpness. "But you're on my husband's land, and I suppose you work for him. What's your name? I need to know it so I can tell him of your insolence. Jeffrey Masters is not the man to allow his wife to be insulted with impunity by one of his cattlemen. It will be my business to see to it that he is told—everything. You were riding that way." She pointed the way she had come. "I s'pose toward the ranch house. Let me pass!"

She moved her horse as though to proceed. There was no sign of fear in her. No haste. At that moment her dignity was superb. Every word she had spoken had been calculated, and the sting she had conveyed with her information had not been overdone. She looked for its effect, which came with a dramatic change in the man's whole demeanor. His evil face lost its smile, and, in a moment, he had bared his bristling head. But even as Elvine beheld these things she understood the curious expression which he seemed powerless to banish from his ferretty eyes.

"You're Mrs. Masters, ma'am?" the fellow cried. "Say, ma'am, I'm just kind o' knocked all of a mush. I hadn't a notion. I truly hadn't. Guess I took you for a leddy I kind o' remember up Orrville way. An' the likeness is jest that o' two beans. I'm beat, ma'am, beat sore. I wouldn't have offered you insult for a farm. I'm sorry. I'd heerd the boss's wife was around, but I didn't figger I——" Then he replaced his hat, and made as though to pass on. But he remained where he was. "Y'see, I was ridin' in about last night. We lost another bunch. On'y ten cows and their calves, but I had to make a report."

"Another raid?"

In a moment the woman caught him up. And her attitude had taken on a calculated change.

The man observed her interest, and took prompt advantage of it.

"Yep. An' things are lookin' pretty bad. This gang's jest workin' how, an' when, an' wher' they fancy. If the boss 'ud on'y listen to me he'd leave no stock around the outstations. It's devilish luck, ma'am, that's what it is—devilish."

Elvine remained lost in thought, and the man's narrow eyes never left the profile she presented to him. When she turned to him again, however, his whole attitude was one of bland humility.

"You can ride back to your station," she declared, with perfect authority. "I'll convey your report. What's your name? You didn't give it me."

"Sikkem. Sikkem Bruce. I'm out at Spruce Crossing, back ther' in the hills. It's jest a piece. Mebbe three miles, wher' this stream makes a joining with the Gophir Creek. Say——"

"Well?" Elvine inquired as he paused.

"You ain't makin' no complaint to the boss, ma'am? It was jest a darn fool mistake of mine. It surely was. I ken see it was. I can't figger how I mistook you fer the lady I was thinkin' of. Y'see, she was no account anyway. She was jest one o' them vampire sorts who'd sell her soul fer a price, yep, and sell any man's life that way, too. Y'see, that's how I come to know her. She handed over a bunch o' guys, scallawags, sure, who didn't need nothin' better, fer the price o' ten thousand dollars. She corralled the information, an' drove her weak-livered man to do the lousy work. I tell you, ma'am, a woman who gits that low is pretty mean. You was sure right to figger on an insult when I guessed you was that 'piece.' But I didn't mean it that way, I sure didn't."

The marble coldness of Elvine's face as she listened to the man's words gave no indication of any feeling behind it. At the end, however, she forced a smile to her lips.

"You can forget it," she said. Then she added deliberately: "I shall not inform my husband."

"Thank you, ma'am. Then I guess I'll get right on back—if you'll carry in the report. Y'see, we're huntin' the trail. That-a-way I'll be able to join up with the boys."

"Yes."

The man hesitated as though waiting for her to depart first, but as she made no movement, and offered no further word, he was forced to the initiative. With an astonishing deference, which, perhaps, was even too elaborate, he wheeled his horse about and rode off.

Elvine watched him until he was swallowed up by the narrow pathway between the bluffs, then she turned back and rode slowly homeward.

But the face which was now turned down the river was no longer the face which had confronted Sikkem Bruce. It was ghastly. It was the face of a soul-tortured woman.

"She was jest one of them vampire sorts who'd sell her soul fer a price, yes, an' sell any man's life that way, too."

The words, even the tones of the man's voice dinned in her brain, and she knew that the legions of Fate had appeared upon a fresh horizon.

CHAPTER XVII

THE CALL TO ORRVILLE

The windows were wide open. Voices from within the parlor reached Nan. She was waiting on the veranda. Waiting for the long council of men-folk to reach its conclusion. She had elected to remain outside. She knew that the future well-being of the Obar Ranch was being considered by men whose sole regard that well-being was. And somehow the woman in her demanded that in all the vital affairs of life it was the will of the men-folk which should rule.

But her self-denial was strained to breaking as the interminable minutes grew, and, at last, she abandoned her principles to her woman's curiosity, and slipped into the room. She knew well enough that none of those present would resent her intrusion. And, anyway, it was hard to stand by when her whole interest was absorbed in the decisions to be arrived at.

She passed round the room and took up a position on the arm of her father's chair. No one spoke to her. Scarcely an eye turned in her direction. And something of the impressiveness of it all caught the girl's imagination.

There was the dear familiar room with its simple furnishing, and its poignant associations. It was part of her life. It was certainly part of her father's and Jeff's. Then there was the warm sunlight pouring in through the open windows. It lit the tanned, strong faces of the men, and searched the weak spots in their toil-worn equipment. There was not a weak face among them. And Nan felt comfort in the thought that theirs was the decision.

The face of Jay Pendick, their own headman, with its small, alert dark eyes reflected the intentness of his mind. His capacity had been tried over and over again in his long years of service. Then Lal Hobhouse, the best-hated man on the countryside for his ruthless genius in obtaining work from those under him, and the driving force of Jeff's side of the partnership. Her father, wise and silent, except for his heavy breathing. And lastly Jeff, full of a hard determination to beat the game in which he was engaged.

So keen was the interest of the gathering that Bud alone was smoking. But then Bud regarded tobacco as a necessary adjunct to soundness of judgment.

He slipped an arm about Nan's waist as she took up her position at his side.

Jeff was seated at the centre table, a position strongly reminiscent to the girl of a smaller gathering some four years back, when he had occupied the position of leadership in the enterprise which had had such successful results for them all. Jay was poised upon the edge of a small chair which suggested immediate peril under his forceful and scarcely elegant methods when discussing the doings of rustlers, and imparting his opinion upon all and sundry of their class. Lal disdained all parlor attitude.

He was squatting against the edge of the table without the least consideration for its somewhat trifling powers of endurance. But Jeff was talking, and Nan's whole attention was swiftly caught and held by the man whose words and actions were at all times irresistible to her.

He was talking slowly and clearly with that shadow of a drawl which was his way when his decision was arrived at.

"Say, it's as clear as don't matter we're up against an experienced and organized proposition," he said. "I don't guess this is any kind of scallawag outfit of toughs which just get around and duff a bunch, and hit the trail for safety till the froth they've raised dies down again. It's Orrville repeating itself." He paused thoughtfully. His eyes were regarding the table before him. When he raised them again they were full of a peculiar light which shone in Bud's direction. "Ther's features in the game carry a parallel to that play, and I guess they point the fact that the fellers of that gang who got away at their round-up have got around this region now, and figure to carry on the same play right here. You'll get that, Bud—sure." Bud nodded. "Well, it's up to us," Jeff went on, as though the other's agreement had left his course of action clear. "Maybe ther's States Marshalls around, and a pretty bunch of deputies lying behind Sheriff Hank Killick, but there never was an official gang these folk couldn't beat a mile. Guess they're not duffing the private property of Hank Killick, or any of his boys. We best get busy our own way, which is the way Dug McFarlane took nearly five years to dream out."

His blue eyes had grown colder and harder while he talked. There was a bite, too, in the manner in which he referred to the doings in Orrville of four years ago. There was a curious curl to his firm lips, which, to Nan's mind, suggested a painful smile. And she disliked it. She disliked his whole manner, which, just now, was none of the Jeff she had always known. Bud read deeper. And that which he read carried him back to an unforgettable scene in the Cathills, when a twin stood gazing upon its other half, hanging by the neck dead under the shade of a wide-spreading tree.

"It's up to us to set up a reward, Bud," Jeff went on, in the same passionless fashion. "A big reward. We've got to make it so some amateur Judas is ready to sell his friends. It'll cost us a piece, but it's the way to fix things. And anyway it's going to be worth it, sure. I allow we'll need to hand out the story of reward good. It's got to reach this gang itself. An' if I guess right, and there's toughs from Orrville way running this lay-out, why, they aren't li'ble to have forgotten what happened that time. We'll break the gang, or—we'll get 'em."

There was something unrelenting, and even vicious, in the manner in which he gripped the pencil in his hand and dug the pointed lead and crushed it against the surface of the table. Nan drew a deep sigh of relief as he finished speaking, and turned gladly as her father removed his pipe and cleared his throat.

"An' the reward. How much?" he questioned.

The answer flashed back at him like the slash of a knife.

"Ten thousand dollars!"

In that answer Jeff's voice was unrecognizable to Nan. His whole expression, too, seemed to have undergone some subtle change. She sat groping for the meaning of it all, and somehow regretted she had not remained out on the veranda.

Bud inclined his head and replaced his pipe in corner of his mouth.

"It goes," he declared. Then he lumbered out of his chair. "That all?" he inquired. And by his manner and tone Nan knew that he, too, had been affected by the things which had troubled her.

"Not quite."

Jeff turned on his own foreman. He had lost none his intensity.

"That reward goes," he said sharply. "Get the exact amount. Ten thousand dollars. Not a cent more or less. Hand it out everywhere. Meanwhile I'll see to it the notices are printed, and we'll have 'em set up wherever the eyes of these scum are likely to get peeking around." Then he emitted a sound like a laugh, but there was no mirth in his eyes. Nor in his manner. "We'll locate the best trees for a hanging, and we'll set 'em up there."

Nan moved over to an open window as the two headmen took their departure. Bud had taken up a position against the cold iron stove. Jeff alone retained his seat, during the few silent moments which followed.

With the departure of the men, however, he looked up from a letter he had withdrawn from his

pocket.

"Say, Bud," he said without emotion, "guess the Presidency of the Western Union's going to claim me right away. I'll need to make Orrville right off."

"Orrville?" Bud's eyes were sharply scrutinizing.

"Sure." Jeff's indifference was obviously assumed. Nan's questioning eyes passed uncertainly from Jeff to her father. There was something between these two she did not understand. Orrville? It was when he had been speaking of Orrville all that intensity of bitterness had been so apparent in Jeff. She received no enlightenment, however.

"What's the play at—Orrville?"

Bud's question had a suggestion of anxiety in it.

Jeff rose from his chair. He passed one hand wearily across his brow and smoothed back his lank fair hair.

"Oh, it's just arbitration," he said. "The parties agree to take my decision in some grazing rights instead of handing good dollars over to the law. It's Dug. Dug McFarlane, and a feller called Peters. Peters figgers he's got rights on Dug's land, and—well, Dug just guesses he hasn't."

"When are you starting?" Nan inquired, from her place at the window.

"I'll need to get off early to-morrow." Jeff's eyes were on the girl. The change in them had become pronounced. Warmth had replaced frigidity, and the smile in them was real now. "It's tough on top of my home-coming, eh, Nan? Maybe Evie'll feel lonesome too—when I tell her. Still, these things are part of the game, and I can't weaken on 'em. It's these toughs around I'm worrying 'll scare her. I was kind of wondering if you'd——"

"You don't need to worry a thing." Nan's smile was full of a staunch reassurance. And her readiness came with a spontaneity which had nothing to do with Jeff's wife. It was the result of her delight and pride in this man himself who was called upon, and looked to, for leadership, in this little world of theirs.

"You'll——"

"I'll handle things here for you, Jeff." Nan gave him no chance to make his appeal. "Elvine shall be as safe as we can make her. She can come right over here till you get back, or I'll sleep at your place. It shall be just as she feels. She shan't be lonesome, and I guess my Daddy an' me we're equal to any crowd of rustlers."

The genuineness, even enthusiasm of the girl was quite transparent. Nor was the man insensible to it. For all his preoccupation he realized something of his debt to these people, to Nan. It was a debt he had never attempted to pay, and now its rapid mounting made even ultimate payment seem doubtful.

"You're pretty good to me, Nan," was all he trusted himself to say.

Nan shook her head in smiling denial.

"Women need to help each other in—these parts."

But Jeff did not accept her excuse.

"Maybe that's so," he said thoughtfully. "But it don't alter things a little bit. I'd just like to feel I deserved it. But I don't and can't feel that way. Some day——" He laughed and made a helpless gesture. "But why talk? It's too easy, and it's mighty cheap anyway. I——"

But Nan was pointing out of the window. She welcomed a sudden diversion.

"It's Elvine coming right along over." Then, as Jeff craned forward: "Say, she's a dandy horsewoman. Get a look at her. Gracious, she might have been born in the saddle."

But Jeff had not waited. He was out on the veranda to greet his wife as she came. And just for one instant Nan caught a glimpse of the light in his eyes which the sight of Elvine had conjured. All the coldness she had witnessed that morning, all the merciless purpose, even the simple friendliness he had displayed toward her. These were gone. Their place had been taken by a light of passionate regard for the woman who had yielded herself to him. For a moment it seemed as if her own emotions must

stifle her. But the next she was within the room again, her eyes merrily dancing, talking to the parent she adored.

"Say, you Daddy of mine," she said, almost boisterously, "haven't you work to be done, the same as I have? Shame on you for dallying. Shame on us both. Come right along, sir. Come right along at once." Then, as he moved toward the window, "No, no, you dear blundering Daddy, not that way! That's reserved. The back door for us, sure. Come along."

And the great Bud permitted himself to be hustled from the room through the kitchen way.

Nan's effort was only partially successful. In a few moments the fugitives were urgently recalled to hear the news of the disaster at Spruce Crossing, which Elvine had brought with her. And during the discussion which followed Nan was forced to stand by while the handsome woman who had supplanted her occupied the centre of attention.

Somehow the news which held the others, drawing forth hot condemnation from Bud, and the bitter comment of Jeff, for once left Nan cold. Somehow it seemed so small a thing compared with that other disaster which was always with her. Her whole attention was held by Jeff and his wife. Not a detail of expression or emotion, as the swift words flowed between them, was lost upon her. And the exquisite pain of it all was excruciating.

The great love of the man was so apparent. There was a moment, even, just as Jeff and Elvine were about to take their departure, when Nan could have almost cried out. It had followed upon an expression of Elvine's dislike and fear of the man who conveyed the news to her.

Jeff took up her complaint in no half-hearted fashion, and, somehow, the injustice of his attitude and his obvious thought for his wife alone brought the girl's hot resentment very near the surface.

"Yes," he said. "He's a tough, sure. I've kept him on because he's one of the brightest cow-hands east of the mountains. But you're right, Evie. And I can't stand for you being scared by the 'hands' on my ranch. I'll have to get rid of him." Then, as he sat in the saddle with Elvine on her pony at his side, he had taken in Nan and her father in a smiling, comprehensive glance. "I guess Evie's some sport acting the way she's done," he declared with a lover's pride. "I allow we owe her a heap of thanks, eh, Bud?"

Bud nodded.

"We're mighty grateful, ma'am," he declared, heartily in his formal way. "Guess we all thank you, sure." Then he turned to Jeff more directly. "I'll get busy right away. That'll leave you free to get right on doping out that reward notice this afternoon, an' generally fixing things before you make the trail tomorrow morning."

Then they had taken their departure. And with their going Nan hastily returned to the parlor.

Bud followed her almost on the instant. He had moved with incredible swiftness, which is often the way of heavy men under stress of feeling. Already the tears were gathering in the girl's eyes when his words fell upon her ears.

"Say, little gal," he said, with a deep note of sympathy in his rumbling tones, "we're bein' hit up pretty bad since Jeff bro't her back home. Maybe we're feelin' 'bout as foolish as we're lookin'. But we're goin' to beat the game—sure, eh? We're goin' to beat it because we're built that way, an'—we got the grit to do it."

* * * * *

The horses were walking leisurely over the summer grass. The house was less than two miles distant. There was no immediate hurry. Besides, Elvine was reading the letter which Jeff had handed her in reply to her inquiry as to the contemplated journey which Bud had mentioned.

Jeff was observing her closely as she read. There were no doubts in his mind. He was not even seeking the effect of the letter. He was dwelling with a lover's delight upon the picture she made.

Nor was his approval extravagant. Any one must have admitted the justice of it. Nan had admitted it when she beheld her in a prairie saddle, on a prairie pony, with only the wide wealth of grass-land for her setting. Elvine in the saddle suggested a single identity between horse and rider. Her riding suit was expensively simple, and cut as only such suits can be cut. The figure beneath it was displayed to its fullest advantage. There was no studied pose. Just the perfection of horsemanship which demands an intimate freedom at all times. Then her dark head under her carefully adjusted prairie hat. The shining masses of hair, obvious in their wealth even under careful dressing. The softly healthy cheeks, and the perfect profile as she pored over the letter in her hand.

Presently Elvine looked up. She did not turn at once to the husband at her side. Her gaze was directed ahead. It ignored the scene of undulating plain, and the distant ramparts of wooded hills. It saw nothing but the images in her own brain, and the conjured thoughts of a troubled heart and conscience.

"You see it's important," Jeff said, with a feeling that the news in the letter had caused disappointment.

"I s'pose it is."

There was a curious lack of interest in the woman manner. Her tone was listless.

"I'm afraid I'll have to go." The man felt he was apologizing, and it seemed absurd that apology should be required. Then he reminded her. "You see, these things come with my work as President. It's pretty good if you think. Guess I'll only be from home one night."

"You *must* go—I s'pose?"

The man's eyes widened.

"Sure."

"But it seems unfair you should be put to all this for nothing."

Jeff shook his head.

"Why, I don't guess it's any worry. Besides, it's an honor. You see, Evie, I'm out all I know to set up a big position for you. And it's these calls as President of the Western Union are going to fix things the way I'd have them."

His eyes had somehow become serious. There was even a lack of his recent warmth in them. He had not expected any protest from his wife. A shade of disappointment at his going perhaps. But that was all.

"You're at the call of anybody around to settle disputes?"

"Only where the interests of cattle-raising are affected."

Elvine handed him back the letter. She did not turn to him. A curious set to her lips warned Jeff that in some way his contemplated journey was adversely affecting her. Nor was it merely the disappointment he had been prepared for. He felt there was need to say more, though the need of it was obscure. It had never been his way to appeal, but he resigned himself to the reflection that his life had been entirely changed by his marriage. He was no longer responsible only to himself. With an effort he flung aside an inclination to resentment.

"Say, Evie," he cried, "it's a bit tough on you having to leave you even for a day just as we've got back to home. It's that way with me, too. I just don't fancy going a small bit. But I daren't refuse Dug McFarlane. He's one of the biggest men around, and I'll need all the friends I can round up. There's another thing. I've got it back of my mind later on to form a Trust amongst the growers, and Dug's a most important concern in such a scheme. I'd be crazy to refuse. Why, I just couldn't refuse anyway. You're going to help me, dear, aren't you? I've talked to Bud and Nan, and fixed things so you won't be lonesome. Nan's promised to sleep in the house with you, so you shan't feel that way. Or you could go over to her. It's just one night, that's all."

It may have been his obvious sincerity, it may have been that the woman's objections were really the result of disappointment only. At any rate a distinct change came over her, and she turned to him with a smile.

"I'm just too selfish, Jeff," she cried. "But—but it did seem hard—at first. Go? Of course you must go. And you're not to worry about me. Nor is Nan. I wouldn't have her come over for me for anything, and I'm not going to sleep out of my home, either. You needn't be scared I'll be lonesome. I've got all this beautiful world around me, and all your interests. And rustlers? Why, I'm not scared of the worst rustlers living."

A delighted sense of gratitude replaced Jeff's every other feeling.

"Say," he cried, with a sudden vehemence, "you've good grit, Evie. You're a bully soul. You're the sort would set a man crazy to corral the world, and set it at your feet. I'll get right back quick. I won't wait an hour more than I need."

Elvine's decision had been forced upon her, but once having taken it she threw something more into her words than the mere encouragement that seemed necessary.

"No," she declared, her eyes shining. "You're not even to hurry back. Get right through with your work, or any schemes you have to arrange while you're there, before you think of me." Then her voice softened to a great tenderness. "I want you to win through in everything you undertake, Jeff. I don't care now for a thing else in the world. You do believe that, don't you? Oh, Jeff, I want you always to believe that. Whatever may come in our life together, I want you always to know I love you better—better than the whole world, and your—your happiness is just my happiness. Without your happiness I can never be happy. It was selfishness made me demur at first. You believe that, don't you? I have always been very, very selfish. It was nothing else. You don't think there was anything else, do you? I sort of feel I'd always have you in my sight, near me. I'm happy then, because I feel nothing can ever come between us. When you're away, I don't know, but it sort of seems as if shadows grow up threatening me. I felt that way this morning. I felt that way when I read your letter. But these things just shan't be. I love you with all that's in me, and—you love me. Nothing shall ever come between us. Say that's so, Jeff. Nothing. Nothing."

The man responded with all a lover's impetuosity. He gave her to the full that reassurance of which she stood in need. But for all his sincerity it was as useless as if it had been left unspoken.

