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Title: Hidden Gold

Author: Wilder Anthony

Release date: April 11, 2008 [eBook #25043]

Language: English

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HIDDEN GOLD

BY

WILDER ANTHONY

FRONTISPIECE BY

G. W. GAGE

NEW YORK

THE MACAULAY COMPANY

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA



At the sharp crack of the rifle, Moran stopped short.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I THE COMING OF THE SHEEP	11
II A MEETING AND A PARTING	23
III JEALOUSY	35
IV THE GATHERING STORM	44
V TREACHERY	57
VI MURDER	73
VII THE OLD TRAIL	84
VIII HIGHER THAN STATUTE LAW	93
IX THE BATTLE AT THE RANCH	106
X THE SENATOR GETS BUSY	114
XI TANGLED THREADS	129
XII DESPERATE MEASURES	144
XIII INTO THE DEPTHS	156
XIV A DASTARD'S BLOW	171
XV THE FIRST CLEW	181
XVI TRAPPED	200
XVII A WAR OF WITS	212
XVIII A RESCUE, AND A VIGILANCE COMMITTEE	234

XIX	BAFFLED, BUT STILL DANGEROUS	250
XX	THE STORM BURSTS	262
XXI	WITH BARE HANDS AT LAST	272
XXII	CHURCH-GOING CLOTHES	283

HIDDEN GOLD

[Pg 11]

CHAPTER I

THE COMING OF THE SHEEP

From his seat on the top of a high ridge, Gordon Wade looked into the bowl-shaped valley beneath him, with an expression of amazement on his sun-burned face. Pouring through a narrow opening in the environing hills, and immediately spreading fan-like over the grass of the valley, were sheep; hundreds, thousands of them. Even where he sat, a good quarter mile above them, the air was rank with the peculiar smell of the animals he detested, and their ceaseless "Ba-a-a, ba-a-a, ba-a-a," sounded like the roar of surf on a distant coast. Driven frantic by the appetizing smell of the sweet bunch-grass, the like of which they had not seen in months, the sheep poured through the gap like a torrent of dirty, yellow water; urged on from the rear and sides by barking dogs and shouting herders.

Straightening his six feet of bone and muscle, the cattleman stood up and stepped to the extreme edge of the rim-rock, with hardened countenance and gleaming eyes. A herder saw him standing there, in open silhouette against the sky line, and with many wild gesticulations pointed him out to his companions. With a quick motion, Wade half raised his rifle from the crook of his arm toward his shoulder, and then snorted grimly as the herders scrambled for shelter. "Coyotes!" he muttered, reflecting that constant association with the beasts that such men tended, seemed to make cowards of them all.

[Pg 12]

With an ominous shake of his head, he went back on the ridge to his waiting horse, eager to bear word of the invasion to Santry, his ranch foreman and closest friend. Thrusting the short-barreled rifle into its scabbard beneath the stirrup leather, he mounted and rode rapidly away.

Dusk was gathering as he pushed his way through the willows which fringed Piah Creek and came out into the clearing which held his ranch buildings. Nestling against the foot of a high bluff with the clear waters of the creek sparkling a scant fifty yards from the door, the log ranch house remained hidden until one was almost upon it. To the left, at the foot of a long slope, the corrals and out-buildings were situated, while beyond them a range of snow-capped mountains rose in majestic grandeur. Back of the house, at the top of the bluff, a broad tableland extended for miles; this, with Crawling Water Valley, comprising the fine range land, on which fattened three thousand head of cattle, carrying the Wade brand, the Double Arrow. Barely an hour before, the owner had surveyed the scene with more than satisfaction, exulting in the promise of prosperity it seemed to convey. Now all his business future was threatened by the coming of the sheep.

After putting his horse in the corral, the ranch owner turned toward the house. As he walked slowly up the hill, he made a fine figure of a man; tall, straight, and bronzed like an Indian. His countenance in repose was frank and cheerful, and he walked with the free, swinging stride of an out-door man in full enjoyment of bodily health and vigor. Entering the cabin by the open door, he passed through to the rear where a rattling of pots and pans and an appetizing smell of frying bacon told that supper was in progress.

[Pg 13]

Bill Santry was standing by the stove, turning the bacon in its sizzling grease, with a knack which told of much experience in camp cookery. The face which the lean and grizzled plainsman turned toward his friend was seamed by a thousand tiny wrinkles in the leathery skin, the result of years of exposure to all kinds of weather.

"Hello, Gordon!" he exclaimed. His pale blue eyes showed like pin points under the shaggy, gray brows. "You're back early, just in time for me to remark that if we don't get a pot-wrestler for this here outfit pretty darn quick, the boys'll be cookin' their own chuck. I'm blamed if I'll herd this stove much longer."

Wade smiled as he passed into the adjoining room to remove his spurs and chaps. "There's a Chinese coming up from town to-morrow," he said.

Santry peered across the stove to watch him as he moved about his room. The week before, a large picture of an extremely beautiful girl, which she had sent to Wade and which at first he had seemed to consider his most precious ornament, had fallen face downward on the table. Santry was curious to see how long it would be before Wade would set it up again, and he chuckled to himself when he saw that no move was made to do so. Wade had presented Santry to the girl some months before, when the two men were on a cattle-selling trip to Chicago, and the old

[Pg 14]

plainsman had not cared for her, although he had recognized her beauty and knew that she was wealthy in her own right, and moreover was the only child of a famous United States Senator.

"There's thunder to pay over in the valley, Bill." Wade had produced "makings," and rolled himself a cigarette as he watched the foreman cooking. "Sheep—thousands of them—are coming in."

"What?" Santry straightened up with a jerk which nearly capsized the frying pan. "Sheep? On our range? You ain't kiddin' me?"

"Nope. Wish I was, but it's a fact. The sheep are feeding on the grass that we hoped to save against the winter. It's the Jensen outfit, I could make that out from where I stood."

"Hell!" Stamping angrily across the floor, Santry gazed out into the twilight. "That dirty, low-lived Swede? But we'll fix him, boy. I know his breed, the skunk! I'll...." The veins in the old plainsman's throat stood out and the pupils of his eyes contracted. "I'll run his blamed outfit out of the valley before noon termorrer. I'll make Jensen wish...."

"Steady, Bill!" Wade interposed, before the other could voice the threat. "Violence may come later on perhaps; but right now we must try to avoid a fight." [Pg 15]

"But by the great horned toad...!"

Santry stretched out his powerful hands and slowly clenched his fingers. He was thinking of the pleasure it would give him to fasten them on Jensen.

"The thing puzzles me," Wade went on, flecking his cigarette through the window. "Jensen would never dare to come in here on his own initiative. He knows that we cowmen have controlled this valley for years, and he's no fighter. There's lots of good grass on the other side of the mountains, and he knows that as well as we do. Why does he take chances, then, on losing his stock, and maybe some of his herders by butting in here?"

"That's what I want to know," Santry immediately agreed, as though the thought were his own. "Answer me that! By the great horned toad! If I had my way...."

"This country isn't what it was ten years ago, Bill. We're supposed to have courts here now, you know." Santry sighed heavily. "To-morrow," Wade continued, "I'll ride over and have a talk with whoever's in charge of the outfit. Maybe I can learn something. You stay here and keep Kelly and the rest quiet if they get wind of what's going on and seem inclined to show fight. I've been, in a way, looking for trouble ever since we refused to let that fellow, Moran, get a foothold in the valley. If he's back of this, we've got a clever man to fight."

"There's another *hombre* I'd like awful well to get my hands on to," declared Santry belligerently. "Damned oily, greedy land shark! All right, all right! Needn't say nothin', Don. You're the brains of this here outfit, an' 'thout you say the word, I'll behave. But when the time comes and you want a fightin' man, just let me at him! When you want to run some of these here crooks outter the country, you whisper quiet like to old Bill Santry. Until then, I'll wait. That is—" He waved a warning finger at Wade.—"That is, up to a certain point! We don't want war, that is to say, to want it, you understand me! But by the great horned toad, I ain't a-goin' to let no lousy, empty headed, stinkin', shepherdin' Swede wipe his feet on me. No, siree, not by no means!" [Pg 16]

Wade made no reply to this, and with a further admonitory shake of his grizzled head, the old man resumed his cooking.

"You're sure that Chink'll be over in the mornin'?" he asked anxiously, after a little; and Wade nodded abstractedly. "Cookin' ain't no job for a white man in this weather. Breakin' rock in Hell would be plumb cool alongside of it." He wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. "Say, do you remember them biscuits you made over in the Painted Rock country? The batch I et ain't digisted yet."

"Every time I cook a meal," he went on, chuckling, "I think about the time Flour Sack Jim hired out to wrestle grub for that Englishman. Flour Sack was one of your real old timers, rough and ready, with a heart as big as a bucket, but he wouldn't bend his knee to no man livin'. The English jasper was all kinds of a swell, with money enough to burn a wet dog. For family reasons, he'd bought him a ranch and started to raise hosses. He wore one of these here two-peaked hats, with a bow on top, and he always had an eyeglass screwed into one eye." [Pg 17]

"The first night after Flour Sack come on his job, he got up a mess of jack-rabbit stew, and stickin' his head out the door, yelled in real round-up style—'Come and git it!' Then he piled up his own plate and started in ter eat. In about ten minutes, in walks the English dude, and when he seen the cook eatin' away, he rares back and says, haughty-like—'Bless me soul, I cawn't eat with me servants, doncher know.' Flour Sack never bats an eye, but says, with his mouth full 'Take a cheer,' he says, 'an' wait until I git through.'"

Although Wade had heard the story before, he laughed pleasantly as Santry began to dish up the food; then the latter summoned the hired men.

"Mind, now, Bill," Wade admonished. "Not a word about the sheep."

The next morning, after a restless night, the young rancher set out alone for the sheep camp. He was more than ever concerned over the outlook, because sleep had brought to his pillow visions

of cattle starving on a denuded range, and of Santry and Race Moran engaged in a death struggle. Particularly because of the danger of this, he had insisted upon Santry staying at home. The old plainsman, scarred veteran of many a frontier brawl, was too quick tempered and too proficient with his six-shooter to take back-talk from the despised sheep herders or to bandy words with a man he feared and hated. Wade was becoming convinced that Moran was responsible for the invasion of the range, although still at a loss for his reasons. The whole affair was marked with Moran's handiwork and the silent swiftness of his methods.

[Pg 18]

This Race Moran was a stranger who had come to Crawling Water some months before, and for reasons best known to himself, had been trying to ingratiate himself in the neighborhood, but, although he seemed to have plenty of funds, the ranch and stock men did not take kindly to his advances. He posed as the agent of some Eastern capitalists, and he had opened an office which for sumptuous appointments had never been equaled in that part of the country; but he had not been able to buy or lease land at the prices he offered and his business apparently had not prospered. Then sheep had begun to appear in great flocks in various parts of the surrounding country and some of these flocks to overflow into Crawling Water Valley. Moran denied, at first, that they had come at his instance, but later on, he tacitly admitted to the protesting cattlemen that he had a certain amount of interest in sheep raising.

More far-sighted than some of his neighbors, Wade had leased a large strip of land in the valley for use as winter range. Moran had seemed to want this land badly, and had offered a really fair price for it, but Wade had not cared to sell. Relying upon his privilege as lessee, Wade had not feared the approach of the sheep, and he had no reason to wish to dispose of his holdings. Now, it began to look as if the purpose was to "sheep" him out of his own territory, so that the agent might buy up the lease and homestead rights on practically his own terms. The thing had been done before in various parts of the cattle country.

[Pg 19]

Cattle and sheep cannot live on the same range, and when sheep take possession of a country, cattle must move out of it, or starve. No wonder, then, that the cattlemen of Crawling Water Valley were aroused. Their livelihood was slipping away from them, day by day, for unless prompt steps were taken the grass would be ruined by the woolly plague.

Thus far, Gordon Wade, a leader in the cattle faction, had been firm for peaceful measures though some of the ranchers had threatened an open war on the herders. "Avoid bloodshed at almost any cost," had been his advice, and he had done his best to restrain the more hot-headed members of his party, who were for shooting the sheep and driving out the herders at the rifle point. But there was a limit, even to Wade's patience, and his jaws squared grimly as he considered the probable result, should Moran and his followers, the sheep owners, persist in their present course of action.

It was still very early in the morning when Wade arrived at the herder's camp. Oscar Jensen, a short, thick-set man, with an unwholesome, heavy face, stepped out of the little tent as the rancher rode up.

[Pg 20]

"Mornin'."

"Good-morning!" The cattleman affected a cheerfulness which he did not feel. "Are these your sheep, Mr. Jensen?" He waved in the direction of the grazing band, a dirty white patch on the green of the valley.

"Yes."

"Perhaps you don't know that you are on Double Arrow land? I've ridden over to ask you to move your sheep. They're spoiling our grass."

Jensen grinned sardonically, for he had been expecting Wade's visit and was prepared for it.

"I got a right here," he said. "There's plenty good grass here and I take my sheep where they get fat. This is government land."

"It is government land," Wade quietly acknowledged, "but you have no right on it. I control this range, I've paid for it, and unless you move within the next twelve hours you'll be arrested for trespass."

The sheepman's sullen face darkened with anger.

"Who'll do it? The sheriff won't, and I'm not afeerd of you cattlemen. My sheep must eat as well as your cattle, and I got a good right here. I won't move."

"Then remember that I warned you if you get into trouble, Jensen. There's plenty of open range and good water on the other side of the hills. I advise you to trail your sheep there before it is too late. Don't think that Race Moran can save you from the law. Moran is not running this valley, and don't you forget it."

[Pg 21]

"How do you know Moran's backin' me?" The Swede could not conceal his surprise. "You can't bluff me, Wade. I know my rights, and I'm goin' to stick to 'em."

"The devil you say!" Now that he was sure of Moran's complicity in the matter, Wade felt himself becoming angry, in spite of his resolve to keep cool. "You'd best listen to reason and pull out while you're able to travel. There are men in this valley who won't waste time in talk when they know you're here."

"Bah!" Jensen snorted contemptuously. "I can take care of myself. I know what I'm doin', I tell you."

"You may, but you don't act like it," was Wade's parting remark, as he turned his horse and rode off.

"Go to hell!" the Swede shouted after him.

Heading toward Crawling Water, the ranch owner rode rapidly over the sun-baked ground, too full of rage to take notice of anything except his own helplessness. The sting of Jensen's impudence lay in Wade's realization that to enlist the aid of the sheriff against the sheep man would be very difficult, if not altogether impossible. There was very little law in that region, and what little there was seemed, somehow, to have been taken under the direction of Race Moran.

It was now broad day and the prairie warmed to the blazing sun. Long, rolling stretches of grass, topped with rocks and alkaline sand, gave back a blinding glare like the reflection of a summer sea, from which arose a haze of gray dust like ocean mists over distant reaches. Far to the South, a lone butte lifted its corrugated front in forbidding majesty.

[Pg 22]

Beyond the summit of the butte was a greenish-brown plateau of sagebrush and bunch-grass. Behind this mesa, a range of snow-topped mountains cut the horizon with their white peaks, and in their deep and gloomy canyons lurked great shadows of cool, rich green. As far as the eye could see, there was no sign of life save Wade and his mount.

The horse's feet kicked up a cloud of yellow dust that hung in the air like smoke from a battery of cannon. It enveloped the ranchman, who rode with the loose seat and straight back of his kind; it came to lie deeply on his shoulders and on his broad-brimmed Stetson hat, and in the wrinkles of the leather chaps that encased his legs. He looked steadily ahead, from under reddened eyelids, over the trackless plain that encompassed him. At a pace which would speedily cover the twenty odd miles to Crawling Water, he rode on his way to see Race Moran.

Two hours later Oscar Jensen was shot from behind as he was walking alone, a little distance from his camp. He fell dead and his assassin disappeared without being seen.

CHAPTER II

[Pg 23]

A MEETING AND A PARTING

Had some one of Gordon Wade's multitude of admirers in the East seen him as he stood looking out over his Wyoming ranch, he might have recognized the true cowboy composure with which the ranchman faced the coming storm, but he would not have recognized the stripling who had won scholastic and athletic honors at Princeton a few short years before, and who had spent a year after graduating in aimless travel and reckless adventure.

After flitting rapidly and at random almost all over the habitable globe, he had returned to his home in New York with some thought of settling down there, but the old family mansion was empty excepting for the servants, and his sense of loneliness and sorrow for the loved ones who were no longer there to greet him, drove him on speedily and he turned toward the West to explore his own country last of all, as so many other travelers do.

Attracted by the surpassing beauty of the country, he had lingered in Wyoming long enough to feel fascination of the ranch life that was then to be found in all its perfection in the wilder part of that State, and realizing that he had found the precise location and vocation that suited him, he had converted his modest fortune into cash, and invested all in the Double Arrow Ranch.

[Pg 24]

But on his way thither, he had stopped in Chicago, and there he had come face to face with Romance.

Before he had gone a dozen steps after getting off the train, some one dealt him a mighty blow between the shoulders, that well nigh sent him spinning. Before he could recover himself, he was caught from behind and hurled headlong into a taxicab.

"I've heard of Western hospitality before," he said, calmly, before he could see who his assailant was, "but you seem to be hard up for guests."

"No," said his college chum, George Stout, grinning happily as he clambered into the taxi, "but I wasn't taking chances; somebody else might have seen you first."

Followed three feverish days and nights; then as they sat in pajamas in Stout's apartment, Wade said: "I don't imagine there is anything more to see or do in this hectic city of yours, and I am free to say I don't like it; I think I'll move on."

"Not yet," said Stout, with the grin that endeared him to everybody that ever met him. "You've only seen the outside edges so far. To-night you are going to break into society."

"Do they have society here?" asked Wade.

"Well, they call it that," still grinning, "anyhow you'll be interested, not to say amused. The game

is new as yet, but they go through the motions, and Oh, boy, how lavish they are! You'll see everything money can buy this evening, and probably meet people you wouldn't be likely to run across anywhere else.

[Pg 25]

"You're bidden to appear, sir, at the ornate mansion of a Senator of the United States—the Senator, perhaps, I should say, I've secured the invitation, and Mrs. Rexhill will never recognize me again if you don't go."

"Would that be serious?"

"Very serious. I am counsel for one of the Senator's companies."

"And does that imply social obligation?"

"It does with Mrs. Rexhill."

"Oh, very well, I'll go anywhere once, but who is Mrs. Rexhill? I suppose, of course, she is the Senator's wife, but who is she in society? I never heard of her."

"You wouldn't; it isn't what she is, it is what she wants to be. You must not laugh at her; she is doing the best she can. You'll admit one thing readily enough when you see her. She is probably the handsomest woman of her age in Chicago, and she isn't more than forty. Where the Senator found her, I can't say, but she was his wife when he made his first strike in Denver, and I will say to his credit that he has always been a devoted husband."

"I'm glad to hear something to his credit," said Wade dryly. "The general impression I've gathered from reading the newspapers lately, hasn't been of the most exalted sort."

"Oh, well," replied Stout, and his habitual grin faded away as he spoke. "A man in public life always makes enemies, and the Senator has plenty of them. It almost seems sometimes that he has more enemies than friends, and yet he has certainly been a very successful man, not only in politics, but in business. He has more irons in the fire than any one else I know, and somehow or other he seems to put everything through. I doubt if he could do so well if he was not at the same time a political power."

[Pg 26]

"Yes," said Wade, still more dryly. "I have heard the two facts mentioned together."

"Come, come," said Stout, more earnestly than he was in the habit of speaking, "you mustn't put too much faith in what the newspapers say. I know how they talk about him in the other party, but I happen to know him pretty well personally, and there is a good side to him as I suppose there is to everybody. Anyhow, he pays me well for my professional services, and I have seen nothing thus far that leads me to be disloyal to him."

It seemed to Wade's sensitive ear that his friend was speaking with a large mental reservation, but wisely reflecting that the matter did not concern him, he said no more, and when evening came, he went, willingly enough, to make the acquaintance of the man who was then counted as one of the greatest political powers in the country. Nor had he any premonition that in the near future he and his host of the evening would be engaged in a life and death struggle.

Of all that, however, there was no present indication whatever. On the contrary, the great man welcomed him with all the suavity of manner for which he was equally as famous as he was for the over-bearing rudeness he often displayed when his will was disputed. This latter trait had won for him the nickname of the Czar of American Politics; but he was an adroit politician, not lacking in courtesy to guests in his own house. Moreover, he was keen in his appraisal of men and quick to see that a man of Wade's type would be more valuable to him as an ally than as a foe.

[Pg 27]

Accordingly, he presented the young aristocrat to Mrs. Rexhill, who openly showed her delight in meeting one of such distinguished appearance, and with a great display of cordiality, she introduced him to her daughter Helen.

"It is her coming-out party, Mr. Wade," she said, gushingly, "and you must do all you can to make it a happy occasion."

One glance at the beautiful girl who stood before him was enough to determine Wade that her evening should be as happy as he could make it. The glaring ostentation of the house and its equipment had offended his fastidious taste when he entered, and the sight of the really handsome, but vulgarly overdressed and richly be-jeweled mother, had made him shudder inwardly, but when he looked into Helen's eyes, he forgot all his first impressions and imagined himself in Fairyland for the remainder of the evening.

An older head than his might easily have been turned and a wiser man bewildered by the tender glances of the charming girl who frankly met his advances half way, being as much impressed by his appearance as he with hers, and showing carelessness equal to his in regard to the comment they excited among the other guests. One thing that Helen Rexhill had never learned at school, or from the parents who had done all that could be done to spoil her, was to conceal her feelings. Just now she felt no inclination to do it, and she gave Wade dance after dance, with reckless disregard of her engagements and of the ill-concealed anger of some of the men she threw over with utter carelessness of social obligation.

[Pg 28]

Wade saw it clearly enough, but the preference she showed for him was so flattering as to make

him indifferent, even had he considered himself responsible. He was therefore amused rather than exultant when man after man came up to claim a dance, only to be told "I just promised this one to Mr. Wade."

One such there was, who took his rebuff exceeding ill. Instead of retiring as the others had done, he stepped up closer to the girl and said rudely, "That's all very well, Helen, but you promised me first, and I hold you to it."

And he looked contemptuously at Wade who had started in surprise at his words, and had stiffened himself instinctively, as if to interfere, but who controlled himself instantly and kept silent despite his inclination.

A moment later he was glad he had done so. Helen's eyes flashed and she straightened her form proudly as she spoke.

"Did I really promise you, Race Moran? If I did, I have forgotten it, and anyhow, I am going to sit this dance out with Mr. Wade in the conservatory."

Race Moran, as she called him, was a handsome enough man, though rather flashy in appearance. But the evil look that came quickly on his face, no less than his huge and burly build, indicated that he would have been more at home in a barroom or a street fight, than where he was. For just a moment he seemed about to say more, but apparently thought better of it, and turning away with what sounded like a muttered oath, he walked toward the Senator, who stood at the other side of the room.

[Pg 29]

"I've made an enemy for you, Mr. Wade," said Helen, half laughingly and half seriously, as she led the way to the conservatory, closely followed by her eager escort.

"Well," said Wade lightly, "they say a man is poor, indeed, who hasn't a few enemies. I don't know that one more or less is of great importance, but it is well to know something about them. Who is the gentleman?"

"I hardly think you would call him a gentleman," said Helen, "though he thinks he's one; I wouldn't tolerate him a moment, only on my father's account. Dad calls him a political heeler, and says he is very useful."

"He ought to be that," said Wade, smiling; "I'd hardly call him ornamental."

"Indeed he isn't," said Helen, pouting prettily, "and he presumes too much on Dad's favor. He actually persecutes me with his attentions, but you know a politician's daughter has to put up with a good deal, sometimes."

"I don't think you need to suffer much," said Wade, gallantly. "You will always find admirers enough to stand between you and any trouble you may have. I rather think there is one of them coming this way at the moment. I shall certainly take pleasure in recognizing Mr. Moran as an enemy, but is this likely to be another one?"

[Pg 30]

"Oh, no," said Helen, laughingly, as an effeminate looking young man came up, evidently in search of her.

"I beg pardon, Miss Helen," he said, with a bow that seemed to include Wade, politely enough, in the apology, "But your mother asked me to find you. She wants you to meet some new guests who have just arrived."

"Oh, bother," said Helen carelessly. "She can look after them for a while. Tell her I'll be with her by-and-by," and she turned back to Wade, paying no further attention to the luckless messenger, who departed, hiding his chagrin as best he could, though not very successfully.

After he had gone, she said, "No, I don't think Maxwell Frayne is likely to be an enemy; at least, not one that you need fear. He is a gentleman, though he is too insipid to interest me."

"And you think Moran is a man to fear," asked Wade, trying to speak gravely, but showing amusement in spite of himself.

"I don't believe you fear the devil," said Helen, with open admiration, "but Race Moran can be very dangerous, and I feel sure he will try to injure you, if he ever finds a chance."

"Well in that case he will at least be interesting," said Wade, lightly. He would have been amazed if he had realized at the time how prophetic the girl's words were.

[Pg 31]

For the moment, however, he had little thought of peril and adventures to come. The time, the girl and the place, were all at hand, and he plunged headlong into a complication that kept him for weeks in Chicago, strongly inclined to stay permanently, yet reluctant to settle in a city so little to his liking, when the great out-doors was calling to him so urgently.

While the petals of the passion flower were unfolding so rapidly in the conservatory, Race Moran had taken the Senator to the latter's private room where they had had many secret conferences before. He had done the great man favors in New York where he was a valuable cog in the political machine, while the Senator was still a newcomer in the field, and with accurate judgment he had foreseen that Rexhill would be a winner.

Quick to see opportunities, he had cultivated the latter's acquaintance and courted his favor until

he had become the Senator's most trusted adherent, and was admitted to the closest intimacy, so that he had become a constant visitor in the Rexhill home, and had definitely determined in his own mind, to become one of the family. He knew well enough that Helen disliked him, but his ideas of women had been gained from association with a class that is easily dominated, and he was confident of his own powers, which, in fact, were very considerable.

The Senator was not blind to the other's purpose, but though he was far from approving it, having other ideas concerning the daughter he idolized, he had not sought to discourage Moran, nor did he intend to. He would let him go on until a crisis should come, and in the meantime, Moran had not declared himself.

[Pg 32]

Helen's insolence at the door of the conservatory, however, had stung Moran, and as soon as he had the Senator in seclusion, he broke out.

"Who is that puppy Helen has on a string to-night?" he demanded roughly.

But the Senator could overlook rudeness when it suited his purpose to do so.

"I wouldn't call him a puppy exactly," he said, pleasantly enough; "he is a good deal younger than you and I, but he comes of pretty good stock in your town, Moran, and Stout tells me he has distinguished himself already in two or three ways. I reckon he'd be a pretty good friend to have, if he ever takes an interest in politics."

"Oh, I know the Wade family all right," said Moran impatiently; "they belong to the silk stockings, but we have our own way of dealing with that kind in New York, and I'm able to do the same thing anywhere else, if I have to. Maybe I will have to if he comes between me and Helen. Senator, I want to marry that girl myself. I ain't asking your consent, exactly, for me and her will be likely to do what we want to, anyhow, but I'd a heap rather have you favor the match."

That was almost too much, but the Senator knew his man and also knew how valuable he was. There was no sense in breaking with him until it was unavoidable, so he still spoke pleasantly, though he had flushed with anger for a moment.

[Pg 33]

"Yes, I reckon you and Helen will do as you like about it, especially as Helen likes. It was sort of decent of you to speak to me first, but there doesn't seem to be anything particular for me to say till you find out what Helen really thinks."

"Oh, I'll find that out, all right," said Moran, boastfully. "But this Wade person better look out; I might have him run into the river some night, if he pokes his nose in too far."

"I'd go easy on that, if I were you," said the Senator laughing heartily, "a dead Wade might interfere with your plans worse than a live one."

"Oh, of course," replied Moran, refusing to laugh. "I talk foolish with my mouth sometimes, when I'm mad, but all the same, he'd better look out."

"Now I wonder," said the Senator thoughtfully, after the other had left him, "how long it will be before he does find out, and how serious it will be. He's hit pretty hard, but I will have to keep him along some way or other; I can't afford to lose him."

And he sat musing over his cigar till one by one his guests had gone, but not until the great drawing room was well-nigh empty, did Helen leave the conservatory.

For a few weeks thereafter Chicago seemed, to Gordon Wade's fancy, to be the very center of the Universe. Gradually, however, the sturdy nature of the man asserted itself, and realizing that for him there were many more desirable places, he determined to look farther before choosing a permanent home. He told Helen frankly of his purpose, and to his great satisfaction she approved. There was no definite word of marriage between them, though they both looked forward to it and both, at the time of parting, deemed the understanding complete between them.

[Pg 34]

Helen would have had him turn to the East, for her heart was set on city life in one of the world's great capitals, but he declared he must see the West before deciding, and though she was dissatisfied, she was too wise to seek the domination she intended, at that stage of the game.

He departed, therefore, to find in Wyoming later on, his ideal of a home. His thought of Chicago thereafter, was that of the place where the girl he thought he loved was waiting for him, to claim her, so soon as his home was made suitable. There was much to do by way of preparation, however, and almost imperceptibly his ardor cooled as he found himself becoming prominent among the bold and independent citizens who were rapidly putting Wyoming on the map.

CHAPTER III

[Pg 35]

JEALOUSY

Meantime, many things of great interest to Gordon Wade happened without his knowledge.

A national election at which the previously dominant party was defeated, was a sad blow to Senator Rexhill, who not only suffered in prestige but in pocket. There was no question, even in

the minds of his friends, that he frequently used his political influence to back up the many business enterprises in which he held an interest, and in which the greater part of his quickly-made fortune was invested. With the loss of his political pull, disaster came to one after another of those enterprises, and his successive losses were soon heavy enough to drive him almost to desperation.

His previous successes, however, had all been due to the audacity of his plans, for his boldness and courage were unquestionable. For a time he felt confident of winning again, and accordingly, maintained his lavish expenditures and luxurious style of living, with no word of caution to his wife and daughter, and he continued to seek for the long chances in business that offered the largest risks and the greatest gains.

All the redeeming qualities of his nature (and he had more than his enemies gave him credit for), were shown in his family life, and it was not surprising that Helen and her mother were both undisturbed by the gathering storm, but continued to live as he encouraged them to, having perfect confidence in his ability to overcome any and all the difficulties he might encounter.

[Pg 36]

Mrs. Rexhill continued to dream of social distinction. Failing to see that she had lost much of her own prestige by the Senator's political reverses, she continued to entertain so extravagantly in her palatial home, that she was still tolerated and she took infinite satisfaction in the position she thought she occupied.

She considered Chicago the greatest city in the world, and she dreamed of Helen as its queen. To her mind, the easiest way to accomplish that ambition was to persuade Helen to marry Maxwell Frayne. He had persistently courted the girl ever since he first met her, and he was heir to the great Frayne fortune.

The idea was not entirely revolting to Helen, though she had a small opinion of the elegant young trifler who pursued her so persistently, for she, too, had social aspirations, though being more clear-sighted than her mother, she dreamed of wider circles than those of Chicago. Her husband, whoever he was to be, should take her to Paris, or at least to New York.

Her infatuation for Gordon Wade, however, was as strong as ever. Perhaps she was right in thinking of it as true love, but she was greatly annoyed by Wade's choice of a ranchman's life, and by his settling down out of the world, as she considered he had done. Her letters to him, tender as they were, told him plainly enough of her dissatisfaction, and thereby undoubtedly contributed to the slow growth of his indifference.

For a time she failed to perceive this, and enjoying the excitement of the life she was leading, she was content to wait till Wade should tire of the wilderness, as she fully expected him to do, and should return to her. So she drifted, until after a time her suspicions were aroused by the tone of his letters, and she became anxious.

[Pg 37]

As time went on, Senator Rexhill's affairs became more and more involved. He realized that he stood little chance of reelection, when his term of office should expire, and meantime, his fortune dwindled rapidly, though he was still careful not to betray that fact at home.

Moran knew the situation perfectly well, but he remained outwardly loyal to his employer, partly because of the latter's liberality, but more, perhaps, because of the hope he still had of winning Helen eventually, despite the dislike she took no pains to hide.

Knowing how bold the Senator was in his speculations, he came to him one day with an exciting story.

"There's a guy in town," he said, "who may be just a plain nut, but he has the name of being a scientific sharp who knows his business from A to Izzard, and he's either got something almighty big, or he's got the willies.

"What he says is, that he's found gold in a new spot and oodles of it. According to what he tells, it beats California in '49. It's so big, he says, that he's scared stiff, thinking he can't grab enough of it, and he don't know, no more'n a baby, what to do with it. So he's looking for somebody to take hold of it in a big way and give him a whack."

"Where is this gold?" asked the Senator incredulously.

[Pg 38]

"That's the funny part of it," says Moran; "it's in Wyoming, and as near as I can make out, it must be close to where that young squirt is that Helen thinks she's stuck on. I'm not sure but what it's on his place, but even if it is, there is no reason why he should have any of it. The expense will be pretty heavy to do the thing up right, but if you're game, I reckon we can hog the whole business. We can stall this scientific nut off with promises, and probably buy off Wade for the price of pasture land, and then file claim on the whole dog-gone tract."

This vision of enormous wealth was captivating to the Senator, who had made his first start in mining and knew something of its possibilities. Bold as he was, however, he was also cautious, but after several conferences with Moran, he fell in with the scheme, first securing the services of a skilled metallurgist and an equally capable engineer, who were liberally paid and solemnly sworn to secrecy. He sent them out to verify the discoverer's story, and sent Moran to Crawling Water, to establish himself, and to do such preparatory work as should be necessary. In due time, Moran reported by letter that the gold was located, and was beyond question abundant. He was having trouble, however, in getting the property, as Wade refused to sell.

"Of course," he wrote, "we can file mining claims on the ground we know of, and get possession that way, but we want to make more surveys before doing that, so as to be sure of getting all there is, and we can't do that without giving the whole snap away, and filling the mountains full of prospectors. If that damn Wade won't sell, I'll find some means to drive him away."

[Pg 39]

It was just after the receipt of this letter, which filled the Senator with hope on the one hand, and anxiety on the other that he came on Helen one evening, as she was entering her own sitting room, and followed her in for a chat.

"What are you thinking of?" he asked, presently, when she failed to notice some trivial question he had asked, and seemed to be in a reverie.

She looked at him with laughing eyes.

"Crawling Water."

"Gordon Wade, eh? Well, I wouldn't think of him too much. Better let that pass. You've outgrown it."

"Oh, no I haven't."

The Senator sighed.

"Mother said to me a little while ago, that he was probably going with other girls and forgetting me, and it made me angry."

"Well, I reckon your mother is about right. Gordon is a likely looking chap, you know. I've got nothing against him, except that he isn't good enough for you; no man is. You don't really care so much for him, do you?"

"Oh, don't I?" She viewed her father through half closed lids, in a quizzical way. "I care so very much for him that if I really thought there was another girl, I would go to Crawling Water to-morrow. You'd have to drop everything and take me."

[Pg 40]

Her father gently pinched her cheek.

"I would, eh? Well, maybe I'll have to go out there anyway. But do you realize what Crawling Water is like,—a rough, frontier town?"

"I wouldn't mind that for a while."

"No, I suppose not. You've got too much of your old dad in you to balk at a few difficulties. There's somebody else out there who'd be mighty glad to see your pretty face. Race Moran."

"Mr. Moran!"

The sudden change in the girl's tone from tenderness to scorn caused the Senator a twinge of uneasiness. His plans were so closely linked with Moran's for the present, that the man might prove dangerous if his love for Helen were too openly scorned. That she could scarcely tolerate him, despite his ability and force of character, her father knew from the past; but even in the moment of his need he did not seek to influence her in Moran's favor. His love for her was genuine and very deep.

"He's been out there for some time, as my agent."

"Yes, I know that. He—he has written to me, although I've never answered his letters. I've been curious to hear from him again, because he promised to send me some kodaks of Crawling Water."

"Maybe he hasn't done so because you've ignored his letters."

Helen's lip curled in disdain.

"He'd never let a little thing like that stop him. But perhaps I will answer the next one, if only to find out what is going on out there. It's all so very mysterious. Do you know, father,"—She playfully shook her finger at him—"this is the first time in a long while that you haven't taken me into your confidence, and I think it a very ominous sign. I'm sure you'll be punished for it."

[Pg 41]

The Senator winced at the word punished, and Helen laughed at what she thought was the effect of her raillery.

"Why don't you tell me? You see, I'm so worried about Gordon. Honestly, father, I'm serious about that. I—I love him, and I don't want him hurt."

"Hurt? Why, who is thinking of hurting him?"

"Oh, I don't know. Moran hates him, and has referred to him once or twice in a way that I do not understand. Do tell me all about it."

"Oh, well, my dear, there's really nothing to tell. It's all concerned with some homestead lands out there that I want to get hold of for an investment. Wade will not be hurt, no; that is, he won't be if he beats me out. If I win, he'll lose."

"He will?"

"We both can't win, of course. It's to be a fight, yes,—an amicable business struggle, I hope. There's no reason for it to be otherwise." The Senator appeared strangely nervous, despite his effort at self-control. "Wade as a man and a Westerner doesn't expect to be fed on pap, you know, any more than I do. May the best man win, that's the way of it."

Helen thought this over for a moment.

[Pg 42]

"Perhaps I'd better go out there with you, after all," she remarked, half in jest.

Then the Senator thought that over for a moment and left the room.

Next day Helen received a package by mail which proved to contain a dozen clear photographs of Crawling Water and its neighborhood.

First of all, as though Moran thought it most important, was a snapshot of himself, which had been taken, so he wrote on the back of the print, by an obliging cowboy. The girl's face was a study in amused scorn as she looked at the photograph, for which Moran has posed with a cigar in his mouth, his hands in his pockets.

Then there were a number of views of the town itself; of its main street, its hotel, its dance-hall, and of "some of the boys" in various poses of photographic self-consciousness. There were also pictures of the marvelously beautiful countryside, but as she neared the end of them, Helen was disappointed to find none of Wade. "Of course, he wouldn't send me one of *him*," she said petulantly to herself, and she was rapidly running through the remaining prints only to pause suddenly at the very last, while a rosy tide flooded her face and neck.

The little photograph showed a tall, handsome, vigorous looking man, in the garb of a cattleman, half turned in his saddle, with one hand resting on his pony's flank. The man was Wade. With his other hand, he was pointing ahead, apparently for the benefit of a girl—a very good looking girl whose fine head was thrown back, as the wind blew her hair into pretty disorder.

[Pg 43]

Helen Rexhill had not hitherto experienced real jealousy, but this little photograph excited it. In the highly actinic light of Crawling Water at noon the camera had done its work well, and the figures of the two stood out from the distant background with stereoscopic clearness. Wade was smiling at the girl, who seemed to be laughing back at him, although her face in the picture was partially turned away, so that Helen got only an impression of charm. But the impression was enough to rouse her jealousy.

On the back of the print, Moran had written:

"A surprise picture of Gordon Wade and our new fellow-townswoman, Miss Dorothy Purnell, whose beauty and general attractiveness have made her the idol of Crawling Water."

CHAPTER IV

[Pg 44]

THE GATHERING STORM

On the north bank of the river, from which it derived its name, the town of Crawling Water lay sprawled out in the shape of an irregular horn. Its original settlers had been men of large ideas, and having had plenty of space at their disposal, they had used it lavishly. The streets, bordered by dusty, weather-beaten, frame buildings, were as wide as those of a large city; indeed, in area, the town could compete with many a metropolis; but there the resemblance ended. Crawling Water was not fated to become a big city. The fact that the nearest railroad point was at Sheridan, forty miles away, did away with any ambitions that Crawling Water might have had to be more than a neighborhood center.

The mixed population was composed of cattlemen, sheep men, cow punchers and herders, with a sprinkling of gamblers and other riff-raff. Rough, uncouth, full-blooded men, they were, for the most part; hard working; decisive in their likes and dislikes; fearing neither God nor man, they met Life as they found it and faced Death with a laugh. They were the last of a fast disappearing type, picturesque, but lacking in many of the attributes which differentiate mankind from the beasts.

