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The Spoilers of the Valley

ROBERT WATSON

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TO
A LADY CALLED NAN

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	The Man Hunt	11
II	The Wolf Note	19
III	At Pederstone's Forge	36
IV	Wayward Langford	44
V	The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing	58
VI	A Bird to Pluck	67
VII	Wild Man Hanson Goes Wild	74
VIII	Like Man, Like Horse	89
IX	The Doings of Percival	101
X	Jim's Grand Toot	122
XI	Sol Wants a Good Wife--Bad	140
XII	The Dance	148
XIII	The Big Steal	165
XIV	The Round-Up	176
XV	Sol's Matrimonial Mix-Up	190
XVI	The Breakaway	203
XVII	Wayward Langford's Grand Highland Fling	224
XVIII	The Coat of Many Colours	240
XIX	Ranching De Luxe	258
XX	A Breach and a Confession	273
XXI	A Maiden, a Lover and a Heathen Chinese	302
XXII	Fire Begets Hot Air	320
XXIII	So Deep in Love am I	338
XXIV	The Landslide	355
XXV	The Bank Robbery	372
XXVI	The Dawn of a New Day	382

The Spoilers of the Valley

THE SPOILERS OF THE VALLEY

CHAPTER I

The Man Hunt

Up on the hill, high above the twinkling lights of the busy little ranching town of Vernock, at the open dining-room window of a pretty, leafy-bowered, six-roomed bungalow, a girl, just blossoming into womanhood, stood in her night robes and dressing gown, braiding her dark hair. She was slight of form, but health glowed from her expressive face.

She was dreamily contemplating the beauties of the night.

Below her, stretching like a fan, was the Valley upon which was built the merry, happy-go-lucky, scattered little town she loved. Everywhere around were the eternal, undulating hills, enclosing the Valley in a world by itself. The night had just lately closed in. The sky was clear and presented a wall and a dome of almost inky blue. Away due south, right over the peak of a hill, on the wall of blue hung a great star, bright and scintillating like a floating soap bubble, while a handspan straight above that again a thin, crescent moon lay coldly on its back sending up a reflection of its own streaky, ghostly light from the distant lake which was no more than visible through a rift in the hills.

As the girl drank in the delights of the peaceful panorama spreading away right from her very feet, she was aroused sharply from her meditation. She heard, or fancied she heard, a distant shot, followed by the sound of excited voices and the barking of dogs. She went to the door, threw it open fearlessly and peered down the hill; but all was silent again save for this barking which travelled farther and farther away all the time, being caught up and carried along in a desultory fashion by the dogs of all the neighbouring houses and ranches.

She stood for a moment, looking about her, then, shivering slightly with the cold, she threw a kiss to the Valley, closed the door again and turned slowly toward her bedroom.

Her fingers were upon the lamp to turn down the light, when three short peremptory raps at the back door caused her to start nervously. She took up the lamp and tiptoed into the kitchen.

"Who's there?" she called.

The rapping was repeated; this time with a much greater insistence.

"Quick,--quick! For God's sake let me in!" came a hoarse, muffled voice which sounded strangely tired.

The girl set the lamp on the kitchen table and went cautiously forward to the door.

"Who's there?" she repeated, her hand on the door fastenings.

"Let me in!" came the voice in desperation. "If you have a heart, please open."

"I cannot until I know who you are. I am a girl. I am alone."

A groan escaped the man on the outside, and the anguish of it struck into the bosom of Eileen Pederstone. Once more the voice came pleadingly:--

"And I am a man! I am hunted,--I need help."

The girl shot back the bolt, threw wide the door and stood back with bated breath.

A masculine figure, panting and dishevelled, staggered in, blinking in the lamplight.

Eileen slowly pushed the door shut, keeping her frightened eyes upon the incomer who tottered weakly to the wall and leaned against it for support.

Dirty from head to heel, he was dressed only in a pair of ragged trousers and a torn, mud-stained shirt. His stockingless feet were partly hidden in a pair of broken boots. Several days' growth of beard made it hard to guess him young or old. But his blue eyes, despite their tired and bloodshot appearance, betrayed, as they gazed in wonder at the girl, many characteristics of a youthfulness not yet really past.

While the two stood thus, the far-away sound of voices floated up the hill from below.

The fugitive's eyes roved like those of a hunted animal. He braced himself as if ashamed of his momentary show of fear. He tried hard to smile, but the smile was a dismal failure.

"Sorry," he panted, "but--but---" His voice sounded harsh and hoarse from exposure. "Is there anywhere--any place where you could hide me till they pass. They were only--only a little behind me. Guess--I--shouldn't--shouldn't have got you mixed up in this. They are coming this way. They want to take me back--but I can't--I won't go back there. Ah!"

He clung with his fingers against the wall to prevent him from collapsing.

In a moment, anxious and all alert, Eileen searched the kitchen for a place of safe hiding. She thought of the cupboards, the clothes-closets in her own bedroom, even her bed of spotless linen; but none of these afforded security. At last, her ready eyes found what her nimble mind

was seeking.

"Quick--here!" she cried, turning to the huge box in the corner which she used for holding the short firewood for her stove. "Help me unload this wood. The box is good and big. You can get inside; I'll pile the wood on top of you. They'll never guess."

The girl, although slight in appearance, set to with a vigour and an agility that carried a swift contagion. The man was by her side at once. He gave a little crackle of a laugh in his throat, and shot a glance of admiration at her. In sixty seconds more, the box was emptied of its contents. The man clambered inside and crouched in the bottom of it.

It was only then that the girl noticed his very great physical weakness.

"Oh, what shall I do?" she cried in sudden alarm. "I can't leave you this way. You have been hurt. There is blood on your shirt. The cowards!--they've shot you."

"Never mind me--hurry! It is nothing at all--only a scratch! Quick!" he gasped.

"Wait a moment then!" she whispered.

The man raised himself on his elbow and watched her as she ran to the tap in the pantry and filled a tumbler to the brim with water.

Greedy hands clutched the glass from her, and the contents were swallowed in great gulps. The man sighed like a tired child. He smiled slightly, showing teeth of delightful regularity.

"Water's great--isn't it?" he said childishly.

And as Eileen looked into his eyes she saw that they were young eyes; eyes filled with tears, and eyes that were ever so blue.

"Quick! They're pretty nearly here."

Eileen commenced cautiously to pile the wood on top of him.

"Don't mind me!" he whispered huskily. "Tumble it in. I'm--I'm only a runaway convict."

She worked fast and furiously, and had just turned away from the innocent-looking, well-piled box of split wood in the corner, when she heard the excited voices of hurrying men at her front door.

They tapped sharply.

She took the lamp from the kitchen table, carried it with her to the door, shot the bolt back again and threw the door wide open.

Three men stepped into the semi-circle of light. All were tall and of agile build.

"Poor boy!" was Eileen's first thought. "What chance has he against these?"

One of the men carried a rifle. She knew him. Everybody in Vernock knew him. She had known him ever since his coming to the Valley five years before.

She had marked with childlike wonder--as others had done--his meteoric progress in wealth and power. He was a man, disliked by some, feared by many, and obeyed by all; a land-owner; a cattle breeder; a grain dealer; a giant in body as well as will; and--the new Mayor of Vernock.

The other men were strangers to the girl.

All three walked straight through to the kitchen. The one nearest to Eileen addressed her.

"Sorry miss, for intrudin' so late, 'specially as we hear your dad's at Enderby and you're all alone to-night. But we're after a man--a convict--escaped from Ukalla jail. Saw your light! Thought we saw your door open!"

He peered about suspiciously. "Didn't see anything of him--did you?"

Eileen looked away from the ferrety eyes that searched hers.

"I was just going to bed," she answered nervously. "I--I fancied I heard voices and a shot."

"Wasn't any fancy, miss!"

"I--I opened the door and looked out, but didn't hear anything more, so I closed the door again."

"Hum!" put in her interlocutor, rubbing his chin. "You didn't see any signs of our man when you looked out?"

Eileen shivered, for she did not know how much these men knew or how much they had really seen.

"Yes or no, miss!" he snapped.

"No!--most certainly, no!" Eileen shot back at him in defiance. "How dare you talk to me in that way!"

Tears of vexation sprang to her eyes; vexation that she should have had to lie, although it was forced upon her unless she meant to betray the man who had trusted himself to her safe-keeping.

"Easy, officer;--easy! Miss Pederstone is all right," put in the man with the rifle. "What she says you can bank on."

"Oh, pshaw!--you don't have to teach me my business," retorted the detective.

"Maybe not; but you can stand some teaching in manners," returned the other.

"See here, sir!" came the quick answer, "if you don't like this, you had better get down the hill and home. You village mayors give me a pain."

The man with the rifle bit his lip and remained silent.

"You don't mind me having a look round, miss?" inquired the officer a little bit less brusquely, but starting in to search without waiting for her permission.

He threw open the cupboards and the closets. He examined every room in the house. He even went into Eileen's bedroom. She followed him there, carrying the lamp. He looked into her bed and searched under it. He examined her clothes chest.

At last both returned to the kitchen.

The moment she got there, Eileen's heart stood still. She gave vent to a startled exclamation, which, however, she quickly covered up by stumbling slightly forward as if she had tripped on the rug and almost upset the lamp.

The second officer, who all along had remained silent and simply an onlooker, was seated on the top of the wood box, rapping his heels on the side of it and whistling softly to himself with a look on his face which might have been taken for one of blissful ignorance or secret knowledge, so bland was it.

"All through, Barney?" he asked.

"Ya!"

"Satisfied?"

"Ya!--come on!"

The second officer turned to the box upon which he had been sitting.

"Some box this!" he exclaimed, kicking it with his foot. "Guess we'd better see if there's anyone under the wood pile."

He got down and commenced to throw a few pieces off the top.

Eileen's heart stopped beating.

The detective at the door came over with a look of supreme contempt on his face. He lifted the lid of the stove and spat some tobacco juice into the fire, then he went over to his companion.

"Say, Jim!--are you a detective or a country boob on his vacation?"

"Why? What's the matter with you?"

"Aw, quit! Can't you see the lady wants to get to bed! Why don't you look inside the teapot?"

"Oh, all right!" replied the other, dusting off his hands. "This is your hunt:--if you are satisfied, so am I."

Eileen's heart thumped as if it would burst through her body, and she feared for the very noise of it.

Slowly the second detective followed the other two men out.

CHAPTER II

The Wolf Note

At the door, the man carrying the rifle came close to Eileen. He caught her hand in his and tapped it lightly.

"Don't worry, little girl! I tried my best to keep them from disturbing you," he said in low tones, "but you know what these fellows are like."

"Thank you! You are very kind," answered Eileen quietly. "Father will thank you, too, when he comes back."

The Mayor wished her good-night, raised his hat and followed the others, who were already well on their way down the hill.

Eileen waited at the door until they were no longer within sight or earshot. Then she closed and bolted it. She ran over to the wood-box. She tossed the chunks of wood about her in frantic haste, whispering, almost crooning, to the man underneath, who did not hear her for he was lying there crumpled in a senseless heap.

With a cry she freed him and bent over him. Her supple young arms went under his shoulders. She raised him, half dragging, half lifting, until she had him stretched upon the floor in front of the stove. She ran for a basin of water, cut some linen into strips and, on her knees beside him, she bathed and dressed the raw, open wound in his side, where a bullet had ripped and torn

along the white flesh.

When she finished, she raised his limp head and bathed his brow with cold water.

The fugitive groaned and opened his eyes.

He smiled a wan sort of smile through a grimy, unshaven mask, as he looked into the sweet face above him. Then he closed his eyes again, as if he feared the picture might vanish.

"Oh, brace up!" Eileen whispered tearfully, almost shaking him in her fear. "You must brace up. They've gone. But they may come back. If they do, they'll be sure to get you."

Gathering his scattered senses, the man on the floor raised himself with an effort on to his elbow. He struggled to his feet and swayed unsteadily. He passed his hand over his eyes and made an involuntary movement as if to thrust his fingers through his hair. As he did so, a pained expression crossed his face, for his fingers encountered nothing but a short stubble of hair close cropped to his skin.

Eileen lent him her support, as he tried to brace himself. She set him in an armchair, then brought him bread, butter, some cold meat and fresh milk from the cupboard, placing them on the table before him.

Only his eyes expressed thanks, but they did it eloquently. Ravenously he turned to, while his young hostess watched him in curiosity and wonder, for never before had she seen one really famishingly hungry.

When not a morsel remained, the man pushed back his chair and turned to the young lady apologetically.

"You'll excuse me if I forgot my table manners, but--but that was my first food for three days."

He rose.

"I guess I will be able to make it now. I feel all right;--thanks to you."

"No, no!" exclaimed Eileen, "you mustn't go just yet. You must rest if only for a few minutes. I was anxious before these men were clear away, but they have gone. The rest will do you good."

"No!--I must go. It--it would mean trouble for you if they found me here."

"You shan't! Sit down!" she commanded. "You may require all your strength before morning."

She set him in the chair again, and he obeyed her helplessly and with a sigh of weariness.

"But---" he protested feebly, raising his hand.

"Trouble for me!" she interposed; "I am not afraid of trouble."

"You are indeed a Good Samaritan," he said in a voice which sounded less forlorn. "If I wasn't a jailbird, I'd thank you in my prayers."

He smiled crookedly. "You know, convicts' prayers don't seem to rise very high, miss--don't seem to reach anywhere. We haven't got the stand-in with the Boss that others seem to have," he said in some bitterness.

"Hush!" she whispered. "You must not say that, for it isn't true. Those men might have caught you,--but they didn't. But, but," she added seriously, "surely you are not a convict; not a criminal, I mean?"

He turned his hands outwards with a shrug.

"You don't look like one who loved doing wrong. If you have ever done wrong, I am sure it was done in a moment of rashness; maybe thoughtlessness." She clasped her hands in front of her. "You would never do it again."

He shook his head.

"No,--never, never again!" But his voice had no sound of contrition in it.

"When you are free--really free--you will try to be what God meant you to be; a real man; good, honest and earnest."

He moved uneasily, then he got up once more, went over to the window and looked out into the night. He remained with his back to her for some time, and she did not seek to break into his thoughts.

Finally he turned, and, as he leaned against the wall by the door, he gazed at her curiously.

"They nick-named me 'Silent' in jail, because I wouldn't talk," he said in a husky tone. "God knows!--what inducement had a man to talk--there?"

"Maybe I shouldn't talk now--but I might feel better if I did, and you cared to listen."

"Yes, oh yes!--please tell me," replied the girl earnestly.

"I have never committed any crime against anyone. The only wrong I have done is to myself. Like a fool, I took the blame to save the other fellow, because, oh, because I thought I was better able to--that was all. But that other fellow skulked away, deserted me;--the low coward!"

The man's voice rose in the quiet of that little bungalow upon the hill where the only other sounds were the ticking of the clock and the quick breathing of an anxious listener.

"God help him when we meet!"

"Hush!" cautioned the girl again.

"When I took on his troubles," he continued, more quietly, "I did not think of anything more than a few months in prison, but, Great God! they gave me five years:--FIVE YEARS!"

His eyes widened at the awfulness of the thought and a look of agony came into his face.

Eileen Pederstone gasped, and her lips parted.

"Five years," she whispered.

The man continued in bitterness.

"Yes! five years in hell--buried alive--away from humanity--from light--air--freedom; from the sunshine, the hills, and the valleys; from the sea, the wind, and, and, the higher things--literature, music, art: truth--love--life:--buried from the combination of all these, from God himself."

He shuddered. He almost wept in his frailness. "And now the very sunshine hurts like an electric shock, the open spaces make me feel lost and afraid; make me long for the confinement of a cell again."

He stopped suddenly and brushed his eyes with the back of his hand.

Eileen went over to him, laid a hand tenderly on his torn shirt-sleeve and led him over to the chair again, for he still showed signs of his physical exhaustion. He sat back and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, Eileen spoke to him.

"And you ran away? Why, oh, why did you do that? Couldn't you see that it would mean recapture; more imprisonment? And you were probably so near the end of it."

Her whole soul was speaking compassionately.

"Near the end!" he said bitterly. "It was the end. I broke prison because they had no right to keep me there any longer."

"But why? How could that possibly be?" she asked, closing her hands nervously.

He gave expression to a sound of surprise at her innocence.

"You don't know them, miss. Anything, everything is possible in there. They are masters, kings, gods. My conduct was good. After three years and eight months I was due to get out in one month more. But I was useful to them in there. I had education. I was the only accountant; the greatest book-lover in jail. To keep me from thinking--for the thinking is what drives men mad--I worked and slaved night and day. They had no one to take my place. I was trusted. I did the work of three men.

"One day I interfered in behalf of a fellow prisoner--a horse thief--who was wrongly accused at this particular time of breaking some trivial prison law. My good conduct sheet was cancelled. I was told that I must serve my full time. That's what I got for trying, for the second time, to help my fellow-man." He laughed. "That--and a peculiar-sounding word which that strange little jailbird gave to me, on condition that I would never sell it, stating it was all he had and that it might be useful to me some day if I ever had the handling of horses.

"Yes!--I should have been wise that time. It was my second offence of helping my neighbour. Three years and nine months in jail for a kindly act! Fifteen months more in hell in exchange for a word! What bargains!"

He grew bitter again.

"The hell-hounds!--they thought I didn't tumble to their little game."

He stopped again, closing his mouth tightly as if inquiring of himself why he should be telling this young lady so much.

"Please--please go on," Eileen pleaded, divining his thoughts.

"Why?" he asked bluntly, surveying the slight, lissom figure before him.

"Oh, because--because I am interested. I am so sorry for you and for so many others like you," she said.

"Well!--I served my full time--five years--three years with 365 days each and two leap years with an extra day in them,--1,827 days and nights, 43,848 hours; 2,630,880 minutes; 157,852,800 second strokes on the clock. You see I remember it all. Great God, how I used to figure it out!

"Eight days ago my time was up. I asked them regarding my release. And simply because I inquired instead of waiting their good pleasure, they told me I had two weeks more to serve. The damnable lie! As if I didn't know, as if every jailbird doesn't know the day and the very minute his release is due!

"Two weeks more!" he went on, his face flushed with indignation and his breath coming in short jerks.

The clock on Eileen's mantelshelf struck midnight, slowly and clearly.

The convict looked at it and gasped. When it stopped striking, he turned to Eileen and his eyes twinkled for a second.

"The Governor of the prison has a little clock just the same as that in his private room," he said.

"Do you know, I'm afraid all the time that I'm going to wake up from this and find myself back there."

He jerked his torn garments together.

"Guess I'd better be going, though. I've stayed far too long already. I feel rested now."

"Won't you finish your story first?" pleaded Eileen. "I think you are safer here--for a while longer--than you would be outside. It won't hurt to let those horrid, prying, suspicious creatures get well away from here."

"I have already said more than I intended to," he remarked.

The pair presented a strange contrast as they sat opposite each other in the lamplight; the one, wet-eyed, sympathetic and earnest; the other, gaunt, indignant and breathless as he gasped out his story with the hunger of one to whom sympathy was a rediscovered friend.

"Where was I at?" he asked. "Ah, yes!

"The Governor's dirty-worker wouldn't listen when I tried to explain. He ordered me back.

"At work in the office next day, I took advantage of a warder's slackness and broke clear away.

"I didn't care what happened then. I was crazed. An old lady in a cottage--God bless her!--fed me and gave me these clothes--her son's castaways--and three dollars; all the money she had.

"I walked twenty miles without stop or let-up. After that I slept during the day and walked at night. Three days after my breakaway, I got on to a freight train and stole a ride as far as Sicamous. I slept overnight in a barn there. Next morning I tried to bribe a boy to get me some food at the grocery store. I gave him a dollar. He never came back. I heard some men talking at the door of the barn about a suspicious character who had been seen skulking about. That decided me. I got out when night came and slipped under an empty fruit car which was being shunted on the siding. I got off yesterday, slipping away between a little village up the line and here. The engineer got his eye on me and stopped the train. He let some men off: they were two detectives, I think. They had been riding in the caboose. They came after me. I fell exhausted somewhere in the bush. When I came to it was broad daylight and the men were gone."

He looked up at Eileen suddenly.

"There isn't much more. Early this morning I managed to get into a barn by the railway tracks. I got in through a skylight in the roof. I went to sleep among the straw there. Soon after, the sound of a key in the padlock outside woke me. I scrambled up and through the skylight again, and away. There were three men--one with a rifle. They hunted me, finding me and losing me several times. The devil with the rifle got a line on me down the hill a short time ago.

"When I got to your door I was all in." He smiled. "You're a real sport. You didn't give me away."

He got up and threw out his hands. "Oh, what's the good anyway! All jailbirds tell the tale and shout their innocence."

Eileen's heart was moved. Tears welled up in her eyes. She was at a loss to know what to do or say.

As the man turned from her, his elbow struck something hanging on the wall. He caught at it quickly as it was falling.

It was an old violin of very delicate workmanship.

"Sorry!" he exclaimed, handing it to her. "I am clumsy in a house. Haven't been in one for so long. Glad I didn't smash it."

"I almost wish you had," said Eileen enigmatically.

"Don't you like music?" he asked.

"Oh, yes!"

"Violin music?"

"Yes!--but not from that violin. It is not like other violins: it has an unsavoury history."

"Do you play?"

"Not the violin," said Eileen, standing with her back to the table, leaning lightly there, clad in her dressing gown, her plaited hair hanging over her shoulder and her eyes on her strange visitor in manifest interest.

"My father is very fond of scraping on a violin. The one he plays is hanging up there."

She pointed to another violin beside the mantelshelf in the adjoining room.

"And this one?" he queried curiously, pointing to the one she had laid on the table.

"This one is several hundred years old. It has been in the family for ever so long. The story goes with it that the member of our family who owns it will attain much wealth during his life, but will lose it again if he doesn't pass it on when he is at the very height of his prosperity. My father says it has always proved true, and he is hoping for the day when its promise will be fulfilled in his case, for he longs for wealth and all it brings; and he has striven all his life to get it."

"I hope that he has his wish and is able to tell when he gets to the highest point of his success, so that he may get rid of the violin in time."

Eileen smiled.

"Daddy says that has been the trouble with our forefathers, who always got wealthy but never seemed to be able to hold it when they got it. That is my daddy over there."

She pointed to framed picture on the wall.

"He is big and brawny, and not afraid of anybody. He is--oh, so good. He is the best in all the world."

The young man gazed at her as she expressed her admiration.

"He isn't here to-night?" he remarked.

Eileen turned her eyes on him sharply, as if she had sensed something of a suspicious nature in his query. But she shook the thought from her and laid her mind bare.

"No!--daddy was called away this afternoon. He won't be back until to-morrow, noon.

"This violin," reverted Eileen, as if endeavouring to interest her guest and keep his thoughts away from the misery of his own condition as long as possible, "was the last work of a very famous Italian violin maker, who disappeared mysteriously and was never heard of afterwards. It has a most beautiful tone, but for one note, and that one note is hideous. Ugh!--I hate it."

She shuddered. "I would have destroyed it long ago only my father prizes it as a great curio and as an heirloom."

The convict showed deep interest.

"Isn't it strange that a beautiful instrument like this should have a discordant note in it that no one seems to be able to explain away?" she asked, as they stood together near the window, losing themselves in their interest.

"Yes,--it is strange," returned the man, examining the violin closely. "I have read of something similar somewhere. The discord, I think, is called the *wolf note*, and it is well named. I believe its presence is difficult to explain, and such an instrument has occasionally been produced by the best violin makers. They usually destroyed them, as the discord is unalterable, making the instrument, of course, unmarketable as a music producer."

Eileen remained in thought for a while, then she held out her hand for the violin, took it from the man and went to the wall where she hung it up, as if dismissing a distasteful subject.

Back to the young man's face came the hopeless look of remembrance. "I had almost forgotten myself," he remarked. "Thank you! I must be off. I should not be here. I--I should never have intruded."

"One moment!" said Eileen. "The air is chilly and you have nothing but that thin, torn, cotton shirt on your back. Get into this! It is an old sweater of mine; it is loose and big. It will keep the cold out."

"No! You have already done more than I can ever hope to pay back. I might get caught with it on---"

"But you must," she put in imperiously. "I have several of them. This is the oldest of those I have. You are not depriving me of anything, and you will be glad of it before the morning, for it is cold up here at nights."

He took it from her with reluctance, pushed his arms into it and drew it over his head and shoulders.

"Thank you!" he said in a quiet voice. "I was sick and in prison--I was anhungered--I was thirsty--I was naked. I don't know exactly how it goes," he apologised, "but it is something like that and it certainly does apply to you, miss."

His mood changed. He turned up part of the sleeve of the sweater and put it to his lips.

Eileen's face took on a flood of colour despite herself.

A smile flitted across the unshaven face of the man, disclosing his regular, clean teeth.

Eileen drew herself up stiffly.

She went to the door and opened it to allow him to pass out of her life as he had come into it. But as he turned to go, he started back at a sound in the dark.

The tall, athletic figure of a man loomed up, blocked the way and stepped into the kitchen beside them.

Eileen gasped and clutched at her bosom in terror.

"Mr. Brenchfield," she cried in sudden anger, "what do you mean? You--you have been watching. I didn't think you were a spy, although after all, possibly I did, for I intentionally held back the man you are after."

Brenchfield ignored her remark and pointed with his finger at the fugitive, who came forward, his eyes staring as if he were seeing an apparition.

"Great God,--you!" exclaimed the young man. Then with a catching sound in his throat, he sprang at the burly, well-fed man before him.

Brenchfield was taken completely by surprise. He staggered against the side of the door, as thin claw-like fingers found his throat and tried to stop the vital air. The fingers closed on his

windpipe too tightly for comfort.

Eileen cried out and tried to go between, but she was thrust aside.

The men swayed together, then Brenchfield's hands went up, catching the other by the wrists in a firm hold. There was a momentary struggle, the runaway's grip was broken and he was flung to the floor.

Brenchfield turned to Eileen.

"Miss Pederstone, have you gone crazy trying to hide this man? Don't you know he is a runaway; a dangerous convict? The police--blind fools--didn't tumble to your nervousness, but I caught on. I knew you had him hidden in the wood-box."

The hunted man rose slowly from the floor and staggered forward, gasping for breath. He gave Brenchfield a look of loathing.

"Graham," he said brokenly, "may the good God forgive you, for I never shall."

He threw out his thin arms and looked at them, while tears of impotence came into his eyes. He clenched his hands and grit his teeth. "And may the devil, your friend, protect you," he continued threateningly, "when these grow strong again."

Brenchfield looked him over with indifference.

"My good fellow, you'll excuse me! You have wheels in your head. I don't know you from a hedge-fence. Damn it!" he suddenly flared angrily, "I don't want to know you. Get out; quick! before I help you along, or put you in the hands of your friends down the hill who are so anxious to renew your acquaintance."

The young man stared fearlessly into the eyes of Graham Brenchfield, wealthy rancher, cattleman, grain merchant and worthy Mayor of Vernock. Then his lips parted in a strange smile, as he threw up his head.

He turned to Eileen.

"Guess I've *got* to go now. I have my marching orders."

"Come on;--enough of this--git!" put in Brenchfield roughly, stepping up in a threatening manner.

The fugitive ignored the interruption.

"Good-bye, Miss--Miss Pederstone--and, remember this from a convict who doesn't count:--as surely as there is a wolf-note in some violins, so surely is there a wolf-note in some men. Strike the wolf-note and you set the devils in hell jumping."

In the next moment he passed out at the door and down the dusty highway leading to Vernock.

Graham Brenchfield stood looking after him until the night shut him out.

Eileen Pederstone stared in front of her with eyes that saw no outward thing.

At last Brenchfield broke the silence.

"It was rather unwise--foolish--harbouring such a man as that; and your father from home."

"Yes?" queried Eileen, with a slow intonation of resentment.

"Unprotected as you were!"

"We girls would have little need for protection if you men were all as gentlemanly as he was. He seemed to be an old acquaintance of yours. Who is he?"

Brenchfield shrugged his shoulders.

"Pshaw!--that kind would claim acquaintance with the very devil himself. You don't suppose I ever met him before. He is a dangerous criminal escaped from Ukalla."

"He told me so," put in Eileen, as if tired of the interview, "and he seemed quite annoyed when I refused to believe the *dangerous criminal* part."

"But the police tell me he *is*. It was only for your sake that I let him go."

Brenchfield tried to turn her to the seriousness of her misdemeanour. "For the sake of your good name, you had no right admitting him. You know what Vernock is like for gossip. You know the construction likely to be placed on your action."

Eileen drew herself up haughtily.

"You'll excuse me, Mr. Brenchfield! When did you earn the right to catechise Eileen Pederstone?"

He changed suddenly and his peculiarly strong and handsome face softened.

"I am sorry. I did not mean it in that way, Eileen. And this is no time to speak, but--but I hope--some day--"

The girl held up her hand, and he stopped.

He was tall, full-chested and tremendously athletic of figure and poise, with dark eyes that fascinated rather than attracted and a bearing of confidence begotten of five years of triumphal success in business ventures and real-estate transactions; a man to whom men would look in a crisis; a man whom most men obeyed instinctively and one to whom women felt drawn although

deep down in their hearts they were strangely afraid of him.

He held Eileen with his eyes.

"There is something I wish to ask you some day, Eileen. May I?"

"Nothing serious, I hope, Mr. Brenchfield?" she returned lightly, for she at least had never acknowledged any submission to those searching eyes of his. "And please remember, it is past midnight. My father isn't here."

"Serious!--yes!" he returned, ignoring her admonition, "but some day will do."

"It is an old story;--some day may never come, good sir!"

He smiled indulgently.

Eileen, despite her apparent unconcern, placed her hand over her heart as if to stay a fluttering there.

Mayor Brenchfield was a young man, a successful man; to many women he would have been considered a desirable man.

He professed friendship with Eileen's father. He put business her father's way. He was of the same political leanings. He had met Eileen on many occasions. Brenchfield was a tremendously energetic man; he seemed to be everywhere at once.

Eileen, like other women, could not help admiring him for his forceful handling of other men, for his keen business acumen, for his almost wizardly success.

He had many qualities that appealed strongly to the romantic in her youthful nature; but, girl-like, she had not stopped at any time to analyse the feelings he engendered in her.

And now, up there on the hill, in the chill of the night air, under the stars that hung so low and prominently that one felt one might almost reach up and pluck them from the heavens,--now there came a sudden dread.

It was this inexplicable dread that set her heart athrob.

Brenchfield took her hand from her bosom and patted it gently.

His touch annoyed her. She drew away imperiously, and she shivered.

"Why, little woman!--you are cold and it is very late. How thoughtless of me! Good night, Eileen!"

"Good night!" she returned wearily, closing the door.

The moment he heard the bolts shoot home, Brenchfield's whole nature changed. An oath came to his lips. He crushed his hat down on his head, leapt the fence and rushed headlong by the short cut down through the orchards--townward.

At the Kenora Hotel corner his low whistle brought two men from the saloon.

The three conversed together earnestly for a few moments, then they separated to different positions in the shadows but commanding a full view of the road leading down the hill from the east of the Main Street of Vernock.

But of all this Eileen Pederstone--alone in the little bungalow up on the hill--was blissfully ignorant.

CHAPTER III

At Pederstone's Forge

Pederstone the blacksmith--or, to give him his full name which he insisted on at all times, John Royce Pederstone--was busy on his anvil, turning a horse shoe. His sleeves were rolled up almost to his shoulders and his lithe muscles slipped and rippled under his white skin in a rhythm of harmony. His broad chest was bare as his arms, and his chubby apple-red cheeks shone with perspiration which oozed from his every pore. He was singing to himself in happy unconcern about his being a jovial monk contented with his lot. Two horses were tied inside the shop waiting to be shod, chafing and pawing in their impatience.

Pederstone's right-hand man, Sol Hanson, a great chunk of a bachelor Swede, was at the back door swearing volubly because an iron tire refused to fit the wooden rim of a cart wheel to his satisfaction.

Horseshoes, ploughs, harrows, iron gates and cart and buggy wheels of all kinds were lying about in disorderly profusion.

The noonday sun was pouring in aslant at the front door, while at the back door, away from Hanson, a Russian wolf-hound was stretched out lazily gnawing at a bone which it held between its fore paws.

The furnace fire was blazing, and Pederstone's anvil was ringing merrily, when suddenly the melodious sounds were interrupted by a deep growl and then a yelp of pain from the hound as it sprang away from the spurred boot of a great, rough, yet handsome figure of a man of the cowboy type, who came striding in, legs apart, dressed in sheepskin chaps.

"Say, Ped!--ain't you got that hoss o' mine shod? Can't wait all day in this burg!"

The smith stopped suddenly and glared at the newcomer.

"None of that Ped stuff, you untamed Indian! Mr. Royce Pederstone to you and your kind; and, if you don't like it and can't wait your turn, take your cayuse out of here and tie her up at the back of the hotel for an hour or two. You're not half drunk enough yet to be going back to Redmans Creek."

"All right, Mister-Royce-Pederstone--but I ain't Indian, and don't you forgit it. The fact that I git all the booze I like from Charlie Mac settles that in this burg."

It was a sore point with the newcomer, for at least three-quarters of him was white, and part of it first-class white at that.

He took off his hat.

"Ever see an Indian with hair like that?"

He pushed a tousled head of flaring red hair under the blacksmith's nose. He struck his chest dramatically with his fist.

"Donald McTavish McGregor, that's my name. And I'm off to take your advice, but you can keep the mare till she's shod."

He swaggered out.

At the door he had to side-step--much to his disgust--to get out of the way of one, Ben Todd, who was not in the habit of making way for anyone but a lady. Todd was the Editor and Manager of the *Vernock and District Advertiser*, the man behind most of the political moves in the Valley. He was a hunchback, with a brain that always seemed to have a "hunch" before any other brain in the country started to wake up.

"Hullo, John!" shouted Todd.

"Fine day, Ben!" returned Pederstone.

"See the Government's turned down the new Irrigation Scheme!"

"What?" shouted Pederstone. "The mean pikers!"

"Guess it's about time we had a new Government, John!"

"Yes!--or at least a new member for the Valley," returned the smith.

"Well,--there's truth in that, too. And, as you're President of the Association, why don't you get the boys to change their man? The one we've got has been too long on the job. Seems to think he's in for life."

"The trouble is, Ben,--who could we get that would be an improvement?"

"Why not have a try at it yourself, John, at the coming election?" suggested the editor as a feeler.

"What!--me?" exclaimed the smith in surprise, viewing the serious look on the face of the bearded hunchback.

"Sure!--why not?"

"It isn't a question of why not," laughed Royce Pederstone, "but rather one of WHY."

"Because we want you," returned the editor. "You're one of us, and you know what this Valley requires better than any other."

Royce Pederstone was silent.

"Would you run if we put you up?" pursued Ben Todd.

"Might," grinned the smith, "but I won't say where I'd run to."

"But straight goods?"

"No, siree! Not for me! A bit of ranching and my work here in the shop keeps me busy enough. In fact, I've been thinking lately that I would like to give up this strenuous labour in the smithy."

Ben Todd was about to pursue the subject further when they were interrupted by the approach of a horse, which pulled up abruptly at the front door. A beautiful, full-blooded mare, of tremendous proportions, reared high in the air, then dropped to a stand-still as docile as a lamb.

Mayor Brenchfield, groomed to perfection in leggings and riding breeches, slid to the ground, thrust his reins through a hitching ring and stepped inside, thus providing the third side of an interesting triangle for conversation.

They had been talking for some fifteen minutes, when the conversation veered to the subject that had been uppermost in everyone's mind in the neighbourhood of Vernock for many weeks past.

"I see the Assizes have got through with their work at last," put in Ben Todd.

Brenchfield's eyebrows moved slightly.

"Yes?"

"Loo Yick, the chink, is to hang."

"You bet,--the yellow skunk! Imagine a fine girl like Lottie Mays being done to death by that; and every man that ever saw her just crazy for her."

"Well!--Lottie and her kind take chances all the time. Somebody generally gets them in the finish," put in Royce Pederstone. "She wasn't content with her price, but stole his wad as well. The town would be better quit of the bunch."

"Guess you're right," agreed Brenchfield. "But it does seem a pity we can't cut down in the number of Chinamen we have in the Okanagan."

"Yes!" put in Todd, "but you know who brought them here. You fellows with the ranches, looking for cheap help, did it."

He laughed. "And, by God, you got it with a vengeance; and all that goes with it. They're likely to rout us out of house and land before they're through with us. You will have one *high-U* time getting them out,--believe me."

"And Pierre Qu'appelle got sent down for ten years."

"Guess that ends the wholesale thieving that has been going on around Vernock these last five years."

"Hope so!" exclaimed the Mayor. "But you can't always sometimes tell."

"Pierre didn't have the ghost of a chance; caught with the goods on him," remarked Todd.