The letter from Dug McFarlane at Orrville, the recognition of her by the man Sikkem Bruce, had warned Elvine that the sands of her time of happiness were running out. She felt she knew that a gape of despair was already yawning at her feet.

CHAPTER XVIII

DUG MCFARLANE

The aroma of cigars blended delightfully with the fragrant evening air. Through the cool green lacing of the creeper the sun poured the last of its golden rays into the wide stoop. The mists were already gathering upon the lower slopes of the hills, and a deep purpling seemed to be steadily embracing the whole of the great mountain range.

Two men were lounging comfortably in wide wicker chairs on the veranda. They were resting bodies that rarely knew fatigue in the strenuous life that was theirs. But then the day was closing, and one of them had come a long saddle journey. Whisky stood on a table at the elbow of Dug McFarlane. Jeffrey Masters had coffee near by.

Outside the veranda a smudge fire in a bucket was doing battle with attacking mosquitoes, while its thin spiral of smoke served as a screen upon the still air to shut out the view of the disheveled township of Orrville.

Dug McFarlane, opulent, of middle life and massive proportions, was in strong contrast to his guest. The American-Scot was something of a product of the soil. He was of the type which forces its way up from the smallest of small beginnings, a type which decides early upon a career in life, and which deviates not one step from the set course. He was a man of one idea—cattle.

He knew nothing beyond—cattle. Cattle was the sum and substance of his celibate life. He was an old type of ranchman whose waking hours were devoted to a physical labor which left no room for anything else. But Jeff knew that for all his roughness of manner and speech, a roughness which left his own partner, Bud, a man of education and refinement beside him, he counted his wealth, as he, Jeff, could only hope to count his in the distant years to come.

Jeff was his guest for the night, and the dispute upon which he was to arbitrate was to be settled upon the arrival of the man Peters. And while they waited they talked of the thing which was their mutual interest. The land and its produce, whether animal or vegetable, was their beginning and end. They discussed every prospect from the overwhelming competition of the Argentine, to the rapid transformation of grazing pastures into golden wheat fields. Their interest seemed endless, and it seemed only to require the non-appearance of Peters for their talk to continue until sleep overtook them.

But the break came in the flow of their "shop" at the mention of the name of Peters. Jeff was curious

to hear about him.

"Who is this Peters, anyway?" he demanded. "He's not down in the stock register, and nobody seems to have found him except you."

Dug's reply came with a great laugh. His very bright gray eyes were full of a good humor beneath his pronounced black brows.

"Peters? Why, I guess Peters 'ud make a funeral procession laff. You've never seen him? You don't know him? No. Sure you wouldn't. Nor you wouldn't find him registered. Y'see, they don't register mixed farm stock. Anyways, he got me laffin' all the time. But he's bright—oh, yep, he's bright, sure. He's a little feller. To git him right you need to think of a buck louse with a think-box developed abnormal. He's a great amusin' little cuss when you see him on his patch of land. You'd think he was runnin' a cirkis he's so busy fixin' things wrong. I'd like him fine if it wa'an't fer his habits. I can't stand the feller who eats the top of his fingers raw, an' sings hymns o' Sunday in a voice that never oughter been handed out to anything livin' that hadn't the sense to choke itself at birth."

"Is that the reason of the dispute?" Jeff asked with smile.

Dug grinned and shook his head.

"No, siree," he cried. "It ain't a thing to do with it. But I guess we'll keep clear of the dispute till he gets around. Y'see, this arbitration game needs to be played good. I'd hate to get ahead of the little cuss by settin' out my case in private. Nope. I hain't got a thing agin that grasshopper. Not a thing, and I jest need to get this thing straightened right, even if it goes agin me. That's why we fixed on appealin' to you rather than the law. Y'see, I could buy up a decision at law, which Peters knows, so we decided on the right judgment of a straight feller. Say, what in——!"

Dug sprang from his chair with a forcible oath. Jeff, too, was on his feet. There was a frantic clatter beyond the screen of creeper. A string of hoarse invective in a human voice. The hammering of horses' hoofs and the sound of tin being battered in a wanton riot. Dug broke into a great laugh as he thrust his head out.

"Well, I be——!" he cried.

Jeff joined in his laugh. An absurdly small man was clinging desperately to the saddle of an absurdly large horse, which was rearing and plunging in a wild effort to shed its rider and bolt from the neighborhood of the overturned smudge-fire bucket.

What a wealth of terror reigned. The gray-headed little man's face matched the hue of his hair. His short arms were grabbing frantically at his horse's neck. His eyes were full of a piteous appeal, and his savage-looking spurs were firmly grappling his steed's flanks. The wretched horse was shaking in every limb. Its eyes were bulging, and the fierce snorts of his gushing nostrils had the force of escaping steam.

Before any assistance could be offered by the onlookers the climax was reached and passed. Elias Peters rolled slowly out of the saddle and reached the ground with a heavy flop. Then, while its recent burden gathered himself up, quite unhurt and smiling amiably in relief, the horse contentedly mouched off toward a patch of inviting grass.

"Guess I'm kind o' late, Mr. McFarlane," Elias apologized. "An' it seems I've bust up your fire-bucket some," he added ruefully. Then with cheery optimism: "It was hustling to get here. I didn't jest see it. Still, I got around."

"You sure have," grinned Dug. Then he indicated his companion. "This is Mr. Jeffrey Masters, President of the Western Union. If you'll come right along in we ken get things fixed up. Meanwhiles I'll jest have a 'hand' round-up your plug an' feed him hay."

* * * * *

Another chair was brought from the house and Elias Peters was ensconced therein. He was a gray little man. Gray from head to foot, it seemed. His hair, his eyes, his skin, his whiskers, his shirt, his loose jacket over it, his trousers. Even the top-boots he wore, which, had doubtless once been black. Everything about him was gray.

Dug pressed whisky on him.

"Take your time," he had said, in his easy, cordial fashion. "Ther' ain't no sort o' hurry. It's li'ble to shake a boy o' your years foolin' around in the dust when you'd oughter be in the saddle."

"That's just it, Mr. McFarlane," came the prompt, distressed complaint.
"What in the nature o' blamed things made me act that way?"

"Jest the—nature o' things, I guess."

The little man's eyes twinkled.

"Guess you mean ther's folks who ain't in their right element in the saddle, an'—I'm one of 'em." Then he turned on Jeff, whose whole interest had been quite absorbed in a personality which Dug had described as being reminiscent of a "buck louse." "Say, Mr. Masters, guess you ain't never tried any stunt like raisin' kebbiges on a hog ranch? No, sure you ain't. Ther's jest one feller runnin' loose on this planet 'ud act that way, an' that's me. Guess I bin doin' it all my life," he added, thoughtfully chewing a forefinger. "I was built for, an' raised in a fifth rate city, an' I got the ideas an' ambitions of the President of a Republic. Ther' ain't a blamed thing I can't do but I want to do. An' the worst of it is ther's a sort o' restless spirit in me jest sets me so crazy to do it I can't resist makin' the jump. That's how I come to buy up a bum homestead up toward the hills here, an' got the notion I could make a pile runnin' a mixed farm that way. That's how I come to get outside a hoss when I'd be safer inside. That's how I come to—'break' a deal more prairie land than I could ever sow or harvest. That's how I bought machinery for a thousand acre farm when I'd only got a half a mile. That's how I come to run a bunch of cows without settin' up fencin' around my crops. That's how I bo't the whole blamed lay-out without verifin' the darned law feller's statement I'd got grazin' rights on Mr. McFarlane's grass—which is the thing I came right here to yarn about when I got mixed up with that unnatural hell, which I've learned since was only set up to amuse the skitters. Kind o' makes me feel if I was to set fer my pictur' I'd sure come out a shipwreck at sea, or some other darn fool kind of unpleasantness."

Jeff was forced to echo the laugh which Dug indulged in without restraint. It seemed cruel in face of the strange little man's serious distress. But its only effect upon him was to produce an inquiring glance of profound but unresentful astonishment.

"Guess I must 'a' said something," he protested mildly. "Seems to me I most generly do, with Mr. McFarlane around." Then he smiled in his wintry fashion, which was quite powerless to add warmth to his curious aspect of grayness. "Guess he must ha' been born laffin'—p'raps," he added thoughtfully. "It's a dandy thing bein' born laffin'. I don't reckon I ever got that luck. It's more likely my moma got lost in a fog the day I was born. Can't account noways fer things otherwise."

Dug pushed the whisky bottle at him as a set-off to his own uncontrolled mirth, and in a few moments contrived to subdue his paroxysms sufficiently to start the business in hand.

"Now, Masters," he said, as soon as the diminutive Elias had ministered adequately to his glass, "we've got a curious proposition to set before you. It's jest one of them things which crops up in a country like this, where a whole heap o' the laws happens along through custom. An' like all sech customs, ther's li'ble to be a tarnation lot of friction lyin' around if we can't get a right settlement. Now, if we go to the courts it's goin' to be a mighty big scrap, eatin' up a hell of a pile of dollars. An' if you're wise to the ways of the law fellers you ken just about figger the verdict is goin' to come along to the feller with the biggest wad. In this case I guess I'm the feller with the biggest wad. Now, ther's no sort o' bad blood between Peters an' me, 'cep' it is he will sing hymns outrageous on a Sunday. Still, I ain't goin' to let that cut no ice. I'm out for a square decision between us by a feller that don't know the meanin' of graft. I don't care a cuss who gets it. But I ain't goin' to be bluffed by any fancy legal readings of a position by city lawyers who don't know the north end of a steer goin' south from the cluckin' proposition of a blind hen motherin' a litter o' dormice. Peters here'll give you his case, seein' he's plaintiff, in an elegant flow of warm air, an' when he's through I'll sort of hand you a counterblast. An' when we finished you'll hand out your dope on the subject, that is if we ain't talked you into a home for incurable arbitrators. You'll get busy right away, Peters."

The rancher's manner was irresistible in its breezy frankness and generosity. Jeff wondered at him. Any man of modern business methods, he felt, would have jumped at the advantage which his wealth would have given him in the law courts over so insignificant a person as Elias Peters. The whole situation inspired in him the feeling that he was in the presence of a really big man. A man who deserved every fraction of his success.

Nor was there any doubt as to the little gray man's feelings as he took a drink of whisky, and fixed his small eyes upon the weather and years-lined features of his adversary.

"Guess you've made me feel 'bout as big as an under-fed skitter," he complained. "You make me sort o' feel I want to tell you to keep your darn grazin' rights till I ken hand you a bunch of bills such as I'd like to pass on to an honest man. But I don't guess I'm goin' to do it. Y'see, I just can't afford it. If I can't graze my stock on your grass they got to starve, or I got to get out. An', seein' I doped all my wad into

this lay-out, it 'ud well-nigh mean ruin to act that way."

Then he turned to Jeff, who was almost bewildered at the curious attitude toward each other of these men.

"Now, I ain't got a fancy yarn to hand you," he went on, fumbling in his pockets. "I jest got my papers, here, as I got 'em from the law fellers. You best take 'em, an' after we done get a look into 'em." He passed them across. "Now these are the fac's of how I bo't, why I bo't, an' who I bo't from. The place is a haf section, an' they asked five thousand odd dollars for it. It was a bum sort o' homestead, an' belonged to a widder woman who'd got her man shot up by some rustlers workin' around this country. They went by the name of Whitstone, but their real name, by them papers, was Van Blooren——"

"What name?" Jeff's voice broke sharply in upon the little man.

"Van Blooren."

"Go on."

Jeff's eyes were gazing out through the lacing of creeper. He was no longer regarding the man's unemotional gray features.

"Wal, the place wa'an't worth the five thousand, 'cep' fer one clause in them papers. This widder woman owned a right to graze up to two hundred head o' stock on Mr. McFarlane's range. There was no mention o' lease, nor nothin' to talk of payin' fer it. The right was in the deed of sale, clear an' unquestioned. You'll see it right there in them papers. Wal, I'm runnin' a hundred of stock, and the half section is under cultivation. Now, Mr. McFarlane comes on me with the news that this widder woman had no such rights to sell, an' that she and her man were only allowed to graze their stock on his grass to help them out. He's acted white over it so far, an' ain't taken no sort of action. He's jest let my fool cows an' their calves run around chewin' till their jaws is tired, which is a white way of seein' things. All he's handed me is that I ain't got no right, an' the thing stands pending your decision. He says the whole proposition is jest business. He's got to safeguard the values of his property. Now, sir, I claim them rights by right of that deed, an' if ther's any case it's between that Van Blooren widder an' Mr. McFarlane. You got my papers, an'—wal, how d'you guess I stand?"

The little man's eyes were anxious as he made his final appeal. But no satisfaction was forthcoming at the moment. Jeff's head was bent over the papers he had been handed. His eyes were hidden. He seemed wholly engrossed upon the various clauses in the deed. Finally he spoke without looking up.

"There's no deed granting grazing rights executed by Mr. McFarlane here," he said.

Before Peters could reply, Dug broke in.

"Ther' never was one made," he said easily. "I don't guess you'll find it ther'—'less you use trick eyes. Here—say, Peters has given you his story right. I ain't no kick comin' to a word of it. But this thing has more sides to it than you'd fancy. Now, I don't just care a cuss Peters' grazin' two hundred, or five hundred head of stock on my pastures. But if Peters bo't rights an' ken prove it, why, he's the right to sell 'em on to any feller who comes along, which kind o' turns my ranch into common land. Nothin' doin'. No, siree!"

Jeff had abandoned his search of the papers. Nor was he regarding either of the men. His eyes were directed through the lacing of creeper, his gaze concentrated upon the purple vista of the hills. His brows were depressed with profound thought. Nor were the blue depths of his eyes easy. Peters' whole attention was upon the rancher.

"Now, see right here, Masters," Dug went on, after a deeply considering pause. "I got a story to tell you I'd have liked to hold up, an' the reason I hate handin' it you is jest a sort o' fool sense of honor. Howsum, when folks git gay I can't see you're right to hold your hand. Now, them rights are sold by the law fellers of that widder woman, an', I guess, actin' under her instructions. Now, she knows she don't own no rights to sell. Wal, I allow she's on the crook."

"Crook?" Jeff's interrogation came swiftly, in a harsh voice utterly unlike his own. Then his eyes came round to the face of the rancher. There was something deadly in the steadiness of their regard. "This widow," he said. "Her name is Van Blooren. What is her first name, and the first name of her—husband?"

Before Dug could reply Peters pointed at the deeds of sale.

"Guess her full name's writ ther'," he said. "Elvine van Blooren. Sort of queer name, ain't it? It sort o' hit me that way when I first see it. Kind o' good name fer a—crook."

Jeff's eyes dropped to the papers again as Dug gave the other information required.

"The man's name was Robert—Bob. Called hisself when he was here. Y'see, his paw was some swell guy who guessed his son had made some darn fool marriage. An' I allow he was wise. Howbe, their names an' sech don't cut no ice."

"No."

Jeff's monosyllable brought Dug's gaze swiftly in his direction. The next moment they were looking squarely into each other's eyes, and, as far as Jeff was concerned, Peters was entirely forgotten.

"Will you tell me all you know of—this woman?" Jeff said, after a moment. "I guess it'll be necessary—before we're through."

"Sure. That's how I figgered." A momentary tension seemed to have been relaxed. Dug once more settled himself at his ease.

"'Tain't a pretty yarn, when you come to think," he said, his brows contracting under his feelings. "Men are jest men, an' I guess you don't generly expect more'n a stink from a skunk. But with women it's diffrent. When a feller thinks of women, he thinks of his mother, or sweetheart, or his wife. An' when he thinks that way, why, I don't guess he figgers to find bad wher' he reckoned ther' was only good. Howsum, it kind o' seems to me human nature's as li'ble to set a feller cryin' as laffin' most times. This thing come over that Lightfoot gang. We got most of 'em, and those we got if they wa'an't pumped full of lead out of hand they was hanged. Sort o' queer, too, the way we got 'em. I'd set up a reward. Ten thousand dollars. It was right out o' my own bank roll. Wal, I set it up—the notice o' reward—one night, an' next day got the news we was all yearnin' for. Bob Whitstone, as he called himself, brought it right along to me. I hadn't no use fer the feller up to then. He was weak-kneed. And, in a way, had fallen fer Ju Penrose's rye. He'd come to me once before on the subject o' these all-fired grazin' rights. Y'see, he'd been tryin' to git ahead raisin' wheat in a country where ther' was only a market fer cattle an' rye whisky. Anyway, he cut most o' the wheat racket, an' guessed he'd travel the same road as other folks, an' asked me for permission to graze. I was kind o' sorry about him, an' his good-lookin' wife—both city-raised folk—an' I did as he ast. I said he could graze up to two hundred head. Git a line on that. Them rights was verbal between him an' me to help him out. Ther' wa'an't no sort o' deed, an' he knew it wa'an't no saleable proposition. Wal, when he come along in with his news I set him right through it, an' I allow, before I quit him, I got the notion that fer all his addled ways there was a heap to him I hadn't guessed. He started by sayin' he'd located the rustlers, got their camp set in the hills, an' could hand over the whole blamed bunch right away quick. That was elegant. But I ast him how it come he'd on'y located 'em twelve hours after I'd set up a ten thousand dollar reward. Y'see, they'd been rustlin' around fi' years. Wal, to cut a long yarn, I got the whole thing out of him in quick time—he was like a kid in my hands. He hadn't located that camp, he wasn't goin' to touch a cent of them ten thousand. He called it 'blood money,' an' cussed it good an' plenty with an elegant flow. It was his wife. Yes, siree, it was the woman driving the man. She'd located them rustlers by chance only the day before, while he was around Ju's place sousin' rye. When he got home an' told her of the reward, she was nigh crazy to git her hands on the dollars. Seems to me ther' must have been a mighty scrap-up. I guess she told him of his ways, an' what he'd brought her to—in a way some women-folk can. I didn't git it all clear. Y'see, he did his best to screen her. Anyways, she made him promise to fix things so she touched those dollars. An' that's why he come to me. Ther's jest one thing stuck in my head so I can't lose it. It was his last words to me about it. He says, says he, see here, Mr. McFarlane, I need one favor out o' you. I want to go with you on this racket, an' if ther's any mercy in the God of Heaven, he'll let me get my dose when the shootin' starts. Effie—that's how he called his wife—wants them dollars, an' you'll see she gets 'em. But for me I just couldn't ever live around a woman who'd handled that blood money! He didn't use them words. They're mine. But it's 'bout how he put it. Wal, when the play was over he'd had his wish. He was dropped plumb in his tracks. Then I handed his widder the dollars. She ain't around these parts now so it don't matter handin' you the story of it. Maybe she's married agin. She was some picture woman. But anyway I'd say right here, the woman who could take the price of men's lives would be low enough to bluff a boy like Peters here out of his stock of dollars on a play like these rights. An' that's why I reckon this thing's been done on the crook."

He reached round for his glass and took a deep drink in the silence that followed his story. Then, as neither the man who was to arbitrate, nor Peters, attempted to break it, he went on:

"Guess a reward's jest a reward, an' you can't kick at the feller who comes along an' grabs a holt on it. But when a woman, young, a good-looker, an' eddicated, an' refined, gits grabbin', why, it makes you see sulphur an' brimstone, an' horns an' hoofs when your thoughts are full o' buzzin' white wings an' harps, an' halos an' things. Git me? I guess stealin' dollars out o' a citizen's pocket-book wouldn't be a circumstance to a female of that nature. Say, I ain't got rid o' the stink of it yet, though it happened four years ago."

The man's contempt and loathing were intense. He had offered the reward, paid it, he had led the Vigilantes in the hanging. But these things were simply part of the justice of man as he saw it, and rightly administered.

The silent moments slipped by. Jeffrey Masters was sitting erect in his chair. A marble coldness seemed to have settled itself upon his keen face. Peters was waiting for that decision he desired. Dug McFarlane, with more understanding, realized that something was wrong. He, too, remained silent, however.

At last Jeff stirred. His gaze shifted. It turned half vaguely upon the little man Peters. Then it seemed to drift unmeaningly toward the rancher. A moment later it fell upon the papers he was so tightly gripping. It was then that realization seemed to come upon him. He reached out and handed the deeds to their owner. A moment later he was on his feet, and had moved across to the front of the veranda, where he stood, slim, erect, and with his back turned upon the others.

He cleared his throat and spoke in a steady voice.

"I can only hand you a decision on the intention as apart from the legal aspect of the case," he said judicially. "It's clear to me no saleable rights were given. There was no transaction over them. The widow of this man had no rights to sell. If disinterested advice is acceptable I should urge this. It's in view, I guess, of McFarlane's expressed indifference to Peters' cattle grazing on his land. Let Peters acknowledge he has no rights. Then let McFarlane enter into an agreement that Peters can run his stock on his land, the right being non-transferable. I should put the whole thing in writing."

"An' a darn good an' honest decision, too," cried Dug heartily.

The shadow of a beatific smile passed over Peters' small features.

"Bully!" he murmured. Then he added: "But I sort o' feel we both oughter set the law on that—she devil."

Jeff turned abruptly. His movement was almost electrical.

"I shouldn't," he said sharply.

Dug caught a glimpse of the desperate light in his eyes.

"Why not?" There was a dash of resentment in Peters' tone.

But Jeff was spared a reply. Dug anticipated him with an oath.