Hardly more than a village, Crawling Water was yet a town, and the seat of such machinery of government as had been established, and accordingly, Gordon Wade had ridden directly thither after his far from satisfactory interview with Oscar Jensen. After he had stabled his horse and seen it fed, he started up the street in the direction of Moran's office. He was resolved to find out where the agent stood on the sheep question without any unnecessary delay. Save for a few dogs, sleeping in the blaze of the noon-day sun, which hung overhead like a ball of fire, the town seemed deserted.

[Pg 45]

When Wade entered the office, Moran was seated at his desk, chewing on a cigar, above which his closely cropped reddish mustache bristled. Like Senator Rexhill, he was a man of girth and bulk, but his ape-like body was endowed with a strength which not even his gross life had been able to wreck, and he was always muscularly fit. Except for the miner's hip boots, which he wore, he was rather handsomely dressed, and would have been called tastefully so in the betting ring of

a metropolitan race-track, where his diamond scarf-pin and ring would have been admired.

"Hello!" he boomed as Wade entered. "Have a cigar." He pushed a box of an excellent brand toward his visitor and waved him to a chair. His greeting was noisy rather than cordial.

Wade declined both the chair and the cigar.

"I dropped in to find out why you told Jensen to run his sheep in on my range," he began bluntly.

"Let me see—" The agent very deliberately lifted a large, white hand and took the cigar out of his mouth. "Just what range is that?" [Pg 46]

"The upper valley range which I have under lease."

"Which you have under lease?" Moran affected sarcastic surprise. "I wasn't aware that you had any legal right to that part of the valley. It's government land, ain't it?"

"You seem to have forgotten that you once tried to buy the lease from me." The rancher bared his teeth in a grim smile. "We'll not quibble over that, however. We've got our legal rights, all of us; but we're a long distance from the courts here. What I want to know in plain English is, will you order Jensen to trail those sheep? Now, wait a moment!"

Moran subsided with a show of tolerance he did not feel.

"Think well before you answer," Wade went on. "I'm not here to threaten you, but there are desperate men in this valley who will take matters into their own hands, if this business is not stopped. There's plenty of grass on the other side of the mountains and your sheep are welcome to it. Why don't you make use of it?"

"Why should I? The sheep have a right to be where they are and there they'll stay until I get ready to move 'em. You cattlemen think you own this country, but when it comes to the show down, you're a bunch of bluffers. Now, Wade, I made you an offer once,—I'll admit it, and I'll make it again for the last time. Sell me your homestead and lease rights at the price I offered you—ten thousand dollars, and get out smiling. There isn't room for the two of us in the valley." [Pg 47]

"Ten thousand for the homestead and the lease combined!" Wade laughed mirthlessly. "You're crazy, man. Why, you offered me that much for the lease alone a few weeks ago."

"Did I? I'd forgotten it. Anyway, it's a fair offer. The land is still owned by Uncle Sam, you know. You haven't proved up on your claims, and you never will if I can help it. We are spending lots of money here, and the government will see that our interests are protected. You cattlemen can't hog the whole of Crawling Water Valley. Times have changed. Well, what do you say?"

The ranchman dismissed the proposition with a gesture, but did not immediately speak. Silently, the two big men faced each other, their glances crossing like rapiers: the cattleman like a statue in bronze in the fixed rigidity of his attitude, but with an expression that showed him one dangerous to trifle with; the agent affecting that half tolerant amusement which one may feel toward an enemy unworthy of one's prowess. Wade presently broke the silence.

"Moran, you may be a big man in the East, but you're not big enough for the job you've tackled here. I've held my friends back as long as I can—longer than I thought I could—and when they break loose, this valley will be a little hell, perhaps a shambles. Men are going to be killed, and I have a feeling that you are going to be one of them. Against that time, once more, I warn you. Tell Jensen to trail his sheep!"

Swinging on his heel, the ranchman left the office, paying no attention to the ironical "Good night," which Moran called after him. [Pg 48]

In the street, Wade chanced upon a neighboring cattle owner, Lem Trowbridge of the Circle Heart outfit, who fell into step with him.

"Gordon, how long are we going to stand for this thing, eh? Say, do you know what some are saying about you? Now, I'm your friend, and I'm telling you straight that you've gone far enough with this pacifist stuff."

"They say I'm afraid, I suppose?" Wade stopped and faced Trowbridge. "Have they said that to you?"

"To me? Say, what the — kind of a friend do you take me for?" Trowbridge flamed up like a match. "No, they haven't said just that, Gordon; but they're hinting, and I don't like it."

"Well, if you hear it direct, send the man on to me with it," said Wade, his lips compressing ominously. "I'm about through, Lem, not quite, but pretty nearly. I've told Moran to have Jensen trail those sheep, and if he doesn't...."

Trowbridge nodded and smiled, as they paused at a street corner—one of the few that Crawling Water possessed.

"That's the idea, Gordon. We'll all be the readier for the waiting. Well, I'll not go any farther with you." He winked with elaborate precision and looked in the direction of a snug little cottage, with flower boxes in the windows, a biscuit toss away. "She's home. I saw her leave the store yonder a little while ago."

"I don't get into town so very often," he began lamely, when Trowbridge slapped him heartily on the back.

"You don't need to make any excuses to me, old man," he said, moving off. "That little woman has put Crawling Water on edge with admiration. You're not the only one—or, maybe, you are."

Secretly eager though Wade was to reach the cottage, the nearer he approached it, the slower he walked, fuming at himself for his sudden spinelessness. Although no ladies' man, he had never been woman wary until lately, and this of itself was a sign, the significance of which he was far from realizing. When he was with Dorothy Purnell, he almost forgot her sex in the easy companionability of their relationship; when away from her, he thought no more of her than he might of some man friend; but the approach had become a matter of embarrassing difficulty with him. There had even been occasions when he had walked past the cottage and ridden home without seeing her, trying speciously to convince himself that such had all along been his intention.

Something of the sort might have happened now had she not hailed him from the open doorway.

"Whither bound, stranger?" she smilingly demanded, in her low, rich contralto. "Better come in where it's cool. Mother'll be glad to see you, and I—shan't mind."

She had come to Crawling Water for the restorative effect of the bracing mountain air upon the health of her mother, who was threatened with nervous invalidism, following the death of Mr. Purnell, two years before. The town called them Easterners because their home was as far East as Michigan, but they had never been city dwellers, as Dorothy's fresh complexion and lithe, alert figure bore witness.

Her chestnut hair, piled in a silken crown on her shapely head, shaded a face that made those who saw it for the first time, catch their breath in instant admiration. Her radiance was of a glorious, compelling, and wholly distinct type, as refreshing as some view of green mountains from out a gloomy canyon. She had eyes, blue in repose, but shading to violet tints when aglow with vivacity; her nose was not perfect, because a trifle tip-tilted, but her face gained character through the defect; her very red lips held most delicious allurements in their slightly full curves. Her hands and feet were small enough to pay tribute to her birth and breeding, but not so small as to be doll-like. She wore a simple, white dress, freshly laundered, which made her look cool and inviting.

"You won't mind? Now that's good of you, and no mistake." Wade shook hands with her, slowly relinquishing her cool palm. "How is Mrs. Purnell? Better?"

"Oh, yes, I think so. You're better, aren't you, mother?" she asked, as they entered the cozy little living-room, where the temperature was in pleasant contrast to the outer heat. "The air up here does you good, doesn't it?"

Mrs. Purnell, a dispirited little person, admitted that she felt very well indeed, and seemed cheered at the sight of Wade, who greeted her deferentially but with easy geniality. She liked him for his wholesomeness, and she frequently declared that he was worth all the doctors in the country because of the impression of health and optimism which he bore with him. But she was aware that Dorothy liked him, too, and so presently made an excuse to leave the two young people together.

"Now, you may tell me all about what's worrying you," the girl said, seating herself across from Wade. "Something is. You can't keep the signs from me."

"Good girl!" His voice held a suggestion of tenderness, as he rolled and lighted a cigarette, in the home-like privilege which they allowed him there. "That's your way, always. No matter who's in trouble, you are ready to hasten to the rescue."

"Oh—," she deprecatingly began, with a trace of violet showing in her eyes, which meant a great deal more than words.

"No wonder every man in the valley considers himself your own, especial knight."

"I thought perhaps I could help you," she said briskly, to cover her sentimental moment. "But that was foolish of me, too, wasn't it? The idea of any one helping *you*."

"I'm likely to need all my friends soon, Dorothy," Wade answered soberly. "I came in to-day to see Race Moran. There's a big band of sheep on our upper range, and Jensen, who has charge of them, admitted to me this morning that Moran is behind him."

"Goodness, more sheep! Wherever do they come from?"

"I don't know where they come from, but they can't stay where they are unless I go out of business, that's certain." In a few words, he explained to her the significance of the movement, and told her of his talk with Moran. "I've no use for the man," he concluded, "and if it comes to a showdown between us, he need expect no sympathy. I've held back as long as I can. I understand better than he does what the crack of the first rifle will lead to."

"You have not liked him since you found that he took that snapshot of me," she said whimsically. "I didn't mind, but I can't imagine what he wanted it for."

Wade's face darkened.

"It was a confounded impertinence, whatever he wanted with it. But my dislike of him goes farther back than that."

"What are you going to do?" she asked, resting her chin in her hand, and looking him straight in the eyes, as she always did to those with whom she talked.

"It largely depends on him. Santry—you know how hot-headed he is—would run the herders away by force and kill off the sheep. As a last resort, of course, we may have to do something like that, but I want to win this fight without open violence if we can. A faction war, in the end, would be likely to ruin us all."

[Pg 53]

"You must be careful," the girl declared earnestly. "Moran is not going to be an easy man to handle. He seems to have plenty of money, and they say here in town that he stands in with the government; that he has some sort of 'pull.' He's clever, I think. He'll trick you if he can."

"I'm sure of that, Dorothy, but we're not going to let him. If only...! Say, do you know something else that is being said in this town? Something that they're saying about me?"

"Something nice?" her tone was archly inquiring.

He leaned forward and lightly rested his hand on her knee, just as he might have done with a man friend, and she took as little notice of it. His fingers were trembling a little under the stress of the emotion he felt.

"They're saying, those who don't like me, I guess, that I'm afraid of Moran and his crowd; afraid of a lot of sheep herders. No, of course, my friends don't believe it," he hastened to add when she started to interrupt. "But it's not doing me any good, especially now that public feeling is running so high."

"But you mustn't mind what they say, Gordon. That's part of the courage your friends know that you have; to do what you feel to be right, no matter what is said."

Her cheeks were glowing with indignation, and he appreciatively patted her hand before sitting erect in his chair again. It was no wonder, he reflected, in that almost womanless land, that many a cowpuncher rode the range by night, seeing her image in every star. The thought that each single man, and many a married one, in Crawling Water, would ride into the Pit itself to win one of her smiles, had been Wade's comfort, even when he was thinking of the possibility of bloodshed between the two hostile factions. But now, in the moment of her sympathy for him, he felt that he could not be content without some further assurance of her safety.

[Pg 54]

"What you say sounds well, Dorothy, but my pride's working on me, too, now. I can't help it. If my friends, who have been good enough to accept my leadership so far, should lose their heads and go to it without me, I might talk afterward until Kingdom come. I'd never convince anybody that I hadn't funk'd the thing. You spoke a few minutes ago of helping me. You can help me a great deal."

Her lovely face instantly blazed with eagerness.

"Can I? How?"

"By promising me that, if it comes to a fight, you and your mother will come out to my ranch. You'd be safer there. That is, of course, unless you'd prefer to leave Crawling Water altogether."

"Indeed, I shouldn't prefer to leave Crawling Water at this stage of the game, and"—she smiled reassuringly—"I'm sure we should be safe enough right here whatever happened. But, if you'd feel better about it, we would go to the ranch."

"Thanks. I feel better about it already, more free to show my hand. You are safe enough here now, of course, and might be clear through to the finish; but cheap whiskey has led many a fairly good man astray."

[Pg 55]

"If only there were some peaceable way out of it all." Her eyes became anxious as she thought of what he might have to face. "Can't you telegraph to Washington, or something?"

"Washington doesn't know whether Crawling Water is in the United States or in Timbuctoo," Wade laughed. "If we had some one in authority right here on the ground we might make him understand, but Mahomet will never come to these mountains, and they can't go to Mahomet. Why, what's the matter?"

His question was prompted by the sudden elation with which she had clapped her hands and sprung to her feet.

"How stupid of me, Gordon, to have forgotten." She stood over him with shining eyes and eager countenance, as lovely as a Lorelei. "There is an official of the United States Government here at this very moment."

"Here? In Crawling Water?" he exclaimed in amazement. "Who is he?"

"Senator Rexhill, Gordon." Wade stared almost vacuously at her as she ran on with her news. "He came in with his daughter last night on the Sheridan stage. Isn't that glorious? You must go up to see him at once."

"I will, of course," Wade said slowly, trying to catch his mental balance. "And with pleasure, too. [Pg 56]
It's been a long time since I last saw either of them."

"You know them—him?" Dorothy hesitated a little over which pronoun to use, with the somewhat disturbing reflection that Helen Rexhill was a most beautiful and distinguished looking girl. "That will make it all the easier," she added generously.

"Of course, Senator Rexhill has no authority of his own in such a matter, you know; but if we can get him interested, he may wake up Washington in our behalf. Only, I don't see what can have brought him to Crawling Water."

"Do you—do you know the daughter well?" Dorothy asked, with feminine cogency. "I suppose you met her back East?"

"We've known each other for a number of years." He arose, his face expressive of the delight he felt at the Rexhills' presence in town. "We used to be good friends. You'll like her. But it's strange they didn't tell me of their coming. You'll pardon me if I hurry over to the hotel, won't you, Dorothy?"

She gently urged him out of the house.

"Of course! Don't waste a moment, and let me know just as soon as you can what the outcome is. I do hope the Senator can settle all this trouble."

"I want you to meet them right away," he called, over his shoulder, and when he looked back for his answer, she nodded brightly.

But as she turned back into the cottage after watching him swing up the street she was not at all sure that she would like Helen Rexhill.

CHAPTER V

[Pg 57]

TREACHERY

Overjoyed at the prospect of a peaceful solution of the problem which confronted him, Wade walked rapidly toward the hotel, happy, too, in the thought of meeting Helen Rexhill.

Whether he loved her with the single-hearted devotion which a man should feel toward his future wife, he was not sure; but he was confident that he did not love any one else. The idea of love in connection with Dorothy had never occurred to him; she was his good friend, nothing more. To Helen, belonged the romance of his life, fostered in other years by the distinct preference she had shown for him. At one time, they had been reported engaged, and although the word had never actually passed between them, many things more significant than speech had contributed to the warm regard which they felt for each other. Beneath Helen's reputed coldness of heart lay intense feeling, and on numerous occasions she had verged on unwomanliness in baring her moods to Wade, in a way that many other men would have been quicker to fathom, and perhaps to take advantage of, than he had been.

Now, the knowledge that she was close at hand, and that he might see her at any moment, caused his heart to beat rapidly. If to others she had been cool, to him she had been ardent, and this warmth had been the one thing needful to make her physically captivating. Only when some vital cause impends is a young man likely to distinguish between the impulses of his body and the cravings of his soul, and no such vital exigency had as yet appeared in Wade's life. He wondered if she was as beautiful as ever, and began to reproach himself for lack of ardor in his recent letters to her, lest he should now be repaid in kind. He wanted to be received upon the old, delicious footing, with her in his arms, and her lips trembling beneath his. [Pg 58]

There were dozens of men in Washington and New York who would almost have bartered their souls for such privilege, and Gordon Wade need not be decried for his moment of passionate yearning. He was enough of a man to put the thought aside, pending his interview with the Senator, which was his first purpose. He felt sure that if Senator Rexhill could be moved to interest in Crawling Water affairs, his influence would be potent enough to secure redress for the cattlemen, and Wade meant to pull every string that could bear upon so happy a result. He was glad that Mrs. Rexhill had not made the journey, for he was conscious of her hostility to him, and he felt that his chances of moving her husband were better without her.

When he inquired at the hotel, he was told that the Rexhills were in, and he presently found himself shaking hands with the Senator, who greeted him with effusive warmth.

"Helen is changing her gown and will be in shortly," the big man explained. "I'm mighty glad to see you, Gordon. Only this morning we were talking of looking you up. How are you? Sit down, my boy, sit down!" [Pg 59]

"Senator," Wade began, after they had exchanged commonplaces for a few moments. "Glad as I am to see you, on my own account, I am more than glad in behalf of my friends, who have not yet had the pleasure of meeting you. Your arrival in Crawling Water could not possibly have been

more opportune. You have come just in time to save us, most likely, from an internecine strife which might have ruined us all. I was more glad than I can tell you to learn that you were here."

"Indeed, Gordon? I—I am much interested. Perhaps, you will...."

While Wade succinctly sketched the situation, the Senator nervously toyed with his eyeglasses, now and then lifting his double chin from the confinement of his collar, only to let the mass of flesh settle again into inertness. He thought rapidly. Evidently, Moran had not divulged the fact that he, the Senator, was concerned in the Crawling Water enterprise. Certainly, Moran had done very well in that, and Rexhill almost wished now that he had been less precipitate in coming to Crawling Water. If he had stayed in the East, his complicity in the affair might possibly have been concealed to the very end. He hastily considered the advisability of remaining under cover; but now that he was on the ground he decided that he had better be open and above board, in so far [Pg 60]

So, presently, as Wade neared the end of his *résumé* of the situation, Rexhill permitted an oleaginous smile to overspread his countenance. At the last, he even chuckled.

"It's really a bit amusing. No, no, not what you have said, my boy; but what I am about to say to you. You invoke my influence to stop these—er—depredations, as you call them, and up to a certain point, you shall have my aid, because I seem to see that matters have gone a bit beyond bounds. But when you ask me to go to extremes myself, why, I'm bound to tell you that I, too, have interests at stake. Why do you suppose I came to Crawling Water?"

"I'll admit that puzzled me."

Rexhill looked keenly at Wade, wondering if he were foolish enough to believe the trip a sentimental journey, purely. He concluded that the young ranchman had too much sense to jump at such a conclusion.

"Well, the reason is...." The Senator leaned ponderously forward, twiddling his glasses upon his thumb. "The reason is that I, if you please, am the moving spirit behind the company which Race Moran is representing here. You see...." He chuckled plethorically again at Wade's start of surprise. "It really is a bit amusing."

"Then Moran is your agent?"

"In a sense, yes."

"Well, I'll be damned!" The cattleman's tone was rich in disgust, but even more keen was his intense disappointment at this failure of his hopes. "Would you mind telling me, Senator, just what the purpose of your company is?" [Pg 61]

"Certainly not. It's no secret," Rexhill replied briskly. "Certain parties back East, myself included, as I've told you, have reason to believe that a railroad will be put through this valley in the near future. This is an extremely rich and productive section, with natural resources which will make it heard from some day, so we are anxious to obtain a portion of the valley for speculative purposes. If the railroad comes through we'll probably build a town somewhere nearby and open up an irrigation project we have in mind. If not, we'll use our holdings to raise wheat and livestock. The proposition is a sound investment either way you look at it."

"A few years ago," said Wade, "I and several others leased upwards of twenty thousand acres of grass land here in the valley for stock grazing purposes. I, personally, filed a claim on the land I now call my home ranch. Our lease, which is direct from the Government, gives us entire control of the land so long as we pay for it."

"Besides ourselves, there are a number of ranches in the valley, all of them cattle and horse outfits. There has always been a tacit agreement that sheep should not be grazed here because sheep and cattle can't live on the same range in large numbers. Until Moran came here, we had no trouble whatever—the sheep ranchers kept to their own side of the mountains and we cattlemen kept to ours. Since Moran has arrived, however, the sheep have crossed the Divide in thousands, until the entire valley is being overrun with them." [Pg 62]

"Only this morning, Moran admitted to me that the sheep men are acting with his authority and backing. Senator Rexhill, this is wrong, and your agent, or manager, is making a big mistake. Since you are the prime mover in this matter, your arrival is even more opportune than I at first thought, because you have the power to immediately correct your hired man's mistake. So far as we cattle ranchers can learn, Moran is bringing sheep in here with the deliberate intention of starving us out of our homes. He seems to want our range and he—I'll not say you—thinks that such a course is the cheapest way to gain possession. He'll find it the dearest in the end. Unless the sheep are moved mighty soon, we shall be mixed up in one of the bloodiest little wars in the history of the range country. Mark you, I'm no firebrand,—some call me too conservative; but we have about reached the limit, and something is bound to happen before many days."

Senator Rexhill drummed with his fingers on the table.

"Um! Does Moran know of this attitude in you and your friends, Gordon?"

"Yes. I have just finished telling him of it. But he merely laughs at us. We are a long way from the courts here, Senator, and we can't easily appeal to the authorities. We are obliged to settle our [Pg 63]

differences among ourselves. Moran knows this as well as I do; but he forgets that the thing can work two ways. Each day that the sheep are here in the valley they spoil more grass than all our cattle could eat in a week; in two months, if the sheep stay, the range will be as bare as a ball-room floor. Can you wonder that we ranchers are becoming desperate?"

"It's strange," Rexhill commented, apparently much perturbed. "Moran is not the sort to take useless risks. He's dominant, but he's no fool. Well, my boy, I'll talk this over with him; in fact, I really came out here to see how things were shaping up. If things can be peacefully arranged, that's the way we want them. We're not looking for trouble. Certainly, you are quite right to object to sheep being run on your leased pasture. I'll look into it right away and see what can be done."

"Thank you." Wade was much relieved and he showed it. "I felt sure that an appeal to your sense of fair play would not be fruitless. I'm mighty glad you are in town."

"Gordon!" a girl's voice exclaimed softly behind him.

"Helen!" He sprang to his feet and turned to seize her hands.

Those who admired Helen Rexhill at Washington social functions never saw her look more lovely than she did at this moment of meeting with Wade, for the reason that all the skill of the costumer could not beautify her so much as the radiance of love now in her face. The dress she wore was far from inexpensive, but it was cut with the art which conceals art, and to Wade it appeared simple. [Pg 64]

Yet his first sensation was one of acute disappointment, which he strove rather ineffectually, to conceal. Doubtless, this was because his recollection of her had soared beyond the bounds of human perfection. But the gown, which she had chosen with so keen a wish to impress him, reminded him of the simple frocks which Dorothy Purnell wore, and in Helen Rexhill's face there was not the same sweet simplicity of expression which distinguished her rival. Flaming love was there, to transform her from the suggestion of a lily to that of a pomegranate; but it was the love that demands and devours, rather than the constant affection which, in giving all, seeks nothing but the privilege of loving in return. Without actually analyzing the impression which Helen made upon him, Wade felt something of the truth of this, and was disappointed in the realization of his dream of her. Materially she was too perfect, too exotic, for the setting of Crawling Water.

"Why, you look just the same," she happily exclaimed. "And I? Have I changed? Now, be careful what you say! You're not a bit of a courtier."

"Everything changes, doesn't it?" he said, slowly feeling his way. "Except the heart?" His answer pleased her.

"Will you listen to that, Father? In the cattle country, too."

"Very pretty," the Senator observed judicially. "Inspired, perhaps." [Pg 65]

"How long are you going to stay?" asked Wade.

Helen laughed happily.

"Perhaps that will depend upon how glad I think you are to have us."

She gave him an ardent glance, which he was not proof against, nor would any other man have been so.

"No doubt of that." He laughed with her, his disappointment passing before the old love spell, which she knew so well how to cast about him. "You couldn't have come at a better time, either, for now there is some one here who can be company for you. That is," he added lamely, "when you're tired of having me around."

"Really?" Helen was a bit chilled by this obvious *faux pas*. Truly, despite his worth as a man, Gordon Wade was no courtier. "Who is it?"

"Of course, you haven't heard of her, but you'll like her. She's Miss Dorothy Purnell. Everybody does like her."

Helen affected a gayety which she could scarcely have been expected to feel. Although she was not socially adept in concealing her real feeling, Wade saw nothing wrong. Only the Senator twisted his mouth in a grim smile.

"Oh, but I have heard of her; indeed, I have. Mr. Moran sent me a little photograph of you both on horseback. Just see how her fame has crossed the continent. I shall be charmed to meet her."

A great light dawned upon Wade. [Pg 66]

"Then that was what he wanted with the picture," he exclaimed. "We wondered at the time. I thought it pretty impudent of him, but, of course, if he wanted it just to send to you, that was all right."

Miss Rexhill winced inwardly. In spite of herself, her face expressed a certain amount of pique, for the implication was manifestly that if Race Moran had wanted the picture for himself, the idea would have been intolerable to Wade.

"Oh, yes, quite all right. You seem...." She checked herself, with the reproach upon her tongue, reflecting that, after all, she was most fond of Wade because of his naturalness. Maxwell Frayne, for instance, was without a peer in spinning graceful phrases; but he spun little else.

"But I don't understand why he should send it to you," Wade said, in a low tone, as the Senator turned to bend over an open traveling bag on a nearby chair. "Is he—do you—?" A slight rigor of jealousy seemed to seize upon him, under the witchery of her slow smile.

"Oh, he's been writing to me, and I suppose he thought I'd be interested. Of course, I was." She leaned toward him a trifle, a mere swaying of her body, like a lily in a breeze, and impulsively he placed his big hand over hers.

"He'd better not—he'd better mind his own business!" he said grimly.

She laughed softly, tantalizingly, and being human, Wade kissed her; the Senator being still busy with the contents of the bag. [Pg 67]

Thus engaged, none of them heard a knock at the door, which finally opened before Moran, who, even if he did not actually see the kiss, could hardly have failed to suspect it from their embarrassed manner. Helen felt sure from his annoyed expression that he had witnessed the caress, and she was rather glad of it.

He exchanged a slightly stiff greeting with the rancher, and then while Wade and Helen continued their talk, the agent spoke in a carefully guarded undertone with his employer. The news he brought, whatever it was, seemed significant, for the Senator appeared worried and presently turned to Wade.

"You'll not mind if I go over to the office with Moran, Gordon?"

"Certainly not, Senator. Don't let me interrupt you. But what's the use of us staying indoors, Helen? The sun has turned now and it's cooler out. I'll show you something of our little metropolis. Or, I tell you what we'll do! Why not let me take you over and introduce you to the only woman you're likely to find congenial in this neighborhood? She'll be glad to meet you, I know."

In any other company, Miss Rexhill would probably have resented an invitation to call upon a rival, even apart from the ethics of social calls, but not before Race Moran. Before him, she would not humble Wade in the least degree, if only because to do so would reflect upon her own preference between the men. She could only pretend to welcome the prospect of going to see Miss Purnell, and she played her part well. [Pg 68]

"We may as well stay here now," Rexhill said, when the two young people had left the room. "When did all this happen?"

"I just got word of it," Moran answered, a bit excitedly. "Don't you see how it plays right into our hands? It's the greatest thing that could have happened for us. It might have been made to order."

"Are you sure it wasn't? Are you sure you didn't have the man shot, Race?" Senator Rexhill's tone was very dry and he watched his companion keenly as he asked the question.

Moran assumed an attitude of indignation.

"Why, Senator...!"

"Tush! I want to know where we stand. By God, Race, you mustn't go too far! We're traveling mighty close to the wind as it is."

"But these brawls are likely to happen at any time. This one in particular has been brewing for weeks. Why connect me with it, unnecessarily?"

"All right. I see your point, of course. The assassin is unknown; suspicion naturally falls upon Wade, who is at the head of the cattle faction and who, as you say, threatened Jensen only this morning. If we can jail him for awhile his party is likely to fall down."

"Exactly!" Moran cried eagerly. "Fortune has placed him right in our hands."

"Well, I'm not going to have him arrested," Rexhill announced doggedly, "at least, not on any trumped up charge. He's broken my bread, Helen likes him. We call him a friend, in fact. I always play square with my friends—as far as possible. Strategy is strategy, nobody can quarrel with that; but this thing you propose is something more." [Pg 69]

Moran, while listening, had restrained his impatience with difficulty. He not only had reason on his side, but personal hate as well. His sense of triumph in bringing the news to Rexhill had not been for their mutual cause alone; it had seemed to Moran to point toward the end of his rivalry with Wade for the love of Helen. To have the fruits of victory snatched from him, because of a sentiment of friendship, was almost more than the agent could stand for.

"Good God, Senator," he burst out, "don't throw this chance away! Think what it means to us! We are running close to the wind, and until this moment, it's been a toss up whether we'd get out of here with our lives; whether I would, at any rate. I've run a mighty big bluff on these cattle people, but I did it because it was the only way. I've held my own so far, but when they find out

that it's not farm land we're after, but ore—why, Senator, there'll be no holding them at all! With Wade at their head and forty miles between us and the cars, where would we get off? We'd be lucky if we didn't swing from the limb of a tree. Do you suppose Wade would remember then that he'd broken your bread? I'll bet dollars to doughnuts he wouldn't.

"But"—his voice sank to a significant whisper—"if we land him in jail...."

[Pg 70]

"His friends here would get him out," interposed the Senator, nervously wiping his glasses.

"Then Uncle Sam would put him in again, with a troop of cavalry to keep order here, and *that* would be another advantage gained for our side. No, sir, once we get him in jail, we've got the law with us and against him, don't forget that. Then the cattle party would lay mighty low. Wade has been their leader right along. I tell you, it's the only way, and you know what it means to us—to you."

"You don't have to tell me that," rasped Rexhill. "If we fail to put this through, I'm a ruined man."

Moran's eyes gleamed.

"Well, then, it's the only way, unless—unless...."

"Unless what?"

"Unless your daughter marries him, and it all comes into the family." Upon that point, Moran wished to know just where he stood.

"I've never made a dollar through my daughter yet, and I never will," said the Senator grimly. "I'm not selling my own flesh and blood. I'll rot in the poor-house first."

Moran gently breathed his relief. He would have fought to the fullest extent of his power to have aborted such a marriage, but if the Senator had favored it, he knew that it would have been difficult to prevent.

"Wade has a foreman he's mighty fond of, an old man named Santry," the agent remarked, trying another tack.

[Pg 71]

"That's a horse of another color." Rexhill appeared aroused, at last. "I remember the old fellow. He must be nearly ready for the bone yard by this time anyhow. Saddle it on him, if you can. Wade's devoted to him. He'd do as much for Santry as for himself, maybe more."

"I've heard about that kind of devotion," the agent sneered, "but I've yet to see a sample of it."

"Well, you may before long. Your first proposition's no good anyway. It would simply further antagonize Wade's friends. It's quite possible, though, that Santry might have been mixed up in such a brawl. Get him arrested, and then we'll let Wade know, gradually, that our influence is at his command, for a price. I've no objection to that—none at all. By Heaven, we've got to do something."

"We'll do it all right. I'll have a warrant sworn out."

"Meanwhile, Race, go easy with those sheep. Wade was telling me about them, and as a matter of strategy, I had to pretend that I would help him. Move them across the Divide until we see what comes of this Santry affair. I can't go too heavy with the boy right at the start."

"All right." Moran arose. "The sheep don't count much now anyway."

"I don't mind saying, Race," Senator Rexhill observed, a trifle pompously, "that you've done pretty well so far. If you stick to it, you'll not find me ungrateful when the battle is over. You'll be entitled to your reward."

[Pg 72]

Moran hesitated, seeming to summon courage to say something.

"Maybe you've guessed the reward I'll ask, Senator," he said slowly. "There are some things that mean more to a man than mere money. I'm thinking of Miss Helen."

Rexhill found some difficulty in placing his gaze so that it would appear to naturally fall elsewhere than on Moran. He was mortified by a sense of shame that he could not deal squarely with this aspirant for his daughter's hand. He had been sincere in saying that he would never barter her to further his own interests, but so much hung in the balance here that until the issue really arose he feared to pass upon it. He felt himself stultified by this truth.

"I haven't spoken to her, Senator, because the time has not come, and just now she's too much occupied elsewhere, perhaps. But all my hopes are fixed on her, sir, and when the time does come, I trust you'll not oppose them."

Rexhill coughed to hide what his face might otherwise have shown.

"Well, Race," he said, with a choking sensation that was new to him, "you know what I think of you. As for the rest, well, that will depend entirely upon Helen."

[Pg 73]

CHAPTER VI

MURDER

"How do you think you'd like to live in Crawling Water?"

Wade looked whimsically at Helen, as she picked her way with the grace of a kitten through the dust of the main street. Carefully though she walked, her shoes and the bottom of her skirt were covered with dust, and gray with it.

"I shouldn't like it," she said, with a little moue. "I don't see why you stay here. You aren't going to always, are you?"

"I reckon it's likely."

"Not—for always?" She had stopped and was looking up into his face with delicious dismay. "That would be awful."

"Most of my friends, and all of my business interests are here. Besides, I have a kind of pride in growing up with this country. Back in the East, things have been settled for so long that a man's only a cog in a machine. Out here, a fellow has a sense of ownership, even in the hills. I think it's because he gets closer to the soil, until he comes to love it and to be almost a part of it."

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed the girl. "That sounds fine, but the reality isn't up to my anticipation of it."

Wade laughed in his hearty way.

[Pg 74]

"That's only because you haven't been here long enough, Helen."

"There are things that are splendid about the West," she generously admitted. "Its vastness and wholesomeness, and especially its men. I'm sure that's why I first liked you, Gordon, because you were *different*—not like the general run of young men in the East."

"Oh, there are lots of good men East, too."

"Not so very many. At least, I have seen very few who were at all worth while. There's one, Maxwell Frayne, who has been plaguing me for months; but I don't care for him—much." She was closely watching him as she spoke, and she smiled when he started.

"You'd better not."

"But if I really thought you meant to stay here all the time, I'm sure I'd love him devotedly. Now"—she eyed him mischievously—"I think this would be a nice place to call home, don't you know, just for fun, and then spend most of the time in New York and London. See that man staring at me!"

"How, staring at you?"

Wade turned and looked in the direction she indicated, surprised at the suggestion that she was being annoyed in Crawling Water, where chivalry to women ran high.

"Oh, he didn't mean anything, I daresay."

"They're friends of mine, and curious, perhaps." He referred to a group of cattlemen across the street, who did seem to be staring and talking, with some indecision in their attitude. "I wonder if anything can have happened? Oh, I guess not. Well, what would I do in London?"

[Pg 75]

"I didn't say anything about *you* being in London, did I?"

"Well, it's safe to say that where you were, I'd want to be, at any rate. Haven't I made two trips to Chicago for no real reason except to see you?" he demanded, fast slipping into the thralldom of her fascination.

She viewed him through half-closed eyes, knowing that the pose has always allured him.

"Don't you think you'd be kept busy looking after me?" she playfully asked. "Seriously, I hate an idle man, but I don't know what you'd find to do there. What a question. You'd have to have investments that would take you over every year or two."

"Now you're trying to make a city man of me," he said, half in jest. "Besides,"—a dogged note crept into his voice—"I'd have the right to expect something of you, wouldn't I?"

"Not the right, but the privilege," she answered softly.

"This is where the Purnells live." He turned her into the pathway to the door. "This is what I'd like, a neat little home like this, with a couple of kiddies and some dogs. Then I could spend my out-door time at the ranch."

Before Helen could reply to this, Mrs. Purnell appeared on the threshold to welcome them, but to Wade's surprise, she told them that Dorothy was not there.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," said Helen, with intense relief.

[Pg 76]

"I don't know where she went either," the mother went on. "She was out for a few minutes soon

after you left, Gordon. Then she came back and called out something to me, but I didn't catch what she said. Before I knew what she was doing she had saddled her pony and ridden off. But come right in. I don't think she'll be gone long."

They entered and Helen, graciously choosing to overlook the fact that this was evidently Wade's second visit there within a very short time, sought to impress him with her tactfulness to Mrs. Purnell. She would have been amazed could she have guessed that she was actually arousing him to resentment. He felt, somehow, that she was patronizing their hostess, who was a woman of refinement, even if she lacked the artificiality of manner that Helen affected. He was sincerely glad when the visit came to an end.

"You must come again," said Mrs. Purnell, in a spirit of friendliness.

"So glad to have met you," Helen replied. "I hope to have the pleasure of meeting your daughter, too, before we leave Crawling Water."

"They're splendid women, both of them," Wade remarked, as they walked back toward the center of the town.

"Oh, yes," Helen agreed, without much spirit. "Nice, comfortable home people, I suppose."

"Best kind in the world."

"Gordon!" Helen laughed good-naturedly, facing him as she walked. "What in the world has been the matter with you to-day? We usually get on so well together, and to-day, if I do say it, only my unwillingness to quarrel has kept us from it." [Pg 77]

"Oh, no!" He smiled, too. "Maybe that New York and London business rubbed me the wrong way; that's all. I have plenty of faults, but I'm loyal to my friends. I don't like even hints that they aren't the best friends a man could have."

"Surely, I haven't...."

"Maybe not. Maybe I imagined it. But Crawling Water is a lot more real than London, to my way of thinking."

"You haven't been to London."

"I'm not likely to go, either," he retorted.

Her red lips curled in a way that seemed to indicate that she thought he would go. Already, she was planning to get him out of Crawling Water and beyond the influence of Dorothy Purnell.

As they turned into the main street again, a man leaving a group near the livery stable, and mounting a horse, rode toward them.

"I wonder what's up now?" Wade muttered, recognizing the horseman as one of the Trowbridge outfit.

"Mr. Wade. Just a minute." With the grace of a Centaur, the rider swung his mount in beside them and doffed his hat. "Two of Jensen's herders have been shot. I thought you ought to know about it."

"What?" The ranch owner's jaw dropped at the news.

"It's true, sir. Word just came in."

"Thanks, Barker." Wade pulled himself together, as the restless pony raced back to the barn. "I must go, Helen," he went on, turning to the girl at his side. "There's been fighting—murder, perhaps—out near the ranch. Santry will need me." He was uneasy lest the old plainsman should have been concerned in the shooting. [Pg 78]

"You'll take me to the hotel?"

"Of course, yes! Would you mind walking a little faster?" They quickened their pace. "I'm sorry, Helen; but I must hurry to the ranch." Even at that moment he could not but reflect that there would have been no need to take Dorothy home. Somehow, the ways of the East seemed to fit less and less aptly into the life of Crawling Water.

On his way to the livery stable after his horse, Wade did some rapid thinking. Santry might have been concerned in the shooting, but his employer thought not. The old fellow had promised to stay at home, and his word was as good as another man's bond. It was too bad, certainly, that the thing should have happened just when Senator Rexhill's promised aid had seemed in a fair way to settle the controversy. Now, the whole thing was more upset than ever, for Moran and Rexhill could hardly be blamed if they backed up their own men, especially if the herders had been blameless, as was probably the case. Yet if the Senator did this, Wade knew that a bloody little war would be the outcome.

"Where's Trowbridge, Barker?" he asked of the cowpuncher, whom he found waiting at the stable.

"At the ranch, I think."

Wade nodded. Ten minutes later he was in the saddle and headed for the mountains, just as dusk [Pg 79]

began to fall. The cool night air, blowing against his face as he reached the higher levels, was delightfully refreshing after the heat of the day. He took off his hat and opened the neck of his shirt to the breeze, which revived his energies like wine. He knew that as he felt, so his horse felt, and he was glad, for the animal would have to make a fast, hard trip. At the crest of the first hills, before dipping into the valley, he turned for an instant in his saddle to look backward over his trail toward the twinkling lights of Crawling Water in the distance below.

He had covered some five miles of his journey, to no other sound than the occasional note of some bird, when his quick ears caught the thud of a horse's feet on the trail ahead, with now and then a sharp clatter as the animal slipped on the stones. Wade slowed his own horse down to a walk, and eased his Colt in its holster. He expected to meet some harmless wayfarer, but, under the circumstances, it was just as well to be prepared for trouble. Soon, however, he smiled to himself, for whoever rode toward him made too much noise for any but a peaceful mission. The other horse, too, had been slowed down and the two riders approached each other with such caution that the rancher finally became impatient and pressed forward recklessly.

Out of the night the stranger came on, still slowly, until a turn in the trail brought them face to face.

"Don't shoot!" said a woman's contralto. "I'm a friend."

[Pg 80]

"Dorothy!" Wade ejaculated, at once recognizing the voice, although he could not see the girl distinctly in the darkness. "In Heaven's name, what are you doing out here?"

"Is it you, Gordon?" In her relief, she laughed softly as she pulled her pony up side of him. "I was a little scared for a second or two. I've awfully bad news, I'm afraid," she added, immediately serious. "I've been trying to find you. I went to the hotel and they told me you'd gone somewhere."