"Seems funny to me that he should play a lone game, though," said Royce Pederstone.

"Not when you know the bunch he gangs with," remarked Ben Todd. "They're generally all in it, and one man takes the risk and the blame. He'll get his share kept for him till he comes out again."

"Morrison of the O.K. Supply Company says he has had over seven thousand dollars' worth of feed and flour stolen from his warehouses inside of six months. The Pioneer Traders never give out what they lose."

"You, yourself, have lost quite a bit, haven't you, Brenchfield?" put in Pederstone.

"Yes!--from time to time, but I could never lay my finger definitely on the shortage. My records have been faulty in the past, but I'm going to keep a better watch on it for the future."

"Well!" returned the smith, "the fewer of Pierre Qu'appelle's thieving kind we have in the community, the better for all of us."

"We pretty nearly had a newcomer of the same brand when you were at Enderby, John."

"So I heard! How did it finish, Ben? I heard they got him. How did they manage it?"

"Better ask the Mayor," said the editor guardedly. "He ought to know how these things finish. Who was the man, Graham? How did the chase end?"

"Oh!" muttered Brenchfield, "it was some runaway from Ukalla. He landed in here under a freight train, and the detectives were riding in the caboose and he didn't know it."

Todd laughed.

"Pretty good copy! What else?"

"He gave them the slip. They got in touch with me later. We set off on a hunt. Found the fellow in a barn. But he got out at the skylight window and made a run for it."

"The poor devil! He deserved to get away after that," remarked the editor.

"Pretty nearly did, too! One of the detectives winged him on the B. X. Road," lied the Mayor. "He beat us to it for a time. I went home to bed after a bit, but I heard later that they fell in with their man looking for food in Chinatown in the early morning. He led them another chase up over the high road and down the Kickwillie Loop to the lake. He got into a rowing boat and made out into the middle of the water. The detectives got into Murray's gasoline launch and were soon within hailing distance of him. But the beggar was game, although he must have been half-dead by that time."

"When he saw it was all up, he took off the coat, or sweater, or whatever it was he was wearing, wrapped it round the little anchor in the boat, undid the rope and plumped the lot into the lake."

"What on earth did he do that for?" asked Pederstone.

"Oh, I guess he got the clothes from someone up here and didn't wish to implicate them."

"By gosh! but he was game," put in Ben Todd. "Darned if I wouldn't like a shake of his hand for that!"

The editor turned, and his expression changed. He raised his hat.

"Eh,--excuse my language, Miss Pederstone. I,--I didn't know you were there."

The talk stopped abruptly, as Eileen Pederstone came forward into the centre of the shop.

"Hello, Eilie, dear!" cried her father. "Dinner time already? and my work miles ahead of me,

while we gossips are going at it like old wives at market. Why,--what's the matter, lass?"

The girl's face showed pale in the light of the forge fire and her eyes were moist.

She pulled herself together.

"Nothing, daddy! I was just feeling sorry for that poor young fellow Mr. Brenchfield was telling about."

"Tuts!" exclaimed Todd, "don't waste your sorrow, Eileen. Why,--he wasn't a young fellow. He was an old, grey-haired, cross-eyed, yellow-toothed, dirty, wizened-faced, knock-kneed specimen of a jailbird escaped from Ukalla. Look up the Advertiser Thursday, you'll see."

"Oh no, he wasn't; he--he,--Mr. Brenchfield---" Eileen stopped. "Didn't I hear you say he was a young man, Mr. Brenchfield?" she asked, endeavouring to cover up her confusion, turning her big eyes full on the Mayor.

"Why, eh--yes! I did mention something about him being young," gallantly agreed Brenchfield.

"Did--he--get--away?" inquired Eileen desperately.

Brenchfield busied himself adjusting his leggings. Eileen put her hand on his arm.

"Did he get away, Mr. Brenchfield?" she asked again.

"Better finish the yarn, Graham!" said Royce Pederstone. "Eilie is like others of her sex; you can't shake her once she gets a grip."

"Well!" resumed Brenchfield uneasily, "as far as I can learn the man jumped out of the rowing boat as the launch came up on him. He tried to swim for it. He evidently knew how to swim, too;--but he was weak as a kitten. The detectives played him. When he was thoroughly exhausted, they let him sink."

"The beasts!" exclaimed Eileen, her body aquiver with sudden anger.

"Guess I had better stop this stuff!" said Brenchfield.

"No, no! Don't mind me. Go on!"

"He came up--and they let him sink again. Next time he came up, they fished him out, because he might not have come up again.

"The fellow came to after a bit. You see, that kind won't kill. So I guess he is now safely back home, in his little eiderdown bed, getting fed with chicken broth;--home in Ukalla jail, where he belongs.

"Little boys always get into trouble when they run away from home, eh, Ben!" laughed Brenchfield.

The coarse humour didn't catch on.

Eileen Pederstone laid her basket on the smithy floor, threw a look of contempt into the youthful Mayor's face and walked out with her head high.

"One for his nobs!" laughed Ben Todd. "And, damn it!--you cold-blooded alligator!--she served you rightly."

CHAPTER IV

Wayward Langford

While the foregoing was taking place in Pederstone's smithy at Vernock, a scene of a different nature was being enacted in the Governor's private office at Ukalla Prison.

Phil Ralston, somewhat refreshed from a scrubbing, a good sleep and two prison meals, had just been ushered into the presence of the man who held power almost of life and death over every unfortunate confined there.

Phil expected no mercy. His feelings were blunted by what he had already gone through, so the worst that might happen now did not worry him; for, when hope of relief entirely goes, what one has to face loses most of its terrors.

The well-fed, strong-jawed governor leaned over his desk and looked at his prisoner.

"Ay, Ralston! So you were a naughty boy and ran away!"

The young fellow did not reply.

"Look up, man! I'm not going to eat you."

Ralston's eyes met his calmly.

"Why did you run away?"

"Because my time was up, sir!"

"Of course it was! Hang it all!--that's why I can't understand your behaviour."

The governor smiled in a manner that was meant to be reassuring--for, after all, he knew he had exceeded his limit and, if it were known, he might have difficulty in squaring himself.

"But you told me, sir, that I had still two weeks to serve."

"What? I told you that? Why, man, you're crazy. Wake up! You foolish fellow, don't you know that the moment you made off, your discharge papers were lying on my desk all ready?"

"And you *didn't* say I had two more weeks to serve?"

"No, damn it, no! How could I? Why, Johnston there had already been sent to the storage room for your belongings.

"Isn't that so, Johnston?"

"Yes, sir!" nodded the chief jailer emphatically.

"Didn't I tell you number three hundred and sixteen was due out that day?"

"Yes, sir! Remember distinctly, sir."

Phil's lip curled contemptuously, and, although he was in no mood for arguing under such conditions, he could not resist one more query.

"Why then did they go after me and bring me back, sir?"

"Why did they! Why do you think, you young fool? Do you imagine breaking out is the way to leave Ukalla Jail? What kind of an institution do you think we are running here? Do you fancy we are going to stand still to that kind of thing? What kind of respect have you for my good reputation anyway? You selfish bunch are all alike!

"Of course we went after you! Of course we brought you back, just to teach you manners, same as a school teacher calls back a scholar to shut the door he has left open.

"If you got your deserts you would be back there for a few months longer. If you don't watch yourself when you get out, you'll be back here again. Eh, Johnston!"

"Yes, sir! They generally do come back, sir," grunted that echo. "Seem to like us; can't stay away, sir!"

"Now, Ralston! Here is your discharge. You're free to go when you like. But Johnston will open the gate for you this time."

In an overflow of weakness, Phil reeled at the unexpected news. He staggered against the Governor's desk as he clutched at the paper.

That official smiled benignly. "Here is a present from the government, a cheque for fifty dollars for your faithful services--never absent, never late," he grinned. "Johnston has your two grips in the hall with your stuff in them that they found in your shack at Carnaby."

He held out his hand.

"Good-bye, Ralston! You've been a good lad here but for your one bad break fifteen months ago, and this one. Don't come back."

In half an hour, Philip Ralston was breathing the air of freedom in the inter-urban tram speeding toward Vancouver.

It was the spring of the year. His worldly wealth was fifty dollars. His clothes were some years behind the latest model, but they were decent enough, clean and serviceable.

He put up at a third-rate hotel on Cordova Street and spent one glorious week sleeping, eating, strolling the busy streets and lounging in the parks and on the beaches. He spoke to few, although he had of a necessity to listen to many. At the hotel in the evenings, several transients told him their story, hoping thereby to hear his own as a time-chaser, but Phil, true to the sobriquet he had earned at Ukalla, remained silent.

At the end of a week, after paying his bed and board, his fifty dollars had dwindled to thirty. He knew he could not afford to let it go much lower, otherwise the detectives, who seemed forever spying on him, would be arresting him on a vagrancy charge. Vancouver was chuck-full of detectives, many of whom Phil knew by sight, while the others he sensed. And he loathed and abhorred their entire breed.

Too many were the stories he had heard from fellow prisoners at Ukalla, who had tried honestly to take up some definite occupation after leaving jail, only to be hounded from position to position by these interfering sleuths who fancied it their duty to inform the erstwhile employer that the man who was working for him was an ex-jailbird and consequently should have a keen eye kept on him for a while. The inevitable, of course, followed; for what employer could afford to have an ex-convict on his staff?

And so, Phil did not attempt to secure work in Vancouver. He had a horror of the rush and buzz of the city anyway.

Policemen were everywhere; on the sidewalks watching everybody and everything; at the street corners directing the traffic.

Self-consciousness made Phil feel guilty almost. These men gave him the creeps, innocent of all guilt though he was. His one desire was to get as far away from them and all things connected with them as was possible.

He sat on a seat in the park one afternoon, trying to decide his future.

He thought of Graham Brenchfield, now Mayor of Vernock, evidently wealthy beyond Phil's wildest dreams. He remembered the old partnership pact and the five hundred dollars he paid for it--five years, a pool and a straight division of the profits. He put his hand in his pocket, took out his money and counted it over;--twenty-four dollars and fifteen cents.

He laughed. But his laugh was void of merriment, for he had vowed solemnly to himself in prison that some day he would get even with Graham Brenchfield. And, so far as Brenchfield was concerned, the iron was still in Phil Ralston's soul.

As he sat there, the vision of an angel face came back to him; the picture of a girl of small frame, fairy-like, agile, bending over him as he lay faint and wounded on the floor of her little bungalow up on the hill overlooking Vernock. And it settled his mental uncertainty.

He would go back there! It was a free and bracing life in that beautiful Valley, and, God knows! that was what he required after five years of confinement. He could pick up his strength while at work on the farms, or among the orchards, or on the cattle ranges. Lots of things he could do there!

No one would know him,--no one had seen him before but she and Brenchfield. She would never recognise him--shaved and clean--for the broken, ragged wretch whom she had befriended. As for Brenchfield--he would know Phil anywhere, in any disguise, but Phil knew how to close his mouth tighter than a clam.

Besides, there was the settlement to be made between Brenchfield and himself.

Yes!--Vernock was the place of all places for Phil Ralston.

He went back to the hotel, dressed himself in the best clothes he had, paid his score and packed his grips. And that night he was speeding eastward.

On the following afternoon he landed at the comparatively busy little ranching town of Vernock, where he had decided to try out his fortune.

He left his grips at the station and sauntered down the Main Street. There were few people about at the time and all were evidently too intent on their own particular business to pay much attention to a new arrival. He passed a commodious-looking hotel, built of wood, typically western in style, with hitching posts at the side of the road, a broad sidewalk and a few steps up to a wide veranda which led into an airy and busy saloon.

For want of anything better to occupy his attention, Phil strolled in. He called for a glass of beer at the bar. While waiting service, he took in his surroundings.

Several men were lounging at the bar talking loudly, smoking, spitting carelessly and drinking. At a table, near the window, a long-legged, somewhat wistful-looking young man, with prominent front teeth and a heavy mop of auburn hair, was sitting in front of a glass of liquor, gazing lazily into the vacant roadway. From an adjoining room off the saloon rough voices rose every now and again in argument over a poker game which was in progress there between a number of men who appeared to be in off some of the neighbouring ranches.

As Phil surveyed the scene, a man galloped up to the hotel entrance, tossed his reins over his horse's head and jingled loudly into the saloon. He was clean-cut, dark-skinned and red-haired, and walked with a swinging gait. He shouted the time of day to the bar-tender, as he kept on into the inner room where the card game was in progress.

Phil guessed him for the foreman of the cattlemen inside and conjectured that he had been giving them some instructions regarding their departure, but passed the incident from his mind as quickly as it had cropped up: and he was still slowly refreshing himself when half a dozen rough-looking men tumbled out of the card-room.

"Come on fellows! Drinks all round, Mack! Don't miss a damned man in the room. Everybody's havin' one on me."

The speaker hitched up his trousers, blew out a mouthful of chewing tobacco and waved his arm invitingly.

The counter loungers gathered round in expectation, as the proprietor and his assistant busied themselves filling the welcome order.

"Hi, Wayward!" he continued, shouting over to the long-legged man sitting by the window. "What-ya drinkin'?"

There was no answer.

"Oh, hell!--he's up in the clouds. Take him over a Scotch and soda, Pete."

Phil looked up in time to intercept a wink between the speaker and one of his gang.

"Hello, stranger! Just blowed in?"

"Yes!" answered Phil. "I am just off the train."

"Stayin' long?"

"Possibly!"

"All right,--what's your poison? It's my deal and your shout."

"Nothing for me, thanks!" replied Phil. "I've all I require here."

The broad-shouldered, clean-limbed fellow came over closer to Phil.

"Say, young man,--'tain't often Don McGregor stands drinks all round, but when he does 'tain't good for the health to turn him down. You've got to have one on me, or you and me ain't goin' to be friendly,--see."

Phil looked him over good-naturedly and smiled.

"Oh, all right; let her go!" he answered. "I'll have a small lemonade."

"What?" exploded the man who called himself Don McGregor.

A shout of laughter came from everyone in the bar-room.

"Didn't you ask me to name my drink?" put in Phil.

"Sure!"

"Well--I've named it."

"No, you ain't! Lemonade ain't a drink: it's a bath."

More merriment greeted the sally.

Phil flushed but held down his rising temper. He had had five years' experience of self-effacement which stood him in good stead now.

"You're not trying to pick a quarrel with me?" he inquired quietly.

"Me? Not on your life! I ain't pickin' scraps with the likes of you. But, for God's sake, man,--name a man-sized drink and be quick. The bunch is all waitin'."

Phil immediately changed his tactics.

"Thanks!" he answered. "I'll have a Scotch."

"That's talkin'."

The bar-tender came over with a bottle in his hand. "Say when!" he remarked to Phil.

"Keep a-going," put in Phil. "Up,--up!"

McGregor stood and gaped.

"That's 'nough!" said Phil easily, as the liquor was brimming over.

The bar-tender pushed along a glass of water. Phil pushed it back.

At a draught he emptied the liquor down his throat. It burned like red-hot coals, for he was unused to it, but he would have drunk it down if it had cremated him.

McGregor had made a miscalculation and he appeared slightly crestfallen as he turned from Phil and talked volubly to his comrades.

While they conversed, McGregor backed gradually, as if by accident, until he was almost touching Phil. Finally he got the heel of his boot squarely on Phil's toe, and he kept it there, pressing harder and harder every second, still talking loudly to those around him and apparently all oblivious of his action.

Even then Phil had no definite notion that it was not merely the clumsy accident of a half-intoxicated cowboy.

At last he poked the man in the back.

"Excuse me," he said, "but when you are finished with my foot I should like to have it."

"What'n the--Oh!" exclaimed the red-haired man, grinding his full weight on Phil's toe as he got off. "Was I standin' on you? Hope I didn't hurt you!" he grinned maliciously.

The pain was excruciating, but still Phil forebore with an effort, accepting the man's half-cocked apology.

Suddenly a new diversion appeared in the shape of a half-witted boy of about twelve years of age, who slouched in evidently on the look-out for any cigar ends that might be lying about the floor.

The boy was clad raggedly and wore a perpetual grin.

"Hullo, Smiler!" cried one of the men. "Come and have a drink."

The boy shook his head and backed away.

McGregor made a grab at him and caught him by the coat collar. He pulled the frightened youngster to the counter and, picking up a bottle of whisky, thrust it under the lad's nose.

"Here, kid;--big drink! Ginger-beer;--good stuff!"

The boy caught the bottle in his hands, tilted it and took a gulp. Then he coughed and spluttered, and spat it out, almost dropping the bottle as McGregor, laughing hilariously, laid hold of it.

"Come on, Smiler!--you got to finish this. Say, Stitchy,--let's make him drunk. Here!--you hold him."

The boy made that inarticulate cry which dumb people make when seized suddenly with fear.

Only then did it strike Phil Ralston that the lad was dumb, as well as half-witted.

The man whom McGregor addressed as Stitchy caught the boy and held him securely by the arms, tilting his head backward until he was unable to move. McGregor brought the bottle and was on the point of forcing the helpless Smiler to open his mouth, when the bottle was sent flying out of his hands and he staggered back against the counter from a blow on the side of the face from Phil's fist.

"Leave the boy alone!" he cried angrily, his face pale as he laboured to stifle his excitement.

He had refrained from interfering as long as he could, well knowing his present physical weakness and what a mix-up might mean to him if the police happened along, but this ill-treatment was a little more than he could stand, despite all possible consequences.

The moment Smiler was released, the boy ran to the door and away.

Meantime, McGregor pulled himself together and began to laugh as if from his stomach.

"I guess that means a scrap," he grunted.

"Not that I know of," put in Phil. "But I like to see fair play. The youngster wasn't hurting you."

For answer McGregor unbuckled his belt and handed it to his friend called Stitchy, spitting noisily on the saw-dusted floor.

The hotel proprietor jumped over the counter and interfered.

"There's going to be no rough-house here. If you fools want to fight get out on the back lot where there's plenty of room. Come on,--out you go! The whole caboodle of you!"

He and his assistant--both burly men--cleared the bar.

Phil was among the last to leave, and, in a faint hope of avoiding trouble, he turned aside, but McGregor sprang after him and laid hold.

"Not by a damn-sight!" he cried. "Here, stick them up!"

He feinted round Phil, then ran in on him. Phil had no alternative. He put up his arms, jumped aside and dealt the cattleman a stiff blow on the mouth.

The crowd gathered round and made a ring. For a time, Phil more than held his own, getting in blow after blow, while McGregor tried his best to come to grips.

"Don't ever let him get his arms round you," cautioned a friendly voice, the owner of which Phil had no time to note.

The stout-chested cattleman had no science, but he possessed an unlimited amount of vital energy and strength. Phil had science, but nothing else to back it up.

The ultimate issue was beyond all question and Phil knew it, for five minutes had not gone ere he was gasping for breath and had black specks floating in hundreds before his vision. He sprang aside and circled time and again, trying to avoid his antagonist's determination to get to grips, but at last, just after a particularly close escape, someone pushed him suddenly from behind and, before he was aware of it, two great arms were round him crushing the life out of him. He struggled frantically, but felt like a puppy-dog in the paws of a grizzly. He was whirled round and round till he grew dizzy. He was crushed and hugged until he became faint. When his bones were cracking and the very life seemed oozing out of him, he felt himself suddenly catapulted somewhere in glorious release, then his senses gave way and he remembered no more for a time.

When he came to, he was lying on the bar-room floor. Someone, whose face he recollected, was bending over him, holding up his head and mopping his brow with a wet cloth. He looked into the face and remembered it. It was the long-legged man with the mop of wavy, auburn hair, whom he had noticed sitting by the window in abstraction a short time before.

"Getting better, old man?" said the young fellow good-naturedly, grinning and showing his great, strong, prominent teeth.

Phil muttered a few inarticulate words of thanks and tried to rise. The lanky man helped him up, led him over to a bench, set him down and then sat down beside him.

"Sorry I didn't interfere sooner. Might have saved you that rough handling," said the stranger. "But to tell you the truth, I thought you were going to eat Rob Roy McGregor up. Guess you could, too, for you handle your fists better than any man I have ever seen;--but you're just as weak as a half-drowned kitten. What's the matter; been boozing?"

"No!" replied Phil. "I seldom drink."

"Lucky you!" put in the big fellow. "Sick then?"

"Yes!--I--I'm just recovering from a severe illness," answered Phil, for want of a better excuse.

"Just come into town?"

"I came in off the noon train."

"Any friends?"

"No!"

"Say!--you don't mind me cross-examining you this way, old man? I--I kind of like your looks."

A big smile went over the face of the stranger, wrinkling and puckering it amusingly.

"What's your name? Mine's Jim Langford. They call me Wayward,--because I am. I'm a B. Sc. of

Edinburgh University; a barrister, by profession only; lazy; fond of books and booze; no darned good; always in trouble; sent out here for the good of my health and for the peace of mind of the family, after a bit of trouble; had ten thousand dollars to start with; spent it all before I woke up. I get fifty dollars a month to keep away from the Old Land.

"Have you a place to sleep to-night? Got any baggage?"

"No!" said Phil, in answer to the second last question. "I haven't had time to look around yet. My baggage is at the station."

"Come then! Let's get your stuff. My landlady has a spare room. I guess she'll be glad to let you have it. She's a decent sort, too."

Phil hesitated a moment.

"If you haven't got the money, that won't matter."

"I have a little;--a very little,--enough for a few days. I'm up here to find work."

"Well,--come along with me for the time being," said Langford.

"All right!" assented Phil. And the two walked up Main Street together, up toward the railway tracks, past the barn Phil had hidden in on his first, unofficial visit to Vernock.

"How,--how did you manage to beat off those cowpunchers?" asked Phil.

"Easy as breathing! I once punched the heart out of that rotter McGregor. Beat a man once, good and plenty, and it isn't hard beating him again. And that doesn't only refer to fighting, either. But say! if I didn't know you were a stranger hereabout, I would have said Rob Roy's picking on you was a put up job."

A pang shot through Phil at the suggestion, and it set him wondering.

"First thing you've got to do, young fellow, is to get up your strength and go back and lick the stuffing out of that scum. If you don't, your life won't be worth living in Vernock."

Phil laughed.

"That's straight goods!" returned Langford, his Scottish burr turning the Western phrase strangely.

"Well--I don't mind if I do," said Phil.

They called in at the railway depot, and Phil got his two grips.

"Ralston!--what kind of business do you follow? Hope you aren't a pen-pusher, because pen-pushing isn't for you for some time to come. What you need is something out in the open. You seem to have played merry hell with your constitution. I'm skin and bone myself, but I'm not the fattening kind. I'm built for speed. Now your frame's made for muscle and flesh, and you haven't a pick of meat on your entire carcass."

Phil smiled in an embarrassed kind of way.

"Don't mind me," continued Langford. "You'll get on to my way after a bit. What's your line of trade?"

"Well, to be honest," said Phil, "I haven't any. I came out here to try anything. I'm an M.A. of Toronto University; have substituted in school; can clear land if I get my own time to it; have a pretty fair knowledge of accounting; but haven't done much of anything so far. I used to be a good athlete."

It was Langford's turn to smile.

"Another poor, hand-fed chicken out of the University incubator, who can do everything but what he is meant to do--lay eggs, golden ones. Say, Ralston, the world is full of us and we're little or no damned good. We know too much, or think we do, to be contented with the pick and shovel game, and we don't know enough--because we think we know it all already--to get down to the steady grind year in and year out, at some business that might ultimately bring us to an armchair job. So we go along with our noses to the ground snuffing for a convenient hole to crawl into.

"Oh, well!" he exploded, "who the devil wants to be tied up body and soul to some corporation all his life, for the sake of making a little money that somebody else is going to go to the dogs over after you have gone?"

CHAPTER V

The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing

Far enough up the hill to view the blossoming orchards all over the Valley and the distant blue of the lake between the hills, Langford stopped at a large, two-storied dwelling house set in expansive grounds and almost hidden among shade trees.

He walked right in, and Phil followed him.

A matronly woman, of portly dimensions, met them in the hallway.

"Mrs. Clunie," cried Langford, "I've caught you a new, live lodger fresh off the train to-day. He will just fit the spare room over the way from mine."

Mrs. Clunie looked her prospective tenant over critically.

"Mrs. Clunie,--Mr. Ralston," continued Langford.

Phil bowed, and Mrs. Clunie nodded in a strictly non-committal way.

"His father is Lord Athelhurst-Ralston of Ecclefechan, Mrs. Clunie. He has come out here for his health."

"Mr. Langford,--that'll do," said the landlady severely. "There was no' a Ralston in the whole o' Ecclefechan let alone a Lord What-ye-call-him Ralston, when I left twenty years syne, and I ha'e my doots if there's one there noo. Don't be makin' a fool o' the young man."

"Where do ye come frae, laddie?"

"I come from Campbeltown, Mrs. Clunie."

"What?--Campbeltown on the Mull o' Kintyre,--then you must ha'e left there before you were shortened," she returned quickly.

"Campbeltown, Ontario!" corrected Phil.

"Oh,--ahee!--You're sober, respectable, law-abiding, and attentive to your work?"

"I hope so."

"As upright as Mr. Langford?"

"Oh, yes!" laughed Phil, remembering Langford's autobiography as he had heard it a short time ago.

"I hope so," she returned pointedly, repeating Phil's own words.

"And he can say the Shorter Catechism and repeat the Psalms of David by heart," put in Langford sonorously.

"Mr. Langford,--that'll do. Scotsmen shouldna be flippant ower such serious subjects," the goodly Mrs. Clunie chided.

"Come up stairs and I'll show ye your room."

She showed Phil into a comfortable little place, fixed a price that suited his scanty purse, collected a month's rent on the spot--lest haply Phil might run into temptation by having that much more money in his possession--and left the newcomer to his own devices.

Half an hour later, Langford shouted to him from the hallway.

"Come on over, Ralston, if you're awake."

Phil obeyed.

"We've all had to go through what you did," said Langford, "but Mrs. Clunie is worth it;--she's a crackerjack. How do you like the lay-out?"

Phil was busy taking in the physical features of Langford's room.

But for the bed and the bureau, the room was more like a study than a bedroom. It contained bookcases from floor to ceiling, packed with literary treasures.

"My pals," said Langford, pointing to two of them containing the classics of fiction, poetry and essays.

"My enemies," he continued, nodding at the third bookcase, packed with books on law.

"Friends of mine," he went on, pointing to a pen and inkwell on a small writing table.

He went over to one of the trunks that graced the window as seats. He raised the lid. It was filled to overflowing with rolls of paper, loose sheets and scraps, all closely written upon.

"My babies," he laughed. "Behold in me the most prolific mother in all literature!"

"What are they?" inquired Phil.

"The offsprings of fancy," returned Langford, grandiloquently; "essays, short stories, dramas, poems--all of no financial value. Dime novels worth fifty dollars a time, but all cashed. Advice to the Love Sick--five dollars a column--alas also unconvertible."

Phil stood before him a little nonplussed, while Langford grinned and smoked on.

"I suffer continually the mental pangs of literary childbirth."

He sat in a chair and lounged dreamily as he puffed out clouds of smoke, his long legs sprawling out in front of him.

"You're lucky to have such a talent," put in Phil at last.

"Lucky! Talent!" exclaimed Langford.

"I always understood literature was a lucrative pursuit."

"Pursuit,--yes;--but lucrative! Ye gods!

"You see, Ralston, I suffer with my thoughts until I relieve myself by getting them down as best I can on paper, then I bury them in my trunk along with their elder brothers. I know I ought to burn them, but I haven't the heart to murder my children born in such travail. Some day, however, it will have to be done, otherwise they'll crowd their father-mother out of house and home."

"Don't you try to market your work?"

"I did once--many times once--but they would have none of my high-faluting flights, although as Captain Mayne Plunkett, the writer of penny dreadfuls for the consumption of England's budding pirates and cowpunchers, I am not without a following, and I have a steady contract for one per month at fifty dollars straight. To a New York girls' journal, I am not unkindly thought of as Aunt Christina in the Replies to the Love Lorn column,--five dollars per--."

He laughed reflectively.

"But don't you work?" asked Phil innocently.

"Work! Lord, isn't that work a-plenty?"

"Yes, but work that pays in real dollars and cents."

"Ah!" Langford's eyes swept the ceiling. "Meantime, I am what you might call Assistant to the Government Agent. God knows how long he will suffer me. He is a real good sort, and doesn't expect too much for his money either in time or in ability. I knock about fifty dollars a month out of him when I work, and that, with the fifty with which my old dad so benevolently pensions me, together with fifty for every 'penny horrible' I write, I contrive to eke out a scanty living.

"You've got to work, too, Ralston; haven't you?"

"Work or starve!" answered Phil.

"I hate to think of any man having to work," mused Langford, "but if starve is the only alternative, why, I guess you've got to find a job. Got anything in view?"

"No!"

"Particular about what you tackle?"

"Not at all!"

"All right! I've to be at the Court House at five o'clock. Kick your heels around this little burg for a few hours and I'll try to scare up something for you. But don't get into mischief."

He rose, knocked the ashes out of his pipe on the heel of his boot at the stove, and put on his hat.

He turned at the door.

"Say, Ralston! It won't be any pen-pushing job, mark you. You have to get your muscle up, for there's something I want you to do when you are good and fit."

"And what is that?"

"Tell you later. So long!"

A few minutes later Phil got his hat from the hall-rack and strolled leisurely out, taking the road down the hill toward the main street of the town.

He passed a red brick building which bore the aristocratic title on a large painted sign over the doorway, "Municipal Hall." He looked at the windows. Hanging on one of them, in the inside, was a black card with gilt letters, "Mayor Brenchfield."

Phil's under lip shot out and his brow wrinkled. His hand travelled to his hip pocket, as a nervous man's does when he sees a sign in a railway station, "Beware of Pickpockets."

He swung on his heel and walked up the wooden steps into the main office, as calm and collected as could be.

"Is the Mayor in?" he asked one of the officials.

"Yes! Wish to see him? What name, please?"

"Oh, just tell him it's an old friend."

The office man went into the inner room and soon returned.

"He is very busy on some special work. Would you mind calling in again?"

"Anybody with him?"

"No!"

Phil brushed past the man and walked straight into the Mayor's office, closing the door behind him.

Brenchfield was sitting in an armchair, behind a desk, smoking a huge cigar and blowing clouds in the air; the very picture of municipal overwork.

"Thought it might be you! Heard you were in town. Sit down, Phil!"

"Thanks, no!" returned Phil brusquely.

Brenchfield reached over, opened a cheque book, took up a pen, dipped it in an inkwell, turned his cigar savagely to a corner of his mouth and looked up at his visitor inquiringly.

"How much do you want?"

Phil smiled on him, half-pityingly. Physically, he was tremendously weak, but he despised the man before him so much that it gave him courage and strength.

"How much have you?" he asked.

"None of your damned business!"

"Oh!--I guess you've forgotten that our five years' partnership is up:--a pool and a fair divide, wasn't it? Share and share alike! Well,--there's mine!"

He threw a few bills and a little silver on the table.

Brenchfield pushed back his chair.

"So that's your game, you poor miserable--you know the name!"

"Poor and miserable, all right,--like the fool I was. But I'm not a fool any more. I know you. I know the world just a little better than I did five years ago."

"Shut up, man! Do you wish the whole town to hear?"

"What if they do hear? I've nothing to hide;--I'm not like you."

"And you'll be getting a little more of what you have already had, if you don't go easier than you are doing. See here!--I'm busy, but I'm willing to start you off. What's your price to get out of here for good and forget you ever knew me, and to forget me for all time to come?"

"One-half of all you have, and interest to date,--I to stay here as long as I please."

The Mayor looked at Phil as if he were looking at a lunatic, then he smiled and started in to fill up a cheque.

"I owe you five hundred. I've tacked on a thousand more. There! The train leaves at 3:15 P.M. to-morrow. You get out on it. Do you understand?"

"Thank you!--but this place suits me. I like it and I'm going to stay."

"You are,--eh! If you don't get out with to-morrow's train you'll go out the day following, in a box, feet first."

"Yes! Judging from what happened early this afternoon, I daresay you are quite equal to that kind of thing," said Phil quietly. "But I'm going to stay all the same."

"You won't get a job within twenty miles of Vernock. If you do, you won't hold it, for every man in the district will know you for what you are,--an ex-jailbird."

"Who will tell them?"

"I will."

"No, you won't!"

"Won't I? Try it out and I'll show you quick enough."

Phil went over to Brenchfield's desk.

"I suppose you think your tracks are pretty well covered up after five years."

"I have none to cover," retorted Brenchfield. "I don't know you personally; never did know you;--don't want to know you. I do know you by reputation for an escaped jailbird and a would-be blackmailer, who will be back where he belongs before he is much older. Get that?"

"Yes,--I got it," answered Phil, desperate, and almost beaten, when an imp in his mind set him busy.

"I'm going to stay here, Graham, and you're not going to try to prevent me or say a word that would injure my standing. If you do, then God help you."

Brenchfield laughed up at the ceiling.

"Five years ago," went on Phil, "you wrote a little note in cypher and left it with me when you turned tail and ran away. Maybe you have forgotten about that note. Well,--written things have a habit of turning up."

Brenchfield's bravado oozed away. His hard face grew pale.

"You're lying. You burned that note."

"Did I?"

"If you didn't, it would have been found and would have come out in the evidence."

"Perhaps!"

Phil put his hand in the inside pocket of his jacket, as if to bring out the paper, then he appeared to change his mind, for he desisted and made as if to leave.

Brenchfield jumped up quickly, sprang for the door and stood with his back to it.

"Damn you! How much do you want?"

"Nothing!"

"Name your price and give me that note."

"It is priceless."

"Good heavens, man!--you need money. You're a pauper. I can make you comfortable. I can get you a position that will make you secure for life."

Phil slowly picked up his own money that he had thrown on the desk and put it in his trouser pocket.

"Much obliged!" he remarked, "but I have no intention of remaining a pauper for long. I wouldn't insult my conscience by taking any position you could find for me. Do you mind letting me out?"

For answer, Brenchfield was on him like a wild-cat. Phil wriggled, but the Mayor got behind him, with an arm pressing his throat and a hand over his mouth. With a quick movement and without the slightest noise he bore Phil backward full length on the thickly carpeted floor. He moved his grip and, half strangling him with one hand as he knelt heavily on Phil's chest, he went through Phil's inside pocket.

The pocket was empty.

Phil could not cry out, and would not have done so had he been able.

Slowly Brenchfield searched every pocket in turn. He failed to find a document of any kind.

He released him at last, rose and brushed the dust from his trousers, breathing heavily.

"Damn you!--I knew you lied."

Phil got up also.

"Guess you take me for a fool such as I used to be," he panted. "I don't carry my valuables with me now when I visit your kind. I have more sense. Now, do you mind letting me out?"

Brenchfield made as if he were going to strike Phil in his anger.

"If I thought you had that paper, I'd kill you for it."

"And, if you thought I hadn't, you'd hound the life out of me. Well,--do your darnedest."

"The money offer still holds good," said Brenchfield in a more conciliatory tone. "Keep your mouth shut and I'll do the same. Let me know when you are ready to name your price for that paper."

"When I need the money, I'll let you know," replied the other.

Brenchfield opened the door, and smiling an urbane mayoral "Good afternoon," that all in the main office could hear, he ushered Phil out.

CHAPTER VI

A Bird to Pluck

As he walked down Main Street toward the Kenora Hotel, where it was his intention to have a bite to eat, Phil congratulated himself inwardly, on the one side, on the more than ordinary success of his gigantic bluff--for he knew that so long as he was able to hold this bogey of a confession as a club over the head of Brenchfield, he was safe from open interference:--on the other side, he cursed his arrant stupidity and childlike simplicity in destroying a document which, even if he never used it, proved beyond the shadow of a doubt his innocence of the crime for which he had been imprisoned.

He tried hard to recollect exactly what had happened that fatal morning after Brenchfield had left the shack on the side of the road at Carnaby, but all was more or less hazy and indistinct. He remembered deciphering the note and crumpling it up in his despair and worry. Later, he recollected gathering up the loose papers and other material evidences of Brenchfield's guilt, stuffing them into the stove and setting them alight.

As he walked along his musings were brought to an abrupt stop, as his eye caught sight of a tall, straight, picturesque-looking individual coming toward him. The man was dressed in what at one time had been an immaculate sporting suit, but which, in its now battered and tattered state, gave the wearer the look of a bookmaker who had been dragged through a mud puddle and then hung out to dry.

The man's wide sombrero was battered, his stock around his neck was dirty, the brass buttons on his robin-redbreast waistcoat were dull and tarnished, his riding breeches and leggings seemed sworn enemies of brush and polish. But despite all this, one could not get away from the fact that everything the man wore was of the very best and most expensive materials.

He stepped up in front of Phil apologetically. His voice was attractively musical and exceedingly English.