"Gol darn you, because she's—a woman!" he cried, with a fierce warmth. "Hell take it you ken have your rights. That's enough, I guess. I'll have the papers wrote, an' have you sign 'em to-morrow. Meanwhile I'm sick to death of the whole blamed thing. I quit right here."

His intention was plain enough. He meant there should be no misunderstanding it. And the little man, Peters, took his dismissal without demur.

The moment Peters had safely negotiated the saddle and vanished in a cloud of dust, Dug pressed the whisky bottle upon his guest. Jeff almost mechanically accepted it. He gulped down a stiff drink of neat spirit. Dug watched him.

"Guess you're feelin' pretty darn saddle weary," he said kindly.

Jeff flung himself into his chair without replying.

Dug returned to his seat and gazed out at the yellow and purple afterglow of sunset.

"Say, maybe you'd feel like handin' me the reason you wouldn't set the law on to that—woman?" he went on presently.

The question was by no means idle. It was inspired by the man's genuinely kindly nature. Somehow, he felt that he had been responsible for that which he had seen, still saw, in this man's eyes.

But he was wholly unprepared for the reply forthcoming. It came promptly. Each word came distinctly, deliberately, in a voice of bitter coldness. The tragedy of it left the rancher speechless.

"Because I married Elvine van Blooren just over six weeks ago."

CHAPTER XIX

THE RETURN HOME

A long day of anxiety and fevered apprehension merged into a night of terror. It was the outcome of a conviction that was irresistible. The shadow of disaster was marching hard upon her heels. Nor had she the power to avoid it.

As night came on Elvine remained alone in her twilight bedroom. She had no desire to come into contact with the servants, she had no desire for human companionship of any sort. So, with the fading light, she betook herself to the bedroom.

But there was no relief. It was haunted to-night, teeming with the fancies of a dreading imagination. It seemed to her like the cell of a condemned prisoner.

The day had passed heavily, drearily. Every moment of it had been filled with the thought that Jeff was on his way to Orrville. On his way to meet Dug McFarlane. On his way to meet the one man in whose hands her whole fate lay. He alone knew the source of the ten thousand dollars which she had carried back to her paternal home as the net result of her first marriage. He alone knew it to be the price of the blood of men, amongst whom was the twin brother of her present husband.

Memory was alive, and full of a poignant torture. It brought back to her the scene when she had driven her first husband to help her to the money she had desired to possess. He had spoken, in his horror and anger, of "blood money," of "Judas," and she would not hear. She had derided him, she had lashed him with the scorn of an unbridled tongue, she had turned upon him in her selfish craving, without a thought of any principle.

Now she understood what she had done, but she only understood because of the threat which overshadowed her. It was no spiritual awakening. It was again the self in her, threatened in its desires as a result of her earlier wanton actions. Her motives, even the picture of the carnage in that hidden valley, which came back to her unbidden, had no power to add to the hopelessness of her feelings. Every emotion was wrapped in the thought that she was about to be robbed of all the fruits of the one great passion of her life.

She had one desire now, one motive in life only. It was the man she had married. The man she had designed to marry for the station and wealth he could offer her, and who had almost instantly become the centre of her whole life. Nothing of any worldly consideration counted any longer. There was nothing could interest her of which he did not occupy the centre of the focus. Self dominated still, but it was a more human type of self, which had, perhaps, some rightful claim on human sympathy.

The shadows grew, and the wide airy room was filled with a hundred added terrors which claimed reality in the troubled brain. The silence of the world about her became a threat. The darkening of the cloudless sky beyond the open window. She sat on, refusing to invoke the aid of lamp-light to banish the gathering legions of her dread. She knew it was impossible to banish them.

Oh, she had no physical fear of the world about her. What was there to fear? Did she not know it all? Had she not lived it all before? The two wide open windows invited her. She moved to one of them, and drew a chair so that she could rest upon the sill and gaze out into the space so perfectly jeweled. And the cool night air fanned her cheeks, and seemed to relieve the fever that was raging behind her hot eyes.

The morrow. There was no other concern with her now but—the morrow. To-morrow Jeff would return. To-morrow she would know the worst, she would know if the purpose of Fate were for or against her. Oh, that to-morrow! And in the meantime there were interminable hours of darkness to endure, when sleep was impossible. And after that the daylight, when she must fear every eye that was turned in her direction, when every moment brought nearer the possibility of the end for her of all things in the world which mattered.

The night wore on. Midnight came and passed. She had not moved again. Her straining eyes had watched the starry groups as they set beyond the horizon. There was no moon to create shadows upon the wide, rolling pasture before her. Everything was in shadow, just as her every thought was similarly enwrapped. There was no relief anywhere.

Once she heard a sound that set her jarred nerves hammering. It was a distant sound, and, to her fancy, it was the rapid beat of horse's hoofs sweeping across the wide valley. But it died out. She had been caught by the thought of the possibility of her husband's return, suddenly, in the night. She

pictured for one brief instant the headlong race of the man to charge her with the crime of his brother's life.

She saw that keen, stern face with its cold blue eyes and the grimly tightened lips. She had seen some such expression there before, and she knew there were depths within his soul which she had never probed, and hoped that she might never have to probe.

It was the mystery of these unknown depths which had inspired her passion. It was because of that cognizance of something unusual, profound, in his personality that he had first become so completely desirable. Then as she grew to know him, so she found she knew him less, and desired to know him more. Her love and worship of him was of the primitive. It was such as is the love of all women when inspired by an emotion not untouched by fear.

So, when the sounds of hoof-beats broke the night silence, she became panic-stricken, because such a return, at such an hour, could have but one meaning.

Then the sounds passed, and her nerves steadied, and presently a stirring night breeze rustled the lank grass. It came over the plain toward her. It reached her window and fanned her cheeks with its chill breath. Then it passed, sighing round an angle of the house. Then, in its wake, came the plaintive dole of a scavenging coyote. The combination, to her fancy, was an echo of her feelings. It was the sigh of despair, and the cry of a lost soul.

Presently the drowse of utter weariness descended upon her. The dread of thought remained heavily overshadowing, but a certain distortion displayed the reaching of limits beyond which human power could not go, even in suffering. It was a merciful nature asserting itself. Her eyes closed, slowly, gently, with a drowsy helplessness. Once her elbow slipped from the sill of the window and awoke her. A somnolent thought that she would go to bed passed dully through her mind. But she did not act upon it. She propped her head upon her hand once more, and, in a moment, everything was forgotten.

She awoke with a start. There was no drowse in her wakefulness now. Her eyes were wide, and her thoughts alert. The sensation of a blow, a light, unforceful blow was still tingling through her nerves. The blow, it seemed, had fallen upon her forehead, and she thrust a hand up mechanically to the spot. But the action yielded her no enlightenment. There was no pain, no sign.

She peered through the open window and realized that the moon had risen. She stared at it, and presently it occurred to her that she must have slept, and, by the position of the moon above the horizon, for at least an hour.

Then her thoughts returned to the blow which had awakened her, and the conclusion followed that it must have been the result of the half-blind flight of one of those great winged beetles.

She closed the window abruptly. She closed the second one. Then, having drawn the curtains, she fumbled for the matches and lit the candles upon her dressing bureau. It was her intention to search for the intruding beetle, and then retire.

But her search terminated abruptly. It terminated even as it began. That which had struck her was lying almost at her feet upon the soft rug on which she stood, and within a yard of where she had been sitting. It was a piece of paper tied about a small ball of soil.

She stared down at it for some startled moments. The effects of her dread were still upon her, and they set up a sort of panic which made her fearful of touching the missile. But it could not remain there uninspected. There could be no thought of retiring without learning the meaning of what lay there on the floor.

Gingerly she stooped with a candle in her hand. She stooped lower, but making no attempt to touch the thing which had disturbed her. The candle revealed a folded sheet of white paper. A string bound it round the rooted portion of a grass tuft.

After a few moments she reached out and picked it up. The next moment she was standing erect at her bureau, and with a pair of scissors she severed the string and dropped the grass tuft to the floor.

The paper was folded and thumb-marked by dirty hands. With shaking fingers and tense nerves she deliberately unfolded it.

It was a note, and she read it eagerly.

"You sold the lives of men for a price. You had it your way then. We're goin' to have our way now. You'll pay for that deal the only way we know."

Elvine sat watching the scenes of the work of the range. The men were returning from distant points making for the ranch house where their evening meal was awaiting them at the bunkhouse. Teams were moving toward the barns, and barn-hands were watering those which had already returned. There was a general stir everywhere. Certain stock was being corralled and hayed for the night. In the hay corral men were busy cutting and hauling feed. There was no loneliness, no solitude. The business of so great an enterprise as the Obar Ranch involved many hands, and seemingly endless work.

But Elvine watched these things without interest. In her present state of mind they meant nothing to her, they could mean nothing. She was waiting, waiting in a perfect fever for the home-coming of her husband.

Strangely, too, she was not without a glimmer of hope. Somehow the belief had taken possession of her that had Jeff learned anything of her story he must have been home before this. It seemed to her that he must have flung every consideration to the winds, and rushed in fevered haste to denounce her as the murderess of his twin brother.

The mysterious note which had been flung in through her open window had left her sleepless for the rest of the night, but, even so, now, in the broad light of day, it was only relatively alarming. The other terror overwhelmed it.

The sun was already tinting the hilltops with ruddy, golden hues. The frigid snow-caps no longer wore their sheen of alabaster. There was a golden radiance everywhere, a suggestion of a perfect peace, such as the woman felt could never again find place in her heart.

She turned her eyes from the splendor of the scene in silent protest. The green of the wide-spreading valley, even the dark purple shadows of the lower mountain slopes were better in harmony with her mood. But even these she denied in her nervous irritation, and again, and yet again, her searching gaze was flung out to the northwest along the trail over which she knew her husband must come.

The waiting seemed endless. And the woman's heart literally stood still when at last she detected an infinitesimal flurry of dust away on the far distance of the trail. A mad desire surged through her to flee for hiding to those vast purple solitudes she knew to lie in the heart of the hills.

She remained where she was, however. She stirred not a muscle. She was powerless to do so. What, what had the coming of the man for her? It was the one absorbing question which occupied her whole brain and soul.

The dust flurry grew to a long trail in the wake of a horseman. In five minutes he stood out ahead of it, clear to the eye. In ten his identity was distinguishable. And, presently he rode swiftly at a gallop past the ranch buildings and drew up before the house.

The rack of that moment was superlative. The woman's hands clenched and her finger nails dug into the soft flesh of her palms. There was no greeting upon her lips. She only had power to stare; her wide beautiful eyes were searching the face of the man she loved, searching it as the criminal in the dock might search the face of the judge about to pass sentence.

Her tongue was ready for its release. Pent words lay deep in her soul for an outpouring at the lightest sign. But these things were dependent, dependent upon the reading she found in the man's eyes.

The horse stood drooping at the termination of its effort. The man sprang from the saddle. A barn-hand took the beast away to its stable. Elvine's tongue remained almost cleaving to the roof of her mouth.

The man's fair brows were depressed. His eyes were sternly cold. And not once did they turn in her direction. He spoke in his usual tone to the barn-hand. He issued his orders without a sign of emotion.

Elvine could stand no more. She stirred. Then slowly she passed within the house.

Presently Jeff's step sounded on the veranda. It was quick. There was nothing lagging in it. The woman gripped the back of a chair in the living-room in which she had taken refuge. She was seeking support.

The man entered the room. Nor did he remove his hat. He stood just within the window opening, and his eyes, cold as the gleam of the mountain glaciers, regarded her steadily.

"I see you understand," he said. "You realized what must happen when I visited Dug McFarlane in the matter of Peters, who bought your dead husband's farm. You knew it when you read that letter I gave

you. And so you protested. So you assured me of—your regard."

He came a step nearer. The movement was almost involuntary.

"I have prayed to God that some day he might bring me face to face with the person who sold my brother's life. He has granted me my prayer. But it never entered my wildest dreams that it could be the woman I married. I never questioned your past. To me it was sufficient that you had taught me the meaning of love. To me you must be all you seemed. No more, no less. God help me, I had no imagination to tell me that so fair a body could contain so foul a heart. Were you not my wife, were you a man, I should know how to deal with that which lies between us. As it is you must thank the difference in our sex for that which nothing else could have done for you. As yet I have not had the time to arrange the details of our future. To-morrow, perhaps, things will have cleared in my mind. I shall sleep to-night over at Bud's——"

"Oh, Jeff, Jeff, have mercy. I——"

"Mercy? Mercy?" A sudden fire blazed up where only a frigid light had shone. The man's tones were alive with a fury of passion. "Did you have mercy? Was there one merciful, womanly emotion in your cruel, selfish heart when you sent those men, that man to his death for ten thousand filthy dollars? Pray to God for mercy, not to me."

A curious sullen light dawned in the woman's eyes. But even as it dawned it faded with the man's movement to depart.

"You—you won't leave me?" she pleaded. "Oh, Jeff, I love you so. What I did was in ignorance, in cruel, selfish longing. I had been reduced to the life of a drudge without hope, without even a house fit for existence. I believed I had honest right. I believed even that my act was a just one. Jeff, Jeff, don't leave me, don't drive me out of your life. I cannot bear it. Anything, anything but that. My God, I don't deserve it. I don't—true. Jeff—Jeff!"

Her final appeal came as the man, without a word, passed through the open window. She followed him in a desperate hope. But the hope was vain. She saw him mount the fresh horse which had been brought round and left at the tying post.

As he turned the beast about to depart, just for one instant he looked in her direction.

"I will see you again in the morning. By that time I shall have decided what is best for us both."

He waited for no more. There was nothing to wait for. He lifted the reins and his horse set off. The dust rose up and screened him from view.

Once more Elvine was standing on the veranda. Once more her gaze was following the trail of rising dust. But there was no fever of suspense in her beautiful eyes now. There were not even tears. The blow had fallen. Fate had caught up with her. Its merciless onrush had overwhelmed her. She was crushed. She was broken under its sledge-hammer blow. She stood drooping, utterly, utterly broken and spiritless before the man's swift, brief indictment and action.

The end had come. Nor had it anything of the end she had visualized in her dread. It was ten times more cruel than she had even dared to dream.

CHAPTER XX

AT BUD'S

Supper was over when Jeff arrived. He came straight into the room where the colored girl had just finished clearing the table. Nan was returning a few odds and ends to their places. Bud had already lit his evening pipe preparatory to settling down for the brief interim before turning in for the night.

There was no preamble. There was no sign of emotion, even at the moment of his arrival. Jeff launched his request at father and daughter in a voice such as he might have used in the most commonplace of affairs.

It was a request to be put up for the night.

But both Bud and Nan were startled. Nan's cheeks paled, and imagination gripped her. She said nothing. With Bud to be startled was to instantly resort to verbal expression.

"Wot's wrong?" he demanded.

Then the storm broke. It broke almost immoderately before these two who were the intimates of Jeff's life. All that had been withheld before Dug McFarlane, all which he had refused to display before the wife he had set up for his worship, Jeff had no scruples in laying before these two. It was the sure token of the relations between them, relations of perfect trust and sympathy.

Bud sat gazing at the outward sign of the passionate fires he had always known to lie smouldering in the depths of this man's soul. Nan stood paralyzed before such violence. Both knew that hell was raging under the storm of emotion. Both knew that the wounds inflicted upon this man's strong heart were well-nigh mortal.

The whole story was told, broken, disjointed. For the first time Nan learned the result of the search for an erring twin brother, and her horror was unbounded. A heart full of tenderness bled for the man whose sufferings she was witnessing. The story of Elvine's own actions filled her with revolting, yet with pity. It was not in her to condemn easily. She felt that such acts were beyond her powers of judgment.

The man's grief, his bitter, passionate resentment smote her beyond any sufferings she had ever known herself. Elvine absorbed all the anger she could bestow, but even so it was infinitesimal beside the harvest of grief which the sight of this man's suffering yielded her. That was the paramount emotion of the moment with her. That, and the injustice she deemed to have been meted out to him.

It was not until the great crescendo of the man's storm of grief had passed that Nan bethought herself of the need in which he stood. Nor was that need apparent until his whole note had changed to a moody bitterness with which he regarded the future. Then she understood the demon that was knocking at the door of his soul.

Immediately her decision was taken. She left the two men together and went to make the necessary preparations for this refugee's accommodation. Curiously enough, these preparations were not complete for nearly an hour, at the time, in fact, that it was her father's habit to seek his bed.

When she returned to the parlor the place was full of the reek of Bud's tobacco, but it was only from the one pipe. Neither of the men were talking when she entered the room, and her glance passed swiftly from one to the other.

She moved over to where Jeff was sitting with his back turned to her, and stood behind his chair.

"Everything's fixed for you, Jeff," she said. "But—but maybe you don't feel like turning in yet. My Daddy usually goes at this time, and—he's had a hard day."

Bud looked across at her. His pipe was removed from his mouth for the purpose of protest. But the protest remained unspoken in face of the meaning he beheld in the girl's brown eyes. Instead he rose heavily from his rocker.

"Say, jest take your time, Jeff, boy," he said. "Guess you'll need to think hard before mornin'. I don't guess it's your way to jump at things. I ain't never see you jump yet. Anyway, when you're thinkin', boy, it'll be best to remember that a woman's jest a woman, an' her notions ain't allus our notions."

Nan came over to him, and he rested one great arm about her shoulders, and stooped and kissed her.

"Good-night, little gal," he said. "Maybe Jeff'll excuse me. An' maybe you ken tell him some o' them things that don't come easy to me. So long, Jeff. I'll sure see you in the mornin' before you quit."

He stood uncertainly for a moment with his arm upon Nan's shoulders. He seemed to want to say more, and was at a loss how to say it. Finally he stuck his pipe back into his mouth with a savage thrust and lumbered heavily from the room.

Nan understood. She knew he was laboring under profound emotion, and a feeling of self-disgust at his own inability to help his partner and friend.

As the door closed she moved over to the table and leaned against it. Jeff's back was toward her, and his face was turned in the direction of the window, across which the curtains had not yet been drawn.

He was leaning forward, his gaze intent and straight ahead out into the black night beyond. His

elbows were on his knees, and his hands were clasped, and hanging between them. To the sympathetic heart of Nan there was despair in every line of his attitude. She nerved herself to carry out her decisions.

"Jeff!"

There was no movement in response. But a reply came. It was in the tone of a man indifferent to everything but the thought teeming through his brain.

"Well?"

"Why did you come around here—to-night?"

The question achieved its purpose. The man abandoned his attitude in a movement of fierce resentment. He swung round on the questioner, his eyes hot with feeling.

"Because I guess I need to sleep somewhere. Because nothing on earth could make me share roof with the woman who's my wife. Gee, my wife! Say, Nan, the thought of it nearly sets me crazy."

"Does it? You didn't feel that way—two nights ago."

The man's eyes met the girl's incredulously.

"How can you talk that way?" he demanded roughly. "I didn't know a thing then. I thought she was all she seemed. Maybe I was just a blind fool, crazy with love. Anyway—I hadn't learned the hell lying around her heart."

"I s'pose there is hell lying around her heart?"

Nan's words were provocative. Yet they were spoke in such a tone of simplicity as to rob them of all apparent intent.

Jeff was in no mood for patience. Swift resentment followed upon his incredulous stare.

"Do you need me to give it you all again?" he cried fiercely. "It don't need savvee to grip things." Then his voice rose. "And to think those dollars have fed her, and clothed her, a body as fair as an angel's, and a heart as foul as hell." Then his tone dropped as if he were afraid of the sound of his own voice. "Say, thank God I kept my hands off her. If she'd been a man——"

He left his sentence unfinished. In her mind Nan completed it. But aloud she gave it another ending.

"If she'd been a man I don't guess she'd have been there to have you lay hands on her."

There was a new note in the girl's tones. But it passed Jeff by.

"No," he said with almost foolish seriousness.

"Say, Jeff," the girl went on gently, a moment later, "aren't you acting a teeny bit crazy over this? I mean talking of souls foul as hell. And—an' not sharing the same roof with the woman you've sworn to love, and—and cherish as long as you both live. She hasn't done a thing wrong by you since you said—an' meant that. She hasn't done a thing wrong anyway."

The denial was so gentle yet so decided. Had there been heat in it it must have been ineffective. As it was Jeff stared incredulously and speechless, and the girl went on:

"You think I'm wrong," she said. "Maybe you think I'm crazy, same as I guess this thing's made you feel." She shook her head. "I'm not—sure. Take us here. Maybe I'm chasing around through the hills. Chance runs me plumb into the camp of these rustlers who're cutting into your profits on the Obar. I come right in and hand you the story. You and Bud round up a bunch of boys and I take you to where the camp's hidden. You hold 'em up, and you hang them. Well, I guess the pleasantest moment of that racket for you would be to get back to home and hand me a bunch of dollars. Say, I can see you doing it. I can see your smile. I can hear you sayin': 'Take 'em, little Nan, an' buy yourself some swell fixing.' And say, Jeff, I wouldn't have done a thing less than your Evie's done. That's how I'd say now, acting as you are, you aren't the 'Honest Jeff' I've always known. You're not fair to Evie, you aren't just—before God."

The man made a gesture of fierce impatience. He seemed on the verge of a furious outburst. But the steady light of Nan's eyes was upon him. For some moments he gazed into their sweet depths, and their courage, their steadfastness, seemed to abash him. He flung out his arms in a helpless gesture of appeal.