"Miss Rexhill and I went to call on you."

"You did? If I'd only known. I've been clear out to the ranch."

"Is Santry there?" In his anxiety he forgot momentarily the loneliness of her long ride. "They say some of Jensen's men have been shot up; and I'm anxious to find out what Bill knows."

"That's just what I want to tell you. I heard of the shooting before I left town. Whoa, Gypsy!" She reined up her pony, nervously, for it would not stand still. Wade seized the animal's bridle and quieted it. "I don't know if he's there or not," the girl went on. "I couldn't see. The ranch house is full of men."

"Men? What men?" Wade demanded sharply.

"Race Moran's crowd. They went out to arrest Santry. The Sheriff is with them. I heard part of it in town, and that's why I tried to find you." Wade groaned. "I peeped in at a window, and when I could see neither you nor Santry I slipped away without being seen and took the old trail back because it was shorter."

[Pg 81]

"Lord, what a mess!" Wade ground his teeth savagely. "Poor old Bill was all alone there and they must have surprised him. But I don't see why Barker didn't mention the posse when he told me of the shooting?"

"He didn't know of it, probably. They left town very quietly. I happened to be out back of the house and I heard one of them talking as they rode by."

"Good Lord!" Wade's head drooped. "I told Bill to stay at the ranch, and he promised me...."

"I don't believe he shot Jensen at all," Dorothy declared, with spirit. "Yes, it was Jensen himself and one of his herders. Both in the back—killed."

"Bill Santry never shot any man in the back," Wade declared, in a relieved tone. "If you're sure of the facts, Santry will come clear all right."

"It's just a devilish scheme of Moran's, that's all, to put it on you and Santry. I'm sure it is. He hates you both. Whoa, Gypsy!" She reined the little mare in again. "No, it's all right, Gordon. I can manage her," she remonstrated, as he reached for the bridle once more.

"So that's their game, eh? By Heaven, I more than half believe you're right." His face grew ugly with rage. "Dorothy," he continued grimly, "thanks are useless. You're a brick, that's all. Do one thing more for us, will you?"

"Anything," she replied simply, her eyes shining with devotion to him, but he was too overwrought to read them in the darkness.

[Pg 82]

"When you get back to town get word to some of the men for me. You may meet them on the way out, if not they'll be around the barn. Tell them to meet me at the big pine, on the old trail."

His horse had grown restless and now he allowed it to have its head; he was moving past her when she clutched his arm.

"Gordon!"

She loved him dearly, too dearly to let him know how well until he should speak, if he ever did

speak; but above them was the starlit sky and over them hovered the wondrous spirit of the Western night. Her pulse was beating, too, to the call of danger, and despite the control which she had over her nerves, she was just a bit hysterical beneath the surface. She knew that ahead of him was a little army of hostile men, and already that day two men had been killed. So, tremulously, she held on to his sleeve, until she stopped him.

"What are you going to do? You can't do anything alone against so many. They may kill you."

Her sympathy was very sweet to him and he warmly squeezed the little hand which had held him back.

"Don't you be afraid, little girl," he said tenderly. "I shall not get hurt if I can help it."

"Wait until the others come, won't you?"

"Surely," he answered readily, touched by the anxiety in her voice. "I'm going to look around—just as you did—on the quiet. You wouldn't hold me back, where you went in, now would you?"

[Pg 83]

"No—!" She smiled a little into his face.

"That's the stuff! Then I'm coming back to the big pine, and you'll send the boys there. They'll not put Santry in jail if we can prevent them. They've played their last card to-night. It's war from now on."

"All right, Gordon, I'll go." Her voice was full of courage again; the moment of weakness had passed. "Remember now, take good care of yourself."

"You bet," he retorted cheerily, and as her mare moved ahead, he caught her arm as she had caught his. She went quite limp in her saddle and swayed toward him, but he merely added: "You're a wonder, Dorothy."

He released her then, and with a wave of her hand she disappeared into the night. Not until she was beyond recall did he realize that he might have kissed her; that she had wanted him to kiss her, for the first time since they had known each other. He sat in abstraction for several moments before he shook the reins in his hand and his horse sprang forward.

"I've kissed one girl to-day," he muttered aloud, "and I reckon that's enough."

CHAPTER VII

[Pg 84]

THE OLD TRAIL

For another mile Wade followed the main road and then diverged sharply to the left into what was known as the old, or upper, trail. This had formerly been the valley road until made dangerous by a wash-out a year or two previous. In the following spring the wash-out had been partially repaired, but the going was still so rough that the new road was widened, and had been used by preference ever since. The old trail, however, was nearly four miles the shorter of the two, and was still traveled in cases of emergency, although to do so at speed and in the dark was hazardous.

Wade's promise to Dorothy to take good care of himself had been made with mental reservation, for, obsessed by his anxiety over Santry, the young ranchman was in no mood to spare either himself or his horse. His going was marked by a constant shower of stones, sometimes behind him, as the wiry cayuse climbed like a mountain goat; but as often in front, as horse and rider coasted perilously down some declivity. The horse sweated and trembled with nervousness, as a frightened child might, but never refused to attempt what its master demanded of it. One might almost say that there existed a human understanding between man and beast as to the importance of their errand; a common impulse, which urged them onward.

[Pg 85]

When Wade reflected that Dorothy, too, had come over that trail by night in his interest, he thought her more than ever a wonderful girl. Even to one born and raised in the cattle country, the trip would have been difficult; but then he realized that Dorothy seemed much like a ranch-bred girl in her courage and frank womanliness, nor was she any less charming on that account. After all, he thought, women paid too highly for little accomplishments, if to gain them they had to sacrifice the vital points of character. He could not help but contrast Helen's insistence that she should be escorted back to the hotel with Dorothy's brave ride alone, and while he was too loyal to Helen Rexhill to blame her in this respect, the thing made a deep impression upon him.

The way was long, and he had time for many thoughts. It was natural, in the still night, with Dorothy only a little while gone, that he should think tenderly of her, for this cost Santry nothing. For Santry, Wade was reserving not thought but action. He was making up his mind that if Moran had taken the foreman into custody on a trumped up charge of murder, the agent should feel the power of a greater tribunal than any court in the locality—the law of the Strong Arm! Behind him in this, the ranchman knew, was the whole of the cattle faction, and since war had been thrust upon them he would not stop until the end came, whatever it might be. His conscience was clean, for he had exerted himself manfully in the cause of peace, even to the point where his own

[Pg 86]

character had suffered, and now the hour of reprisal was at hand.

He rode, at last, over the top of the Divide and into the little draw that led up to the ranch buildings, in the windows of which lights gleamed. With an imprecation at sight of them, he tied his horse to a post, and, revolver in hand, crept toward the house as quietly as a Sioux.

Except for the light, there was no sign of life about the place, and Wade craftily advanced into the deeper shadows close to the wall of the house. Taking off his hat, so that the crown might not betray him, he peeped through a window. What he saw made him clinch his fingers and grit his teeth in rage.

Inside were half a dozen men, besides three of his own ranch hands who lay trussed up like turkeys in one corner of the room; doubtless they had been surprised by the posse before they had opportunity to run or put up a fight. Moran was there, stretched comfortably on Wade's own cot, smoking a cigar. Once, he looked directly toward the window at which the watcher had placed himself, but the latter did not move. Instead, he fingered his gun and waited; he was not sure that he really wanted to avoid detection; if it came, Moran would pay, and the rest, at the moment, did not seem to matter. He had forgotten Dorothy entirely.

But Santry was not there and this fact puzzled Wade. The Sheriff was not there either, and presently it occurred to the cattleman that a part of the posse, with Santry, might have returned to Crawling Water over the main trail. Probably Moran, with the rest, was waiting for him. The mere thought of Santry already on his way to jail filled Wade with a baffling sense of rage, and creeping from the house, he examined the surrounding turf by the faint rays of the moon. It was badly cut up by the feet of many horses, and several minutes passed before Wade was really sure that a number of mounted men had taken the trail back to town. Satisfied of this at length, he untied his horse and swung into the saddle.

[Pg 87]

Before riding away he considered the advisability of driving off the horses belonging to Moran's party, but there would still be others in the corral, and besides their absence, when discovered, would give warning of the impending attack. On second thought, however, he quietly made his way to the corral and caught a fresh horse of his own. When he had saddled it he set out over the old trail for the big pine.

When he reached the rendezvous his men were not there; but knowing that he must meet them if he followed the road from there on he did not stop. He came upon them in a few minutes, riding toward him at full speed, with Tim Sullivan in the van, too drunk to stand erect, but able to balance himself on a horse's back, drunk or sober.

"We come acrost Santry and the Sheriff a while back," explained Big Bob Lawson, one of Wade's own punchers. "They must be in town by now. We was aimin' to light into 'em, but Santry wouldn't hear of it. Course, we took our orders from him same as usual. He said to tell you that you wanted him to keep quiet, an' that's what he aimed to do."

"He said we wasn't to tell you that he didn't shoot them Swedes," put in another of the men.

[Pg 88]

"What?" Wade demanded sharply.

"He said—hic!" broke in Tim Sullivan, with drunken gravity. "He said—hic!—that if you didn't know that without—hic!—bein' told, you wasn't no friend of his'n, an'—hic!—you could go to hell."

"Shut up, you drunken fool!" Lawson snapped out.

"Jensen and his herder were shot in the back, they say. That clears Santry," Wade declared, and sat for some moments in deep thought, while the men waited as patiently as they could. "Lawson," he said, at last. "You're in charge for the present. Take the boys to the big pine and camp there quietly until I come back. I'm going into town."

"Hadn't you better take us with you, boss? We'll stick. We're for you an' Bill Santry an' ag'in' these—shepherders, whenever you say the word."

"That's—hic—what we are!" Sullivan hiccupped.

Wade shook his head.

"No. You wait for me at the pine. You'll have to rustle your grub the best way you can. I may not get back until to-morrow—until this evening—it's morning now. But wait until I come. There will be plenty for you to do later on and there is no use of you going back to town with me. It might get you into worse trouble than you're headed for already, and what I've got to do, I can do alone."

Wheeling his horse, he rode off toward Crawling Water.

That he could take his men with him, storm the jail and release Santry, Wade did not doubt, but to do so would be to bring each of the men into open conflict with the law, a responsibility which he was resolved to bear alone. Then, too, because his long ride had cooled him somewhat, he intended to make one more appeal to the Senator. Possibly, Moran had exceeded his instructions, and if this were so, it was no more than just that Rexhill, who had seemed to evince a willingness to be helpful, should have the opportunity to disown the act of his agent. Besides, if Santry could be peaceably released, he would be freed of the charge hanging over him, which would not be the case if he were taken from the jail by strategy or violence.

[Pg 89]

With haggard countenance and inflamed eyes, Wade bore little resemblance to his normal self when he again appeared before the Senator, who received him in his dressing-gown, being just out of bed. Rexhill listened with a show of sympathy to the cattleman's story, but evidently he was in a different mood from the day before.

"My boy, your friendship for your foreman is leading you astray. Your faith in him, which is natural and does you credit, is blinding you to an impartial view of the case. Why not let the law take its course? If Santry is innocent his trial will prove it. At any rate, what can I do?"

"Senator—" Wade spoke with intense weariness. "Only yesterday you offered to help us. The situation, as I explained it then, is unchanged now, except for the worse. Bill Santry is free of any complicity in Jensen's death. I am positive of it. He sent me word that he had not left the ranch, and he would not lie to save himself from hanging. Besides, the men were shot in the back, and that is absolute proof that Santry didn't do it."

[Pg 90]

"Mere sentiment, Gordon; mere sentiment. Proof? Pooh!"

Rexhill's slightly contemptuous tone worked upon Wade in his exhausted, overwrought condition, and stung him. A strange look of cunning appeared in his eyes, as he leaned across the table which separated them.

"Senator, Moran made me an offer the other day for my land. If—I accept that offer, will you exert your influence in Santry's behalf?"

Coming so swiftly upon his planning, the prospect of such signal success was so gratifying to Rexhill that only in halting speech could he maintain a show of decorous restraint. His countenance expressed exultant relief, as well it might, since he seemed to see himself snatched out of the jaws of ruin.

"Why, Gordon, I—Of course, my boy, if you were to show such a generous spirit as that, I—er—should feel bound...." The sense of his remarks was lost in the crash of Wade's fist upon the table.

"Damn you!" The cattleman was beyond himself with fatigue, rage, and a rankling sense of injustice. "They told me that was your game. I believed it of Moran, but I thought you were square. So you're that sort, too, eh? Well, may you rot in hell before you get my land, you robber! Now listen to me." He waved his hand in the direction of the street. "Out there's a hundred men—real men—who're waiting the word to run you out of this country, you and Moran, too, and by God we'll do it—we'll do it—and we'll begin right away!" Again his heavy fist crashed down on the table "Never mind Bill Santry"—the instinct of discretion was gaining in Wade.—"He can stay where he is for the present. First, we'll attend to you pirates—then we'll see."

[Pg 91]

He stopped suddenly at sight of Helen, who attracted by the noise, had entered the room, and stood before him in a filmy negligee.

"What is the matter, Gordon?" she demanded anxiously.

"I beg your pardon." Wade spoke awkwardly, unashamed of himself, except for her. "I'm worn out and I—I lost my temper."

"Will you—er—leave this room!" The Senator was beginning to pull himself together. It was the first time he had ever been ragged in such a way, and his composure had suffered; he spoke now with more than his usual pomposity.

"I will," Wade answered curtly, as he turned on his heel and departed.

The Senator, puffing slightly, fiddled with his glasses.

"Your young friend has seen fit to accuse me of—of—" For the life of him, he could not at once say of just what he had been accused, unless he allowed self-accusation to prompt his words. "Some shepherders have been murdered, I believe," he went on, "and Wade seems to think that Moran and I are implicated."

[Pg 92]

"You!" his daughter exclaimed; evidently her amazement did not extend to Moran.

"Preposterous nonsense!"

"Yes, of course." Helen walked to the window and stood looking down into the street. "I'm afraid Gordon hasn't improved since we saw him last," she added, finally. "He seems quite a different person from the man I used to know. What are you going to do about it?"

"Crush him!" The Senator's lips set in a thin, white line, as his hand descended on the table on the spot where Wade's fist had fallen. "This, apparently, is his gratitude to me for my interest in him. Now I intend to show him the other side of me."

"Certainly, no one could blame you for punishing him. Oh, everything between him and me is quite over," said the girl, with a peculiar smile. "He's a perfect bear."

"I'm glad you feel that way about it, Helen." Her father's set lips relaxed into a responsive smile. "You couldn't be my daughter and not have some sense."

"Have I any?" Helen naïvely asked.

She was gazing out of the window again, and to her mind's eye the dusty, squalid street became a broad highway, with jewelers' shops on either side, and *modistes*, and other such charming things, just as they are found in New York, or—Paris!

CHAPTER VIII

[Pg 93]

HIGHER THAN STATUTE LAW

Wade descended the stairs of the hotel and went into the barroom, fuming with rage and chagrin because Helen had seen him in such a temper. Like most men of action, he took pride in his self-control, which seldom failed him, but the villainy of the Senator's attitude had momentarily mastered his patience.

Gathered about the bar were a number of men whom he knew, but beyond a nod here and there he took no notice of them, and went to sit down alone at a small table in the corner. His friends respected his desire to be left alone, although several eyed him curiously and exchanged significant remarks at his appearance. They seemed to be of the opinion that, at last, his fighting blood had been aroused, and now and then they shot approving glances in his direction.

"Whiskey," Wade called to the bartender, and a bottle and glass were placed on the table in front of him.

With a steady hand the ranchman poured out and quickly swallowed two stiff drinks of the fiery liquor, although he was not ordinarily a drinking man. The fact that he drank now showed his mental state more clearly than words could have expressed it. Searching in his pockets, he found tobacco and papers and rolled and lighted a cigarette. Nothing could be done for Santry until night, and meanwhile he intended to get something to eat and take the sleep that he needed to fit himself for the task ahead of him. He ordered a steak, which on top of the whiskey put new life into him.

[Pg 94]

The more he thought of his outburst of temper before Helen the more it annoyed him, for he realized that he had "bitten off a bigger wad than he could chew," as Bill Santry would have expressed it. Rascal though the Senator was, so far as he was concerned, Wade felt that his hands were tied on Helen's account. For her sake, he could not move against her father in a country where the average man thought of consequences after the act rather than before it. In a sense Wade felt that he stood sponsor for Crawling Water in the hospitality which it offered Helen, and he could not bring peril down on her head.

But as for Moran and his hirelings, that was a different matter! When the ranchman thought of Moran, no vengeance seemed too dire to fit his misdeeds. In that direction he would go to the limit, and he only hoped that he might get his hands on Moran in the mix-up. He still looked upon his final visit to Rexhill as a weakness, but it had been undertaken solely on Santry's account. It had failed, and no one now could expect tolerance of him except Helen. If the posse was still at the ranch, when he and Santry returned there at the head of their men, they would attack in force, and shoot to kill if necessary.

He learned from Lem Trowbridge, who presently joined him at the table, that the posse would probably still be there, for the report in town was that Moran had taken possession of the property and meant to stay there.

[Pg 95]

"He does, eh?" Wade muttered grimly. "Well, he may, but it will be with his toes up. I'm done, Lem. By Heaven, it's more than flesh and blood can stand!"

"It sure is! We're with you, Gordon. Your men were over at my place a few hours ago. We grubbed them and loaned them all the guns we could spare. I sent over my new Winchester and a belt of shells for you."

"Thanks."

"That's all right. You're more than welcome to all the help I can give you, not only against Moran and his gang, but against Rexhill. If you like, we'll run him out of town while you're putting the fear of God into Moran. Lord! I sure would like to go back to the ranch with you, but it's your own quarrel and I won't butt in."

Wade briefly explained his attitude toward the Rexhills and added that their cause would not be helped by violence toward the Senator, who was a big man at Washington, and might stir the authorities into action on his behalf if he could prove personal abuse. The noise that would be made by such a happening might drown out the justice of the cattlemen's claim.

"Well, that's true, too," Trowbridge admitted. "I can see the point all right. What we want to do is to get something 'on' the Senator. I mean something sure—something like this Jensen shooting."

Wade nodded slowly.

"That's the idea, but I'm afraid we can't do it, Lem. I haven't a doubt but that Moran is mixed up in the killing, but I hardly believe Rexhill is. Anyhow, they've probably covered their tracks so

[Pg 96]

well that we'll never be able to connect them with it."

"Oh, I don't know. You can't always tell what time'll bring to light." Trowbridge lowered his voice. "What's your idea about Santry? Do you want help there?"

"No." Wade spoke with equal caution. "I believe I can manage all right alone. The Sheriff will probably be looking for us to rush the jail, but he won't expect me to come alone. Bat Lewis goes on duty as the relief, about nine o'clock. I mean to beat him to it, and if the Sheriff opens up for me I'll be away with Santry before Bat appears. But I must get some sleep, Lem."

The two men arose.

"Well, good luck to you, Gordon." Trowbridge slapped his friend on the shoulder, and they separated.

"Frank, can you let me have a bed?" Wade asked of the hotel proprietor, a freckled Irishman.

"Sure; as many as you want."

"One will do, Frank; and another thing," the ranchman said guardedly. "I'll need an extra horse to-night, and I don't want to be seen with him until I need him. Can you have him tied behind the school-house a little before nine o'clock?"

"You bet I can!" The Irishman slowly dropped an eyelid, for the school-house was close by the jail.

Wade tumbled into the bed provided for him and slept like a log, having that happy faculty of the healthy man, of being able to sleep when his body needed it, no matter what impended against the hour of awakening. [Pg 97]

When he did wake up, the afternoon was well advanced, and after another hearty meal he walked over to the Purnells' to pass the time until it was late enough for him to get to work.

"Now, Gordon will tell you I'm right," Mrs. Purnell proclaimed triumphantly, when the young man entered the cottage. "I want Dorothy to go with me to call on Miss Rexhill, and she doesn't want to go. The idea! When Miss Rexhill was nice enough to call on us first."

Mrs. Purnell set much store upon her manners, as the little Michigan town where she was born understood good breeding, and she had not been at all annoyed by Helen Rexhill's patronage, which had so displeased Wade. To her mind the Rexhills were very great people, and great people were to be expected to bear themselves in lofty fashion. Dorothy had inherited her democracy from her father and not from her mother, who, indeed, would have been disappointed if Helen Rexhill appeared any less than the exalted personage she imagined herself to be.

"Oh, I'd like to meet her well enough, only..." Dorothy stopped, unwilling to say before Wade that she did not consider the Rexhills sufficiently good friends of his, in the light of recent developments, for them to be friends of hers.

"Of course, go," he broke in heartily. "She's not responsible for what her father does in the way of business, and I reckon she'd think it funny if you didn't call." [Pg 98]

"There now!" Mrs. Purnell exclaimed triumphantly.

"All right, I'll go." In her heart Dorothy was curious to meet the other woman and gauge her powers of attraction. "We'll go to-morrow, mother."

Quite satisfied, Mrs. Purnell made some excuse to leave them together, as she usually did, for her mother heart had traveled farther along the Road to To-morrow than her daughter's fancy. She secretly hoped that the young cattleman would some day declare his love for Dorothy and ask for her hand in marriage.

In reply to the girl's anxious questions Wade told her of what had happened since their meeting on the trail, as they sat together on the porch of the little cottage. She was wearing a plain dress of green gingham, which, somehow, suggested to him the freshness of lettuce. She laughed a little when he told her of that and called him foolish, though the smile that showed a dimple in her chin belied her words.

"Then the posse is still at the ranch?" she asked.

"I think so. If they are, we are going to run them off to-morrow morning, or perhaps to-night. I've had enough of this nonsense and I mean to meet Moran halfway from now on."

"Yes, I suppose you must," she admitted reluctantly. "But do be careful, Gordon."

"As careful as I can be under the circumstances," he said cheerfully, and told her that his chief purpose in coming to see her was to thank her again for the service she had rendered him. [Pg 99]

"Oh, you don't need to thank me for that. Do you know"—she puckered up her brows in a reflective way—"I've been thinking. It seems very strange to me that Senator Rexhill and Moran should be willing to go to such lengths merely to get hold of this land as a speculation. Doesn't it seem so to you?"

"Yes, it does, but that must be their reason."

"I'm not so sure of that, Gordon. There must be something more behind all this. That's what I

have been thinking about. You remember that when Moran first came here he had an office just across the street from his present one?"

"Yes. Simon Barsdale had Moran's present office until he moved to Sheridan. You were his stenographer for a while, I remember." Wade looked at her curiously, wondering what she was driving at.

"Moran bought Mr. Barsdale's safe." Her voice sounded strange and unnatural. "I know the old combination. I wonder if it has been changed?"

"Lem Trowbridge was saying only this morning," said Wade thoughtfully, for he was beginning to catch her meaning, "that if we could only get proof of something crooked we might...."

"Well, I think we can," Dorothy interrupted.

They looked searchingly at each other in the gathering dusk, and he tried to read the light in her eyes, and being strangely affected himself by their close proximity, he misinterpreted it. He slipped his hand over hers and once more the desire to kiss her seized him. He let go of her hand and was just putting his arm around her shoulders when, to his surprise, she appeared suddenly indignant.

[Pg 100]

"Don't!"

He was abashed, and for a moment neither said a word.

"What is the combination?" he finally asked hoarsely.

"I promised Mr. Barsdale never to tell any one." Her lips wreathed into a little smile. "I'll do it myself."

"No, you won't." Wade shook his head positively. "Do you suppose I'm going to let you steal for me? It will be bad enough to do it myself; but necessity knows no law. Well, we'll let it go for the present then. Don't you think of doing it, Dorothy. Will you promise me?"

"I never promise," she said, smiling again, and ignoring her last words in womanly fashion, "but if you don't want me to...."

"Well, I don't," he declared firmly. "Let it rest at that. We'll probably find some other way anyhow."

She asked him then about Santry, but he evaded a direct answer beyond expressing the conviction that everything would end all right. They talked for a while of commonplaces, although nothing that he said seemed commonplace to her and nothing that she said seemed so to him. When it was fully dark he arose to go. Then she seemed a little sorry that she had not let him put his arm around her, and she leaned toward him as she had done on the trail; but he was not well versed in woman's subtleties, and he failed to guess her thoughts and walked away, leaving her, as Shakespeare put it, to

[Pg 101]

"Twice desire, ere it be day,
That which with scorn she put away."

Having mounted his horse at the livery stable, he first made sure that the extra horse was behind the school-house, where he tied his own, and then walked around to the jail. On the outside, this building was a substantial log structure; within, it was divided into the Sheriff's office and sleeping room, the "bull pen," and a single narrow cell, in which Wade guessed that Santry would be locked. After examining his revolver, he slipped it into the side pocket of his coat and walked boldly up to the jail. Then, whistling merrily, for Bat Lewis, the deputy, was a confirmed human song-bird, he knocked sharply on the door with his knuckles.

"It's me—Bat," he called out, mimicking Lewis' voice, in answer to a question from within.

"You're early to-night. What's struck you?" Sheriff Thomas opened the door, and turning, left it so, for the "relief" to enter. He had half feared that an attempt might be made to liberate Santry, but had never dreamed that any one would try the thing alone. He was glad to be relieved, for a poker game at which he wanted to sit in would soon start at the Gulch Saloon.

He was the most surprised man in Wyoming, when he felt the cold muzzle of Wade's Colt boring into the nape of his neck and heard the ranchman's stern warning to keep quiet or take the consequences. Sheriff Thomas had earned his right to his "star" by more than one exhibition of nerve, but he was too familiar with gun ethics to argue with the business end of a "45."

[Pg 102]

"Not a sound!" Outwardly cold as ice, but inwardly afire, Wade shoved the weapon against his victim's neck and marched him to the middle of the room. "I've got the upper hand, Sheriff, and I intend to keep it."

"You're a damn fool, Wade." The Sheriff spoke without visible emotion and in a low tone. "You'll go up for this. Don't you realize that...."

"Can it!" snapped Wade, deftly disarming the officer with his free hand. "Never mind the majesty of the law and all that rot. I thought that all over before I came. Now that I've got you and drawn your teeth, you'll take orders from me. Get my foreman out of that cell and be quick about it!"

There was nothing to do but obey, which Thomas quietly did, although somewhat in fear of what Santry might do when at liberty. When the cell door was unlocked, the old plainsman, in a towering rage at the injustice of his incarceration, seemed inclined to choke his erstwhile jailer.

"None of that, Bill," Wade admonished curtly. "He's only been a tool in this business, although he ought to know better. We'll tie him up and gag him; that's all. Rip up one of those blankets."

"I knew you'd come, boy!" The foreman's joy was almost like that of a big dog at sight of his master. "By the great horned toad, I knew it!" With his sinewy hands he tore the blanket into strips as easily as though the wool had been paper. "Now for him, drat him!" [Pg 103]

Wade stood guard while the helpless Sheriff was trussed up and his mouth stopped by Santry, and if the ranch owner felt any compunction at the sight, he had only to think of his own men as he had seen them the night before, lying on the floor of the ranch house.

"Make a good job of it, Bill," was his only comment.

"You bet!" Santry chuckled as he drew the last of the knots tight. "That'll hold him for a spell, I reckon. How you feel, Sheruff, purty comfortable?" The flowing end of the gag so hid the officer's features that he could express himself only with his eyes, which he batted furiously. "Course," Santry went on, in mock solicitude, "if I'd thought I mighta put a bit of sugar on that there gag, to remind you of your mammy like, but it ain't no great matter. You can put a double dose in your cawfee when you git loose."

"Come on, Bill!" Wade commanded.

"So long, Sheruff," Santry chuckled.

There was no time to waste in loitering, for at any moment Bat Lewis might arrive and give an alarm which would summon reinforcements from amongst Moran's following. Hurrying Santry ahead of him, Wade swung open the door and they looked out cautiously. No one was in sight, and a couple of minutes later the two men were mounted and on their way out of town. [Pg 104]

"By the great horned toad!" Santry exulted, as they left the lights of Crawling Water behind them. "It sure feels good to be out of that there boardin'-house. It wasn't our fault, Gordon, and say, about this here shootin'...."

"I know all about that, Bill," Wade interposed. "The boys told me. They're waiting for us at the big pine. But your arrest, that's what I want to hear about."

"Well, it was this-a-way," the old man explained. "They sneaked up on the house in the dark and got the drop on us. Right here I rise to remark that never no more will I separate myself from my six-shooter. More'n one good man has got hisself killed just because his gun wasn't where it oughter be when he needed it. Of course, we put up the best scrap we could, but we didn't have no chance, Gordon. The first thing I knew, while I was tusslin' with one feller, somebody fetched me a rap on the head with a pistol-butt, an' I went down for the count. Any of the boys shot up?"

Wade described the appearance of the ranch house on the previous night, and Santry swore right manfully.

"What's on the cards now?" he demanded. "How much longer are we goin' to stand for...."

"No longer," Wade declared crisply. "That's why the boys are waiting for us at the pine. We're going to run Moran and his gang off the ranch as soon as we can get there, and then we're going to run them out of the country." [Pg 105]

"Whoop-e-e-e-e-e!" The old plainsman's yell of exultation split the night like the yelp of a coyote, and he brought his hand down on Wade's back with a force which made the latter wince. "By the great horned toad, that's talkin'! That's the finest news I've heard since my old mammy said to the parson, 'Call him Bill, for short.' Whoop-e-e-e-e-e!"

Wade's warning to keep still was lost on the wind, for Santry stuck his spurs into his horse's flanks and charged along the trail like an old-time knight. With a grim smile his employer put on speed and followed him.

CHAPTER IX

[Pg 106]

THE BATTLE AT THE RANCH

When Wade and Santry approached the big pine, the waiting men came out from its shadow and rode forward, with the borrowed rifles across their saddle horns.

"All right, boys?" the rancher asked, taking Trowbridge's new rifle, a beautiful weapon, which Lawson handed to him.

"All right, sir," answered Tim Sullivan, adding the "sir" in extenuation of his befuddled condition the night before, while each man gave Santry a silent hand-shake to welcome him home.

Grimly, silently, then, save for the dashing of their horses' hoofs against the loose stones, and an occasional muttered imprecation as a rider lurched in his saddle, the seven men rode rapidly toward the mountains. In numbers, their party was about evenly matched with the enemy, and Wade meant that the advantage of surprise, if possible, should rest with him in order to offset such advantage as Moran might find in the shelter of the house. But, however that might be, each man realized that the die had been cast and that the fight, once begun, would go to a finish.

"I only hope," Santry remarked, as a steep grade forced them to lessen their speed, "I can get my two hands on that cussed tin-horn, Moran. Him and me has a misunderstandin' to settle, for sure."

[Pg 107]

"You leave him to me, Bill." Wade spoke vindictively. "He's my meat."

"Well, since you ask it, I'll try, boy. But there's goin' to be some fightin' sure as taxes, and when I get to fightin', I'm liable to go plumb, hog wild. Say, I hope you don't get into no trouble over this here jail business o' mine. That 'ud make me feel bad, Gordon."

"We'll not worry about that now, Bill."

"That's right. Don't worry till you have to, and then shoot instead. That's been my motto all my born days, and it ain't such durn bad philosophy at that. I wonder"—the old man chuckled to himself—"I wonder if the Sheruff et up most of that there gag before Bat let him loose?"

Wade laughed out loud, and as though in response, an owl hooted somewhere in the timber to their right.

"There's a durned old hoot owl," growled Santry. "I never like to hear them things—they most always mean bad luck."

He rode to the head of the little column, and the rest of the way to the ranch was passed in ominous silence. When they finally arrived at the edge of the clearing and cautiously dismounted, everything seemed from the exterior, at least, just as it should be. The night being far gone, the lights were out, and there was no sign of life about the place. Wade wondered if the posse had gone.

"There ain't no use in speculatin'," declared Santry. "They may be asleep, and they may be layin' for us there in the dark. This will take a rise out of 'em anyhow."

[Pg 108]

At sight of the old fellow, pistol in hand, Wade called to him to wait, but as he spoke Santry fired two quick shots into the air.

There was an immediate commotion in the ranch house. A man inside was heard to curse loudly, while another showed his face for an instant where the moonlight fell across a window. He hastily ducked out of sight, however, when a rifle bullet splintered the glass just above his head. Presently a gun cracked inside the house and a splash on a rock behind the attackers told them where the shot had struck.

"Whoop-e-e-e!" Santry yelled, discharging the four remaining shots in his revolver at the window. "We've got 'em guessin'. They don't know how many we are."

"They were probably asleep," said Wade a bit sharply. "We might have sneaked in and captured the whole crowd without firing a shot. That's what I meant to do before you cut loose."

Santry shook his grizzled head as he loaded his revolver.

"Well, now, that would have been just a mite risky, boy. The way things stand we've still got the advantage, an'...." He broke off to take a snapshot at a man who showed himself at the window for an instant in an effort to get a glimpse of the attacking force. "One!" muttered the old plainsman to himself.

By this time Wade had thrown himself down on his stomach behind a bowlder to Santry's left and was shooting methodically at the door of the house, directly in front of him. He knew that door. It was built of inch lumber and was so located that a bullet, after passing through it, would rake the interior of the cabin from end to end. The only way the inmates could keep out of the line of his fire was by hugging the walls on either side, where they would be partially exposed to the leaden hail which Santry and the punchers were directing at the windows.

[Pg 109]

There was a grim, baleful look on the young man's usually pleasant face, and his eyes held a pitiless gleam. He was shooting straight, shooting to kill, and taking a fierce delight in the act. The blood lust was upon him, that primal, instinctive desire for combat in a righteous cause that lies hidden at the very bottom of every strong man's nature. And there came to his mind no possible question of the righteous nature of his cause. He was fighting to regain possession of his own home from the marauders who had invaded it. His enemies had crowded him to the wall, and now they were paying the penalty. Wade worked the lever of his Winchester as though he had no other business in life. A streak of yellow clay mingled with a bloody trickle from a bullet scratch on his cheek gave his set features a fairly ferocious expression.

Santry, glancing toward him, chuckled again, but without mirth. "The boy's woke up at last," he muttered to himself. "They've drove him to it, durn 'em. I knew almighty well that this law an' order stunt couldn't last forever. Wow!"

[Pg 110]

The latter exclamation was caused by a bullet which ricocheted from a rock near his head,

driving a quantity of fine particles into his face.

"Whoop-e-e-e-e!" he howled a moment later. "We got 'em goin'. It's a cinch they can't stand this pace for more'n a week."

Indeed, it was a marvel that the defenders kept on fighting as long as they did. Already the door, beneath Wade's machine-like shooting, had been completely riddled; the windows were almost bare of glass; and great splinters of wood had been torn from the log walls by the heavy rifle bullets on their way through to the interior. Soon the door sagged and crashed inward, and into the gaping hole thus made Wade continued to empty his rifle.

At last, the fire of those within slackened and temporarily ceased. Did this mean surrender? Wade asked himself and ordered his men to stop shooting and await developments. For some moments all was still, and the advisability of rushing the house was being discussed when all at once the fire of the defenders began again. This time, however, there was something very odd about it. There was a loud banging of exploding cartridges, but only a few shots whistled around the heads of the cattlemen. Nevertheless, Wade told his men to resume shooting, and once more settled down to his own task.

"What'n hell they tryin' to do?" Santry demanded. "Sounds like a Fourth o' July barbecue to me." [Pg 111]

"I don't know," Wade answered, charging the magazine of his rifle, "but whatever it is they'll have to stop mighty soon."

Then gradually, but none the less certainly, the fire from within slackened until all was still. This seemed more like a visitation of death, and again Wade ordered his men to stop shooting. They obeyed orders and lay still, keenly watching the house.

"Do you surrender?" Wade shouted; but there was no reply.

Santry sprang to his feet.

"By the great horned toad!" he cried. "I'm a-goin' in there! Anybody that wants to come along is welcome."

Not a man in the party would be dared in that way, so, taking advantage of such cover as offered, they advanced upon the cabin, stealthily at first and then more rapidly, as they met with no resistance—no sign whatever of life. A final rush carried them through the doorway into the house, where they expected to find a shambles.

Wade struck a light, and faced about with a start as a low groan came from a corner of the back room. A man lay at full length on the floor, tied hand and foot, and gagged. It was Ed Nelson, one of the Double Arrow hands who had been surprised and captured by the posse, and a little farther away in the shadow against the wall his two companions lay in a like condition. With his knife Wade was cutting them loose, and glancing about in a puzzled search for the wounded men he expected to find in the house, when Santry shouted something from the kitchen. [Pg 112]

"What is it, Bill?" the ranch owner demanded.

Santry tramped back into the room, laughing in a shamefaced sort of way.

"They done us, Gordon!" he burst out. "By the great horned toad, they done us! They chucked a bunch of shells into the hot cook-stove, an' sneaked out the side door while we was shootin' into the front room. By cracky, that beats...."

"That's what they did," spoke up Nelson, as well as his cramped tongue would permit, being now freed of the gag. "They gagged us first, so's we couldn't sing out; then they filled up the stove an' beat it."

What had promised to be a tragedy had proved a fiasco, and Wade smiled a little foolishly.

"The joke's on us, I guess, boys," he admitted. "But we've got the ranch back, at any rate. How are you feeling, Ed, pretty stiff and sore?"

"My Gawd, yes—awful!"

"Me, too," declared Tom Parrish, the second of the victims; and the third man swore roundly that he would not regain the full use of his legs before Christmas.

"Well, you're lucky at that," was Santry's dry comment. "All that saved you from gettin' shot up some in the fight was layin' low down in that corner where you was." He let his eyes travel around the littered, blood-spattered room. "From the looks o' this shebang we musta stung some of 'em pretty deep; but nobody was killed, I reckon. I hope Moran was the worst hurt, durn him!" [Pg 113]

"He'll keep," Wade said grimly. "We've not done with him yet, Bill. We've only just begun."

CHAPTER X

THE SENATOR GETS BUSY

It was daylight when the routed posse, with Race Moran in the lead, his left arm tied up in a blood-stained handkerchief, rode into Crawling Water. A bullet had pierced the fleshy part of the agent's wrist, a trifling wound, but one which gave him more pain than he might have suffered from a serious injury. None of the members of the posse had been dangerously wounded; indeed, they had suffered more in the spirit than in the flesh; but there had been a number of minor casualties amongst the men, which made a sufficiently bloody display to arouse the little town to active curiosity.

Under instructions from the leader, however, the fugitives kept grouchy silent, so that curiosity was able to feed only on speculations as to Wade's temper, and the fact that he had brought about Santry's release from jail. The story of that achievement had been bruited about Crawling Water since midnight, together with the probability that the Law would be invoked to punish the ranchman for his defiance of it. Popular sentiment was running high over the likelihood of such a step being taken, and the members of the posse were the targets of many hostile glances from the townspeople. At least two-thirds of the citizens were strongly in favor of Wade, but before they took active steps in his behalf they waited for the return of a horseman, who had hurried out to the ranch to learn at first hand exactly what had happened there.

[Pg 115]

Meanwhile Moran, in an ugly mood, had awakened the Senator from the troubled sleep which had come to him after much wakeful tossing. Rexhill, with tousled hair, wrapped in a bathrobe, from the bottom of which his bare ankles and slippered feet protruded, sat on the edge of his bed, impatiently chewing an unlighted cigar while he listened to Moran's account of the fracas.

"You went too far, Race,—you went too far," he burst out angrily at last. "You had no orders to jump the ranch. I told you...."

"We've been fooling around long enough, Senator," Moran interrupted sullenly, nursing his throbbing wrist. "It was high time somebody started something, and when I saw my chance I seized it. You seem to think"—his voice trailed into scorn—"that we are playing marbles with boys, but, I tell you, it's men we're up against. My experience has shown me that it's the first blow that counts in any fight."

"Well, who got in the hardest lick, eh?" Rexhill snorted sarcastically. "The first blow's all right, provided the second isn't a knockout from the other side. Why, confound it, Race, here we had Wade at our mercy. He'd broken into jail and set free a suspected murderer—a clear case of criminality. Then you had to spoil it all."

Moran smothered an imprecation.

"You seem to forget, Senator, that we had him at our mercy before, and you wouldn't hear of it. If you'd taken my advice in the first place, we'd have had Wade in jail instead of Santry and things might have been different."