"Excuse me, old chap! I'm a stranger here. I'm deuced dirty and devilish hungry. Do you mind directing me to a good hotel where I could get a wash and a jolly good tuck in?"

"Certainly," said Phil. "I think the Kenora's all right. I'm going that way myself for a snack, if you care to come along."

"Thanks! Jolly decent! Don't mind if I do!"

He turned with Phil, and as they went on together he took a little silver case from his pocket and handed a card to Phil.

"My name! What's yours?"

Phil scanned the card and smiled.

Percival DeRue Hannington
The Oaks Mount Raeburn
Hants

"Sorry I haven't a card," he said. "My name's Ralston, Phil Ralston."

"Don't mention it, old chap! They don't cotton much to cards out here, I notice."

He wrung Phil's hand heartily.

A little cord was hanging round Percival Hannington's neck and led to a top pocket of his vest. Phil felt positive it terminated in a monocle and, as the stranger's fingers wandered down the cord, Phil, in his dread of what was about to happen, laid his hand restrainingly over the travelling fingers.

"Don't!" he pleaded. "They don't cotton to that, either, out here."

The stranger flushed a little.

"By jove,--you're right. Thanks! Habits are beastly things, you know. Better rid myself of all my old ties if I'm to start afresh, eh!"

He pulled out the monocle, jerked the cord from his neck, snapped the glass between his fingers and tossed the lot into the roadway.

Something in the spontaneous act went to Phil's heart and he felt from that moment that here was a man he could like despite his strange exterior.

They passed through the bar of the Kenora, which was the only way one could get admittance to that hotel unless by the back door among empty cans and kitchen garbage. The strange apparition of the Englishman reduced everyone in the saloon to funereal silence. Phil bravely led the way, however, without mishap, except for a distant shout of laughter which reached them at the dining-room.

Phil spoke to the hotel clerk, who shouted for the bell boy.

"Follow that boy," said Phil. "He will fix you up."

"Thanks! If you don't mind, I should like to have my bite with you, old chap. I won't be a jiffy."

And off he strutted after the grinning boy, while Phil sat in five minutes' dreamy contemplation.

Back came Percival DeRue Hannington, spick and span as far as a clothes-brush and soap and water could make him.

"By jove! It's a corker how much dirt can stick to a fellow without falling off," he remarked. "What are you having?"

Phil named something light.

"That all?" asked Hannington. "I'm hungry as a blooming hawk. I haven't had a decent bite for three months.

"Everything on the blessed calendar for me, miss, frills and extras included," he went on, addressing the waitress, who went away with the end of her apron in her mouth.

"You know, Mister--Mister---"

"Phil Ralston!"

"Ah, yes! Mister Phil---"

"Just plain Phil!"

"Phil--yes, excuse me! You know, I came out to this bally country on false pretences, as it were. Oh,--the country's all right! Don't misunderstand me. It's a regular ripper, but, damme, I got done, you know."

The soup came along, and DeRue Hannington fumbled for his monocle but suddenly seemed to remember that it was no longer a part of him. He blundered awkwardly a while, as if he had suddenly been deprived of one of his active members.

"It's this way, Mister, eh, Phil. The gov'nor thought I was going the pace too hard and becoming a bally rotter, so he said I had to go out West and be a rawncher. He said it just like that,--as if being a rawncher was as easy as being a rotter.

"Are you a rawncher?"

"No! It takes money to be that."

"You're a foreman, or a cowboy, or something?"

"No,--I'm not anything yet," smiled Phil. "I'm just starting in. I've lately finished my college

training.”

The irony in his voice was lost on DeRue Hannington who was too full of his own troubles to worry about those of anyone else.

“Well, you see,--when the dad and I had that tiff, I just took him on.

“I saw an advertisement of a rawnching chap in a London journal, offering to take on an Englishman as an apprentice and teach him everything about rawnching for three years for five hundred dollars a year. I just cabled that fellow and got his answer to come right away. And here I got three months ago.”

All the time he was speaking, Hannington was eating ravenously but with the ease and daintiness of one whose table manners were an eternal part of him.

“The rawncher met me at the station with two horses. Not a blessed wagon or a thing to carry my luggage did the bounder have. It is lying at the station yet;--at least it was last time I called in there. The fellow took my five hundred dollars, then took me twenty miles up over these everlasting hills. A thousand miles in the bally wilderness!

“Of course, you know, Phil, I will admit I was deuced raw.”

Phil laughed. DeRue Hannington’s good nature asserted itself and he laughed, too.

After a while, he went on.

“This rawnching Johnnie’s name was Duff. You don’t happen to know him?”

Phil shook his head.

“Well,--he put me in the charge of Mrs. Duff, and she set me to paring potatoes, washing the floors, scouring pots and pans, wringing clothes and all that sort of rot; till, one day, I just said to Duff that I’d come West to rawnch, not to skivvy.

“Of course, I’ll admit, I didn’t know an apple tree from a cauliflower, but, damme, I was game to learn, Phil. Don’t you think I did right to jolly-well remonstrate?”

“You certainly did!”

Thus encouraged, DeRue Hannington continued:

“He then put me to digging, and digging, and digging, till the cows came home, then to weeding, and weeding, and weeding, miles and miles of rows and rows of beastly carrots and things until I can’t look an honest carrot in the face or a potato in the eye without feeling faint.

“I really didn’t seem to be learning anything, but I stuck it gamely until three days ago, when Mr. and Mrs. Duff went off to visit a neighbour five miles up the Valley. They left me to look after the blooming squawking baby. That just got me real mad, so when it started in to bawl, I sat down and wrote a note saying I was through. I pinned it to the baby,--and, here I am.

“Don’t you think I did the right thing?”

“You bet!” answered Phil, striving hard to suppress his bubbling merriment.

“They cawn’t make me serve my three years out, can they, Phil?” queried DeRue Hannington, anxiously.

“Not they! Why, all they wanted was your five hundred dollars. They’ll be glad to be quit of you.”

The Englishman perked up.

“They’re welcome to the money. But I’m not through rawnching, you know. You see I’ve got the worst over now and I’m feeling quite a Westerner. You don’t happen to know anyone who has a good rawnch for sale?--one with a decent sort of a house and stables, and lots of fruit trees on it. I’ve got the money in the bank, you know, and could pay cash for it. I really think I could run a rawnch now.”

“No,--I haven’t the slightest idea!” returned Phil. “But it shouldn’t be a hard job getting a ranch, if you have the money. There are always lots of people ready to sell goods for cash. Take my advice, though; don’t be in too great a hurry.”

Phil rose to go.

DeRue Hannington followed him to the saloon, where Phil shook hands and left him.

As he passed out at the door he heard the voice of the stranger raised above the general conversation of the saloon.

“Excuse me, but have any of you good fellows any idea where a chap could buy a good rawnch for cash?”

Phil threw up his hands in despair and walked on, knowing that Percival DeRue Hannington had still a lot to learn about ranching and about those who had ranches to sell.

Jim Langford was waiting for Phil at Mrs. Clunie's.

"Where the Sam Hill have you been, Phil? I've been looking for you everywhere. Got a job yet?"

"No,--not even the scent of one!"

"Want one?"

"You bet!"

"Hard work and start to-morrow?"

"Sure thing! Where is it? what is it? who is it? Tell me quick! I'm aching to work for real money, for more reasons than one."

"Royce Pederstone, the blacksmith, is quitting being an active blacksmith any more. He is putting Wildman Hanson in charge, and Hanson's job is going a-begging."

"Wildman Hanson! That sounds good for a start, Jim."

"And it's as good as it sounds, too, young fellow, my lad. I'm not going to tell you anything about his 'wildman' tricks. You'll find that out for yourself in good time. But he's a crackerjack blacksmith and can show you all of the trade that is worth showing."

"I haven't the strength to be a smith."

"Not now;--but you have the frame and you've got to build on it."

"The job's worth twenty dollars a week to start, and it's yours for the taking. I did the asking from Hanson this morning. Are you on?"

"Of course I'm on."

"All right!--six o'clock to-morrow morning at Pederstone's shop, one block down the hill and two blocks to the left."

Langford chuckled.

"What are you grinning at?" asked Phil.

"Oh,--just thinking what you'll be able to do with that rusty-headed, son-of-a-gun McGregor after a month or two under Hanson."

"Thanks! I've had some McGregor, and I'm not greedy. I'm not at all anxious for more."

"What? See here, Phil,--you've got to beat that lobster stiff if it takes you a year. It took me all I knew to turn the trick, and I had to keep off drink for six months to do it, but there was something inside of me that just wouldn't stay quiet till I licked the stuffing out of him. He's a bully. He's the craftiest, sneakiest, most underhand skunk in the Valley. He's at the bottom of most of the trouble with cattle and feed hereabout, but he's too damned wary to be caught."

"I'm surprised at the Mayor having anything to do with him. But, of course, the Mayor's a cattleman himself, and, give Rob Roy McGregor his due, there isn't a better man on stock this side of Calgary."

"And I've to go blacksmithing with the set purpose of eating this fellow up?"

"No, you're going blacksmithing for the purpose of setting yourself up, you rickle of bones! Licking McGregor can be your side line. When you beat him, you'll know you are in pretty good shape."

"All right,--I'm on!" agreed Phil. "But who is this Royce Pederstone? Why is he giving up his work?"

"Who? why? and wherefore? At times you're a regular bairn for asking questions, but when you're wanted to talk you're as silent as the tomb."

"Royce Pederstone has been here since the flood. He's a good blacksmith, only he never finishes a job. If he is making a gate, he stops at the last rivet and Hanson has to drive it home. If he is shoeing a horse, he forgets a nail. If he is making a fish hook, he omits the barb. It is the same with his land deals; he buys land and, for the time being, forgets he owns it so far as selling again is concerned. Then he buys some more whenever he has the ready cash. It is all working for him,--so he says. He owns more earth than he has any idea of. He doesn't know how much stock he has; doesn't even know what happens to his farm implements once he pays for them; in some cases doesn't know if they have been delivered to him. Often he finds some of them when the snow goes away in the spring time. There are many things he doesn't know; all the same it isn't safe to take too many chances on what he passes up."

"Then he has got too rich for blacksmithing?"

"Not he! Royce Pederstone is not that kind of a man, Phil. He is just too busy. He is going to be the next member of parliament from the Valley. Watch and see!"

"The new election comes off in three months' time. Last week the Association met to elect their representative. Some were for Barrington of Armstrong, others for Brenchfield the Mayor. They couldn't agree. Royce Pederstone was chairman of the meeting. At midnight they were as far off a decision as ever. Someone proposed John Royce Pederstone, and it carried without a dissenting voice."

"He's a cracking good man, is Pederstone, on the platform. He is straight, honest and more or less of a farmer. Ben Todd, the editor, is hand and glove with him, so he will have *The Vernock and District Advertiser* at his back.

"The old government is sure to be kicked out of office, if only to give the people a change; so, who is going to keep Royce Pederstone from being the Valley's representative at Victoria, I should like to know?"

"And that's why he's stepping out of the blacksmith's shop?" put in Phil.

"Yes!--that's the why, boy."

Next morning at six o'clock Phil, in the company of Jim Langford, presented himself at Pederstone's forge.

"Hullo!" cried Jim, "that's funny. Not open yet!"

The front door was heavily barred across. They went to the back entrance. It also was firmly secured.

Langford shielded his face with his hand and peered through the narrow, barred windows.

"Well, I'll be darned!" he exclaimed. "And on your first morning, too! Hard luck, Phil!"

"Why,--what is it?"

"Oh, nothing much! Only I fancy you're going to see why your new boss is called Wildman Hanson.

"Look in there."

Phil did so.

"What did you see?"

Phil puckered his face in disgust.

"Not much wildman there," he remarked. "As far as I can see Hanson is sound asleep on a pile of coke. There are two empty bottles at his side. Seems to me he might be dead drunk."

"That's what he is, too."

"Then let's go in and throw a bucket of water over him and wake him up."

"Not on your life! Then there *would* be a funeral. I guess you had better postpone your start till to-morrow. Only one man in Vernock can handle Hanson after he's had a night of it, and that man's the Mayor. Man to man, Hanson has him shaded. With a rope in his hand, the Mayor is the best man."

Voices behind them made them turn round.

Royce Pederstone and Mayor Brenchfield were riding down the side road as if on some definite bent. They were equipped as for a round-up.

"How do, Jim! Is this Hanson's new apprentice?" asked Pederstone, bending over his horse and shaking hands genially with Phil.

"Glad to meet you, young man, and sorry this has happened on your first day. Hanson only goes on the toot once in a long while. You must just forget what you are going to see in a few minutes and think later only of what he shows you of blacksmithing."

Brenchfield completely ignored Phil's presence.

The two men got off their horses.

Royce Pederstone turned the water on at the tap at the trough, to which a hose was already attached. He directed the nozzle through a broken window pane, squirting a thin, strong stream directly on the upturned face of the open-mouthed and heavily-breathing Swede.

With a grunt the huge fellow spread himself.

The Mayor jerked off the water, then he and Royce Pederstone sprang on their horses and took up positions at different sides of the yard.

Jim and Phil in curiosity kept their eyes glued to the dirty window.

Growling fiercely, Hanson scrambled to his feet. His usually handsome and childlike face was contorted with rage and horrible to see. His eyes, bloodshot and bleared, stood out wildly in his head, his teeth showed like the teeth of a snarling puma and a foamy lather slithered from his mouth down on to his huge, hairy, muscle-heaving chest. He stood over six feet--a man of gigantic proportions, with every inch of him tuned and in perfect symmetry.

But he seemed madness incarnate.

With a fierce oath, he wiped the water from his face. He staggered and bumped into an anvil, striking his knee against the metal. He swore again and, in his mounting anger, he seized the anvil in his great hands, lifted it bodily from its stand and heaved it into a corner--a feat which four strong men, at any time, would have experienced difficulty in performing.

"Great Cæsar!" whispered Phil in awe.

"After a booze, he's as strong as a railway engine," returned Jim, "and he goes plumb daffy. Murder or anything else doesn't matter a hill of beans to him at a time like this."

"That sounds exceedingly pleasant."

"Pshaw!--you needn't mind. You'll know in lots of time, for he's happy and gentle as a lark when he's really boozing. It is only when he wakes up the morning after--after a ten hours' sleep--that the fun begins.

"He killed a horse once with his bare hands. Got on its back and strangled it somehow. He half-killed the old Police Chief. He got a year in jail for that. They were going to send him to an asylum afterwards, but he was such a fine workman and so decent at an ordinary time, that Royce Pederstone and the Mayor gave their guarantees and promised to attend to him any time he tried his monkey-doodle business again."

Meantime, Hanson walked over to the front door and tested it. Then he came toward the back one.

"Run!" shouted Langford, suiting prompt action to his word.

Phil remained a moment or two longer, trusting to his nimbleness of foot for emergency.

He saw Hanson stoop and pick up a great, heavy, sledge, then spring madly to the back door, swinging the big hammer above his head. With a shivering crash the woodwork splintered.

Phil turned to run.

Another great crash and the whole door and its fastenings tumbled outward, and that giant piece of infuriated humanity stood looking about him, framed in the broken woodwork.

Phil heard a warning shout, as he rushed headlong.

But his toe caught on an iron girder and he came down heavily on his face. As he sprang to his feet again he heard further shouting all about him. He turned his head. Hanson was springing toward him and making on him with a speed Phil could not realise in a man so weighty; a speed he could not begin to emulate.

The great hairy hands were almost on his coat, when something happened.

He staggered, balanced himself and stood up sheepishly.

Hanson was on the ground, struggling, cursing and kicking viciously at a rope which Royce Pederstone had cast smartly round his left foot.

Pederstone tugged with all his strength, and his horse lent her weight, but together they could do no more than hold their own with the fallen Vulcan. Hanson brought out a clasp-knife from his clothes, opened it and slashed at the rope. He had it almost cut through, when Brenchfield, who had been sitting on his horse an inactive and silent spectator--in response to Pederstone's urgent call, whirled his rope around his head several times and dropped it deftly over Hanson's shoulders, pinning his arms helplessly to his side.

Brenchfield then tugged in one direction and Royce Pederstone in the other, each tying the end of his rope tightly to a stake at his side of the yard, with the result that the madman was half hamstrung and reduced to impotence.

Langford came round the side of the building with fresh ropes. These were quickly bound round Hanson, until he was unable to move hand or foot, although he still struggled violently, the veins in his neck and head standing out in blue knots, the perspiration running over his shapely forehead and the frothy slither again oozing from his lips.

"Say, Graham!--what went wrong? Why didn't you rope him? Thought you said you would take first throw."

"Did I?" asked Brenchfield calmly.

"Sure you did! It might have been a serious accident. It isn't often you make a forget like that, old man."

"Oh, pshaw!--what's the odds anyway? Everything was all right."

"Was--yes! But it might have been all day with the new man."

"No chance! I had that cinched. Anyway, he had no right dawdling at the window as long as he did."

"Here, you two scrapping schoolboys--forget it!" interposed Langford. "I fancy Phil knows how to look after himself without either of you."

On the instructions of Pederstone, the four men carried the trussed Hanson into a nearby stable, where they made him fast with fresh ropes to some heavy stanchions.

When all was secure, Hanson was left to regain his normal, Pederstone turning the key in the lock for further security.

"Guess that's all this time, Ped," said Brenchfield.

"All through--thanks, Graham!" returned Pederstone, and Brenchfield rode off in deep thought. As a blacksmith, the Mayor felt that Phil was easy and safe for him, although he did not like the intimacy that seemed to have sprung up so soon between Phil and Jim Langford, for Langford was a strange composite, capable of anything or nothing; clever; altogether an unknown quantity, but one well worth the watching closely.

"Do you want Phil to-day now this has happened?" asked Jim of Royce Pederstone.

"Sure thing!--if he hasn't changed his mind about working?"

"Not me!" answered Phil.

"All right!" said Jim. "Me for the Court House. I'm only a couple of hours late now. See you later, Phil!"

Royce Pederstone went into the forge, doffed his coat, rolled up his sleeves and put on his leather apron.

Phil followed suit with an apron of Hanson's, and soon the doors were wide open, the fires blowing and the anvil ringing, drowning the groans and shouts that came from Hanson as he lay like a trussed fowl in the adjoining stable.

"I'm sorry this has taken place on the first day of your apprenticeship, young man, but it has been pending for some time. After this is over, you won't be afraid to be left with Hanson, I hope. He'll be all right in a few hours, and very much ashamed of himself you will find him."

"I'm not afraid," said Phil. "I am just beginning to discover that fear is the greatest devil we have to contend with and that the less we worry about it the less real and the more a mere bogey it becomes."

"True for you, Phil. And the older you grow the more you'll realise the wisdom of what you say."

"Well, it is just a year since Hanson had his last drinking bout. I was beginning to think he had got completely over it. He is not likely to break out again for ever so long."

"What is it exactly that gets him?" asked Phil.

"Oh,--likes drink once in a while, but drink doesn't like him;--that's all. It goes to his brain somehow. Do you think you could manage him if he took you unawares?"

"I could try," answered Phil.

"That's the way to talk. And you've got the frame to work on, too. Can you throw a rope?"

"I used to when I was a kid. I guess, with a little practice, I still could do it pretty well."

"Well,--practise in your spare time. It is handy to be able to throw a rope in this Valley. And it doesn't cost anything carrying the ability about with you. Can you use your fists?"

"Yes!--tolerably well."

"Good for you! Now all you need is to be able to use your head and everything will be O. K."

All that day, Royce Pederstone worked like the real village blacksmith he was; shoeing horses, repairing farm implements, bolting, riveting and welding; showing Phil all he could in the short time he had with him, telling him--because it was uppermost in his mind--just a little of his electioneering plans and what he intended doing for the Okanagan Valley in the way of irrigation, railroads and public buildings; instilling in his apprentice an enthusiasm for his new work and making for himself at the same time another friend and political booster; for Phil was quick to appreciate the kindness of this sturdy, pioneering type of man and he felt drawn to him by that strange, attractive sub-conscious essence which flows from all who are born to lead, an hypnotic current which is one of the first essentials of all men who can ever hope successfully to carry out any good or big undertaking for, or with, their fellow men; the ability with the triple qualities--to interest, to attract, to hold,--making one feel that it is good to be within the dominant influence, if only for a time.

And all day long, in the barn at the rear of the smithy, Wildman Hanson kept up his groaning, and moaning, and cursing; shouting at the top of his voice that he was being murdered, and threatening a separate strangling to half a dozen men whom he called by name, talking to them as if they were by his side.

Towards closing time, a brilliant burst of evening sunshine flooded the smithy, and with it came one whose radiating charm made the sun for a moment slide back to second place.

"Hullo, dad!" she cried. "I thought you weren't going to work here any more?"

"Hullo, Eilie! I thought so, too, but---Oh, Eileen, this is Phil."

Eileen Pederstone looked in admonishing surprise at her father.

"I beg pardon! Mr. Ralston, our new man,--my daughter, Miss Eileen!"

The young lady bowed sedately to Phil, who was standing a mere dark silhouette against the glare of the furnace fire. But Eileen was in the full glow of the flames and, as Phil looked into her face, he gasped for breath and his heart commenced to thump under his open shirt.

It was the face of the good samaritan, the good fairy that had of late so often been pictured in his mind in the day-time, the face that smiled to him at night through his dreams.

In a flash, he saw himself again; bearded, unkempt, ragged, faint and hunted, groping for support against the wall of the little kitchen in the bungalow up on the hill; the sweet vision of the fearless maid whose heart had opened in practical sympathy to his broken appeal for succour, her ready response and---

But he pushed his crowding thoughts away, for he was standing before her--pale, mute and almost foolish.

He bowed, not daring to raise his eyes to hers lest she should recognise him. But he need not have feared on that score, for to her he was merely the clean-cut outline of a shadow;--but even

had it not been so, the difference between the young, beardless man before her and the haggard, broken convict whom she had befriended that night was greater by far than Phil even could have imagined.

Fortunately for his peace of mind, a sudden cry from the stable burst in on the momentary quietness.

Eileen turned her head quickly, then she ran over to her father anxiously and held his arms.

"Dad,--what is that?"

"Hush, dearie!--it's Hanson."

"But--but where is he?" she asked.

"In the barn, tied up good and tight,--quite safe."

"But it isn't right, daddy, to tie a man up like that. He's not a beast, and he's a kind-hearted decent fellow when he is well."

"When he is well, Eilie,--yes! But he isn't well. Better for him that we tie him up for a day every once in a while, than confine him in a lunatic asylum for the term of his natural life. That is what would have to be otherwise."

"Don't you think he might be better now, daddie?" she pleaded.

"Yes!--I guess he is getting pretty nearly wised up now. He has stopped his swearing and yelling. That's a good sign. That last cry of his was the first for half an hour. You run along home, girlie, and Phil and I will go in and see how he is."

"You won't keep him tied up there all night, dad?"

"Not unless I can't help it, Eilie."

She pouted and stamped her foot impatiently.

"I just won't go home till you tell me for sure. I couldn't sleep if I thought a man was roped up all night like he is now."

Her father smiled indulgently.

"Foolish little woman! You sleep other nights, yet every minute of the days and nights you live there are men all over the world who, both literally and metaphorically, are chained, and roped, and lashed, and dungeoned; men whose lives are a racking agony, to whom day and night are alike--all night--men who have no prospect of relief to-morrow, whose only release is death, and the release they long and pray for seems never to come. And many of them are men who have done no wrong, unless it be wrong to offend a potentate, to have an opinion of your own, to have the courage to express it; to object to laws and customs which should have been scrapped a thousand years ago.

"Hanson there knows his weakness. He has asked and begged us, in his sober moments, to be sure to do this very thing to him as a personal kindness. To-morrow his heart will be flooding with gratitude to know that he has got through with it without doing anyone any harm."

"Yes, daddie, yes! But won't you go to see if he cannot be released to-night?" she pleaded.

"Sure, girlie, if it will please you. Wait here!"

The sturdy smith took down the key from a nail in the wall and went out.

Eileen switched her attention to Phil.

"Have you been long in the Valley, Mr. Ralston?"

Phil was afraid of his voice, so he answered in a deeper intonation than was his usual.

"Just a few days, miss."

"And you're a blacksmith?"

"Not yet, Miss Pederstone!" Phil grinned to himself and felt slightly more confident. "I hope to be, some day."

Eileen seemed surprised.

"Haven't you been blacksmithing before? Why, my father started to learn his trade when he was fourteen years old."

"Do I seem so terribly old then?" asked Phil.

"Oh, no!--not that exactly, but old to be starting in to learn a trade. Sol Hanson isn't so very much older than you can be, but he has been a journeyman smith ever since I have known him." She stopped. "Oh, I don't know---You mustn't mind what I say, Mr. Ralston. I guess I am a bit of a silly. I let my foolish tongue run away with me at times. I just say what I feel; just what comes to my mind."

"If everyone did that," remarked Phil, "we should have less dissension in the world."

"And we would make lots of enemies," she put in.

"We might offend those we think are our friends, and we might alarm each other by mirroring our tremendous deficiencies, but, in the finish, it would make for sincerity and truthfulness--two qualities of nature sadly in the background nowadays. Don't you agree with me?"

"Of course you are right!" said Eileen, "but you talk so earnestly one would almost imagine that you had suffered at some time through the insincerity and untruthfulness of one you had trusted."

This was getting too near home for Phil.

"None of us have to live very long to do that. I have often thought, though, that if, when we looked into the mirror, we could see our natures as well as our reflected features, our conceit would suffer a severe shock."

"A woman, maybe!" said Eileen, "but nothing can ever cure mortal man of his conceit."

"You think a man more conceited than a woman?"

"Assuredly!"

Phil laughed, and the laugh rang in his own natural tone.

Eileen Pederstone stopped. Her brows wrinkled as if some little chord of memory had suddenly been struck.

Phil also dropped back into an awkward silence.

A noise outside roused both of them, and Royce Pederstone crossed the yard, followed by Hanson. The latter refused to come inside when he knew Miss Pederstone was there.

"Better run home, Eilie,--out the front way!"

"Is he all right, daddy?"

"Yes,--back to normal."

"Oh, I'm so glad. You won't be long?"

"Fifteen minutes!"

"Good night, Mr. Ralston!" she said, scrutinizing him in slight perplexity.

"Good night!" returned Phil, still keeping to the shadows.

CHAPTER VIII

Like Man, Like Horse

With the passing days, Phil found Sol Hanson a man of rugged simplicity, as full of fun and frolic as a child; a man strong as a lion, an excellent blacksmith and, what was more to Phil's advantage, a kind and unselfish teacher who was willing to impart to his willing pupil--as John Royce Pederstone had been--all he knew of his ancient, noble and virile calling.

Phil, with a natural aptitude and a delight in at last doing work of a practical nature, was soon able to shoe a horse, temper and weld iron, bolt and rivet a gate and mend broken farm implements with considerable skill, much to the open-minded and childlike Hanson's pleasure and astonishment.

Phil gloried in the knowledge of returning vigour and in the steadily increasing size and power of his biceps. His bones no longer showed an anxiety to burst through his skin. The tired ache, after a little exertion, was no longer with him. His chest broadened by inches and his body took on the buoyancy and elasticity that were his real birthright, but of which the close confinement of Ukalla had almost robbed him for good.

Jim Langford delighted in this physical change even more than did Phil himself. He insisted on sparring and wrestling with Phil in the evenings; and, when the latter began more and more to hold his own, Jim chuckled and chuckled to himself in anticipation of some amusing future event he knew was sure to come along sooner or later. When these amusements palled, they threw their latent energies into the roping of a post in the long-suffering Mrs. Clunie's orchard, and later the moving and more elusive objects on the ranges.

All this time, Phil saw little or nothing of Mayor Brenchfield, for his were busy days, and Brenchfield's fields of operation were seldom within the confines of the blacksmith shop.

Only once had Eileen Pederstone visited the forge since her father had gone on his electioneering campaign, and that was one afternoon during Phil's dinner hour when she had run in hurriedly to have her horse shod. She was just mounting to ride off as Phil returned, Hanson having attended to her needs. But her bright smile of remembrance and the wave of salutation with her riding crop left something pleasant with Phil that lingered near him till closing time.

The next day he heard casually that she had joined her father on his tour of the Valley. And he heard something else that disturbed him more; although, why it should do so, he could not really understand, for it was no affair of his. He heard that Mayor Brenchfield had been invited--and had accepted the invitation--to attach himself to the Royce Pederstone party in

order to give the candidate the support of his fluent tongue and widespread influence.

Somehow Phil resented Brenchfield's apparent friendliness with the Pederstones. To his mind, Eileen Pederstone was too trusting, too straight, and honest, and pure-minded to be even for a little time in the company of a man of the stamp of Brenchfield.

He often wondered at the tremendous wall of protection which Brenchfield seemed to have raised about himself, and he puzzled as to where the breach in that wall might be--for of a breach somewhere he was certain. He wondered who would be first to find it, when it would be likely to be widened and carried. And after his wondering came the hope and the determination that he would be there to lend a hand at the storming of the stronghold.

But these were not consuming desires with Phil. He had a life of work ahead of him; he had lost time to make up; he had ambitions to fulfil; great things to do; there were fortunes to be won by determination, shrewdness and ability, and he was not going to be behind in the winning of one of them.

That was the day Sol Hanson was called out to repair some machinery belonging to The Evaporating Company, leaving Phil alone to run the smithy as best he could.

He had been only a few hours at work when Mayor Brenchfield flung himself from his gigantic thoroughbred and came forward into the shop, smiling amiably.

"Well, Phil!--so you're learning to be a blacksmith. Pretty hard work--isn't it, old man?"

Phil stopped and looked across at him.

When Brenchfield was most pleasant, he knew that was the time for him to be most on his guard.

"It is more honest than some work I could name."

"Poof!--any fool can be a smith. Why don't you get into something worth while?"

"This suits me!"

"You're devilish snappy, Phil. What the hell's the matter with you, anyway? Can't you be civil to Royce Pederstone's customers? Do you want to turn away business?"

"Stick to business and it will be all right. There is nothing outside of that that I want to talk to you about."

Brenchfield threw out his bulky chest and smiled, as he walked toward the back door. Suddenly he wheeled round, put his fingers into his vest pocket and pulled out a piece of blue paper.

"Phil,--aren't you going to let bygones be bygones? I'll make it well worth your while. There's going to be big things doing here and I can put you wise."

To show how little he thought of the suggestion, Phil commenced hammering on his anvil and so drowned Brenchfield's voice.

The latter came over and laid his hand on Phil's arm.

"If you can't stop being foolish, you might at least be mannerly," he commented.

"Yes?"

"Here,--take this!"

"What is it?" asked Phil.

"Look and see!"

Phil took the paper and opened it out. It was a cheque for fifteen hundred dollars.

"What's this for?"

Brenchfield threw out his arm casually. "Just to let bygones be bygones!"

"No other tags on it, eh?" asked Phil dubiously.

"Not a damned tag!"

Phil held it in his hand as if weighing the matter over, while Brenchfield watched him narrowly.

"Here's its twin brother, Phil!"

He handed another cheque over. It was for fifteen hundred dollars also.

"And this one? What's it for?"

"That's to get out of here on to-morrow's train and to stay out."

"Uhm!" answered Phil. "That makes three thousand dollars."

Brenchfield's face took on a little more confidence. He knew the temptation proffered money held for the average man. Only, he forgot that he was not dealing in averages with Phil Ralston.

"I've one more--a sort of big brother!" he remarked, handing over cheque number three.

Phil opened it up and whistled.

"Pheugh! Seven--thousand--dollars! Coming up, eh? This must be the price of suicide or a murder, Graham."

The Mayor frowned, but he held rein on his temper.

"That's for a little piece of paper in cipher. It is more than you'll save all your life."

Phil put the three cheques neatly together, folded them up and went over to the furnace. He placed them between some glowing coals and pushed them home with a bar of iron.

He swung round just in time, for Brenchfield was almost on him.

The latter grinned viciously for a moment, then let his clenched hands drop to his sides.

"I can make or break you; and, by heavens! you've made your own choice. I'll break you till you squeal,--then there will be no ten thousand dollars. It will be get out and be-damned to you."

"Go to it," replied Phil easily, "it's your move."

Brenchfield walked to the door.

"Come out and have a look at my horse!" he shouted over his shoulder. "She wants shoeing all round."

Phil followed to where the sleek, black animal was securely tied to a hitching post. Phil had heard of this particular horse of Brenchfield's. She was the fastest piece of horseflesh in the Valley. She was a beauty, but as vicious with her teeth as she was treacherous with her feet. She had the eye of a devil. No one had been found who could ride her save Brenchfield and no one could groom her but her owner. Several had tried; one had been killed outright, one lamed permanently and others gave up before they were compelled to.

"So this is Beelzebub?" asked Phil.

"Yes!"

"Guess you had better bring her back to-morrow when Hanson is here."

"Can't you shoe a horse?"

"Some horses!"

Brenchfield laughed sarcastically.

"Tie her up in the frame then," said Phil, "and I'll do it. Hanson told me she always has to be shod in that way."

Brenchfield laughed again.

"A bright blacksmith you are!" he grunted.

The young smith's face flushed angrily.

"All right!" he retorted, "leave her where she is. There isn't any horse or anything else belonging to you or connected with you,--and including you--that I can't put shoes on."

Phil went over to look more closely at the animal, as the Mayor went to her head and stroked her nose.

"Sure you're not scared? She's a heller!"

Phil walked round her without answering. He was at her rear, closer than he should have been, when Brenchfield suddenly reached and whispered a peculiar, grating, German-like, guttural sound in the mare's ear.

Like lightning her ears went back, her eyes spurted fire, a thrill ran through her body and her two hind feet shot into the air. Brenchfield shouted warningly.

Phil, only half alert, sprang aside. The iron-ringed hoofs flashed past him, one biting along his cheek and ripping it an eighth of an inch deep. Phil staggered to the wall, as the horse continued to plunge and rear in a paroxysm of madness. Her owner tried to pacify her, but he made little headway with the job.

"Good Lord, man! as a man working among horses don't you know better than to hang around the flanks of one of her kind like that? If she had hit you, it would have been all day with you."

Phil pulled himself together.

"Do you think so?" he remarked in a much more casual tone than he felt.

"It looked for a minute like a bad accident."

"It looked to me like attempted murder," retorted Phil.

Brenchfield frowned, but ignored the opening.

"She's a vicious devil. She takes turns like that occasionally when a stranger is near her."

"You mean *you* give her turns like that occasionally?" put in Phil suggestively.

At that moment, Jim Langford sauntered round the smithy building into the yard.

"Hullo! A love-feast going on! What's the argument, fellows? What have you been doing to your cheek, Phil?"

The Mayor growled.

"This blacksmith pal of yours thought he could shoe Beelzebub. She's got a mad streak on and pretty nearly laid him out. Now he blames me for rousing her, as if she needs any rousing."

"And so you did! I'm not blind or deaf. I saw you and heard you as well."

Brenchfield laughed and tapped his forehead significantly to Langford. But Langford did not

respond.

"You mean, Phil, that the Mayor knows what they call 'the horse word'?"

"He seems to possess *one* of them, at any rate," replied Phil.

"So there are two of them?" laughed Jim.

"There ought to be, if there are any at all;--just as there is hot and cold, day and night, right and wrong, good and bad, positive and negative."

"That sounds reasonable enough, too," answered Jim, who turned suddenly to Brenchfield as the latter was frantically endeavouring to quiet the plunging Beelzebub.

"Now then, for the land's sake, Graham Brenchfield *Lavengro*, why don't you use that other word? What's the good of creating a devil if you can't keep the curb on him?"

Brenchfield commenced to belabour the horse in his irritation, but the more he struck the more nervous and vicious she seemed to grow.

The sight set Phil's thoughts awandering. A little door in his brain opened and he remembered the queer little wizened-faced horse rustler in for life at Ukalla Jail, whom he had befriended and who in return had given him a word which he said might be useful some day, as it was guaranteed to quiet the wildest horses. At the time, he had grinned at it in his incredulity, but now the thought came, "What if there might be something in it?"

He had not noted that little word, and now he had a difficulty in recalling it. But, as he reviewed the scene at Ukalla Jail in his mind once more, it came to him. He was not quite certain, but he fancied he had it. What if its strange power were true? It was a queer, soft, foreign-sounding word.

There could be no harm in giving it a trial and, if by lucky chance it proved successful, what a triumph he would have over the arrogant Mayor of Vernock, and over Jim Langford as well.

He smiled to himself now at his credulity, as he had done once at his incredulity over the same peculiar word. Then recurred to him that wonderful little saying of Will Shakespeare's:--

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Encouraged by the quotation and angered by Brenchfield's cruelty, he decided to take a chance. He sprang to the mare's head.