"Nan, Nan!" he cried, in a voice of hopelessness. "I can't argue it. I just can't. I can't see things right. I sure nearly am crazed. The only thing I can see is the blood of poor Ronny on her—her hands. The hands I've held in mine. The hands I've kissed. Oh, was there ever so foul——"

"Yes, Jeff, there was. There is."

Nan's voice was low but thrilling with deep feeling. She moved forward from her place at the table with a little rush. The rustle of her skirts only ceased as she fell upon her knees at the man's side, and her warm brown hands clasped themselves upon the strong arm propped upon his knee.

"It's a far, far fouler thing, this thing you've got fixed in your mind to do. Oh, Jeff, dear, if I could speak the things as I feel them. But I can't. It's all inside me mussed up and maybe foolish. But, oh, I know I'm right I want to tell you something, and I don't just know how."

Her eyes were gazing up into his, the soft brown eyes of the beautiful soul within. She strove to compel his gaze, but it moodily withheld its regard.

"Jeff, you'll kill poor Evie. You'll break her heart by robbing her of all you've brought into her life through your love. Say, can't you see it all? And you'll do it for a shadow. Yes, it's a shadow, an ugly shadow, this crazy thought of yours for a brother who was just a low-down cattle rustler, same as these toughs you're making a bid of ten thousand dollars to see hanged the same as he was. Think of it, Jeff. She's just a woman, weak and helpless, and you're going to rob her of all that makes her life worth while. Would you act that way by a mother, or—or a sister? And she's your wife, Jeff, who's given you all a loving woman has to give. I could tell you of the things this means to you, and the schemes and plans you've sort of set your heart on, but I don't need to. I just want you to see what you're doing by her, and all the time she's done you no wrong. Do you get that, dear? Evie's never done you a wrong, and in return you're going to do all you know to kill her heart dead."

"Done me no wrong?" There was a desperate sort of sneer in the words. They were the words of a man who is robbed of denial but still protests.

But Nan rejected even that. She swiftly flung it back in her sense of the injustice of it.

"It's as I said, Jeff. Just as I said," she declared solemnly. She drew a deep breath. She was about to take a plunge which might bear her she knew not whither. "Oh, I could get mad with you for that. I could so, Jeff. I know the story of it. You've told it yourself, and I don't guess you've spared her any. But you're blinding yourself because you're crazy to do so. You're blinding yourself to all sense of justice to defend a wretched scallawag who happened to be your brother. Say, you're trying to fix on your wife, the woman who loves you, and who you guess you love, all the dirt you should heap on the worthless man who lived by theft, and maybe, even, was a murderer. Say, don't speak. Not just a single word. Guess you can say all you need when I'm through," she cried, as the man, with eyes ablaze, sought to break in. "When I'm through I'll listen. Say, bring this right home here. We're being robbed by cattle thieves. I don't guess they're better or worse than your brother. What if he'd been one of this gang? If you'd got this gang, with him in it? Would you've let him go and hanged the others? Tell me. Tell me right here and now."

The man sprang from his seat. He moved away to the window.

"You're talking foolish," he flung over his shoulder. "It's not the position. My brother's deserts aren't in question. It's Evie's act. My wife's act. You're a woman and defend her. How could you be expected to see a man's point of view?"

"There can be no man's point of view in it," Nan cried warmly. "I guess there's just one point. The point of right and justice. In justice she's not done a thing to make you act this way. For your sake, for hers, for the sake of justice you'll have to go back to her."

The man swung round.

"You'd have me go back to her?" he cried in fierce derision. "Say, you're crazy! Go back to her feeling as I do?"

"Feeling as you've no right to feel," Nan retorted swiftly. Then in a flash her voice changed, dropping to a note of deep tenderness and sympathy. "Say, Jeff, won't you go back? Won't you?" she pleaded. "Think of all it means to her, to you. Think of a poor woman driven to the depths of despair for a shadow you've nursed in your brain these years. That's what it comes to. I know. Oh, Jeff, as sure as there's just a great big God above us you'll pay for it if you don't. You surely will."

The man shifted his gaze. The lids of his eyes drooped and hid from the waiting girl all that

passionate feeling he had not hesitated to display. She wondered as she waited. She was fearful, too.

In the man every sort of emotion was surging through him in a chaotic tangle. Nothing seemed clear; anger, revolting, even hatred, all fought for place. And through it all the pleading tones of the girl would not be denied.

After a moment he suddenly flung out his arms.

"I—I just can't, Nan!" he cried desperately.

A wave of relief swept through Nan's heart. He was yielding, and she knew it. His manner had completely and abruptly changed. She drew nearer to him. Every honest art of persuasion was in her tender manner. All self was forgotten in that moment of spiritual purpose.

"But you can—if you will," she said, her brown eyes uplifted to his. "There isn't a thing you can't do—and you will. And this is so small, Jeff. So small. Just think of that great big God somewhere up above waiting, waiting to help you. He's always waiting to help us—any of us. Ask Him. Ask His help. He'll give it you. He surely will. And He can clear away all this dreadful feeling. It'll pass right away easy. I know. He's done things for me. You just can't guess how much. Say, Jeff, and when He's fixed you right, feeling that way, He'll show you, and tell you more. He'll show you that Evie's act was not hers, but—His. It was just His way of bringing Ronny's punishment back to you. You see, Jeff, Ronny was part of you. You said so. And oh, He's wiser than you an' me. And He figures this thing is best so. It's a little Cross, such a teeny one, He's set you to bear, and if you're the man I know and believe in, why, you'll just carry it without a squeal. Then later you'll understand, and—you'll be real glad for it. Will you—will you go back to her—to-morrow, Jeff?"

Nan waited almost breathlessly. She was watching him with a gaze that searched every detail of his face. She saw the strong veins at his temples standing out, the usually clear eyes stained and bloodshot. She saw him raise one hand wearily to his forehead, and pass it back over his hair. She knew the movement so well. The sight of it thrilled her. There was little about him she did not know and understand.

"You've made it seem I'll have to, Nan," he said with desperate reluctance.

For a moment a strange feeling of weakness came over the girl. But she resolutely thrust it aside.

"It's not me, Jeff," she disclaimed. "You know it's not me. And you'll—promise?"

He nodded.

"I'll go back to her, because—of you."

A curious look of fear crept into the girl's eyes.

"You'll go back, because—of her," she persisted.

The man shook his head.

"Anyway—I'll go back."

The words were roughly spoken. But Nan accepted them. It was all she could hope for. And—well, she had done her best.

She sighed deeply. She glanced about her. For a moment they dwelt upon the man who was denied her. The man in whom she saw all that could ever make life worth while.

"Good-night, Jeff."

Her voice was very low and soft.

"Good-night, Nan." Then with a sudden outburst, as forceful as it was spontaneous: "God, if the world were only made up of women like you!"

But the door had closed. And as Nan crept to her bedroom, unrestrained tears coursed down her soft cheeks. The full force of the irony of it all was too great for her. He was going back to Elvine, and—she had sent him.

CHAPTER XXI

THE BARRIER

Jeff was abroad at daylight. Even Bud, whose habit was sunrise, had not yet wakened from his heavy slumbers. But Nan was stirring. She heard Jeff moving, and she saw him beyond her window. She saw him bring his horse from the barn, saddled and bridled. In a moment he had mounted and ridden away. Then she dressed, and, for the rest, wondered at the possible outcome of it all. Half an hour later the sun rose and the day's work began.

When Jeff reached his home it was still wrapped in the habit of night. There was no one and nothing stirring, for, as yet, only the golden glow of the eastern sky promised the coming of day.

His mood was bitter. But his purpose was calculated and deliberate. He had given his promise in answer to Nan's irresistible pleading. But otherwise the man was completely unchanged. He moved away down to the corrals, and leaned against the great lateral rails which closed the entrance. The beasts within were chewing the cud, and still picking at the remains of their overnight feed.

They were a goodly sight to eyes that understood the meaning of such things. It was only one of a number of corrals similarly crowded with beasts, that were, for various reasons, herded in shelter at night. These were a few, a very few of the vast numbers which bore the familiar "O—" brand. There were the outlying stations which harbored their hundreds. There were the pastures with their complement of breeding cows. Then there were the herds of two- and three-year-olds roaming the plains at their will, fattening for the buyers who came at intervals.

Thoughts of these things compelled Jeff now. And he saw what Nan had saved him from. Wreck had been threatening in the course he had marked out for himself at first. How could prosperity have maintained under the conditions he would have imposed? Even now, under the modification which Nan had appealed for, he failed to see the continuation of that success he had striven so hard for. The incentive was no longer in him, he told himself. Where lay the use, the purpose in it all? The future? That dream future which had come to him could never mature now. It was no longer a dream. It was nightmare.

He wondered why he had yielded to Nan's entreaty. It all seemed so purposeless now in the broad light of day. He could force himself to live with his wife—under the same roof. Perhaps in time he could even meet her in daily intercourse. She might even become a factor in the great work of the Obar. But the joy of achievement had been snatched from him. All that he had foreseen might be achieved in the work, even. But the process would have been completely robbed of its inspiration, and was therefore not to be counted worth while.

The thought of the woman's regard for him left him cold. He dwelt upon it. Suddenly he wondered. Two days ago he could not have thought of it without a thrill. Now it meant—nothing. He remembered Nan's appeal. Why—why had it affected him last night? It had not been because of—Evie.

Nan had talked of justice—duty. He could see no appeal in either now. Why should he be forced to observance of the laws of justice, or—duty toward a woman who—?

He stirred restlessly. His attention was drawn to his horse. He moved over to it and off-saddled. Then he returned to his place at the corral. The sun was just breaking the horizon. He heard sounds of life coming from the bunkhouse.

Nan's appeal no longer convinced him—now that he was away from her. But—he had pledged his word. He could not break his word to Nan, although he longed—madly longed to resaddle his horse and ride away, and leave behind him forever this place which had suddenly become so full of bitter memories. No—he had pledged his word.

Soon he must once more confront his wife. He reviewed the possibilities. The night long he had spent in considering the position he intended to place before her. Would she accept it? And—what then? The long days of work, unlit by any hope of the future. The process of building, building, which all men desire, without that spark of delight which inspires the desire. Just the drudgery of it. The resulting wealth and commercial power of it maybe, but not one moment of the joy with which only two days before he had regarded the broad vista of the future.

Now the smell of cooking reached him from the bunkhouse. Several men were moving down toward the corrals. He passed on toward the house. A moment or so later he stood on the veranda gazing out at the streaming cattle as they moved toward the wide home pastures, under the practised hands of the

ranchmen. It was a sight to inspire any cattleman, and, for a moment, the brooding eyes of the master of it all lit with a flash of their former appreciation. But the change was fleeting. The blue depths clouded again. The question once more flashed through his brain—what—what was the use of it all?

None, none at all. Every dream had been swept from his waking thoughts. Every enchanting emotion was completely dead. The woman who had inspired the rose-tinted glasses through which he had gazed upon the future no longer had power so to inspire him. By her own action she had taken herself out of his life. She could never again become a part of it. He would live on with her, under the same roof, a mockery of the life which their marriage imposed upon them. He had pledged that to Nan, and he would not break his word to—Nan. But love? His love was gone. It was dead. And he knew that the ashes of that once passionate fire could never be stirred into being again.

There was a rustle of skirts behind him. He heard, but did not turn. A fierce passion was rising to his brain, and he dared not turn until he had forced it under restraint.

"You have come back, Jeff?"

The voice was low and soft. There was something tragically humble in its tone.

The man turned.

"Yes, Evie." Then he added: "I told you I would."

His voice was gentler than he knew. The harshness of their previous meeting had gone out of it. Nor was he aware of the change, nor of the reason, although in his mind was the memory of his promise to Nan.

"And you'll tell me your decision—now?"

The humility was heart-breaking. Nor was the man unaffected by it. He looked into the beautiful face, for the dark eyes were averted. Then his gaze dropped to the charming figure daintily clad in a simple morning frock of subtle attraction. But his eyes came back to the face with its crowning of beautiful dark hair, nor was there any change in their expression as a result of their survey.

"As well now as later."

"What is it?"

For the first time Jeff found himself gazing into the wide dark eyes. There was pain in them. Apprehension. There were the signs about them of long sleepless nights. He shut the sight of these things out by the process of turning away to observe the general movement going on in the near distance.

"Guess there's no use to say a deal," he said, a curiously moody note taking possession of his voice. "If I did, why, I'd likely say a whole heap more than a man may say to his wife. Guess the right an' wrong of things had best lie in our hearts. You know just what you did, and why you did it. I know what you did, an' can only guess why you did it. I don't figger any talk could convince either of us different to how we think and feel. Maybe there's Someone knows the rights of this thing better than either of us. That being so, I allow He'll ultimately fix things as He intends. Meanwhile it's for us to do as we feel, just so far as our personal earthly concerns go."

The coldness in his voice had grown, and it left Evie with a complete sense of hopelessness that was harder to bear than any fears which violence of language might have inspired.

His pause was prolonged. She made no effort to break it, she dared not break it. For the man, he was gathering the threads of what he had to say so as to deliver it concretely. He feared to prolong this interview. In view of his decision he must not risk any violent outbreak such as his feelings were even now striving to force upon him.

"Maybe you'll remember what I said to you about Ronny just after we were—married. I don't guess you'll have forgotten, seeing things are as they are. What I said then stands now. If you'd been a man I'd have shot you down in your tracks when I got to home last night. That should say all that need be said about how I'm feeling now. You aren't a man, and you're my wife. Well—you're still my wife. That means it's up to me to keep you as though this thing hadn't broken things up. I intend to act as right as I can by you. This is your home. You must use it, if you feel that way. The Obar has to go on. It's your means of living. It's my means of living. Then there are others concerned in it. For these reasons I shall carry on things, and your knowledge of this sort of work should hand you a reasonable share in the running of this place. If you feel you can act this way, without remembering we're man and wife, why, I guess we can agree to live our—separate—lives under the same roof. If you don't feel you can do this,

why, you need to say so right here an' now, an' state your wishes. I'll do my best to carry them through, provided you understand our lives are separate from now on. Do you get that?"

Did she get it? Could there be any mistaking those cold tones, that ruthless decision?

From slightly behind him Elvine had stood watching with straining eyes the still figure, speaking with so obvious a repression of feeling, his eyes steadily fixed upon the distant horizon. Once or twice an ominous flush had suddenly flamed up in her eyes. A deep flush had stained her cheeks. But as he ceased speaking the same shrinking, the same humility marked her attitude. She knew instinctively she dared not say the things she was yearning to pour out. She knew instinctively that any such course would at once break down that thin veneer of restraint he was exercising. And for perhaps the first time in her life she stood awed and cowed by a man.

But this woman was the slave of her passions, and she knew it. It was this now that made a coward of her. With all the power of self in her she had abandoned herself to her love for her husband. And, with slavish submission, she was prepared to accept his words rather than banish herself out of his presence altogether. A mad, wild hope lay somewhere deep down in her heart that some day he could be made to forget. That some day, through what looked to her like endless days of devotion and help, she might win back something of what she had lost. She knew her own attraction. She knew her own powers. Might there not then be hope in the dim future?

She had no pride where Jeff was concerned. She wanted him. His love was all life to her now. If she had followed the natural course which should have been hers and refused his proposal, she would have been closing the door, finally, upon all that made life possible. If she submitted there still remained to her the vaguest possible shadow of hope. This was her thought and motive in the crisis with which she was faced, and her calculations were made out of her yearning, and without true understanding of the man with whom she was dealing.

Jeff awaited her decision under an enforced calm.

"It's for you to say," she said, after some moments. "Nor is the choice mine. I shall obey. You've said I can help in the work. Maybe it's my right. I'll claim that right anyway. It's the only right I'll claim. I've only one other thing to say, and maybe you'll let me speak it this once."

"Go on."

"I didn't guess I was doing wrong. I don't know now I did wrong. Anyway, if what I did was wrong it's against God's laws and not man's. Maybe you've a right to punish me. I don't know. Anyway, my life and interests are bound to yours, and I want you to know every effort of mine will be to further—your interests. This has made no change in me—that way. You can trust me as you'd trust yourself. I'm not here to squeal for any mercy from you, Jeff. And maybe some day you'll—understand. I guess your breakfast's ready. I'll have mine later."

* * * * *

Later in the day Elvine rode out from the ranch house. Nor did she concern herself with her object, nor her course, beyond a wild desire for the solitude of the hills. The full torture of the new life, on the threshold of which she now stood, had not come upon her until after the effects of her interview with her husband had had time to calm down. Then to remain in the house, which had become a sort of prison to her, was made impossible. She must get out. She must break into activity. She felt that occupation alone could save her reason.

So she struck out for the hills. Their claim of earlier days was upon her. The hills, and their wooded valleys. Their brooding calm, their dark shadows, their mysterious silence. These things claimed her mood.

She rode recklessly across the wide spread of Rainbow-Hill Valley. She had no thought for the horse under her. She would have welcomed the pitfalls which might have robbed her of the dreadful consciousness of the disaster which had overwhelmed her. She was striving to flee from thoughts from which she knew there was no escape. She was striving to lose herself in the activities of the moment.

The switchback of the plain rose and fell under her horse's busy hoofs. It rose higher, and ever higher, as she approached the western slopes. She left the fenced pastures behind her, and the last signs of the life to which she was now committed. Before her the woodlands rose up shrouded in their dark foliage. The mourning aspect of the pines suited her temper; she felt as though their drooping boughs were in harmony with the bereavement of her soul.

She plunged amidst the serried aisles of leafless trunks with something like welcome for their

shadows. She rode on regardless of distance and direction.

From the crest of a hill she looked down upon narrow mountain creek surging between borders of pale green foliage. The sound of the waters came up to her, and the wilderness of it all appealed, as, at that moment, nothing else could have appealed. She pressed her blowing horse forward, and rode down to the banks so densely overgrown.

She leaped from the saddle. She relieved her horse of its saddle and flung herself upon the mossy ground in the shelter of a cluster of spruce. The humid heat was oppressive. The tumbling waters were unable to stir the atmosphere. But their music was soothing, and the sight of their turbulent rush seemed to hold sympathy for her troubled heart. And so she lay there, her head propped upon a supporting hand, and yielded herself to the sway of her emotions.

After a while tears dimmed her eyes. They overflowed down her cheeks. She had reached the end of endurance before yielding to her woman's pitiful weakness. Time had no meaning now. Place had lost its influence. She saw nothing, knew nothing but the trouble which had robbed her of all she lived for.

Then came the inevitable. Her tears eventually relaxed the tension of her nerves, and, after several ineffectual attempts to keep them open, the weight of the atmosphere closed her eyes and yielded her the final mercy of sleep.

* * * * *

Elvine awoke with a start. She awoke with the conviction of the presence of the man she had met in the hill regions before. She knew some one was near her, but, for the moment—

Yes. She sat up. A pair of brown eyes were gazing down into hers. Then came the voice, and it was low, and gentle. It had nothing startling in it.

"Why, say, an' I've been hunting your trail this hour, taking you for—some one else."

Nan had been standing with her arm linked through her horse's reins. Now she relinquished them, and flung herself upon the ground before the startled woman.

Elvine stared at her with unease in her dark eyes. Nor did she gain reassurance from the pretty face with its soft brown hair, and the graceful figure beneath its brown cloth riding suit. Yet she was not insensible to the companionship. Her greater fears had been of the man, Sikkem, who had been in her waking thoughts.

"You were following my tracks?" she demanded uncertainly.

Nan's eyes grew grave.

"I certainly was. Though I didn't guess they were yours. Say, you must have crossed the tracks I was following," she added thoughtfully. "Did you see anybody? Four fellers? Mighty tough-looking citizens, an' strangers?"

The frankness of the girl reestablished confidence.

Elvine sat up.

"No," she said. Then the wonder of it possessed her. "But you—you alone were following on the tracks of four tough strangers?" she cried incredulously.

Nan smiled. Her smile was pretty. It was a confident, wise little smile.

"Sure," she said. "I saw them, and it was up to me. You see, Evie, we folks out here kind of need to think diff'rent. A girl can't just help being a girl, but when rustlers are around, raising small Cain with her men-folks' goods, why, she's got to act the way they would when they light on a suspicious trail. I was guessing that track would lead me somewhere. But," she added with a grimace, "I wasn't as smart as I figgered. You must have crossed it, an' I lost 'em."

"But can't you get back to it? Maybe I can help some. I've followed a trail before," Elvine added, in a tone which Nan understood better than the other knew.

But the girl shook her head.

"My plug is tired, and there's the chase back to home. I guess we'll leave 'em, and just—report. But there's something doing. I mean something queer. These folk don't reckon to show themselves in daytime, and I guess they were traveling from the direction of Spruce Crossing."

"That's where the man Sikkem's stationed," said Elvine.

"Sure. But I don't guess they been near his shanty. They wouldn't fancy gettin' around Sikkem's layout in daytime. You see, he's—sudden."

Nan's confidence was not without its effect. But Elvine was less sure.

"This Sikkem. I don't like him. But——"

Nan dismissed the matter in her own way.