[Pg 116]

"Your advice was worthless under the circumstances; that's why I didn't take it." Rexhill deliberately paused and lighted his cigar, from which he took several soothing puffs. To have been aroused from his bed with such news had flustered him somewhat; but he had never known anything worth while to come out of a heated discussion, and he sought now to calm himself. Finally, he spoke slowly. "What you proposed to me then was a frame-up, and all frame-ups are dangerous, particularly when they have little to rest upon. For that reason I refused to fall in with your ideas, Race. This release of Santry from jail is—or was—an entirely different thing, an overt criminal act, with Sheriff Thomas on our side as an unimpeachable witness."

Moran was suffering too keenly from his wound and smarting under his defeat too much to be altogether reasonable. His manner was fast losing the appearance of respect which he had previously shown his employer. His expression was becoming heated and contemptuous.

"You didn't base your refusal on logic at the time, Senator," he said. "It was sentiment, if I remember right. Wade had broken bread with you, and all that. I don't see but what that applies just as well now as it did then."

"It doesn't," the Senator argued smugly, still rankling from Wade's arraignment of him the day before, "because even hospitality has its limits of obligation. So long as I knew Wade to be innocent, I did not care to have him arrested; but I don't admit any sentiment of hospitality which compels me to save a *known* criminal from the hand of justice. Sheriff Thomas came in to see me last night and I agreed with him that Wade should be brought to account for his contempt of the law. Wade forced his way into the jail and released his foreman at the point of a gun. Even so, I feel sorry for Wade and I am a little apprehensive of the consequences that will probably develop from his foolhardiness."

[Pg 117]

"Well, by God, if there's any sympathy for him floating around this room, it all belongs to you, Senator." Moran tenderly fingered his aching wrist. "I'm not one of these 'turn the other cheek' guys; you can gamble on that!"

"But now where are we?" Rexhill ignored the other's remarks entirely. "We are but little better off than Wade is. He pulled Santry out of jail, and we tried to steal his ranch. The only difference is that so far he has succeeded, and we have failed. He has as much law on his side now as we have on ours."

Moran's head drooped a little before the force of this argument, although he was chiefly impressed by the fact that he had failed. His failures had been few, because Fortune had smiled

upon him in the past; and doubtless for this reason he was the less able to treat failure philosophically. His plans at the ranch house had gone awry. He had counted on meeting Wade there in the daytime, in the open, and upon provoking him, before witnesses, into some hot-headed act which would justify a battle. The surprise attack had left the agent without this excuse for the hostilities which had occurred.

[Pg 118]

Rexhill arose and walked up and down the room in thought, his slippers feet shuffling over the floor, showing now and then a glimpse of his fat, hairy legs as the skirt of his bathrobe fluttered about. A cloud of fragrant smoke from his cigar trailed him as he walked, and from the way he chewed on the tobacco his *confrères* in the Senate could have guessed that he was leading up to one of his Czar-like pronouncements. Presently he stopped moving and twisted the cigar in his mouth so that its fumes would be out of his eyes, as his glance focused on Moran.

"There's just one way out of this mess, Race," he began. "Now heed what I say to you. I'm going to send a telegram to the Department of the Interior which will bring a troop of cavalry down here from Fort Mackenzie. You must go slow from now on, and let the authorities settle the whole matter."

The agent sat up alertly, as his employer, wagging a ponderous forefinger impressively, proceeded.

"You were not on the ranch for the purpose of jumping it at all. Mind that now! You and I stand for the majesty of the law in this lawless community." Moran's eyes began to twinkle at this, but he said nothing. "When you and Sheriff Thomas went out to the ranch, you carried two warrants with you, one for Santry, as the accessory, and one for Wade, as the principal, in the Jensen shooting. Yes, yes, I know what you are going to say; but I must save my own bacon now. Since Wade has proved himself to be a lawbreaker, I'm not going to protect him."

[Pg 119]

"Now, you're talking!" exclaimed Moran, delighted at the prospect of what such a course would start going.

"I'll have the matter of the warrants fixed up with Thomas," the Senator continued. "Now, follow me carefully. Thomas arrested Santry at the ranch, and then left you, as his deputy, to serve the other warrant on Wade when he came home. It was because of his knowledge of what was in store for him that Wade, after getting Santry out of jail, attacked you and your men, and it was in defense of the law that you returned their fire. It will all work out very smoothly, I think, and any further hostilities will come from the other side and be to our great advantage."

Moran looked at his employer in admiration, as the latter concluded and turned toward his writing table.

"Senator," the agent declared, as Rexhill took up his fountain pen and began to write on a telegraph form, "you never should have started in Denver. If you'd been born in little old New York, you'd be in the White House now. From this minute on you and I are going to carry this whole valley in our vest-pockets."

"You take this over and put it on the wire right away, Race. It's to the Secretary of the Interior and my signature on it should get immediate attention." Senator Rexhill handed over the telegraph form he had filled out.

[Pg 120]

"But what about State rights in this business?" Moran asked, anxiously. "Will they send Government troops in here on your say so?"

The Senator waved his hand in dismissal of the objection.

"I'll have Thomas wire the Governor that the situation is beyond control. This town is miles from nowhere, and there's no militia within easy reach. The State will be glad enough to be saved the expense, especially with the soldiers close by at Fort Mackenzie. Besides, you know, although Wade's ranch is inside the State, a good deal of his land is Government land, or was until he filed on it."

When Moran had left the room in a much easier frame of mind than he came into it, the Senator sat down heavily on the bed. He was puffing at his cigar and thinking intently, when he caught sight of the white, startled face of his daughter in the mirror of the bureau across the room. Whirling about, he found her standing in the doorway looking at him. Rexhill had never before been physically conscious of the fact that he had a spine, but in that moment of discovery a chill crept up and down his back, for her expression told him that she had heard a good deal of his conversation with Moran. The most precious thing to him in life was the respect of his child; more precious even, he knew, than the financial security for which he fought; and in her eyes now he saw that he was face to face with a greater battle than any he had ever waged.

[Pg 121]

"Father!"

"What, are you awake, my dear?"

He tried hard to make his tone cheery and natural, as he stood up and wrapped the bathrobe more closely around him.

"I heard what you said to Race Moran."

Helen came into the room, with only a dressing wrapper thrown over her thin night-dress, and

dropped into a chair. She seemed to feel that her statement of the fact was accusation enough in itself, and waited for him to answer.

"You shouldn't have listened, Helen. Moran and I were discussing private business matters, and I thought that you were asleep. It was not proper...."

Her lips, which usually framed a smile for him, curled disdainfully and he winced in spite of himself. He avoided the keen appraisal of her gaze, which seemed now to size him up, as though to probe his most secret thoughts, whereas before she had always accepted him lovingly on faith.

"Certainly, they were not matters that you would want an outsider to hear," she said, in a hard voice, "but I am very glad that *I* listened, father. Glad"—her voice broke a little—"even though I shall never be able to think of you again as I...."

He went to her and put his heavy hands on her shoulders, which shrank under his touch.

"Now, don't say things that you'll regret, Helen. You're the only girl I have, and I'm the only father you have, so we ought to make the best of each other, oughtn't we, eh? You're prone to hasty judgments. Don't let them run away with you now." [Pg 122]

"Don't touch me!" He made way for her as she got to her feet. "Father,"—she tremblingly faced him, leaning for support against a corner of the bureau,—"*I heard* all that you said to Mr. Moran. I don't want you to tell me what we've been to each other. Don't I know that? Haven't I felt it?"

The Senator swallowed hard, touched to the quick at the sight of her suffering.

"You want me to explain it—more fully?"

"If you can. Can you?" Her lips twitched spasmodically. "I want you to tell me something that will let me continue to believe that you are—that you are—Oh, you know what I want to say." Rexhill blushed a deep purple, despite his efforts at self-control. "But what can you say, father; what *can* you say, after what I've heard?"

"You mean as regards young Wade? You know, I told you last night about his attack on the Sheriff. You know, too"—the blush faded as the Senator caught his stride again—"that I said I meant to crush him. You even agreed with me that he should be taught a lesson."

"But you should fight fairly," Helen retorted, with a quick breath of aggression. "Do you believe that he killed Jensen? Of course you don't. The mere idea of such a thing is absurd."

"Perhaps he planned it."

"Father!" The scorn in her tone stung him like a whip-lash. "Did he plan the warrants, too? The warrant that hasn't been issued yet, although you are going to swear that it was issued yesterday. Did he plan that?" [Pg 123]

Once in his political career, the Senator had faced an apparent *impasse* and had wormed out of it through tolerant laughter. He had laughed so long and so genially that the very naturalness of his artifice had won the day for him. Men thought that if he had had a guilty conscience, he could not have seemed so carefree. He tried the same trick now with his daughter; but it was a frightful attempt and he gave it up when he saw its ill-success.

"See here, Helen," he burst out, "it is ridiculous that you should arraign me in this way. It is true that no warrant was out yesterday for Wade, but it is also true that the Sheriff intended to issue one, and it was only through my influence that the warrant was not issued. Since then Wade, besides insulting me, has proved himself a lawbreaker. I have nothing to do with the consequences of his actions, which rest entirely with him. You have overheard something that you were not intended to hear, and as is usually the case, have drawn wrong conclusions. The best thing you can do now is to try to forget what you have heard and leave the matter in my hands, where it belongs."

He had spoken dominantly and expected her to yield to his will. He was totally unprepared, well as he knew her spirit, for what followed.

She faced him with glowing eyes and her trembling lips straightened into a thin, firm line of determination. He was her father, and she had always loved him for what she had felt to be his worth; she had given him the chance to explain, and he had not availed himself of it; he was content to remain convicted in her eyes, or else, which was more likely, he could not clear himself. She realized now that, despite what she had said in pique, only the night before, she really loved Wade, and he, at least, had done nothing, except free a friend, who, like himself, was unjustly accused. She could not condemn him for that, any more than she could forget her father's duplicity. [Pg 124]

"I won't forget it!" she cried. "If necessary, I will go to Gordon and tell him what you've done. I'll tell it to every one in Crawling Water, if you force me to. I don't want to because, just think what that would mean to you! But you shall not sacrifice Gordon. Yes, I mean it—I'll sacrifice you first!"

"Don't talk so loud," the Senator warned her anxiously, going a little white. "Don't be a fool, Helen. Why, it was only a few hours ago that you said Wade should be punished."

She laughed hysterically.

"That was only because I wanted to get him away from this awful little town. I thought that if he were—punished—a little, if he was made a laughing stock, he might be ashamed, and not want to stay here. Now, I see that I was wrong. I don't blame him for fighting with every weapon he can find. I hope he wins!"

[Pg 125]

Rexhill, who had been really frightened at her hysterical threat of exposure, and assailed by it in his pride as well, felt his fear begin to leave him and his confidence in himself return. In the next minute or two, he thought rapidly and to considerable purpose. In the past he had resolutely refused to use his child in any way to further his own ends, but the present occasion was an emergency, and major surgery is often demanded in a crisis. If she were willing, as she said, to sacrifice him, he felt that he might properly make use of her and her moods to save himself and her as well. He realized that if she were to shout abroad through Crawling Water the conversation that had passed between him and Moran, the likelihood of either of the two men getting out of the county alive would be extremely remote.

"So that was it, eh? And I complimented you upon your good sense!" His laugh was less of an effort now. "Well, doesn't it hold good now as well as it did then? Come, my dear, sit down and we'll thresh this out quietly."

She shook her head stubbornly, but the woman in her responded to the new note of confidence in his voice, and she waited eagerly for what he had to say, hopeful that he might still clear himself.

"You tell me that I must fight fair. Well, I usually do fight that way. I'm doing so now. When I spoke yesterday of crushing Wade, I meant it and I still mean it. But there are limits to what I want to see happen to him; for one thing, I don't want to see him hung for this Jensen murder, even if he's guilty."

[Pg 126]

"You know he isn't guilty."

"I think he isn't." Her eyes lighted up at this admission. "But he must be tried for the crime, there's no dodging that. The jury will decide the point; we can't. But even if he should be convicted, I shouldn't want to see him hung. Why, we've been good friends, all of us. I—I like him, even though he did jump on to me yesterday. That was why"—he leaned forward, impelled to the falsehood that hung upon his tongue by the desperate necessity of saving himself his daughter's love and respect—"I arranged with Moran to have the boy arrested on such a warrant. He is bound to be arrested"—Rexhill struck the table with his fist—"and if he should need a basis for an appeal after conviction, he could hardly have a better one than the evidence of conspiracy, which a crooked warrant would afford. I wanted to give him that chance because I realized that he had enemies here and that his trial might not be a fair one. When the right moment came I was going to have that warrant looked into."

"Father!"

Helen dropped on her knees before him, her eyelashes moist with tears and her voice vibrant with happiness.

"Why didn't you explain all that before, Father? I knew that there must be *some* explanation. I felt that I couldn't have loved you all my life for nothing. But do you really believe that any jury would convict Gordon of such a thing?"

[Pg 127]

"I hope not."

Never had Senator Rexhill felt himself more hopelessly a scoundrel than now as he smoothed her hair from her forehead; but he told himself that the pain of this must be less than to be engulfed in bankruptcy, or exposure, which would submerge them all. Moreover, he promised himself that if future events bore too heavily against Wade, he should be saved at the eleventh hour. The thought of this made the Senator's position less hard.

"I hope not, Helen," he repeated. "Of course, the serving of the warrant at this time will help my own interests, but since a warrant must be served, anyway, I feel justified, under the circumstances, in availing myself of this advantage."

"Y-e-s, of course," Helen agreed doubtfully. "Oh, it is all too bad. I wish none of us had ever heard of Crawling Water."

"Well, maybe the Grand Jury will not indict him, feeling runs so strong here," her father continued, and she took fresh hope at this prospect. "But, anyway, he will feel the pressure before all is done with, and very likely he'll be only too glad to dispose of his ranch and say good-by to Wyoming when he is free to do as he pleases. Then you and he can make a fresh start, eh? All will be sunshine and roses then, maybe, forever and aye."

"That's what I want to do—get away from here; and that was all I meant when I said to punish Gordon."

[Pg 128]

The Senator patted her cheek tenderly and drew a deep breath of relief.

"By the way, father," Helen said casually, when she started back to her room, a little later, "I saw Miss Purnell on the street yesterday. You know, she was out when Gordon took me to see her."

"Well, is she dangerous?"

Helen looked at him in amusement, and shrugged her shoulders.

TANGLED THREADS

Relieved though Helen was to some extent, by her father's assurances and by the explanation which he had given, she was far from being in a tranquil frame of mind.

She knew that whatever might be the outcome of the graver charge against Gordon, he would probably have to suffer for his release of Santry, and she found herself wishing more than ever that her lover had never seen the West. What little it had contributed to his character was not worth what it had cost already and would cost in the future. Surely, his manhood was alive enough not to have needed the development of such an environment, and if his lot had been cast in the East, she could have had him always with her. A long letter, which she had recently received from Maxwell Frayne, recounting the gayeties of New York and Washington, made her homesick. Although she could scarcely think of the two men at the same moment, still, as she sat in the crude little hotel, she would have welcomed a little of young Frayne's company for the sake of contrast. She was yearning for the flesh-pots of her own Egypt.

From the news of the fight at the ranch, which had been brought to town by the messenger, she gathered that Wade meant to intrench himself on the ranch and defy the law, which would probably embroil him in other criminal acts. Crawling Water, too, was rapidly filling up with armed cattlemen, who, she thought, would do Gordon's cause more harm than good. Toward afternoon, word came of a bloody skirmish on the Trowbridge range, between a number of his punchers and some of Moran's hired men, and that added to the tension among those crowding the main street.

[Pg 130]

From the parlor windows of the hotel she watched what was going on outside, not without alarm, so high did feeling seem to run. The threats of the ranch men, handed about amongst themselves but loud enough for her to catch a word now and then, made her wonder if the town was really safe for her father, or for herself. A storm was coming up, and the rising wind whipped the flimsy lace curtains of the windows and kept them fluttering like flags. The distant muttering of the thunder and an occasional sharp flash of lightning wore on her tired nerves until she could sit still no longer.

For the sake of something to do, she went up to her room, intending to write some letters there, but her bed had not been made up, so she returned to the parlor with her fountain pen and writing-pad. To Maxwell Frayne she wrote a brief note, which was not likely to cheer him much. She had become so in the habit of taking her moods out on Maxwell that to do so, even with a pen, was second nature to her. She despised him for his tolerance of her tyranny, never realizing that he reserved to himself the privilege of squaring their account, if she should ever become his wife.

[Pg 131]

Then to ease her mind of the strain it bore, she wrote at some length to her mother; not telling the whole truth but enough of it to calm her own nervousness. She said nothing of the conversation she had overheard, but went fully into the scene between her father and Gordon Wade. With a little smile hovering on her lips, she wrote dramatically of the Senator's threat to crush the ranchman. "That will please mother," she said to herself, as her pen raced over the paper. "Gordon felt, you see, that"—she turned a page—"father knew Santry had not killed Jensen, and..."

The hotel-keeper poked his head in at the doorway.

"Two ladies to see you, Miss," he announced. "Mrs. Purnell and daughter."

He gave Helen no chance to avoid the visit, for with the obviousness of the plains, he had brought the visitors upstairs with him, and so, blotting what she had written and weighing down her letter against the breeze, she arose to greet them.

"This is good of you, Mrs. Purnell, and I am so glad to meet your daughter. I've been lonely and blue all day and now you have taken pity on me."

Mrs. Purnell shot an "I told you so" glance at Dorothy, which made that young lady smile to herself.

"I was sorry not to have been at home when you called, Miss Rexhill."

The two girls looked at each other, each carefully veiling hostility, Dorothy beneath a natural sweetness of disposition, and Helen with the *savoir faire* of social experience. Each felt and was stung by a realization of the other's points of advantage. Dorothy saw a perfection of well-groomed poise, such as she could hardly hope to attain, and Helen was impressed with her rival's grace and natural beauty.

[Pg 132]

"Won't you sit down?"

"But aren't we disturbing you?" Mrs. Purnell asked, with a glance toward the writing materials.

"Indeed, you are not. I was writing some duty letters to kill time. I'm only too glad to stop because I'm really in no writing mood and I am most anxious to hear what is going on outside."

Isn't it dreadful about Mr. Wade?"

"You mean his helping Santry?" Dorothy asked, with a little touch of pride which did not escape her hostess.

"Partly that; but more because he is sure to be arrested himself. I've been terribly worried."

Dorothy glanced at her keenly and smiled.

"I have an idea that they may find Gordon hard to arrest," she remarked.

"Yes," Mrs. Purnell put in. "He is so popular. Still, I agree with you that there is every cause for anxiety." The good lady did not have a chance every day to agree with the daughter of a United States Senator, and the opportunity was not to be overlooked.

"The people feel so strongly that Santry should never have been arrested that they are not likely to let Gordon be taken just for freeing him," Dorothy explained.

[Pg 133]

Helen shook her head with every indication of tremulous worry.

"But it isn't that alone," she insisted. "He's to be arrested for the Jensen shooting. That was why the posse waited at his ranch after Santry had been caught."

"For the Jensen shooting?" Dorothy showed her amazement very plainly. "Are you sure?" she demanded, and when Helen nodded, exclaimed: "Why, how utterly absurd! I understood that you were with him yourself when he received word of it?"

"I was," Helen admitted. "He is supposed only to have planned the crime, I believe. He's supposed to have been the principal, isn't that what they call it?" She appealed to Mrs. Purnell.

"Oh, but do you think he could do such a thing?" Mrs. Purnell asked, much shocked.

"I don't know. I hope not."

"I *do* know!" Dorothy burst out emphatically. "I know Gordon Wade too well to think for one minute that he did it; and every true friend of his ought to speak out at once and say the same thing."

The challenge in her voice was unmistakable, and Mrs. Purnell moved uneasily in her chair. She glanced anxiously at Helen and was relieved to see that the latter had lost none of her poise.

"I hope so as fully as you do," Helen said sweetly, "but things move so fast here in these mountains that I find it hard to keep up with them."

"Of course," Mrs. Purnell soothed, with a troubled look at her daughter.

[Pg 134]

"Who swore out the warrant, I wonder?" Dorothy asked, in a more tranquil tone, a bit ashamed of her outburst. "Was it Mr. Moran?"

"I'm sure I don't know," Helen answered. "I supposed it was the Sheriff. Why should Mr. Moran have anything to do with it?"

"Because he seems to have been concerned in all the trouble we have had," Dorothy replied calmly. "This was a peaceful little community until Mr. Moran moved into it."

Helen made no direct reply to this, and for awhile Dorothy allowed her mother to sustain the conversation. She had no doubt but that Moran was back of it all, and she was thinking of what Lem Trowbridge had said; that if they could only "get something on" Moran and the Senator, a solution of the whole problem would be at hand. She thought that she had detected a defensive note in Helen's voice, and she was wondering why it should have been there.

"But you haven't answered my question yet about Mr. Moran," Helen presently challenged her. "You seemed to have something more in mind than what you said. Would you mind telling me?"

Dorothy looked steadily but not offensively at her.

"Oh, it's nothing, Miss Rexhill. I was only thinking that he has gone rather far: been very zealous in your father's interests. Probably...."

"Why, Dorothy—!" her mother interposed, in a shocked tone.

"Miss Rexhill asked me, mother, and you know that I always speak frankly."

[Pg 135]

"Yes, do go on," Helen urged, with even an added touch of sweetness in her manner. "I really want to know. I am so out of touch with things here, so ill informed."

"Well, you can sit here at the windows and learn all you wish to know. There isn't a man in this town that would see Gordon arrested and not fight to free him. Feeling is running high here now. You know, it's something like a violin string. You can stretch it just so far and then it snaps. That's all."

"Dorothy, I'm really mortified that you...."

"Oh, you've no occasion to be, Mrs. Purnell," Helen interrupted, smiling. "I asked for the plain truth, you know."

Mrs. Purnell laughed feebly.

"Dorothy has known Mr. Wade so long and we both like him so well that she can't bear to hear a word against him," she explained. Her sense of *l'èse majesté* was running away with her judgment, and Dorothy shot an irritated glance at her. "Not that I think he did it at all, you understand; but...."

"Oh, perfectly," declared Helen, with rising color and an equal feeling of annoyance. "Oh, dear me, do look at my poor letters!"

A gust of wind, stronger than any that had come before, had swept the weight to the floor and scattered letter paper, envelopes, and blotter about the room. Helen was just able to catch the writing-pad as it slid to the floor, while Dorothy and her mother laughingly salvaged the rest. The incident happily relieved the awkward drift of their conversation, and they all felt relieved. [Pg 136]

"Well, now, did you ever?" Mrs. Purnell ejaculated, looking at the lithographed blotter, which she held in her hand. "I declare this picture of a little girl reminds me of Dorothy when she was that age."

"Oh, mother!"

"Really?" Helen broke in. "How interesting. I hadn't noticed the picture. Do let me see."

To be courteous, she agreed with Mrs. Purnell that there was a strong likeness, which Dorothy laughingly denied.

"I guess I know what you looked like when you were five better than you do," Mrs. Purnell declared. "It's the image of you as you were then, and as Miss Rexhill says, there is a facial resemblance even yet."

"Perhaps you would like to take it with you, then," Helen suggested, to Mrs. Purnell's delight, who explained that the only picture she had of Dorothy at that age had been lost.

"If it wouldn't deprive you?"

"No, indeed. You must take it. I have a large blotter in my writing-pad, so I really don't need that one at all. So many such things are sent to father that we always have more than we can use up."

When Dorothy and her mother left the hotel, urged homeward by the first big drops of the coming rain, Mrs. Purnell tucked the blotter in the bosom of her dress, happy to have the suggestion of the picture to recall the days when her husband's presence cheered them all. Her world had been a small one, and little things like this helped to make it bright. [Pg 137]

Soon afterward the supper bell rang, and during the meal Helen told the Senator, who seemed somewhat morose and preoccupied, of the visit she had had.

"Sure tiresome people. Goodness! I was glad to see them at first because I thought they would help me to pass the afternoon, but instead I was bored to death. That little minx is crazy about Gordon, though. I could see that."

"Um!"

"And the worst of it is that she just fits into the scenery here, and I don't. You know, father, I never could wax enthusiastic over shooing the cows to roost and things like that."

"Um!"

"I feel like a deaf person at a concert, here in this town."

This remark brought a wry laugh from her father, and Helen smiled.

"Well, I've made you laugh, anyway," she said. "You're frightfully grouchy this evening."

"My dear, I'm busy, very busy, and I haven't time to think of trifles. I'll be at it most of the night."

"Oh, shall you? Goodness, that's cheerful. I wish I had never come to this awful little place. I suppose I must go back to my letters for something to do. And, father," she added, as he lingered with her for a moment in the hallway, "the Purnells seem to think that you and Mr. Moran had better not go too far. The people here are very much wrought up." [Pg 138]

He patted her shoulder affectionately.

"You leave all that to me and go write to your mother."

There was nothing else for her to do, so she returned to the parlor. When she had finished her letters, she idly picked up a week-old copy of a Denver newspaper which lay on the table and glanced through the headlines. She was yawningly thinking of bed, when Moran came into the room.

"Oh, are you and father through at last?"

"Yes," he answered, smiling. "That is, we're through upstairs. I'm on my way over to the office to straighten up a few loose ends before I turn in. There's no rest for the weary, you know."

"Don't let me keep you, then," she said dryly, as he lingered. "I'm going to bed."

"You're not keeping me. I'm keeping myself." He quite understood her motive, but he was not thin-skinned, and he had learned that he had to make his opportunities with her. "Your father told me you were getting anxious."

"Not anxious, tired."

"Things are getting a little warm here, but before there's any real danger we expect to have the soldiers here to take charge."

He rather ostentatiously displayed his bandaged wrist, hoping to win her sympathy, but she professed none. Instead, she yawned and tapped her lips with her fingers, and her indifference piqued him. [Pg 139]

"I was talking with Dorothy Purnell this afternoon," Helen finally remarked, eyeing him lazily, "and she seems to be of the opinion that you'll have hard work arresting Gordon Wade. I rather hope that you do."

"Well—" He teetered a little on his feet and stroked his mustache. "We may have, at that. Miss Purnell is popular and she can make a lot of trouble for us if she wants to. Being very fond of Wade, she's likely to do all that she can."

"Would she really have so much influence?" Helen asked, carefully guarding her tongue.

He laughed softly as though amused at the thought.

"Influence? Evidently you don't realize what a good looking girl means in a frontier town like this. She's part sister, part mother, sweetheart and a breath from Heaven to every man in Crawling Water. On that account, with one exception, I've had to import every last one of my men. The exception is Tug Bailey, who's beyond hope where women are concerned. To all the rest, Dorothy Purnell is 'Wade's girl,' and they wouldn't fight against her, or him, for all the money in Wyoming."

He was watching her keenly as he spoke, and was gratified to see spots of color spring to her cheeks.

"How interesting!" Helen could make her tone indifferent to the point of languor, but she could not keep the gleam of jealousy out of her eyes. "Gordon is a fortunate man to have such an able ally, isn't he?"

"The finish will decide that, I should say," Moran replied sneeringly. "She may stir up more trouble than all her friends can take care of." [Pg 140]

For all of her social schooling, Helen was not proof against the sneer in his words, even though she fully saw through his purpose to wound her. She felt her temper rising, and with it came curiosity to learn how far the relationship between Wade and Dorothy Purnell had really gone. That Moran would exaggerate it, she felt sure, for he had his own ends to gain, but possibly from out of his exaggeration she could glean some truth. Yet she did not want to go so far in her anger as to gratify his malice, and this placed her in something of a dilemma.

"I don't believe that she is 'Wade's girl,' as you call her, at all," she said coldly. "They may be good friends, and if so, I'm glad; but they are nothing more than that. There is no 'understanding' between them."

Moran carelessly waved his hand in the direction of the rain-swept street, illuminated now and then by the lightning.

"Ask any one in Crawling Water."

"That sounds well, but it's impracticable, even if I wanted to do it. I prefer to draw my own conclusions."

The agent drew up a chair with his well hand, and sat down with that easy familiarity that came so natural to him. Helen watched him, lazily impertinent.

"I've been wanting to have a talk with you, Helen," he began, "and this looks like a good chance to me. You've been foolish about Wade. Yes, I know that you're thinking that I've got my own ends to further, which is true enough. I have. I admit it. But what I am going to tell you is true, also. Fortune's been playing into my hand here lately. Now, if you'll be reasonable, you'll probably be happier. Shall I go on?" [Pg 141]

"Wild horses couldn't stop you," she answered, amused that he seemed flattered. "But if we were in Washington, I fancy I'd have you shown out."

"We're not in Washington, my dear girl." He wagged his finger at her, in the way her father had, to give emphasis to his words. "That's where you've made your mistake with Wade. We're all just plain men and women out here in the cattle country, and I'm talking its language, not the language of drawing-rooms." He was himself a little surprised at the swift dilation of her pupils, but his words had probed deeper than he knew, reminding her as they did of the truth which she had so fully realized that afternoon. "Wade liked you—loved you, maybe, in Chicago, but this ain't the East. He cares nothing for you here, and he'd never be happy away from here. You know that picture of yourself that you sent to him?" She nodded. "Well, we found it on the floor of his room, covered with dust. He hadn't even troubled to pick it up from where it must have fallen weeks

ago."

She looked at him dumbly, unable to keep her lips from twitching. He knew that she believed him, and he was glad; that she had to believe him, because his story bore the impress of truth. It was not something that he could have made up. [Pg 142]

"And while your picture was lying there, Wade and this Purnell girl were making goo-goo eyes at each other. Why, it was she that rode out to warn him that we were after Santry." Helen's lips curled. "I can't swear to that, but I heard it and I believe it myself. They must've met on the trail somewhere in the dark, and you can bet he was grateful. I don't imagine that they stopped at a hand-shake. I imagine they kissed, don't you?"

"Oh, I'm tired, worn out," Helen declared, forcing a smile so artificial that it could not deceive him. "Do go, please. I am going upstairs to bed."

"Wait one minute." He put out his injured arm, and, thinking that he reached for her hand, she brushed it aside, accidentally striking his wound.

"I'm sorry if I hurt you," she said coldly, as he winced.

"Maybe I've hurt you worse," he persisted, with a tenderness that was intolerable to her, "but, if I have, your wound'll heal just as mine will." He gently pushed her back into her chair as she started to get up.

"Are you making love to me, Race?" Under the ridicule of her tone his face darkened. "If you are, it's insufferable in you."

"Go easy, now," he warned her. "I'll not be made a fool of."

She did not heed his warning. Glad to have him on the rack, where she had been, she laughed at him.

"Haven't you sense enough to know that, for that very reason, I'd refuse to believe anything you might say against Gordon Wade? I know how you hate him. Listen to me. Oh, this is absurd!" She laughed again at the picture he made. "You've pursued me for months with your attentions, although I've done everything but encourage you. Now I want you to know that I shall never again even listen to you. What Gordon is to Dorothy Purnell is for him, and her, and perhaps for me to be interested in, but not for you. Now I'm going to bed. Good night!" [Pg 143]

He caught her by the arm as she stood up, but immediately released her, and stepped in front of her instead.

"Hold on," he begged, with a smile that meant wonderful mastery of himself. "I've got feelings, you know. You needn't walk on them. I love you, and I want you. What I want, I usually get. I mean to get you." She looked up at him with heavy-lidded insolence. "I may fail, but if I do, it'll be one more notch in my account against Wade. I know now where to strike him—to hurt."

"You be reasonable, and *you'll* be happier," she retorted. "May I go?"

"Certainly." He stepped out of her way. "Good night."

CHAPTER XII

[Pg 144]

DESPERATE MEASURES

If Moran or Helen, early in their conversation, had looked out of the window of the hotel, during one of those vivid lightning flashes, they might have seen a woman stealthily approaching the agent's office across the street. Taking advantage of the deeper shadows and of the darkness between lightning flashes, she stole to the rear of the building, where she found an unlatched window, through which she scrambled with the agility of a boy.

Within, the place was pitch dark, but like one amid familiar surroundings, she crossed the hall and found the room she sought; the office room now of Moran, but formerly occupied by Simon Barsdale. She bent over the big safe, and was twirling the combination knob in her slim, cold fingers, when she was startled by a noise in the hallway outside. With a gasp of fright, she stood motionless, listening acutely, but there was no further sound; reassured, she produced a bit of candle, which she lighted and placed to one side of the safe, so that the flame was shaded from the windows. She was in the act of manipulating the combination again when, her whole body rigid with fear, she stood erect once more, holding her breath and striving for self-control. There was no doubt about the noise this time. Some one had entered the adjoining room. [Pg 145]

Hastily snuffing out the candle, she crouched into the darkness of a corner. She never doubted that the newcomer was Race Moran, or that he would almost immediately discover her. She tried to summon enough resolution to bluff things through when the moment of discovery should come.

But, as the seconds slipped by and the lights were not turned on, she began to regain her courage. Perhaps Moran was sitting in the dark of the other room, smoking and thinking, and

perhaps she could complete her task without being caught, if she moved swiftly and silently. She bent again over the shining knob, at the same time watching in the direction of the door, which was still closed as she had left it. It was difficult to work the lock in the dark, and, as she became engrossed with her purpose, she ceased temporarily to listen acutely. She had just succeeded in effecting the combination, when something touched her side.

"Don't move!" a voice hissed behind her. "I'll shoot if you do!"

She wanted to cry out, "Please don't shoot!" but her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth, which had suddenly gone dry. She had fallen forward against the door of the safe, and was curiously conscious how cold it felt. She was on the point of fainting, when in a rush of relief it dawned upon her that she knew the voice; it was not Moran's.

"Gordon!" she cried joyously, finding the use of her tongue as quickly as she had lost it, and scrambling to her feet. "It's me—Dorothy!" [Pg 146]

With an exclamation as joyous as her own and equally surprised, he seized her by the shoulders, peering through the darkness into her face.

"Dorothy! What the...?" A lightning flash revealed them clearly to each other. "I told you not to try this."

"But what are you doing in town?" She clutched his arms, overcome by a fear greater than that for her own safety. "Gordon, Gordon, you must not stay here. There's a warrant out for you—no, no, not for that—for the Jensen shooting. You'll be arrested on sight."

"What?" He stared at her, amazed, and she nodded. "So that's their game now, eh? They've stooped even to that. By God!" He struck a match.

"Be careful," she warned him instantly. "The light—put it out. They'll see it from the street. But, oh, Gordon, why did you come?"

He thrilled at the anxiety in her voice.

"To find out what Moran is hiding here; and you're after the same thing, of course."

"Yes."

Impulsively, he squeezed her fingers, until she could have cried out in pain but for the sweetness of it; there are some agonies which do not hurt. Her throat swelled with joy, her breast heaved, and her eyelids fluttered. She was grateful for the darkness, which hid these outward signs of love from him. She blushed; she could feel the warm tide pulsing in her temples; and she laughed brokenly from sheer happiness. [Pg 147]

"You shouldn't have taken such a risk, Dorothy. I told you not to."

"You're taking that risk, Gordon, and more."

"That's different. It's so dark a night, I thought I'd chance it."

"There's not much risk for me," she declared. "I can reach home in five minutes. Isn't it odd, though, that we both should have thought of doing it at exactly the same time. But come, Gordon, we must hurry!"

Now that the safe was open, to remove its contents took only a moment, and they tossed all the papers they found into a corner. Then, when Wade had swung the safe around on its casters, they had a snug shelter behind it, where by shaded candle-light they ran rapidly through their loot. Most of the documents related to land purchases and development, but at the bottom of the pile Wade came upon a bundle of papers and blue-prints, held together by a rubber band, which he stripped off.

"Oh, if we should find nothing, after all," Dorothy whispered, bending with him over the blue-prints. "What are they, Gordon?"

"Maps of my own range, Dorothy!" His tone was tense with excitement, as he leaned nearer to the light. "Well, what do you know about that? By Heaven"—He fairly glared at the sheet before his eyes.—"It's all there!"

"What's all there? What is it?"

"Gold!" He looked at her in the flickering light, like a man gone mad. [Pg 148]

"Gold? On your range? Oh, Gordon!"

"Yes; on my range. It's inconceivable, almost; but it seems to be true. See! Look here!" Their heads were almost touching, so that her soft hair caressed his face. "This is a map of the upper valley, and the description says these red crosses indicate the location of gold. One is near the head of Piah Creek, not half a mile from my buildings."

"Oh, Gordon, I *am* so glad!" Dorothy exclaimed. "How wonderful it all is. You'll be rich, won't you?" She was not too excited to remember that his wealth would probably be shared by another woman, but she was too generous to be any the less glad on that account.

"That remains to be seen," he replied. "It may not prove to amount to much, you know. At any

rate, Moran won't get any of it. That's worth a whole lot."

She nodded vehemently.

"I thought it must be something like that, Gordon. They would never have done the things they have without some powerful reason."

"Yes, you were right, Dorothy. You're usually right." He caught her hand and squeezed it again, and in this moment of their triumph together she could not help returning the pressure. "You're a jewel, a brick, a trump—all those things and then some. The sweet...."

"Now, we haven't time for that sort of thing, Mr. Man. We...."

[Pg 149]

"Must get away while we can, yes," he finished for her. "But just the same I...."

Her cold fingers on his lips stopped him.

"Listen!"

She put out the candle and they crouched down beside the safe. Some one was coming up the stairs, not stealthily this time but boldly, as one who had a right there, whistling softly. Wade could feel the girl's shoulder tremble against his side, as he slipped his revolver out of its holster.

"Don't, Gordon! You—you mustn't shoot, no matter what happens." Her teeth were chattering, for she was far more frightened now than she had been for herself alone. "That's Moran. He mustn't see you here. Remember that warrant. Hide behind the safe. Please!"

"Never!" he muttered grimly. "He'd find us anyhow."

"Yes, yes. Please!" She was almost hysterical in her excitement. "I can bluff him till you can get away. He won't hurt me. If he does you can show yourself. Do it for me, for your friends. Please! Remember, he mustn't know that *you've* learned his secret."

It was Moran, for they heard him now in conversation with some passer-by in the hallway. Dorothy was grateful for the respite, for it gave them time to throw the loose papers back into the safe and close it. Wade then pushed the safe to its original position, the casters making little noise as they rolled. Then he crouched behind it.

[Pg 150]

"I don't like this stunt!" he protested; but yielded to her beseeching "Please." She was right, too, he knew. It would be far better if Moran could be kept in ignorance of his visit there.

The office now bore little sign of their invasion of it, and, drawing a deep breath, Dorothy schooled herself to calmness as she awaited Moran, who was walking down the hall toward the entrance to the room. A plan had flashed into her mind by means of which she might save both Wade and herself, if he and her heart would only be quiet. The unruly heart was beating so violently that it shook her thin dress, and that her voice must tremble, she knew.

Moran was almost at the threshold, when Dorothy opened the door for him.

"Good evening, Mr. Moran. Did I startle you?"

"Well, not exactly," he said, striking a match, after an instant's pause. "What are you doing here?"

Passing her, he lighted the large oil lamp, and swept the room with a quick, keen glance. Finding nothing apparently wrong, he turned again to his visitor with a puzzled expression in his face.

"Well?"

"I wanted to see you and I thought you'd be here. The door was unlocked so I just walked in. I've been here only a minute or two." Fortified by another deep breath, drawn while his back was turned, Dorothy found her voice steadier than she expected.

The agent looked at her keenly.

[Pg 151]

"That's strange," he commented. "I don't know what the door was doing unlocked. I always lock it when I leave."

"You must have forgotten to do so to-night."

"I surely must have, if you found it open."

Half convinced that she was telling the truth, Moran could see but one reason for her evident fright: she was afraid of him. The suggestion of that strengthened the impulse which her beauty stirred in him. If she thought so, why not?

"Say, you're a good-looking kid, all right," he leered. "What did you want to see me for?"

A slight sound from behind the safe, or perhaps she imagined it, caused Dorothy's heart to flutter wildly. She had not anticipated this attitude in Moran, and she instantly realized that it brought a fresh danger into the situation. She knew that Wade would not remain in concealment if the agent insulted her. She must avoid the chance of that, if possible; must get him out of the office so that Gordon might escape.