"Let the horse alone, man," he cried. "Can't you see you are only making her worse?"

"What the devil do you know about horses? She'll eat you alive, you fool of a tenderfoot."

"I'm willing to take a chance. Stand back and see what I know."

Brenchfield gazed at him in surprise, but, ever ready to be enlightened, he stepped back.

"Jim,--go to the other end of the yard; take him with you,--and watch."

Langford, anxious at all times to be amused; Brenchfield grinning in derision; both went some thirty yards out of hearing, while the horse continued to kick and plunge.

Holding out his hand, Phil drew nearer to the mad animal.

Quietly he murmured the three-syllabled word which he had so dearly earned from his convict friend. The soft and soothing effect of its vowels surprised Phil himself. Time and again he repeated the word, going closer and closer.

Beelzebub stopped her plunging. She cocked forward her ears, straining and listening intently. Phil kept on--as a slow tremor passed over the horse. Slowly the wicked gleam died from her eyes. Phil's hand reached out and touched her nose. He stroked it cautiously--gently. He reached and whispered the word close in her ear. She sighed almost like a woman. In a moment more Phil's left hand was on her sleek neck and running over her back. She whinnied, then her nozzle sought his arm and rubbed along it to his shoulder.

She became as quiet as the proverbial lamb.

Langford and Brenchfield came forward, blank amazement showing in their faces.

"By jiminy!--where the dickens did you learn that? Did I mention *Lavengro*. *Lavengro's* a *has been*, in fact, a *never waser* alongside that."

He slapped Phil's shoulder. "Good old Phil!"

Surly as an old dog, Brenchfield loosened the reins from the hitching post.

"I'll give you five thousand dollars for that word," he said, turning suddenly to Phil.

"You're mighty free with your money to-day. You must have a lien on somebody's fortune."

"Five thousand dollars," repeated the Mayor.

"Not on your life!" answered Phil. "It was given me strictly on the understanding that it was not to be sold."

"Well then,--I'll give you my 'word' in exchange for yours."

"Your 'word,'--yours? No, Mister Mayor, I haven't any desire to know your 'word.' Keep it,--it fits you. The two words are just about the difference between you and me,--and, God knows, I'm no saint."

Brenchfield laughed in his easy, devil-may-care way. He jumped on to the back of his horse without touching her with his hands.

"Aren't you going to let me shoe her?" asked Phil in assumed disappointment.

For answer, the Mayor touched the horse's side with his spur, trotted round the end of the building and away.

"Phil, old man, where did you learn to subdue horses?"

"I got the word from an old horsey-man whom I befriended once."

"Did you ever use it before?"

"No! I just rethought of it a moment or two before I tried it out."

"Lordy! I shouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. You know, Beelzebub is positively the worst mare in the Valley. Sol Hanson will throw a fit of delight when he hears about this.

"I've heard some queer things about horses, Phil. I once knew an old horse dealer in the East of Scotland. He owned a famous Clydesdale stud stallion. He used to travel with it all over the country. Old Sommerville, they called the man, was a terrible booze artist. He was drunk day and night. But never so drunk that he couldn't look after himself and his stallion. You know, just always half-full of whisky. Well,--there wasn't a paddock that could hold that stallion. It had killed several men and had created tremendous havoc time and again in stables. If it had not been for its qualities as a perfect specimen of a horse, the Government would have ordered its destruction. A special friend of old Sommerville's died, and, on the day of the funeral, Sommerville swore he wouldn't taste liquor for twenty-four hours. He didn't. That night he was taking the stallion from one village to another. He failed to turn up at the village he intended making for, and next morning the stallion was discovered miles away, while later in the day a farm-hand came upon a mass of bloody bones and flesh pounded to mince meat among the earth at the side of a road."

"I quite believe it," said Phil, "because I have heard before somewhere that a horse--no matter how vicious it may be--will never interfere with a man smelling of liquor."

"Well,--I guess the horse had more sense than some of us have," said Jim.

"Sound horse sense, I suppose," laughed Phil.

"But say!--you and Brenchfield don't seem to love each other exactly. What is it, Phil?"

"Oh!--we don't pull together, that's all."

"Anybody can see that. Did you ever meet him before coming here?"

"Yes!" answered Phil shortly.

"Well, old chum, it isn't any of my business, but the Mayor's an oily-tongued rotter and well worth the watching. I'm lying in wait for him myself. He doesn't love me any more than he seems to love you, so if I can help you out any time, let me know.

"He's got the nerve of the devil. He is setting up to little Eileen Pederstone too, the hound. I hope to God a fine woman like she is doesn't have such putrid luck as to marry such a miserable son-of-a-gun. But it is generally that way though, and that coyote nearly always gets what he goes after. He seems to be making money hand over fist. His stock is the largest and best in the Valley. They say he owns half a dozen mines up north and more ranch land in the Okanagan than he can ever use.

"Eileen Pederstone has gone after her dad campaigning, and I heard up at the Court House this morning that Brenchfield is going off in a day or so, invited by the Party to join Royce Pederstone and help along his election with his influence and his glib tongue.

"If Pederstone gets in--as he is sure to do--the next thing we will be hearing will be the Mayor's engagement with Eileen.

"Honest to goodness!--I think I would plug him full of bullet holes on a dark night if that happened."

CHAPTER IX

The Doings of Percival

When Hanson returned that afternoon, his round face was beaming. His big blue eyes stared right into Phil's.

"Say,--by yiminy,--you some kid! You quiet Brenchfield's she-devil!"

"And what about that?"

"What about it! That no good for Sol Hanson. I know all about him. Somebody tell me. By

yiminy! you make damn good blacksmith. Some day we put up signboard, 'Hanson and Ralston, General Blacksmiths.' We get all the trade in this damn Valley."

"Who told you about she-devil, Sol?" asked Phil curiously.

"Oh, somebody! He not speak very much but he say plenty when he be good and ready. He watch round corner. Brenchfield make she-devil wild. You speak to her and she get quiet."

"It wasn't Jim Langford who told you, Sol?"

"Langford,--no! Langford's mouth all stitched up. He say nothing at all. You wait!"

Sol put his fingers in his mouth and whistled.

In a second, the half-witted, ragamuffin Smiler bobbed his grinning face round the door post. Hanson waved him in and when the youngster saw that only Sol Hanson and Phil were inside he raced round and round Phil in sheer delight, like a puppy-dog round its master. He rubbed his hand up and down Phil's clothes, and he kept pointing to himself and to Phil. Phil could not make out his meaning.

"He says you and him good pals," interpreted Hanson.

"You bet we are, Smiler!" said Phil, patting the boy's matted hair.

"Smiler and me make a deal. We going to live together after this," said Sol. "Smiler he got nobody. Smiler hungry most all the time; dirty, no place to sleep; just a little mongrel-pup. I got lots of grub, nice shack, good beds. Smiler get lots of bath. Smiler and me we going to be pals. What you say, Smiler?"

The boy grinned again and gurgled in happy acquiescence.

"But the kid can't talk?"

"Oh, he talk all right; you bet! He talk with his head, and his eyes, his feet and his hands; talk every old way only you don't savvy his kind of talk."

As soon as work was over, Phil hurried up the hill home. He had had a trying day of it one way and another and he was longing for a refreshing bath and a clean-up.

He popped his head into Langford's room, but Langford either had not come or had been in early and had gone out again.

Whistling softly, he went into his own. His whistle ended abruptly, for his bedroom looked as if it had been struck by a cyclone. Everywhere, in wild confusion, lay shirts, collars and clothes; books, papers and personal belongings. The drawers of his bureau were pulled out and the contents scattered. Someone evidently had been in on a thieves' hunt and had been neither leisurely nor nice about the job.

Phil could not, for the life of him, imagine why anyone would want specially to ransack his of all the choice of rooms at Mrs. Clunie's. He had nothing worth stealing, while many of his landlady's boarders were fairly well endowed in the matter of worldly possessions.

He leaned over the bannister and called excitedly for Mrs. Clunie.

"Guid preserve us a'; what's wrang?" she exclaimed, pulling her dress up in front and hurrying up the stairs.

Phil showed her into his room without a word. The moment she saw the state of it, she threw up her hands in amazement.

"Goodness sakes, Mr. Ralston! It looks as if there had been thievin' bodies here."

"Have any strangers been in the house?"

"Not a soul, Mr. Ralston, except the man you sent wi the note to let him ha'e your spurs that were in the bureau drawer."

"But I didn't send any man, and I didn't write any note!" put in Phil.

"You didna? Oh, the slyness o' him! As sure as my name's Jean Clunie, he was the thief."

"Well!" said Phil ruefully, "he has made a deuce of a jumble of my clothes. But he came to the wrong room if he came for valuables."

"I was busy and I told him to run up and get them. Oh, the cunnin' de'il. Is there nothing missing?"

"Nothing that I know of; certainly nothing valuable, for I don't own any such!"

"Bide a minute till I get that note," exclaimed the perspiring and excited landlady.

She returned in a minute with the paper.

Phil read it over. It was written in a rough hand, in pencil.

Mrs. Clunie,

Please allow bearer into my room to get my spurs for me. He will know where to find them.

PHIL RALSTON.

Phil scratched his head.

"Well, that beats all!"

"And you never wrote it?"

"Not I!"

"But he took your spurs, for I saw them in his hand."

Phil glanced about him.

"Yes!--I guess he has taken my spurs."

"My, but I'm the foolish woman. I never heard tell o' the like o' it before. This place is gettin' as bad as the ceety o' Glesca."

"What was the man like, Mrs. Clunie?"

"Oh, just a wee, short kind o' a rough lookin', dirty kind o' a mannie, wi' a horse."

"What kind of a horse did he have?"

"To tell ye the truth, I didna pay muckle attention to the beastie, but I think it was brown coloured, wi' a white patch on its e'e. Oh, ay! and it was lame, for when he went aff I could see it hobblin' on its fore legs as it galloped doon the road."

"All right!" said Phil. "If you send Betsy up to put the room in order, everything will be O.K."

"I'm right sorry I wasna more parteecular, Mr. Ralston, but I didna think for a minute except that you would be anxious for your spurs. A letter like that would deceive the very Lord himsel'."

"Don't you worry now! I paid only a dollar and a half for the spurs, and I have had that much wear out of them, so they don't owe me anything."

At the same time, Phil himself worried considerably over the matter, for closer inspection betrayed the fact that his little box of private papers and letters had been burst open and examined; also that his leather letter-case--in fact everything likely to contain documents of any kind--had been scrutinised.

As he bathed and dressed himself, he still worried, until it ocured to him that this might be some of Brenchfield's doings. He wondered, and then he laughed to himself at the chances the would-be thief had taken to get--nothing.

Once more Phil lost patience with himself, as he thought of his foolishness in getting rid of that confession of Brenchfield's; and yet, in destroying it he had merely acted up to the feeling and good intentions he had had at the time.

He took a turn outside. At the top of the hill, at the corner, little Smiler, with a cleaner face than usual, ran out from the end of a house and stood up in front of Phil.

"Hullo kiddie! What's the good word?"

Smiler just grinned.

"Smiler!" inquired Phil, "you see a little man to-day on a brown horse with a white eye?"

Smiler looked as serious as was possible for his permanently crooked face, then he nodded intelligently. He pointed to his leg and went a few steps limping.

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed Phil, "horse got a lame leg!"

Smiler nodded.

"Where did you see him?"

Smiler pointed in the direction of the hill.

"Up near my place?"

The boy nodded again.

"Where did he go?"

Smiler shook his head this time.

"Too bad!" exclaimed Phil.

"If you see him again, anywhere, Smiler, run in and tell me, will you? I'll be at the Kenora for a bit."

Smiler nodded, delighted that he was going to have a chance to be of service to the big man he had taken such a fancy to.

"Here!" Phil handed him twenty-five cents, and the boy ran off in the direction of the Chinese restaurant.

Phil continued down the street, knowing that if the little man on the lame brown horse with the white eye was still in town, it would not be long before Smiler would have him wise to it.

He strolled into the dining-room of the Kenora and ordered his lunch. And, as he waited, in came an old acquaintance in all his high-coloured and picturesque splendour--Percival DeRue Hannington.

Hannington spotted Phil at once and strutted over. He shook hands with vigour and set himself down opposite.

"By gad! old chap,--but this is quite refreshing. I've often thought about you and your good advice not to be in too big a hurry to buy a blooming rawnch."

"Why?" inquired Phil. "I'm glad you took it and it did you good."

"But I didn't take it;--worse bally luck. Don't you know, I thought you might be trying to put me off the chance of getting into something good. Everybody warned me when I came out here that I wasn't to take everything I heard for gospel. The beastly trouble seems to be to distinguish between the gospel and the tommyrot."

Phil laughed, and it made him forget his own troubles.

DeRue Hannington ordered dinner also, and, as he refreshed himself he became reminiscent.

"So you did buy a ranch?" started Phil.

"I paid for one," said Hannington, "and, if that isn't jolly-well buying one, you've got to search me, as the Johnnies out here say.

"You see, when you toddled off that day, I was in the saloon asking three fellows if they knew of anyone who had a ranch for sale.

"One Johnnie said he had a good one I could have cheap, for cash."

"What was the man's name?" asked Phil.

"Barney, Barney something-or-other; oh, yes! cawn't forget it;--Barney Douthem. He *did me*, the rotter.

"Do you know him, Mister--Mister Phil?"

"I have heard of him. He left here some time ago for the other side of the Line."

"I fancied so," said Hannington. "I'm looking for that miserable thieving jossler.

"Well, I hired a horse and went out with the Barney fellow to see the ranch, right away. A jolly nice place it was, too--just ten miles out. The Barney chap lived there with a Chinaman who did his housework. It was a twenty-acre place on the side of a hill, with a decent sort of a house and stables. There was a beautiful view of the lake and the Valley, and a fine fishing stream running right through the property. One could fish out of his window, lying in bed. A positive duck of a place!"

"Yes!" remarked Phil, "but a rancher can't live on scenery and by fishing in bed. What kind of fruit trees did the place have?"

"Deuced good trees, Phil! At least, they seemed all-right. Of course, I'm not a bally expert on fruit trees.

"The Douthem chap said he could recommend it and I could have it for five thousand dollars cash. I gave him a cheque right off the reel. He gave me his receipt for the money, and the deal was closed there and then."

DeRue Hannington stopped, as if the memory of it was somewhat painful.

"Not exactly closed, Phil! because it sort of opened up again, two days ago, just three weeks after I was done by Douthem, and he had cashed my cheque and jolly-well beat it, as they say out here.

"It was like this. I was sitting on the veranda, enjoying a smoke and admiring my property and the view, when a collector Johnnie came up the road and asked me where Douthem was. I told him Douthem was gone, and I was now the proprietor.

"'Didn't know they had changed tenants,' said he. 'I've called for the rent.'

"Do you know, Phil, I fancied the silly owl had gone balmy, but he insisted that he had to collect thirty dollars a month rent.

"Of course, I showed the fellow my receipt for the place, proving I was the owner of it. But he just looked at it and said:--

"'Say!--who are you making a kid of? This might be all right for a bunch of groceries, or electric light, or a ton of coal, but it isn't all right for a ranch.'

"'Why!--what's the matter with it?' I asked. 'Doesn't it say, Received from Percival DeRue Hannington the sum of five thousand dollars for one ranch of twenty acres, with house and barns, situated ten miles from the city of Vernock and called Douthem's Ranch?'

"'Sure it does,' said the chap. And he was devilish rude about it too."

By this time, Phil had all he could do to keep from shouting with merriment. He did not dare to look at DeRue Hannington, so he kept religiously to his food.

"Well,--he told me the ranch belonged to some other people; that Douthem only rented it, and that one had to have a deed and register it when one bought property. The blooming upshot was I had to pay the collecting fellow his thirty dollars and get out. So I landed back here to-day.

"I daresay, Phil, a man has to pay for his experience, but you know it looks as if a fellow had to do so much paying that when he does finish up by really owning something, he will have paid such a beastly lot for it that he'll never be able to make it up again."

Phil showed impatience.

"Good heavens, man!--don't you know that land is not exchanged without an Agreement for Sale, or a Deed?"

"How should I know?" answered the innocent. "I never bought land before. If I pay the price for

an article, it should be mine, shouldn't it?"

"If the man you pay is honest," replied Phil, "but he isn't always honest, hence Agreements and Deeds.

"Next time you buy a ranch, Mr. Hannington, take my advice and hire a lawyer to see the deal through for you."

"No more bally rawnches for me, Phil. And it is possibly just as well I lost this one, because I have learned that one has to grub and mess among caterpillars and all those dirty little insects and worms they call bugs, which keep getting on the fruit trees, eating up the bally stuff you are trying to grow. I simply cawn't stand the slimy, squashy little reptiles, you know!"

"I am afraid you are destined to meet them in other places besides ranches," remarked Phil.

"I have found them on my dinner table before now!"

"How disgusting!" exclaimed the horrified Englishman.

"What are you going to tackle next? Don't you think you had better get a job for a while, working for wages, until you get acclimatised; and so conserve your money until you have had the necessary experience?"

"Not so long as my old dad is willing to foot the bills! The least he can do is to keep me going here. It is cheaper for him than letting me gad about between London, Paris and the Riviera. Besides, my mother would die of shame if she fawncied her boy Percy was working for wages like a common labouring bounder."

This was a species of maternal niceness Phil had never run up against, consequently he did not feel sympathetic toward it.

"They tell me oil-wells are a jolly good thing to get into. That fellow Rockefeller made a lot out of them, didn't he? You don't know of any likely places around here, Phil?"

"No! I don't think this is much of an oil country, Mr. Hannington. What we hear about oil here is more or less bunk. Better leave it alone!"

"You know,--I did meet a fellow on the train coming across. He had a jolly good thing. He was a water-diviner;--could tell you where the water was for a well just by walking over the land with a twig in his hand and doing a kind of prayer. Seemed to listen for the water, the same way as a robin does on the lawn when after worms."

Phil laughed. "Yes!--I have met a few of that water-divining species, and some of them were pretty good at it, too. They seemed to strike it right fairly often."

"Aw, yes, Phil!" continued DeRue Hannington, wiping his mouth with his napkin and leaning back in his chair, "but this fellow did have a good scheme. He said, you know, if a man could divine water, there was nothing to prevent him from divining oil too. So he was going to the oil-well district in California to test himself out with his idea, then he was coming back to Canada to start up oil-wells all over the bally country."

"He's going to let me in on it too. That's what I call one of my *futures*. Just a speculation, old chap! I gave him two hundred and fifty dollars on his note. He required it to pay his way to the Oil Wells. Don't you think it might be a real good thing, Phil?"

"It might!--but I don't think I would tell many people about it," said Phil quietly.

"Why?--Oh, yes, I see! I oughtn't to give the chap away before he elaborates his plans. Might spoil them. Silly I didn't think of that!"

"Just so, Mr. Hannington!"

"Meantime, though,--I intend buying a house here and settling down. I do like this Valley. It is so deuced picturesque, you know, and rural. When I'm properly established, I can go in for mining. On a hilly country like this, there ought to be good mining properties; gold, silver, etcetera. Don't you think so, Phil?"

"There might be, if one could only hit them. I've never had enough time or money myself to take the matter up as a hobby."

DeRue Hannington rose slowly from the table.

"Well, Phil, old top!--I've enjoyed our talk. I hope to see you again soon. Come and have a cocktail before I go!"

Phil got up, and they went into the bar together, where a number of Vernock's seasoned bar-loungers were following their usual bent.

DeRue Hannington kept harping on his various money-making schemes, in his high drawling voice, which could be heard all over the saloon. Suddenly his eye fell on one with whom he seemed to be casually acquainted; a foppishly dressed, smooth-tongued rascal who dealt in horses, cards, bunco real-estate, insurance and anything else that brought a commission without much work. He was called Rattlesnake Jim by those who knew him, but Mr. Dalton by those who didn't.

"Excuse me, Phil, but I would like to have a word with Mr. Dalton."

Phil knew at once that Hannington was one of those who didn't know Rattlesnake Jim.

The Englishman called Dalton over.

"Say, old chap,--have a drink!"

Dalton had one.

"What about that horse, Dalton? Have you sold her yet?"

"No siree! I'll sell her when I get my price. I ain't in no hurry."

"Well, you know I offered you two hundred and fifty for her."

"And she's yours for five hundred bucks."

Phil interfered.

"Oh, come off the grass! What do you take my friend for?"

"Do you know the horse we're talking about?" asked Dalton.

"Sure I do!--the white mare. She's a good enough horse, a beauty to look at, but there aren't any millionaires around Vernock going to give you five hundred dollars for her. A hundred and fifty is plenty for a good riding horse these days."

"Say!--whose horse is it, anyway?"

"Yours,--I presume!" said Phil.

"Who's buying the horse?"

"Not me!"

"All right,--keep out!"

Phil smiled.

Dalton twisted up his face and turned to Hannington.

"Well, boss,--is it a go?"

Hannington demurred, then he showed a little decision, which Phil was beginning to think he was entirely devoid of.

"No!--I'm dimmed if I'll pay that much for her. I want the horse because she's white all over and there isn't another like her in colour about the bally town. I like things different, by gad! But I simply won't be put upon. No, dim it, dim it all,--I just won't!"

Dalton walked away without a word, then he whirled on his heel and came slowly back.

"Want a mine--a gold mine?"

Percival DeRue Hannington, ever ready to nibble, showed interest.

"Say, Rattlesnake, forget it! Darn it all, do you think you are talking to a crazy man?"

"See here, Ralston!--why don't you live up to your pet name and keep your trap shut? Butt out!" exclaimed Dalton, curling his upper lip in evident disgust.

"It's an honest-to-goodness gold mine, Mr. Hannington, and I hold all the rights to it."

Phil addressed his friend.

"Don't be foolish now. Everybody in Vernock knows about Dalton's mine. He can't give it away."

"Say, Ralston! if I was big as you and as ugly, I'd knock your face in. Mind your own dirty business and keep out. Mr. Hannington is a man-sized man, with a man-sized bean-pot and doesn't need a wet nurse with him. He knows whether he wants a mine or not," said Dalton sourly.

Phil's eyes flashed anger.

"Now, Phil, please!" put in Hannington. "Really you mustn't quarrel. And you never know, you know;--there really have been old, good-for-nothing mines and things that have turned out wonderful."

Phil shrugged his shoulders.

"Go to it!" he said. "It's your funeral."

"Oh, come now! Don't be playing the bally Dead March over me because of a silly mine.

"Mr. Dalton, what name does this gold mine go by?"

"The Lost Durkin Gold Mine!"

Hannington's face lit up as he caught an inward glimpse of himself as the owner.

"Lost Durkin! Deuced romantic name, you know! Isn't it, Phil?"

Phil failed to respond.

"But why Lost Durkin, Mr. Dalton?"

"It's like this: Durkin and another guy were the discoverers of this ere mine. It panned out,--well!--nobody knowed for sure certain how it panned out; only Durkin and his pal always had lots of nuggets and dust. Durkin's pal went away and Durkin worked it all by hisself. They say he struck it rich in a vein and went batty over it. Anyway, he acted queer for a time. One day his hat was found in the tunnel, and no sign of Durkin from that day to this.

"Durkin's pal, Don Flannigan, without ever comin' back, sold out the mine to Jem Grierson.

Grierson sold to me. It ain't been worked to speak of since Durkin tried it out. The gold might be lyin' there just for the pickin' up."

"Oh, say, Rattlesnake!--come off," interposed Phil.

"Why, Hannington,--every hobo that has come to this Valley is open to have a go at it any old time he likes."

"Not on your tin tacks! I hold the mining rights to it, and nobody else. Just let somebody try it on!" put in Dalton.

"But there must be some gold in it, Phil!" remarked Hannington.

"Sure,--about four dollars a day hard working!"

"By jove!--if there's that, there might be more, you know."

"Yes, and there might not!"

"If the gold was absolutely sure, Phil, you know nobody would sell. Would they? A man has got to take a chance."

"What do you want for the bally thing, Mr. Dalton?"

"One thousand plunks," remarked Dalton without a tremor.

"Plunks?"

"Yes, plunks,--bucks!"

"Bucks?"

"Yes,--plunks, bucks, greenbacks, In-God-We-Trusts, D-O-double L-A-R-S."

"Two hundred quid!" figured Hannington roughly, who, for the proper realisation of actual values still had the habit of converting his dollars into English coinage.

"Tisn't much for a gold mine, Phil,--is it now?"

"I could get you a dozen for that."

"Oh, now, Phil!"

Rattlesnake Jim was getting impatient.

"Say, mister--if you're interested, come outside and talk. No use trying to make a deal, with this old man of the sea out playin' buttinsky."

"Don't be a fool now," interposed Phil. "Stay where you are!"

But DeRue Hannington was in the toils again, and the fever was in his blood.

Dalton walked slowly to the door.

Hannington hesitated, looked sheepishly at Phil, then exclaimed over his shoulder:

"Eh, excuse me, old chap,--won't you!" And he hurried alongside the owner of The Lost Durkin Gold Mine.

"Couldn't you come down a bit in your price, old dear? Your figure seems deuced steep where mines seem to be so beastly plentiful," Phil heard Hannington say.

At the door Dalton stopped.

"One thousand for the mine, and just to show you that I'm a real sport and playin' fair, I'll throw the white mare in for luck."

Hannington gasped, then slapped Dalton on the shoulder and grabbed his hand in ecstasy at the overflow of generosity on the part of the mine owner.

"Done,--done! It's a bally go!"

And the two disappeared outside in head-to-head conversation, to the accompaniment of a round of loud laughter from some old timers in the saloon who had overheard part of the talk and who knew that once more a sheep was about to be shorn of its wool.

Phil swung round with his back and elbows on the counter. He surveyed the crowd dimly through the haze of smoke in the bar-room.

Just then Jim Langford came in by the swinging doors.

Phil went over to him directly, led him to a table in the corner, and told him in a few, quick sentences of the thieving visit that had been made to his room at Mrs. Clunie's.

"There's more in this than you think," said Langford, after Phil had concluded. "Haven't you heard the news of the other thieving in town?"

"No,--where was it?"

"A gang must have been working on the O.K. Supply Company's premises last night. Three days ago, Morrison unloaded two carloads of feed and flour in his No. 1 Warehouse. They haven't sold a nickel's worth, and this morning there aren't fifty sacks left."

"Was the place broken into?" asked Phil.

"Must have been, but every bolt and bar is secure, so are all the padlocks. It's a mighty queer thing."

"I had it on the inside that the Pioneer Traders were shy last week, but they gave out no report; and Mayor Brenchfield, whose Warehouse and stables lie between the Pioneer Traders and the O.K. Supply Co. lodged a complaint with Chief Palmer this morning that he had lost forty bags of bran and oats from his place. Of course, his loss isn't a patch on the loss of the other two.

"You know, this darned thing has been going on for several years. Somebody is getting fat on it. The O.K. Supply Company have lost sixty thousand dollars' worth in four or five years. They have put new locks and bolts on, but all to no purpose. The Pioneer Traders must be considerably shy, too.

"The Police don't do a thing, and everybody seems scared to act for fear of being got back at in some way.

"The Indians are being blamed for it; so are some of the wilder element who have cattle ranches and lots of live stock to feed. Easy way to fatten your animals, eh, Phil!

"If we could lay the man by the heels who ransacked your place, we might be able to get a clue to the others."

Phil shook his head. "No,--I don't think so!" he answered.

"Well, old man Morrison of the O.K. Company is a decent head and these continual robberies are bleeding him white. He told me all about it this morning.

"I have made arrangements to quit the Court House for a while and take a job with him as warehouseman, just to see what I can fasten on to."

"Won't they get suspicious if they know you are on the job?"

Langford laughed. "Good Lord, no! I have been in a dozen jobs in this town in as many months. Besides, nobody ever thinks of me as a Sherlock Holmes. I'm just languishing for a little excitement anyway."

"You won't forget then to call me in to lend a hand if there is any scrapping going?" said Phil.

"Would you really come in on it?"

"You bet!"

"All right! This old burg will have something to wake it up one of these days."

Their attention was distracted by the rattle of gravel on the window at which they were sitting. Langford shook his fist at a disappearing figure.

"Who was that?" asked Phil.

"Don't know! Looked like Smiler, the dummy kid. Queer little devil!"

Phil jumped up.

"Maybe he's got some information for me. Wait here! I'll be back directly."

Phil went outside slowly and round the corner of the building to the back-yard. Sure enough, as soon as no one was in sight, Smiler darted up to him. He was all excitement and kept pointing to a clump of trees down a side road.

"Did you find the man with the lame horse?" Phil asked.

Smiler nodded and grinned with pleasure, catching Phil by the coat and leading the way cautiously to where stood the brown mare with the white patch over her eye. She was tethered to a tree, well hidden from view of the road.

Phil examined her legs and saw at a glance that she favoured her left fore foot. A look showed him that some gravel had worked up into an old sore.

Phil pulled the strings of a bag that hung from the saddle. The first things he came across were his own spurs. He took possession of them.

Meanwhile, Smiler was watching with deep interest.

"Where's the man, Smiler?" asked Phil.

The boy grinned and nodded his head, as if to say:--"Come along,--I'll show you."

He led Phil through the back lanes to Chinatown, stopping in front of a cheap, Chinese restaurant. He pointed inside. Phil made to enter.

He encountered, of all people, Brenchfield coming out.

The suddenness of the Mayor's appearance caused him to catch his breath. In Phil's mind it solved the problem at once.

Brenchfield stopped and stared at Phil, then he glared at Smiler who turned tail and ran off as if for his very life.

The Mayor appeared to be in one of his most sullen moods. He turned again and looked angrily at Phil, his eyes travelling from the young smith's face to his boots, then back to his left hand in which he still held his recovered spurs.

Phil jingled them suggestively, and kept on into the restaurant. Brenchfield remained on the sidewalk in front of the door.

Phil knew quite well that he was taking chances, but he risked that.

There was nothing of any moment taking place in the main dining-room. Several diners were on stools at the counter. Others were at tables. A Chinese waiter was serving, while the cook was tossing hot cakes beside the cooking range. The door of the adjoining room was open. Some Chinamen were at a table, deeply interested in a game of chuckaluck. In a room still farther back, some white men were playing poker.

Phil strolled in there. No one paid any heed to him.

His eyes travelled over the players. He did not know any of them. But it did not take him a second to settle in his mind which was the man he was after.

A little, stout, narrow-eyed fellow, who did not seem to have been shaved or washed for months, was seated at the far corner, chewing tobacco viciously. Evidently he had just resumed his game, for Phil heard one of the players exclaim:--

"Aw!--get a move on, Ginger! What'n the deuce do you want to keep us here all day for, waitin' for you and that blasted Mayor to quit chewin' the fat?"

None worried about the new arrival: they were all too engrossed in their game.

In the middle of it, Phil went up close.

"Men,--I hate to butt in, but I want that dirty little fellow over there." He pointed suggestively at his man.

"Yes,--you Ginger!" he shouted, as the little man gaped.

"Aw,--get back on your base!" was all he got for answer, for the man had no idea who had challenged him, and drunks had a habit of interfering at cards, ultimately to find themselves thrown out into the street. He took Phil for one of those and left it to the man nearest to the intruder to settle the account.

With a quick movement Phil threw his body over the table, catching the little fellow smartly by the neck-cloth and shirt in a grip that there was no gainsaying. By the sheer power of his right hand and arm, he pulled the astonished Ginger--before his more astonished partners--right across the table, planting him on his feet in front of him.

The little man gasped for breath and struggled, but finding his struggling merely meant more strangling, he commenced to feel at his hip as if for a gun.

Phil struck him on the side of the head, sending him staggering against the wall. As Ginger recovered, Phil held his spurs under the man's nose and jingled them.

"I guess you know these?"

The fellow's narrow eyes opened wide. He let out a guttural sound and sprang for the door. Phil shot after him. But the little one's speed was accelerated by his fear. Phil's boot was all that reached him and it did its work uncommonly well. A nicely planted kick, just when he reached the door-step, sent Ginger in the air and seated him on the plank sidewalk. He jumped up almost before he touched the boards and tore down the road as if the devil himself were behind him.

Brenchfield, who had been a silent spectator of what had taken place, came into the main room of the restaurant, where a crowd of low whites and curious Chinese had gathered.

"Look here, young man!--you don't want to be doing much of that in this town or you'll find yourself locked up."

Phil shook his spurs in the Mayor's face.

"And *you* don't want to be doing much of *this*, or you'll find yourself my next cell neighbour."

The Mayor had no idea how far his opponent was prepared to go, and evidently afraid to risk a scene, he turned his back on Phil with an oath.

"First time I catch that damned, sneaking little rat I saw you with I'll thrash him within an inch of his miserable little life."

"You just try it on,--and, God help you,--that's all," retorted Phil.

CHAPTER X

Jim's Grand Toot

As Phil knocked the dust from his clothes and wiped the perspiration from his face, it suddenly struck him that Jim Langford must have been waiting fully half an hour for him at the Kenora.

He hurried through Chinatown and down toward the hotel. When he got there, he found Jim in lazy conversation with some passing acquaintance, whom he immediately left.

"Did you finish what you were after, Phil?"

"You bet!"

"Tell me about it. I wish to size the thing up."

With the exception of his encounter with the Mayor, Phil recounted all that had happened. He preferred keeping to himself that little bout he had had with Brenchfield, for he knew Jim already had suspicions that he and Brenchfield had some old secret antagonism toward each other. Some day, he thought, he might feel constrained to unburden himself on the point to Jim, but the time for that did not appear to be ripe.

"Darned funny!" remarked Langford, when Phil concluded. "I can't recollect the man from your description and there doesn't seem to be any connection between him and the flour and feed steal. But--what the devil could that fellow be after, anyway?"

Suddenly, as was his habit, he dismissed the subject and broke in on another.

"Say, Phil,--know who's in the card-room?"

"No!"

"An old pal of yours!" He commenced to sing a line of an old Scot's song:--"Rob Roy McGregor O."

"Yes!"

"How's your liver?"

"Don't know I have one--so it must be all right!"

"What do you think about paying off old scores?" Mischief was lurking in his eyes.

"Oh, let's forget that, Jim! It is too cold-blooded for me."

"Cold-blooded nothing! The dirty skunk didn't look at it that way when you were as weak as Meeting-house tea and hardly able to stand on your two pins."

"That's no lie, either!"

"And he'd do it again if he thought it would work."

Phil looked at Jim.

"I guess you are right,--and I feel mad enough to scrap with anybody."

"Right! Let us work it as near as we can the way he worked it on you."

They went over to the table near the window and rehearsed quietly their method of operation, and it was not long before a noise in the back room signalled the break-up of the card game. Half a dozen rough-looking fellows from Redmans Creek followed one another out to the saloon, headed, as usual, by McGregor, straddling his legs and swaggering, looking round with a cynical twist on his handsome face. They went over to the bar.

McGregor pushed himself in at the far end, brushing an innocent individual out of his way in the operation. The man who followed McGregor wedged himself in next. McGregor slid along and two more harmless men at the bar gave way. It was an old trick and they knew how to perform it. Still the McGregor gang pushed in, one after another, until the entire counter was taken up by the six, who stood there, legs and elbows sprawled, laughing and jeering at the men they had displaced and at their lack of courage in not endeavouring to hold their own.

They stood in this fashion for possibly five minutes, blocking the counter and not allowing anyone else to get near it.

Suddenly Phil jumped up from his seat and walked over to the bar.

"Say, fellows! Come on all and have a drink on me!" he shouted.

The six at the bar swung round to look at the speaker.

"Come on,--ease up, you ginks!--unless you've hired the Kenora saloon for the night."

No one moved, so Phil caught the man nearest to him by the belt and yanked him out deftly. Langford, who was immediately behind Phil, caught the next one and repeated the performance.

There was a scramble and some of the more aggressive bystanders joined in to Phil's and Jim's assistance. Then the more timid followed, with the ultimate result that five of McGregor's gang were dislodged, as a dozen men crowded alongside and around their champion. McGregor still held his place defiantly, elbows and legs asprawl as before. Phil was close up to him, with Jim at Phil's left hand.

"Guess you think you're some kid!" McGregor remarked, spitting a wad of chewing tobacco on to the floor.

"Quit your scrapping," returned Phil in assumed irritation. "Have a drink!--it's on me. It isn't often I stand treat. Name your poison!"

"Well,--if that's all you're up to, guess I might as well," he answered, in reluctant conciliation.

"Come on, fellows! This hell-for-leather blacksmith wants to blow in his week's wages on drinks. We ain't goin' to stop him."

The bar-tenders served as fast as they could. Phil paid the score, then turned to have a fresh look at McGregor. The latter was watching him closely out of the corner of his eyes. He took up his glass.

"Guess you think you're puttin' one over," he snarled. "Well,--you've got another guess comin'."