"Sikkem's been on the ranch nigh three years. He's a cattleman first, and hates rustlers worse than poison. But he's tough. Oh, he's tough, all right. I wouldn't gamble a pea-shuck he hasn't quite a dandy bunch of notches on his gun. But we're used to his sort."

Then she went on in a reflective fashion as though hollowing out a train of thought inspired by the man under discussion:

"Sort o' seems queer the way we see things. Right here on the prairie we mostly take folks on trust, an' treat 'em as we find 'em. Maybe they're wanted for all sorts of crimes. Maybe they done a turn in penitentiary. Maybe they even shot up folk cold. These things don't signify a cent with us so they handle cattle right, and are ready to push lead into any bunch of rustlers lyin' around. Guess it's environment makes us that way. The prairie's so mighty wide it helps us folks to get wide."

Evie was watching the play of the girl's expressive eyes.

"I wonder—if you're right."

"Mostly, I guess."

"Mostly?"

Nan nodded.

"It isn't easy to condemn amongst folks on the prairie," she said with a sigh.

Elvine shook her head. Her eyes were turned from the girl. They were staring down into the turbulent stream.

"I don't think I've found it that way."

"How?"

The interrogation was natural. But it brought Elvine's eyes sharply to the girl's, and, for a moment, they gazed steadily into each other's.

Then the woman's graceful shoulders went up.

"I see you know."

"And—you aren't mad with me for knowing? You aren't mad with Jeff for me knowing? I wanted you to know I knew. I wanted to tell you I knew, only I didn't just know how to tell you. Then I wanted to tell you—something else."

There was simple sincerity in every word the girl spoke. The light in her eyes was shining with truth. Elvine saw it, and knew these things were so, and, in her loneliness of heart, in her brokenness of spirit, she welcomed the chance of leaning for support upon a soul so obviously strong and sympathetic. She yielded now as she would never have believed it possible to yield.

Suddenly she raised her hands to her head and pressed her fingers to her temples.

"Oh, I—I don't know what to do. I sort of feel I just can't—can't stop around. And yet—— Oh, I love him so I can't, daren't leave him altogether. You can't understand, child, no one can. You—oh, you've never known what love is, my dear. I'm mad—mad for him. And—and I can never come into his life again."

She dropped her hands from her head in a movement that to Nan seemed as though she were wringing them. Nan's own heart was thumping in her bosom. She, too, could have cried out. But her eyes steadily, and almost tenderly, regarded the woman who had taken Jeff from her.

"You must stop around," she said in a low, firm tone. "Say, Evie, I don't guess I'm bright, or clever, or

anything like that. I don't reckon I know things different to other folk. But just think how it would be if you went away now. You'd never see Jeff again, maybe, and he'd never know just how you love him. You see, men-folk are so queer, too. Maybe Jeff's right, and you and me are wrong. Maybe we're right, and he's all wrong. I can't say. But I tell you Jeff needs you now—more than ever. He don't know it, maybe. But he wants you, and if you love him you'll just—stand by. Oh, I could tell you of a thousand ways you can help him. A thousand ways you can show him your love without telling him. It means a hard fight for you. I know. And maybe you'll think he isn't worth it. But he is—to you. You love him. And any man a woman loves is worth to her every sacrifice she can make. I don't know. Maybe you got to be punished, not by us folk, not for what you done to Jeff. But Someone guesses you got to be punished, and this is the way He's fixed it. Say, Evie, you won't let go of things, will you? Maybe you can't see ahead just now. But you will—later. You love Jeff, and he just loves you, though he's sort of blind to it now. But he loves you, an' no one else. He wouldn't act the way he's doing if it weren't so. I sort of felt I must say all this to you. I—I don't know why—just. But I won't ever talk like this again. I haven't a right, I know. But I don't mean harm. I don't sure. And if you'll let me help you anyway I can I'll—be real glad."

CHAPTER XXII

THREATENINGS

The offer of reward for the rustlers operating in Rainbow Hill Valley was without the desired effect. It was worse. The men against whom it was directed received it with deliberate but secretly expressed contempt. Nor did Chance serve the masters of the Obar, as four years before She had served Dug McFarlane.

Nor was the failure due to lack of effort. Bud left no stone unturned. And Jeff—well, Jeff did all a man could. The hills were scoured, and the deeps and hidden hollows of the greater foothills. The notices of reward were sent broadcast, even penetrating to the Orrville country. They were set up as Jeff had promised, on tree trunks in the remoter hills where any chance eye might discover them. Where undoubtedly the men who constituted the gang must sooner or later discover them.

The only response was a continuation of the raids.

But a distinct change had taken place in the method of these. Whereas, originally, they had been directed against not only the Obar Ranch, but wherever opportunity offered in the district, they now fastened their vampire clutches upon the Obar only, and, finally, on only one section of its territory: the land which belonged to Jeff's side of the partnership.

So marked was this that it could not be missed.

The partners were out at a distant station where they had been urgently summoned. A young "hand" had been wounded, a nasty flesh wound in the arm. He had been bringing in a small bunch of steers which had strayed to a distant hollow in the hills. It had been overnight. He was held up, and shot by three outlaws, and his cattle run off.

It was Bud who voiced the thought of both partners immediately after a close interrogation of the injured man.

"Looks like some low-bred son-of-a-hobo owes you a reckonin' he's yearnin' to git quit of, Jeff," he said, the moment they were alone. "They're workin' this way all the time. They ain't so much as smelt around the old 'T.T.' territory in days. D'you make it that way?"

Jeff nodded.

"Sure."

But he made no attempt to throw enlightenment.

"Guess you signed the reward."

Bud watched the shadowed serious face of his friend.

"Maybe it's that." There was something like indifference in the younger man's manner.

Perhaps it was this manner which stirred Bud's impatience and drove him to resentment.

"Say," he cried, in fiercely vibrant tones, "d'you know what it is I got in my head? It's the 'hands' on our range. Sure. Ther's some lousy guy on the Obar working in with the gang. Cowpunchers are a mongrel lot anyway. Ther' ain't one but 'ud souse the sacrament wine ef the passon wa'an't lookin' on. I guess we'll need to chase up the penitentiary re-cord of every blamed thief on our pay-roll. Maybe the cinch we're lookin' fer lies that way."

"It's curious."

"Curious? Gee, it's rotten!"

The old man's patience completely gave way.

"See right here, Jeff. I ain't rattled. Not a thing. But ther's got to be some guts put into this thing, an' you an' me's got to find 'em. See? I'm sick to death. Right here an' now I tell you ther's goin' to be a rotten piece of trouble around this lay-out, an' I'm goin' to be in it—right up to my back teeth."

It was perhaps the first time Bud had displayed impatience with the man who had always been the leading spirit of their enterprise. The truth was, something seemed to have gone out of Jeff. He neglected nothing. He spared himself no pains. His physical efforts seemed even to have become greater as the days passed. Frequently, now, night as well as day found him in the saddle watching over their interests. He had become a sort of restless spirit urging forward the work, and watching, watching with the lynx eyes dreaded so much by the men who served him. But for all that something had certainly gone out of him, and Bud knew and feared its going.

If Bud knew and feared the change, he also knew the cause of it. Neither he nor Nan were blind to the drama silently working out in the other household. It was bitterly plain and almost heart-breaking to the onlookers. The same roof sheltered husband and wife. But no unnecessary word was spoken between them. Their meals were taken apart. They were as completely and coldly separate as though they occupied opposite poles. And the girl who recognized these things, and the man who watched them, only wondered how long it must be before the final disaster came upon them.

Jeff's moods had become extraordinarily variable. There were moments when his moroseness became threatening. The canker at his heart was communicating itself to his whole outlook, and herein lay the failure in his work.

It was the realization of all this which stirred Bud's impatience. He knew that unless a radical change was quickly brought about, the vaunted Obar had certainly reached and probably passed its zenith.

Finally, he opened his heart to the sure sympathy of Nan. He had purposely taken her with him on a boundary inspection amongst the foothills. They were riding through a silent hollow where quiet seemed to lie on the top of everything. Even their horses' hoofs failed to make an impression upon it. Peace was crowding the woodland slopes, a peace profound and unbreakable.

"The Obar's struck a mighty bad patch, Nan," he said abruptly. "Ef things kep hittin' their present gait, why, I don't jest see wher' we're to strike bottom. The pinch ain't yet, but you can't never kick out a prop without shakin' the whole darned buildin' mighty bad. An' that's how the Obar's fixed. Ther's a mighty big punch gone plumb out o' Jeff's fight, an', well, I guess we're needin' all our punch to fix the things crowdin' around us."

"You mean the rustlers?" Nan drove to the heart things without hesitation.

"Sure. Them an'—other things."

The girl nodded. She knew the other things without asking.

"Jeff's in a heap of—trouble," she said with a sigh.

"An' looks like carryin' us along with him—ef we ain't watchin' around."

"We've always kind of leaned on Jeff."

"Most folks are ready to lean, Nan. It sort o' saves 'em a deal of trouble."

"Yes. Till you kick the prop away."

"Sure. Our prop's been kicked away, an' we've jest got to git right up on to our hind legs an'—git busy. The leanin' racket's played out fer us. We got to hand Jeff a prop now, an' see it don't git kicked away. See?"

For some moments the girl's gaze searched straight ahead of her down the valley. And into her eyes there grew a gentle light of enthusiasm. Suddenly she turned upon the great figure on its horse beside her.

"We've stood up on our own years, Daddy—before Jeff came along. We can stand now, can't we? I guess we're not going to fail Jeff now he's in trouble. Jeff's been all for us. We're going to be all for him. He needs us, Daddy, and—I'm glad in a way. Say, my heart nigh breaks every time I peek into his poor sad an' troubled face. Jeff's just beating his soul dead. And if the Obar gets wrong, it'll sure be the end of everything for him. It mustn't, Daddy. Things mustn't go wrong. 'Deed they mustn't. It's up to us. You must show me how, Daddy. You're wise to it all. You're strong. You know. Show me. Put me wise, an' I'll—take Jeff's place."

The girl's words came full of a passionate sincerity. There were no half measures in this child of the prairie. Her love was given, a wealth of generous feeling and loyal self-sacrifice. Her father read with a rare understanding. And in his big heart, so rough, so warm, he cursed with every forceful epithet of his vocabulary the folly of the man he had marked out for a son.

"We'll make good, or—bust," he said, with a warmth that almost matched the girl's.

Then he pointed ahead where the hollow opened out, and a large clump of trees marked dividing ways.

"I guessed you'd best see this. It's one o' them notions o' Jeff's. That play ain't worth a cent."

"Ah!"

They rode up to the bluff in silence. And after a moment's search Bud drew rein before a heavy tree trunk, to which was secured a printed sheet. He pointed at it, and, for a while, neither spoke. Nan was taking in the disfigurements with which it was covered, and she read the words written across it in bold but illiterate characters:

"We're wise to her. She don't git no second chanst."

The rest of the disfigurings were mischievous, and of almost indecent character.

"Does Jeff know?" Nan's question was almost a whisper.

"I ain't told him."

Bud's reply was one of doubt.

"He—he ought to be told."

Then Bud suddenly abandoned the restraint he had been exercising.

"Oh —! Ther' ain't no use. He can't do a thing. He wouldn't do a thing. I tell you we're jest suckin'-kids in this racket. We got to lie around crazy enough to fancy we're goin' to git the drop on these bums. What a country! What a cuss of a lay-out wher' you got to set around watching a darnation gang o' toughs whittlin' away your work till they got you beat to a mush. Here, I'm goin' to start right in. I'm goin' to get around Calthorpe. The sheriff's got to git busy, an' earn his monthly pay check. We'll hev to raise vigilantes. I tell you they'll break us else. Ef Jeff can't see, why, he'll hev to be made to. Blast their louse-bound souls to hell!"

And Nan welcomed the outburst. Rough, coarse, violent. It did not matter. What mattered to her was the purpose. The purpose which she hoped and prayed would help Jeff. She had no thought for themselves. Their end of the enterprise never came into her considerations. She was thinking of Jeff. Solely of Jeff—the man she loved better than her life.

* * * * *

The change in Elvine was no less marked than it was in Jeff. But it was a change in a wholly different direction. She was deeply subdued, even submissive in her attitude. But now after the first crisis and its accompanying pain, a general relief was apparent. A relief which anything but indicated the hopelessness which had at the first overwhelmed her. She was not hopeless. Therein lay the key of the matter.

From the time when she had passed through those moments of frenzied despair, after Jeff's return from Orrville, her decision had been taken with lightning celerity. Her back was to the wall, and she meant to fight for all she yearned, desired, by every art she possessed. She knew nothing of the reason

which had made her husband return to her. It was sufficient that he had done so. It gave her the vague, wild hope she needed, and with all her might she intended to set herself to the task of winning back her position in his regard.

She was not logical. Had she been, she must have accepted the alternative of freedom offered her, and, on a liberal allowance, betaken herself to some selfish, worldly life which might have appealed to her. No, she was not logical. Had she been, she would never have loved this man as she now knew better than ever she loved him. She was not logical, but she had courage. It was the same courage which had driven her to fight for that which she had desired years ago. She was going to fight now. And again it was for selfish motives. Only this time they took the form of the love of the man she had married.

She set to work from the very start. Her attractions she knew were great. Jeff must be made to realize them. He must be made to realize all a woman could mean in this life which was theirs. She would unobtrusively study his interests to the last degree. His position in the ranching world would give her ample scope in this. Then there was the work of the ranch. Here her earlier experiences would help her materially.

So she laid for herself a deliberate campaign. Always counting that his lightest command was her law, and nothing must be permitted to display her desire to break down the barrier he had set up between them.

Two days of deep consideration showed her her course. And once having marked it out she set about following it.

Her house was her first care. It must be ordered as no other house of its kind was ordered. She thought of every expressed wish of his during their brief engagement and honeymoon, and sorted it into its place in scheme.

Then came her place in the work of the range. This was more difficult to take at once by reason of lack of precedent. But by tactful watchfulness she felt it could be accomplished. Her first step must be to impress on Lal Hobhouse her intention, and, in this, even sooner than she had dared to hope, she managed to secure a footing. Once her mind was set to achieve a purpose her capacity was beyond all question, and in these troublous times of rustlers the foreman was more than content to welcome her aid.

Throughout these days she rarely obtruded herself upon the man she desired most in the world. He might almost have been non-existent. The rare moments in which he spoke to her were met with a cool reserve on her part, which left nothing to be desired, and gave no opportunity for the reopening of those matters which had brought about the position. Indeed, Elvine had more than reason to be satisfied with her work.

She felt at last that the worst was over, and now it remained for her to win back, step by step, the lost ground, until she had restored herself to her position. It could be done. It should be done, she told herself. She admitted no crime against him. Then where was the justice of it? Anyway, that fierce dread was off her mind. She knew the worst now. She no longer stood on the brink of an abyss of doubt—

She was in her bedroom considering these things. It was a golden evening and the setting sun was shining athwart her windows. Quite suddenly the simple sewing in her fingers dropped upon her lap, and her startled eyes turned upon the wide view of the valley bathed in the perfect evening light.

Was she no longer standing upon that brink? The question flashed through her mind as she remembered an incident until then completely lost in the greater issues. It was the threat of that scrawled note which had been flung in at that very window. She even remembered the sensation of the blow which had awakened her on the night of torture during which she had waited for Jeff's return from Orrville.

She sprang to her feet. Every other thought was swept from her mind. And, for a moment, fresh panic stirred her veins. The words of that message. They were unforgettable.

"You sold the lives of men for a price. You had your way then. We're goin' to have our way now. You'll pay for that deal the only way we know."

The only way we know! Her memory flew to the man Sikkem. Oh, she knew him. She had recognized him on the instant of their meeting. She knew he came from Orrville. She had seen him there. But— Was he one of the original Orrville gang, all unsuspected, or, at least, if not unsuspected, *unknown* to

be?

While she pondered the subject she heard her husband's arrival. She heard him cross the veranda and, pass into the house.

Then again she took up the thread of her thought. This man Sikkem. If he were one of the Orrville gang, what was more likely than that he should have sent that threat? If he sent it, what more likely than that he was one of the gang of rustlers operating here? If he were one of them, then what added significance did it give threat?

A wave of sudden excitement replaced the panic of a moment before. "The only way we know." Did that mean raiding her husband's stock and endeavoring so to ruin the Obar? It looked like it. It would account for what was being done. But no. That might be part of what was contained in the threat. But not all. The only way we know! The only way this class of man understood paying off a score was different from that. With these men it was always a life for a life. Whose? Hers? It might be.

The sun had sunk beyond the mountain peaks. In the adjoining living-room she heard the clatter of supper things. Jeff was having his meal in the solitude which had become their habit.

If it were her life they intended it would not much matter. But was it? Would they punish her that way? To her it did not suggest the refinement of cruelty which would appeal to them. No, there were other signs. Their purpose looked to be to ruin the Obar, and then—what then? Rob her of the man she loved? It could be done. It would be easy, and surely the refinement of it would appeal to natures so ruthless.

Her sewing had dropped to the floor. Mechanically she picked it up. Then and there she purposed to break in upon her husband's meal. But she hesitated, and the impulse passed. Instead, she went to a drawer in her bureau and withdrew the folded paper. She read it over and returned to her seat. Decision was lacking. Her interpretation of the threat had taken strong hold upon her, but she could not decide what best to do. Her fine eyes were troubled as she gazed out into the growing dusk. Dared she go to him? Would he listen?

But once more her thoughts were diverted. The sound of a great clatter of hoofs reached her from the other side of the house. Some one had ridden up to the veranda at a great pace. Who? And what could the urgency be at such an hour?

She heard Jeff moving in the living-room. She heard him pass out on to the veranda. Then curiosity, perhaps apprehension, urged her. She passed to the window beyond her bureau, which was near the angle of the building, and leaned out of it. Ordinary tones on the veranda would reach her there.

She waited, breathing lightly lest her hearing should be impaired. A strange voice was talking. She could not place it. It was rough, and the language was rough. No doubt it was one of the "hands" from some outlying point.

"They got him through the chest, an' I guess he's goin' to pass in. He sez to me, 'Ride like hell an' fetch the boss. Tell him I got 'em plumb wher' he wants 'em. I located their lay-out. I ain't got above an hour or so to tell him in. Just hike an' ride like ——!'"

Then came Jeff's voice cold and undisturbed.

"Where is he?"

"Why, by his shack at Spruce Crossing. He jest got in, an' nigh fell plumb in his tracks out o' the saddle. I don't guess any feller but Sikkem could ha' done it. He's tough—mighty tough."

Sikkem! Elvine moved from the window. Sikkem! Her heart was pounding in her bosom, and, for a moment, her brain seemed in a whirl. Sikkem had discovered the raiders and was willing to give them away. In a flash she was back in Orrville, and her mind was searching amongst shadowy memories that had suddenly become acute. Sikkem! Sikkem! No. She must see Jeff. She must tell him of—Sikkem. She must warn him, and show him her note. A sudden, crushing foreboding descended upon her, and she hurried toward the door.

In a few seconds she was on the veranda confronting her husband. For a moment her courage well-nigh failed her. Jeff was standing with his back turned toward the sunset. The ranchman was no longer there. He had gone to the barn to order a fresh saddle horse for the master of the Obar. Apparently Jeff had turned to re-pass into the house.

His fair strong face, serious and cold, was turned directly upon the beautiful figure of his wife, and it was the coldness of it that daunted her now.

"Well?"

The bitterness of that frigid, surprised inquiry was crushing. Elvine looked into his eyes for one single shadow of softening. She could find none. It shocked the hope she had been steadily building in her heart.

She had no words in which to answer. She stood thus for one uncertain moment. Then she thrust out her hand. It contained the threatening message.

"Will you read that—at once?"

His cold regard dropped from her face. The man noted the dirty paper in her soft white hand. Then he took it. Nor did their hands come into contact.

"Is it a matter of importance?"

Elvine could have cried out with the stab of the question. Only some matter of vital importance justified her action in his eyes. Her gaze was averted to hide her pain.

"I should not have come to you otherwise."

The man moved to the edge of the veranda to obtain more of the dying light. At that moment the ranchman approached with two saddle horses. Elvine scrutinized him carefully. He was a complete stranger to her.

Jeff had read the note. He stood regarding the ranchman. Suddenly his voice broke sharply.

"Leave my horse at the tying post. Wait for me at the barn."

He watched the man secure his horse. Then he watched him return to the barn. Nor did he speak again till he was out of earshot.

At last he turned back to the waiting woman.

"Who sent this? When did you get it? How?" The questions came rapidly.

"It came the night you were at Orrville. It was flung in through the open window late at night. I'd fallen asleep in my chair—waiting. It hit me on the face. They'd made it fast around a grass-tuft."

"Who sent it?"

"It must have been the man, Sikkem, who's just sent in word to you he's—shot up."

"Sikkem? Why?"

Suddenly the restraint Elvine was exercising gave way. Even her husband's deliberate coldness was powerless to stem the tide of conviction which had steadily mounted up within her. The one thought in her mind was that he stood in danger. Her reason was slight enough, but her love accentuated her intuition. She saw in her mind the claiming of the toll these men demanded, and to her swift imagination the picture of her husband's murder was complete before her eyes.