"This is no place to talk that way," she said bravely. "It isn't a good place for me to be anyway. If people knew I was here, there would be a terrible scandal. I've something important to tell you."

Won't you come for a walk?"

"In this rain? Not much," he chuckled. "Come here!" She shook her head and tried to smile. "Well, if you won't, I'll have to go to you." She shrank back from him, as he approached her, with an evil smile. "Say, little one," he went on, "this is a damned funny game of yours, coming here at night. What's the idea, eh?"

[Pg 152]

"There isn't any, really." She snatched her hands away from him. "I've already tried to explain that I have important news for you; but I won't tell you what it is here."

"Why not? We're dry and cozy here. Go ahead."

"No."

"Oh, come on!" He had driven her to the wall, and now he slipped an arm about her waist and pulled her toward him. "Say, kiss me once, won't you?"

"Hands up, you low-lived hound!"

With an oath, Moran whirled around to find himself staring into the muzzle of Wade's revolver. The ranchman moved his weapon significantly.

"Up!"

As the agent's hands went above his head, Dorothy leaned against the wall for support. She had not made a sound, but she was the color of chalk, and her heart seemed to be trying to jump out of her mouth. She was no whiter than Wade, whose fury had driven every vestige of color from his face and fired his eyes with a murderous light.

"Shall I kill him?" he asked Dorothy, and at the frightful tone of his voice she found the power to shake her head, although her mouth was too dry for speech.

"Take his gun," said Wade sharply and the girl stepped forward.

She reeled toward Moran, who, to do him justice, showed little fear, and pulled his revolver from his hip pocket. She held it out to Wade, who broke it with his free hand by pressing the butt against the top of the safe, and spilled the cartridges on the floor.

[Pg 153]

"Now you can leave us, Dorothy," he said quietly.

"No. I'll stay, Gordon," she answered.

"Moran," Wade continued evenly, without paying any more attention to her, "the only reason why I shall not kill you is because Miss Purnell does not want your worthless life upon her conscience. A man like you ought to die. You're not fit to live."

"Can I put my hands down?"

"No; keep 'em where they are!" Wade gestured again with the gun. "I wish I had a string on each of your thumbs so I could hoist them higher. I've just been through this safe of yours." The agent started. "I've got those maps of my range in my pocket."

"Much good they'll do you."

"They'll do me more good alive than they will you dead, and you're going to die. So help me God, you are! We'll come together again some day."

"I hope so," Moran declared venomously, and even Dorothy was struck by the courage he showed.

"And then there won't be anybody to be held responsible but me." Wade grinned in a slow, horrible fashion. "It'll rest light on me, I promise you. And another thing. I'm going to leave you trussed up here in this office, like I left your friend the Sheriff a few days ago, and along about morning somebody'll find you and turn you loose. When you get loose, you want to forget that you saw Miss Purnell here to-night. I've meant to have her and her mother leave town for a bit until this mess blows over, but things aren't fixed right for that just now. Instead, I'm going to leave her in the personal care—the *personal* care, you understand me, of every decent man in Crawling Water. If anything happens to her, you'll toast over a slow fire before you die. Do you get that?"

[Pg 154]

"She's a good kid," said Moran, with a grin. Nor did he flinch when the weapon in Wade's hand seemed actually to stiffen under the tension of his grasp.

"I guess it's a good thing you stayed, Dorothy," the latter remarked grimly. "This fellow must be tied up. I wonder what we can find to do it with?"

"My cloak?" Dorothy suggested. "It's an old one."

He shook his head.

"It's hard to tear that rain-proof stuff, and besides you'd get wet going home. There's no sense in that. Isn't there something else?"

She blushed a little and turned away for a moment, during which she slipped off her underskirt. Then, as Moran watched her cynically, she tore it into strips. When she had thus made several stout bands, Wade spoke again.

"You take the first throw or two about him," he directed, "and when you have him partly tied you can take my gun and I'll finish the job. Start with his feet, that's right. Now draw it as tight as you can. Put your arms down back of you! Tie them now, Dorothy. That's fine! Here, you take the gun. You know how to use it, if he struggles."

[Pg 155]

Wade tightened up the linen bands, and kicked forward a straight-backed chair, into which he forced Moran and lashed him fast there, to all of which the agent made no great protest, knowing that to do so would be useless. He grunted and swore a bit under his breath, but that was all. When he was well trussed up, the ranchman made a gag out of what was left of the linen and his own handkerchief and strapped it into his prisoner's mouth with his belt.

When the job was done, and it was a good one, he grinned again in that slow, terrible way. A grin that bore no semblance to human mirth, but was a grimace of combined anger and hatred. Once before, during the fight at the ranch, Bill Santry had seen this expression on his employer's face, but not to the degree that Dorothy now saw it. It frightened her.

"Oh, Gordon, don't, please!" She closed her eyes to shut out the sight. "Come, we must hurry away."

"Good night," Wade said ironically, with a last look at Moran.

He let Dorothy draw him away then, and by the time they reached the street he was his old boyish self again. Aping Moran, he slipped his arm around her waist, but she did not shrink from *his* embrace, unexpected though it was.

"Say, kid," he laughed mockingly. "Kiss me once, won't you?"

CHAPTER XIII

[Pg 156]

INTO THE DEPTHS

"Good Lord, Race! What's happened?"

Senator Rexhill, on the next morning, surprised that Moran did not show up at the hotel, had gone in search of him, and was dumbfounded when he entered the office.

Moran, in his desperate efforts to free himself, had upset the chair into which he was tied, and being unable to right it again, had passed most of the night in a position of extreme discomfort. Toward morning, his confinement had become positive agony, and he had inwardly raved at Wade, the gag in his mouth making audible expression impossible, until he was black in the face.

"My God, Race!" the Senator exclaimed, when, having cut the lashings and withdrawn the gag, he saw his agent in a state bordering on collapse, "what has happened to you?" He helped the man to his feet and held him up.

"My throat—dry—whiskey!" Moran gasped, and groaned as he clutched at the desk, from which he slid into a chair, where he sat rubbing his legs, which ached with a thousand pains.

Rexhill found a bottle of whiskey and a glass on a shelf in the closet. He poured out a generous drink of the liquor and handed it to Moran, but the agent could not hold it in his swollen fingers. The Senator picked up the glass, which had not broken in its fall and, refilling it, held it to Moran's lips. It was a stiff drink, and by the time it was repeated, the agent was revived somewhat.

[Pg 157]

"Now, tell me," urged Rexhill.

Prepared though he was for an outburst of fury, he was amazed at the torrent of blasphemous oaths which Moran uttered. He caught Wade's name, but the rest was mere incoherence, so wildly mouthed and so foul that he began to wonder if torture had unbalanced the man's mind. The expression of Moran's eyes, which had become mere slits in his inflamed and puffy face, showed that for the time he was quite beyond himself. What with his blued skin and distended veins, his puffed lips and slurred speech, he seemed on the brink of an apoplectic seizure. Rexhill watched him anxiously.

"Come, come, man. Brace up," he burst out, at length. "You'll kill yourself, if you go on that way. Be a man."

The words seemed to have their effect, for the agent made a supreme effort at the self-control which was seldom lacking in him. He appeared to seize the reins of self-government and to force himself into a state of unnatural quiet, as one tames a frantic horse.

"The safe!" he muttered hoarsely, scrambling to his feet.

His stiffened legs still refused to function, however, and Rexhill, hastening to the safe, threw open the door. One glance at the disordered interior told him the whole story. Moran watched feverishly as he dragged the crumpled papers out on the floor and pawed through them.

[Pg 158]

"Gone?"

"Gone!"

They looked at each other, a thin tide of crimson brightening the congestion of Moran's visage, while Rexhill's face went ghastly white. With shaking fingers, the agent poured himself a third drink and tossed it down his throat.

"It was Wade who tied you up?"

Moran nodded.

"Him and that—girl—the Purnell girl." Stirred more by the other's expression of contempt than by the full half pint of whiskey he had imbibed, he crashed his fist down on the desk. "Mind what you say now, because, by God, I'm in no mood to take anything from you. He got the drop on me, you understand. Let it go at that."

"It's gone right enough—all gone." Rexhill groaned. "Why, he only needs to publish those plots to make this a personal fight between us and every property owner in the valley. They'll tar and feather us, if they don't kill us outright. It'll be gold with them—gold. Nothing else will count from now on."

"I'll get back at him yet!" growled Moran.

"You'll...." The Senator threateningly raised his gorilla-like arms, but let them drop helplessly again. "How did they get into the safe? Did you leave it open?"

"Do you think I'm a fool?" Moran fixed his baleful eyes upon his employer, as he leaned heavily, but significantly, across the flat desk. "Say, let's look ahead to to-morrow, not back to last night. Do you hear? I'll do the remembering of last night; you forget it!"

[Pg 159]

Rexhill tried to subdue him with his own masterful gaze, but somehow the power was lacking. Moran was in a dangerous frame of mind, and past the dominance of his employer. He had but one thought, that of vengeance upon the man who had misused him, to which everything else had for the time being to play second.

"You talk like I let them truss me up for fun," he went on. "I did it because I had to, because I was looking into the muzzle of a six-shooter in the hands of a desperate man; that was why. Do you get me? And I don't need to be reminded of it. No, by Heaven! My throat's as dry yet as a fish-bone, and every muscle in me aches like hell! I'll remember it all right, and *he'll* pay. Don't you have any worries about that."

Rexhill was sufficiently a captain of men to have had experience of such moods in the past, and he knew the futility of arguing. He carefully chose a cigar from his case, seated himself, and began to smoke.

Moran, apparently soothed by this concession to his temper, and a bit ashamed of himself, watched him for some moments in silence. When at last he spoke, his tone was more conciliatory.

"Have you heard from Washington?" he asked.

"I got a telegram this morning, saying that the matter is under advisement."

[Pg 160]

"Under advisement!" Moran snorted, in disgust. "That means that they'll get the cavalry here in time to fire a volley over our graves—ashes to ashes and dust to dust. What are you going to do about it?"

Rexhill blew a huge mouthful of fragrant smoke into the air.

"Frankly, Race, I don't think you're in a proper mood to talk."

"You're right." Something in Moran's voice suggested the explosion of a fire-arm, and the Senator looked at him curiously. "I'm through talking. We've both of us talked too damn much, and that's a fact."

"I'll be obliged to you," the Senator remarked, "if you'll remember that you draw a salary from me and that you owe me a certain amount of respect."

Moran laughed raucously.

"Respect! I don't owe you a damn thing, Senator; and what you owe me you won't be able to pay if you sit here much longer waiting for something to turn up. You'll be ruined, that's what you'll be—ruined!" He brought his big hand down on the table with a thump.

"By your own carelessness. Now, look here, Race, I've made allowances for you, because...."

"You don't need to soft soap me, Senator; save that for your office seekers." The agent was fast working himself into another passion. "I've not ruined you, and you know it. A safe's a safe, isn't it? Instead of ruining you, I'm trying to save you. If you go broke, you'll do it yourself with your pap and sentiment. But if I am to pull your chestnuts out of the fire for you, you've got to give me a free hand. I've got to fight fire with fire."

[Pg 161]

Rexhill wiped his glasses nervously, for despite his assumption of calm, his whole future swung upon the outcome of his Crawling Water venture. If he appeared calm, it was not because he felt

so, but because the schooling of a lifetime had taught him that the man who keeps cool usually wins.

"There's nothing to do but go on as we are headed now," he declared. "Wade's discovery of our purpose is most unfortunate"—his voice shook a trifle—"but it can't be helped. In the legal sense, he has added to the list of his crimes, and we have more against him than we ever had. He now has three charges to face—murder, assault, and robbery. It rests with us whether he shall be punished by the courts for any of the three."

The Senator spoke emphatically in the effort to convince himself that his statements were practically true, but he avoided Moran's eyes as he did so. His show of optimism had little substance behind it, because now that his motives were likely to be bared to the public, he was too good a lawyer not to realize how little standing he would have before a jury, in that section at least; of course, Wade must realize this equally well and feel fortified in his own position. Rexhill's chief hope had been that the support of the cavalry from Fort Mackenzie would enable him to control the situation; but here, too, he was threatened by the unexpected hesitation of the authorities at Washington. [Pg 162]

Moran, however, was frankly contemptuous of the prospect of help from that source. He had never believed greatly in it, although at the time it was first mentioned his enthusiasm for any plan of action had inspired him with some measure of the Senator's confidence. Now that his lust of revenge made him intolerant of all opposition, he was thoroughly exasperated by the telegram received from Washington, and had no faith in aid from such a quarter.

"What if your cavalry doesn't come?" he demanded.

"Then we must rely upon the Sheriff here to maintain the law that he is sworn to support."

"Bah! He's weakening now. He's not forgetting that he's to spend the rest of his days in this town, after we've gone back East, or perhaps to hell. Who's to look after him, then, if he's got himself in bad with the folks here? Senator"—Moran clumped painfully over to the safe and leaned upon it as he faced his employer—"it isn't cavalry that'll save you, or that old turkey buzzard of a sheriff either. I'm the man to do it, if anybody is, and the only way out is to lay for this man Wade and kidnap him." Rexhill started violently. "Kidnap him, and take him into the mountains, and keep him there with a gun at his head, until he signs a quit-claim. I've located the very spot to hide him in—Coyote Springs. It's practically inaccessible, a natural hiding-place."

Rexhill turned a shade or two paler as he nervously brushed some cigar ashes from his vest and sleeve. He had already gone farther along the road of crime than he felt to be safe, but the way back seemed even more dangerous than the road ahead. The question was no longer one of ethics, but purely of expediency. [Pg 163]

"We haven't time to wait on cavalry and courts," Moran went on. "I'm willing to take the risk, if you are. If we don't take it, you know what the result will be. We may make our get-away to the East, or we *may* stop here for good—under ground. You have little choice either way. If you get out of this country, you'll be down and out. Your name'll be a byword and you'll be flat broke, a joke and an object of contempt the nation over. And it's not only yourself you've got to think of; you've got to consider your wife and daughter, and how they'll stand poverty and disgrace. Against all that you've got a chance, a fighting chance. Are you game enough to take it?"

All that Moran said was true enough, for Rexhill knew that if he failed to secure control of Crawling Water Valley, his back would be broken, both politically and financially. He would not only be stripped of his wealth, but of his credit and the power which stood him in lieu of private honor. He would be disgraced beyond redemption in the eyes of his associates, and in the bosom of his family he would find no solace for public sneers. Failure meant the loss forever of his daughter's respect, which might yet be saved to him through the glamour of success and the reflection of that tolerance which the world is always ready to extend toward the successful.

"You are right," he admitted, "in saying that I have my wife and daughter to consider, and that reminds me. I haven't told you that Helen overheard our conversation about Wade, in my room, the other day." He rapidly explained her indignation and threat of exposure. "I don't mean to say that your suggestion hasn't something to recommend it," he summed up, "but if Wade were to disappear, and she felt that he had been injured, I probably could not restrain her." [Pg 164]

The agent leaned across the desk, leeringly.

"Tell her the truth, that I found Wade here in this room with Dorothy Purnell, at night; that they came here for an assignation, because it was the one place in Crawling Water...."

Rexhill got to his feet with an exclamation of disgust.

"Well, say, then, that they came here to rifle the place, but that when I caught them they were spooning. Say anything you like, but make her believe that it was a lovers' meeting. See if she'll care then to save him."

The Senator dropped heavily back into his chair without voicing the protest that had been upon his tongue's end. He was quick to see that, contemptible though the suggestion was, it yet offered him a means whereby to save himself his daughter's respect and affection. The whole danger in that regard lay in her devotion to Wade, which was responsible for her interest in him. If she could be brought to feel that Wade was unworthy, that he had indeed wronged her, her

own pride could be trusted to do the rest.

"If I thought that Wade were the man to make her happy," Rexhill puffed heavily, in restraint of his excitement. [Pg 165]

"Happy? Him?" Moran's eyes gleamed.

"Or if there was a shred of truth—but to make up such a story out of whole cloth...."

"What's the matter with you, Senator? Why, I thought you were a master of men, a general on the field of battle!" The agent leaned forward again until his hot, whiskey-laden breath fanned the other man's face.

"I'm a father, Race, before I'm anything else in God's world."

"But it's true, Senator. True as I'm speaking. Ask any one in Crawling Water. Everybody knows that Wade and this Purnell girl are mad in love with each other."

"Is that true, Race?"

Rexhill looked searchingly into the inflamed slits which marked the location of the agent's eyes.

"As God is my witness. It's the truth now, whatever he may have thought of Helen before. He's been making a fool of her, Senator. I've tried to make her see it, but she won't. You'll not only be protecting yourself, but you'll do her a service." He paused as Rexhill consulted his watch.

"Helen will be over here in a few minutes. I promised to take a walk with her this morning."

"Are you game?"

"I'll do it, Race." Rexhill spoke solemnly. "We might as well fry for one thing as another." Grimacing, he shook the hand which the other offered him. "When will you start?" [Pg 166]

"Now," Moran answered promptly. "I'll take three or four men with me, and we'll hang around Wade's ranch until we get him. He'll probably be nosing around the range trying to locate the gold, and we shouldn't have much trouble. When we've got him safe...." His teeth ground audibly upon each other as he paused abruptly, and the sound seemed to cause the Senator uneasiness.

"By the way, since I've turned near-assassin, you might as well tell me who shot Jensen." Rexhill spoke with a curious effort. "If Wade gets you, instead of you getting Wade, it may be necessary for me to know all the facts."

Moran answered from the window, whither he had stepped to get his hat, which lay on the broad sill.

"It was Tug Bailey, Senator. Here comes Helen now. You needn't tell her that I was tied up all night." He laid Wade's quirt on the desk. "He left that behind him."

Rexhill grunted.

"Yes, I will tell her," he declared sulkily, "and about the Jensen affair, if I've got to be a rascal, you'll be the goat. Give Bailey some money and get him out of town before he tanks up and tells all he knows."

Helen came in, looking very sweet and fresh in a linen suit, and was at first inclined to be sympathetic when she heard of Moran's plight, without knowing the source of it. Before she did know, the odor of liquor on his breath repelled her. He finally departed, not at the bidding of her cool nod, but urged by his lust of revenge, which, even more than the whiskey, had fired his blood. [Pg 167]

"Intoxicated, isn't he? How utterly disgusting!"

Her father looked at her admiringly, keenly regretting that he must dispel her love dream. But he took some comfort from the fact that Wade was apparently in love with another woman. The thought of this had been enough to make him seize upon the chance of keeping all her affection for himself.

"He's had a drink or two," he admitted, "but he needed them. He had a hard night. Poor fellow, he was nearly dead when I arrived. Wade handled him very roughly."

Helen looked up in amazement.

"Did *Gordon* do it? What was he doing here?" The Senator hesitated, and while she waited for his answer she was struck by a sense of humor in what had happened. She laughed softly. "Good for him!"

"We think that he came here to—to see what he could find, partly," Rexhill explained. "That probably was not his only reason. He wasn't alone."

"Oh!" Her tone expressed disappointment that his triumph had not been a single-handed one. "Did they tie him with these?" she asked, picking up one of the crumpled strips of linen, which lay on the floor. Suddenly her face showed surprise. "Why—this is part of a woman's skirt?"

Her father glanced at the strip of linen over his glasses.

"Yes," he nodded. "I believe it is."

"Somebody was here with Race?" Her voice was a blend of attempted confidence and distressing doubt.

"My dear, I have painful news for you...."

"With Gordon?" The question was almost a sob. "Who, father? Dorothy Purnell?"

Helen dropped into a chair, and going to her, the Senator placed his hands on her shoulders. She looked shrunken, years older, with the bloom of youth blighted as frost strikes a flower, but even in the first and worst moments of her grief there was dignity in it. In a measure Race Moran had prepared her for the blow; he, and what she herself had seen of the partisanship between Dorothy and Gordon.

"You must be brave, my dear," her father soothed, "because it is necessary that you should know. Race came upon them here last night, in each other's embrace, I believe, and with the girl's help, Wade got the upper hand."

"Are you sure it was Gordon?" Her cold fingers held to his warm ones as in her childhood days, when she had run to him for protection.

"His quirt is there on the desk."

"But why should they have come here, father—here of all places? Doesn't that seem very improbable to you? That is what I can't understand. Why didn't he go to her house?"

"For fear of arrest, I suppose. Their reason for coming here, you have half expressed, Helen, because it offered them the safest refuge, at that time of night, in Crawling Water. The office has not been used at night since we rented it, and besides Moran has been doubly busy with me at the hotel. But I don't say that was their sole reason for coming here. The safe had been opened, and doubtless their chief motive was robbery."

[Pg 169]

She sprang to her feet and stood facing him with flaming cheeks, grieved still but aroused to passionate indignation.

"Father, do you stand there and tell me that Gordon Wade has not only been untrue to me, but that he came here at night to steal from *you*; broke in here like a common thief?" Her breast heaved violently, and in her eyes shone a veritable fury of scorn.

The Senator met her outburst gravely as became a man in his position. He spoke with judicial gravity, which could leave no doubt of his own convictions, while conveying a sense of dignified restraint, tempered with regret.

"He not only did so, my dear, but he succeeded in escaping with documents of the greatest value to us, which, if prematurely published, may work us incalculable harm and subject our motives to the most grievous misconception."

She lifted her head with so fine a gesture of pride that the Senator was thrilled by his own paternity. Before him, in his child, he seemed to see the best of himself, purified and exalted.

"Then, if that is true, you may do with him what you will. I am through."

He knew her too well to doubt that her renunciation of Wade had been torn from the very roots of her nature, but for all that, when she had spoken, she was not above her moment of deep grief.

[Pg 170]

"My little girl, I know—I know!" Putting his arms around her, he held her while she wept on his shoulder. "But isn't it better to find out these things now, in time, before they have had a chance to really wreck your happiness?"

"Yes, of course." She dried her eyes and managed to smile a little. "I—I'll write to Maxwell to-day and tell him that I'll marry him. That will please mother."

It pleased the Senator, too, for it meant that no matter what happened to him, the women of his family would be provided for. He knew that young Frayne was too much in love to be turned from his purpose by any misfortune that might occur to Helen's father.

CHAPTER XIV

[Pg 171]

A DASTARD'S BLOW

At about the time when Rexhill was freeing Moran from his bonds, Wade and Santry, with rifles slung across their backs were tramping the banks of Piah Creek. In the rocky canyon, which they finally reached, the placid little stream narrowed into a roaring torrent, which rushed between the steep banks and the huge, water-worn boulders, with fury uncontrolled.

Neither of the cattlemen greatly feared the coming of a second posse, at least immediately, but for the sake of prudence, they went armed and kept a careful watch. Wade mounted guard while Santry, who in his younger days had prospected in California, squatted over a sandy, rock-

rimmed pool and deftly "washed out" a pan of gravel. One glance at the fine, yellow residue in the bottom of the pan decided him. With a triumphant yell that echoed and reechoed through the gorge, he sprang to his feet.

"Whoop-e-e-e! I've struck it!" he shouted excitedly, as Wade ran up to him. "Look there!" The old man held out a small handful of the yellow dust.

Wade drew a long breath.

"Gold! It's true, then!"

"You betcher, and it's the richest pay-dirt I ever met up with. No wonder Moran has been willin' to do murder to get a-holt of this land. You're a rich man, boy; a millionaire, I reckon." [Pg 172]

"You mean that *we* are rich, Bill." The younger man spoke slowly and emphatically. "Whatever comes out of here"—he waved his hand toward the creek—"is one-half yours. I decided on that long ago. Never mind asking me why." He clapped Santry on the back. "It's because we're partners in fact, if not in name. Because you've stuck with me through all the lean years. That's reason enough."

The old plainsman carefully emptied the dust back into the pan before he said anything.

"Have you gone clean crazy?" he finally demanded. "Givin' away a fortune like it was the makin' of a cigareet? If you have, I ain't. This stuff's yourn. I'm not sayin' that I won't take a ounce or two, maybe, of this here dust, for old times' sake, if you offer it to me, but that's all." His wrinkled face twisted into a grin. "You'll be needin' it all one o' these days to pay for your honeymoonin', if I read the signs right. Ain't that so, son?" He laughed softly as Wade flushed. "Shake, boy! Put 'er there! I wish you all the luck that's comin' to any white man, by the great horned toad, I do!"

During the whole of the morning they examined the creek bed and they found signs of the yellow metal almost everywhere. At one point, Wade broke a knob of rock from the face of the cliff, the under surface of which was seamed and streaked with golden veins. Santry could scarcely restrain himself; usually taciturn, he was for once as light-hearted and joyous as a boy. But on the way back to the ranch-house he became serious. [Pg 173]

"Say, ain't the bulk of that lode on that forty-acre tract that you took up as a timber claim?" he asked.

"Yes," Wade answered. "That is, I think so. We can run over the lines this afternoon and make sure."

"I reckon we'd better make sure, and if it is, you'll have to lay low until you get your deed. Your homestead rights might be hard to claim now that there's mineral in the ground. Moran'll most likely keep his mouth shut for reasons of his own, and he may not know about your not havin' proved up yet, but some other jasper might get wise."

"I don't think any one around here would contest my right to the land, Bill," Wade replied thoughtfully. "Still, as you say, we'd better be careful. The gold will keep. We haven't heard the last of Moran and his crowd yet, not by a jugful." He chuckled grimly. "I wonder if anybody's cut him loose yet."

"I reckon they have, boy. He'll keep monkeyin' around this territory until he meets up with some feller like me, with a bad temper and a quick gun hand, who'll make him good the same way we useter make good Injuns. Hullo, steady!"

Although they were now in sight of the house and the men hanging about it for the noon-day meal, Santry had not relaxed his caution and his eyes had picked out two moving dots in the distance, which presently developed into galloping horses. He smiled instantly.

"Can't be nobody lookin' for trouble," he observed, and presently his eyes twinkled. "Take a good look, boy. I reckon you know *one* of 'em, anyhow." [Pg 174]

The horses came on rapidly, until upon the foremost of them Wade could see the fluttering skirt of a woman, while the other he recognized as belonging to Lem Trowbridge even before he could clearly make out the rider.

"Tell the cook we'll have company to dinner," Wade called to Santry as he untied a horse from the hitching rack near the barn and rode off to meet the newcomers.

With fine prescience, Trowbridge, when he saw him ride toward them, drew his horse down to a walk, and so was discreetly in the rear when Dorothy and Wade met.

"Mighty glad to see you," he greeted her, "but that goes without saying."

"Thanks," she responded, hoping that he would attribute the heightened color of her cheeks to the exertion of the ride. "We thought we'd ride out to see how you were getting along."

Despite her blush, that had come at the recollection of his kiss the night before, she still looked him straight in the eyes, but with a sweet humility, an attitude of surrender, which he understood and which touched him. There was nothing bold about her look, but an engaging womanliness, which would have appealed to any decent man, even while it stirred his pulse. She wore a wide felt hat, from beneath the brim of which her hair floated, shaken out of its moorings by the jolting [Pg 175]

of her gallop. A flannel blouse, which was most becoming, and a divided skirt completed a sensible costume, which seemed to Wade more attractive than any he had ever seen in the East. She rode with the straight stirrups of the cattle country, and sat her mount with the grace of a born horsewoman.

"What's happened to Moran?" he asked, waving his hat to Trowbridge, as the latter rode toward them.

"He's out and around again. I saw him this morning. He was an awful sight. You must keep your eyes open, Gordon, really you must. He'll be more dangerous than ever now."

"Oh, I guess we've clipped his claws for a while," he said lightly, unwilling that she should be anxious for his safety, sweet though he found her sympathy to be. "Hello, Lem!"

"Hello, yourself!" They shook hands, the firm handclasp of strong men, and then all three rode on together to the house.

After dinner, the plainness of which meant nothing to such appetites as their out-door living had aroused, they sat on the porch, the men over their cigarettes and Dorothy quite content in the contemplation of the sweetness which her heart had found.

"How are things going on your place, Lem?" asked Wade.

"Badly, Gordon. That's one reason I rode over to see you. Have you heard about the fight on my range? You haven't?"

"I didn't have time last night to tell him," Dorothy interposed.

[Pg 176]

"A number of my boys got into a shooting affray with some herders," Trowbridge explained. "Two of the boys were hurt and one of the herders, I understand, was badly shot."

"Too bad," Wade commented. "Confound it, Lem, what are these fellows thinking of? They must know that our patience won't last always, and when it breaks we're ten to their one."

"Well,"—Trowbridge deftly flicked his cigarette stub over the porch railing,—"I'm through now, Gordon. I've given my men orders to stand for no more nonsense. I've told them to shoot at the drop of the hat, and I'll stand behind 'em, law or no law. The next time there's trouble, and it's likely to come any hour, I'm going to lead my outfit into a fight that'll be some fight, believe me. And I'm not going to quit until every sheep man in the county is headed East on the run."

"We'll be with you," Wade said heartily. "Tip us the word and we'll be right after you."

Trowbridge nodded.

"I'll take you up on that, Gordon. Not that we need help, you understand, but because it'll be best for us to present a united front in this business. United, we stand; divided, we fall; that's the word, eh?"

Dorothy leaned forward, with an anxious look.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "I hope neither one of you will get shot."

Trowbridge made her a bow from his chair.

"We'll try not to," he said mockingly, and she was obliged to join in the general laugh.

[Pg 177]

"If you feel that you ought to do it, of course you will—fight, I mean," she said, helplessly. "But I think it's dreadful, all the same."

"What has Thomas done about me?" Wade asked. "I understand that he's holding quite a bunch of warrants up his sleeve?"

"I don't think he's done anything, and I don't believe he's anxious to," Trowbridge answered. "He's shown some courage, that fellow, in the past, but I always thought he had a yellow streak in him somewhere. I don't think you need fear him much."

"Well, I'm glad to know that, not that I've been very uneasy, but we've had to keep a pretty close look-out here, and it's doubled us up uncomfortably. I want to go out to my timber claim this afternoon, and but for what you've said, I know Bill would insist on going along. Now I can leave him here to attend to his work."

Dorothy was opposed to the idea and she said so, but her opinion was overridden by the two men. Trowbridge declared that there was absolutely nothing to fear from Sheriff Thomas, at least immediately.

"I'm positive of that," he summed up. "If there was any new move on foot, I'd have heard of it."

"That may be," Dorothy argued, "but you know Senator Rexhill is behind him to urge him on."

"That's another man we ought to run out of this neighborhood," Trowbridge declared. "The only trouble is that the old fox has laid so low that we haven't anything definite on him. We can suspect all we like; but when it comes right down to facts, he has us guessing. We can't prove a thing against him, and he's too big game to flush without powder. Well, we'd better be off."

[Pg 178]

"Stay a while," Wade urged. "It's early yet. I didn't mean to hurry you when I spoke of going out

to the claim. I've got plenty of time."

"I haven't told him about the gold," Dorothy whispered, as he helped her into her saddle. "I thought you might want to keep it quiet for the present."

"Sure, we'll tell him," he said, pressing her hand. "We're all on the same side in this business."

He explained his good fortune to Trowbridge, who was delighted and enthusiastic over the prospect of the vein impinging upon his own range.

"Well, that *is* some luck, eh?" Trowbridge skillfully managed his horse, which was high-spirited enough to still be sportive in spite of the long ride of the morning. "Every cloud's got a silver lining, as the poet says. And another thing, it shows Rexhill's real motive, don't forget that. Oh, we'll get 'em by and by. Sure thing, we will. Well, so long."

"So long, Lem! Call on us when you want us."

"Good-by!" Dorothy waved to him as the horses sped away in the direction of Crawling Water.

Wade watched them out of sight, and then entered the house to tell Santry that he would not be needed on the afternoon trip to the timber claim. The old man growled a little at the idea of Wade going alone, but he finally gave in.

[Pg 179]

"I'll take my gun and keep my eye peeled," his employer promised. "If I can't stand off trouble until I get home, or you can get to me, I'll lose my bet. You've got your work to do, Bill. If you're going to nurse me all the time, I'll have to get another foreman to run the crew."

He rode away, then, toward the foothills, confident of his ability to look after himself in case of trouble. There was nothing in the peaceful aspect of the range to suggest an enemy, but he kept his rifle ready and his ears and eyes open. Once he paused abruptly when a rabbit jumped out of a clump of quaking-aspens, a hundred yards ahead, only to chuckle at his own overcaution.

The sun, which was still high, was shining as only a Wyoming sun can shine, from out of a blue-vaulted canopy, flecked with fleecy clouds. Swinging from the tops of the sagebrush, or an occasional cottonwood, yellow-breasted meadowlarks were singing sweetly. At intervals a flock of curlews circled above the rider, uttering their sharp, plaintive cries; then they would drop to the ground and run rapidly to and fro on their frail, stilt-like legs, their long ungainly bills darting from side to side in search of food.

Over the plains, from which Wade now turned, hundreds of red and white cattle, their hides as sleek as velvet, were grazing, singly and in scattered groups, as far as the eye could see. Toward its mouth, the valley was spotted with many fenced alfalfa fields, and traversed by irrigation ditches; while to the right, in the direction in which Wade now rode, rose the timber belt. A fresh, soft breeze, fragrant with the odor of clean, damp earth, rustled the leaves of the cottonwoods, some of which were of enormous size, as the horseman pushed his way farther into the shadow of the mountains.

[Pg 180]

After a careful scrutiny, which satisfied him that the vicinity harbored no enemies, he dismounted, but still actuated by caution, kept the bridle reins looped over his wrist, as he searched for further evidence of gold. Unlike Santry, the ranchman was not trained in the ways of prospecting, and he began to regret that he had not allowed the foreman to accompany him. He followed what he thought were promising signs deeper into the silence of the tall timber, and finally dropped on his knees to make sure of some outcroppings of quartz near the base of a huge boulder. He was so crouched when a sudden movement of his horse warned him of danger; but he had not time to arise before a crushing blow on the head, delivered from behind, shook him to the very marrow of his spine. With a low groan, he toppled over onto his face, senseless.

"Have you got him?" Moran peered around the side of the boulder, and smiled exultantly when he saw Wade's still figure. "Throw him across your saddle," he commanded, "and follow me."

CHAPTER XV

[Pg 181]

THE FIRST CLEW

"Let's see!" Trowbridge reined in his horse and meditated, when he and Dorothy had covered several miles of their ride back to Crawling Water. "Jensen was shot around here somewhere, wasn't he?"

"I think it was over there." She pointed with her quirt in the direction of a distant clump of jack-pines. "Why?"

"Suppose we ride over and take a look at the spot." He smiled at her little shudder of repugnance. "We haven't any Sherlock Holmes in this country, and maybe we need one. I'll have a try at it. Come on!"

In response to the pressure of his knees, the trained cow-pony whirled toward the jack-pines, and Dorothy followed, laughing at the idea that so ingenuous a man as Lem Trowbridge might

possess the analytical gift of the trained detective.

"You!" she said mockingly, when she had caught up with him. "You're as transparent as glass; not that it isn't nice to be that way, but still you are. Besides, the rain we've had must have washed all tracks away."

"No doubt, but we'll have a look anyhow. It won't do any harm. Seriously, though, the ways of criminals have always interested me. I'd rather read a good detective story than any other sort of yarn."

"I shouldn't think that you had any gift that way."

[Pg 182]

"That's got nothing to do with it," he laughed. "It's always like that. Haven't you noticed how nearly every man thinks he's missed his calling; that if he'd only gone in for something else he'd have been a rattling genius at it? Just to show you! I've got a hand over at the ranch, a fellow named Barry, who can tie down a steer in pretty close to the record. He's a born cowman, if I ever saw one, but do you suppose he thinks that's his line?"

"Doesn't he?" she asked politely. One of the secrets of her popularity lay in her willingness to feed a story along with deft little interjections of interest.

"He does not. Poetry! Shakespeare! That's his 'forty'! At night he gets out a book and reads Hamlet to the rest of the boys. Thinks that if he'd ever hit Broadway with a show, he'd set the town on fire."

When Dorothy laughed heartily, as she now did, the sound of it was worth going miles to hear. There are all shades of temperament and character in laughter, which is the one thing of which we are least self-conscious; hers revealed not only a sense of humor, rare in her sex, but a blithe, happy nature, which made allies at once of those upon whose ears her merriment fell. Trowbridge's eyes sparkled with his appreciation of it.

"Well, maybe he would," she said, finally.

"Maybe I'll make good along with Sherlock Holmes." He winked at her as he slipped from his horse's back, on the edge of a rocky knoll, fronting the jack-pines. "This is the place, I reckon." His quick eyes had caught a dark stain on a flat rock, which the rain had failed to cleanse entirely of the dead herders' blood.

[Pg 183]

When Dorothy saw it, too, her mirth subsided. To her mind, the thought of death was most horrible, and especially so in the case of a murderous death, such as had befallen the sheep men. Not only was the thing horrible in itself, but still more so in its suggestion of the dangers which threatened her friends.

"Do hurry!" she begged. "There can't be anything here."

"Just a minute or two." Struck by the note of appeal in her voice, so unlike its lilt of the moment before, he added: "Ride on if you want to."

"No," she shuddered. "I'll wait, but please be quick."

It was well for her companion that she did wait, or at least that she was with him for, when he had inspected the immediate vicinity of the shooting, he stepped backward from the top of the knoll into a little, brush-filled hollow, in which lay a rattlesnake. Deeply interested in his search, he did not hear the warning rattle, and Dorothy might not have noticed it either had not her pony raised its head, with a start and a snort. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw the snake and called out sharply.

"Look out, behind you, Lem!"

There are men, calling themselves conjurors, who perform prodigies of agility with coins, playing-cards, and other articles of legerdemain, but they are not so quick as was Trowbridge in springing sidewise from the menacing snake. In still quicker movement, the heavy Colt at his side leaped from its holster. The next second the rattle had ceased forever, for the snake's head had been neatly cut from its body.

[Pg 184]

"Close call! Thanks!" Trowbridge slid his weapon back into its resting place and smiled up at her.

So close, indeed, had the call been that, coming upon the dreadful associations of the spot, Dorothy was unnerved. Her skin turned a sickly white and her lips were trembling, but not more so than were the flanks of the horses, which seemed to be in an agony of fear. When the girl saw Trowbridge pick up a withered stick and coolly explore the recesses of a small hole near which the snake had been coiled, she rebelled.

"I'm not going to stay here another minute," she declared hotly.

"Just a second. There may be another one.... Oh, all right, go on, then," he called out, as she whirled her pony and started off. "I'll catch you. Ride slow!"

He looked after her with a smile of amusement, before renewing his efforts with the stick, holding his bridle reins with one hand so that his horse could not follow hers. To his disappointment there seemed to be nothing in the hole, but his prodding suddenly developed an amazing fact. He was on the point of dropping the stick and mounting his horse, when he noticed

a small piece of metal in the leaves and grass at the mouth of the hole. It was an empty cartridge shell.

"By Glory!" he exclaimed, as he examined it. "A clew, or I'm a sinner!"

[Pg 185]

Swinging into his saddle, he raced after Dorothy, shouting to her as he rode. In her pique, she would not answer his hail, or turn in her saddle; but he was too exultant to care. He was concerned only with overtaking her that he might tell her what he had found.

"For the love of Mike!" he said, when by a liberal use of his spurs he caught up with her. "What do you think this is, a circus?"

"You can keep up, can't you?" she retorted banteringly.

"Sure, I can keep up, all right." He reached out and caught her bridle rein, pulling her pony down to a walk in spite of her protests. "I want to show you something. You can't see it riding like a jockey. Look here!" He handed her the shell. "You see, if I had come when you wanted me to, I wouldn't have found it. That's what's called the detective instinct, I reckon," he added, with a grin. "Guess I'm some little Sherlock, after all."

"Whose is it?" She turned the shell over in her palm a trifle gingerly.

"Look!" He took it from her and pointed out where it had been dented by the firing-pin. "I reckon you wouldn't know, not being up in fire-arms. The hammer that struck this shell didn't hit true; not so far off as to miss fire, you understand, but it ain't in line exactly. That tells me a lot."

"What does it tell you?" She looked up at him quickly.

[Pg 186]

"Well," he spoke slowly, "there ain't but one gun in Crawling Water that has that peculiarity, that I know of, and that one belongs, or did belong, to Tug Bailey."

She caught at his arm impulsively so that both horses were brought to a standstill.

"Then *he* shot Jensen, Lem?"