He put his tumbler up against Phil's jacket, tilted it deliberately, sending the contents trickling all the way down Phil's clothes right to his boot. He looked into Ralston's eyes with a sneer on his face and slowly set his tumbler on the counter, watching every movement in the room through narrowed eyes.

Phil's temper flared out and he swung on McGregor with tremendous quickness.

To his surprise, quick as he was, his fist fell on McGregor's wrist.

In a second, they were in the centre of the room, tables and chairs were whirled into corners as by magic, and the two were in a ring formed by a wall of swaying bodies and eager faces, for more than a few of them had witnessed the previous encounter between the pair and had been wondering just when the return match would take place.

Phil waited with bated breath for the bull-like rush which he expected, while Langford's voice could be heard high over the hubbub, shouting in the Doric to which he had risen in his excitement:--

"Mair room! Gi'e them mair room. Widen oot, can ye no!--widen oot!"

But instead of the rush for grips that Phil anticipated, he found himself faced by a man, strong as a lion, with arms out in the true pugilistic attitude. He guessed it for a ruse and a bit of play-acting, and sprang in. He struck three times for separate parts of the cowpuncher's body, but each time he struck he encountered a guarding arm or fist. This more than surprised him, for it was well known that McGregor's strong and only point was his brute force.

In order to give himself time to think the matter out, Phil sprang away again.

McGregor's face was sphinx-like in its inscrutable cynicism.

They circled, facing each other like sparring gamecocks of a giant variety.

Phil, determined on having another try, jumped in on his huge opponent.

He struck, once--twice. He was about to strike again, when he staggered back as if he had been hit by a sledge hammer fair on the chin. The saloon swung head over heels in a whirligig movement. Phil's arms became heavy as lead and dropped to his side. His legs sagged under him.

In a state of drugging collapse, he felt himself seized and crushed as into a pulp; a not unpleasant sensation of swinging, a hurtling through the air and splintering,--then, well,--that was all.

When he came to, he was being carried up the stairs to his bedroom, to the accompaniment of Mrs. Clunie's repeated regrets, in broad Scotch, that it was a pity "weel bred young chiels couldna agree to disagree in a decent manner, wise-like and circumspectly, withoot fechtin' like a wheen drucken colliers."

This did not prevent that good lady from washing and binding Phil's numerous but not very deadly cuts and bruises.

It was two days before he was able to be out of bed, and during these two days he heard a number of stories, through Mrs. Clunie, of what had happened at the Kenora Hotel after his hurried exit through the window. These stories he refused to believe, for his faith in Jim Langford's ability was too strong to be easily shaken. But one thing he had to give credence to was, that Jim had not shown face at Mrs. Clunie's since the night of the trouble.

Mrs. Clunie complained that half a dozen times she had chased "that hauf-witted, saft sannie o' a daftie, ca'ed Laughner, or Smiler or something," from the back door, and she was sure he was "after nae guid."

On the morning of the third day, Phil, stiff and a little wobbly, set out for the smithy, where big Sol Hanson welcomed him back with an indulgent grin.

Hanson had learned all about the affray, as everyone else in town seemed to have done.

"But has anyone seen Langford?" asked Phil in some concern, as they discussed the matter.

"Oh, Langford go on one big booze," laughed Sol. "He turn up maybe in about one month, all shot to hell, then he sober up again for long time."

"But doesn't anyone know where he is?"

"Sure, sometimes!--maybe at Kelowna, then Kamloops. Somebody see him at Armstrong, then no see him for another while. Best thing you leave Jim Langford till he gets good and ready to come back. Only make trouble any other way. Everybody leave big Jim when he goes on a big toot."

"Well," said Phil with some decision, "I'm going after him anyway, and I'm going to stay right with him till he's O.K."

"All right, son--please yourself! We are not so busy now, but I tell you it no damn good. I know Jim Langford, five, maybe six year,--see!"

Phil set out to make inquiries.

At the Kenora he heard of someone who had seen Jim the day before at the town of Salmon Arm, between thirty and forty miles away. He took the stage there, only to find that Langford had left

presumably for Vernock. Back again he came, and it was late at night when he got to town. On dropping off the stage, he ran into the faithful Smiler.

"Hullo, kid! You see Jim Langford?" he asked.

Smiler nodded.

"Know where he is?"

He nodded again excitedly, hitching up his trousers which were held round his middle by a piece of cord.

"Might have known it," thought Phil, "and saved myself a lot of running about.

"Lead on, MacDuff!" he cried. "Show me Jim Langford and I'll give you two-bits."

Smiler led the way in the darkness, down a side street into the inevitable and dimly lit Chinatown. Smiler stopped up in front of the dirty, dingy entrance of a little hall occasionally used for Chinese theatricals. He pointed inside with a grin, refused Phil's proffered twenty-five cents, backing up and finally racing away.

A special performance in Chinese was being given by a troupe of actors from Vancouver and all Chinatown who could were there.

Phil paid his admission to a huge, square-jawed Chinaman at the pay-box, and pushed through the swing doors, inside.

The theatre was crowded with Orientals, who, for the most part, were dirty, vile-smelling and expectorating.

About half-way down the centre of the aisle, he took a vacant seat on the end of one of the rough, wooden, backless benches which were all that were provided for the comfort of the audience. The place was very badly lighted, although the stage stood out in well-illuminated contrast.

Phil's first anxiety was to locate Jim. He scanned the packed benches, but all he could see was stolid, gaunt-jawed, slit-eyed Chinamen. There did not seem to be another white man in the place.

Someone nudged him on the arm. He turned. A sleek Chinaman, whom Phil had often seen on the streets--the janitor, Phil remembered, for The Pioneer Traders,--grinned at him.

"You tly catch Missee Langfod?" he whispered.

"Yes!" nodded Phil.

"He down there, flont seat."

Phil looked in the direction indicated and, sure enough, there was Jim--alone, in the middle of the foremost and only otherwise unoccupied bench in the hall--all absorbed in the scene that was being enacted on the platform.

Contented in the knowledge that he now had his friend under surveillance, Phil directed his interest to the stage, for he had never before been present at so strange a performance.

The opera, for such it appeared to be, was already under way. The lady, the Chinese equivalent of a prima-donna--dressed in silks emblazoned with gold spangles, tinsel and glass jewels, with a strange head-dress, three feet high, consisting of feathers and pom-pons--was holding forth in what was intended to be song. It occurred to Phil that he had thrown old boots at tom-cats in Mrs. Clunie's back-yard for giving expression to what was sweet melody in comparison.

The actress's face was painted and powdered to a mere mask. Her finger nails were two inches longer than her four-inch-long feet. She rattled those fingers nails in a manner that made Phil's flesh creep, although this action seemed highly pleasing to the audience in general. The lady, Phil learned from the Chinaman at his side, was a famous beauty.

The scenery required no description, being merely a number of plain, movable partitions, draught-screens and chairs. There was no drop-curtain, and the scene shifters worked in full view of the audience, removing furniture and knocking down partitions with hammers during the vocal rendering of some of the thrilling passages of the opera. On another platform, behind the stage, the orchestra was making strenuous, and at times, very effective attempts to drown the squeals of the Leading Lady, who did not seem to mind it a bit. The conductor, in his shirt sleeves, was laying on, alternately, to a Chinese drum and what looked like two empty coconut shells, whacking out a species of rag-time all on his own, while the two other members of the band were performing on high-pitched Chinese fiddles, determined evidently on keeping up the racket at all costs.

Phil noticed no evidence of sheet music, so familiar in a white man's orchestra. These were real artists and they played entirely from memory.

In an endeavour to be enlightened, Phil touched a Chinaman in front of him--for the familiar one at his side had slipped quietly to some other part of the hall.

"John,--what all this play about--you know?" he asked.

Without turning round, the Oriental sang to him in a top-storey voice:--

"Lu-wang Kah Chek-tho, chiu-si. Tung-Kwo chi Ku-su. Savvy?"

Phil did not "savvy," but another Chinaman, more obliging and more English, who introduced

himself as Mee Yi-ow, told him the gist of the tale in pigeon English, up to the point where Phil had come in, so that he was able to follow the performance with some intelligence, from there on.

Away back in the middle ages, a bold, bad, blood-thirsty brigand chief kidnapped the only daughter of the Empress, because of that young lady's irresistible beauty and charm and because of his own unquenchable love for her. He, in turn, was trapped and captured by the Royal Body Guard, who brought him--manacled in chains with cannon balls at the ends of them--before the haughty Empress. He was sentenced to death by nibbling--a little piece to be skewered out of him every two hours, Chinese time.

The Brigand Chief, on the side, was a hand-cuff expert. One day he managed to slip out of his chains and away from his tiresome cannon balls. He made a daring dash for liberty, disarming and killing a sentry. Boldly, he sought out the Captain of the Royal Guard and fought a very realistic duel with him before the Empress and all the members of her retinue who came out from the wings specially to witness the sight.

The rank and file of the Royal Bodyguard--with emphasis on the *rank*--also stood idly by enjoying the spectacle.

At last, the Brigand Chief slew the Captain of the Guard, and the latter, as soon as he had finished dying, rose to his feet and walked calmly off the stage. Then, amid the rattle of drums and empty coconut shells, accompanied by fiddle squeaks, the Royal Guard rushed upon the Brigand Chief, overpowering him and loading him up afresh with his lately lamented chains and cannon balls.

A number of influential people--Princes, Mandarins and things, including the recently kidnapped only daughter of the Empress--pleaded for the gallant fighter's life.

But,--up to closing time that night--the Empress remained obdurate; this being absolutely necessary, as the play continued for six successive evenings.

Throughout the most intensely dramatic incidents, Phil failed to hear a hand-clap or an ejaculation of admiration or pleasure from the sphinx-faced yellow men about him. Yet they seemed intensely interested in the performance.

Cabbages and bad eggs, so dear to the heart of the white actor, would have been preferable to that funereal silence.

Phil was just thinking how discouraging it must be to be a Chinese actor, when, by some signal, unintelligible to him, the play ended for the night. He rose with the audience, made quickly for the only exit and took up his position on the inside, there to await Jim's arrival. When the greater portion of the audience had passed out, Jim rose from his seat in front, picked up a white sheet from a corner of the stage and whirled it about him, throwing an end of it over his left shoulder in the manner of the ancient Grecian sporting gentlemen.

From his looks, he had about three days' growth of whiskers on his face. His eyes, big and dark-rimmed, glowed with an intense inner fire that would have singled him out from among his fellows anywhere.

Jim was well-known and respected among the Chinamen, the more so because of his vagaries.

Suddenly, he raised his arm in a rhythmic gesture of appeal. He uttered one word, arresting and commanding in its intonation:--

"Gentlemen!"

There were not very many gentlemen there, but each one present took the ejaculation as personal. The little crowd stopped and gathered round, gazing up with interest at the erect figure in the aisle, white robed, with hand still outstretched.

After a moment of tense silence, he commenced to recite Burns' immortal poem on brotherly love.

Never had Phil heard such elocution. The intonation, the fervour and fire, the gesticulation were the perfect interpretation of a poet, a mystic, a veritable Thespian. On and on Jim went in uninterrupted, almost breathless silence. Phil was anxious for his friend's well-being, but he stood at the door listening spellbound, as did the Orientals about Jim, and the low whites who had straggled in toward the end of the Chinese performance, half-drunk and doped.

Vigorously, Jim concluded:--

"Then let us pray that come it may,
As come it will for a' that,
That sense and worth o'er a' the earth
May bear the gree, and a' that.
For a' that, and a' that,
It's coming yet, for a' that,
That man to man, the world o'er
Shall brothers be for a' that."

When he finished there was a round of applause, in which the Chinamen joined most noisily--an unusual thing for them who had sat throughout the entire evening's play of their own without the slightest show of appreciation.

Phil had heard somewhere that Scotsmen and Chinamen understand each other better than any

other nationalities on the globe do, but this was the first time he had had a first-hand ocular demonstration that the Chinaman appreciated the Doric of Robbie Burns, when delivered with the true native feeling.

Langford bowed his acknowledgement in a courtly manner, as Sir Henry Irving might have done before a royal audience.

Some of the maudlin white men shouted for an encore.

Nothing loth, Jim laughingly consented, and a hush went over the crowd again, for there was a peculiar hypnotism coming from this erratic individual that commanded the attention of all his listeners.

A little, old, monkey-faced Chinaman, carrying a parcel in his hand, was standing close by. Langford caught hold of him gently and stood the bashful individual before him. In paternal fashion he placed his hand on the greasy, grey head and started impressively into the farewell exhortation of Polonius to Læertes, out of Hamlet:

“And these few precepts in thy memory.
Look thou to character. Give thy thoughts no tongue
Nor any unproportion’d thought his act.
Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar”...

On he recited, oblivious of all but the charm of the words he uttered, careful lest a single phrase might pass his lips without its due measure of expression. He finished in a whisper; his voice full of emotion and tears glistening in his deep-set eyes, much to the amazement of the monkey-face upturned to him.

“This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.”

Deep silence followed, until the squeaky voice of little monkey-face broke through:--

“Ya,--you bet,--me savvy!”

It shattered the spell that was on Langford. He laughed, and grabbed the parcel from the hand of the little Chinaman. He pulled the string from it and the paper wrappings, exposing a bloody ox-heart which was destined never to fulfil the purpose for which it was bought.

Throwing off his sheet cloak, Langford became transformed into a figure of early history. He held the ox-heart high in the air with his left hand and struck a soldierly attitude.

He was now the famous Black Douglas of Scotland, fighting his last fight against the Moors in Spain, with the heart of his beloved dead monarch, Robert Bruce, in the silver casket in which he had undertaken to carry it to the Holy Land.

Parrying and thrusting with his imaginary sword, gasping, panting in assumed exhaustion, staggering, recovering and fighting again, then feigning wounds of a deadly nature, he threw the ox-heart over the heads of his gaping spectators toward the door, where it fell at Phil’s feet.

“Onward, brave Heart,” he cried, “as thou wert wont to be in the field. Douglas will follow thee or die.”

Then, casting his audience on either side of him, like falling thistles under a sickle, he sprang toward the exit. When he reached his objective, he stooped to pick up the ox-heart.

Phil smartly placed his foot on it.

Slowly Jim unbent himself, his eyes travelling from the foot that dared to interfere with his will, up the leg, body and chest, until at last they stared into the familiar eyes of his friend, who returned his stare with cold questioning. Thus they looked at each other for a moment, then Jim’s eyes averted. He turned quickly away and passed into the darkened roadway.

Phil followed, a short step behind.

Jim heard him and quickened his pace. Phil did likewise. Finally he broke into a run. Phil responded. He ran till his breath began to give out, but try as he would, Langford could not shake his follower.

There was no sign of any recognition; no word passed between them.

Three or four times they circled Chinatown in this way. Langford next dropped into a long, swinging stride and started up toward the railway tracks and out on to the high road of Coldcreek. Doggedly, limpet-like, Phil kept closely to him.

On, on he walked, mile after mile, untiring, apparently unheeding, looking neither to right nor left. And on, on, after him, almost at his side, went his determined friend.

In an hour, Jim cut down a side road and commenced to circle back by the low road, past the lake and once again toward the fairy, twinkling lights of Vernock.

The Post Office clock chimed the first hour of a new day, when they got back.

Jim stopped up in front of a stable, pushed his way inside--for the door was ajar--tumbled down in a corner among some hay and, apparently, was soon fast asleep.

Phil dropped down beside him, but did not close his eyes.

And glad he was of it, for, about an hour later, very stealthily Jim rose on his elbow, looked into

Phil's face, and, evidently satisfied that he was unconscious, rose and made softly for the door.

But when he turned to close it behind him, Phil was right by his side.

Without a word, Jim changed his mind and went straight back to his hay bed on the stable floor; and this time he tumbled into a deep sleep.

Phil must have dozed off too, for when he awoke the light of an Autumn sun was streaming through a dirty window on to his face.

He started up in consternation, but his fears were soon allayed for Jim Langford was still sleeping peacefully, dead to the world, with an upturned face tranquil and unlined, and innocent-looking as a baby boy's.

The work horses in their stalls were becoming restless. Phil examined his watch. It was six o'clock.

He knew that the teamster would soon be on his job getting his beasts ready for their day's work, so he roused Langford, who sat up in a semi-stupor, licking his lips with a dry, rough tongue.

He gazed at Phil for a while. Phil smiled in good humour.

"Man, but I'm a rotter!" said Jim.

"Of course you are!" agreed Phil. "We're both more or less rotters."

"But that son of a lobster McGregor knocked you cold," he pursued, starting in where he had left off several days before.

"He did, Jim, and threw me through the window to wind up with."

"And I'm the man that knows it, too. Lord!--but I'm as dry as if I had been eating salt fish for a week."

"And you can have a nice, big drink of fresh water at the trough outside whenever you are ready."

"Water, Phil! Have a heart!"

"Sure thing! Good fresh water!"

"Water, water, everywhere, and not a drop to drink," he quoted.

And sitting up, there among the hay, a strangely assorted pair they seemed as they conversed familiarly.

"Well,--I fancy I've had about enough this trip."

"You certainly have!"

"Ay, Phil,--but think of that big shrimp knocking us soft."

"Us, did you say?" put in Phil. "Then it is true, after all?"

"What?"

"That he finished you off after he put me to sleep!"

Langford tried to spit in disgust, but despite the greatness of his disgust his mouth and salivary glands refused to function.

"Oh, man!--it makes me sick. The big, long-legged, red-haired devil has been learning to box on the quiet. And to think that he had that up his sleeve, and was just waiting for us!"

"Tell me what happened after I got mine, Jim. I haven't heard it right yet."

"Everything happened. I went out and picked you up. I got some of the boys to take you home after I knew that you weren't really booked for 'The Better Land.' Then I went back to lick the stuffing out of Rob Roy. He was in there, grinning and throwing out his chest like a pouter pigeon."

"You want the same dose?" he asked.

"That's what I came for," said I. And, Phil, between you and me, that's just about what I got.

"We fought in the bar-room for three-quarters of an hour. I never hit him worth a rap, for he had a defence like the Rock o' Gibraltar. He didn't hit me very often, either, but when he did,--Oh, Lord! Well, to make a short story for a thirsty man, we had to quit, both of us, from sheer exhaustion. When we could hardly stand, the Mayor came in and separated us. He sent McGregor and his gang slap-bang home to Redmans. And after that--well, they filled me up to the neck. Oh, I was quite ready to be filled, Phil, for my pride was sorely humbled. And--I've been filled up to the neck ever since.

"What day is it, Phil?"

"Wednesday!"

"This week, last week or next week?"

"This week!"

"Is that all? And it happened only last Saturday. Man!" he cried, springing up, "if that's the case, I've only started."

"You have finished," said Phil decidedly, "finished good and plenty, now and for all."

"But man,--think o' my reputation. I always have a month of it."

"Not this time!"

"But I've done it for years. Think o' tradition!"

"Tradition be-darned! If you do, I'll have a month of it, too."

"That's pure blarney, Phil. You're not that kind."

"No, but I shall be. See if I won't, if you don't quit."

Jim looked into Phil's eyes and he saw a determination in them that he knew he could never shake, and, knowing his own weakness, he would have killed Phil rather than see him in the same plight.

"Man!" he exclaimed in perplexity, "I do believe you would."

"Try me and you'll soon find out."

They sat silently for a time. Suddenly Phil broke in.

"Come on,--what is it to be? Back into decency or a month of hell?" he asked.

Jim Langford got to his feet.

"Lead on, old chum," he said. "Me for a bath, a shave, a good breakfast and--honest toil."

CHAPTER XI

Sol Wants a Good Wife--Bad

Phil was busy in the forge one morning, all alone. Sol Hanson, for some unknown reason, had failed to put in an appearance, and his assistant was not a little troubled over his absence. Before starting out to make inquiries, however, he decided to work away until noon, for it was the day after the Provincial Election, and the results were expected any minute and were anxiously awaited.

He felt quite confident within himself that John Royce Pederstone would be elected, for the candidate had received a splendid reception at all his meetings throughout the Valley, with the solitary exception of the hometown of his opponent. Furthermore, rumour had it that Pederstone's party was sweeping the country, so, if there was anything at all in indications, Royce Pederstone's election was a foregone conclusion.

Phil had noticed that the nearer the election day had drawn, the more serious, nervous and unsettled Sol had seemed to grow, as if he dreaded the possibility of his old master's defeat and was taking it to himself as a personal matter.

At noon time, Phil went out, took a hurried lunch, then strolled down to the office of the *Advertiser*, where a crowd was gathered reading the results from the various constituencies as they were posted up on the notice-board outside.

Just as he got there, Ben Todd came rushing out of the office, his eyes jumping, his little hunched body quivering with excitement, and his long arms swinging, apelike and energetic. He mounted a chair. He could not settle himself at the start, so all he did was to wave a paper in the air and shout gleefully:--

"He's in, boys! He's in! Vernock is on the map at last. Hip-hip-hurrah, for John Royce Pederstone, M.L.A.!"

The news was received with yells of delight, cat-calls and some real cowboy war-whoops. When the commotion subsided, Ben Todd continued.

"Our new member is coming in on the stage from Kelowna at six-thirty. The band is going to be there, so don't forget to be there too and give him a rouser. The ladies are busy already at the town hall. Supper at seven-thirty and a dance at eighty-thirty till the cows come home. Put on your glad rags, bring your women folks and whoop her up for a fare-you-well."

Thus relieved of his effervescence, Ben Todd threw his slang overboard and started in to a political speech in good English, on the immense possibilities of the Valley in which they were privileged to dwell; the era of prosperity just ahead--in fact, with some already reached; on the increasing demand for property everywhere, the consequent rising values and the prospect of early wealth to the present holders of land; haranguing the good-natured crowd on the outstanding qualities of John Royce Pederstone, their new member; on the wonderful things he would do for the Valley in the matter of irrigation, railroads, public buildings and everything else; eulogising on the tremendous help Mayor Brenchfield had given with his widespread influence and his virile oratory during the final whirlwind tour over the Valley; and last but not least, dwelling on the unfailing support the new member had received from the greatest of British Columbia's inland newspapers, *The Vernock and District Advertiser*.

Phil had no time to wait to hear all of it. He threaded his way through the crowd and back to the smithy. He had just got his coat off and his sleeves rolled up, when Sol Hanson swaggered in in great style. He was dressed in a loud-checked summer suit, which fitted him only where it touched him. Every button on it was buttoned and straining, and in places the cloth was stretched to bursting point--for no ordinary-sized suit ever fitted Sol Hanson; and, never thinking of such a disloyalty as sending out of the Valley for his clothes, he had, perforce, to content himself with the biggest suit he could obtain in the Vernock stores.

Sol had a black bowler hat, three sizes too small for him, sitting jauntily on the back of his head. His great shock of fair hair was streaming from under it, all round, like a waterfall. It was a new hat, but it looked as if it had had an argument with a dusty roadway.

Later information proved that appearances, so far as the hat was concerned, were not deceptive.

Sol's trousers were tight and straining. They were turned up, high above a pair of flaring yellow boots, displaying some four inches of lavender socks. A red necktie, a walking stick, a huge red rose and a pair of tan gloves completed the external extravaganza. Sol had succeeded in getting one glove on his great ham-like hand, but the other had proved too much for him and he carried it loosely in his hand.

He strutted up and down in front of Phil, with a look of inordinate pride on his big, porridge-soft, Simple Simon face.

Phil gaped in wonder, then, when he could restrain himself no longer, he burst out laughing, much to the dandified Sol's disappointment.

"What's the matter?" he asked, straightening up.

This caused Phil to laugh the more.

"Why, Sol!--you're all dolled up something awful," he remarked.

"Well!--that's all right,--ain't it?"

"Sure thing,--go to it! Mr. Pederstone won't know you when you go up to congratulate him on his victory."

"Ya!--Mr. Pederstone win. I pretty dam-glad. But that ain't any reason why a fellow put on his fine clothes."

"What is it then, Sol? You might tell a fellow. You haven't come into a fortune?"

"No such dam-luck as that! But this my birthday, Phil. I been thirty-three years old to-day."

"Well now!--and I never knew." Phil reached and shook the big Swede's big hand heartily. "Leave it there,--many happy returns, old man!"

Sol's good nature bubbled over, but his face took on a clouded expression shortly after. "'Old man!'" he repeated. "Ya!--you right, Phil, thirty-three, I soon, be old man and I not been got married yet. If I wait two-three year more, nobody have me."

"Oh, go on, you old pessimist. You're a young fellow yet. There's lot of time."

"Maybe--maybe not! Yesterday I think all pretty girl here soon be snapped up. Gretchen Gilder, she get married to that slob Peters last year, and Peters he no dam-good. I never ask Gretchen, or maybe I have her now. I think she been too good. Peters he ask her and get her right off. All them Johnson girls get married; five fine big girl too! Now little Betty McCawl--you know little Irish girl--God bless me!--I just been crazy for her. She go get married day before yesterday to that other Swede, Jan Nansen."

Phil laughed at Sol's rueful countenance, as the latter recounted his matrimonial misses.

"Why!--you're too slow."

"You bet!--too dam-slow to catch myself getting out of bed. I scared to tell little Betty. Think maybe she not like to marry big Swede. Jan Nansen catch her first time. Jan Nansen,--land sakes!--I got more money, more sense, more hair on top my head, more clothes;--I could put Jan in my jean's pocket. Now little Betty, she Mrs. Jan Nansen. Good night and God bless me!"

Sol spat among the hoof parings on the floor in his annoyance.

"Yes, too bad, Sol!" Phil put in.

"Yesterday I say too bad too! I got fine house. Build him all myself too. I got three room, with chairs, tables, fine stove, everything. But I got nobody to keep it nice. Then that dam-fool of a fine little fellow Smiler, he going all plumb toboggan to hell because nobody look after him all day long. Soon no more pretty girl be left, I say to myself:--'Sol Hanson, to-morrow your birthday. You get all dressed up and first girl you meet you ask her if she marry Sol Hanson.' See! Maybe she not take me. All right! I keep on ask next one, then another one, till some girl take me. First one take me, she get me,--see!"

Phil raised his eyebrows in amusement, wondering what next he was about to hear.

"Well, last night I go down to Morrison's store and buy all these. This morning, I have a fine bath, with fine baby soap. I get good shave, dress up swell like this, and come out about one o'clock. One o'clock all fine girl be going back to work after dinner,--see!

"I open front door and get down sidewalk, then come down street. Nobody there; nobody pass me. But when I get ten yard from corner Snider Avenue, who come slap-bang pretty near head-

on collision:--big Martha Schmidt."

Phil yelled uproariously as Sol stood there the picture of seriousness.

"Ya,--you laugh. I laugh now,--ha, ha! You know Martha. She maybe thirty, maybe thirty-six. I don't know. She got one good eye; other eye all shot to hell sometime. Just got one big tooth and he stick out good and plenty. Ugh!

"Well,--Sol Hanson every time he dam-good sport and do what he say he do. But I not meet her. I stop quick,--think for one little time,--then Martha cry, 'Hullo, Sol!' I never hear her. I turn quick, walk back all the same as if, maybe, I left my pipe home. I hurry into house, slam door hard and stand inside all shivers like one pound of head cheese waiting to get cold."

"And what then, Sol?"

"Oh,--after while, I peep out and see Martha go up the road. Little while more, all clear, I come out and have one more try.

"This time, first girl for sure, I say. Well--first girl happen to be black buck-nigger Ebenezer Jones's coon kid, Dorothea. Dorothea she dam-fine girl all right. She say, 'Hullo, Kid,--nice day!'

"I look away down the street to corner. I make her think I not see her. I keep on going. She stand on sidewalk, one big fist on each hip and she look after me and say, 'Wal,--I like dat!'"

"Dirty trick!" remarked Phil.

"What? Holy Yiminy!--that fair enough. You don't expect decent white man ask nigger coon wench to marry him. I maybe not mention it to myself when I make deal with myself, but no black nigger, no Chink or Jap for Sol Hanson. I keep single first,--you bet!"

"Quite right!" switched Phil. "Keep the colour scheme right anyway, Sol."

"Well--then white girl come along. 'By gosh!' I say.

"She Miss Gladys Tierney,--you know,--she work typewriter for Commercial Bank.

"I raise my hat and say, 'Good morning, lady!'

"She look me up and down. 'Are you crazy?' she ask. 'You bet!' I say, 'been crazy for you, sweetheart.'

"She sniff and give me regular freeze-out; leave me standing dam-fool foolish.

"Little while more, pretty fine Jane she come along. I see her sometimes; but not know her name.

"Big,--uhm! Work in steam laundry. She wear her sleeves all rolled up; walk very quick like she been going some place. She look good to me, so I step up in front. I take off my hat.

"'How do you do, Jane!'

"She look at me and laugh. Half-smile, half laugh,--you know, Phil. I guess, maybe, it all right. So I try, little bit more.

"'Very nice day, ma'am,' I say.

"'It is,' she say.

"'You look pretty nice!' I say next.

"'That's comforting!' she say next back, very quick.

"'This my birthday.' And I smile to her.

"'It is written all over you,' she answer.

"'You think I look pretty good to you, eh?' I ask.

"'Swell!' she say.

"'You think somebody like to marry me? I got dam-fine house, and furniture, and Smiler.'

"'Somebody might,' she say.

"Well, Phil,--I seem to be getting on pretty good, so I take the bull by the tail and say right bang off the wrong side of the bat, 'You be my wife?'

"'What?' she say, as if maybe she make a mistake in her ear-drums.

"'You marry me?' I ask again.

"She pull the blinds down all over her face just like biff. She take one swing on me, Phil, right there, and pretty near break my jaw;--knock my four dollar hat all to hell in the middle of the road and walk away laughing like, like--oh, like big, fat, laundry maid laugh."

Very seriously, Phil asked his further adventures.

"Ain't that plenty for one day? No dam-good catch wife that way. I try another trick, though. Maybe it work better."

"What's the other trick, Sol?"

The big simpleton drew a pink coloured, badly frayed newspaper out of his pocket. It was *The Matrimonial Times*, a monthly sheet printed in Seattle and intended for the lonely, lovesick and forlorn of both sexes; a sort of agony column by the mile.

"You don't mean to say you correspond with anybody through that?"

"You bet!"

"And can't you land anyone?"

"Not yet! Everybody say, 'Send photo.' I send it, then no answer come back."

"Never mind!" commiserated Phil. "One of these days your picture will reach the right one and she'll think you're the only man on earth."

"Well,--she have to be pretty gol-darn quick now, for I'm all sick inside waiting."

"Meantime, hadn't you better get back to work, Sol?"

"Guess, maybe just as well."

He went into a corner, took off his glad rags, folded them and laid them carefully on a bench, then donned his working trousers, shirt and leather apron, and was soon swinging his hammer and making the sparks fly as if he had no other thought in the world but the welding of the iron he handled to its fore-ordained shape.

CHAPTER XII

The Dance

That night, Phil and Jim attired themselves in their best clothes and set out for the town hall. There was no missing the way, for Chinese lanterns and strings of electric lights led there, and all pedestrians were making for that important objective.

The two comrades were late in getting there; much too late to be partakers of the supper and listeners to the toasting and speech-making so dear to the hearts of politicians, aspiring politicians, lodge men, newspaper men, parsons, lawyers, ward-committee chairmen and the less pretentious, common-ordinary soap-box orator--whom no community is without. The long-suffering and patient public had evidently been hypnotised into putting up with the usual surfeit of lingual fare by the nerve-soothing influences of a preceding supper with a dance to follow.

Outside the town hall, horses, harnessed and saddled, lined the roadway, hitched to every available post, rail and tree in the vicinity. The side streets were blocked in similar fashion.

The hall inside was a blaze of coloured lights and was bedecked with flags and streamers. The orchestral part of the town band was doing its best. Everybody, his wife and his sweetheart, were conspicuously present, despite the fact that it was the height of the harvest season and most of them had been hard at work in the orchards since early morning, garnering their apple crops, and would have to be hard at it again next day, as if nothing had happened between times to disturb their evening's recuperations.

A number of dances had been gone through, evidently, for the younger ladies were seated round the hall, fanning themselves daintily, while the complexions of the more elderly of them had already begun to betray a perspiry floridness.

The men, young and old alike, mopping their moist foreheads with their handkerchiefs and straining at their collars in partial suffocation, crowded the corridors in quest of cooler air and an opportunity for a pipe or a cigarette. Only a few of the younger gallants lingered in the dance room to exchange pleasantries and bask for several precious extra moments in the alluring presence of some particular young lady with whom, for the time being, they were especially enamoured.

A cheery atmosphere prevailed; both political parties had buried their differences for the night. All were out for a good time and to do honour to the Valley's new parliamentary representative.

The men who congregated in the corridors presented a strange contrast; great broad fellows, polite of manner and speaking cultured English, in full evening dress but of a cut of the decade previous; others in their best blue serges; still others in breeches and leggings or puttees; while a few--not of the ballroom variety--refused to dislodge themselves from their sheepskin chaps, and jingled their spurs every time they changed position.

For the most part, the eyes of these men were clear and bright, and their faces were tanned to a healthy brown from long exposure to the Okanagan's perpetual sunshine. The pale-faced exceptions were the storekeepers, clerks, hotel-men and the bunco-dealers, like Rattlesnake Jim Dalton, who spent their days in the saloons and their nights at the card-tables.

The ladies, seated round the hall, compared favourably with their partners in point of healthy and virile appearance; and many of them, who a few years before, in their former homes in the East and in the Old Land, had not known what it meant to dry a dish, cook a meal or make a dress, who had trembled at the thought of a warm ray of God's blessed sunshine falling on their tender, sweet-milk complexions unless it were filtered and diluted through a parasol or a drawn curtain, now knew, from hard, honest experience, how to cook for their own household and, in addition, to cater for a dozen ever-hungry ranch hands and cattlemen:--knew not only how to make a dress but how to make one over when the necessity called for it; could milk the cows

with the best of their serving-girls; could canter over the ranges, rope a steer and stare the blazing summer sun straight in the eye, with a laugh of defiance and real, live happiness.

The feminine hired-help chatted freely with their mistresses in a comradeship and a kind of free-masonry that only the hard battling with nature in the West could engender.

Phil was leaning idly against the door-post at the entrance to the dance-room, contemplating the kaleidoscope, when Jim's voice roused him.

"Phil,--I see your dear, dear friend, Mayor Brenchfield, is here."

"You've wonderful eyesight!" Phil answered. "Brenchfield is hardly the one to let anyone miss seeing him. His middle name is publicity, in capital letters."

"Little chatterbox Jenny Steele tells me he has had three dances out of the last five with Eileen Pederstone," was the next tantaliser.

"That shows his mighty good taste!"

"You bet it does! But he shows darned poor breeding, unless he's tied up to her."

"It is up to her, anyway, and maybe they are engaged," returned Phil, lightly enough.

"I don't doubt that he would like to be. Guess he will be too, sooner or later. Gee!" he continued in disgust, "I wish some son-of-a-gun would cut the big, fat, over-confident bluffer out."

"Why don't you have a try, Jim?" laughed his companion.

"Me? I never had a lass in my life. I'm--I'm not a lady's man. They are all very nice to me, and all that; but I never feel completely comfortable unless it happens to be a woman who could be my great-grandmother."

"You're begging the question, Jim. Why don't you go over and claim a dance or two from Miss Pederstone, seeing you are so anxious over her and Brenchfield?"

"I would,--bless your wee, palpitating, undiscerning soul, but I don't dance."

"Go and talk to her, then."

"And have somebody come over and pick her up to dance with, from under my very nose? No, thanks! This is a dance, man; and the lassies are here to dance. It would be ill of me to deprive her of all the fun she wants.

"You can dance, Phil? I know you can by the way you've been beating your feet every time the band plays. Go on, man!"

"I could dance, once," said Phil, "but---"

"Once! Spirit of my great-great-grandfather! You talk like Methuselah."

"I haven't danced for five years."

"Good heavens, man! This five years of yours gets on my nerves. You must have Rip Van Winkled five years of your precious life away."

The remark bit deep; and Phil grew solemn and did not reply.

Jim looked into his face soberly, then placed his arm on Phil's shoulder.

"Sorry, old man! I'm an indiscreet idiot. Didn't mean to be rude," he said.

Phil smiled.

"But say," Jim urged, still bent on providing himself with some amusement, "go to it and enjoy yourself. Go on, man;--don't be scared!" he goaded.

Phil undoubtedly was scared, although he felt fairly sure, after that first interview in the smithy, that Eileen Pederstone had not recognised him. But he knew he would be running a risk. As he looked at her across the dancing floor, as she sat there in her soft, shimmering silks, her cheeks aglow, her eyes dancing with happiness and her brown curls straying over her forehead--elfish-like rather than humanly robust--he was tempted, sorely tempted indeed.

"Gee, but you're slow!" went on Jim.

"Oh, go to the devil!" Phil muttered irritably.