"Sikkem comes from Orrville. He was there—four years ago. There was more than suspicion attached to him. My first day here I met him. Maybe you'll remember. He knew me at once. I don't guess there was any mistake. And I knew him. When he heard I was—married to you he pretended he'd mistaken me for—some one else. And when he explained who, and his feelings against that woman—it was me he was describing—I knew he was, as was suspected, one of the Lightfoot gang at Orrville. Sikkem wrote that note. I could stake my life on it. And—now he's sent for you. He's asking you to go out to Spruce Crossing—at night. A distant, lonely point in the hills. He says he's mortally wounded. He has found the rustlers hiding. Of course he has. He's known all along. Nor do I believe he's wounded. He—and the others—think the only way to get back on me is—through you. They mean to kill you. Who's the boy who brought in word?"

"A new 'hand' we've taken on to replace the boy who was shot up two days back."

"One of the gang."

The woman spoke with a decision she did not realize. But her belief had become conviction. No shadow of doubt remained.

Jeff gazed thoughtfully down at the note. When he raised his eyes his regard had undergone a shadow of change.

There was less coldness in them. He shrugged.

"Guess we'll leave that at present. Why all this now?"

"Because your life's in danger. That's how I figure."

There was a deep note of urgency in the woman's voice. Her eyes were alight with a sudden, unmistakable emotion. But even if the man realized these things he ignored them.

"My life?" There was something cruelly biting in the reflection. "And all this time you knew—Sikkem. You knew we were being raided."

"I——" Elvine broke off.

She had no reply. There could be no reply. Why, she wondered in sudden horror, had she not told of this thing before?

She stood with downcast eyes before the accusing glance of the man. Then, after a moment's pause, a sound escaped his lips. And in it was every thinkable expression of condemnation and contempt.

"Tchah!"

He turned away and strode across to his horse. The woman's voice came to him low, despairing, appealing.

"For God's sake, Jeff, don't go! You won't go! They'll kill you! Oh, God! Jeff! Oh!"

The final exclamation came in a sort of moan as the man swung himself into the saddle, and, without a word, turned his horse and rode away.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE HEARTS OF TWO WOMEN

The figure was silent, motionless upon the veranda. The eyes were dull and lifeless. It was as though paralysis held the woman in its grip.

"Tchah!"

The echo of that fierce expletive remained. It rang through heart and brain. Its sting was hot. It seared its way through the life channels and blasted all hope.

Was there ever such contempt, such scorn, such repulsion, concentrated in one single ejaculation! It told the woman everything. It told of a failure so complete that hope became an emotion driven forever from her heart. It told her that the usury of life was beyond all belief. It told her that the interest demanded for every pledged moment was without pity, or mercy, or justice. Now she knew how she had pawned, and, oh God, the interest which was being torn from her!

Her gaze remained upon the angle of the barn around which her husband had vanished. She was waiting for him to reappear. She was waiting to see if he would ride off in spite of her warning. But she was unaware of the thought prompting her. All she knew, all she felt, was the contempt, the scorn, the distrust he had hurled at her.

The western sky had faded to a pallid yellow. The distance was losing itself in the rising purple shadows. Already the dark patches of woodlands were assuming that ghostly vagueness which belongs to twilight. The ranch was wrapped in a deep repose. A sense of rest had fallen upon the great valley. All life seemed satisfied with its long day's effort and desired only the peace of night.

But the quiet suddenly gave way before a fresh clatter of movement. Hoofs once more beat on the sun-baked soil. Two figures grew out of the twilight from behind the barn, and the woman knew that her warning had gone for naught. She watched them until they were swallowed up by the growing dusk. The last dim outline blurred itself into the pasture. Then she stirred.

A deep sigh was heavily breathed. Then, in a moment, the paralysis fell from her. The dullness of her

eyes gave place to a sheen of excitement, and her perfect cheeks assumed a faint, hectic flush.

For one brief moment she glanced back into the house. Then she glanced down at her own clothing. She was still clad in the riding suit which had become her daily wear. The survey seemed to satisfy her, for she left the veranda at a run, and made her way toward the barn.

Perhaps five minutes later she, too, became lost in the growing twilight, and her horse's hoofs awoke anew the echoes of the place. But her way did not lie in the track of the others. Her horse was racing headlong in the direction of Nan's home.

Bud and Nan were just finishing their supper when Elvine broke in upon them. She came with a rush and a clatter which brought Nan out on to the veranda in hurry of anxious inquiry. Bud was behind her, but his movements lacked her impulse.

Elvine was out of the saddle. She stood on the veranda, a figure of wild-eyed appeal.

"Jeff! Oh, he's gone. Nan, they'll—they'll kill him! I know it. I'm certain. And I warned him. I warned him. But—oh!"

She covered her face with her hands. It was a movement inspired by the memory of his scorn.

Nan's responsive heart was caught by the other's emotion. But above it leaped a fear which she was powerless to deny. Jeff? Jeff in danger? She flung out an arm. Her small hand gripped the other with a force that was incredible.

"What d'you mean?" she cried, almost fiercely. "Don't stand there like a fool. Who is going to harm Jeff?"

The sharp authority, so prompt, so unexpected, dragged the distraught woman into some command of herself. She raised her head. Her eyes were hot with unshed tears. They looked into Nan's, so urgent, yet so full of a steadfast sanity.

"It's Sikkem," she cried, steadying herself. "He's sent in to say he's badly shot up. He says he's located the rustlers' camp and must hand Jeff the news before—while he has time. Jeff's gone out there, and—Sikkem's one of the gang and escaped from Orrville four years ago."

"How d'you know?" It was Bud's heavy voice put the question. It was full of stern command.

"I've seen him. I know him, and—he knows me. He—he wrote this and sent it me."

Elvine thrust the crumpled note at Bud. Her gesture was almost desperate.

"When did he send it?" Again came Bud's command.

"Days ago."

"An' Jeff—didn't know till—now?"

"I was afraid to tell him—then."

Bud and Nan read the note by the parlor lamplight. A bitter imprecation broke from the man's lips.

"Guess I don't get it—yet," he said.

But Nan was quicker.

"He's gone to Spruce Crossing—to Sikkem?" she cried, her eyes hot as they dwelt on the shaking woman before her. "Don't wait talking. It don't matter the right of things. You, Daddy, get our horses fixed and round up a bunch of boys from the bunkroom. Jeff's in danger, an' it's up to us. Maybe Evie'll tell me while you go."

Something of the great Bud's feelings was displayed in the celerity of his movements. He was gone before Nan had finished speaking.

The two women were left facing each other.

Seconds passed without a word. The gentle Nan no longer looked out of the brown eyes. They were hot, resentful. Nor would any one have recognized in the anxious-eyed woman before her the beautiful creature who had first stirred Jeffrey Masters out of his years of celibate thought.

Without a word Nan turned back to the parlor. When she reappeared she was buckling a revolver belt

about her slim waist. The two heavy holsters it supported were almost incongruous on so slight a figure.

Elvine watched her. The girl's deliberation was in deep contrast to her own emotions. Then, too, the sympathy which had fled from Nan's brown eyes left them full of hard resolve.

"You—are not going?" Elvine said, pointing at the weapons.

Nan's surprise was genuine.

"Jeff's in danger."

"But you—a woman? You can't help. You might even——"

"Jeff's in danger."

Nan repeated the words with an emphasis there could be no mistaking. And as the final syllable escaped her pretty lips became firmly compressed.

Elvine regarded her for a silent moment or two. A strange new sensation was stirring within her. Nan's attitude had brought it into being. Her earlier emotions receded before this new feeling. And, strangely enough, she remembered some words her mother had once spoken to her. It was at a time before she had engaged herself to her husband.

"But Jeff—is nothing to you," she said abruptly.

There was a new ring in the voice in which she spoke.

"Is he?"

Nan's eyes looked straight into the wife's. There was no smile in them. There was no emotion lying behind them that Elvine could read. They were steady, unflinching. That was all.

Sounds came up from the ranch buildings. Voices reached them plainly. And among them Bud's dominating tones were raised above all.

Nan's eyes were drawn in the direction, but her gaze only encountered the moonless night.

"What is he—to you?" Elvine's demand was strident. She was roused from her sense of her own sufferings, her own misery. The newly awakened emotion had leaped to proportions which threatened to overwhelm all others.

Nan's eyes came back to her face. There was something almost reckless in their regard. There was even a suggestion of derision in them, a suggestion of triumph. But it was not the triumph over a rival. It was the triumph of one who realizes her conquest over self.

"Everything!" she cried. Then she added almost to herself: "Everything I can think of, have ever dreamed of in life." Then suddenly her voice rose to a ring of ecstasy. It was the abundance, the purity of her love, the certainty of victory over self which inspired it. "Ah, Evie, don't be rattled with what I'm telling you. Ther' surely is no need. You want to be mad with me. Guess you needn't to be. Jeff don't know it. He never will know it. I've never had a hope of him since he met you. He's always been just yours. I don't guess you need to worry a thing that way. The worrying's for me. I've loved him since ever I was a child: since ever he came here. Well, you figure he's in danger—so it's up to those who love him to do. You see, I—well, I just love him with my whole soul."

She turned away. The reception of her confession seemed to concern her not at all.

Out of the darkness loomed her father's great figure. He was leading Nan's horse as well as his own. The girl leaped into the saddle, and he passed his own reins up to her.

"I shan't be haf a minit," he said. "I need my guns. The boys are waitin' by the barn."

He passed into the house. Then Nan observed Elvine. She, too, had leaped into the saddle. Nor could the girl help being struck by the manner of her action.

"You're goin' back home?" she cried.

Elvine shook her head resolutely.

"How—then?"

The wife suddenly urged her horse. It came right up to Nan's with an almost spasmodic jump, driven by a vicious jab of the woman's spurred heel.

The dark eyes were lit with an angry fire as she leaned forward in the saddle. Her words came in a voice of passionate jealousy.

"You love him, so you go to him, ready to face anything—for him. Do you think I don't love him? Do you think I'm not ready to dare for him—anything? Your love gives you that right. What of mine? Does mine give me no right? Say, child, your fool conceit runs away with you. I tell you you don't know what love is. You say you love him with your whole soul. And you are content to live without him. Psha! Your soul must be a poor enough thing. I tell you life means nothing to me without him. I can't and won't live without him."

* * * * *

The black earth sped under the horses' hoofs. The stars shone like dew on the velvet pall of night. Bud led, as he always led in the things practical which belonged to his life.

He needed no thought for guidance on that night journey. Unerring instinct served him across those wide plains. Spruce Crossing might have possessed a beacon light, so straight, so unerring was the lead he offered those behind him.

Now, perhaps, more than ever, all his great skill was put forth. For he had listened to the complete, if halting, story of the man's wife, and shared with her the conviction of treachery. For the time, at least, all consideration for the woman was thrust aside. He offered no words of blame. His concern was simply the succor of his friend.

Nan was ready to follow him whithersoever he led. She was ready to obey his lightest command, for she understood his skill. She had no thought for anything but the man she loved. No possibilities of mischance, no threat to herself could find place in her thought. For her Jeff's well-being was her single concern.

Elvine rode beside her, step for step. She had told her story as they rode. After that silence between them prevailed. It was a silence fraught with an emotion too deep for any words. A fierce jealousy mingled with her passionate longing. Her world was empty of all but two figures. The man she loved, and the girl who had confessed her love with all the strength of a great, simple courage.

Whatever the night might bring forth, whatever tragedy might be in store, she scarcely had thought for anything but her own almost mad resolve. This girl, this child of the plains, should obtain no advantage. She was prepared to yield all for the succor of the husband who had scorned her—even to life itself.

CHAPTER XXIV

TO SPRUCE CROSSING

The eyes of the night were there alone to see. It was as well. There are moments in men's lives when it is best that it should be so. Passions are not always sane. They are not always human.

So it was with Jeffrey Masters. The change in him had been rapid. It was almost magical. Always one who lacked something of the softer human qualities, he yet must have been counted a man of balance. If sympathy, sentiment, were never his strong points, he was by no means lacking in loyalty, kindness, rightness of purpose. All his life, achievement, achievement under the strictest canons of honesty, or moral scruple, had been the motive urging him. He had seen neither to the right nor to the left of these things.

Then had come the woman into his life and the lighting of those natural fires which belong to all human life. He yielded to them, and the suddenness of it all seemed to sweep away every cooler method which had always governed him. There had been no thought, no calculation in his yielding, such as might have been expected. He was the victim of his own temperament. His powerful restraint had been suddenly relaxed. And, for the time, he had been completely overwhelmed by the intensity of his passion.

But this passion for the woman who had so suddenly entered his life was merely the opening of vials of emotion hitherto held sealed. It was no radical transformation. All that had been his before still remained, buried perhaps for the moment under the avalanche of feeling, but nevertheless still occupying its place. These things could not be swept away. They could not be destroyed. They would remain when the passionate fires had completely burned themselves out.

But the unlooked-for had happened. These fires had not been permitted to burn themselves out. They had been extinguished, deluged out of existence when the idol of his worship was flung headlong from its pedestal by the complete revolt of his moral being. His prejudices, his instincts, matured through years of effort, were the stronger part of him, and the conflict was decided before it began. The shock of discovery had brought a terrible reaction. His love was killed under the blow. And though for a while the sense of overwhelming disaster had been crushing, the measure of that disaster was taken swiftly. It left him disillusioned, it left him harder, colder. But it left him sane.

These things were not all, however. On this night he had approached far nearer the hell which only a woman can create for a man than his first discovery had borne him. The irony of it was perfect. Out of her great love for him, solely in his interest, in a great desire to shield him from a danger she saw threatening him, she had contrived to convince him that she had been as ready to sacrifice him, his interests, the interests of his friends, as she had been to accept the price offered for the blood of his twin brother.

So the eyes of the night looked down upon the haunting figure of a man who knew neither mercy, nor pity, nor hope. The world of human happiness had closed its doors upon him, and his whole spirit and body demanded a fierce retaliation.

That was the mood which looked out of his coldly shining eyes. That was the mood which drove the horse under him at a headlong gait, and left his spurs blood-stained upon his heels. That was the mood that left him caring nothing for any danger that might lurk under cover of the starlit dark of night. The fierceness of his temper demanded outlet. Bodily outlet. Active conflict. Anything, so that a burning lust for hurt should be satisfied. He cared nothing at all for himself. No bodily suffering could compare with the anguish of mind he had passed through, was still passing through. And so he rode headlong till the youth accompanying him was hard put to it to keep pace with him.

The hammering of the horses' hoofs upon the sun-baked earth was a fitting accompaniment to his mood. The sigh of the night breezes through the trees was no less desolate than his heart. Nor was the darkness one whit more dark than the stream of thought which flowed through his hot brain.

Not one word did he exchange with the man behind him. In truth the youth who had brought the summons had no part in the thing that was happening, at least not in Jeffrey Masters' mind. There was no one besides himself in this. There was just himself and his goal—whatever that might bring forth—with a wild, almost insane desire to act fiercely and without mercy should opportunity offer.

The land rose and fell, from hill to valley, from valley to hill. The way lay through avenues of bluff-lined grass, or across hollows of virgin pasture. Trickling mountain streams barred the way, only to be passed without a thought of their depth, or the dangers of their treacherous, sodden banks. The mountain barrier ahead, looming darkly forbidding in the starlight, with its mazing hollows and woodland crowns, was incapable of inspiration at the moment. There are moments when Nature's profoundest awe is powerless to affect the mind of man. These were such moments. The whole mind of Jeffrey Masters was absorbed till there was no room for any influence which did not arise out of the burden of his bitterness.

But if he were indifferent to his surroundings, the man riding hard behind him moved with eyes and ears fully alert. That which he was seeking would have been impossible to tell. Nevertheless every shadow seemed to possess interest, every night sound to possess some quality worth remarking. Not for an instant, after the hills had been entered, did his vigilance relax.

Spruce Crossing lay deep in the hills, a clearing to the south of the junction of converging mountain streams. It was a mere cattle station, neither better nor worse than several others lying on the outskirts of the Obar territory. Yet it was important that it headed a valley running north and south amongst the hills, where the grass was sweet, and rich, and fattening, one of those surprise natural pastures which the hills love to yield occasionally to those who seek out their wealth.

A glimmer of light, like some distant star fallen to earth from its velvet setting above, marked the station, house. It was visible at a great distance down the flat stretch of the valley. The ranchman's horse was headed directly for it, and the animal moved readily, eagerly now, nor were the spurs needed to urge him further. The instinct of its journey's end was sufficient to encourage its flagging spirits.

The distant light grew brighter. It took on the rectangular form of a window opening in a log-built hut.

Jeffrey Masters had fixed his gaze upon it, and so the shadowy scene about him passed all unnoticed. He saw nothing of the darker objects lying on the ground adjacent to his way. The slumbering kine which bore his brand remained all unheeded. He had no thought for them. His course took him over a track which passed down a land between two fenced pastures. These, too, were stocked with fattening steers, or with the brood cows and their attendant calves. At another time, under other conditions, these things would have held for him an absorbing interest. Now they concerned him not at all.

The dark pastures gave place to a number of corrals, also lost in the summer night. A dog barked. Then, in a moment, its sharp yelps became silent, and the stillness became once more unbroken except for the hard pounding hoofs of the two horsemen approaching.

A few moments later these sounds ceased as the dark outline of the station house itself took shape.

For a few seconds Jeff gazed at the window opening where the light from within was still shining. A sound had caught and held his attention. It came from within the hut, and there was no mistaking it. It was the sound inspired by physical suffering, and the voice that uttered it was a man's. He sprang out of the saddle and turned to hand his horse to the man who had accompanied him. But he found himself standing alone.

With a shrug of the shoulders he left his horse and turned at once to the hut. Just for an instant he hesitated once more. It was his thought to look in through the window. The hesitation passed. The next moment he passed along the lateral log walls to the far end of the building where he knew the door to be situated.

The door was closed. He placed his hand on the heavy wooden latch. A second passed. He glanced over his shoulder. It had occurred to him to wonder at the sudden going of the youth who had accompanied him.

But there was neither sight nor sound of the vanished youth. He raised the latch and swung the door open.

CHAPTER XXV

AN EPIC BATTLE

The station house was extensive. It was a bunkhouse of lesser dimensions.

Jeff's eyes moved swiftly over the dim interior. The remoter corners of the place were shadowed. But the light was sufficient to yield him a view of four squalid bunks on which the many-hued blankets were tumbled. The walls bore signs of personal effort at decoration. There were photographs over each bunk, tacked up and disfigured by flies. There were odd prints pasted on the rough log walls, the seams of which were more or less adequately filled with mud to keep the weather out.

There were two rough window openings, one in each side wall. The only entrance or exit was the door at the northern end, through which he had approached. At the other end, directly opposite this, an oil lamp was shedding its feeble rays through a well-smoked chimney glass. It was standing on a small improvised table which divided two bunks set on wooden trestles. The whole interior was perhaps thirty feet in length and twelve feet wide, a roomy, unkempt shanty, which served its simple purpose as a shelter for men unused to any of the comforts of life.

The object which caught and held Jeff's instant attention was the figure of the man seated on the side of one of the bunks, beside the table on which the lamp stood. It was the figure of Sikkem Bruce, bearing no trace whatever of any mortal injury, and with a look of wide-eyed surprise upon his evil countenance.

Jeff moved up the room. He approached without haste. His eyes were steady, and his expression one of tight-lipped determination. There was something coldly commanding in his attitude. His fair, bronzed features, keen, set, displayed no weakening. His body seemed poised ready for everything that could possibly happen. The latent power and vigor of his movements were tremendous. He carried no weapons of defense in view, and his dress was a simple loose jacket over a cotton shirt, and, for nether

garments, a pair of loose riding breeches which terminated in soft leather top-boots.

Sikkem's eyes were on him the whole time. There was even some slight apprehension in them at the sight of that swift, voiceless approach. Jeff came to a halt before him, and it was the ranch hand who found speech most necessary.

"Say, I didn't guess you was gettin' around to-night, boss," he said with some show of ease.

"No?"

"I sure didn't."

Jeff's retort flashed out.

"Then what did you send that youngster in for with mouthful of durned lies?"

Sikkem stared. But his look was unconvincing. Moments passed before his reply came, and in those moments the keen eyes of his employer were busy. The man was still in the working kit of a cowpuncher. Even to the chapps, and the prairie hat crushed down on his ugly bullet head. Then, too, his pair of guns were still strapped about his waist. None of these things escaped Jeff, any more than did the fellow's clumsy regard. He wondered how much truth—if any—lay behind that mask of wicked eyes and brutish features.

"I'm waiting."

Jeff's demand came with a rasp. The man's delay in reply had conveyed all he wanted to know of the truth in him.

"Wot youngster? I tell you I didn't send no one in." There was truculence in the denial. "Wot's the lies?"

The ranchman was no match for the keen mind of his employer. In brute force he might have been more than his equal. But even that was doubtful. While he was speaking Jeff moved. Up to that moment he had been facing the foreman with his back turned toward the distant door. Now his movement placed him against the table with his back to the other empty bunk, and his focus took in not only the man before him, but the shadowy outline of the distant half-open door.

"It's the boy we took on the other day at—your recommendation. Your recommendation. Get me? Guess he came with the yarn you were shot to death. You'd located the rustlers' camp. You needed to see me quick." Jeff's words came swiftly. Then after a pause he added: "You didn't send him along? Who did?"