Her voice was tremulous with eagerness, for although she had never doubted Wade or Santry; had never thought for a moment that either man could have committed the crime, or have planned it, she wanted them cleared of the doubt in the eyes of the world. Her disappointment was acute when she saw that Trowbridge did not deem the shell to be convincing proof of Bailey's guilt.

"Don't go too fast now, Dorothy," he cautioned. "This shell proves that Bailey's gun was fired, but it doesn't prove that Bailey's finger pulled the trigger, or that the gun was aimed at Jensen. Bailey might have loaned the rifle to somebody, or he might have fired at a snake, like I did a few minutes ago."

"Oh, he might have done anything, of course. But the shell is some evidence, isn't it? It casts the doubt on Tug Bailey, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it does that, all right. It casts it further than him." The cattleman spoke positively. "It's a clew, that's what it is. We've got a clew and we've got a motive, and we didn't have either of them yesterday."

"How do you suppose that shell got where you found it?" she asked, her voice full of hope.

[Pg 187]

"Bailey must have levered it out of his rifle, after the shooting, and it fell into that hole. You see,—he could not resist making the triumphant point once more,—"if I hadn't stopped to look for another rattler, I never would have found it. Just that chance—just a little chance like that—throws the biggest criminals. Funny, ain't it?" But she was too preoccupied with the importance of the discovery to dwell on his gifts as a sleuth.

"What can we do about it, Lem?" She gave her pony her head and they began to move slowly. "What ought we to do?"

"I'll find this fellow, Bailey, and wring the truth out of him," he answered grimly; and her eyes sparkled. "If I'm not greatly mistaken, though, he was only the tool."

"Meaning that Moran...."

"And Rexhill," Trowbridge snapped. "They are the men higher up, and the game we're really gunning for. They hired Bailey to shoot Jensen so that the crime might be fastened on to Gordon. I believe that as fully as I'm alive this minute; the point is to prove it."

"Then we've no time to waste," she said, touching her pony with the quirt. "We mustn't loiter here. Suppose Bailey has been sent away?"

The thought of this caused them to urge their tired horses along at speed. Many times during the ride which followed Trowbridge looked admiringly at his companion as she rode on, untiringly, side by side with him. A single man himself, he had come to feel very tenderly toward her, but he had no hope of winning her. She had never been more than good friends with him, and he realized her feeling for Wade, but this knowledge did not make him less keen in his admiration of her.

[Pg 188]

"Good luck to you, Lem," she said, giving him her hand, as they paused at the head of Crawling Water's main street. "Let me know what you do as soon as you can. I'll be anxious."

He nodded.

"I know about where to find him, if he's in town. Oh, we're slowly getting it on them, Dorothy. We'll be ready to 'call' them pretty soon. Good-by!"

Tug Bailey, however, was not in town, as the cattleman learned at Monte Joe's dance-hall, piled high with tables and chairs and reeking with the stench, left over from the previous night, of whiskey fumes and stale tobacco smoke. Monte Joe professed not to know where the puncher had gone, but as Trowbridge pressed him for information the voice of a woman, as shrill as the squawk of a parrot, floated down from the floor above.

"Wait a minute."

Trowbridge waited and the woman came down to him. He knew her by ill-repute, as did every man in the town, for she was Pansy Madder, one of the dance-hall habitués, good-looking enough by night to the inflamed fancy, but repulsive by day, with her sodden skin and hard eyes.

"You want to know where Tug is?" she demanded.

[Pg 189]

"Yes, where is he?"

"He's headed for Sheridan, I reckon. If he ain't headed there, he'll strike the railroad at some other point; him and that—Nellie Lewis, that he's skipped with." Her lusterless eyes were fired by the only thing that could fire them: her bitter jealousy.

"You're sure?" Trowbridge persisted, a little doubtfully.

"Sure? Of course, I'm sure. Say,"—she clutched at his arm as he turned away,—“if he's wanted for anything, bring him back here, will you? Promise me that! Let me”—her pale lips were twisted by an ugly smile—“get my hands on him!”

From the dance-hall, Trowbridge hastened to the jail to swear out a warrant for Bailey's arrest and to demand that Sheriff Thomas telegraph to Sheridan and to the two points above and below, Ranchester and Clearmont, to head off the fugitive there. Not knowing how far the Sheriff might be under the dominance of the Rexhill faction, the cattleman was not sure that he could count upon assistance from the official. He meant, if he saw signs of indecision, to do the telegraphing himself and to sign at the bottom of the message the name of every ranch owner in the district. That should be enough to awaken the law along the railroad without help from Thomas, and Trowbridge knew that such action would be backed up by his associates.

He had no trouble on this score, however, for Sheriff Thomas was away on the trail of a horse-thief, and the deputy in charge of the jail was of sturdier character than his chief.

[Pg 190]

"Will I help you, Lem?" he exclaimed. "Say, will a cat drink milk? You bet I'll help you. Between you and me, I've been so damned ashamed of what's been doing in this here office lately that I'm aching for a chance to square myself. I'll send them wires off immediate."

"I reckon you're due to be the next Sheriff in this county, Steve," Trowbridge responded gratefully. "There's going to be a change here before long."

"That so? Well, I ain't sayin' that I'd refuse, but I ain't doin' this as no favor, either, you understand. I'm doin' it because it's the law, the good old-fashioned, honest to Gawd, s'help me die, law!"

"That's the kind we want here—that, or no kind. So long, Steve!"

With a nod of relief, Trowbridge left the jail, well-satisfied that he had done a good turn for Wade, and pleased with himself for having lived so well up to the standards set by the detectives of popular fiction. Since Bailey had not had time to reach the railroad, his arrest was now almost a certainty, and once he was back in Crawling Water, a bucket of hot tar and a bundle of feathers, with a promise of immunity for himself, would doubtless be sufficient to extract a confession from him which would implicate Rexhill and Moran.

Feeling that he had earned the refreshment of a drink, the cattleman was about to enter the hotel when, to his consternation, he saw tearing madly down the street toward him Bill Santry, on a horse that had evidently been ridden to the very last spurt of endurance. He ran forward at once, for the appearance of the old man in Crawling Water, with a warrant for murder hanging over his head, could only mean that some tragedy had happened at the ranch.

[Pg 191]

"Hello, Lem!" Santry greeted him. "You're just the man I'm lookin' for."

"What's the trouble?" Trowbridge demanded.

"The boy!" The old plainsman slid from his horse, which could hardly keep its feet, but was scarcely more spent in body than its rider was in nerve. His face was twitching in a way that might have been ludicrous but for its significance. "They've ambushed him, I reckon. I come straight in after you, knowin' that you'd have a cooler head for this here thing than—than I have."

"My God!" The exclamation shot from Trowbridge like the crack of a gun. "How did it happen?"

Santry explained the details, in so far as he knew them, in a few breathless sentences. The old man was clearly almost beside himself with grief and rage, and past the capacity to act intelligently upon his own initiative. He had not been satisfied, he said, to remain behind at the ranch and let Wade go to the timber tract alone, and so after a period of indecision he had followed him. Near the edge of the timber he had come upon Wade's riderless horse, trailing broken bridle reins. He had followed the animal's tracks back to the point of the assault, but there was no sign of Wade, which fact indicated that he had been carried away by those who had overcome him.

[Pg 192]

"I could see by the tracks that there was a number of 'em; as many as five or six," the old man summed up. "I followed their sign as far as I could, but I lost it at the creek. Then I went back to the house and sent some of the boys out to scout around before I come down here after you."

"Where do you suppose they could have taken him?" Trowbridge asked. "They'd never dare bring him to town."

"Gawd knows, Lem! There's more pockets and drifts up in them hills than there is jack-rabbits. 'Tain't likely the boys'll find any new sign, leastways not in time; not before that — of a Moran—it was him did it, damn him! I know it was. Lem, for Gawd's sake, what are we goin' to do?"

"The first thing to do, Bill, is to get you out of this town, before Thomas shows up and jumps you."

"I don't keer for myself. I'll shoot the...."

"Luckily, he's away just now," Trowbridge went on, ignoring the interruption. "Come with me!" He led the way into the hotel. "Frank," he said to the red-headed proprietor, "is Moran in town today?"

"Nope." The Irishman regarded Santry with interest. "He went out this morning with four or five men."

"Rexhill's here, ain't he?" Trowbridge asked then. "Tell him there's two gentlemen here to see him. Needn't mention any names. He doesn't know me."

When Santry, with the instinct of his breed, hitched his revolver to a more convenient position on his hip, Trowbridge reached out and took it away from him. He dared not trust the old man in his present mood. He intended to question the Senator, to probe him, perhaps to threaten him; but the time had not come to shoot him.

[Pg 193]

"I'll keep this for you, Bill," he said soothingly, and dropped the weapon into his coat pocket. "I'm going to take you up with me, for the sake of the effect of that face of yours, looking the way it does right now. But I'll do the talking, mind! It won't take long. We're going to act some, too."

Their visit had no visible effect upon Rexhill, however, who was too much master of himself to be caught off his guard in a game which had reached the point of constant surprise. His manner was not conciliatory, for the meeting was frankly hostile, but he did not appear to be perturbed by it. He had not supposed that the extremes he had sanctioned could be carried through without difficulty, and he was prepared to meet any attack that might be offered by the enemy.

"Senator Rexhill," Trowbridge introduced himself, "you've never met me. I'm from the Piah Creek country. My name is Trowbridge."

"Yes," the Senator nodded. "I've heard of you. I know your friend there by sight." He lingered slightly over the word "friend" as he glanced toward Santry, "There's a warrant out for him, I believe."

"Yes. There's a warrant out for one of your—friends, too, Tug Bailey," Trowbridge retorted dryly, hoping that something would eventuate from his *repartee*; but nothing did. If the news surprised Rexhill, as it must have, he did not show it. "I've just sworn it out," the rancher continued, "but that's not why I'm here. I'm here to tell you that Gordon Wade, whom you know, has been kidnaped."

[Pg 194]

Santry stifled an exclamation of rage in answer to a quick look from his friend.

"Kidnaped from his own range in broad daylight," the latter went on. "I represent his friends, who mean to find him right away, and it has occurred to me that you may be able to assist us in our search."

"Just why has that idea occurred to you?" Rexhill asked calmly, as though out of mere curiosity. "I'd like to know."

A bit baffled by this attitude of composure, Trowbridge hesitated, for it was not at all what he had expected to combat. If the Senator had flown into a passion, the cattleman would have responded with equal heat; now he was less sure of himself and his ground. It was barely possible, after all, that Tug Bailey had shot Jensen out of personal spite; or, at the worst, had been the tool of Moran alone. One could hardly associate the thought of murder with the very prosperous looking gentleman, who so calmly faced them and twirled his eyeglasses between his fingers.

"Why should that idea have occurred to you?" the Senator asked again. "So far as I am informed, Wade is also liable to arrest for complicity in the Jensen murder; in addition to which he has effected a jail delivery and burglarized my office. It seems to me, if he has been kidnaped as you say, that I am the last person to have any interest in his welfare, or his whereabouts. Why do you

[Pg 195]

come to me?"

This was too much for Santry's self-restraint.

"What's the use of talkin' to him?" he demanded. "If he ain't done it himself, don't we know that Moran done it for him? To hell with talkin'!" He shook a gnarled fist at Rexhill, who paid no attention whatever to him, but deliberately looked in another direction.

"That is why we are here," said Trowbridge, when he had quieted Santry once more. "Because we have good reason to believe that, if these acts do not proceed from you, they do proceed from your agent, and you're responsible for what he does, if I know anything about law. This man Moran has carried things with a high hand in this community, but now he's come to the end of his rope, and he's going to be punished. That means that you'll get yours, too, if he's acted under your orders." The cattleman was getting into his stride now that the first moments of his embarrassment were passed. His voice rang with authority, which the Senator was quick to recognize, although he gave no evidence that he was impressed. "Has Moran been acting for you, that's what we want to know?"

"My dear fellow,"—Rexhill laughed rumblingly,—"if you'll only stop for an instant to think, you'll see how absurd this is."

"A frank answer to a frank question," Trowbridge persisted. "Has he been acting for you? Do you, at this moment, know what has become of Wade, or where he is?" [Pg 196]

"That's the stuff!" growled Santry, whose temples were throbbing under the effort he put forth to hold himself within bounds.

"I do not!" the Senator said, bluntly. "And I'll say freely that I would not tell you if I did."

Santry's hands opened and shut convulsively. He was in the act of springing upon Rexhill when Trowbridge seized him.

"You're a liar!" he roared, struggling in his friend's grasp. "Let me at him. By the great horned toad, I'll make him tell!"

"Put that man out of this room!" Rexhill had arisen in all of his ponderous majesty, roused to wrath at last. His pudgy finger shook as he pointed to the door, and his fat face was congested. "I'm not here to be insulted by a jail-bird. Put him out!"

Trowbridge's eyes gleamed exultantly, although he still kept a tight hold on Santry, for this was the sort of thing he had expected to meet. He had not thought that Rexhill would confess complicity in the kidnaping this early in the game; but he had looked for an outburst of anger which would give him the chance he wanted to free his own mind of the hate that was in it. He had wanted the chance to make Rexhill feel that his hour of atonement was close at hand, and getting nearer every minute.

"Easy, now!" he admonished. "We're going, both of us, but we won't be put out. You've said just what I looked for you to say. You've denied knowledge of this thing. I think with Santry here that you're a liar, a God-forsaken liar." He drew closer to the Senator, who seemed about to burst with passion, and held him with a gaze his fury could not daunt. "May Heaven help you, Senator, when we're ready to prove all this against you. If you're in Crawling Water then, we'll ride you to hell on a rail." [Pg 197]

"Now," Trowbridge said to Santry, when they were downstairs again, "you get out of town hot-foot. Ride to my place. Take this!" He scribbled a few lines on the back of an envelope. "Give it to my foreman. Tell him to meet me with the boys where the trail divides. We'll find Wade, if we have to trade our beds for lanterns and kill every horse in the valley."

The two men shook hands, and Santry's eyes were fired with a new hope. The old man was grateful for one thing, at least: the time for action had arrived. He had spent his youth on the plains in the days when every man was a law unto himself, and the years had not lessened his spirit.

"I'll be right after you, Bill," Trowbridge concluded. "I'm going first to break the news to Miss Purnell. She'd hear it anyway and be anxious. She'd better get it straight from me."

Lem Trowbridge had seen only one woman faint, but the recollection was indelibly impressed upon his mind. It had happened in his boyhood, at the ranch where he still lived, when a messenger had arrived with word of the death of the elder Trowbridge, whose horse had stepped into a prairie-dog hole and fallen with his rider. The picture of his mother's collapse he could never forget, or his own horrible thought that she, too, had passed away, leaving him parentless. For months afterwards he had awakened at night, crying out that she was dead. [Pg 198]

The whole scene recurred to him when he told Dorothy of Wade's disappearance, and saw her face flush and then pale, as his mother's had done. The girl did not actually faint, for she was young and wonderfully strong, but she came so near to it that he was obliged to support her with his arm to keep her on her feet. That was cruel, too, for he loved her. But presently she recovered, and swept from his mind all thought of himself by her piteous appeal to him to go instantly in search of Wade.

"We'll find him, Dorothy, don't you worry," he declared, with an appearance of confidence he was

far from feeling. "I came around to tell you myself because I wanted you to know that we are right on the job."

"But how can you find him in all those mountains, Lem? You don't even know which side of the range they've hidden him on."

He reminded her that he had been born in Crawling Water Valley, and that he knew every draw and canyon in the mountains; but in his heart he realized that to search all these places would take half a lifetime. He could only hope that chance, or good fortune, might lead them promptly to the spot they sought.

"Do you think that Senator Rexhill knows where Gordon is?" she asked. "Is he in this, too?"

"I don't know for sure," he answered. "I believe Moran is acting under Rexhill's orders, but I don't know how much Rexhill knows of the details. If I knew that, it would be fairly easy. I'd..." His strong hands gripped the back of a chair until his knuckles showed white under their tan. "I'd choke it out of him!"

[Pg 199]

"Oh, if there was only something I could do!" Dorothy wailed helplessly. "A woman never can do anything in a crisis but *wait!*" Her distress was so pitiable to witness that Trowbridge averted his gaze.

"We'll do all that can be done, Dorothy," he assured her. "Trust me for that. Besides—" A thought had just flashed into his head which might relieve her sense of helplessness. "Besides, we're going to need you here in town to keep us informed of what goes on."

"If I learn anything, how can I get word to you?" she asked, her face brightening somewhat. "You'll be up in the hills."

"I'll try to keep a man at the big pine all the time. If you find out anything send word to him."

"Oh, yes, I will, I will. That'll be something anyhow." Her eyes sparkling with tears, she gave him both her hands. "Good-by, Lem!"

"Good-by, Dorothy," he said solemnly, wringing her hands. "I know just how it is. We'll find him for you!"

CHAPTER XVI

[Pg 200]

TRAPPED

When Wade first opened his eyes, after he had been stricken senseless, he was first conscious of his throbbing head, and on seeking the reason of the pain, was amazed to find his fingers stained with the blood which matted his hair. With an exclamation he struggled to his feet, still too dazed to think clearly, but sufficiently aroused to be startled by the predicament in which he found himself.

He was at the bottom of a rock-walled fissure, about six feet wide by twenty feet in length. There was no way to climb out of this natural prison, for its granite sides, fifteen feet in height, were without crack, projection, or other foothold; indeed, in the light of the afternoon sun, one *façade* shone smooth as glass. If he should be left there without sustenance, he told himself, he might as well be entombed; then, to his delight, he caught the sound of splashing water. At least, he would not perish of thirst, for at one end of the rocky chamber a tiny stream fell down the face of the cliff, to disappear afterward through a narrow cleft. A draught of the cool water refreshed him somewhat, and when he had bathed his head as well as he could, he sat down on the warm sand to think over the situation.

Now that his brain was clearing he felt sure that his capture was the work of Moran, doubtless planned as a revenge for the events of their last meeting, although what shape this revenge was to take the cattleman could not guess. He feared that he would either be shot or left to starve in this *cul-de-sac* in the hills. The thought of all that he and his friends had suffered through Moran lashed the ranchman temporarily to fury; but that he soon controlled as well as he could, for he found its only result was to increase the pain in his head, without aiding to solve the problem of escape. The prospect of getting out of his prison seemed remote, for one glance at its precipitate walls had shown him that not even a mountain goat could scale them. Help, if it came at all, must come through Santry, who could be counted on to arouse the countryside. The thought of the state the old man must be in worried Wade; and he was too familiar with the vast number of small canyons and hidden pockets in the mountains to believe that his friends would soon find him. Before help could reach him, undoubtedly Moran would show his hand, in which for the present were all the trumps.

[Pg 201]

It was characteristic of the cattleman that, with the full realization of his danger, should come a great calm. He had too lively an imagination to be called a man of iron nerve, for that quality of courage is not so often a virtue as a lack of sensitiveness. He who is courageous because he knows no fear is not so brave by half as he who gauges the extent of his peril and rises superior to it. Wade's courage was of the latter sort, an ascendancy of the mind over the flesh. Whenever

[Pg 202]

danger threatened him, his nerves responded to his need with the precision of the taut strings of a perfectly tuned fiddle under a master hand. He had been more nervous, many a time, over the thought of some one of his men riding a dangerous horse or turning a stampede, than he was now that his own life seemed threatened.

Shrugging his broad shoulders, he rolled and smoked a cigarette. The slight exhilaration of the smoke, acting on his weakened condition, together with the slight dizziness still remaining from the blow on his head, was far from conducing to clear thinking, but he forced himself to careful thought. He was less concerned about himself than he was about Santry and Dorothy; particularly Dorothy, for he had now come to appreciate how closely she had come into his life. Her sympathy had been very sweet to him, but he told himself that he would be sorry to have her worry about him now, when there was so little chance of their seeing each other again. He had no great hope of rescue. He expected to die, either by violence or by the slower process of starvation, but in either case he meant to meet his fate like a man.

Of Helen Rexhill, he thought now with a sense of distaste. It was altogether unlikely that she had been privy to her father's depredations, but certainly she countenanced them by her presence in Crawling Water, and she had shown up so poorly in contrast with Dorothy Purnell that Wade could not recall his former tenderness for his early sweetheart. Even if great good fortune should enable him to escape from his prison, the interests of the Rexhill family were too far removed from his own to be ever again bridged by the tie of love, or even of good-feeling. He could not blame the daughter for the misdeeds of her parent, but the old sentiment could never be revived. It was not for Helen that the instinct of self-preservation stirred within him, nor was it in her eyes that he would look for the light of joy over his rescue, if rescue should come.

[Pg 203]

He smoked several cigarettes, until the waning of his supply of tobacco warned him to economize against future cravings. Realizing that even if his friends were within a stone's throw of him they would not be likely to find him unless he gave some sign of his presence, he got to his feet and, making a trumpet out of his hands, shouted loudly. He repeated this a dozen times, or more, and was about to sink back upon the sand when he heard footsteps approaching on the ground overhead. He had little idea that a friend was responding to his call, but being unarmed he could do no more than crouch against the wall of the cliff while he scanned the opening above him.

Presently there appeared in the opening the head of a Texan, Goat Neale, whom Wade recognized as a member of Moran's crew and a man of some note as a gunfighter.

"How," drawled the Texan, by way of greeting. "Feelin' pretty good?" When the ranchman did not reply, his inquisitor seemed amused. "A funny thing like this here always makes me laff," he remarked. "It sure does me a heap of good to see you all corraled like a fly in a bottle. Mebbe you'd take satisfaction in knowin' that it was me brung you down out yonder in the timber. I was sure mighty glad to take a wallop at you, after the way you all done us up that night at the ranch."

[Pg 204]

"So I'm indebted to you for this, eh?" Wade spoke casually, as though the matter were a trifling thing. He was wondering if he could bribe Neale to set him free. Unfortunately he had no cash about him, and he concluded that the Texan would not think promises worth while under the circumstances.

"Sure. I reckon you'd like to see the boss? Well, he's comin' right on over. Just now he's eatin' a mess o' bacon and beans and cawfee, over to the camp. My Gawd, that's good cawfee, too. Like to have some, eh?" But Wade refused to play Tantalus to the lure of this temptation and kept silent. "Here he comes now."

"Is he all right?" Wade heard Moran ask, as Neale backed away from the rim of the hole.

"Yep," the Texan answered.

The ranchman instinctively braced himself to meet whatever might befall. It was quite possible, he knew, that Moran had spared him in the timber-belt to torture him here; he did not know whether to expect a bullet or a tongue lashing, but he was resolved to meet his fate courageously and, as far as was humanly possible, stoically. To his surprise, the agent's tone did not reveal a great amount of venom.

"Hello, Wade!" he greeted, as he looked down on his prisoner. "Find your quarters pretty comfortable, eh? It's been a bit of a shock to you, no doubt, but then shocks seem to be in order in Crawling Water Valley just now."

[Pg 205]

"Moran, I've lived in this country a good many years." Wade spoke with a suavity which would have indicated deadly peril to the other had the two been on anything like equal terms. "I've seen a good many blackguards come and go in that time, but the worst of them was redeemed by more of the spark of manhood than there seems to be in you."

"Is that so?" Moran's face darkened in swift anger, but he restrained himself. "Well, we'll pass up the pleasantries until after our business is done. You and I've got a few old scores to settle and you won't find me backward when the times comes, my boy. It isn't time yet, although maybe the time isn't so very far away. Now, see here." He leaned over the edge of the cliff to display a folded paper and a fountain-pen. "I have here a quit-claim deed to your ranch, fully made out and legally witnessed, needing only your signature to make it valid. Will you sign it?"

Wade started in spite of himself. This idea was so preposterous that it had never occurred to him

as the real motive for his capture. He could scarcely believe that so good a lawyer as Senator Rexhill could be blind to the fact that such a paper, secured under duress, would have no validity under the law. He looked up at the agent in amazement.

"I know what you're thinking, of course," Moran went on, with an evil smile. "We're no fools. I've got here, besides the deed, a check made out to you for ten thousand dollars." He held it up. "You'll remember that we made you that offer once before. You turned it down then, but maybe you'll change your mind now. After you indorse the check I'll deposit it to your credit in the local bank."

[Pg 206]

The cattleman's face fell as he caught the drift of this complication. That ten thousand dollars represented only a small part of the value of his property was true, but many another man had sold property for less than it was worth. If a perfectly good check for ten thousand dollars, bearing his indorsement, were deposited to the credit of his banking account, the fact would go far to offset any charge of duress that he might later bring. To suppose that he had undervalued his holdings would be no more unreasonable than to suppose that a man of Senator Rexhill's prominence would stoop to physical coercion of an adversary. The question would merely be one of personal probity, with the presumption on the Senator's side.

"Once we get a title to the land, a handle to fight with, we sha'n't care what you try to do," Moran explained further. "We can afford to laugh at you." That seemed to Wade to be true. "If you accept my offer now, I will set you free as soon as this check is in the bank, and the settlement of our personal scores can go over to another time. I assure you that I am just as anxious to get at you as you are to get at me, but I've always made it a rule never to mix pleasure and business. You'll have a fair start to get away. On the other hand, if you refuse, you'll be left here without food. Once each day I'll visit you; at other times you'll be left alone, except when Goat may care to entertain himself by baiting you. You'll be perfectly safe here, guard or no guard, believe me."

[Pg 207]

Moran chuckled ominously, his thoughts divided between professional pride, excited by the thought of successfully completing the work he had come to Crawling Water to do, and exultation at the prospect that his sufferings while gagged the previous night might be atoned for a thousand times if Wade should refuse to sign the quit-claim.

"In plain speech," said Wade, pale but calm, "you propose to starve me to death."

"Exactly," was the cheerful assurance. "If I were you, I'd think a bit before answering."

Because the cattleman was in the fullest flush of physical vigor, the lust of life was strong in him. Never doubting that Moran meant what he said, Wade was on the point of compliance, thinking to assume the burden later on, of a struggle with Rexhill to regain his ranch. His manhood rebelled at the idea of coercion, but, dead, he could certainly not defend himself; it seemed to him better that he should live to carry on the fight. He would most likely have yielded but for the taunt of cowardice which had already been noised about Crawling Water. True, the charge had sprung from those who liked him least, but it had stung him. He was no coward, and he would not feed such a report now by yielding to Moran. Whatever the outcome of a later fight might be, the fact that he had knuckled under to the agent could never be lived down. Such success as he had won had been achieved by playing a man's part in man's world.

[Pg 208]

"I'll tell you what I'll do, Moran," he said, finally. "Give me a hand out of this hole, or come down here yourself. Throw aside your gun, but keep your knife. I'll allow you that advantage. Meet me face to face! Damn you, be a man! Anything that you can gain by my signature, you can gain by my death. Get the best of me, if you can, in a man's fight. Pah!" He spat contemptuously. "You're a coward, Moran, a white-livered coward! You don't dare fight with me on anything like equal terms. I'll get out of here somehow, and when I do—by Heaven, I'll corner you, and I'll make you fight."

"Get out? How?" Moran laughed the idea to scorn. "Your friends can look for you from now till snowfall. They'll never find even your bones. Rot there, if you choose. Why should I take a chance on you when I've got you where I want you? You ought to die. You know too much."

"Yes," Wade retorted grimly. "I know too much. I know enough to hang you, you murderer. Who killed Oscar Jensen? Answer that! You did it, or you had it done, and then you tried to put it on Santry and me, and I'm not the only one who knows it. This country's too small to hold you, Moran. Your fate is settled already, whatever may happen to me."

"Still, I seem to be holding four aces now," Moran grinned back at him. "And the cards are stacked."

[Pg 209]

Left alone, Wade rolled himself a cigarette from his scant hoard of tobacco. Already he was hungry, for deep shadows in his prison marked the approach of night, and he had the appetite of a healthy man. The knowledge that he was to be denied food made him feel the hungrier, until he resolutely put the thought of eating out of his mind. The water, trickling down the face of the rock, was a God-send, though, and he drank frequently from the little stream.

By habit a heavy smoker, he viewed with dismay the inroads which he had already made on his store of tobacco for that deprivation he felt would be the most real of any that he could suffer. He tried to take shorter puffs upon his cigarette, and between them shielded the fire with his hand, so that the air-draughts in the fissure might not cheat him of any of the smoke. He figured that he had scarcely enough tobacco left for a dozen cigarettes, which was less than his usual daily

allowance.

On searching his pockets, in the hope of finding a second sack of Durham, he chanced upon his clasp-knife, and viewed the find with joy. The thought of using it as a weapon did not impress him, for his captors would keep out of reach of such a toy, but he concluded that he might possibly use it to carve some sort of foothold in the rock. The idea of cutting the granite was out of the question, but there might be strata of softer stone which he could dig into. It was a forlorn hope, in a forlorn cause, and it proved futile. At his first effort the knife's single blade snapped off short, and he threw the useless handle away.

[Pg 210]

Darkness fell some time before the cool night air penetrated the fissure; when it did so the cold seemed likely to be added to his other physical discomforts. In the higher altitudes the nights were distinctly chilly even in mid-summer, and he had on only a light outing shirt, above his waist. As the hour grew late, the cold increased in severity until Wade was forced to walk up and down his narrow prison in the effort to keep warm. He had just turned to retrace his steps, on one such occasion, when his ears caught the soft pat-pat of a footfall on the ground above. He instantly became motionless and tensely alert, wondering which of his enemies was so stealthily returning, and for what reason.

He thought it not unlikely that Moran had altered his purpose and come back to shoot him while he slept. Brave though he was, the idea of being shot down in such a manner made his flesh crawl. Stooping, he picked up a fragment of rock; although he realized the futility of the weapon, it was all he had. Certainly, whoever approached was moving with the utmost stealth, which argued an attack of some kind. Drawing back the hand that held the stone, the cattleman shrank into a corner of the fissure and waited. Against the starlit sky, he had an excellent view of the opening above him, and possibly by a lucky throw the stone would serve against one assailant, at least.

The pat-pat-pat drew nearer and stopped, at last, on the extreme edge of the hole. A low, long-drawn sniff showed that this was no human enemy. If the sound had been louder, Wade would have guessed that it was made by a bear; but as it was he guessed the prowler to be a mountain-lion. He had little fear of such a beast; most of them were notorious cowards unless cornered, and when presently a pair of glowing eyes peered down into the fissure, he hurled the stone at them with all his might. His aim was evidently true, for with a snarl of pain the animal drew back.

[Pg 211]

But just as amongst the most pacific human races there are some brave spirits, so amongst the American lions there are a few which possess all the courage of their jungle brothers. Actuated by overweening curiosity, or else by a thirst for blood, the big cat returned again and again to the edge of the hole. After his first throw Wade was unable to hit the beast with a stone, although his efforts had the temporary effect of frightening it. Gradually, however, it grew bolder, and was restrained from springing upon him only, as it seemed, by some sixth sense which warned it of the impossibility of getting out of the fissure after once getting in. Baffled and furious, the lion sniffed and prowled about the rim of the hole until the ranchman began to think it would surely leap upon him.

He picked up his broken pocket-knife and waited for this to happen. The shattered blade would be of little use, but it might prove better than his bare hands if he had to defend himself against the brute's teeth and claws.

CHAPTER XVII

[Pg 212]

A WAR OF WITS

"Kidnaped? Gordon Wade?"

At Dorothy's announcement, Mrs. Purnell sank, with a gasp, into her rocking-chair, astonished beyond expression. She listened, with anxiety scarce less than her daughter's, to the girl's account of the event as she had it from Trowbridge. Her mouth opened and shut aimlessly as she picked at her gingham apron. If Wade had been her own son, she could hardly have loved him more. He had been as tender to her as a son, and the news of his disappearance and probable injury was a frightful shock.

Weakly she attempted to relieve her own anxiety by disputing the fact of his danger.

"Oh, I guess nothing's happened to him—nothing like that, anyway. He may have had a fall from his horse. Or maybe it broke away from him and ran off."

"Bill Santry found their trail," Dorothy said, with a gesture so tragic that it wrung her mother's heart strings. "He followed it as far as he could, then lost it." In any other case she would have tried to keep the bad news from her mother, because of her nerves, but just now the girl was too distraught to think of any one but the man she loved. "Oh, if I could only do something myself," she burst out. "It's staying here, helpless, that is killing me. I wish I'd gone with Lem up into the mountains. I would have if he hadn't said I might better stay in town. But how can I help? There's nothing to do here."

[Pg 213]

"The idea!" Mrs. Purnell exclaimed. "They'll be out all night. How could you have gone with them? I don't believe Gordon has been kidnaped at all. It's a false alarm, I tell you. Who could have done such a thing?"

"Who?" The question broke Dorothy's patience. "Who's done everything that's abominable and contemptible lately here in Crawling Water? That Moran did it, of course, with Senator Rexhill behind him. Oh!"

"Nonsense!" said her mother, indignantly.

"Lem Trowbridge thinks so. Nearly everybody does."

"Then he hasn't as good sense as I thought he had." Mrs. Purnell arose and moved toward the kitchen. "You come on and help me make some waffles for supper. Perhaps that will take such foolishness out of your head. The idea of a Senator of the United States going about kidnaping people."

Dorothy obeyed her mother's wish, but not very ably. Her face was flushed and her eyes hot; ordinarily she was a splendid housekeeper and a dutiful daughter, but there are limits to human endurance. She mixed the batter so clumsily and with such prodigal waste that her mother had to stop her, and she was about to put salt into the sugar bowl when Mrs. Purnell snatched it out of her hands. "Go into the dining-room and sit down, Dorothy," she exclaimed. "You're beside yourself." It is frequently the way with people, who are getting on in years and are sick, to charge their own shortcomings on any one who may be near. Mrs. Purnell was greatly worried.

[Pg 214]

"What's the matter now?" she demanded, when Dorothy left her supper untasted on her plate.

"I was thinking."

"Well, can't you tell a body what you're thinking about? What are you sitting there that way for?"

"I was wondering," said Dorothy in despair, "if Helen Rexhill knows where Gordon is."

Mrs. Purnell snorted in disdain.

"Land's sakes, child, what put that into your head? Drink your tea. It'll do you good."

"Why shouldn't she know, if her father does?" The girl pushed her tea-cup farther away from her. "She wouldn't have come all the way out here with him—he wouldn't have brought her with him—if they weren't working together. She must know. But I don't see why...."

"Dorothy Purnell, I declare to goodness, I believe you're going crazy." Mrs. Purnell dropped her fork. "All this about Gordon is bad enough without my being worried so...."

"I'd even give him up to her, if she'd tell me that." Dorothy's voice was unsteady, and she seemed to be talking to herself rather than to her mother. "I know she thinks I've come between her and Gordon, but I haven't meant to. He's just seemed to like me better; that's all. But I'd do anything to save him from Moran."

[Pg 215]

"I should say that you might better wait until he asks you, before you talk of giving him up to somebody." Mrs. Purnell spoke with the primness that was to be expected, but her daughter made no reply. She had never mentioned the night in Moran's office, and her mother knew nothing of Wade's kiss. But to the girl it had meant more than any declaration in words. She had kept her lips inviolate until that moment, and when his kiss had fallen upon them it had fallen upon virgin soil, from out of which had bloomed a white flower of passion. Before then she had looked upon Wade as a warm friend, but since that night he had appeared to her in another guise; that of a lover, who has come into his own. She had met him then, a girl, and had left him a woman, and she felt that what he had established as a fact in the one rare moment of his kiss, belonged to him and her. It seemed so wholly theirs that she had not been able to bring herself to discuss it with her mother. She had won it fairly, and she treasured it. The thought of giving him up to Helen Rexhill, of promising her never to see Wade again, was overwhelming, and was to be considered only as a last resource, but there was no suffering that she would not undertake for his sake.

Mrs. Purnell was as keenly alive as ever to the hope that the young ranch owner might some day incline toward her little girl, but she was sensitive also to the impression which the Rexhills had made upon her. Her life with Mr. Purnell had not brought her many luxuries, and perhaps she over-valued their importance. She thought Miss Rexhill a most imposing young woman and she believed in the impeccability of the well-to-do. Her heart was still warmed by the memory of the courtesy with which she had been treated by the Senator's daughter, and was not without the gratification of feeling that it had been a tribute to her own worth. She had scolded Dorothy afterward for her frank speech to Miss Rexhill at the hotel, and she felt that further slurs on her were uncalled for.

[Pg 216]

"I'm sure that Miss Rexhill treated us as a lady should," she said tartly. "She acted more like one than you did, if I do have to say it. She was as kind and sweet as could be. She's got a tender heart. I could see that when she up and gave me that blotter, just because I remarked that it reminded me of your childhood."

"Oh, that old blotter!" Dorothy exclaimed petulantly. "What did it amount to? You talk as though it were something worth having." She was so seldom in a pet that her mother now strove to make

allowance for her.

"I'm not saying that it's of any value, Dorothy, except to me; but it was kind of her to seem to understand why I wanted it."

"It wasn't kind of her. She just did it to get rid of us, because we bored her. Oh, mother, you're daffy about the Rexhills, why not admit it and be done with it? You think they're perfect, but I tell you they're not—they're not! They've been behind all our troubles here. They've...." Her voice broke under the stress of her emotion and she rose to her feet.

[Pg 217]

"Dorothy, if you have no self-respect, at least have some...."

"I won't have that blotter in the house." The strain was proving more than the girl's nerves could stand. "I won't hear about it any longer. I'm going to—to tear it up!"

"Dorothy!"

For all the good that Mrs. Purnell's tone of authority did, it might as well have fallen upon the wind. She hastily followed her daughter, who had rushed from the room, and overtook her just in time to prevent her from destroying the little picture. Her own strength could not have sufficed to deter the girl in her purpose, if the latter had not realized in her heart the shameful way in which she was treating her mother.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself, child? Look in that glass at your face! No wonder you don't think you look like the sweet child in the picture. You don't look like her now, nor act like her. That was why I wanted the blotter, to remind me of the way you used to look."

"I'm sorry, mother."

Blushing deeply as she recovered her self-control, Dorothy stole a glance at her reflection in the looking-glass of the bureau, before which she stood, and shyly contrasted her angry expression of countenance with the sweet one of the child on the blotter. Suddenly she started, and leaned toward the mirror, staring at something she saw there. The blood seemed driven from the surface of her skin; her lips were parted; her eyes dilated. She drew a swift breath of amazed exultation, and turned to her mother, who had viewed the sudden transformation with surprise.

[Pg 218]

"I'll be back soon, mother. I can't tell you what it is." Dorothy's voice rang with the suggestion of victory. "But I've discovered something, wonderful!"

Before Mrs. Purnell could adjust herself to this new mood, the girl was down the stairs and running toward the little barn. Slipping the bridle on her pony, she swung to its back without thought of a saddle, and turned the willing creature into the street. As she passed the house, she waved her hand to her mother, at the window, and vanished like a specter into the night.

"Oh, hurry, Gypsy, hurry!" she breathed into the pony's twitching ear.

Her way was not far, for she was going first to the hotel, but that other way, into the mountains after Gordon, would be a long journey, and no time could be wasted now. She was going to see Helen Rexhill, not as a suppliant bearing the olive branch, but as a champion to wage battle in behalf of the missing ranchman. She no longer thought of giving him up, and the knowledge that she might now keep the love which she had won for her very own made her reel on the pony's back from pure joy. She was his as he was hers, but the Rexhills were his enemies: she knew that positively now, and she meant to defeat them at their own game. If they would tell her where Gordon was, they might go free for all she cared; if they would not, she would give them over to the vengeance of Crawling Water, and she would not worry about what might happen to them. Meanwhile she thanked her lucky stars that Trowbridge had promised to keep a man at the big pine.

[Pg 219]

She tied her pony at the hitching-rack in front of the hotel and entered the office. Like most of the men in the town, the proprietor was her ardent admirer, but he had never seen her before in such radiant mood. He took his cigar from between his lips, and doffed his Stetson hat, which he wore indoors and out, with elaborate grace.

"Yes, Miss, Miss Rexhill's in, up in the parlor, I think. Would you like me to step up and let her know you're here?"

"No, thank you, I'll go right up myself," said Dorothy; her smile doubly charming because of its suggestion of triumph.

Miss Rexhill, entirely unaware of what was brewing for her, was embroidering by the flickering light of one of the big oil lamps, with her back to the doorway, and so did not immediately note Dorothy's presence in the room. Her face flushed with annoyance and she arose, when she recognized her visitor.