But Jim grinned the more; the imp in him uppermost.

"You've met her, haven't you, Phil?"

"Yes,--I spoke to her once only, in the smithy."

"Well--that's good enough for a start."

"Do you think so?"

"Sure thing! Eileen Pederstone turn you down! Man alive,--Eileen wouldn't have the heart to turn you down if you had a wooden leg. I'll tell you what! If she turns you down, I'll ask her for a dance myself; and I never danced in my life."

The music was starting up. It was a good, old-fashioned waltz. How Phil's heart beat to the rhythm of it! The men commenced to swarm from the corridors. He took a step forward. Jim pushed him encouragingly from behind with a "Quick, man, before somebody else asks her up!" and he was in the stream and away with the current. He started across, his heart drumming a tattoo on his ribs. Half-way over the floor--and he would have turned back but for the thought of

Jim. He kept on, still somewhat indeterminately. When he got near to Miss Pederstone, she looked up almost in surprise, but the smile she bestowed on him was ample repayment for his daring. It was the dancing waters of the Kalamalka Lake under a sunburst.

She held out her hand.

"Good evening, Mr. Ralston! Everybody seems to be here to-night."

"Of course,--isn't this *your* night?" Phil ventured.

She beckoned him to sit down by her side.

"It isn't *my* night," she answered; "it is my daddy's."

"You must be very happy at his wonderful victory."

"Yes,--I am very happy, just for father's sake, he was so set on it toward the finish. He is just like a boy who has won a hard race. And now he is being buttonholed by everybody. I shall never have him all to myself any more."

The dancers were already on the floor and gliding away.

"May I have this dance?" asked Phil.

"With pleasure!" she answered. And his heart raced on again, in overwhelming delight. "But first, let us sit just for a moment or so."

"Is Jim Langford with you to-night?" she asked.

"Yes,--he is over there by the door."

"He is a great boy, Jim," she said. "Everybody likes him, and yet he is so terribly foolish at times to his own interests. He doesn't seem to care anything for money, position or material progress. And he is so clever; he could accomplish anything almost, if he set his mind to it. And,--and he is always a gentleman."

"Yes! Jim's pure gold right through," Phil answered with enthusiasm.

"Mr. Ralston, I think you are the only man he has ever been known really to chum with. And he doesn't dance," she added.

"So he tells me."

"Sometimes I fancy he *can* dance, but refuses to admit it for some particular reason of his own. He looks like a dancer."

"Quite possible!" Phil returned. "I never thought of it in that light."

"He does not seem to hanker after a lady's company very much. He is most at home with the men folks."

"He told me, only a few minutes ago, that he was not a lady's man."

"Ah, but he is!" she differed. "It is true he does not show any inclination for the company of young ladies, but he is very much a lady's man all the same. There isn't a young lady in this hall but would be proud to have the honour of Jim Langford's company and companionship at any time. He is of that deep, mercurial disposition that attracts women. It is good for Jim Langford that he does not know his own power," she said, nodding her dainty head suggestively.

"Shall I tell him?" teased Phil.

"No!--let him find that out for himself. He will enjoy it all the more when he does. Some day, I hope, the right young lady will wake him up. Then maybe he won't be 'Wayward' Langford any more."

"I have heard them call you 'Silent' Ralston."

Her remark startled Phil. In the first place, he fancied the nick-name that had been given him was known merely by the rougher element about town, and it sounded strangely coming from her. Again, that was the name they had given him in Ukalla, and it created an uncanny feeling in him that it, of all nick-names, should again fasten to him.

"But you aren't really so silent,--are you now?"

"No!--I can hold my own in the field of conversation. It is just a foolish name some one tagged on, one day, for lack of brains to think of anything more apt;--and it has stuck to me ever since, as such things have a habit of doing."

"'Wayward' Langford and 'Silent' Ralston!" She turned the words on her tongue reflectively. "What a peculiar combination!"

Phil laughed, but refused to be drawn further.

"Are you as wayward as he?" she asked.

Phil did not answer.

"Are you?" she asked again.

"Jim and I are chums," he answered.

"Which means---?"

"'Birds of a feather---'"

How long they would have chatted on, Phil had no notion, for the lights, the music, the gliding dancers, the gaiety and the intoxicating presence of Eileen Pederstone had him in their thrall. However, he was interrupted by the stout but agile figure of Graham Brenchfield weaving in and out among the dancers and coming their way.

He stopped up in front of them, giving Phil a careless nod. He held out his bent arm to Miss Pederstone.

"This is ours, I think, Eileen," he said. "Sorry I was late. Excuse us, Ralston!"

Phil gasped and looked over to Miss Pederstone.

"No, siree!" answered the young lady, quite calmly and naturally. "I have promised this dance to Mr. Ralston, and was just resting a little bit before starting out."

"Pshaw!--Ralston doesn't dance," he bantered. "This is a dandy waltz,--come!"

"But you *do* dance, Mr. Ralston?" she put in.

"Of course I do!" said Phil, springing up. And, in a moment, they sailed away from him whose very presence tainted the atmosphere for Ralston.

A backward glance showed Brenchfield glooming after them, the fingers of one hand fumbling with the pendant of his watch-chain, the fingers of the other pulling at his heavy, black moustache.

But who had any desire to keep the picture of one such as he in memory, in the new delights that were swarming in on Phil?

He held Eileen Pederstone lightly within the half-hoop of his arm. She was but a floating featherweight. But, ah! the intoxication of it, he could never forget: the violins singing and sighing in splendid harmony and time; the perfume of the lady's presence; the soft, sweet, white, living, swaying loveliness; the feeling of abandonment to the pleasure of the moment that enveloped him from his partner's happy heart. Great God!--and Phil a young man in the first flush of his manhood, exiled from the presence of womanhood for five years, shut away from the refining of their influence and in all that time never to have felt the charm of a woman's voice, the delight of a woman's happy laugh, never to have felt the thrill of the touch of a woman's hand;--and suddenly to be released at the very Gates of Heaven: little wonder he was dumb, sightless and deaf to all else but the bewitchment of the waltz.

Phil thought he had forgotten the way, but, ah! how they danced as they threaded their way through and round. No one touched them; none stopped the swing, rhythm and beat of their movements.

Once Eileen spoke to him, but he did not comprehend. She looked up into his face and, as he gazed down into her eyes, he thought she must have understood his feelings, for she did not attempt conversation again.

He was as a soul without a body, soaring in the vastnesses of the heavens, in harmony and unison with the great and perfect God-created spirit world of which he formed an infinitesimal but perfect and necessary part.

Gradually, and all too soon, alas!--for it seemed to him that they had hardly started--the music slowed and softened till it died away in a whisper, and he was awakened to his surroundings by the sudden burst of applause from the dancers on every side of them.

He did not wait to ascertain if there might be a few more bars of encore. He did not know, even, that there was a possibility of such. Still in a daze, he led Eileen Pederstone to her seat. He thanked her, bowed and turned to cross the floor. But she did not sit down. She laid a detaining hand gently on his arm.

"Thank you so much!" she said. "I enjoyed it immensely. And Mr. Brenchfield dared to say you couldn't dance!"

Phil smiled, but did not reply. The spell of the dance had not yet entirely gone from him.

"Are you afraid to ask me if there might be another?" she inquired, with a coy glance and just a little petulance in her voice.

"Can you--can you spare another?"

"Of course, I can!"

"Another waltz?" he queried eagerly.

"The dance fourth from now is a waltz," she answered.

"May I have it?"

"Yes!"

Brenchfield--surly watch-dog that he was--was at their heels again. This time, the refreshment buffet was his plea.

Phil abandoned his partner to him with good grace, for even Graham Brenchfield could not quench his good spirits over the great enjoyment he still had in store;--another waltz with Eileen Pederstone.

In the hallway, he encountered Jim, who twitted him for a moment for his great courage, but Phil could see that Jim had something on his mind that had not been there when he had left him.

They went to the outside door and stood together in the cool, night air.

"Gee Phil!--but this is a grand night for these feed sneaks to pull off something big," he said, in that mixture of Scotticisms and Western Canadian slang that he often indulged in.

"What makes you think of that?"

"Look at the sky, man!--black as ink and not a moon to be seen. Everybody is at the dance; Chief Palmer and Howden are here; the Mayor, the Aldermen, Royce Pederstone, Ben Todd; why, man,--the town outside there is empty.

"Did you notice anything peculiar in the gathering in there, Phil?"

"No! How do you mean?"

"Not a mother's son of that Redman's bunch is present."

"But they're not much of a dancing crowd."

"You bet they are!--when it suits them. You never saw a crowd of cowpunchers that weren't.

"I have the keys to the O.K. Supply Company's Warehouse on the tracks. Are you game for a nose around, just to see if there's anything doing?"

"What's the good of worrying over a thing like that to-night, Jim? Let's forget it and have a good time."

Jim laughed. "Well,--I'm going anyway. Say, Phil! I've not only got the keys to the O. K. Warehouse, but I have keys that fit Brenchfield's and the Pioneer Traders' as well."

"Better watch you don't get pinched yourself," Phil cautioned.

"De'il the fear o' it, Phil! But I'm going to get one over that bunch if it is only to satisfy my own Scotch inquisitiveness. At the same time, I would like to help out Morrison of the O.K. Company. He's a good old scout, and this thieving is gradually sucking him white. Palmer and his crowd don't seem to be able to make anything of it--or don't want to--yet it has been going on for years."

"I should like to come," Phil answered, "only I've promised to have another dance with Miss Pederstone, and I couldn't possibly think of disappointing myself in the matter. Give me a line on where you'll be, and I'll come along and join you as soon as that particular dance is over. Won't you stick around till then, and we can go together?" he suggested.

"No! I have a kind of hunch there is things doing. You hurry along as soon as you can. Keep your eyes open and, if all is quiet, come round to the track door of the middle Warehouse, Brenchfield's. You should be up there by eleven-thirty. I'll be there then, sharp at that time, and will let you in if all is jackaloorie."

"Have you a gun?"

"Sure!" replied Jim, "and one for you. Here!--stick it in your pocket now. It is loaded. Darned handy thing!"

Phil walked part of the way up the back streets with Jim.

It was noisy as usual round Chinatown, with its squeaky fiddle, tom-tom and cocoanut-shell orchestras, intensified by a fire-cracker display on the part of the more aristocratic Chinese in honour of John Royce Pederstone's victory. The remainder of the town, apart from the neighbourhood of the dance-hall, was in absolute quietness.

Phil parted from Jim near the railway tracks and slowly retraced his steps toward the town hall, whose blaze of lights stood out in high contrast with the surrounding darkness.

When Phil got back, the band had just concluded a cheery two-step and the dancers were scattering in all directions for seats round the hall and for the buffet.

Eileen Pederstone caught sight of him as soon as he entered, and signalled him over.

"I thought you had gone home, Mr. Ralston," she remarked, her eyes sparkling with enjoyment and her breath coming fast with the exertion of the dance.

Phil took in her slender, shapely, elfin beauty, and his heart beat a merry riot of pleasure as he sat down by her side.

"I went along the road a bit with Jim," he answered. "He had some business he wished to see to."

"Poor Jim," laughed Eileen, "he takes life so strangely; at times tremendously seriously; at others as if it meant nothing at all. Now he plays the solemn and mysterious, and again he assumes the rôle of the irresponsible harlequin. I don't think anyone really understands Jim Langford."

"I don't think anyone does," agreed Phil.

"Are you awfully anxious that we should dance this next waltz?" she asked, suddenly changing the subject.

"Why?" asked Phil, a little crestfallen.

"I should like to have a little stroll in the fresh air, if you don't mind. It is dreadfully warm in here and I have been dancing continuously. Do you mind?"

"Not at all!" said Phil.

He helped her with her cloak. She put her arm through his and they went out into the open air together.

It was eleven o'clock. The street lights went out suddenly, leaving everything in inky blackness.

It was a night with a shudder in it.

Eileen clung tightly to Phil's arm as they strolled leisurely along, leaving the lights of the dance-hall and the noise behind them, and going down the main avenue in the direction that led to the Okanagan Lake.

"Do you know, Mr. Ralston," remarked Eileen suddenly, during a lull in what had been a desultory, flippant, bantering sort of conversation, "I can't explain how it is and I know it is ridiculous on the face of it; but sometimes I have the feeling that I have met you before."

Phil felt a tightening in his jaws, and he was grateful for the darkness.

"Do you ever feel that way about people?"

"Oh, yes,--occasionally,--with some people!" Phil stammered. "I feel that way with Jim Langford all the time."

"But I can't ever have met you before you came to Vernock?"

"No,--oh no! I am quite sure of that," said Phil.

"Haven't you ever been here before?"

"No,--never!" Phil had to say it.

"You've never seen me in Vancouver for instance,--or in Victoria?"

"No,--I can't remember ever having seen you till I came up here. Of course, I was only a short time in Vancouver before coming to Vernock," he hedged.

"Then your home isn't in the West?"

"No,--it is away back in a town in Ontario."

"Mr. Brenchfield is an Ontario man," put in Eileen innocently.

"Is he?" returned Phil, on guard.

"But it is the funniest thing, Mr. Ralston," she reverted, "sometimes it is your voice; while in the hall to-night it seemed to be your eyes that reminded me of someone I had known before. A trick of the mind, I daresay!"

"Just a trick of the mind!" agreed Phil, "unless maybe you believe in the transmigration of souls."

Eileen shivered suddenly.

"Guess we'd better get back," said Phil, "for the air is chilly."

They turned and sauntered toward the town.

"Are you waiting until the end of the dance, Mr. Ralston?"

"No! I promised to meet Jim round about eleven-thirty."

"Jim!" she repeated. "You and Jim seem to be thick as sweethearts."

"Thicker!" responded Phil, "because we never fall out."

"Do sweethearts fall out so often?"

"I fancy so, from what I hear."

"Then you think two men can be greater friends than a man and a woman can?"

"Greater friends,--truer friends,--more sincere friends and faithful,--yes!"

Eileen's hold on Phil's arm loosened.

"What makes you think so?" she asked.

"Well,--with men it is purely and simply a wholehearted attraction of congenial tastes and manly virtues or evil propensities, as the case may be. There is no question of sex coming between. When that enters into the reckoning, everything else goes by the board. Not that I infer that man and woman cannot be true friends and fast friends, but everything has to take second place to that question of sex."

Eileen did not answer.

"Don't you agree?" asked Phil with a smile.

"No,--I do not, but I don't feel that I can argue the point."

They were silent once more. Then again Eileen broke into the quiet.

"Oh, dear!--I almost forgot. I wonder, Mr. Ralston, if you would care to come to our place the week after next. Daddy, you know, has bought Baron DeDillier's house on the hill, and we are going to have a house-warming and a big social time for all daddy's friends. Would you care to come if I send you an invitation? Jim will be there. He seldom gets left out of anything, pleasant or otherwise."

Phil was not so very sure of himself, and he would have preferred rather to have been omitted,

but he could not, in good grace, decline such an invitation.

"Why, certainly!" he replied. "It will give me the greatest of pleasure."

"Good! We shall have a nice dance together to make up for the one we missed to-night,--and a talk. Maybe that night I shall be in better frame of mind for meeting your arguments on the relations of sex and friendship."

Phil laughed in his own peculiar way.

Eileen Pederstone stopped up with a start and looked at him with half frightened eyes, as if endeavouring to recall a bad dream yet half afraid lest it should return to her.

Phil knew that an echo had touched her memory from that laugh.

He was about to speak of something else, to take away her thoughts, when a shadow crept up to Phil's side and a hand pulled at his coat sleeve.

He turned quickly and caught at the hand. He pulled its owner round sharply.

It was Smiler--the never-fading grimace on his face, through which penetrated an expression of fear.

"What is it? What is the matter?" asked Phil quickly.

Smiler moved his hands excitedly, trying desperately to make himself understood thereby.

He kept tugging at Phil's coat, as a dog might do, and endeavoured to get him to go along with him.

Phil tried him with several questions.

"Is it Jim Langford?" he asked at last.

Smiler nodded excitedly and pulled at Phil's coat more desperately than ever.

"Jim Langford has sent Smiler for me, Miss Pederstone. I know you will excuse me. Let me hurry you back to the hall."

"It can't be anything serious?" she queried anxiously, "no accident or anything like that?"

"Oh, no!--but Jim's a queer fish and I guess it will be best to get to him as quickly as possible. No saying what trouble he gets into in the course of five minutes."

Phil saw her safely back to the hall, wished her "Good night," and darted after Smiler who was waiting for him in the shadows.

CHAPTER XIII

The Big Steal

On Phil went through the back lanes of the town and up the hill toward the railway tracks, almost trotting in his endeavour to keep pace with the tireless Smiler.

They went past the three Warehouses,--Brenchfield's, The Pioneer Traders' and that of The O.K. Supply Company,--till Smiler came to a stand-still in front of an old, unused barn which stood in the yard in front of the central Warehouse belonging to Graham Brenchfield. Phil pushed his way inside and looked about him inquiringly.

Smiler pointed to a coal-oil lamp which hung--a dark shadow--from a nail on the wall.

Phil closed the barn door tightly, struck a match and set the lantern alight.

The barn floor was littered with damp, stale-smelling straw. Smiler kicked some of it away and knelt down. He commenced to work his fingers into the flooring boards. He gave an inarticulate chuckle when he came to a certain part, gave a tug, and immediately half of the floor swung up on well-oiled hinges, disclosing a cellar or vault almost big enough to let down a dray-load of merchandise at a time.

Phil whistled.

Smiler seized the lamp and started down by a wooden ladder, but Phil grabbed him by the coat collar, pulled him sheer out, planting him down on the floor by his side.

"After me, my dear Alphonso?" he commanded, going down the ladder with the lamp in one hand and his revolver in the other, holding on to the side of the ladder at the same time with a few of his fingers, as best he could.

He had hardly reached the bottom when Smiler was tumbling beside him. The boy ran over to a corner of the cellar. Phil followed.

A huddled bundle lay on the damp ground. Phil dropped beside it and turned it over, setting down his lantern.

It was the unconscious form of Jim Langford, trussed with knotted ropes until it looked more

like a bale of cast-off clothing than a human being. Jim's face was white and all bloody-streaked at the forehead and mouth.

Phil took out his knife and slashed at the ropes. He chafed the arms and legs. He tossed his hat to Smiler and said one word:

"Water!"

Smiler ran off up the ladder and was back in less than a minute.

Phil seized the hat and splashed some of the cold water on the upturned face, wiping the blood from Jim's mouth with his handkerchief.

After a bit, Jim sighed and opened his eyes. Phil held his hat to the oozy lips and Jim drank greedily. Soon he was all alert. He sprang to his feet, staring around him wildly.

"Damn them, the Siwashes! Damn them,--they got me! And they've got awa'."

Then he sagged at the knees and collapsed.

He did not lose consciousness again.

"Take your time!--take your time!" cautioned Phil.

Slowly Jim's strength returned and his brain cleared. He wanted to be up and away at once, but Phil, with his usual caution, insisted on hearing everything that had happened before he would move a foot, knowing that if anything had still to be done Jim would be none the worse for half an hour's rest.

"Stay where you are and tell me all about it," he insisted.

"Stay! Hang it, man,--I canna stay. Come on! I'll show ye. It will be better than sitting here and talking. But bide a bit! We'll get them yet or my name's no' Jim Langford.

"Smiler," he cried, "come here laddie!"

The boy came forward.

"Go up to Mrs. Clunie's. Shut the barn door up there after ye. Don't make a noise. Saddle our two horses and bring them doon to the corner. Our rifles as well;-they're in the locker behind the stable door! Quick! Awa' wi' ye!"

Smiler nodded his head rapidly and was up the ladder and off like a shot.

"Come along here!" Jim continued to Phil.

Phil sucked his breath at what he saw, or rather did not see.

It was not a cellar after all,--but a tunnel.

"Weel ye may gasp!" ejaculated Jim, holding up the lantern and peering ahead. "Come on!"

"Have you your revolver?"

"Yes!"

"Keep a grip of it then. I hardly think there'll be a body here now. But it's as well to keep your wits about ye."

Jim went on first and Phil followed.

Phil's foot struck metal. He looked down.

Two rails ran along the bottom of the tunnel.

"Nothing obsolete about this bunch!" whispered Jim jocularly.

They followed along in caution till they came to a truck on the rails capable of holding twenty sacks of flour or feed at a time.

On either side of them were walls of sacked flour and other grain.

"The Lord only knows how far this underground warehouse extends," remarked Jim, "and how many thousands of dollars worth of stuff is cached away in it, ready to haul away as the chance comes along."

They passed on until they must have been under Brenchfield's warehouse, when the tunnel dead-ended, branching off to the right and to the left.

Jim stopped.

"That's about all," he said. "Brenchfield's warehouse is above us. The Pioneer Traders' is at the end that way. The O.K. Supply Company's is at the other end.

"See! There is a trap door in each, like this up here, that drops inward and acts as a chute for sliding down the stuff right onto the track. Simplest thing on earth, and it has been going on for years with devil a body the wiser."

"Well!--of all the elaborate thieving schemes!" exclaimed Phil, dumbfounded.

"Elaborate nothing! Why, man, thousands and thousands of dollars worth of feed and flour have been stolen from these three places in the last five years--as much as ten thousand dollars at a crack.

"I'm thinking they've got off with that much right this very night. It is just a great big organised, dirty steal,--that's all. Little wonder some folks get rich quick in this Valley, without any

apparent outward reason for their luck either in themselves or in what they seem to be engaged in."

"How did you find all this out?" inquired Phil, his face white with excitement.

"Oh,--easy enough in a way! I was in Brenchfield's warehouse, hiding. I told you I had the key to it. By good or bad luck--I don't know which--I was hiding on top of the darned trap door without being aware of it. I heard a noise, and thought it was in the warehouse where I was. Suddenly the flour sacks on every side of me began to slide. I had just to slide with them; there was nothing else for it; and before I could wink I was down here and in among the gang,--Rob Roy McGregor, Summers, Skookum, and half a dozen others; the whole of that Redmans gang; half-breeds and dirty whites.

"I shot a hole in one of them, then my gun got struck out of my hand. I knocked down two with my fists and made a dash for it. I got to the ladder at the old barn there and ran up, but I forgot about a man who happened to be at the top. He dropped the trap-door crash on my head, and that's the last I can mind."

"Good Lord!" cried Phil.

"And the murdering hounds, not content with that, trussed you up and left you here like a rat in a sewer."

"Ay!--to come back later, maybe, when they had more time, finish me off and bury me in the bowels o' the earth."

Jim pulled himself together.

"Phil," he cried, "come on! We're wasting time here. I'm going to get that bunch before I sleep."

Once outside, they reclosed the barn-door, leaving everything exactly as they had found it. Up the road a little, the faithful Smiler was standing with the two rifles, two cartridge belts, and the two horses from Mrs. Clunie's saddled and bridled to perfection.

"Smiler!--go home to bed," said Jim.

Smiler nodded, grinned and ran off.

"Phil, do you know where Jack McLean, the manager of The Pioneer Traders, lives?"

"Yes!"

"Then tear up there and put him wise. Get hold of Blair, their grocery man, as well. He's a grand scrapper. Get them to bring their rifles.

"Don't tell a soul but these two what the game is."

"What else?"

"I'm going to rustle up Morrison of the O.K. Supply, then down to the Town Hall for two or three who are game for a free-for-all. Make hell-bent-for-leather down to Allison's Wharf at Okanagan Landing. We can leave our horses there, cross the lake to the other side below Redmans, and be on the main road there that leads from Vernock to Redmans a full hour ahead of them; and collar the bunch--men, wagons, feed and every damned thing, as they come slithering along thinking they're safe."

"Jee-rusalem!" cried Phil, as the plan dawned on him.

"But are you sure they are taking the road that way and that Redmans will be where they are making for?"

"You bet I'm sure! And the long way round the hills and the head of the lake is the only way they can make Redmans with heavy wagons. Any bairn knows that they'll reckon to get there just before dawn. The whole bunch are breeds and klootchmen from there, and they're not likely to cache their steal any place but where they can get at it handy. Now, off you go!"

Phil sprang into his saddle.

"Say!" whispered Jim, straining upwards, "I'm going to bring the Mayor along."

"Oh, hang the Mayor!" cried Phil hotly. "If we are going to be helping him in any way, I guess you can count me out."

"But, Phil, laddie;--McLean of the Pioneer Company is coming, and Morrison of the O.K. Company is coming.

"We can hardly leave Brenchfield out." Jim's voice was somewhat sarcastic in its tone.

"Oh, I suppose not!" said Phil sourly, and unconvinced.

Jim laughed.

"Man, but you're thick in the skull. Eh, but it's a lark!" he remarked, giving Phil's mare a whack on the flank and sending her galloping off without further words of elucidation.

Phil found Jack McLean in his front parlour--late as it was--reading a book to his last pipe before turning in. In as few words as possible, he told him of what had happened and of the plan for the capture of the thieves. McLean required no persuading. In five minutes he was on his horse, ready for any escapade and swearing as volubly as only a hardened official of the Pioneer Traders can who has been systematically robbed without being able to lay the thieves by the heels.

In ten minutes more, McLean, big Blair and Phil were heading west, galloping hard for the Landing at the head of the Okanagan Lake.

The night was dark as pitch; there wasn't a star in the sky nor was there a breath of moving air anywhere.

They reached Allison's Wharf in quick time, roused the complaining lake-freighter and got him busy on his large gasoline launch. Not long after that a clatter of hoofs on the hard roadway, a sudden stoppage, and the sound of deep voices, betrayed the arrival of the others: Langford, Morrison, Thompson the Government Agent, and the one police official whom Phil felt was absolutely above suspicion,—Howden, who was Chief Palmer's deputy—and Brenchfield, surly as a bear;—all powerful men and capable of giving a good account of themselves in a tight place.

They were eight, all told, with Allison in addition looking after his own affairs, and they set out across the lake for the quiet little landing below the Redmans settlement, leaving their horses at Allison's place.

"Howden,—why didn't you bring the Chief?" asked Phil.

"Wish to hell we had! Might have saved me the trouble of coming. He's up on the ranges somewhere. There's a lot of cattle missing up there lately and he's keen on catching some of the rustlers red-handed."

"Or red-headed," grinned Jim. "This trip might prove the way to catch them too."

"Do you think the same bunch is operating both jobs?" asked Howden.

"Sure!" replied Jim.

"Oh, give us a rest!" broke in Brenchfield. "A smart lot you wise-Alicks know about it. To hear you talk, one would think you had been raised on a detective farm."

Jim laughed good-naturedly.

"All right, old man! Don't get sore. You've been a grouch ever since we asked you to come along. One would think you didn't have any interests tied up in this affair."

"Then I guess that one has another think coming," answered the Mayor.

"Well,—you're devilish enthusiastic over it; that's all I've got to say," interjected Morrison, who was simply bubbling over with excitement and expectancy,—not so much from the thought of recovering his stolen property as from a hope that, if the thieves were captured, he would at last have a chance to reap the benefits of his labours, unmolested.

"Who wants to be enthusiastic on a wild-goose chase like this?" commented Brenchfield. "I've been on the run these last three weeks, dancing all this evening, and now the delightful prospect of lying in a ditch till morning, and nothing at all at the end of it but the possibility of a rheumatic fever. You juvenile bath-tub pirates and Sherlock Holmeses give me a pain."

"And I'll bet you a new hat we'll land the whole rotten bunch of them before we're through," challenged Morrison.

"Forget it!" grouched Brenchfield, "I've lost as much as any man here, but I haven't made a song and dance about it like some people I know. I am just as anxious as any of you to see the thieves in jail."

Evidently it was not a night for pleasant conversations, and tempers seemed to be more or less on edge, so little more was said until the launch ran quietly alongside the old, unused wharf a quarter of a mile east of the new one at Redmans.

The men got out, one after another, leaving Allison to make his way back to his own side, alone; as they did not require him further.

Jim led the way through the bush and up the trail toward the main highway.

They had not gone more than two hundred yards, when a muttered oath, a noise of stumbling, and a crash, brought them to a stand-still. It was Brenchfield who had stumbled into a hole or over a log. Ready hands helped him up, but he immediately dropped back on the ground with a groan, in evident pain from his ankle.

"Hell mend it!" he growled. "I've turned my ankle in a blasted gopher hole or something."

He writhed about in agony.

"Guess I'm out this trip," he moaned.

"Toots!" put in Jim. "You'll be all right in a minute. Let us give your foot a bit of a rub!"

"Strike a light and let me see what's what," suggested the Mayor.

Someone started in to do so.

"Not on your life!" cried Jim. "Haven't you got more savvy than that? Do you want the whole of that gang up there in on our top?"

A dog barked in the distance and the bark was taken up ominously by other dogs around the settlement.

"Lower your voices and don't make any racket, for God's sake!" pleaded Jim. "Come on, make a try, Brenchfield!"

"What else do you think I'm doing?" growled the Mayor between his teeth. He did make a strong effort then, but was unable to bear his foot on the ground.

"Darn it! It's no good!" he exclaimed, sitting down disgustedly on a log.

"Well, boys," returned Jim, in a hopeless tone, "I guess we've got to leave him. One of us will have to stay with the Mayor. That will leave six for the job ahead of us. Guess we can manage! Will you stay with him, Blair?"

"Sure thing!" came the ready reply, "but I hate to miss the fun."

The Mayor's face could not be seen, but his voice broke in rather too quickly:

"Good heavens!--my own ranch is just up there over the hill. I can creep there on my hands and knees inside of half an hour;--and I won't have to do that.

"No, siree! Nobody's going to stay with me. I'm all right. I'll get along nicely by myself. Every man-jack of you is needed for the job. Go on! Beat it! Don't worry about me."

"We're not worrying about you, Graham," retorted Jim, not sufficiently suggestive to set the Mayor at discomfort. "But you know the rule of the trail, same as we do. When a man gets hurt on a hunting trip, another of the bunch stays with him. Joe Blair is willing to stay behind."

"He won't stay with me, I tell you;--this thing isn't going to be held up or spoiled for me," exclaimed the Mayor. "I'll crawl with you on my fours, first."

He started to carry out his threat.

Three times he fell and groaned in pain, until Jim became convinced that Brenchfield's foot was really badly sprained.

"Won't you leave me here? I'll be all right in a while," cried out Brenchfield, "then I can make my own place in my own time."

"Oh, let's leave him, Jim. We may need every man we've got," said Morrison, "and if any of us take him to his place, it might arouse suspicion."

"Yes!--what's the good of losing two men when one is all we need let go?" added McLean.

"All right, all right!" said Jim. "Here's the flask, Mayor. Come on, boys! Time's passing and we've a goodish bit to go yet."

CHAPTER XIV

The Round-Up

The remainder of the journey was made in silence, and without further mishap. The thick of the crude trail was left behind and they got on to the well-beaten highway, trudging along at a fast gait until they came to the Snake Loop with its two roads--one leading for a mile or so along the lower shore line; the other running round Big Horn Hills.

Jim stopped at the forks.

"Say!--I'm thinking three of us had better go by one way and four of us by the other;--just in case of accidents.

"McLean, Phil and I can go the low way. You four go by the high road. We can wait for each other at the junction further on."

The crowd split up and parted.

Jim, Phil and McLean had only got along about half a mile, when they stopped up at the sound of the fast beating of horse hoofs on the highway behind them.

They listened intently.

"Coming from Redmans," whispered McLean.

"Run on ahead and get in among the bushes at the bend there," shouted Jim. "I'll keep to the road, and whoever he may be I'll stop him as he comes up. If he tries to beat me to it,--shoot! See your ropes are O.K., Mack, for you might have to use them quick."

The two hurried ahead and disappeared. Jim kept jogging along in the middle of the road, slowly and innocently.

The clatter of the oncomer grew louder and louder, and beat faster.

A horseman came tearing along at breakneck speed. When he was some twenty paces off, Jim swung round, levelled his rifle and shouted.

"Stop! Throw up your hands! Quick!"

The horse drew back on its haunches and sprang up in fear, but the rider had it in check and held his seat. He steadied his beast and put his hands up slowly.

Jim went forward. As he drew closer he recognised the rider--Red McGregor.

"Get down!" ordered Jim, smiling grimly to himself.

McGregor seemed to recognise Langford at the same time and, thinking Jim was alone, took a chance.

His off hand lowered and he pulled a gun quickly, but a shot and a flash from the side of the road were quicker still. His arm dropped limply and he yelled in pain and surprise.

"Get down!" ordered Jim again.

"You be damned!" cried McGregor, swinging his horse round and setting spurs.

The horse sprang in response. Jim thought he was going to make it, when a lariat flew out like a long snake, poised for a second over Red's head and, in a second more, stretched him on the roadway, half-choked.

McLean held the rope taut, while Jim and Phil ran in and secured their prisoner.

"What'n the hell's the matter with you bunch," gasped Red. "Can't a man go to Vernock when he damned-well wants to?"

"Not always, Red!" answered Jim. "It isn't always healthy to want to go to Vernock."

"By God!--let me go and I'll take you on one at a time--two at a time if you like. You, Langford,--I'll fix you for this anyway."

"We're going to fix you first, Rob Roy McGregor O!"

"I pretty near done you in last time, Langford. I'll make good and sure next time,--you bet!"

"Oh, shut up!" exclaimed Jim, "you're wearing your windpipe out talking."

They half pulled McGregor and half dragged him to a nearby tree, to which they tied him securely, divesting him of his knife and other articles that they considered he might feel constrained to use.

He cursed them roundly, until Jim tied Red's cravat round his mouth.

"Come on, boys! That's good enough! We don't want to take him along. If we don't hurry up, that bunch may beat us to it yet."

They reached the junction of the two roads without further adventure. Five minutes later, along came Morrison, Thompson, Deputy Chief Howden and Blair, with one more--an unrecognised--in their company.

"What did you catch?" asked Jim.

"Just little Stitchy Summers!" replied Howden. "We found him out for a constitutional, hoofing it for Vernock. Says he does it every morning early for the good of his health. So we brought him along."

"We found a somnambulist, too," said Jim, "Rob Roy McGregor. We tied him up at the roadside, in case he might wake up and hurt himself."

"Foxy trick that all the same--one each way to make sure of one getting through!"

"Say!--you don't suppose they're wise?" asked Morrison.

"Sure they are!"

"But who could give the show away?"

"I'm thinking that sprained ankle of Brenchfield's was a darned *lame* excuse," Jim answered. And that was all they could get out of him on the subject.

It was sufficient, however, to set all of them a-wondering. But no shadow of suspicion had ever before crossed their minds, and they soon dismissed the suggestion as one more distorted ridiculous romance from the fertile brain of Jim Langford.

The whimpering Stitchy--like most of his kind; never a hero when alone--was secured in the same way as Red had been, then the men hunters continued to the top of the hill, where, as soon as dawn came up, a good view would be had of the single road as it wound, snake-like, for half a mile on the incline.

"It is five o'clock," remarked Jim. "With no mishaps, they should be here any time now."

The seven men distributed themselves in the ditches and bushes--three on one side and four on the other, at intervals of ten yards, covering a distance of seventy yards in all.

As they lay there in the ditches by the roadside, the early morning air bit sharp and chilly, having a touch of frost in it--the harbinger of colder weather to come--but still retaining a dampness that searched into the marrow.

A grey light was just beginning to spear the darkness on the top of Blue Nose Mountain away to the east. A heavy blanket of cold fog completely enveloped the low-lying lands. Suddenly, the dark leaden sky seemed to break up into ten thousand sections of gloomy puff-clouds, all sailing hap-hazard inside a dome of the lightest, brightest blue. The sun, cold to look at but shining with the light of a blazing ball, rode up over the hills, sending great shafts of searchlight down the sides of the hills and filling the ghostly valley below, with its tightly-packed firs and skeleton-like pine trees, with a warm, yellow mist, suggestive of luminous smoke rising from some fairy cauldron of molten gold; transforming the dead, chilly night into a crisp, living,

moving, late-autumn morning.

As the mists completely melted away, Jim signalled to Phil and Phil repeated to McLean. The sign was passed along the other side as well.

Away down the roadway, at the turn between the low-lying hills, a heavy team appeared, struggling in front of a great wagon, piled high with produce of some kind. Another came into view, and still another, until eight of them, following closely on one another, crept along in what seemed to be a caterpillar movement.

As they came unsuspectingly onward, the drivers urging their horses--cheerful in the knowledge that the worst of their journey was successfully over--the silent watchers crept closer to cover, fearful that the brightening day would betray their whereabouts. But nothing untoward happened, except that a closer view of the oncomers gave out the fact that every wagon was loaded high with alfalfa, while what were looked for were wagon-loads of flour and feed.

McLean wormed his way past Phil and along to Jim.

"Dommit,--we're fooled!" he whispered angrily.

"Deevil the fool! Get back, Mack,--get back!"