As Jeff watched the man's deliberate shake of the head he became aware of a muffled sound, somewhere away beyond the door. It was faint, but, to him, unmistakable. He gave no sign.

"Where are the other boys?" he demanded.

"Out on cattle guard."

The movement beyond the door again penetrated the silence of the hut. Now it was that the ranchman made his mistake. Only for an instant did he turn his head and eyes in the direction of the sound. But it was sufficient.

Jeff's voice rasped again.

"Stand up, darn you! Stand up!"

Sikkem's gaze came back abruptly, and on the instant his right hand flew to his waist for his guns. But the muzzle of Jeff's revolver was within a foot of his head, and behind it his coldly shining eyes.

Sikkem's hand dropped from his waist. He stood up. The law of the gun was powerfully ingrained upon his mind.

"Loose those guns at your waist—quick! Let 'em drop on the bunk! Quick, or I'll pump you full of lead!"

The deadliness of Jeff's command was irresistible. The power of that leveled gun indisputable. The buckle was loosened, and the weapons fell on the blankets behind the ranchman.

"Now push your hands up! Right up!"

The command was obeyed on the instant, but the look which accompanied the movement was as deadly as human passion could make it.

"Back away! Back to the far end! Sharp!"

Sikkem moved. But his movement was not rapid enough. Jeff urged him.

In the pause Jeff's straining ears caught again the sound of movement, and he wondered why development was not precipitated. Perhaps— But Sikkem had nearly reached the distant wall, and, at that instant, a whistle shrilled through the building.

Jeff knew he was trapped. But, with a wonderful sense of detachment, mind and body worked almost electrically. His revolver spat out its vicious report. For the fraction of a second he held the smoking lamp poised in his other hand. Then, like a shooting star, it flew through the adjacent window and fell extinguished amidst the crash of its own glass. It was at the complete fall of darkness that the door slammed closed, and half a dozen shots rang out through the building, followed by the "plonk" of the bullets embedding themselves in the solid logs immediately behind where the rancher had been standing.

But Jeff was no longer there. There had been a simultaneous clatter of falling bunk boards. There was the rustling of straw. Then a sound of scrambling, and, after that, a dead silence. The darkness was complete except for the faint silhouette of the windows against the dim starlight beyond them.

Jeff had taken the big chance. What remained now must be met as circumstance permitted. The blood in him was fired. The savage delight of battle. He would sell the last breath in his body at the highest price he could make his enemies pay. He had walked into a trap laid by the rustlers, headed, perhaps, by Sikkem Bruce, with his eyes wide open, and some almost insane yearning made him glad.

Now he crouched down against the wall beside the table. He had flung up a barrier of straw palliasses before him. It was not as a protection against gun-fire, but to screen his movements should his opponents produce a light. Then, too, there was another thought in his mind.

The place became alive with sounds, voiceless, muffled sounds of cautious movement. It was the movement of men who know that death is lurking at every turn. Nor could they tell whence it was most likely to come. It was a moment of tense and straining nerves wherein the wit of one man had discounted the elaborate plan to murder of those whose indifference to death only shrank from the contemplation of their own.

Jeff's eyes strained against the darkness. The windows stood out in silhouette. From these he had no fear. He knew, and he knew that these ruffians would know, the dangers attending themselves from any attack upon him from such a direction. The advantage would be entirely his, since he had possessed himself of Sikkem's complete arsenal. He knew it was for him to await the fire of these men, every shot of which would yield him a sure target.

A flash broke the blackness ahead of him. The bullet sank into the woodwork just above his head with a vicious splash. But he refrained from reply. Another crack split the silence, and the wall to the left of him flung back its response. Still he offered no reply.

His eyes were searching, searching. And a surge of excitement suddenly thrilled him.

Two shots came on the same instant. One slithered hotly in the flesh of his shoulder, but the other struck wide of him.

The wound gave him no concern. Every sense, every faculty was concentrated on one thought, on one object. A dim, fine-drawn but uneven line of shadowy light had grown out of the darkness to his now accustomed eyes. It was vague, so vague that it required the greatest concentration to detect. But he recognized it for what it was, and a savage delight possessed him as he observed that there were breaks in its continuity. The line was waist high, and lateral, and he interpreted it to suit himself.

He raised his gun and took steady aim at one of the breaks. His shot was deliberate, careful, since the sight of his weapon, even the weapon itself, remained invisible in the dark. He fired, and dropped himself prone behind his barrier.

A bitter curse followed by a groan of pain was the answer to his shot. Then, where that break in the shadowy line of light had been, now the line was unbroken.

A fierce glee permeated him. The curse, the moan had been music to him. But it only required a second before he had the enemy's retort.

It came with a fusillade. And every shot seemed to find practically the same spot on the wall. He knew that the flash of his gun had been the target. He knew he had only escaped by a fraction of time.

His shoulder stung him. But his will, his savage yearning for the continuance of the fight, left him disregarding. There was more to come, and he knew it. Nor did he care how much. The blood was hot in his brain. No pain, nothing mattered. Again he searched along that lateral line of light.

He was reaching out far beyond his retreat. He had stealthily crawled to the left of the table. Again his weapon was raised against another break in that telltale line of light, this time at a point where the angle of the building must be. A moment passed while he judged his aim. It was by no means easy. Instinct was his only guide. That instinct which belongs to the man accustomed to the constant use of a revolver.

His shot rang out. Again came a cry, inarticulate, fierce. Then followed the sound of a falling body. Then he let loose a second shot. But even as it sped he had his answer. Four tongues of flame leaped out at him in the darkness, and four bullets smote viciously into the wood behind him.

His second shot had cost him a sharp penalty. The flesh of his forearm had been ripped by one of those four bullets and he felt the trickle of warm blood over the unscored flesh.

He crouched behind his barrier. The joy of battle for the highest stakes for which a man can play was undiminished in him. The wounds he had received left him all unconcerned. In the thrill of the moment he had no time for them. The desire to kill was strong, and he knew he could already count two victims.

But the general in him was foremost, even in the excitement of battle. The number of his opponents, their next move. These things concerned him seriously.

He searched the line of light with eager eyes. He listened to the sound of movement. These things were all he had to rely on, and on their accurate reading depended his chances of victory or defeat, with its certainty of swift death.

In two places there were still definite breaks in the line. He knew he had accounted for two of the enemy. Originally a volley of six shots had come at him. There were two unaccounted for. Where were these? They were not standing.

He looked for no depths of subtlety in the methods of these men. He understood their ruffianism too well. Therefore the sound of movement that reached him suggested the obvious result of their first failure. It was the presage of an attack at close quarters.

He listened intently. The sounds were of shuffling bodies, moving uncertainly, possibly fearful of contact with obstruction which might betray them. And he calculated they were approaching low down along the side walls, thus hoping to offer the least target possible. If they reached him the chances would be all against him. They must not reach him. His decision was promptly taken.

He raised one of Sikkem's guns. It was heavy, and a sense of pleasure filled him as he felt the enormous bore of the muzzle with one finger. Stealthily he raised himself to his full height behind his barrier. He leveled his gun at a spot just below the right hand window, where the wall rose up out of the floor. There was no obstacle intervening.

A moment later the crack of the gun burst through the silence. Then, on the instant, he flung himself prone across the table. His answer came like lightning. Four shots. And three of them harmlessly tore their way into the bowels of the woodwork. The fourth had come from the direction in which he had aimed.

A fierce spasm of pain through his chest blinded him mentally and physically for the moment. But, by an almost superhuman effort, he recovered himself. He knew he was hit, and hit badly. Something seemed to have broken inside him, just under his left armpit.

He forced himself to an upright position and flung out his gun arm. His eyes were again on the line of light. A fury of recklessness was urging him. There were the breaks, and he blazed at each in turn, carefully, deliberately. A moment later two shots came from the right and left of him, and he dropped down behind his barrier, but not before he had heard the death-cries of fierce blasphemy at the far end of the room.

He lay behind his shelter breathing hard and suffering an agony of physical pain. The sweat poured down his forehead. It seemed to him that everything was somehow receding from him, even the sense of his own danger. In these feelings he realized how near he was to defeat, and with all his will he set himself to conquer his weakness. A few moments passed. His pain eased. Then, with all the

recklessness of the gambler, he prepared for his final throw.

He was certain he had accounted for four of the enemy. Four. He calculated there were still two remaining. He shifted his position, moving himself clear of his shelter. A hell of suffering was endured in the process, and the sweat poured out afresh upon his forehead. He gritted his teeth with superlative determination and flung back the dreadful faintness seeking to smother his powers.

He raised himself to a sitting posture. He sought support from the wall behind him. Then, with unbroken nerve, he raised both Sikkem's guns, one in each hand. Without a tremor he held them, and his aim took in the two points at which he felt the remaining foe were advancing upon him. Oh, for one moment of light wherein to assure himself! But the thought passed as it came, followed by a wild, simple hope that one of his shots might find its billet.

He pressed the trigger in each hand. He fired rapidly. He fired until both guns were empty. Then he flung them to the ground with a clatter. For an instant he thrilled at the sound of a cry of pain, and the fierce accompanying blasphemy. Then he flung himself down and crawled to his retreat behind the palliasse, convinced that the cry was in the voice of Sikkem Bruce.

His sufferings were well-nigh unendurable. His very breathing caused him an exquisite pain. He even found himself wondering how much longer he could endure.

But his work was not yet finished. If he must die he would die fighting.

Now, blending with fresh sounds of movement along the side walls, another sound added its threat to the quiet of the room. It came from behind the straw palliasse. There was heavy breathing, almost gasping. There was a distinct gritting of teeth. But there was also a sound of the effort which caused these things in the wounded man. There was a sharp ripping and tearing, the rustle of straw and—something else. The movements were hasty, desperately hasty. Movements which suggested the defender's realization of the narrow limits of time before his powers would become completely exhausted.

These things lasted a matter of seconds only. Then the threat broke. The quiet was shocked into desperate action. There was the shout of human voices. There was the rush and scramble of feet. Then, in the midst of the tumult, a great tongue of flame leaped up from the heart of the straw palliasse.

Its fierce, ruddy light revealed the faces of two men leaping to the attack of the wounded defender. They were within a yard of their goal. But even as they were closing upon him they reeled back before the new terror whose dread was overwhelming even in face of their murderous lust.

The flame shot up toward the roof. Jeff staggered to his feet bearing in his arms the blazing bundle. Higher he raised it. Higher and higher, till the devouring flame licked at the parched thatch of grass roof above. It caught in a second. The flames swept up along the rough rafters till they reached the pitch of the roof. In a moment great billows of smoke were rolling out of the dry crevices.

Just for one instant, before the fog closed down upon the whole interior, Jeff beheld the result of his work. The men had fled toward the closed door, and, on the ground, against the far wall, he had a glimpse of five bodies lying crumpled up where his guns had laid them.

Suddenly a great shout reached him from without.

"Ho, Jeff! Ho, boy!"

It was a deep-throated roar which drowned the hiss and crackle of the blazing straw.

Jeff's answer rang through the burning structure with all the power of his lungs.

"The door! Bust it! Quick, Bud! Bust it, an' stand clear!"

For answer there was a crash on the woodwork outside. He waited for no more. With a wild rush through the blinding, choking fog of smoke he charged down the room. With all his might he flung the blazing palliasse from his scorched hands. He had no idea of the direction in which it went. His one desire now was to reach the door as it gave under the sledge-hammer attacks of the men outside.

He heard a crash and rending of woodwork. He could see nothing. He was incapable of further effort. The end had come all too soon. He staggered blindly, helplessly. His tottering limbs gave under him. Suffocation gripped him by the throat. He was conscious of the rush of a figure toward him. The sound of his name shrieked in a woman's voice. Then there were shots fired. He heard them. And it seemed there were many of them, and the sound was blurred, and vague, and distant from his ears. He fell. He knew he fell. For hours it seemed to him he continued to fall in an abyss of blackness that was wholly

horrifying. It was a blackness peopled with hideous invisible shadows. So impenetrable was the inky void that even sound had no place in it.

CHAPTER XXVI

UNDER THE VEIL

There was no moon. Only a starry sheen lit the night. A wonderful peace had descended upon the hills. The quiet was the hush of the still prairie night. Teeming maybe with restless life; but it was a life invisible, and rarely audible. Nevertheless the hush was merely a veil. A veil which concealed, but had no power to sweep away the garnered harvest of violent human passions.

The figure of a man lay stretched upon his back on the bank of the river. His head was carefully pillowed. A covering had been spread over the upper body, as though to hide that which lay beneath, rather than yield warmth and comfort on the summer night. The covering was a coat, a woman's coat, and the owner of it sat crouching over her charge.

Nan stirred. She reached out and tucked the long skirts of the coat under the man's shoulders with that mother instinct at once so solicitous, so tender. She shifted her position which had become cramped with her long vigil. These were moments of darkness, literal and mental. Her anxiety and dread were almost overwhelming. The waiting seemed interminable.

She raised her eyes from her yearning regard of the still, bandaged head with its pale features. She sighed, as she turned them in another direction, toward an object lying beneath the shadow of a great red willow near by. It was a dark object, huddled and, like the other, quite still. A curious sort of fascination held her for some moments, then, almost reluctantly, as though impelled by the trend of her feelings, her gaze wandered in the direction whence was wafted toward her a pungent reek of burning. It was the dimly outlined skeleton of the station house, roofless and partly fallen, white-ashed and still faintly smoking.

For long moments she regarded this sign of the destruction which had been wrought. Nor was the sigh which escaped her wholly of regret. A deep stirring was in her heart. She was thinking of the heroic battle which the station home had witnessed. She was thinking of the desperate odds one man had faced within those four walls. She was thinking, too, of the victory which ultimately had been his. But the cost. She shuddered. And her eyes came back to the white upturned features of the man before her.

She started. The man's eyes were open. Tenderly she raised a hand and smoothed the cold forehead with its soft palm. Tears of emotion had gathered in her eyes on the instant. But they did not overflow down her cheeks.

The eyes closed again. The lids moved slowly, as though reluctant to perform their office. The girl literally held her breath. Would they open again? Or— Her question was answered almost on the instant. They reopened. This time even more widely. They were staring straight up at the starlit sky, quite unmoving. There was no consciousness in them, and barely life.

Nan waited for some long apprehensive moments. Her heart was full of a wild, new-born hope. But fear held her, too. At last she moved. She withdrew herself gently but swiftly. Then she stood up, a picture of dapper womanhood in the white shirt-waist and loose riding breeches which the coat spread over the man's body should have held concealed. A moment later the darkness swallowed her up as she sped down the trail which passed near by.

With her going there crept into the man's vacant eyes the first real sign of life.

Five minutes later the girl was back at his side. But she had not returned alone. Bud was with her, and together they bent over the prostrate form. The girl was kneeling. She had gently taken possession of one of the bandaged hands lying inert at the man's side. Tenderly enough she held it between her own soft palms and chafed it, while her shining eyes, yielding all the secrets of her devoted heart, gazed yearningly down into his.

"Jeff!" she murmured, in a low, eager tone. "Jeff!"

There was no response. The eyes were fixed and staring.

Bud had less scruples in his anxious impatience.

"Say, that ain't no sort o' way to wake him, Nan," he whispered hoarsely. Then in his deep gruff voice he displayed his better understanding. "Say, Jeff! You ken hear me, boy. You're jest foolin'. Say, hark to this. You beat 'em. You beat 'em single-handed, an' shot 'em plumb down."

Curiously enough there was almost instant result, and Bud's satisfaction became evident. The staring eyes relaxed their regard of the starry heavens. The lids flickered, then the eyes themselves turned in the direction whence came those sonorous tones.

"You ken hear?"

Bud's words came on the instant, and were full of triumph. Then he turned to the girl who had promptly relinquished Jeff's hand.

"We ain't got a thing to hand him, 'cep' it's water," he said half-angrily. "We can't jest move him, not nothin', till the boys git along with the wagon, an' that blamed dope merchant gits around. What in hell ken we do?"

"Wait."

Nan's finality robbed her father of his complaint.

"Guess we'll hev to. Say——"

"Yes?"

"Do you guess he ken talk if he feels that way?"

But Nan was no longer giving him any attention. All her thoughts, all her being was for the man before them.

A faint tinge of color was creeping under his skin, up to the soft white wrapping fastened about his fire-scorched forehead. Even in the starlight it was plainly visible to the girl's eager eyes. There was something else, too. The look in his eyes had completely changed. To Nan there was something approaching the shadow of a smile.

She moved close to his side so that she could reach out and give him support. Then she gave the father at her side his orders.

"Get water, Dad—quick!" she demanded.

Bud demurred.

"I only got my hat," he said helplessly.

"It'll do. But get it."

Bud moved away, with the heavy haste of two hundred and ten pounds of mental disturbance.

The moment he had gone a faint sigh escaped the injured man. Nan held her breath. Would he—speak? She would give worlds to hear the sound of his voice, She had believed him dying. Now a wild hope surged. If he would—could speak, it seemed to her simple logic that he must—live.

"Nan!"

The word was distinct, but, oh, the weakness of voice. The girl thrilled.

"Yes, Jeff. I'm here. I'm right beside you."

"Tell me—things."

The girl's heart sank. In a flash she remembered all there was to tell. Why had his first thoughts on returning life been of these—things? Yet it was like him—so like him. She drew a deep breath and resorted to subterfuge.

"It's as Dad shouted at you just now, Jeff. You beat them all—lone-handed. But you mustn't talk. Don't worry about them. Guess they're not worth it. You've been shot up, Jeff, an' Dad an' I we've just fixed you the best we know, an' the boys have gone right in for a wagon, an' a doctor. The doc's got to get in from Moose Creek, twenty miles away. That's what scares me."

The smile in the man's eyes had deepened.

"Don't—get—scared, Nan. I'm—not dying."

The girl thrilled at the assurance in the tired voice. But the thrill passed as swiftly as it came. She knew what would follow when Jeff had gathered sufficient strength.

Sure enough he went on presently:

"I remember everything—till—I dropped," he said haltingly. "What happened—after—that? Y'see—I—heard—firing."

Nan glanced helplessly about her. If only her father would return with the water! It might help her. She felt that she could not, could not tell him the things he was demanding of her.

But again came his demand, and in the tone of it was a sound of peevish impatience.

"What—happened—after—Nan? I need—to know."

"It all came of a rush. I can't just tell it right."

The man's eyes closed again. He remained silent so long that Nan's apprehensions reawakened. She even forgot her panic at his persistence.

"Jeff! Jeff!"

Her call to him was almost a whisper. But the man heard. His eyes opened at once.

"Yes, Nan?"

The girl laughed a little hysterically.

"I—I—was——"

"You thought I——"

"Yes, yes. But you are—better? Sure?"

The man's head turned deliberately toward her. There was astonishing vigor in the movement.

"Ther's things broke inside me, Nan," he said, in a voice that was growing stronger. "A rib, I guess. Maybe it's my shoulder. The others—guess they're just nothing. Now tell me—the things I asked. How did you happen to git around? Start that way."

A sense of relief helped the girl. He had given her an opportunity which she seized upon.

"Oh, Jeff, it was just thanks to Evie. I guess she saved your life."

"How?"

The girl's enthusiasm received a set-back in his tone.

"She came right along over to us, and told us—everything—the moment you'd gone. We followed you just as hard as the horses could lay foot to the ground. Dad an' me, and six of the boys."

"What did Evie do?"

"She came along—too."

"Wher' is she?"

Nan made no answer. The question was repeated more sharply.

"Wher' is she?"

"She's under that red willow—yonder."

The girl's voice was low. Her words were little more than a whisper.

"Is she—hurt?"

"She's—dead."

At that moment Bud reappeared bearing a hat full clear river water.

Nan looked up.

"How can we give it him?" she questioned. Somehow the importance of the water had lessened in her mind.

Jeff answered the question himself.

"I don't need it, Bud," he said. Then he added as an afterthought: "Thanks."

Nan looked up at her father who stood doubtfully by.

"Set it down, Daddy. Then get right along an' look out for the doc, an' the wagon. Hustle 'em along."

Bud obeyed unquestioningly. He felt that Nan's understanding of the situation was better than any ideas of his. He set the hat down for the water to percolate through the soft felt at its leisure. Then he moved on.

The moment he was out of earshot Jeff's voice broke the silence once more.

"Nan?"

"Yes, Jeff?"

"Wher's the red willow? How far away?"

"A few yards."

"Can you help me up?" The question came after a long considering pause. It came with a certain eagerness.

But Nan remonstrated with all her might.

"No, no, Jeff," she cried, in serious alarm. "You mustn't. True you mustn't. It'll kill you to move now."

Her appeal was quite without effect.

"Then I'll have to do it myself."

Jeff's obstinate decision was immovable, and in the end the girl was forced to give way.

The sick man endured five minutes of the intensest agony in the effort required. Twice he nearly fainted, but, in the end, he stood beside the somewhat huddled figure under the red willow, gasping under the excruciation of internal pains.

"I can lie here, Nan," he said. "Will you—help me?"

Exerting all her strength the girl helped him to the ground. The position he had chosen was close to the still form of his dead wife. Once he was safely resting again, Nan breathed her relief.

He looked up at her, and something like a smile was in his blue eyes.