"You will please pardon me, but I do not care to receive you," she said primly.

This beginning, natural enough from Helen's standpoint, after what her father had told her in Moran's office, convinced Dorothy that she had read the writing on the blotter correctly. She held her ground, aggressively, between Miss Rexhill and the door.

[Pg 220]

"You must hear what I have to say to you," she declared quietly. "I have not come here to make a social call."

"Isn't it enough for me to tell you that I do not wish to talk to you?" Helen lifted her brows and shrugged her shoulders. "Surely, it should be enough. Will you please stand aside so that I may go to my room?"

"No, I won't! You can't go until you've heard what I've got to say." Stung by the other woman's contemptuous tone, and realizing that the situation put her at a social disadvantage, Dorothy forced an aggressive tone into her voice, ugly to the ear.

"Very well!" Miss Rexhill shrugged her shoulders disdainfully, and resumed her seat. "We must not engage in a vulgar row. Since I must listen to you, I must, but at least I need not talk to you, and I won't."

"You know that Gordon Wade has disappeared?" Helen made no response to this, and Dorothy bit her lip in anger. "I know that you know it," she continued. "I know that you know where he is. Perhaps, however, you don't know that his life is in danger. If you will tell me where he is, I can save him. Will you tell me?" The low throaty note of suffering in her voice brought a stiletto-like flash into the eyes of the other woman, but no response.

"Miss Rexhill," Dorothy went on, after a short pause. "You and Mr. Wade were friends once, if you are not now. Perhaps you don't realize just how serious the situation is here in this town, where nearly everybody likes him, and what would happen to you and your father, if I told what I know about you. I don't believe he would want it to happen, even after the way you've treated him. If you will only tell me...." [Pg 221]

Helen turned abruptly in her chair, her face white with anger.

"I said that I would not talk to you," she burst out, "but your impertinence is so—so insufferable—so absolutely insufferable, that I must speak. You say you will tell people what you know about me. What *do* you know about me?" She arose to face Dorothy, with blazing eyes.

"I am sure that you know where Gordon is."

"You are sure of nothing of the kind. I do not know where Mr. Wade is, and why should I tell you if I did? Suppose I were to tell what I know about you? I don't believe the whole of it is known in Crawling Water yet. You—you must be insane."

"About me?" Dorothy's surprise was genuine. "There is nothing you could tell any one about me."

Miss Rexhill laughed scornfully, a low, withering laugh that brought a flush to the girl's cheeks, even though her conscience told her that she had nothing to be ashamed of. Dorothy stared at the other woman with wide-open, puzzled eyes, diverted for the moment from her own purpose.

"At least, you need not expect me to help you," Helen said acidulously. "I have my own feelings. I respected Mr. Wade at one time and valued his friendship. You have taken from me my respect for him, and you have taken from him his self-respect. Quite likely you had no respect for yourself, and so you had nothing to lose. But if you'll stop to consider, you may see how impertinent you are to appeal to me so brazenly." [Pg 222]

"What are you talking about?" Dorothy's eyes, too, were blazing now, but more in championship of Wade than of herself. She still did not fully understand the drift of what Miss Rexhill had said.

"Really, you are almost amusing." Helen looked at her through half-closed lids. "You are quite freakish. I suppose you must be a moral degenerate, or something of the sort." She waited for the insult to sink in, but Dorothy was fairly dazed and bewildered. "Do you want me to call things by their true names?"

"Yes," answered Dorothy, "I do. Tell me what you are talking about."

"I don't mind, I'm sure. Plain speaking has never bothered me. It's the deed that's horrible, not the name. You were found in Mr. Moran's office with Mr. Wade, late at night, misbehaving yourself. Do you dare to come now to me and...."

"That is not true!" The denial came from Dorothy with an intensity that would have carried conviction to any person less infuriated than the woman who faced her. "Oh!" Dorothy raised her hands to her throat as though struggling for breath. "I never dreamed you meant that. It's a deliberate lie!" [Pg 223]

In the grip of their emotions, neither of the girls had noticed the entrance of Senator Rexhill. Helen saw him first and dramatically pointed to him.

"There is my father. Ask him!"

"I do not need to ask him what I've done." Dorothy felt as though she would suffocate. "No one would believe that story of Gordon, whatever they might think of me."

"Ask me? Ask me what?" the Senator nervously demanded. He had in his pocket a telegram just received from Washington, stating that the cavalry would be sent from Fort Mackenzie only at the request of the Governor of Wyoming. The Governor was not at all likely to make such a request, and Rexhill was more worried than he had been before, in years. He could only hope that Tug Bailey would escape capture. "Who is this?" He put on his glasses, and deliberately looked Dorothy over. "Oh, it's the young woman whom Race found in his office."

"She has come here to plead for Gordon Wade—to demand that I tell her where he is now. I don't know, of course; none of us know; but I wouldn't tell her if I did." Helen spoke triumphantly.

"You had better leave us," Rexhill said brusquely to Dorothy. "You are not wanted here. Go home!"

While they were talking, Dorothy had looked from one to the other with the contempt which a good woman naturally feels when she is impugned. Now she crossed the room and confronted the Senator.

"Did you tell your daughter that I was caught in your office with Gordon Wade?" she demanded; and before her steady gaze Rexhill winced. [Pg 224]

"You don't deny it, do you?" he blustered.

"I don't deny being there with him, and I won't deny anything else to such a man as you. I'm too proud to. For your own sake, however, you would have done better not to have tried to blacken me." She turned swiftly to his daughter. "Perhaps you don't know all that I supposed you did. We were in Moran's office—Mr. Wade and myself—because we felt sure that your father had some criminal purpose here in Crawling Water. We were right. We found papers showing the location of gold on Mr. Wade's ranch, which showed your father's reasons for trying to seize the land."

Helen laughed scornfully.

"Do you expect me to believe that?"

"No, of course not," her father growled. "Come on up to our rooms. Let her preach here until she is put out." He was on his way to the door when the vibrant command in Dorothy's voice halted him.

"Wait. You'd better listen to me, for it's the last chance you'll have. I have you absolutely at my mercy. I've caught you! You are trapped!" There was no doubting that the girl believed what she said, and the Senator's affairs were in a sufficiently precarious state to bid him pause.

"Nonsense!" He made his own tone as unconcerned as he could, but there was a look of haunting dread in his eyes.

"Senator Rexhill,"—Dorothy's voice was low, but there was a quality in it which thrilled her hearers,— "when my mother and I visited your daughter a few days ago, she gave my mother a blotter. There was a picture on it that reminded my mother of me as a child; that was why she wanted it. It has been on my mother's bureau ever since. I never noticed anything curious about it until this evening." She looked, with a quiet smile at Helen. "Probably you forgot that you had just blotted a letter with it." [Pg 225]

Helen started and went pale, but not so pale as her father, who went so chalk-white that the wrinkles in his skin looked like make-up, against its pallor.

"I was holding that blotter before the looking-glass this evening," Dorothy continued, in the same low tone, "and I saw that the ink had transferred to the blotter a part of what you had written. I read it. It was this: 'Father knew Santry had not killed Jensen....'"

The Senator moistened his lips with his tongue and strove to chuckle, but the effort was a failure. Helen, however, appeared much relieved.

"I remember now," she said, "and I am well repaid for my moment of sentiment. I was writing to my mother and was telling her of a scene that had just taken place between Mr. Wade and my father. I did not write what you read; rather, it was not all that I wrote. I said—'Gordon thought that father knew Santry had not killed Jensen.'"

"Have you posted that letter?" her father asked, repressing as well as he could his show of eagerness.

"No. I thought better about sending it. I have it upstairs." [Pg 226]

"If you hadn't it, of course you could write it again, in any shape you chose," Dorothy observed crisply, though she recognized, plainly enough, that the explanation was at least plausible.

"There is nothing in that," Rexhill declared, when he had taken a deep breath of relief. "Your championship of Wade is running away with you. What other—er!—grave charges have you to bring against me?"

"I have one that is much more grave," she retorted, so promptly that he could not conceal a fresh start of uneasiness. "This morning, Mr. Trowbridge and I were out for a ride. We rode over to the place where Jensen was shot, and Mr. Trowbridge found there a cartridge shell which fits only one gun in Crawling Water. That gun belongs to a man named Tug Bailey."

By now Rexhill was thoroughly aroused, for although he was too good a jurist not to see the flaws in so incomplete a fabric of evidence against him, he was impressed with the influence such a story would exert on public opinion. If possible, this girl's tongue must be stopped.

"Pooh!" He made a fine show of indifference. "Why bring such tales to me? You'd make a very poor lawyer, young woman, if you think that such rumors will serve to impeach a man of my standing."

"There is a warrant out for Bailey," Dorothy went on quietly. "If he is caught, and I choose to make public what I know and can guess, I am sure that you will never reach a court. You underestimate the people here. I would not have to prove what I have told you. I need only to proclaim it, and—I don't know what they'd do to you. It makes me a bit sick to think about it."

[Pg 227]

The thought made the Senator sick, too, for of late he had seen that things were going very badly for him. He was prepared to temporize, but there was no need for him to contemplate surrender, or flight, so long as Bailey remained at large. If the man were captured, and there was likelihood of a confession being wrung from him, then most decidedly discretion would be the better part of valor.

"Oh, of course," he confessed, "I am willing to admit that in such a community as this you might make trouble, unjustly, for me and my daughter. I am anxious to avoid that, because my interests are valuable here and I have my daughter's safety to consider."

"Don't think of me," Helen interposed quickly. Above all fear for herself would be the shame of being beaten by Dorothy and of having her triumph go to the making of Wade's happiness. The thought of that appeared far worse to her mind than any physical suffering. "Do what you think is right. We are not cowards."

"But I must think of you, my dear. I am responsible to your mother." He turned to Dorothy again. "How much do you want?"

"How much? Oh!" She flushed hotly beneath the insult, but she chose to ignore it. "There is only one price that will purchase my silence. Tell me where Mr. Wade is?"

[Pg 228]

"Bless my soul, I don't know." The Senator affected a display of injured innocence, which sat oddly upon his harried countenance. "I am willing to do what I can to save trouble, but I can't do the impossible."

For a moment, in a wretched slough of helplessness, Dorothy found her conviction wavering. Could it really be possible that he was speaking the truth; that he did not know? But with the dreadful thought came also the realization that she must not let him fathom her mind. She told herself that she must keep her countenance, and she did so.

"There is not a man in Crawling Water who does not believe that Race Moran is responsible for Mr. Wade's disappearance," she declared. "That is another thing that you should consider, for it is one more link in the chain of evidence—impressions, you may call them, but they will be accepted as evidence by Wade's friends."

Rexhill was considering it, and swiftly, in the light of the visit he had had from Trowbridge. The cattleman had left him with a distinct feeling that every word spoken had been meant. "If we can prove it against you, we'll ride you to hell on a rail." The language was melodramatic, but it seemed very suggestive as the Senator called it to mind. He regretted that he had supported Moran in his lust for revenge. The lawless spirit of the West seemed to have poisoned his own blood, but somehow the feeling of indifference as to suffering personal violence had been left out, and he realized that the West was no place for him.

[Pg 229]

"Even so," he said pompously, "even if what you say of Moran should prove true, it does not follow that I know it, or am a party to it. Race Moran is his own master."

"He is your employee—your agent—and you are responsible for what he does in your behalf," Dorothy retorted desperately. "Why do you bandy words with me like this? You may be able to do it with me, but don't think that you can do it with Mr. Trowbridge, and the others, if I tell them what I know. I tell you, you can't. You feel safe before me alone, but you are in much greater danger than you think. You don't seem to realize that I am holding your lives in my hand."

Helen's cheeks blanched at this.

"I do realize it." There was a slight quaver in the Senator's voice, although he tried to speak with easy grace. "I assure you, I do and I shall be very grateful to you"—his anxiety was crowding out his discretion—"if you will help me to save my daughter...."

"I say just what I said before," Helen interposed, courageous to the last. There is, many times, in the woman a finer fiber of courage than runs in the man.

Dorothy regarded the Senator scornfully, her feminine intuition assuring her that he was weakening. She no longer doubted that he knew; she was certain of it and happy to feel that she had only to press him harder to wring the truth from him.

[Pg 230]

"Grateful? For helping you? I am not trying to help you. You deserve any punishment that could be inflicted upon you, I would say that, even if you had not insulted me and lied about me. You are an evil man. I am offering you your safety, so far as I can grant, only for the sake of Mr. Wade. If it were not for him, I should not have come here at all."

Her sense of approaching triumph had carried her a little too far. It aroused Helen to bitter resentment, and when she began to speak Dorothy was sorry that she had not kept silent.

"Father, don't do it!" Miss Rexhill burst out. "It is insufferable that this woman should threaten us so. I would rather run any risk, I don't care what, than give in to her. I won't tolerate such a thing."

"You may be urging him to his death," Dorothy warned her. "I will not stop at anything now. If I tell the cattlemen what I know they will go wild. I mean what I say, believe me!"

"I know you will not stop at anything. I have seen that," Helen admitted. "A woman who can do what you've already done...."

"Helen!" The Senator was carrying with him a sense of gratitude toward Dorothy, and in the light of her spirit he was a little ashamed of the part he had played against her. "Let's try to forget what has past. At least, this young woman is offering us a chance."

[Pg 231]

"Listen!" Dorothy cried out suddenly.

Outside, in the street, a galloping horseman was shouting to some one as he rode. The girl ran to the window and raised the shade to look out. The lusty voice of the horseman bore well into the room. "They've caught Bailey at Sheridan. He'll be here to-morrow."

"Senator Rexhill," said Dorothy, turning away from the window, "you'd better take the chance I've offered you, while you can. Do it for the sake of the old friendship between you and Gordon Wade, if for no other reason. No matter how bitter he may feel toward you, he would not want you in Crawling Water when Tug Bailey confesses. It would be too awful." She shuddered at the thought. "Tell me where he is and get out of town at once."

"Bailey hasn't confessed yet," Helen cut in gamely.

"No; but he will," Dorothy declared positively. "They'll put a rope around his neck, and he'll confess. Such men always do. Try to remember the position you are in. You'd be sorry if your father were lynched. Go with him, while you can. I know these people better than you do."

The Senator swallowed hard and mopped his damp forehead with his handkerchief. There was nothing to do but follow the girl's advice, and that quickly, he knew. After all, in the face of death, financial ruin seemed a mere bagatelle.

[Pg 232]

"So far as I have been informed, Wade is confined at Coyote Springs, somewhere in the mountains," he said bluntly. "That's all I know of the matter. I hope you will find him all right there. He ought to be very proud of you."

Dorothy caught her hands to her breast in a little gesture of exultation, and the expression on her face was a wonderful thing to see.

"You'll go?"

"In the morning," Senator Rexhill answered.

Eager as Dorothy was to reach the big pine with her message, she could not leave without giving Helen such a glance of triumph as made her wince.

Then, hurrying to her pony, she rode rapidly out of town into the black night which cloaked the trail leading to the pine. She knew that her mother would miss her and be anxious, but the minutes were too precious now to be wasted even on her mother. She did not know what peril Gordon might be in, and her first duty was to him. She was almost wild with anxiety lest the courier should not be at his post, but he was there when she dashed up to the pine.

"Take me to Mr. Trowbridge. Quick!" she panted.

"He's somewhere between Bald Knob and Hatchet Hill," the man explained, knocking the ashes from his pipe. "It's some dark, too, miss, for ridin' in this country. Can't you wait until morning?"

"I can't wait one second. I have found out where Mr. Wade is, and I mean to be with you all when you find him."

[Pg 233]

"You have, eh?" The man, who was one of Trowbridge's punchers, swung into his saddle. "That bein' so, we'd get there if this here night was liquid coal."

CHAPTER XVIII

[Pg 234]

A RESCUE AND A VIGILANCE COMMITTEE

At the end of an hour, or so, the lion withdrew and Wade thought he had seen the last of it. He began to pace up and down the fissure once more, for now that his thin shirt was damp with perspiration, set flowing by the nervous strain he had been under, he began to get chilly again. He had just begun to warm up, when he heard the animal returning. He crouched back against the cavern wall, but the lion had evidently lost the zest for such impossible prey. It walked about and sniffed at the edges of the fissure for some minutes; then it sneaked off into the timber with a cat-like whimper.

The exhausted ranchman kept his feet as long as he could, but when the first rays of the morning sun cast purple shadows into the depths of the hole, he could no longer keep awake. With his hands, he drifted the loose sand about him, as travelers do when exposed to a snow-blizzard, and

slept until Goat Neale aroused him, in broad daylight. The Texan performed this service by deftly dropping a small stone upon the sleeping man's face.

"I just stepped over to inquire what you-all'd like for breakfast this mornin'," he said with a grin. "Not that it matters much, 'cause the dumb-waiter down to where you be ain't waitin' to-day, but it's manners, kinder, to ask." [Pg 235]

Wade looked up at him grimly, but said nothing. Just awake as he was, his healthy stomach clamored for food, but since none would be given him, he knew that he might as well try to be patient.

"Mebbe you'd like to step over to our hotel an' take your meals, eh?" The Texan went on, after a short pause. "I've got a pot of coffee bilin' an' a mess o' bacon fryin'. No?" He grinned sardonically. "How'd you like me to give you some o' this here cabareet stuff, while you're waitin'? I ain't no great shucks as a entertainer, but I'll do what I can. Mebbe, you'd like to know how I happened to catch you that clump on the head yesterday. Huh?"

"I was up in the low branches of a thick pine, where you was moseyin' along. You was that busy watchin' the ground, you never thought to raise them eyes o' yourn. I just reached down and lammed you good with a piece of stick, an' here you be, safe an' sound as a beetle in a log. Here you'll stay, too, likely, on-less you get some sense, and I don't know when that there dumbwaiter'll get to runnin'. It's a shame, too, if you ask me, 'cause a man needs his three or four squares a day in this here climate."

"How much do you want to give me a hand out of here, Neale?" the cattleman demanded abruptly, tired of listening to the fellow's monotonous drawl; and after all the chance was worth taking.

The eyes of the Texan glittered.

"Got the money on you?"

"You'd get the money all right."

[Pg 236]

"Sure, son, I know that—if you had it! I'd just hold my gun on you, an' you'd toss the roll up here, without puttin' me to the trouble o' givin' you no hand." He chuckled in appreciation of his own humor. "But I know you ain't got it on you—we frisked you down yonder in the timber—an' I don't deal in no promises. This here is a cash game. If I thought tha...."

He whirled about suddenly, looking behind him and seemed to listen for an instant; then his hand dropped to the gun at his hip. He never drew the weapon, however, for with a horrible facial grimace, as his body contorted under the impact of a bullet, he threw his arms into the air and reeled over the edge of the hole. A second afterward the report of a rifle came to Wade's ears.

"Hello!" the rancher shouted, springing from under the Texan's falling body. The instant it struck the sand, Wade snatched Neale's revolver from its holster and waited for him to try to rise; but he did not move. A bloody froth stained his lips, while a heavier stain on his shirt, just under the heart, told where the bullet had struck. The man was dead.

"Hello! Hello!" Wade shouted repeatedly, and discharged the revolver into the sand. He realized that, although a friend must have fired the rifle, there was nothing to show where he was. "Hello!"

"Hello!" The hail was answered by the newcomer, who, thus guided, approached the spot until his voice was near at hand. "Hello!"

"Hello! Come on!" The prisoner threw his hat up out of the hole. "Here I am!"

[Pg 237]

The next moment Bill Santry, with tears streaming down his weather-beaten cheeks, was bending over the edge of the fissure with down-stretched hands. Beneath his self-control the old man was soft-hearted as a woman, and in his delight he now made no attempt to restrain himself.

"Thank Gawd for this minute!" he exclaimed. "Give me your hands, boy. I can just reach 'em if I stretch a little an' you jump." Wade did so and was drawn up out of the hole. "Thank Gawd! Thank Gawd!" the old fellow kept exclaiming, patting his employer on the back. "Didn't hurt you much, did they?"

Before Wade could answer, a patter of hoofs caused him to turn, as Dorothy slipped from Gypsy's bare back and ran toward him. She stumbled when she had almost reached him, and he caught her in his arms.

"Are you all right? Oh, your head! It's hurt—see, the blood?" She clung to him and searched his face with her eyes, while he tried to soothe her.

"It's nothing, just a bad bruise, but how—?" He checked the question upon his lips. "We mustn't stay here. Moran may have...."

"There ain't nobody here. I wish to Gawd he was here. I'd...." Santry's face was twisted with rage. "'Course," he added, "I knew it was him, so'd Lem Trowbridge. But we come right smack through their camp, and there was nobody there. This here skunk that I plugged, he must be the only one. I got him, I reckon."

[Pg 238]

"Yes," Wade answered simply, as he watched three men from the Trowbridge ranch ride up to them. "Where's Lem?"

Dorothy explained that she had set out to find him in company with the man she had met at the big pine; but on the way they had met Santry and the three cowboys. One of the men had then ridden on to Bald Knob after Trowbridge, while the rest had come straight to Coyote Springs. She tried to speak quietly, but she could not keep the song of happiness out of her voice, or the love out of her eyes.

"Then you did this, too?" Wade wrung her hands and looked at her proudly. "But how—I don't understand?"

"I'll tell you, when we're in the saddle," she said shyly. "There's so much to tell."

"Santry!" The ranch owner threw his arm fondly across the shoulders of his foreman. "You, too, and Lem. I've got all my friends to thank. Say, dig a grave for this fellow, Neale. There was a lion around here last night, and I'd hate to have him get Neale, bad as he was. Then—" His voice became crisp with determination. "Hunt up Trowbridge and ask him to pass the word for everybody to meet at the ranch, as soon as possible. There's going to be open war here in the valley from now on." He turned again to Dorothy. "Dorothy, I'm going to take you right on home with me."

"Oh, but..." The gleam in his eyes made her pause. She was too glad to have found him safe, besides, to wish to cross him in whatever might be his purpose. [Pg 239]

"No buts about it. I'll send for your mother, too, of course. Town won't be any place for either of you until this business is settled. George!" he called to one of the three cowmen, who rode over to him. "I suppose it'll be all right for you to take orders from me?"

"I reckon so."

"I want you to ride into Crawling Water. Get a buckboard there and bring Mrs. Purnell out to my place. Tell her that her daughter is there, and she'll come. Come now, little girl." He caught Dorothy in his arms and lifted her on to Gypsy's back. "All right, boys, and much obliged." He waved the little cavalcade on its way, and swung into the saddle on the extra horse, which Santry had provided.

On the way down through the timber, Dorothy modestly told him of the part she had played, with the help of Lem Trowbridge. He listened with amazement to the story of her generalship, and was relieved to hear that the Rexhills were probably already out of Crawling Water, for that left him a free hand to act against Moran. This time the agent must suffer the penalty of his misdeeds, but greater even than his pleasure at that thought, was Wade's gratitude to Dorothy for all she had done for him. He was filled with a wonderful tenderness for her, which made him see in the play of her facial expression; the shy lowering of her lashes; the color which ebbed and flowed in her cheeks; the free use which she made of her red lips, a greater fascination than she had ever before exerted over him. There, in the fissure, he had expected never to be at her side again, and now that he was so, and knew what she had come to mean to him, the old friendship between them seemed no longer possible; certainly not from his side. He felt, in its place, all the confusion of a lover, anxious to speak and yet struck dumb with clumsiness and the fear, never absent no matter what the degree of encouragement, that his suit might not find favor with the lady when put into words. [Pg 240]

"You're a wonderful girl," he burst out, at last, with a heartiness that, in bringing a flush to her cheeks, made the old phrase seem new to her ears.

"I'm not at all," she denied shyly. "I just had to do it, that was all. People always do what they have to do."

"They do not. Lots of them can't, but you—you're always capable; that's what makes you so wonderful, Dorothy!" He pulled his horse closer to hers, meaning to put his arm around her, but he dared not attempt it, when her dress brushed his sleeve.

"Yes?" She was trembling now far more than when she had faced the Rexhills. "What is it?"

His arm dropped to his side, and he suddenly became acutely conscious of his appearance, what with his blood-matted hair; his blood-stained and soiled face; his generally woe-begone and desperate state. At least, before he risked his future on such a question, he ought to make himself as presentable as he could. [Pg 241]

"Nothing."

"But—" She looked at him curiously. "You were going to say something, weren't you?"

"Yes; but I'm not going to do it until I can get to a hair-brush, and a wash-basin, and a clean shirt," he answered lugubriously. "What I've got on my mind is a church-going sentiment and I want to be in church-going clothes." The expression of his countenance contributed more than his words to the humor he strove for, and she laughed at him, merrily with her mouth, very tenderly with her eyes.

"There's the house." She pointed ahead. "Even though I'm riding bareback, I can beat you to it. Come on!"

Once Wade was within reach of food, his hunger became insistent, and he could not wait for the cook to prepare a meal of fried chicken. He foraged in the larder beforehand, and then did full justice to the meal put before him. By the time this was over, Mrs. Purnell arrived, and he had no chance to get into his "church-going clothes," as he called them. He had to tell the old lady all that had befallen him.

"I never would have thought it of that Miss Rexhill," Mrs. Purnell declared.

"It wasn't Miss Rexhill, it was her father and Race Moran," Dorothy interposed.

"Or the Senator either, speaking merely from the looks of him," her mother retorted. "And think of the position he holds, a Senator of the United States!"

[Pg 242]

"That's no hall-mark of virtue these days," Wade laughed.

"Well, it should be. If we're to have people like him running the Nation, there's no telling where we'll end."

"It just goes to show how an honest man, for I think Rexhill was an honest man when I first knew him, can go wrong by associating with the wrong people," said Wade. He could not forget his earlier friendship for the Rexhills, and to him the word friendship meant much. "He not only got in with a bad crowd, but he got going at a pace that wrung money out of him every time he moved. Then, in the last election, he was hit hard, and I suppose he felt that he had to recoup, even if he had to sacrifice his friends to do it. We mustn't judge a man like that too hard. We live differently out here, and maybe we don't understand those temptations. I'm mighty glad they've gone away. I can get right down to work now, without any qualms of conscience."

"But think of you, Dorothy, out all night in those mountains!" Mrs. Purnell exclaimed.

"Mother—" Dorothy smiled tenderly. "You always think backward to yesterday, instead of forward to to-morrow."

By then, the first of the neighboring ranchers were drifting in, in response to Wade's summons. When all were present, and Trowbridge had wrung Wade's hand in a hearty pressure of congratulation, they were asked into the living-room, where Santry stood in a corner, munching slowly on a mouthful of tobacco and smiling grimly to himself.

[Pg 243]

"Gentlemen," began Wade, facing the little group of stern-faced men, "you all know why we are here. To a greater or lesser extent, we've all suffered from Race Moran's depredations, although until lately none of us knew his motive. Now, however, we know that there is gold here in the valley—on our land—which Moran is trying to get possession of. He has proved that he is willing to resort to any villainy to get what he wants, and while he and his men are at large our lives and most of our ranches are in danger.

"We have tried the law, but it has not helped us. Such little law as we have here is entirely in the hands of the enemy. We must now assume the direction of our own affairs. Many of you have already served in a vigilance committee, and you all know the purpose of such an organization. My idea is to form one now to take possession of Crawling Water and run Moran and his hired bullies out of the county. Between us, we can muster about a hundred men; more than enough to turn the trick, and the quicker we get to work the sooner we'll be able to go about our business affairs without fear of being shot in the back. My plan is this: Let us assemble our force quietly, ride into Crawling Water, capture Moran and his followers, and escort them out of the county. There must be no lynching or unnecessary bloodshed; but if they resist, as some of them will, we must use such force as is needed to overcome them."

He stopped speaking, and for some minutes silence prevailed. Then Bill Santry shifted the quid in his cheek, spat unerringly through the open window, and began to talk. His loose-jointed figure had suddenly become tense and forceful; his lean face was determined and very grim.

[Pg 244]

"Being as I've suffered some from this skunk, and have lived here some while, so to say, mebber I can horn in?" he began.

"Go ahead!" said Wade heartily.

"Gordon here has stated the gist o' this business a whole lot better'n I could, but I'd like to make a few additional remarks. We've all been neighbors for some years, and in the natural course of things we've been pretty good friends. Until this feller, Moran, got to monkeyin' around here, there wasn't no trouble to talk about, and we was all able to carry on our work calm and peaceful like. But since this skunk camped among us, we ain't hardly knowed what a decent sleep is like; he's grabbed our range, butchered our stock, shot up our men, lied, and carried on high, in general. We've given the law a chance to do the square thing by us. All we asked was a fair shake, and we turned the other cheek, as the Bible says, hopin' that we could win through without too much fightin', but we've been handed the muddy end of the stick every time. It's come to a showdown, gents. We either got to let Moran do as he damn pleases 'round here, or show him that he's tackled a buzz-saw. Most of us was weaned some earlier than the day before yisterday. We gradooated from the tenderfoot class some time back, and it's up to us to prove it."

He paused and looked around him earnestly for a moment; then, as his audience remained silent, he went on:

[Pg 245]

"I'm older'n you men, an' I've lived a heap in my time. For nearly forty years I've been knockin'

'round this Western country without no nurse or guardeen to look after me. I've mixed with all kinds, and I've been in some scrapes; there's notches on my gun handles to prove that I ain't been no quitter. I've rode with the vigilantes more'n once, and the vigilantes has rode after me—more'n once; in my young days I wa'n't exactly what you'd call a nickel-plated saint. But I never killed a man, 'cept in a fair fight, an' I don't believe in violence unless it's necessary. It's necessary right now, fellers! Moran's gone too far! Things have drawed to a point where we've got to fight or quit. In my experience, I ain't never seen but one judge that couldn't be bought; money an' influence don't count a whoop with him. It's Judge Colt, gents! You all know him; an' with him on our side we can round up Moran an' his crew of gun-fighters, an' ship 'em out of the country for keeps. Now's the time! The quicker we get busy, the quicker the air in these hills will be fit for a white man to breathe."

"It's a go with me," Lem Trowbridge declared grimly. "That's what I'm here for. How about the rest of you?"

When the other stock men assented, Wade smiled, for he knew their type. Honest, hard-working, peace-loving men though they were, when aroused they possessed the courage and tenacity of bull-dogs. They were aroused now, and they would carry on to the end, with a step as firm and relentless as the march of Time. Woe to whoever attempted to thwart them in their purpose!

[Pg 246]

Wade's neighbor to the north, Dave Kelly, spoke up in his slow, nasal drawl. "You say there's to be no lynchin'," he remarked. "How about Tug Bailey, when he gets here from Sheridan? According to what Lem says, Bailey shot Jensen."

"Sure, he did," Trowbridge put in. "We'll just slip a noose over his head and make him confess. That'll publicly clear Gordon and Bill. Then we'll give him a good coat of tar and feathers and run him out of town."

"That's right," said Santry. "Jensen was only a Swede and a sheepherder. This here committee's to protect men."

Kelly chuckled. "Have it your own way," he said. "I'm not particular. As it is, there'll be plenty doing."

For an hour or more the cattlemen went over the plan of their campaign, which worked out into simplicity itself. Early the next evening they would marshal their force outside of Crawling Water, each man armed and mounted. After dark they would ride up the main street, where they would halt at each crossing, while a squad detailed for the purpose searched each saloon and other gathering place for members of Moran's gang. After the prisoners were rounded up they would be assembled in a compact body and marched to the railroad where they would be set free, under threat of instant death if they ever returned to Crawling Water.

[Pg 247]

Although counting on superior numbers and the morale of his men, Wade, who had been chosen to command the little army, knew that there would be considerable hard fighting. Moran's people would probably be scattered and otherwise unprepared for the attack, but many of them would resist to the death. If Moran should attempt an organized resistance, the cattlemen meant to storm the town. Once the first shot was fired, the fight would be to a finish, for any other outcome than victory would spell ruin for the cattle interests in that section.

The prospect was more than serious. Moran had established himself in Crawling Water and practically ruled it, surrounded as he was by some sixty adherents, the off-scouring of a dozen lawless communities. The decent citizens held aloof from him, but on the other hand the lower element viewed his reign with favor. The gamblers, particularly Monte Joe, who proclaimed himself Moran's lieutenant, had welcomed him, as had the saloonkeepers, to all of whom the presence of his men meant gainful trade. The better class, in the town itself, was in the minority and unable to restrain the unbridled license which flourished everywhere.

No matter how stiff Moran's resistance proved, however, Wade felt very sure of the final result. He knew the men in his party and he knew that they meant business. He was relieved to believe that Dorothy and her mother would be safe at the ranch until after the trouble was over, and that Helen and Senator Rexhill had left Crawling Water. The two factions were now arrayed against each other almost like opposing armies, and the cattleman shuddered to think what his state of mind would have been had Dorothy and Mrs. Purnell remained in Crawling Water.

[Pg 248]

"You'll be entirely safe here," he told them, when he was ready to leave for Crawling Water on the following evening. "I shall leave Barker to look after your wants, but you won't really need him. There isn't a sheepherder, or any of the Moran gang, between here and Crawling Water. The fighting will all be in town, thank goodness."

At the word "fighting" Dorothy caught her breath sharply, too proud to urge him against his duty and yet afraid for him. He had not been able to muster courage enough to speak to her of what was in his heart, foolish though that was in him, and he sat there in the saddle for a moment, looking tenderly down on her as she stood smoothing out his horse's forelock.

"Do be careful of yourself, Gordon," Mrs. Purnell called to him from the porch, but he did not hear her.

"I haven't had a chance yet to get into my church-going clothes, have I?" he said whimsically to Dorothy, who flushed prettily and looked away.

"I don't see what clothes have to do with talking to me," she said half coyly and half mischievously.

"Neither do I," he agreed. She had stepped aside and his horse's head was free. "I guess they haven't a thing to do with it, but I haven't been seeing things exactly straight lately. I reckon I've been half locoed."

[Pg 249]

Touching his horse with the spurs, he loped away to join Santry, who was waiting for him on ahead.

CHAPTER XIX

[Pg 250]

BAFFLED, BUT STILL DANGEROUS

When Trowbridge left Dorothy Purnell, promising to find his friend for her sake, he had assumed a confidence that he was far from feeling. No man knew the country thereabout any better than he did, and he realized that there was, at best, only a meager chance of trailing the miscreant who had succeeded in trapping his victim somewhere in the mountains. A weaker man would have paused in dismay at the hopelessness of the task he had undertaken, but Lem Trowbridge was neither weak nor capable of feeling dismay, or of acknowledging hopelessness. Time enough for all that after he should have failed. In the meantime it was up to him to follow Moran. He had learned from Santry of the place where Wade was stricken down, but how far from there, or in what direction he had been taken, was a matter of conjecture only, and the only way to learn was to trail the party that had undoubtedly carried the helpless man away perhaps to his death, but possibly, and more probably, to hold him captive.

Desperate as he knew Moran to be, he did not believe that the immediate murder of Gordon Wade was planned. That would be poor strategy and Moran was too shrewd to strike in that fashion.

It seemed clear enough that parley of some sort was intended but knowing both Wade and Moran as he did, Trowbridge realized that in order to be of any assistance, he must be on the spot without delay. He had planned rapidly and he now acted rapidly.

[Pg 251]

One of his men was stationed at the big pine, as he had told Dorothy, but all the others in his employ rode with him as swiftly as the best horses on his ranch could carry them, to the spot Santry had told him of. There they found unmistakable traces of half a dozen or more horses, besides the footprints of Wade's mount, and a brief examination was enough to show which way the party had gone. Undoubtedly they had taken Wade with them, so the pursuing party followed.

It was one thing to follow, however, and another thing to overtake. Moran was better versed in the intricacies of big cities than in those of the wilderness, but he was shrewd enough to realize that Wade's friends would start an instant search, as soon as they should miss the ranchman, and it was no part of his plans to be taken by surprise.

Therefore, as soon as he had had his victim thrown into the prison from which escape seemed impossible, Moran selected a camp site nearby, from which he had a view of the surrounding country for miles around in every direction, and scanning the horizon carefully after his vain attempt to intimidate Wade, he saw Trowbridge's party approaching, while they were still half a dozen miles away.

His first thought was to stay where he was and give battle. In this he would have had a good chance of victory, for, by opening fire on Trowbridge and his followers as they came up, he could undoubtedly have picked off three or four of them before they reached him, and so secured odds in his own favor, if it should come to an immediate encounter.

[Pg 252]

Second thought, however, showed him the folly of such a course. There was too much remaining for him to do, and the temporary advantage he might gain would not compensate him for the havoc it would make in his ultimate designs. He therefore called Goat Neale aside and said: "There's a party of Wade's friends coming up from the East, looking for him, and I've got to lead them away. You stay here, but keep in hiding and take care that nobody learns where Wade is. He'll live for a few days without grub and I'll come back and tend to his case after I've got this party going round in circles.

"You stay, and the rest of us will all ride off to the north, and they'll think we have Wade with us, so they'll follow us, but we'll lose them somewhere on the way. Sabe?"

Neale demurred at first to the plan, but consented willingly enough when Moran promised him extra pay; so he stayed, and we already know the result. Moran, however, followed out his plans successfully enough, and before night he reached Crawling Water in safety, while Trowbridge, getting word through one of his scouts of Wade's rescue, abandoned the pursuit. He had been prepared to shoot Moran down at sight, but he was ready enough to leave that work to the man who had a better claim to the privilege than he had.

[Pg 253]

Accordingly Moran had ridden into town, exhausted by the exertions of his trip, and had slept for twelve hours before thinking of anything else. When he learned on awakening of all that had

happened during his absence, he was furious with rage. Tug Bailey had been arrested and was on his way to Crawling Water in custody. Senator Rexhill and Helen had taken an Eastward-bound train without leaving any word for him, and to crown it all, he presently learned that Neale had been shot and Wade had been found, and that the whole countryside was aflame with indignation.

It was characteristic of the man that even in this emergency he had no thought of following his cowardly accomplice in flight. It might be hopeless to stay and fight, but he was a fighting man, and he really exulted in the thought of the inevitable struggle that was coming.

Sitting alone in his office studying the situation, he felt the need of liquor even more strongly than usual, though the habit had grown on him of late, and accordingly he drank again and again, increasing his rage thereby, but getting little help towards a solution of his difficulties.

He was enraged most of all at Wade's escape from Coyote Springs and was still puzzled to think how this had happened, for Senator Rexhill in leaving had kept his own counsel on that point, and Moran did not dream of his having betrayed the secret.

Not only had the ranchman been able to turn another trick in the game by escaping, but he had also evaded Moran's intended vengeance, for the latter had had no thought of letting his prisoner go alive. He had meant first to secure Wade's signature, and then to make away with him so cleverly as to escape conviction for the act. [Pg 254]

He realized now, when it was too late, that he had acted too deliberately in that matter, and he was sorry for it. He considered the departure of the Rexhills a cowardly defection. He was furious to think that Helen had refused to listen to him while she stayed, or to say good-bye to him before leaving. The sting of these various reflections led him to take further pull at a silver flask which he kept in his pocket, and which bore the inscription, "To Race Moran from his friends of the Murray Hill Club."

"So," he muttered, chewing his mustache, "that's what I get for sticking to Rexhill." Leaning back in his swivel chair, he put his feet up on the desk and hooked his fingers in the arm-holes of his vest. "Well, I ain't ready to run yet, not by a jugful."

In his decision to remain, however, he was actuated by a desire to close with Wade, and not by any enthusiasm for the cause of the hired rascals who were so loudly singing his praise. They were not cowards, nor was he, but he had had too much experience with such people to be deluded into believing that, when the showdown came, they would think of anything but their own precious skins. He had heard rumors of the activity of the cattlemen but he discounted such rumors because of many false alarms in the past. He would not be frightened off; he determined to remain until there was an actual clash of arms, in the hope that events would so work out as to allow him a chance to get back, and severely, at Wade. [Pg 255]

He got to his feet and rolled about the room, like a boozy sailor, puffing out volumes of smoke and muttering beneath his breath. When he had worked off some of his agitation, the big fellow seated himself again, shrugged his massive shoulders, and lapsed into an alcoholic reverie. He was applying his inflamed brain to the problem of vengeance, when hurried footsteps on the stairs aroused him. Going to the door, he flung it open and peered out into the dimly lighted hallway.