"But it's alfalfa they've got. You canna risk holding them up when maybe the bunch we're after are comin' along hauf a mile ahin'."

Jim bit his lip. This was something he had not reckoned on.

All at once his knowledge of Scottish History came to his aid.

"Something tells me they're the crowd we're after," he answered in a low voice. "And we've got them--every mother's son o' them. Lord sake, Mack! I'm surprised at ye. You a Scot and you canna remember the takin' o' Linlithgow Castle! What was under the hay-carts then, laddie?--what? but good, trusty highlanders. And what's under the alfalfa now but good feed and flour that'll show in your next Profit and Loss Account in red figures if you don't recover it. It's a fine trick, but it is too thin.

"Go back! Signal the others to hold them up at all costs."

And McLean went back, bewildered but as nearly convinced as a Scot can be who has not the logical proof right under his nose.

Slowly the teams came straggling up the incline, coming nearer and nearer the men in ambush, until the latter could see clearly that every driver was a half-breed and that every man of them had a rifle across his knees. When they were well within the line, the preconcerted signal--Howden's rifle--rang out.

Taking chances, the deputy chief sprang out into the centre of the road and shouted, covering the leader. Three men on one side and three on the other sprang up and covered six of the drivers.

Some of the half-breeds immediately threw up their hands, taken completely by surprise. But a shot, fired by one of the uncovered drivers, sang out and big McLean dropped with a bullet through his thigh.

Howden sprang on to the first wagon, knocked the driver over, kicked his rifle aside and climbed right on top of the load, bringing down the man who shot McLean as neatly as could be with his revolver.

That ended what little fight there was in the gang. The half-breeds had no chance, with their horses getting excited and their heavy loads beginning to back on them down-hill.

In a short time, they were all unarmed and secured. McLean and the wounded half-breed were made comfortable on top of some alfalfa, the other seven drivers were set in front of their wagons, under guard, and the entire outfit was soon making its return trip to Vernock.

"Cheer up, Mack!" shouted Jim, by way of heartening.

"Tell me," groaned McLean, "what is under the alfalfa?"

"Just what I told you already, Mack,--good honest flour and feed in one hundred pound sacks, which will help to swell the credit side of your next balance sheet."

"The Lord be thankit!" he groaned. "But I wish one of them had been loaded up with King George's Special."

Jim shot out his tongue.

"Me too!" he answered pawkily.

They had not got very far on their journey, when a lone horseman came dashing toward them over the hill from the direction of Vernock.

It was Chief Palmer. His horse was in a lather and the Chief looked as if he had ridden hard and had been out all night to boot. He wore a crestfallen expression when he drew up alongside.

"Hullo!" he cried, with an assumption of gaiety. "Holding up the quiet farmer on the public highway? Captured the gang, eh?"

Immensely proud of himself and his achievement, Howden jumped down, intending to give his chief a full account of the capture, but Palmer seemed in no mood to listen, and told him he had

better keep his story for later on, and look after his prisoners.

"You don't seem particularly gay over it, Chief!" commented Jim.

"Why should I?" he replied. "I've ridden for two hours, hoping to be in time for the scrap, and you fellows beat me to it."

The journey toward continued.

When nearing their destination, they were joined by two more horsemen, Brenchfield--his left foot heavily bound round the ankle--and one of his white ranch hands. The Mayor was surly as usual and seemed in desperation to get in touch with Chief Palmer, who obligingly dropped behind with him. As they brought up the rear, they indulged in a very earnest conversation.

When the wagons were safely harboured in the Police Yard and the thieves safely jailed under lock and key, the Chief, as if to make amends for his previous surliness, shook hands all round and congratulated the men on their coup.

"This will help to make an interesting calendar for the next Assizes, boys. I'll be after all of you for witnesses, so don't get on the rampage anywhere in between times."

"I guess, Morrison, old chap," broke in Brenchfield, "this will end the flour and feed racket for some time to come. We fellows will have a chance to make a little profit out of our businesses at last."

"Oh, you haven't much to worry over," replied Morrison. "You haven't all your eggs in one basket like I have. It is just pin-money for you, but it means bread and butter and bed for me and mine."

Brenchfield steered his horse alongside and laid his hand sympathetically on the old man's shoulder.

"Never mind, Morrison! It is all over now,--so here's to better days."

Morrison was not very responsive, and the Mayor excused himself on the plea of his ankle, his want of sleep and the further pressure of mayoral business.

"Darn it!" exclaimed Morrison to Jim and Phil, as he left them at the end of the avenue, "I used to like Brenchfield, but I don't know what's come over me lately with him. When he laid his hand on me a few minutes ago, I felt as if a wet toad was squatting on the back of my neck."

When they reached home, Jim did not go to his own room immediately. He followed into Phil's and sat down on the edge of the bed as Phil commenced to get out of his clothes preparatory to having a bath.

"Well!--what did you think of it, Phil?" he asked, glad, evidently, to be alone with his comrade where he could at last express his thoughts and pent-up feelings freely.

"Pretty work!"

"What?"

"I said I thought it was pretty work. We did a clean job;--got all we went out for."

"Like the devil we did!" shot out Jim.

"Why!--what did we forget, grouchy?"

"Everything! They're too blamed wise for us, that bunch, and they're too many."

Phil stopped pulling off a sock and looked over at Jim.

"Aw, come off!" cried the other. "Let in the daylight, man! What did we get anyway?"

"We got the thieves, didn't we?"

"Not by a jugfull! Half a dozen half-breed teamsters,--that's all!"

"Armed and driving stolen goods!"

"Yes! I grant that, but what good is that going to do?"

"Well, Jim,--you've discovered the plan they have been operating for doing away with the stuff. That is something."

"Sure!--that too, and it will end the wholesale thieving for a bit, till they find another way. It will give poor old Morrison a chance to recoup."

"Then I guess you always expect too much, Jim. You're never contented."

"Why should I be;--with Brenchfield's foreman and head-boss rotter Red McGregor, and that sneaky little devil Stitchy Summers not among the casualties."

"But Palmer will get them, won't he?"

"Not on your life!"

"Why not? We stopped each of them making for the gang to warn them off."

"How are we to prove that? They might have been going anywhere. Why man!--that pair could pretty nearly nail us for unprovoked assault."

Phil laughed.

"And they were the men who were conducting the entire steal when I fell in among them in the

cellar;--but I can't prove it."

"You're sure they were, Jim?"

"Of course I'm sure. Red hit me on the head with the butt-end of his quirt. I'll get him one for it too, before I'm done."

"And they engineered the whole affair, set the teamsters on their journey, then beat it ahead for Redmans?"

"Oh noble judge! O excellent young man," Jim quoted sarcastically.

Phil felt the thrust. He went over to the bed, tilted up Jim's chin with his forefinger and looked straight into his mischievous eyes.

"Seeing you know so much, Jim Langford,--tell me more. What side is Brenchfield on in this affair?"

Jim grew serious all of a sudden.

"Now you're talking!" he exclaimed, his eyes snapping angrily and his voice throwing fire. "I've had no darned use for that son-of-a-gun for some considerable time. He has his nose in everything. He pretty nearly bosses the whole Valley. He's political boss, Mayor, rancher, and God knows what else. If he isn't crooked, why does he have his biggest ranch right in the thick of that Indian settlement? He has the whole of the breeds on the reservation under his thumb. He's a party heeler, a grafter from away back, and everybody falls for him. And yet,--good Land!--if you did so much as open your mouth against him, you'd get run out of town."

"Go on! Go on!" applauded Phil. "I like to hear you."

"Yes!--and *you've* got the biggest grudge against him of any for something or other, or I'm not Wayward Langford. But you're so darned tight about it."

Phil's applause ended abruptly.

"Thought that would stop you!" grinned Jim. "But that man, and the blindness of the so-called wise men of this wee burg make me positively sick in the stomach."

"Who's at the back of the whole feed steal?--Brenchfield! Half-breeds didn't make that tunnel. It is a white man's job all through. It was all nicely done. Oh, ay! A tunnel to the three warehouses, Brenchfield's included! Thieving right and left and Brenchfield always losing a bit--to himself--every time; just to keep up appearances; and getting richer and richer every theft until he owns about as much land and gear as Royce Pederstone does!"

"Well then, Jim;--why can't that fertile brain of yours devise something to land him on this?"

"Weel ye may ask!" answered Jim, breaking into the Doric, "and I canna answer ye."

"We can't prove a thing on him. He would plead absolute ignorance of the entire affair; that he had been away for weeks and only got in yesterday with Royce Pederstone, and was at the dance when it happened. Everybody would believe him and sympathise with him too because of an apparent endeavour to blacken the character of a public man, a prominent citizen and a local benefactor--one who himself had lost so much by the thefts--for, mark you, Brenchfield has made much of it in his conversations."

"Can't Chief Palmer make the half-breeds talk? They will surely be pretty sore over the raw deal that has been handed out to them."

"Palmer be jiggered! He is another of Brenchfield's cronies, and is feathering his nest like the rest of them. I'll be very much surprised if the innocent Howden isn't fired by this time for his share in this morning's work. I'm half sorry I dragged him into it."

"Couldn't a good lawyer wriggle something out of the Indians at the trial?"

"He might,--but the Indians will be darned well paid to keep their mouths shut. Believe me!--it'll fizzle out. You watch and see!"

Jim sat quiet for a bit, then he began again.

"And that kind of animal has the nerve to want to marry little Eilie Pederstone. Oh, hell!--I'd better stop or I'll burst a blood-vessel or something."

"Say!"

"Speak on!"

"Are you going to work after breakfast?"

"Of course!" answered Phil. "Aren't you?"

"No!"

"Are you going to bed?"

"Not yet! This is Saturday morning, man. My usual monthly 'Penny Horrible' is only half finished and it has to be ready before mail time."

Phil laughed.

"What is the name of it this month, Jim?"

"Two Fingered Pete's Come-back, a Backwoods Mystery."

"Sounds exciting!" remarked Phil. "I think I would like to read that one. Save a copy for me, Jim,

when it comes along.”

“De’il the fear! It’ll never be said that Jim Langford, alias Captain Mayne Plunkett, alias Aunt Christina, ever put anything your way that would fire you, in your rashness, to disgrace me and make a fool of yourself.”

Jim changed the subject again.

“Phil, why don’t you cut that bluffer, Brenchfield, out?”

“Me? What harm have I done, Jim?”

“That’ll do, laddie. You can’t brazen it out that way. Man, I’d give my wee pinkie to see it happen.”

“Oh, don’t talk rot!” returned Phil, serious as an owl, nevertheless pale at the lips. “What chance has an impecunious day-labourer like me with Miss Pederstone?”

“Why don’t you try yourself? You’re mighty good at arranging things for your friends.”

Jim laughed.

Phil turned his head and glared at him; and Jim laughed more uproariously.

“What are you yelling your Tom-fool head off for? I don’t see anything funny about the proposition.”

“What? You can’t see anything funny in it? Gee, Phil!--but you’re dull. Eileen Pederstone hitched to Wayward Langford, booze fighter, ne’er-do-weel, good-for-nothing, never-worked-and-never-will; a-penny-a-liner; Aunt Christina and Captain Mayne Plunkett!”

He became sober again.

“Man, Phil!--I’m ashamed of you even suggesting it. I once fell in love. Don’t get anxious; it was a long time ago when I had ambitions of becoming Lord Chief Justice, or at least a High Court Judge.”

“Yes!”

“The lady and I fell out over her father. He asked me one night how much money I had in the bank. I was eighteen.

“I told him I had twenty pounds.

“‘Tuts, tuts!’ said the old fellow, who was one of those human fireworks--all fizzle and flare,--‘that isn’t enough to keep a cat.’

“‘We know it,’ I answered, speaking for both of us, ‘but we thought we might manage to run along for a while without the cat.’”

Phil laughed.

“The old chapie got angry, and the girl sacked me because I was rude to papa and flippant about the most serious thing in the world--marriage. She couldn’t see the joke. Imagine, Phil, being married to a woman that couldn’t see a joke!

“That was the very nearest I ever got. And believe me---!

“Now you, for instance; you’re different, you’re just made for married life; you’re young, big, handsome, mannerly, sober, sometimes diligent, ambitious. You don’t smoke much, you don’t swear--not all the time--and you can chop wood and brush your own boots. You---”

But Jim got no further. A cushion, well aimed, stopped his flow of talk.

“All right, all right! We’ll say no more. Go and have your bath! You need it. Give your soul a touch o’ soap and water when you are at it.”

CHAPTER XV

Sol’s Matrimonial Mix-Up

For the few days following, the robbery and the rounding-up of the thieves were the talk of the district; but despite this, it was surprising how little *The Vernock and District Advertiser* had to say about it.

Phil openly commented on the peculiarity, but Jim just stuck his tongue in his cheek.

Neither McLean nor the wounded half-breed were seriously hurt, and in a week both were well again--the one going lamely about his business and the other in jail beside his fellows.

The trial was placed on the calendar for the next Assizes which had been arranged for the following month, when most of the Fall crops would be in and shipped, thereby leaving twelve good men and true free to devote some of their time to the requirements of law and justice.

Jim went back again to the Court House as Government Agent Thompson’s assistant. Phil kept

to the forge, serious and tremendously earnest in following the calling he had been so strangely thrust into.

He could not fail to notice, day by day, the gradual change that was coming over Sol Hanson. Sol had not been drunk for weeks. He dressed himself much more neatly than formerly, although what it was exactly that gave him the smarter appearance, Phil could not make out until Smiler led him to understand by signs and grimaces that Sol now washed his face and hands mornings and evenings, instead of every Sunday morning as formerly.

But there was something else.

Sol's blue eyes had contracted a habit of gazing into the heart of the fire while he leaned abstractedly on the bellows handle. He became interested in the train arrivals. He posted letters and called every day at the post office for mail. Whether he got any or not Phil was unable to say definitely. But he got a sneaking suspicion after a while, that the soft-hearted, simple, big fellow was either answering letters through the Seattle *Matrimonial Times*, or corresponding with some lady friend. He felt convinced that Sol was badly, or rather, madly in love.

He probed the big Swede with the sharp end of a question now and again, but Sol was wonderfully impervious.

One day, Jim and Phil were strolling leisurely up Main Street from the Kenora Hotel where they had been having an early lunch together. The north train had just come in and a few drummers, some incoming Chinamen and a number of straggling passengers were spreading themselves for their different destinations, carrying grips and canvas bags with their samples and their belongings as the case might be.

Neither Jim nor Phil was paying any heed to what was a daily occurrence, until they were stopped by a buxom, fair-haired, blue-eyed maiden, with a pleasant smile on her big, innocent face. She was cheaply but becomingly dressed and filled her clothes with attractive generosity. As she laid down her two hand-bags, her smile broadened and beamed until it broke into a merry dimple on each of her cheeks and parted her ruddy lips to the exposure of a mouthful of fresh, creamy-looking, well-formed teeth.

There was no gainsaying who was the object of her smiles:--it was Jim Langford and Jim alone, and there was nothing left for either him or Phil to do but to doff their hats and wait the lady's good pleasure.

She seemed in no hurry to speak.

As Jim gazed at her in surprise, waiting; her fingers--hard, red fingers they were--began to twist a little nervously about the painfully new gloves she carried, and her eyes dropped, looked up, and dropped again.

"Guess you don't know me!" she ventured at last.

"No! I'm sorry! I can't remember ever meeting you before," he answered.

"Ho, ho!" muttered Phil under his breath.

"See you later, Jim!" he said loudly, making to move off.

"Here, you piker! You wait a minute." Jim grabbed Phil's coat sleeve.

The young lady's cheeks began to take on the added attractiveness of a blush.

"You ain't ever met me before, I know," she said. "But don't you know me by my picture?"

Jim shook his head in perplexity.

"I'd a-knowed you any place."

For the first time in Phil's experience of Jim, the latter stood abashed.

"You might have come to meet me at the train though. Guess you was just comin'. I wrote you three days since."

"You did, eh! Well,--I never got your letter," bantered Jim, recovering his composure.

She was a pretty piece of femininity, despite her poor language and her somewhat tawdry finery.

"I think you're stringing me. But say!--I'm awful hungry, and I've been two days in the train.

"Ain't you goin' to get me some eats, Sol?"

"Sol!" exclaimed Jim with a gulp that spoke intense relief. "Why, my good girl, my name's not Sol!"

"Oh, yes it is!" she answered bravely, with the smile fading. "I tell you I'd a-knowed you anywheres."

"You're making a mistake, dear lassie. My name is certainly not Sol."

A glimmer of light was beginning to break in on Phil, but he kept that glimmer miserly to his inmost self.

"Yes it is! Oh, yes it is!" she said again, putting her hand on Jim's arm, but with a peculiar little expression of uncertainty in her eyes.

"You can't fool me, Sol Hanson,--and, say boy!--I've come a long ways for you, and I'm awful tired."

"Hanson! Good Lord!" blurted out Jim. "Me--Sol Hanson! Lassie, lassie, I didna think I was so good looking. Are ye looking for Sol Hanson?"

The girl did not answer. A moisture began to gather in her big, blue eyes, and a tear toppled over.

Jim was all baby at once.

"Dinna greet!--there's a good lass! Dinna greet here in the street," he coaxed. "If it is Sol Hanson ye want, we can soon help ye to get him."

The girl bent down and opened up one of her hand-bags, bringing out a large photograph, pasted on a creamy-coloured, gay-looking cardboard mount. She handed it to Jim, searching his face with her tear-dimmed eyes.

Jim gazed at it in bewilderment. Then he scratched his head and gazed again.

"Ain't that your picture?" the young lady asked. "Don't tell me that it ain't, for it wouldn't be true; and I came all this way because you wrote so nice and looked so big and good. I--I didn't think you was a bluffer like--like other men."

Her breath caught and she began to sob.

"My dear lassie,--I am bewildered,--confounded. I--I---That is my photo, but where in all the world did ye get it from?"

The girl looked at him a little angrily, for she had pluck in plenty.

"Where do you think? I ain't stole it. You sent it to me. Where else could I get it?"

Jim stood foolishly.

"I certainly never sent it. Why, woman!--I never saw ye before. I don't know your name even. I--I---

"There, there! Dinna start to greet again. We'll fix you up, if you'll only tell Phil and me your trouble."

"--And your name ain't Sol Hanson?" she queried, with a trembling lip.

"No!--I am sorry to say it is not!"

From her grip, the girl picked out a bundle of envelopes, well filled, and done up in lavender-coloured ribbon.

"--And--and you never wrote them letters to me?"

Jim looked at the writing and shook his head.

"No,--I never did!"

"--And--and you don't know my name's Betty Jornsens?"

"I didn't, but I do now, Betty," gallantly answered Jim, while Phil was beside himself trying to stifle his amusement one moment, and endeavouring to keep back his feelings of sympathy for the girl, the next.

Several passers-by turned round and stared in open interest at the strange meeting.

"Shut up your bag, lassie! Don't show us any more o' your gear," appealed Jim in perturbation at the thought of what might come out next.

The buxom, fair-haired woman began to sob again. She turned and appealed to Phil.

"Oh, what am I to do, mister? I had a good job at Nixon's Café in Seattle. Sol wrote to me through the *Matrimonial Times*. I wrote back to him. I sent him my picture and he sent me his--this one--and now he says he ain't him."

"That isn't his photo, woman,--it is mine," interrupted Jim.

"But he's you," she whimpered.

"Then who the mischief am I?" asked Jim in perplexity.

"You told me you had a house, and fruit trees, and a blacksmith's shop, and plenty of money and, if I came to Canada, we'd get married. I threwed up my good job and I've come and now you say you ain't him," she sailed on breathlessly, her ample bosom labouring excitedly.

"Phil," said Jim, aside. "How the devil do you suppose that big idiot got my photo? It looks like one taken off one I used to have, and lost."

"I guess that is just what it is," grinned Phil.

"Well,--we've got to see this little woman right, and incidentally give Sol Hanson the biggest fright he ever got in his natural.

"Miss--Miss Jornsens,--there's a mistake somewhere. My name is Jim Langford, and that is my photograph; but I never sent it to you. We happen to know Sol Hanson though. He lives here all right. This gentleman works with him.

"Sol is a Swede?"

"Yes,--yes!" put in Betty, "same as I am."

"I'm thinking he was afraid he wasn't good-looking enough and he was scared to take chances,

so he sent you my photo instead of one of his own," he went on, without even a blush of conceit.

"And--and he ain't such a good-looker as you?" she queried.

"Well,--well, of course, tastes differ. You might like him fine," he grinned, with becoming modesty.

"But he's got a house, and fruit trees, and a blacksmith shop, and he can work?" she asked.

"You bet! He's well fixed. Come along and we'll see him now. He will never be able to resist you."

Betty perked up at the compliment.

Then nervously and timidly she set herself to rights, finally consenting to allow Jim and Phil to escort her to the smithy.

"You wait here!" instructed Jim at the corner of the block. "We'll go and break the news to Sol. We'll come back for you."

"Give me that picture, though. I have a word to say in his ear about that."

Betty opened her bag, gazed fondly on Jim's photo, then at him, before she slowly delivered it up.

Phil went into the smithy, hung up his coat, put on his apron and started in to work.

Jim followed him a few minutes later.

Sol Hanson was busy shoeing a horse. Jim went over to him.

"Here, Sol," he cried, "come over and see this."

The good-natured big fellow stopped his work and followed Jim to the dust-begrimed window.

Jim stuck the photograph under Sol's nose.

"Do you know who that is?"

"Ya,--sure thing! You bet! Dam-good picture too, Jim!" he commented, with an innocence well assumed.

"Yes,--you certainly seem to like it. I can't say it is very like you, you son-of-a-gun."

"Me? No! Pretty like you though, Jim," Sol stammered.

"Look here, you big lump of humanity;--what the devil do you mean by sending my photo all over the country and saying it is yours?"

"Me?--I ain't--I didn't--I---"

"Cut it out, you big bluffer! You couldn't lie decently to save your neck."

Sol laughed at last.

"You not been goin' for to get mad, Jim. Just a little joke I have on some girl. See!"

"Oh,--it was! Darned good joke for me--and you too!"

"Ya!--you see I find it one day on floor here. You drop it some time. I ain't much of a swell looker for girls. All girls like face like yours. I get Vancouver man make me twelve pictures all same as this one. I send them just for little joke to girls I write to some time."

Jim clutched at his own hair despairingly, as Phil furiously worked the bellows in his mirth.

"Great jumping Cæsar! Twelve! Are you going to start a harem?"

"Ach, no! Just have a little fun,--that's all. You don't go and been for to get mad at that."

"Great fun! Great joke!" commented Jim, "but you've put your foot in it this time, old cock. One of these women is in town, looking for your scalp. She is asking everybody in Vernock where Sol Hanson hangs out."

Sol's big face grew a shade paler and his jaw dropped. He became excited.

"You--you didn't been for to tell her,--Jim?"

"Sure I did! Why not? You're going to marry her,--aren't you? She's telling everybody that."

Sol, who had been standing with his big hands spread on his leather apron and his mouth agape, now showed signs of anxiety.

"But,--I--I--Which one is it, Jim? What she call herself?"

"Oh,--there are several, you blooming Mormon?"

Sol ran to his coat and pulled a bundle of letters and miscellaneous photographs from the pocket. He handed them to Jim.

"Look at them," he cried in excitement. "Tell me quick which one come."

He mopped the perspiration from his brow. "By hell!--I guess I been got in a bad fix this time for sure."

Jim slowly went over the documents and photographs.

"No! No! No! No!" he exclaimed, as he handed them back to Sol one by one.

"Not one,--by gosh, Jim! That pretty funny. Must be one, though. Sure you look at every one?"

"She's not there, Sol. Trot out the others, old man."

"I ain't got no more, Jim. Honest! That every dam-one,--honest!"

"Say,--maybe she tell you her name? Is it--is it Gracie Peters?"

"No!"

"Is it Sal Larigan?"

"No!"

"Betty---"

"Yes,--that's it! Betty--Betty Jornsens!"

"What? Betty she come? Jumpin' Yiminy! Let me get my hat and coat. Where is she now? By gosh, Jim,--she dam-fine little peach."

Sol became more and more excited. "I got her picture here. You miss it up. See!"

He ran over the photographs.

"There," he exclaimed, holding it up admiringly.

It was Betty's photograph, and a perfectly charming little picture she made too. But Jim had intentionally passed it over, for he was not through with Sol Hanson. He had still his pound of flesh to exact.

"Ain't that dam-fine girl?" Sol went on. "See that, Phil! I been going to marry her. You bet! Tra-la-la!" he half sang. "Come on!--let's go and find her, Jim. Come on!"

"Wait a bit!--Bide a wee!" returned canny Scot Langford. "That isn't the picture of the woman who is here for you."

Sol's face fell.

"What? But you say her name's Betty Jornsens?"

"Yes! That is what she told me."

"Well!--that's Betty;--that's her."

"Oh, no it isn't! Don't you fool yourself, mister man. You're mixed up in your women, Sol."

"No siree! You look on back," Sol returned triumphantly. "See that! 'With love and kisses to Sol from Betty Jornsens.'"

Jim stood for a moment in silence.

"She nice little girl;--come up, maybe, to your shoulder?" queried Sol.

"No, Sol!--she's six feet high if she is an inch."

"She got fair hair and blue eyes; nice white teeth?"

"No, laddie!--she has carrotty red hair; and her eyes, I mean her eye--for she has only one--is a bleary, grey colour."

Sol commenced to perspire afresh, and to hop from one foot on to the other.

"Aw, you foolin' me, Jim!"

"Devil a fool! It is too serious for that. She's big; she's got one eye; she's lost her teeth in front and she is evidently a widow or she has three kids with her, two at her skirts and one in her arms."

"Good Christopher Columbus!" exclaimed Sol, pulling at his hair.

"And, and, Sol,--she is coming here for you, in five minutes."

The big blacksmith was in desperation.

"Sol,--you're done;--you're done brown," Jim went on relentlessly, "and it serves you darned well right."

"But, Jim,--you been a lawyer. She can't go make me marry her?"

"Yes she can!"

"But she lie to me. She send me picture of nice girl and say it her and she Betty Jornsens. I tell her to come to me, from her picture,--see!"

"You big, blue-eyed, innocent baby! You're done;--you're in the soup;--your goose is cooked. Take it from me,--she's got you, and got you good."

"Didn't you send her my photo and say it was yours?"

Sol stood aghast.

"Aw,--that just a joke!" he persisted.

"Hadn't she a perfect right to do the same thing to you? Well--evidently she has done it. Poor Sol!"

"But--but---"

"It's no good. There aren't any *buts* to this. She is here. She is expecting Sol Hanson to be a fine looking fellow like me, and the poor thing is going to get a pie-faced, slop-eyed individual like

yourself.

"Now, you're expecting a pretty little blonde and you're getting,--well,--something totally different."

Jim slapped Sol on the back.

"Too bad! Take your medicine, though, old man! Be a sport! You're distinctly up against it."

Phil was metaphorically in knots by the furnace fire.

Sol rushed for his coat.

"No dam-fear!" he cried. "I go to coop first. She ain't been going to run any bluff on Sol Hanson,--see! You tell her, and her carrots-hair, and her one eye, and her three dam-kids, to go plumb toboggan to hell.

"I come back sometime--maybe."

Sol made a dart for the front door. Then he changed his mind and made for the back one. But he guessed the wrong one--or, perhaps after all, it was the right one.

As he was going out, Betty Jornsens, with her two grips, came in and blocked up his exit.

She had evidently wearied of waiting at the corner, and had determined to investigate matters for herself.

Sol made to brush past. Suddenly he stopped. He looked at Betty. He stared. His eyes became big and nearly popped out of his head in his amazement.

Betty looked up at him in surprise.

They gaped thus at each other for a few seconds, then Sol staggered to the side of the door and leaned against it, breathing hard as if he had run a mile.

At last he found his tongue and himself, and straightened up.

"Betty,--by gosh! Betty,--little Betty, by Yiminy!" he exclaimed, throwing his long arms about her, knocking her grips aside and sending her hat awry. He lifted her up high and kissed her fair on the mouth. He swung her round and round the smithy, all oblivious of his amused spectators.

Meantime, Betty kicked and struggled, and finally succeeded in smacking his face loudly with a free hand.

Sol set her down and rubbed his cheek foolishly, while she stamped her foot at him.

"You great big--great big--boob!" she cried.

Jim stepped out from the shadow.

"Miss Jornsens,--allow me to introduce you to Mr. Sol Hanson!"

Betty looked at Jim querulously, and then at Sol who was standing nervously by, gazing at her.

Slowly and shyly she sidled up to the big blacksmith. She put her hands on the lapels of his ill-fitting coat and slid her fingers down them tenderly; then she laid her head on his chest, while his big arms went about her again.

"Come on, Phil!" said Jim, "this is no place for the proverbial parson's son."

Sol's eyes took on a new light.

"Jim,--by gosh!--maybe it been no place for a parson's son," he grinned, "but it a dam-fine place for a parson. What you think, eh, Betty?"

"You fellows wait. We all go together, get it over right now. What you think, my little Betty?"

"Sure! There ain't no good in waitin'," answered Betty. "And say, Mister--Mister Langford!--I ain't tryin' to be insultin', nor anything like that, but if you think you're a better looker than my big Sol, then you've got another think comin'."

Sol's head went up and his chest went out, as they were entitled to do, for Jim was considered quite a handsome fellow in his own way.

CHAPTER XVI

The Breakaway

The hour that followed was a busy one. Betty was whisked away by Phil to Mrs. Clunie's for a good, substantial home-made dinner and a general overhaul. Sol rushed home for his new, check suit, then off to the registrar's for the marriage license accompanied by Jim. Phil next unearthed the valiant Smiler from the basement of a Chinese restaurant in Wynd Alley where he was busy sampling the current day's bill of fare, gratis. Phil hauled him off to the barber's for a wash and a haircut, then to the O.K. Supply Store for new clothes, over and under, which set the

poor dumb little rascal wondering as to what sin he had committed to warrant the infliction.

The Reverend Anthony Stormer--the venerable old Lutheran pastor--was next informed of the expected arrivals; and, by the time Jim came along upholding Sol in a state of nervous prostration, all was in readiness for the ceremony.

Ten minutes later, Mrs. Clunie arrived escorting Betty Jornsens; pretty, buxom and beaming, and as full of confidence as Smiler was of Chinese noodles.

Smiler could not understand then what the ceremony was all about, nor did he seem to gain any further enlightenment on the matter at any later date.

It was all over within two hours of Betty's arrival in Vernock.

Sol was for sending Betty to her new home till supper time, intending himself to go back to the smithy with Phil and get down to the heavy work that lay there awaiting completion. But Phil and Jim would have none of it. And when Betty and Mrs. Clunie backed them up, there was nothing left for Sol to do but to obey; so, with three or four hand-bags--half of them borrowed--they were bundled into the Kelowna stage, and nothing more was heard of them for two weeks.

Smiler attended to his own needs as he had had to do often before, and he was back in the basement of the Chinese restaurant in Wynd Alley, finishing his dinner sampling,--with his new rig-out rolled up in a bundle under his arm and garbed in his much beloved rags and tatters.

That was the first of a dozen occasions upon which Smiler was dressed up by various well-meaning members of the community and it was the first of twelve occasions that Smiler resented the interference and went back, at the earliest opportunity, to his old, familiar and well-ventilated draperies.

The next fourteen days were desperate ones for Phil. From the moment he got back to the smithy, repair work piled in on him. Reapers and binders gave way in various parts and had to be put to rights at once, for it was nearing the end of the harvest season and the cold weather was already creeping along. Every horse in the Valley seemed suddenly to require reshoeing; wagon springs broke; buggy tires came off or wore out as they had never done before; morning, noon and night Phil slaved trying to cope with the emergency. There was no help that he could call in, and he would not for worlds have sent word to Sol to end his holiday a moment sooner that might be.

He snatched his meals when and where he could, while everyone clamoured for the immediate execution of his requirements. Finally Phil got up so early and he worked so late, that he made his bed for the time being on a bundle of straw covered with sacking, in a corner beside the forge.

He was young and strong, and he knew his work. He loved the rush of it and he gloried in the doing of things that other men would have groaned at. Above all, he was glad to think that he was now considered of some value in a work-a-day community.

It did not occur to him that day and night labour, even for a little time, had a terribly wearing effect on the physique; that he was losing weight with every twenty-four hours of it and that his cheeks grew paler and a little more gaunt every day of that week or so of extra push.

He chased Jim from the smithy as a worthless time-waster--whenever that worthy showed face--and Jim, for the nonce, had to find companionship and entertainment in his world of Penny Dreadful creation and his Love Knot Untanglements.

One glorious gleam of sunshine burst in on Phil's world of toil and set his muscles dancing and his heart singing in merry time to the ring of his hammer on the anvil. A perfumed note, bearing an invitation to him from Eileen Pederstone to attend a reception on the sixth evening of the month following, at her new home on the hill, was the dainty messenger of joy.

And what cared Phil if Brenchfield should be there? He had held his own before;--he could do it again. What counted all this hard work?--a puff of wind;--he was going to Eileen Pederstone's. What matter it how the world wagged?--a tolling bell;--he would dance again with the dainty, little vision with the merry brown eyes, the twinkling feet and the ready tongue. Ho!--life was good; life was great! Life was heaven itself!

Come on! Fill the smithy and the yard with your horses, and I'll shoe all of them! Block the roads and the by-ways with your wagons and buggies;--what care I for toil? Heap your broken reapers and binders a mountain high, and I'll stand on top of them before nightfall, with my hammer held defiantly to the heavens and shout "Excelsior, the work is done." The Fairy Princess has stopped in her procession; she looks my way; she smiles: her galloping courier brings a perfumed favour; she beckons me. Ah, surely! what a Paradise, after all, is this we live in!

In a sweet little world of dreams--in which even a blacksmith may live at times--Phil battled with his tasks and overcame them one by one.

And it was little he cared about the week's growth of beard that sat on his gaunt face, or for the sweat that ran over his forehead and splashed to his great, bared chest. Pride did not chide him for hands that were horny and begrimed, nor for arms that were red and scarred from the bite of flying sparks.

But it was thus that the lady of his dreams found him, as she wafted in from a gallop over the ranges, with a shoe in her hand and leading a horse that wore only three.

A smile was on her happy face, her cheeks were aglow and her eyes were dancing in childish

delight.

Little wonder then that Phil's heart stopped, then raced with all the mad fury of a runaway; little wonder his face grew pale and his eyes gleamed as he moved back against the wall beside his furnace.

And Eileen's merry smile faded away like the heat of an Indian Summer's day before the cool of the approaching night. She stared with widening eyes at the figure before her, for she saw, not the young, sturdy, country blacksmith, but a picture of the past, a fugitive from the police, a gaunt tired man, spent and almost beaten, seeking sanctuary.

And on this occasion, she did not take time to consider how much the man before her still craved for sanctuary.

Her lips parted in fear. Her hand went to her heart and she stepped slowly backward toward the door.

"Oh,--oh,--oh!" was all she uttered.

She dropped the horseshoe at her feet, and, pressing her hands to her eyes as if to shut out a sight that was unwelcome, she ran the remaining distance to the door, pulled herself into her saddle and rode quickly away.

She did not come back, as some might have done, to view the havoc she had wrought. She did not know even that she had wrought havoc; but three hours later, faithful, dumb, little Smiler found the man he so much adored lying on a pile of horseshoes, breathing scarcely at all, and strangely huddled.

That was the day that big, happy Sol Hanson came back to bear his share of the load--and, for the week that followed, he had to bear all of it, for Phil's overtaxed brain refused to awaken for seventy-two hours and his overworked body declined to limber up for seventy-two hours more.

On the morning of Phil's return to the smithy, at a moment when Sol's back was turned, the little perfumed note--which had brought the message from Fairyland--was dropped on the glowing furnace fire and thrust with an iron deep into the red coals.

With it, Phil fancied he was thrusting the little fairy dream, and he felt ever so glad of it. But he did not know, foolish man, that the fires have never been kindled that can burn dreams from Fairyland; that nothing can keep them from whispering back, at unexpected moments, and beckoning to the dreamer through the flames; ay, even through the cold, grey, dead ashes, when these are all that remain of the dancing passion-fires that have revelled and rioted themselves to exhaustion and oblivion.

On the evening of the reception at John Royce Pederstone's, Phil failed to land home from work at his usual time, and, as the hour drew near when they should be leaving, Jim Langford worried himself not a little, for he knew that Phil had received an invitation--the same as he had done--and he had noticed also how happy his friend had seemed over it. Of course, of the recognition at the smithy between Eileen and Phil he knew nothing, and even if he had known he would not have understood, for, so far, he had not even guessed at Phil's previous history nor at the connection there was between Phil and Graham Brenchfield.