"Thanks, Nan. Say—I'll need that coat of yours—later. Will you go along—and get it?"

Nan moved away. She needed no second bidding. Nor did she return until the man's voice summoned her.

"Nan!" he called.

She came to him at once bearing her coat in her hands. For a second, surprise widened her eyes. He was no longer where she had left him. He had moved a few yards away. And she wondered how he had been capable of the unassisted effort. Then she glanced swiftly at the dead woman. The covering over the body had been moved. She was certain. It had been replaced differently from the way she had arranged it. She offered no comment, but busied herself spreading her coat over the man's bared chest, where the rough bandages had been fastened with her father's aid.

Again she seated herself on the ground beside him, but now his face was turned from her. It was toward the still figure a few yards away.

"Tell me the rest now, Nan," he said. "She did her—best—to—save me."

"More than her best. Say, Jeff, she loved you better than life. That's why she's—there."

"Tell me."

A new note had crept into his demand. There was a hush in his voice which gave his words a curious tenderness, reverence even for the woman they were speaking of.

"Guess it must have been over in a minute. Oh, say, it was just the biggest, blindest, most tremendous thing. It was too awful. She was so beautiful, too. And then the love in it. I kind of shiver when I think of it. We heard your shout, Jeff. Evie came right along with us. She insisted. You see, I'd made her mad. I'd blamed her to her face. I—I'm sorry now. But, my, she was brave, and how she loved you! Well, when Bud heard your shout I guess it didn't take him more than a minute to beat in the door they'd fastened. Him an' the boys. The rest took seconds. We stood clear, as you said, guessing you meant a run for it. The place was ablaze. When the door fell we saw it all. You were near it. Beyond you were two men. Sikkem was one. They were against the far wall, sideways from the door. They had guns in their hands. They meant finishing you anyway, whatever happened after. But there was a bundle of blazing stuff in front of them, an' it seemed to worry them quite a deal. You started for the door. They got busy to use their guns right away. Then something happened. We'd forgot Evie. Guess we were plumb staggered. Something rushed past us, into that blazing hut. It was Evie, an' she managed to get between you and them just as you dropped. She fell where she stood. It was the shots they'd meant for you. Then Bud opened on 'em, the boys did too, and after that we dragged you and Evie out. Oh, Jeff, she just didn't want to live without you."

A great sob broke from the girl, and it found an echo deep down in the man's heart. Nan buried her face in her hands, and the sound of her sobs alone broke the stillness.

The man offered no comment. He made no movement. He lay there with his clear eyes gazing at the silhouette of that still dark figure against the mysterious sheen of night. His look gave no key to his thoughts or emotions. His own physical sufferings even found no expression in them. But thoughts were stirring, deep thoughts and emotions which were his alone, and would remain his alone until the end.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE ROUND-UP

Bud's great bulk blocked the window opening on to the veranda. It was his favorite vantage point in leisure. The after breakfast pipe usually found him there. His evening pipe, when the sun was dipping toward the glistening, fretted peaks of the hills, rarely found him elsewhere. It was the point from which, in a way, he was able to view the whole setting of the life that was his.

The winter had come and gone, vanishing amidst the howling gales of snow and sleet which never fail to herald the approach of the open season. It is almost like the last furious onslaught of a despairing and defeated foe. Now the world was abeat with swift pulsations in fibre and nerve. The wide valley of Rainbow Hill was stirring with the vigor of renewed life. Man, beast, fowl, foliage. It was the same. Spring was in the blood. Spring was in the sap. And all the world was fresh and ready for the call of the coming year.

The spring round-up was in full swing with all its ceaseless toil for the ranching world. Already the pastures were crowded with stock brought in from distant valleys and grazings. Numberless calves answered their mothers' calls, and hung to their sides in panic at the commotion in the midst of which they found themselves. Already hundreds of them had endured the terrors of the searing irons which left them indelibly marked as the property of the great Obar Ranch, while hundreds more were awaiting the same process.

And the irons and forges were kept going all day. Just as was the largely augmented band of cattlemen. In ones and twos these hardy ruffians, many of them "toughs" who worked at no other time of the year, scoured every hill, and valley, and plain, however remote in the vast region. Theirs it was to locate the strays to whatever ranch they belonged, and bring them in to home pastures. The sorting would be made after and the distribution. For the whole of the round-up was a commonwealth amongst the growers, and each and everybody was called upon to do his adequate share in the work.

Bud was glad. Nor was it without good reason. The busy life was the life he lived for. And the busy life had been made possible and complete by the events of the previous summer.

He was physically weary and yearning for the supper which was still awaiting Nan's return. But if he were physically tired the feeling did not extend beyond his muscles. His thoughts were busy as his eyes gazed out upon the scenes of life and movement which were going on.

Just now he was thinking of the girl, impatient at the delay of her return from the pastures, where she was superintending the sorting for the morrow's branding. Thinking of her quickly carried him to thoughts of his partner and friend, and thus, by degrees, his mind went back to the events of the last summer which had left the present operations free from the threat which had then overshadowed all their efforts.

It had been a bad time, a bad time for them all. But for Jeff—ah, it had been touch and go. How near, perhaps, it was only now, after long months had passed, and a proper perspective had been obtained, that the full extent of his narrow escape could be estimated.

It had been Christmas before Jeff was completely out of the hands of the surgeon they had had to obtain from Calthorpe. For three months of that time he had hovered between life and death. Nor had his trouble been confined solely to his physical hurts. No, these had been sore: they had been grievous in the extreme. Three times wounded, and his face, and hands, and arms badly burned. But half of his trouble had been the mental sufferings he had endured as a result of his marriage, and the final tragedy of Evie's death.

Now, as Bud looked back on that time, two things stood out beyond all the rest. It was the desperate courage—even madness he called it—of Jeff, and the superlative devotion of Nan.

He had by no means understood all that Jeff had achieved at the moment of his rescue. It was not till long after, by a process of close questioning, that the magnitude of it became plain. Then the marvel of it dawned on him. The courage, the madness of it. Jeff had rid the district of the whole gang of rustlers single-handed. He had shot five of them to death, and the last two had fallen victims to his own, Bud's, gun after they had been wounded by Jeff.

Then had followed that period when Nan had stepped into the picture. With pride, and a great satisfaction, he remembered her weeks and months of devotion to the injured man. Her sleepless, tireless watch. Her skill and patient tenderness. These things had been colossal. To him it had been a vision of a mother's tender care for an ailing child. And the thought of it now stirred him to a touch of bitterness in his feelings toward his partner and friend.

To Bud there could only be one possible end to such a wealth of devotion as his little Nan had displayed, but it seemed that all his ideas on the subject must be wrong. To his uncomprehending mind they seemed no nearer to each other than in the days before a mad passion had seized upon Jeff for the woman he had married.

Bud was very human. His patience had its limits, and just now they seemed to have been reached. He admitted this to himself frankly. He told himself he had "no durned patience with the bunch." And the bunch included both Nan and Jeff. He felt that Nan, too, must be to blame in some way.

He had "no durned patience with the bunch." Therein lay the key-note of his mixed feelings. Here everything was prospering but the one thing above all others upon which he had set his heart. He felt as though he must "butt in" and put matters right himself. How, he did not attempt to suggest. But he felt that if he did not do so, or something or other did not occur to precipitate matters, the "whole durned shootin' match was li'ble to peter."

This was how he saw things. This was how he felt, as he awaited Nan's return from the pastures.

She came at last. She rode up and passed her weary horse to a barn-hand who promptly waited upon her. She was covered with dust to her waist. Her top-boots were white with it. But her cheeks were as fresh as peach bloom, and her soft eyes shone with all a ranchman's enthusiasm at the most exhilarating period of the year.

"One hundred an' forty-two young Obars to-day, my Daddy," she cried out exuberantly. "Ther' don't seem any end to last year's crop. Say, Jeff's just crazy to death about things."

"He surely is."

The old man's reply was tinged by a reflection of his thoughts. But his eyes lit nevertheless.

Nan regarded him seriously.

"Most men get a grouch when they're kept waiting food," she observed slyly. "Say, come right in an' you'll soon feel the world's a mighty good place to live in."

Instantly Bud's humor improved.

"Guess you do your best to make it that way."

The girl laughed as she led the way in.

"That surely is a pretty nice talk, my Daddy. Guess I'll take advantage of it, an' keep you waiting another three minutes while I get rid of the dust."

Her father nodded.

"Jeff comin' up?" he inquired.

The girl shook her head. For a moment the smiling eyes were hidden beneath their lids.

"Not for supper. He's gone on to the branding 'pinch.'"

She was gone before her father could reply, and he was left to his own reflections, which were still further inspired by impatience.

Well enough he knew the arduous nature of the work. Had he not been at it himself since the first streak of dawn? But he felt that Jeff was going beyond the bounds of necessity. Even beyond the bounds of reason.

However, he was not given much time to nurse any imaginary grievance. For Nan reappeared after a surprisingly short interval, and the transformation she had achieved was not a little startling. Her dusty riding suit had given place to a pretty house frock of some softly clinging material which restored to her at once the charm of her essential femininity. The pretty brown of her eyes, and the wavy softness of her hair became indescribably charming in such a setting. Bud regarded her with warm approval, and his spirits rose.

"Jeff's coming right up after he's eaten," she said, as they took their places at the table. "He's getting the food he needs at the bunkhouse. He guesses he hasn't time to get supper right."

"Ah."

The announcement gave Bud more pleasure than his monosyllable admitted. His eyes once more took in the picture Nan made as she sat behind the steaming coffee urn at the head of the table. And somehow the change she had made became less startling.

The meal was the customary ranch supper. The table was simply loaded with cold meats, and sweets, and cakes of varied description. The fare was homely but plentiful, and, to these simple-living people, it was all that was required. Bud helped himself liberally, while Nan poured out the fragrant coffee.

"We ought to be through in a week now," Nan said, passing a heavy china cup of coffee across to her father. "Jeff figures we're well up on average in spite of the stock we lost last summer. It's pretty good to think—after that time. Say, Daddy, we owe Jeff a pretty big thing."

The old man looked up with a smile.

"Guess the owin' ain't all with us," he said, with his mouth full.

Nan paused in the act of sipping her coffee. Her eyes were full of incredulity.

"I don't understand, Daddy," she said frankly. "We owe more to Jeff than ever. Much more. He came pretty near handing over his poor life so the Obar might prosper. He cleared out that gang who would have done the Obar to death. A man can't give more to—his friends."

Bud remained unconvinced. He shook his great head and his smile deepened to a twinkle of real amusement.

"That's so," he said. "But he didn't just give that poor life of his. I allow he was ready to because—because, wal, I guess he's built in a right fashion. We owed him for that sure. But I 'low he's been paid in a way it don't fall to every feller's lot to git paid. You paid that score for us both, an' if ther's any debt left over to be paid, why I guess I'm ready to pay it." He chuckled. "You know, Nan, woman's a ticklish proposition. Ther's wise highbrows guess they handed out all ther' is to say 'bout women-folk, an' I figger some has used elegant langwidge, an' made pretty talk. But they ain't said it all, an' ain't never

likely to ef they was to yarn the whole way from here to hell an' back. I'm gettin' older most every day, an' maybe I oughter git wiser. But ef I was to live till the great round-up I don't guess I'd ever learn the limits of a woman's self-sacrifice fer them she takes the notion to mother. An' it don't matter if it's her own folk, or her beau, or her man, or some pestilential kid she's rescued from drownin' in a churn of cream she's jest fixed ready fer butter makin'. Wot Jeff don't owe you fer haulin' him right back into the midst of life, why I guess you couldn't find with one of them things crazy highbrows wastes otherwise valuable lives in lookin' at bugs with."

Nan laughed, but her denial came swiftly.

"Jeff doesn't owe me a thing," she declared. "The wasn't a soul else around to nurse him. I'd have hated handing him on to you." Then she sighed, but her eyes shone with a light which her father well enough understood. "I—I needed to nurse him. If I hadn't been able to, why, I think I'd have just died. But he don't owe me a thing—not a thing."

Bud took a great gulp of coffee and set his cup down with a clatter. His deep gurgling laugh was good to hear.

"That ain't no argyment," he cried, his deep eyes twinkling. "You've jest said the things I hadn't savvee to put into words right. Woman's jest a sort of angel come right down from Heaven on a snowflake. She sure is. Ther' ain't no reason to her. Set her around a sick bed with physic she ken hand on to the feller lyin' there, an' ther' ain't no limit to wot she can do. It's a passion. You can't blame her. She's fixed that way. She'll just nurse that feller in a way that makes him feel he wants to start right in trundlin' a wooden hoop, or blowin' a painted trumpet, hanging on to her hand, same as he did before he quit actin' foolish on his mother's lap. It kind o' seems to me a mortal wonder women don't set their men-folk actin' queer settin' aside a railroad track guessin' they're advertisements fer a new hair-wash, or some other fancy dope. I guess women is the greatest proposition ever step out o' the Garden of Eden—somedays."

Nan laughed happily.

"That's spoiled it, Daddy," she cried. "Why not leave it at the Garden of Eden?"

Bud laughingly shook his head.

"Why for should I?" he retorted. "If they're angels they ain't all halo an' wings. Anyway, she did step out o' the Garden. An' though the committee ast her to vacate, I allow it was a mighty good thing fer the human race, or we'd all be eatin' grass still, or some other perfectly ridiculous cattle feed. No siree! She ain't all halo an' wings, or us men 'ud be settin' around all the time shoutin' hymns doleful instead of enjoyin' ourselves lyin' awake at nights figgerin' to beat the other feller's play. Woman's jest woman, an' the diffrences in her is just what a mighty tough world makes of her. Maybe she's foolish. Maybe she ain't. Anyway, she's got most things agin her to make her that way, an' it seems to me a yeller dawg don't have much the worst of the game. No. I guess woman's jest woman, an' us men needs to git right on our knees and thank Providence that is so."

Bud reattacked his supper. There had been impatience as well as amiability in his denial. For all his regard for his partner he could not allow Nan her absurd self-effacement without protest. None knew better than he the extent of his debt to Jeff for ridding the Obar of the rustlers. But Jeff, he also knew, owed his life to the devotion, the skill, the love of this girl upon whom he had no claim.

He remained silent now, lost in thoughts he dared not impart to Nan, and the girl herself had nothing to say. She, too, was thinking. But there was no impatience in her thoughts.

She was thinking of a moment which had occurred down at the pastures. A moment just before her return home to supper. To her it had been a moment of compensation for everything which she had ever suffered, a moment when the whole aspect of her life had been suddenly changed to a radiant vision of happiness.

She had been standing beside Jeff watching the work of the boys within the pastures. Their talk had all been of the business of the day. There had been no other sign between them. The old comradeship alone seemed to prevail. Then they had turned away, with their talk silenced. They had moved toward their horses which were standing in the shadow of a small bluff.

Just as they came up Jeff had paused, and turned, and looked down at her from his superior height. She would never forget that look. It was the look she had seen in his eyes when he first gazed on the beauty of the woman he had married. Her heart was set thumping in her bosom as she thought of it now. A deep flush surged to her cheeks, and she kept her head studiously bent over her plate.

Then had followed a great impulsive abandoning of his usual reserve. It had been so unusual in him, but to Nan so natural. It seemed as though of a sudden some great barrier between them had been thrust aside by emotions beyond the man's control. He had flung out his hands toward her, and, before she knew what was happening, she felt their passionate pressure under the buckskin gauntlets she was wearing. Then had come words, rapid, even disjointed; again to her so natural, yet strange, awkward on the lips of this man.

"Say, little Nan," he cried, "we've won out. Look at 'em. The pastures. They're full. Fuller than we ever guessed they'd be after last year. Things are running same as we've dreamed. The Obar's going up—up. And—it's all too late."

On the warm impulse of the moment she had answered him without a second thought.

"Why—why is it too late?"

Her hands were still held in his passionate grasp. He laughed a bitter, mirthless laugh.

"Why, because—because I've wakened out of a passionate nightmare to realize all I've—lost."

She had abruptly withdrawn her hands. She remembered the curious chill which suddenly seemed to pass through her body. But she answered him simply, earnestly.

"You mustn't blame yourself for all you've lost, Jeff," she said. "Maybe Evie loved you better than you knew. But she—she, too, was to blame. You must try to forget."

Then had happened something so startling that even now she could hardly credit it. Jeff had turned away. His face was toward the hills where the setting sun still lit the fastnesses in which lay the fateful Spruce Crossing. His words came shortly, simply.

"I wasn't thinking of—Evie," he said. "The memory of her, of all that, has gone—forever."

Oh, the bewilderment of that moment. Nan remembered the absurdity of her reply now with something very like panic:

"Who—what—were you thinking of then?"

"Who—what?" The man's eyes lit with a deep, passionate yearning.

"Why, little Nan, the only person who is ever in my thoughts now—you."

It had come so simply yet so full of scarcely restrained passion. Would she ever forget? Never, never. Her emotions had been beyond words. She wanted to weep. She wanted to laugh. But more than all she wanted to flee before he could utter another word. She turned to her horse without a word. In a moment she was in the saddle, and had turned the creature about to ride off. But Jeff's voice stayed her.

"Say, little Nan, I—" he broke off. "Oh, I guess I'll eat at the bunkhouse. I haven't time for supper right. I've got to get down to the branding pinch. Say, Nan," a sudden deep urging had filled his voice, and he came to her horse's side and laid a detaining hand upon its reins. "Can I come along up—later? I didn't mean to make you mad. True. I couldn't help it. I— May I come along—after I get through?"

It had been utterly impossible for her to make articulate reply. Her emotions were too deep, too overwhelming. She had simply nodded her head. And in that trifling movement she knew she had conveyed a sign beyond all misunderstanding.

After that the woman had impelled her. She hurriedly rode off, fearing she knew not what. She knew she fled, incontinently fled. And her first act on arrival home had been to rid herself of the almost mannish suit in which she worked, so that Jeff, when he made his appearance, might find her the woman she really was.

The voices of the men on the veranda reached Nan within the parlor. She did not want to listen. She told herself so. Besides, she had a perfect right to remain where she was. And, anyway, Bud had no secrets from her. So she placed herself beyond the chance of observation, and remained quiet lest she should lose a word of what the voices were saying.

Bud was talking. His tone and words rumbled pleasantly upon the evening air. His talk was of the round-up. It was the talk of a man wedded to the life of the western plains. It was the talk of a man who is conscious of success achieved in spite of great difficulties and trials. There was a deep note of satisfaction in all he said.

Jeff's voice sounded at intervals. A lighter note. His answers were precise, as was his way. But they

lacked the enthusiasm of the other. It was as though his thoughts were traveling far afield, while his ears subconsciously conveyed the other's talk to a brain ready to formulate adequate reply.

Apparently, however, this abstraction impressed itself upon the other at last, for presently Nan heard her father challenge him in his direct fashion.

"Feelin' beat, eh?"

Nan pictured the steady gaze of her father's deep-set inquiring eyes as he put the question.

"No."

The reply came without hesitation. It was simple, definite. Again the picture presented itself to Nan. Jeff, she felt, was gazing out into the twilight, absorbed in the thoughts which held him. She knew the attitude. She had seen it so often before.

It was Bud's voice which broke the silence that followed.

"Guess the work's pretty tough," he said. "You don't need to fergit you bin a mighty sick man. If you do, why, you'll be li'ble to find yourself on Nan's hands again."

"I couldn't wish for better."

The reply had come on the instant. It must have warned even Bud that he had found a key to the man's abstraction.

"That's so—sure."

The emphasis was unmistakable. Nan waited almost breathlessly in a delicious condition of apprehension.

"Wher's Nan?"

Jeff's demand came sharply.

"Som'eres around inside."

"I came up to see her."

"So?"

"Yes."

The lowing of the cattle in the pastures was dying with the deepening twilight. The calves seemed to have found their mothers and all was contentment. Nan glad of the growing shadows. For her, obscurity the only thing just now.

Jeff's voice again broke the silence. There was something utterly simple in the manner of his words.

"I love Nan, Bud," he said. "I want to tell her so. If she'd marry me, I don't guess there'd be a thing left worth asking for. But I don't guess she will. Why should she? I'm not worth her. Gee! But I want her bad."

Nan buried her face in her hands. Then she drew back, back, far into the dusk of the room. But she could not escape the voices.

Bud's answer came slowly, deliberately. There was a curious note of emotion in it.

"You sure aren't. No man is. Ther' ain't a feller on earth worthy my little Nan. But it's up to her. Guess she's around inside som'eres."

There was the sound of swift footsteps on the veranda. Nan drew further back into the room. The far wall alone stayed her progress. The door was to her hand, but she made no attempt to avail herself of it. Oh, those delicious moments of terror. It seemed to her as if every joy of life was concentrated in them. Her breath came pantingly. The moments became insupportable.

Suddenly a figure, tall, slim, filled the open window. Swift as a flash the mind of the girl went back to the long months of nursing when he had lain helpless in her hands. He had been hers then in his helplessness. Now, in his full manhood's strength, he was coming to her again. A choking sensation seized her, a mist grew before her eyes.

"Nan!"

The tone of it The softness. The thrilling passion.

"Yes, Jeff."

The answer was low, almost inaudible.

Nor did the man have to search the darkened room. The love which he had for so long thrust aside was—waiting for him.

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