"Hello, Jed!" he exclaimed, upon finding that the newcomer was one of his "heelers." "What d'you want? Hic!" He straightened up with a ludicrous assumption of gravity.

"The night riders! They've...." The man was breathless and visibly panic-stricken.

"Riders? Hic! What riders?" Moran growled. "Out with it, you jelly-fish!"

"The ranchers—the cattlemen—they've entered the town: they're on the warpath. Already a lot of our fellows have been shot up."

"The hell they have! How long ago? Where?"

"Other end of town. Must be two hundred or more. I hustled down here to put you wise to the play."

"Thanks!" said Moran laconically. "You're headed in the right direction, keep going!"

But the man lingered, while Moran, as lightly as a cat, despite his great bulk and the liquor he carried, sprang to the nearest window. Far up the street, he could distinguish a huddled mass, pierced by flashes of fire, which he took to be horsemen; as he watched, he heard scattered shots and a faint sound of yelling. The one hasty glance told him all that he needed to know; he had not thought this move would come so soon, but luck seemed to be against him all around. Something of a fatalist, in the final analysis, he no longer wasted time in anger or regrets. He was not particularly alarmed, and would not have been so could he have known the truth, that the yelling he had heard marked the passing of Tug Bailey, who had confessed but had made his confession too late to please the crowd, which had him in its power. Nevertheless, Moran realized that there was no time now to form his men into anything like organized resistance. The enemy had caught him napping, and the jig was up. He had seen the vigilantes work before, and he knew that if he intended to save his own skin he must act quickly. When he turned from the window, short though the interval had been, he had formed a plan of escape. [Pg 256]

"They've brought every man they could rake up," Jed added. "I reckon they've combed every ranch in the county to start this thing."

Moran looked up quickly, struck by the significance of the remark. If it were true, and it probably was, then Wade's ranch also would be deserted. He half opened his mouth, as though to confide in his companion, when he evidently concluded to keep his own counsel.

[Pg 257]

"All right," he said simply. "I guess there's still plenty of time. I've got a good horse at the lower end of the street. Take care of yourself. So long!"

The man clattered down the stairs, and Moran turned to his desk, from which he took some papers and a roll of money, which he stuffed into his pockets. In the hallway he paused for a moment to examine a wicked looking revolver, which he took from his hip pocket; for, contrary to the custom of the country, he did not wear his gun openly in a holster. Convinced that the weapon was in good working order, he walked calmly down to the street, sobered completely by this sudden call on his reserve powers.

His horse, a large, rawboned gray, was where he had left it, and shaking his fist in the direction of the vigilantes, he mounted and rode off. He meant to make a wide detour and then work back again to the Double Arrow range. If the ranch were really deserted, he meant to fire the buildings, before attempting his escape. Such a revenge would be a trifle compared to that which he had planned, but it would be better than nothing, while one more offense would not lengthen his term in jail any, if he were caught afterward. He felt in his pocket for the whiskey flask, and swore when he found it missing. He wanted the liquor, but he wanted the flask more, for its associations; he drew rein and thought of returning to search for it, but realizing the folly of this, he pressed on again.

The round-about way he took was necessarily a long one and the ride entirely sobered him, except for a crawling sensation in his brain, as though ants were swarming there, which always harassed him after a debauch. At such times he was more dangerous than when under the first influence of whiskey. It was close upon noon, and the silvery sagebrush was shimmering beneath the direct rays of the sun, when he rode his lathered horse out of a cottonwood grove to gaze, from the edge of a deep draw, at Wade's ranch buildings. That very morning a gaunt, gray timber-wolf had peered forth at almost the same point; and despite Moran's bulk, there was a hint of a weird likeness between man and beast in the furtive suspicious survey they made of the premises. The wolf had finally turned back toward the mountains, but Moran advanced. Although he was reasonably certain that the place was deserted, a degree of caution, acquired overnight, led him first to assure himself of the fact. He tied his horse to a fence post and stealthily approached the house to enter by the back door.

[Pg 258]

Dorothy was alone in the building, for her mother had gone with the overly confident Barker to pick blackberries, and the Chinese cook was temporarily absent. The girl was making a bed, when the door swung open, and she turned with a bright greeting, thinking that her mother had returned. When she saw Moran leering at her, the color fled from her cheeks, in a panic of fright which left her unable to speak or move. She was looking very pretty and dainty in a cool, fresh gown, which fitted her neatly, and her sleeves were rolled up over her shapely forearms, for the task of housekeeping which she had assumed. In her innocent way, she would have stirred the sentiment in any man, and to the inflamed brute before her she seemed all the more delectable because helpless. Here was a revenge beyond Moran's wildest dreams. To her he appeared the incarnation of evil, disheveled, mud-splashed and sweaty, as his puffed and blood-shot eyes feasted on her attractiveness.

[Pg 259]

"Good morning!" He came into the room and closed the door. "I didn't expect to find you, but since you're here, I'll stop long enough to return your visit of the other night. That's courteous, ain't it?"

Dorothy gulped down the lump in her throat, but made no reply. Realizing the importance of a show of bravery, she was fighting to conquer her panic.

"You're sure a good-looking kid," he went on, trying to approach her; but she put the width of the bed between him and herself. "Each time I see you, you're better looking than you were the last time. Say, that last time, we were talking some about a kiss, weren't we, when we were interrupted?"

"Mr. Wade may come in at any moment," Dorothy lied desperately, having found her tongue at last. "You'd better not let him find you here."

"I shouldn't mind," Moran said nonchalantly. "Fact is, on my way out of the country, I thought I'd pay a farewell call on my good friend, Wade. I'm real sorry he ain't here—and then again I'm not. I'll—I'll leave my visiting card for him, anyhow." He chuckled, a nasty, throaty, mirthless chuckle that sent chills up and down the girl's spine. "Say, what's the matter with giving me that kiss now? There's nobody around to interrupt us this time."

[Pg 260]

Dorothy shuddered, for already she had divined what was in his mind. The avid gleam in his eyes had warned her that he would not restrain himself for long, and summoning all her strength and courage, she prepared to meet the fearful crisis she must face.

"Will you please go?"

"No!" Moran chuckled again, and stepped toward her. "Will you come to me now, or shall I go

after you?"

"You brute! You coward!" she cried, when she found herself, after a desperate struggle, held firmly in his grasp.

She screamed, then, at the top of her lung power until his hand fell firmly across her mouth, and she could only struggle with the mad strength of desperation. Her muscles could offer him no effective resistance, although for a moment the sudden fury of her attack drove him back, big though he was; but it was only for a moment. It gave her a chance to scream once more; then, closing in upon her, he seized her again in his ape-like embrace. She fought like a cornered wild-cat, but slowly and surely he was bending her to his will. Her nails were leaving raw marks upon him, until the blood ran down his face, and presently catching between her teeth one of the fingers of the hand which gagged her, she bit it so fiercely that he cried out in pain.

"Curse you, you little she-devil," he grunted savagely. "I'll make you pay twice for that!"

[Pg 261]

"Gordon! Oh, come to me! Quick! Quick!"

Quivering all over, she sank on her knees before the brute who confronted her, a figure of distress that must have appealed to the heart of any man above the level of a beast. But in the heat of passion and rage, Moran had lost kinship with even the beasts themselves. Lust burned in his eyes and twisted his features horribly as he seized her again, exhausted by the brave struggle she had made, and all but helpless in his grasp.

"Gordon! Mother! Barker! Save me! Oh, my God!"

CHAPTER XX

[Pg 262]

THE STORM BURSTS

The vigilantes had entered Crawling Water at about ten o'clock, when the saloons and gambling joints were in full swing. Ribald songs and oaths from the players, drinkers, and hangers-on floated into the street, with now and then the bark of a six-shooter telling of drunken sport or bravado. Few people were abroad; good citizens had retired to their homes, and the other half was amusing itself.

So it was, at first, that few noticed the troop of horsemen which swung in at one end of the town, to ride slowly and silently down the main street. Each of the hundred men in the troop carried a rifle balanced across his saddle pommel; each was dressed in the garb of the range-rider; and the face of each, glimpsed by the light from some window or doorway, was grimly stern. The sight was one calculated to make Fear clutch like an ice-cold hand at the hearts of those with guilty consciences; a spectacle which induced such respectable men as saw it to arm themselves and fall in behind the advancing line. These knew without being told what this noiseless band of stern-eyed riders portended, and ever since the coming of Moran into Crawling Water Valley, they had been waiting for just this climax.

Before the first of the dives, the troop halted as Wade raised his right arm high in the air. Twenty of the men dismounted to enter the glittering doorway, while the remainder of the vigilantes waited on their horses. A few seconds after the twenty had disappeared, the music of the piano within abruptly ceased. The shrill scream of a frightened woman preceded a couple of pistol shots and the sounds of a scuffle; then, profound silence. Presently the twenty reappeared guarding a handful of prisoners, who were disarmed and hustled across the street to an empty barn, where they were placed under a guard of citizen volunteers.

[Pg 263]

So they proceeded, stopping now and then to gather in more prisoners, who were in turn escorted to the temporary jail, while the column continued its relentless march. The system in their attack seemed to paralyze the activities of the Moran faction and its sycophants; there was something almost awe-inspiring in the simple majesty of the thing. By now the whole town was aware of what was taking place; men were scurrying hither and thither, like rats on a sinking ship. Occasionally one, when cornered and in desperation, put up a fight; but for the most part, the "bad men" were being captured without bloodshed. Few bad men are so "bad" that they would not rather live, even in captivity, than come to their full reward in the kingdom of Satan. Frightened and disorganized, the enemy seemed incapable of any concentrated resistance. As Santry succinctly put it: "They've sure lost their goat."

Not until the troop reached Monte Joe's place, which was the most imposing of them all, was real opposition encountered. Here a number of the choicer spirits from the Moran crowd had assembled and barricaded the building, spurred on by the knowledge that a rope with a running noose on one end of it would probably be their reward if captured alive. Monte Joe, a vicious, brutal ruffian, was himself in command and spoke through the slats of a blind, when the vigilantes stopped before the darkened building.

[Pg 264]

"What d'you want?" he hoarsely demanded.

"You, and those with you," Wade curtly answered.

The gambler peered down into the street, his little blood-shot eyes blinking like a pig's. "What for?" he growled.

"We'll show you soon enough," came in a rising answer from the crowd. "Open up!"

Monte Joe withdrew from the window, feeling that he was doomed to death, but resolved to sell his life dearly. "Go to hell!" he shouted.

Wade gave a few tersely worded orders. Half a dozen of his men ran to a nearby blacksmith shop for sledge hammers, with which to beat in the door of the gambling house, while the rest poured a hail of bullets into the windows of the structure. Under the onslaught of the heavy hammers, swung by powerful arms, the door soon crashed inward, and the besiegers poured through the opening. The fight which ensued was short and fierce. Outnumbered though the defenders were, they put up a desperate battle, but they were quickly beaten down and disarmed.

Shoved, dragged, carried, some of them cruelly wounded and a few dead but all who lived swearing horribly, the prisoners were hustled to the street. Last of all came Monte Joe, securely held by two brawny cow-punchers. At sight of his mottled, blood-besmeared visage, the crowd went wild. [Pg 265]

"Hang him! Lynch the dirty brute! Get a rope!" The cry was taken up by fifty voices.

Hastily running the gambler beneath a convenient tree, they proceeded to adjust a noose about his neck. In another instant Monte Joe's soul would have departed to the Great Beyond but for a series of interruptions. Wade created the first of these by forcing his big, black horse through the throng.

"Listen, men!" he roared. "You must stop this! This man—all of them—must have a fair trial."

"Trial be damned!" shouted a bearded rancher. "We've had enough law in this valley. Now we're after justice."

Cheering him the crowd roared approbation of the sentiment, for even the law-abiding seemed suddenly to have gone mad with blood-lust. Wade, his face flushed with anger, was about to reply to them when Santry forced his way to the front. Ever since Wade had released the old man from jail, he had been impressed with the thought that, no matter what his own views, gratitude demanded that he should instantly back up his employer.

"Justice!" snapped the old man, pushing his way into the circle that had formed around the prisoner, a pistol in each hand. "Who's talkin' o' justice? Ain't me an' Wade been handed more dirt by this bunch o' crooks than all the rest o' you combined? Joe's a pizenous varmint, but he's goin' to get something he never gave—a square deal. You hear me? Any man that thinks different can settle the p'int with me!" [Pg 266]

He glared at the mob, his sparse, grizzled mustache seeming actually to bristle. By the dim light of a lantern held near him his aspect was terrifying. A gash on his forehead had streaked one side of his face with blood, while his eyes, beneath their shaggy thatch of brows, appeared to blaze like live coals. Involuntarily, those nearest him shrank back a pace but only for a moment for such a mob was not to be daunted by threats. A low murmur of disapproval was rapidly swelling into a growl of anger, when Sheriff Thomas appeared.

"Gentlemen!" he shouted, springing upon a convenient box. "The law must be respected, and as its representative in this community...."

"Beat it, you old turkey buzzard!" cried an irate puncher, wildly brandishing a brace of Colts before the officer. "To hell with the law and you, too. You ain't rep'sentative of nothin' in this community!"

"Men!" Wade began again.

"String the Sheriff up, too," somebody yelled.

"By right of this star...." Thomas tapped the badge on his vest. "I am...."

"Pull on the rope!" cried the bearded rancher, and his order would have been executed but for Wade's detaining hand.

"I'm Sheriff here." Thomas was still trying to make himself heard, never noticing three men, who were rolling in behind him a barrel, which they had taken from a nearby store. "I demand that the law be respected, and that I be permitted to—to...." He stopped to sneeze and sputter, for having knocked in the top of the barrel, which contained flour, the three men had emptied its contents over the officer's head. [Pg 267]

His appearance as he tried to shake himself free of the sticky stuff, which coated him from head to foot, was so ludicrous that a roar of laughter went up from the mob. It was the salvation of Monte Joe, for Wade, laughing himself, took advantage of the general merriment to urge his plea again in the gambler's behalf. This time the mob listened to him.

"All right, Wade," a man cried. "Do as you like with the cuss. This is mostly your funeral, anyhow."

"Yes, let the — go," called out a dozen voices.

By this time the close formation of the vigilantes was broken. From time to time, men had left the ranks in pursuit of skulkers, and finding the way back blocked by the crowd, had taken their own initiative thereafter. Wade and Santry could not be everywhere at once, and so it happened that Lem Trowbridge was the only one of the leaders to be present when Tug Bailey was taken out of the jail. Trowbridge had not Wade's quiet air of authority, and besides, he had allowed his own blood to be fired by the "clean up." He might have attempted to save the murderer had time offered, but when the confession was wrung from him, the mob, cheated of one lynching, opened fire upon him as by a common impulse. In the batting of an eyelash, Bailey fell in a crumpled heap, his body riddled by bullets.

[Pg 268]

Meanwhile, Wade and Santry were searching for the chief cause of all their trouble, Race Moran. They were not surprised to find his office vacant, but as the night wore on and the saffron hues of dawn appeared in the sky, and still he was not found, they became anxious. Half of the gratification of their efforts would be gone, unless the agent was made to pay the penalty of his crimes. Wade inquired of the men he met, and they too had seen nothing of the wily agent. The search carried them to the further end of the town without result, when Wade turned to Santry.

"Hunt up Lem and see if he knows anything," he said. "I'll meet you in front of the hotel. I'm going to ride out and see if I can dig up any news on the edge of town. Moran may have made a get-away."

With a nod, Santry whirled his horse and dashed away, and Wade rode forward toward an approaching resident, evidently of faint heart, who meant, so it seemed, to be in for the "cakes" even though he had missed the "roast." A little contemptuously, the ranchman put his question.

"Yes, I seen him; leastwise, I think so," the man answered. "He went past my house when the shootin' first started. How are the boys makin' out?"

"Which way did he go?" the cattelman demanded, ignoring the other's question. The resident pointed in the direction taken by Moran. "Are you sure?"

"If it was him, I am, and I think it was."

[Pg 269]

Wade rode slowly forward in the indicated direction, puzzled somewhat, for it led away from Sheridan, which should have been the agent's logical objective point. But a few moments' consideration of the situation made him think that the route was probably chosen for strategic reasons. Very likely Moran had found his escape at the other end of the town blocked, and he meant to work to some distant point along the railroad. Wade drew rein, with the idea of bringing his friends also to the pursuit, but from what his informant had told him Moran already had a long start and there was no time to waste in summoning assistance. Besides, if it were still possible to overtake the quarry, the ranchman preferred to settle his difference with him, face to face, and alone.

He urged his horse into a lope, and a little beyond the town dismounted to pick up the trail of the fugitive, if it could be found. Thanks to a recent shower, the ground was still soft, and the cattelman soon picked up the trail of a shod horse, leading away from the road and out upon the turf. By the growing light, he was able to follow this at a fairly rapid pace, and as he pressed on the reflection came to him that if the agent continued as he was now headed, he could hope to come out eventually upon the Burlington Railroad, a full seventy miles from Sheridan. The pursuit was likely to be a long one, in this event, and Wade was regretting that he had not left some word to explain his absence, when he suddenly became aware of the fact that he had lost the trail.

With an exclamation of annoyance, he rode back a hundred yards or so, until he picked up the tracks again, when he found that they turned sharply to the right, altogether away from the railroad. Puzzled again, he followed it for half a mile, until convinced that Moran had deliberately circled Crawling Water. But why? What reason could the man have which, in a moment of desperate danger to himself, would lead him to delay his escape? What further deviltry could he have on foot? There was nothing to lead him in the direction he was now traveling, unless...! Wade's heart suddenly skipped a beat and beads of cold sweat bedewed his forehead, for Dorothy Purnell and her mother had come into his mind. There was nothing ahead of Moran but the Double Arrow ranch! If that were the agent's objective point, there would be nothing between him and the women save Barker, and the "drop" of a gun might settle that!

[Pg 270]

Never had the big black horse been spurred as cruelly as he was then, when Wade plunged his heels into his flanks. With a snort the horse bolted and then settled into his stride until the gentle breeze in the rider's face became a rushing gale. But the pain which the animal had felt was nothing to the fear which tugged at the ranchman's heartstrings, as he reproached himself bitterly for having left only one man at the ranch, although at the time the thought of peril to the women had never occurred to him. With the start that Moran had, Wade reasoned that he stood small chance of arriving in time to do any good. He could only count upon the watchfulness and skill of Barker to protect them.

[Pg 271]

Failing that, there was but one hope, that the rider who had gone on ahead might not be Moran after all. But presently all doubt of the man's identity was removed from the ranchman's mind, for on the soggy turf ahead his quick eyes caught the glitter of something bright. Sweeping down from his saddle, he picked it up without stopping, and found that it was a half emptied whiskey flask. Turning it over in his hand, he read the inscription: "To Race Moran from his friends of the Murray Hill Club."

WITH BARE HANDS AT LAST

In after years, when Wade tried to recall that mad ride, he found it only a vague blur upon his memory. He was conscious only of the fact that he had traveled at a speed which, in saner moments, he would have considered suicidal. Urging the big black over the rougher ground of the higher levels, he rode like a maniac, without regard for his own life and without mercy for the magnificent horse beneath him. Time and again the gelding stumbled on the rocky footing and almost fell, only to be urged to further efforts by his rider.

Five miles out of Crawling Water, the cattleman thought of a short-cut, through a little used timber-trail, which would save him several miles; but it was crossed by a ravine cut by a winter avalanche like the slash of a gigantic knife. To descend into this ravine and ascend on the farther side would be a tortuous process, which would take more time than to continue by the longer route. But if the gelding could jump the narrow cleft in the trail, the distance saved might decide the issue with Moran. On the other hand, if the leap of the horse was short, practically certain death must befall both animal and rider.

Wade decided, in his reckless mood, that the chance was worth taking and he rode the black to the edge of the cleft, where trembling with nervousness, the animal refused the leap. Cursing furiously, Wade drove him at it again, and again the gelding balked. But at the third try he rose to the prick of the spurs and took the jump. The horse's forelegs caught in perilous footing and the struggling, slipping animal snorted in terror, but the ranchman had allowed the impulse of the leap to carry him clear of his saddle. Quickly twisting the bridle reins around one wrist, he seized the horse's mane with his free hand, and helped by the violent efforts the animal made, succeeded in pulling him up to a firmer footing. For some minutes afterward he had to soothe the splendid brute, patting him and rubbing his trembling legs; then, with a grim expression of triumph on his face, he resumed his journey. The chance had won!

[Pg 273]

There was less likelihood now that he would be too late, although the thought that he might be so still made him urge the horse to the limit of his speed. He kept his eyes fastened on a notch in the hills, which marked the location of the ranch. He rode out on the clearing which held the house just in time to hear Dorothy's second scream, and plunged out of his saddle, pulling his rifle from the scabbard beneath his right leg as he did so. From the kitchen chimney a faint wisp of smoke curled upward through the still air; a rooster crowed loudly behind the barn and a colt nickered in the corral. Everywhere was the atmosphere of peace, save for that scream followed now by another choking cry, and a barking collie, which danced about before the closed door of the house in the stiff-legged manner of his breed, when excited.

[Pg 274]

Wade burst into the house like a madman and on into the back room, where Moran, his face horribly distorted by passion, was forcing the girl slowly to the floor. But for the protection which her supple body afforded him, the ranchman would have shot him in his tracks.

"Gordon!" The overwhelming relief in her face, burned into Wade's soul like a branding-iron. "Don't shoot! Oh, thank God!" She fell back against the wall, as Moran released her, and began to cry softly and brokenly.

Snarling with baffled rage and desire, Moran whirled to meet the cattleman. His hand darted, with the swift drop of the practised gun man, toward his hip pocket; but too late, for he was already covered by the short-barreled rifle in Wade's hands. More menacing even than the yawning muzzle was the expression of terrible fury in the ranchman's face. For a space of almost a minute, broken only by the tense breathing of the two men and a strangled sob from Dorothy, Moran's fate hung on the movement of an eyelash. Then Wade slowly relaxed the tension of his trigger finger. Shooting would be too quick to satisfy him!

Moran breathed more freely at this sign, for he knew that he had been nearer death than ever before in all his adventurous life, and the sway of his passion had weakened his nervous control. Courage came back to him rapidly, for with all his faults he was, physically at least, no coward. He took hope from his belief that Wade would not now shoot him down.

[Pg 275]

"Well, why don't you pull that trigger?" His tone was almost as cool as though he had asked a commonplace question.

"I've heard," said Wade slowly, "that you call yourself a good rough-and-tumble fighter; that you've never met your match. I want to get my—hands—on you!"

Moran's features relaxed into a grin; it seemed strange to him that any man could be such a fool. It was true that he had never met his match in rough fighting, and he did not expect to meet it now.

"You're a bigger man than I am," the cattleman went on. "I'll take a chance on you being a better one. I believe that I can break you with my—hands—like the rotten thing you are." He paid no heed to Dorothy's tearful protests. "Will you meet me in a fair fight?" Wade's face suddenly contorted with fury. "If you won't...." His grip on the rifle tightened significantly.

"No, Gordon, no! Oh, please, not that!" the girl pleaded.

"Sure, I'll fight," Moran answered, a gleam of joy in his eyes. He gloried in the tremendous strength of a body which had brought him victory in half a hundred barroom combats. He felt that no one lived, outside the prize-ring, who could beat him on an even footing.

"Take his gun away from him," Wade told Dorothy. "It's the second time you've disarmed him, but it'll be the last. He'll never carry a gun again. Take it!" he repeated, commandingly, and when she obeyed, added: "Toss it on the bed." He stood his rifle in a corner near the door. [Pg 276]

"You're a fool, Wade," Moran taunted as they came together. "I'm going to kill you first and then I'll take my will of her." But nothing he could say could add to Wade's fury, already at its coldest, most deadly point.

He answered by a jab at the big man's mouth, which Moran cleverly ducked; for so heavy a man, he was wonderfully quick on his feet. He ducked and parried three other such vicious leads, when, by a clever feint, Wade drew an opening and succeeded in landing his right fist, hard as a bag of stones, full in the pit of his adversary's stomach. It was an awful blow, one that would have killed a smaller man; but Moran merely grunted and broke ground for an instant. Then he landed a swinging left on the side of Wade's head which opened a cut over his ear and nearly floored him.

Back and forth across the little room they fought, with little advantage either way, while Dorothy watched them breathlessly. Like gladiators they circled each other, coming together at intervals with the shock of two enraged bulls. Both were soon bleeding from small cuts on the head and face, but neither was aware of the fact. Occasionally they collided with articles of furniture, which were overturned and swept aside almost unnoticed; while Dorothy was forced to step quickly from one point to another to keep clear of them. Several times Wade told her to leave the room, but she would not go. [Pg 277]

Finally the ranchman's superior condition began to tell in his favor. At the end of ten minutes' fighting, the agent's breathing became labored and his movements slower. Wade, still darting about quickly and lightly, had no longer much difficulty in punishing the brutal, leering face before him. Time after time he drove his fists mercilessly into Moran's features until they lost the appearance of anything human and began to resemble raw meat.

But suddenly, in attempting to sidestep one of his opponent's bull-like rushes, the cattleman slipped in a puddle of blood and half fell, and before he could regain his footing Moran had seized him. Then Wade learned how the big man's reputation for tremendous strength had been won. Cruelly, implacably, those great, ape-like arms entwined about the ranchman's body until the very breath was crushed out of it. Resorting to every trick he knew, he strove desperately to free himself, but all the strength in his own muscular body was powerless to break the other's hold. With a crash that shook the house to its foundation, they fell to the floor, and by a lucky twist Wade managed to fall on top.

The force of the fall had shaken Moran somewhat, and the cattleman, by calling on the whole of his strength, succeeded in tearing his arms free. Plunging his fingers into the thick, mottled throat, he squeezed steadily until Moran's struggles grew weaker and weaker. Finally they ceased entirely and the huge, heavy body lay still. [Pg 278]

Wade stumbled to his feet and staggered across the room.

"It's all right," he said thickly, and added at sight of Dorothy's wide, terror-stricken eyes: "Frightened you, didn't we? Guess I should have shot him and made a clean job of it; but I couldn't, somehow."

"Oh, he's hurt you terribly!" the girl cried, bursting into fresh tears.

Wade laughed and tenderly put his arms around her, for weak though he was and with nerves twitching like those of a recently sobered drunkard, he was not too weak or sick to enjoy the privilege of soothing her. The feel of her in his arms was wonderful happiness to him and her tears for him seemed far more precious than all the gold on his land. He had just lifted her up on the sill of the open window, thinking that the fresh air might steady her, when she looked over his shoulder and saw Moran, who had regained consciousness, in the act of reaching for his revolver, which lay on the bed where she had tossed it.

"Oh, see what he's doing! Look out!"

Her cry of warning came just too late. There was a flash and roar, and a hot flame seemed to pass through Wade's body. Half turning about, he clutched at the air, and then pitched forward to the floor, where he lay still. Flourishing the gun, Moran got unsteadily to his feet and turned a ghastly, dappled visage to the girl, who, stunned and helpless, was gazing at him in wide-eyed horror. But she had nothing more to fear from him, for now that he believed Wade dead, the agent was too overshadowed by his crime to think of perpetrating another and worse one. He had already wasted too much valuable time. He must get away. [Pg 279]

"I got him," he croaked, in a terrible voice. "I got him like I said I would, damn him!" With a blood-curdling attempt at a laugh, he staggered out of the house into the sunshine.

For a moment Dorothy stared woodenly through the empty doorway; then, with a choking sob,

she bent over the man at her feet. She shook him gently and begged him to speak to her, but she could get no response and under her exploring fingers his heart apparently had ceased to beat. For a few seconds she stared at the widening patch of red on his torn shirt; then her gaze shifted and focused on the rifle in the corner by the door. As she looked at the weapon her wide, fear-struck eyes narrowed and hardened with a sudden resolve. Seizing the gun, she cocked it and stepped into the doorway.

Moran was walking unsteadily toward the place where he had tied his horse. He was tacking from side to side like a drunken man, waving his arms about and talking to himself. Bringing the rifle to her shoulder, Dorothy steadied herself against the door-frame and took long, careful aim. As she sighted the weapon her usually pretty face, now scratched and streaked with blood from her struggles with the agent, wore the expression of one who has seen all that is dear in life slip away from her. At the sharp crack of the rifle Moran stopped short and a convulsive shudder racked his big body from head to foot. After a single step forward he crumpled up on the ground. For several moments his arms and legs twitched spasmodically; then he lay still.

[Pg 280]

Horried by what she had done, now that it was accomplished Dorothy stepped backward into the house and stood the rifle in its former position near the door, when a low moan from behind made her turn hurriedly. Wade was not dead then! She hastily tore his shirt from over the wound, her lips twisted in a low cry of pity as she did so. To her tender gaze, the hurt seemed a frightful one. Dreading lest he should regain consciousness and find himself alone, she decided to remain with him, instead of going for the help she craved; most likely she would be unable to find her mother and Barker, anyway. She stopped the flow of blood as best she could and put a pillow under the ranchman's head, kissing him afterward. Then for an interval she sat still. She never knew for how long.

Santry reached the house just as Mrs. Purnell and Barker returned with their berries, and the three found the girl bathing the wounded man's face, and crying over him.

"Boy, boy!" Santry sobbed, dropping on his knees before the unconscious figure. "Who done this to you?"

Dorothy weepingly explained, and when she told of her own part in shooting Moran the old fellow patted her approvingly on the back. "Good girl," he said hoarsely. "But I wish that job had been left for me."

[Pg 281]

"Merciful Heavens!" cried Mrs. Purnell. "I shall never get over this." With trembling hands she took the basin and towel from her daughter and set them one side, then she gently urged the girl to her feet.

"You!" said Santry, so ferociously to Barker that the man winced in spite of himself. "Help me to lay him on the bed, so's to do it gentle-like."

Dorothy, who felt certain that Wade was mortally hurt, struggled desperately against the feeling of faintness which was creeping over her. She caught at a chair for support, and her mother caught her in her arms.

"My poor dear, you're worn out. Go lie down. Oh, when I think...!"

"Don't talk to me, mother!" Dorothy waved her back, for the presence close to her of another person could only mean her collapse. "I'm all right. I'm of no consequence now. He needs a doctor," she added, turning to Santry, who stood near the bed bowed with grief. He, too, thought that Wade would never be himself again.

"I'll go," said Barker, eager to do something to atone for his absence at the critical moment, but Santry rounded upon him in a rage.

"You—you skunk!" he snarled, and gestured fiercely toward the bed. "He left you here to look after things and you—you went *berry pickin*!" Barker seemed so crushed by the scorn in the old man's words that Dorothy's sympathy was stirred.

"It wasn't Barker's fault," she said quickly. "There seemed to be no danger. Gordon said so himself. But one of you go, immediately, for the doctor."

[Pg 282]

"I'll go," Santry responded and hurried from the room, followed by Barker, thoroughly wretched.

Dorothy went to the bedside and looked down into Wade's white face; then she knelt there on the floor and said a little prayer to the God of all men to be merciful to hers.

"Maybe if I made you a cup of tea?" Mrs. Purnell anxiously suggested, but the girl shook her head listlessly. Tea was the elder woman's panacea for all ills.

"Don't bother me, mother, please. I—I've just been through a good deal. I can't talk—really, I can't."

Mrs. Purnell, subsiding at last, thereafter held her peace, and Dorothy sat down by the bed to be instantly ready to do anything that could be done. She had sat thus, almost without stirring, for nearly an hour, when Wade moved slightly and opened his eyes.

"What is it?" She bent over him instantly, forgetting everything except that he was awake and that he seemed to know her.

"Is it you, Dorothy?" He groped weakly for her fingers.

"Yes, dear," she answered, gulping back the sob in her throat. "Is there anything you want? What can I do for you?"

He smiled feebly and shook his head.

"It's all right, if it's you," he said faintly, after a moment. "You're all right—always!"

CHAPTER XXII

[Pg 283]

CHURCH-GOING CLOTHES

After his few words to Dorothy the wounded man lapsed again into coma, in which condition he was found by the physician, who returned with Santry from Crawling Water. During the long intervening time the girl had not moved from the bedside, though the strain of her own terrible experience with Moran was making itself felt in exhaustive fatigue.

"Go and rest yourself," Santry urged. "It's my turn now."

"I'm not tired," she declared, trying to smile into the keen eyes of the doctor, who had heard the facts from the old plainsman as they rode out from town.

Wade lay with his eyes closed, apparently in profound stupor, but gave signs of consciousness when Dr. Catlin gently shook him. Dorothy felt that he should not be disturbed, although she kept her own counsel, but Catlin wanted to see if he could arouse his patient at all, for the extent of the injury caused by the bullet, which had entered the back in the vicinity of the spinal cord, could be gauged largely by the amount of sensibility remaining. The wounded man was finally induced to answer monosyllabically the questions put to him, but he did so with surly impatience. The physician next made a thorough examination, for which he was better fitted than many a fashionable city practitioner, by reason of his familiarity with wounds of all kinds.

[Pg 284]

When he arose Santry, who had watched him as a cat watches a mouse, forced himself to speak, for his throat and mouth were dry as a bone.

"Well, Doc, how about it?"

"Oh, he won't die this time; but he may lie there for some weeks. So far as I can tell the bullet just grazed the spinal cord, and it's the shock of that which makes him so quiet now. A fraction of an inch closer and he would have died or been paralyzed, a cripple, probably for life. At is it, however, barring the possibility of infection, he should pull through. The bullet passed straight through the body without injury to any vital organ, and there is no indication of severe internal hemorrhage."

Santry moistened his lips with his tongue and shook his head heavily.

"What gets me," he burst out, "is that Gawd A'mighty could 'a' let a skunk like Moran do a thing like that! And then"—his voice swelled as though the words he was about to utter exceeded the first—"and then let the varmint get away from me!"

Dr. Catlin nodded sympathy with the statement and turned to Dorothy. She had been anxiously searching his face to discover if he were encouraging them unduly, and when she felt that he was not stretching the facts a tremendous weight was lifted from her mind.

"You are going to stay here?" he asked.

"Yes; oh, yes!" she answered.

[Pg 285]

"That's good." He opened his medicine case and mixed a simple antipyretic. "I'll explain what you're to do then. After that you better lay down and try to sleep. Wade won't need much for some days, except good nursing."

"I'm not tired," she insisted, at which he smiled shrewdly.

"I'm not asking you if you're tired. I'm telling you that you are. Those nerves of yours are jumping now. You've got our patient to consider first, and you can't look after him unless you keep well yourself. I'm going to mix something up for you in a few minutes and then you're going to rest. A nurse must obey orders."

He explained to her what she was to do for the patient and then gave her something to offset the effects of her own nervous shock. Then counseling them not to worry too much, for there would be no fatal result if his directions were followed, the physician mounted his horse and rode back to town. Such journeys were all in the day's work to him, and poor pay they often brought him, except as love of his fellow-men rewarded his spirit.

During the long days and nights that followed Dorothy scarcely left Wade's bedside, for to her mother now fell the burdens of the ranch household. From feeling that she never would be equal to the task of caring for so many people, Mrs. Purnell came to find her health greatly improved by

her duties, which left her no opportunity for morbid introspection.

Santry, too, was in almost constant attendance upon the sick man, and was as tender and solicitous in his ministrations as Dorothy herself. He ate little and slept less, relieving his feelings by oaths whispered into his mustache. He made the ranch hands move about their various duties as quietly as mice. Dorothy grew to be genuinely fond of him, because of their common bond of sympathy with Wade. Frequently they sat together in the sickroom reading the newspapers, which came out from town each day. On one such occasion, when Santry had twisted his mouth awry in a determined effort to fold the paper he was reading without permitting a single crackle, she softly laughed at him.

[Pg 286]

"You needn't be so careful. I don't think it would disturb him."

The old fellow sagely shook his head.

"Just the same, I ain't takin' no chances," he said.

A moment afterward he tiptoed over to her, grinning from ear to ear, and with a clumsy finger pointed out the item he had been reading. An expression of pleased surprise flooded her face when she read it; they laughed softly together; and, finding that he was through with the paper, she put it away in a bureau drawer, meaning to show that item some day to Gordon.

Under the care of Dr. Catlin who rode out from Crawling Water each day, and even more because of Dorothy's careful nursing, the wounded man was at last brought beyond the danger point and started on the road to health. He was very weak and very pale, but the one danger that Catlin had feared and kept mostly to himself, the danger of blood-poisoning, was now definitely past, and the patient's physical condition slowly brought about a thorough and complete recovery.

[Pg 287]

"Some of it you owe to yourself, Wade, as the reward of decent living, and some of it you owe to the Lord," Catlin told him smilingly. "But most of it you owe to this little girl here." He patted Dorothy on the shoulder and would not permit her to shirk his praise. "She's been your nurse, and I can tell you it isn't a pleasant job for a woman, tending a wound like yours."

"Is that so?" said Dorothy, mischievously. "That's as much as you know about it. It's been one of the most delightful jobs I ever had."

"She's a wonderful girl," said Wade, with a tender look at her, after they had laughed at her outburst.

"Oh, you just think that because I'm the only girl around here," she blushingly declared, and the physician kept right on laughing.

"There *was* another girl here once," said Wade. "Or at least she acted somewhat differently from anything you've done lately."

He was well enough now to receive his friends on brief visits, and Trowbridge was the first to drop in. Dorothy did not mind having Lem, but she was not sure she enjoyed having the others, for she had found the close association with Gordon so very sweet; but she told herself that she must not be foolish, and she welcomed all who came. Naturally so pretty a girl doing the honors of the house so well, and so closely linked with the fortunes of the host, gave rise to the usual deductions. Many were the quiet jokes which the cattlemen passed amongst themselves over the approaching wedding, and the festival they would make of the occasion.

[Pg 288]

"Well, good-by, Miss Purnell," said Trowbridge one day, smiling and yet with a curiously pathetic droop to his mouth.

"*Miss Purnell?*" Dorothy exclaimed, in the act of shaking hands.

"That's what I said." He nodded wisely. "Good-by, Miss Purnell." Refusing to be envious of his friend's good fortune, he laughed cheerily and was gone before she saw through his little joke.

The next afternoon she was reading to Gordon when the far-away look in his eyes told her that he was not listening. She stopped, wondering what he could be dreaming about, and missing the sound of her voice, he looked toward her.

"You weren't even listening," she chided, smilingly.

"I was thinking that I've never had a chance to get into those church-going clothes," he said, with a return of the old whimsical mood. "But I look pretty clean, don't I?"

"Yes," she answered, suddenly shy.

"Hair brushed? Tie right? Boots clean?"

To each question she had nodded assent. Her heart was beating very fast and the rosy color was mounting to the roots of her hair, but she refused to lower her eyes in panic. She looked him straight in the face with a sweet, tender, cool gaze.

[Pg 289]

"Yes," she said again.

"Well, then, give me your hand." He hitched his rocker forward so as to get closer to her, and took both her hands in this. "Dorothy, I've got something to tell you. I guess you know what it is." Her eyes suddenly became a little moist as she playfully shook her head. "Oh, yes, you do, dear,

but I've got to say it, haven't I? I love you, Dorothy. It sort of chokes me to say it because my heart's so full."

"Mine is, too," she whispered, a queer catch in her voice. "But are you sure you love me?"

"Sure? Why, that other was only...."

Withdrawing her hands from his, she laid her fingers for an instant on his lips.

"I want to show you something," she said.

She went to the bureau, and taking out the paper which she had hidden there, brought it to him. It was a moment before she could find the item again, then she pointed it out. They read it together, as she and Santry had done the first time she had seen it. The item was an announcement from the Rexhills of the engagement of their daughter Helen to Mr. Maxwell Frayne.

Dorothy watched Wade's face eagerly as he read, and she was entirely content when she saw there no trace of his former sentiment for Helen Rexhill. He expressed genuine pleasure that Helen was not to be carried down with her father's ruin, but the girl knew that otherwise the news had left him untouched. She had always thought that this would be so, but she was comforted to be assured of it.

[Pg 290]

"Why, that was only an infatuation," he explained. "Now I'm really in love. Thank Heaven, I...." When she looked at him there was a light in her glorious violet-shaded eyes that fairly took his breath away.

"Hush, dear," she said softly. "You've said enough. I understand, and I'm so...."

The rest was lost to the world as his arms went around her.

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Minor changes have been made to make spelling and punctuation consistent through the text; otherwise, every effort has been made to be true to the original book.

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