Before going up to Pederstone's, Jim called at the smithy, but found the place closed up for the night. He hurried along to Sol Hanson's little home, but the lovebirds there could tell him no more than that Phil had quit work at the accustomed hour, that Smiler was also a truant; which made it possible that the two had gone off together on some boyish adventure. There was nothing left for Jim to do after that but to go to Royce Pederstone's alone, in the hope that Phil would be there or would show up later.

Everyone in Vernock of any importance was at the reception, in the company of his wife or sweetheart; but there was no sign of Phil. And the hours wore quickly on without his appearing.

Eileen--bright, blushing, buoyant and busy--found time to corner Jim.

"What has happened to Mr. Ralston? I--I thought he would be sure to be here."

Jim thought her tone was just a little strained and that her colour went somewhat suddenly.

"I haven't the slightest idea! He didn't show up to-night at home; yet he has been aching for this little affair since he received your invitation."

"Oh, I--I hardly think so, Jim. He is not the man to ache much over this kind of thing. You don't suppose anything serious could have happened?" she asked with a show of anxiety.

"I don't. But I'm sure only something serious would keep him away. However,--what's the good of worrying!--Phil can look out for himself pretty good."

"Yes,--I daresay!" she said absently, staring at the dancers as they glided round in the next room.

Jim put his hand on her arm and moved her round to him.

"Eileen,--what is it that is troubling you? You are not so terribly interested in Phil as all that,--are you?"

She roused herself.

"Me? Oh dear no! Not any more than I am in Sol Hanson, in Mr. Todd, in--in Jim Langford," she bantered. "Why should I? I know him only in the most casual of casual ways."

"Have you seen him since he was invited here?" Jim asked bluntly.

"Ye-yes!--just for a moment in the smithy the day he took sick. I thought,--oh Jim!--I thought possibly he might have misunderstood something--something that happened there at that time,--but--ah well!--anyway, it doesn't matter now.

"He does not say very much at any time, does he, Jim? He's a queer fellow."

"Ay!" said Jim drily, "and you're a queer little fellow yourself, Eileen,--eh!"

"Do you know anything of him before he came to Vernock?" she inquired suddenly, with a change of tone.

"Practically nothing! He has kept that a sealed book, and it is none of my affairs; but I do know that since he came here he has been the real stuff, and that is good enough for Jim Langford."

She smiled.

"Oh you men! You stand by your pals to the very last ditch; while a woman will desert her woman friend at the first one.

"Never mind! Let us forget Mr. Ralston meantime.

"Did you hear the news, Jim?--the great news! Daddy,--my own daddy has been offered the portfolio of Minister of Agriculture on the new Cabinet. He will be the Honourable John Royce Pederstone. And this his first session in Parliament too! Isn't it great?"

"Je--hosephat!" Jim jumped up. "And I never heard a thing."

"I don't wonder at that, Jim. Dad only got the wire an hour ago making the definite offer."

"By jingo!--I must go and give him my congratulations. Here's the Mayor looking for you, Eileen. I'll leave you to him. I must find your dad."

And while the reception at John Royce Pederstone's was at its height, Phil Ralston was trudging the hills alone, coming over the ranges from Lumby, a village which lay several miles distant, where he had gone by stage direct from the smithy. He walked in the melancholy enjoyment of his own thoughts. It did him good--and he knew it--to get off in this way when things were not going to his liking. It gave him an opportunity to review himself in the cold blood of retrospect, without interference; and it gave him time quietly to review the conduct of others about him; a chance to decide whether he was right or wrong in the position he had assumed; a chance to plan his future course from what had already taken place.

It was a crisp, frosty night, with a deep blue velvet dome of cloudless sky overhead, with star-diamonds that flashed and twinkled with ever varying colours, until a crescent moon, shaped like the whip of an orange, rose up over the hills to the east, cold, luminous and silvery, and paled the lesser twinkling lights into insignificance and ultimate obscurity.

As Phil topped the last hill overlooking Vernock, his head was high and so were his spirits, for he had made up his mind that come what might he would pursue his way calmly and earnestly to the end as he thought fit, and, if Eileen Pederstone cared to betray his secret, he would meet that difficulty as he had met others.

He looked down into the town before him, but its usual fairy-like aspect was absent, for the town fathers were beginning to get frugal and did not use their electricity on the main streets when the moon was up or when the snow was lying. Only the smaller lights of the dwelling houses gave out any signs of life.

He dropped gradually down, then across an orchard and on to the main highway leading to Vernock.

As he was passing the town jail, his attention was attracted by an unusual commotion there. Voices were gabbling noisily and quite a crowd was gathered at the main entrance. He hurried over. The first man he ran against was Langford, who accosted Phil in a rush of Doric, which at once informed him that something serious must be wrong.

"Where ha'e ye been, man? I've been pryin' for ye everywhere."

"Walking!" answered Phil shortly. "What's the matter?"

"Matter! De'il tak' it,--I thocht the whole toon kent by this time. I thocht maybe ye were efter them."

"Well, I'll be hanged!" exclaimed Phil as the truth dawned on him.

"Ay,--ye may weel say it! What did I tell ye? Didna I say they'd never face trial? The eight o' them broke awa' three or four hours ago. It was real nicely planned.

"Ye see the airshaft there! It runs richt into the top o' the wall and ventilates the prison where the men sleep. There was outside collusion, of coorse. Standin' on a horse, I guess they threw a rope into the airshaft from the outside and it slid richt doon to the passageway, inside. They say one of the prisoners was a good hand at pickin' locks and that he did them a' wi' a hairpin. Maybe he did. But they got oot o' their cells anyway, climbed the rope one at a time, crawled up the airshaft and out. Just look at that airshaft--it would hold a half a dozen men at a time nearly. They might as well have left an open door for them as have that contraption,--no wire protection over the ends, nothing but hinged lids that anyone can raise at any time."

"And they're gone?" asked Phil helplessly.

"Gone,--ay! good and gone! Like as no' they're 'ower the border' by this time, like 'a' the blue

bonnets' in the song.

"They had horses waitin' for them."

"But, land sakes, Jim!--where the deuce were the jailers, the police, all this time?" asked Phil.

Jim laughed.

"Where did ye expect them to be? Chief Palmer was at Royce Pederstone's reception. Howden--well, it seems Howden had a date on with one of the Kenora waitresses. Ryans, the jailer, says everything was quiet. He happened to open an unused cell, where he kept his brooms and things, and, when he was inside somebody slammed the door on him and locked him in. A trump-up from beginning to ending, and too thin to keep a draught out even. Phil, it sure would make one's stomach turn; politics, justice, protection, the whole thing would seem to be a farce from start to finish, and we are parties to it ourselves, aiding and abetting it; too weak or else too lazy to issue even a mild protest."

"And what is being done now? Who put you on to it?"

"Oh,--that youngster Smiler, as usual. He knows everything that goes on. The wee deevil came up to Pederstone's. They wouldn't let him in, but he shot through the door and made for me. Brenchfield was standing by and saw the dumb show, and understood it quicker than I did, for he was off like a greyhound, and so was Palmer.

"Before I got down here, he had his own pursuit gang working and they were away, hot-foot, after the runaways,--perhaps."

"Well,--I guess that ends it," lamented Phil.

"I guess it just does," agreed Jim. "Palmer leading the chase, and Brenchfield at his ear telling him how to do it before he set out. Gee, man!--I wish we had been in it, though. There would have been hell apopping for somebody, for I'm just in the mood."

"But didn't Brenchfield go, too?"

"Not so far as I know! He was here, got them started after much pow-powing with Palmer; then someone came for him and he went off again in a hurry. One of the gang, no doubt! Damn them!"

"Oh, oh, oh,--Jim Langford!" interrupted a well-known, melodious voice at Jim's elbow.

Jim and Phil turned quickly to the speaker.

It was Eileen Pederstone, wrapped up snugly in a warm, fur coat. Apparently she was alone.

"Great Scot, lassie!--what are you doing here?"

"Good evening, gentlemen!" she said politely.

Phil returned her salutation, with a very uneasy feeling inside.

"Little ladies should be sleeping in their beds," put in Jim in a tone of admonition.

"I wouldn't mind if I were now," she returned. "I just couldn't resist coming down here when I heard of the breakaway from jail, and so many of the men felt they had to rush off from our place.

"I coaxed daddy to bring me down. I lost him somewhere in the crowd half an hour ago."

"Ugh-huh!--and what else?" inquired Jim.

"Well, I am positively sick of having my dad for a member of parliament. I never seem to have him to myself for five minutes on end. I don't know where he has gone to, I'm tired and,--and I'm looking for some big, strong man to see me home up the hill. Would you mind, Jim?"

"No, indeed, Eileen! I would be glad to do so,--but unfortunately I have promised Thompson, the Government Agent, to stay here in charge till he gets back. But Phil here will see you home, and be delighted to do so. Eh, Phil?"

"Why--why, certainly! Only too pleased!" said Phil, although he could have punched Jim's head for putting him in such a predicament. He half hoped that Eileen Pederstone would find an excuse, but instead, she accepted the proffered service without demur.

They started off immediately. Neither spoke for a hundred yards or so, for a constraint seemed to be holding both back; the one did not know of anything fitting to say, and the other had so much to say that she was at a loss to know how or where to begin.

Womanlike, Eileen was first to break the silence.

"I was sorry, Mr. Ralston, that you were too busy to come to our place to-night--or, I should say, last night, for it is morning now."

"I wasn't exactly too busy," returned Phil frankly. "I walked the hills for the good of my health, and I enjoyed myself splendidly."

"Oh!--I thought--I thought you would be sure to come, if only for daddy's sake,--unless something serious would prevent you," said the young lady slowly.

It was dark and impossible for either one to see the other clearly, so they had to be guided by the voice alone.

"Yes,--I guess probably I should have come, but---"

Eileen interrupted him.

"Mr. Ralston,--don't let us fence any more. That's what everybody does nowadays. It isn't honest. Can't we be honest?"

"Of course we can, Miss Pederstone! I am glad you put it so plainly. Now, if you had been in my shoes,--would you have come?"

"Oh, please don't put it that way. We have gone through too much for that. We know too much of each other for argument."

"You mean, you know too much about me," corrected Phil, a little bitterly.

"Yes!--and, believe me or not as you will, I never thought, I never guessed--until--until I saw you that afternoon in the smithy, tired-out, begrimed, your hair awry and your clothes loose about you--I never dreamed that you--that you--that---"

"That I was the escaped convict you befriended!"

Eileen put her hand on his arm.

"Mr. Ralston,--why do you have to be so callous; why are you so severe with yourself?"

There was a touch of irony in the short laugh Phil gave.

"One can't afford to be otherwise with one's self," he retorted. "It is a privilege one is permitted to take."

"It is a privilege you have no right to take and--and I am so sorry if I hurt your feelings that afternoon. I did not think for a second how you might misconstrue my behaviour, although--although I could see it all afterwards. Won't you please understand me? I was so surprised, so taken aback,--the picture returned to me so suddenly--that I could not think properly. I just had to run out into the open and away, in order to pull myself together."

Phil walked along by her side, up the hill, without answering.

"Won't you believe me?" she pleaded.

"I can never forget that you were kind to me when I needed it most."

"Then you believe me," she reiterated, "and you will believe that I shall never, never, never tell anyone your secret?"

The moon sailed out behind the clouds, and Phil looked down and saw a pale, earnest face searching his.

"Yes!--I do believe you," he answered. "I could not do anything else now."

"Thanks ever so much!" Eileen smiled.

And with that smile, the ache that had been at Phil's heart for some days took wings and flew away to the Land of Delusion from whence it came.

"May I ask just one little question before we bury that small bit of the past?" Eileen asked.

"Yes!--what is it?"

"Does anyone else up here know that you are the same person who--who was recaptured that night?"

"Yes!--one other knows."

"Jim Langford?"

"No, not Jim--although I think I may have to tell him some day. It is awkward at times."

"Your secret would be safe with him."

"I know it would."

"If it isn't Jim who knows, it can be only one other," she reasoned, "Mayor Brenchfield."

"Yes!"

"Is he likely to betray you?"

"He would if he felt free to do it;--but as things stand, he daren't."

"Oh!"

That simple little word which can mean so many things, was Eileen's answer.

She sighed, then she brightened up again.

"Well!--that has been got rid of, anyway."

On climbing the steepest part of the hill road, she questioned Phil once more.

"Do you intend making blacksmithing your life's business?"

"Why? Isn't it a good calling?"

"Oh, yes! My dad was a blacksmith for the most of his life. But I think you are intended for something different, something bigger than that. You have had more education, for one thing, than my dear old daddy had."

Phil laughed.

"That is quite flattering--but your dad has my education beaten a thousand miles by his experience and shrewdness. I guess I shall have to keep to blacksmithing until I get some money ahead and until that 'something different' that you speak of, turns up."

"I should dearly love to see you and Jim in partnership. You would make a great team, for you never quarrel."

"Is that the secret of successful business partnership?"

"I think it is an important one of them."

"I daresay you are right," said Phil. "But what are we to do?"

"What do others do? Look at the men without brains, without even business ability, who have made money--heaps of it--buying and selling land right in this Valley, in this town, and who started in without a dollar. Why,--I could name them by the score;--Fraser & Somerville; McWilliams; Peter Brixton; McIntyre & Anderson, and even that good-for-nothing, Rattlesnake Dalton;--why, the town swarms with them. If they can do it, what could not two smart men, honest, with up-to-date business methods, do? Property has been changing owners hand-over-fist lately and I know it is merely the beginning. Next year property will move faster than ever; money for investment is pouring in; the people are flocking westward; values are rising; the ranches are producing more than ever; prices are improving; irrigation schemes are afoot;--why, it simply cannot be held back. Dad, Mayor Brenchfield, Ben Todd,--they are all anticipating it."

Phil almost gasped at Eileen's enthusiasm.

"They are the monied land-owners, the vested interests," he put in. "It suits them to anticipate."

"And, believe me, they will realise," retorted Eileen.

"Almost thou persuadest me to be a real estate agent," he bantered.

"Well,--one thing I do know; no man ever got very far ahead working for the other fellow. If a man isn't worth more to himself than he is to someone else, you can bet that someone else is not going to employ him."

"You talk as if you had worked it all out, Miss Pederstone."

"I have, too!" she went on. "If you are holding down a job at a fair price, it ought to be a sufficient indication to you that you should be at it on your own account."

Eileen's ardour set a spark aglow in Phil, but, manlike, he was prone to ignore it and even to argue against her conclusions.

"You must pardon me if I have said too much," apologised Eileen at last, "only, only I have tried to speak for your own good, and Jim's, for there is so much good in Jim that just wants elbow room;--and besides, knowing what I know, I should like so much to see *you* make good."

"I haven't any fear at all of the ultimate 'making good,'" replied Phil. "I have always known that it would come sooner or later. It has never been merely a hope with me, it has been an inward knowledge since I was quite a little chap."

"Why then, that knowledge, backed by your every endeavour, cannot fail to realise great success for you. It is fear of failure that kills so many successful ventures before their birth. Without fear--which is at best a cowardly bugaboo, the world would be heaven."

"Well,--heaven is where the devil isn't," said Phil, "so fear must be the very devil himself."

"Fear is the only devil I know," asserted Eileen.

"I am afraid I have the misfortune to be acquainted with quite a lot of other little devils," he laughed.

They crossed the road together, along the west-end of Mayor Brenchfield's local ranch and town house, which was divided from the new Royce Pederstone property by the big house and grounds which that eccentric Englishman, Percival DeRue Hannington, had bought for himself and now occupied in lordly bachelordom.

Several of Brenchfield's stables and out-houses were situated quite close to the roadway.

In passing, Phil observed a faint light in one of these, which swung as if in the hands of someone moving about.

As they continued along, he fancied he heard the sound of voices, one of which rose and fell as if in anger.

His momentary curiosity caused him to stop conversing and to listen more intently.

One of the voices rose again; there was the distinct sound of the crack of a whip, followed by a high-pitched throaty articulation as of an animal in pain. It sounded so helpless and piteous, that Eileen drew herself up nervously and shuddered. She gripped at Phil's arm.

Ever suspicious where Brenchfield or any of his followers were concerned, and quickly roused to anger at the slightest abuse shown to any of the lower creation, Phil acted on the impulse of the moment.

"Please stay here for a second, Eil--Miss Pederstone. I am going over to see what is doing there."

He turned, vaulted the fence, and bending low he crept cautiously over to the barn. At the

window, he rose slowly upright and peered inside.

The horror of what he saw there remained focussed on his mind ever afterwards; and always when he turned to that picture in the album of his memory, his gorge rose and a murderlust that could hardly be stifled filled his entire being.

He darted to the door of the barn. It was unfastened. He flung it open and rushed inside, throwing himself with mad fury on Brenchfield, who had his coat off and his sleeves rolled up. He had a long whip in his hand, poised high in the air, and was about to continue his devilish cruelty.

The Mayor swung round and, before Phil got to him, the downward stroke of the whip caught the latter across the head and shoulders. He staggered for the fraction of a second, then closed with his adversary, catching the right arm that held the whip and, turning it smartly over his shoulder in a trick Jim Langford had taught him, had Brenchfield groaning with the pain of the strain on his elbow. He relaxed his fingers and the whip dropped to the strawed floor.

Phil released his hold, whirled round and shot his right fist full in the face of his opponent. His left hand followed, sending Brenchfield backward. Recovering quickly, the Mayor came back at Phil, cursing roundly. But strong and heavy as he was, he was no match now for the sturdy, young blacksmith before him. And it was not very many minutes before he knew it.

They fought around the stable like wild cats. Time and again Brenchfield got in on Phil, but for every time he did Phil got in on him half a dozen. The heavier man's breath began to give out. His face was cut and bleeding and his vision was becoming more and more faulty as time went on.

"Skookum!" he cried furiously. "What the hell's the matter with you? Brain this fool with the lantern, can't you?"

But his henchman, Skookum, had already perceived how the fight was going and his discretion proved much greater than his valour. He dropped the lantern and darted out at the door. As good luck would have it, the lantern fell right-end up and, after wobbling precariously on its rim, sat upright in the corner, blinked, then continued to shed a fitful light over the scene.

Phil, with anger unabated, darted in on Brenchfield, smashing at him right and left. The latter tottered. Phil sprang in and clutched at his throat. Both went forcibly to the ground, with Brenchfield undermost. Phil gripped and squeezed and shook with almost ferocious brutality, until the Mayor's struggles became less and less violent, and finally ceased. And after that, Phil's grip did not relax, for that murderlust, which he had read of and heard of but had never before understood, was on him.

Had it not been for a quiet, pleading voice and a little hand that slipped over his and along his fingers, pushing its way between his and the soft throat of his adversary, the sunlight would have gone out of his life for all time.

"Please, Phil,--please!" she cried. "Don't! Phil--you would not kill him! You must not,--for my sake, for my sake! He isn't worth it. Phil, Phil,--let him go!"

And the murderlust--as it had done so often before at the gentle but all powerful pleading of God's women--shrank back, dwindled down, then faded into its native oblivion.

Phil's fingers relaxed and he rose slowly, working his hands convulsively, then pushing his wet hair back from his forehead, as he looked first down at the gasping figure of his hated adversary and then in open-eyed amazement at Eileen.

"Thanks!" he said, very quietly.

"Why did you do that?" she said. "What has he done?"

For answer, Phil caught her by the arm and turned her about-face.

A bundle of rags was trussed against the post of one of the stalls. Phil lifted the lantern from the ground and held it up.

"Oh!--oh, dear God!" she wailed piteously, running forward with hands outstretched. "Quick, Phil!--loose the ropes. The hound!--oh, the miserable, foul hound!" she continued.

Phil drew a pocket knife and slashed the ropes that held poor, little, half-unconscious Smiler.

They set the boy gently in a corner; and slowly, in response to crooning words and loving hands that stroked his dirty, wet brow, he came to; and what a great smile he had for Eileen as she laid her tear-stained cheek against the cold, twisted face.

Phil turned as Brenchfield was slowly rising on his arm. He went over and picked up the whip.

"What are you going to do?" anxiously cried Eileen.

"Just three!" said Phil, "for the three he gave that poor, helpless little devil. Say 'No' and I won't."

It was a challenge.

For answer, Eileen hid her face among Smiler's rags. And three times, with all the force of a young blacksmith's arm behind it, that whip rose and fell across the shoulders of Vernock's Mayor, ere it was broken with a snap and tossed by Phil among the straw.

A little later and Smiler was on his feet, little the worse.

Eileen led him outside.

Phil and Brenchfield were then alone.

"Damn you, for an interloping jail-breaker! I'll fix you for this before you're much older," growled the Mayor.

"Damn all you like," answered Phil, "but one word of any kind from you of what has happened here to-night and you are the man who will be trying to break jail. Keep your mouth shut, and we are square on what has happened. Say as much as a word and--well,--it's up to you."

"Oh, you go to hell!" exclaimed Brenchfield.

CHAPTER XVII

Wayward Langford's Grand Highland Fling

Jim Langford did not make an appearance until breakfast time that morning, and then there was dirt on his clothes, fire in his eyes and venom on his tongue.

"What do you know?" asked Phil as soon as they were alone.

"Know? What did I tell you, man? Darn them for the four-flushing hypocrites that they are. An hour ago Palmer came trotting back quite calmly with his crew.

"The bunch got away on us, across the Line,' he whimpered.

"A put-up game from start to finish! Oh, don't let me talk about it, Phil. It makes me positively crazy. For ten cents I'd go and shoot up the town."

Phil tried to get Jim to sit down and eat, but it was useless, for Jim kept walking Mrs. Clunie's dining-room like something in a cage.

Knowing the danger of the mood, Phil kept a wise silence and, much as he disliked it, he had to leave his angry chum and get along to his work.

At the smithy, things were little better. Sol Hanson had, in a roundabout way, gathered that Smiler had been abused, and, in some inexplicable manner, had arrived at the truth, that Brenchfield was responsible for it. Sol was vowing vengeance in no uncertain tones.

"What you know about it, Phil?"

"Guess he's just been in a scrap with some other kids," answered Phil in an off-hand way.

"Scrap nothing! You just about as dumb as Smiler. All the same, some day I kill that big blow-hard Brenchfield. Maybe he Mayor; maybe he got all kinds of money. Dirty son-of-a-gun, that's all! I know him,--see! Next time he tie Sol Hanson up, by gar!--I finish him. He what you call,--all cackle, no egg."

Phil laughed.

"All right!--you laugh away. Some day I get drunk--good and drunk--just for fun to break his big fat neck. You watch me,--see!"

"Forget it, Sol! You can't afford to do that kind of thing now. You're a married man, you know."

"Sure I am," he answered proudly. "And my Betty, she says, 'Go to it!' Anybody hurt Smiler, hurt Betty,--see! Anybody hurt my Betty,--well,--by gar!--he only hurt her one time,--that's all."

Truly Phil had his hands full, and when he got back home he met with further disquieting news, Jim Langford, with his horse, and a cheque he had just received that day in payment for some of his dime novels, was off on the rampage.

For the three days following, Phil tried hard, but could find no trace of his chum.

On the fourth day news reached him that Jim was out on the race-track, a mile from town, racing a band of Indians for their horses. He hurried over, and got there just in time to see the last horse added to the lot, tethered to a fence, that Jim had already won. The moment Jim set eyes on Phil, he put spurs to his mare, vaulted the fence right on to the highway, and set off full tear for Vernock, leaving his live winnings behind him without a thought.

This foolish act was characteristic of Jim, and it suited the Indians splendidly. The losers at once started out to claim their horses. But Phil got there first, strung the animals together, pushed his way boldly through the protesting crowd and trotted nine horses back with him to town. He stabled the lot in Mrs. Clunie's spacious barn, then set out on foot to search for Jim once more.

He did not have far to go, for on passing through the Recreation Park he came on a scene that he positively refused to disturb. Instead, he dropped on his hands and knees, and stalked stealthily behind the trees and among the bushes until he could both see and hear all that was going on.

Jim's horse, with its reins trailing, was cropping grass close by.

Jim was seated on the grassy bank near the creek, where the clear water wimpled and gurgled over the white, rounded stones. Around Jim, in easy attitudes but with eyes wide and gaping mouths, squatted some twenty-five or thirty boys of varying ages and of varying colours and nationalities, but all of a kin when it came to appreciation of the universal language--the language of an exciting story.

Jim was reading to them from one of his most bloody dime novels, and the wonderful elocution he possessed never displayed itself with greater zest. His wavy, reddish-brown hair swept his forehead becomingly; his face, thin, keen and full of cultured intelligence, betrayed every emotion as he declaimed; and his long arms and tapering fingers moved in a ceaseless rhythm of gesticulation.

It was the same old stuff:--

"Hal, the boy rider of the Western plains, stood on the brink of the chasm: behind him, three thousand feet of sheer precipice to the seething, boiling waters and jagged rocks below;--before him, the onrushing bandits.

"Black Dan, outstripping the others, sprang on Hal, mouthing fearful oaths. With astounding agility, Hal stepped aside, caught Dan by the middle, and, swinging him high over his head, sent him hurtling, with ear-splitting shrieks, down, sheer down to his doom.

"This staggered Dan's followers for a second, until Cross-eyed Dick, jibing his comrades for their cowardice, next rushed in upon our dauntless hero. Hal drew his dagger from his belt and bravely awaited the onslaught. When Cross-eyed Dick was within a few yards of him, he raised his arm and threw his dagger deftly and with terrific force, burying it to the hilt in the train-robber's windpipe. With a clotted gurgle--blood spurting from his mortal wound--Hal's assailant still came rushing on. He staggered on the brink for a moment, then--without another sound--he toppled over and joined his dead leader who was lying, a beaten pulp, among the boulders, far below."

On and on Jim went, making the hackneyed, original; the ridiculous, feasible; the impossible, real; until even Phil hated to pull himself away from the scene, to await a more convenient season for his endeavours to bring Jim back to himself.

If ever there was poetry in a "Deadwood Dick," thought Phil, surely it was then.

Feeling that Jim was in harmless company for the time being, Phil left him, intending to round him up later.

An hour afterwards he returned to Mrs. Clunie's to have a look at the horses he had stabled. To his great surprise and annoyance he found the place empty of all but his own and Mrs. Clunie's animals. Surmising that the half-breeds had "put one over on him" he started down town, hot foot and hot of head. He took the back way through Chinatown, as he knew Jim had a habit of frequenting the most unusual places when on the rampage.

His journey, for a time, proved without adventure.

Had he taken the way of Main Street, or further over still, toward the poorer class of shacks and dwellings, it might have been more interesting for him, for Jim's insatiable love of a change was being indulged to its full and he was busy making quite a good fellow of himself with all the orphans and poverty-stricken widows he could find.

It was he, and not the half-breeds, who had taken his horses from Mrs. Clunie's barn. What he did with them after he took them was not clear to himself then, for his memory merely served him in flashes. But all of it returned to him later, in startling realism.

He found himself on top of a wagon-load of sacked potatoes, driving a good team of heavy horses townward, with his own mare leisurely ambling behind, unhitched--following him as a dog would.

He had no use for sacked potatoes at that particular moment, so he bethought himself how best to get rid of them. As usual, he set about to do a good turn where it was most needed.

From one end of the little country town to the other he went, stopping at the door of every family he knew of where the produce would prove of value, and off he unloaded one, or two, or three sacks, as he thought they might be required; refusing to betray the source of supply further than that they were a gift which the Lord was providing.

It was thus that Phil finally found him, and quite unabashed was that lanky, dust-browed individual.

"Can you no' let a man be?" he remonstrated. "When I'm playin' the deevil, you admonish me, and when I'm tryin' to do a good turn, you're beside me, silent and stern as a marble monument.

"Man, Phil, ye mak' me feel like the immortal Robert Louis Stevenson must have felt when he wrote 'My Shadow.'"

"I never heard of it," said Phil.

"What? Never heard of it! May the Lord in his bounteous mercy forgive ye for your astounding ignorance. No time like the present, Philly, laddie;--no time like the present. Listen!--and never dare ye tell me again that ye never heard it,--for it's your twin brother."

And there, in that back street, beside the potato wagon, he burst into melody in as clear and rich a baritone voice as Phil had ever heard.

Jim was a born minstrel.

From beginning to end, he sang that never-dying, baby melody of the master-craftsman, Robert Louis Stevenson, with a feeling true to every word of it and emphasising particularly the parts which he fancied applied especially to Phil.

*"I have a little shadow that goes in and out with me,
And what can be the use of it is more than I can see.
He's very, very like me from the heels up to the head,
And I see him jump before me when I jump into my bed.
The funniest thing about him is the way he likes to grow,
Not at all like proper children, which is always very slow,
For he sometimes shoots up taller, like an India rubber ball,
And he sometimes gets so little that there's none of him at all.*

*"He hasn't got a notion of how children ought to play,
And can only make a fool of me in every sort of way.
He stays so close beside me, he's a coward you can see,
I'd think shame to stick to nursie as that shadow sticks to me.
One morning, bright and early, before the sun was up,
I rose and found the shining dew on every butter-cup
But my lazy little shadow, like an arrant sleepy-head
Had stayed at home behind me and was fast asleep in bed."*

There were few people about when Jim began his singing, but a considerable crowd was gathered long before he finished.

Suddenly a little fair-haired girl came up to him with a show of bashfulness. He put his hand on her curls.

"What is't?" he asked. "Tell me;--ye need never be feart for me."

"Please--please, sir,--that was a nice song and mother says would you sing it to us at our social to--to-night?"

"Sing it,--of course I'll sing it. Just you tell your Uncle Jim where to come, and I'll be there. What social is it, bairnie?"

"Please--it's the Salvation Army."

"Oh-h!" groaned Jim, clutching at his forelock. But he held manfully to his contract. "What time would ye like me to be there, lassie?"

"Mother says, please nine o'clock."

"Nine o'clock at the barracks! Right you are! I'll be there, and I'll sing 'My Shadow.'"

"Please--and what is your name?" she inquired, in a business-like way.

"My name!--let me see,--oh, ay! Uncle Jim,--just plain Uncle Jim!"

"And you'll come sure?" she asked.

"Yes, bairnie!--I'll come sure."

The little girl ran off, evidently highly pleased at the addition she had made to the programme for their social meeting.

Phil gripped Jim by the arm.

"Yes, shadow dearie!" said the big fellow whimsically, "what is't?"

"Aren't you going to cut this stuff out, Jim?"

"What? Man alive, do ye want to make a mock o' me? Me!--cut it out and this just the first week. You managed that once, Phil, to my eternal disgrace. Don't ye know that when I start, it means a month on the calendar--and has always meant that and always will mean---"

"No, it won't," put in Phil. "Not if I know it!"

"But, Phil, the folks expect it. Ye could never disappoint the people."

"Disappoint be-damned! Are you going to quit this right now, or not?"

"Man, ye shouldna put it like that to me," expostulated Jim, swaying slightly as he threw his arm round by way of emphasis.

Phil held out his hand to him.

"All right, Jim! I'm sorry. Good-bye! Good-bye for good!"

Almost a haunted look came into the bloodshot eyes of the big fellow.

"Phil,--Phil,--ye don't mean that? Ye wouldna throw me doon?"

"But I do mean it. I thought you and I were going to make a good partnership some day."

"And aren't we?"

"Not this way! Good heavens, Jim!--what's the matter with you, anyway? Haven't you got the courage to stand a little disappointment now and again without flying to this? You can't go on being a fool all your life."

"I tell you, I came here to make good. I am making good and I'm going to make better. So can you, if you get down to it. We can turn this town round our thumbs, if we go to it together. If you haven't the grit to quit this damnable foolishness--then I'm through with you for keeps and I'm going to find somebody with sense to go at it with me. If I can't, then I'm going to go at it alone."

With bent head, Jim stood in silence under the tirade.

"Where did you get this rig?" asked Phil, referring to the team and wagon.

Jim shook his head.

"What did you do with the horses you took from Mrs. Clunie's barn?"

Jim shook his head again.

"They were your own horses;--where did you get them?"

Jim's shock of auburn hair waggled a negative.

"And that's what the booze is doing for you, old man. You won't know your own name pretty soon."

Suddenly Phil's voice changed and he slipped his arm across his friend's shoulder.

"Jim,--Jim,--we've been good pals. Won't you quit this crazy behaviour, and we'll stay good pals right to the finish?"

"When do you want me to start?" asked Jim quietly.

Phil's face lit up.

"Right now!"

"Give me to-night;--two or three hours more, and don't interfere with me between this and then,--and I'll take you on."

"It's a go!" exclaimed Phil, holding out his hand.

Jim gripped it, and Phil knew that Jim would keep his word, for he was the kind of man whose word, drunk or sober, was as good as the deed accomplished.

"Mind you, Phil,--I don't say I'll never drink again."

"I'm not asking you to promise that," answered Phil.

"Right! At nine o'clock to-night I'm through with the long-term Highland Fling for keeps."

Phil assented to the proposal and left Jim to complete his potato distribution.

But Jim could not have remained very long with the job, for, by the time Phil had taken a leisurely stroll round to the forge to have a few words with Sol Hanson, and had partaken of a bit of supper with Betty and the big, genial Swede, Jim had succeeded in putting up his delivery-outfit, had dressed himself out in his cowboy trappings; chaps, Stetson, khaki shirt, red tie, belts, spurs and all complete, and was creating a furore among the law-abiding citizens down town.

Phil came upon the scene--or rather, the scene came upon Phil--like a flash of lightning out of the heavens.

He was making down town, intent on spending half an hour with his pipe and the evening paper in a secluded corner of the Kenora Hotel, when he heard a shout and witnessed a scurrying of people into the middle of the road. Phil himself had hardly time to get out of the way of a mad horseman who was urging his horse and yelling like an Indian on the war-path; tearing along the sidewalk in a headlong gallop, striking at every overhanging signboard with the handle of his quirt and sending these swinging and creaking precariously--oblivious of everybody and everything but the crazy intent in speed and noise that seemed to possess him so fully.

"How long has he been at this?" Phil asked of an old, toothless bystander.

"Oh,--'bout half an hour, maybe more, maybe not quite so much," came the reply.

"Nobody been hurt?" he inquired further.

"Guess nit! That Langford faller's all right. On the loose again, and just a-lettin' off steam. A good holler and a good tear on a cayuse ain't goin' to hurt nobody nohow, 'cept them what ain't got no call to go and be interferin'."

With difficulty Phil extricated himself from the man's superfluity of negatives and continued on his way.

He passed through the saloon of the Kenora, which was already overflowing with the usual mob such places attract in any Western country town; ranchers, cowpunchers, real-estate touts, railway construction men, horse dealers, teamsters and several of Vernock's sporty storekeepers and clerks.

He seated himself in a lounge chair in one of the side rooms, lit his pipe and pulled out the previous day's Coast newspaper. He was tired from his all day's running around after Jim. It was a raw evening out-of-doors, but it was cosy in there. The popping of corks, the clinking of glasses, the hum of voices and the occasional burst of ribald laughter, even the quarrelsome argument; all had more or less a soothing effect, which began to make Phil feel at harmony with the world at large. He looked at his watch. It was eight o'clock. He stretched his legs, unfolded

the large sheet and settled down comfortably.

He did not get very far. He had only scanned the headlines and had read the chief editorial, when the sound of an old, familiar voice in the saloon attracted his attention. He looked up.

It was DeRue Hannington, immaculate as usual, but terribly excited and mentally worked-up.

This same Percival DeRue Hannington had now become an established fact in Vernock. While he was looked upon as more or less of a fool in regard to money matters--with more money than brains--he had that trait about him which many well-bred Englishmen possess; he always commanded a certain amount of respect, and he declined to tolerate anything verging on loose familiarity.

"Say!" he was drawling, as he strode the saw-dusted floor, whacking his leggings with his riding crop, "what would you Johnnies do with a rotter that grossly maltreated your horse?"

"Stand him a drink," came a voice.

"Lynch him," suggested another.

"Push his daylight in!"

"Dip him in the lake!"

"Invite him up home and treat him to a boiled egg!"

"Forget it!"

Various were the suggestions thrown out, gratis, to DeRue Hannington's query, for all of them knew that he was crazy over horseflesh in general and particularly over the pure white thoroughbred he had got from Rattlesnake Dalton the day he closed the deal and became owner of the good-for-nothing Lost Durkin Gold Mine.

Whether or not DeRue Hannington considered that he had been defrauded in the matter of the mine still remained for him to test out, but the white horse was certainly a beauty, and her owner was never so happy as when careering down Main Street or over the ranges astride of her.

"By gad!--lynching is not half severe enough," fumed the Englishman. "You chaps are all jolly fond of horses. That is why I dropped in. It is an out and out beastly shame. The scoundrel should be horse-whipped and run out of town."

"Say, sonny!--why don't you tell us what'n-the-hell's the matter with your blinkin' hoss, 'stead o' jumpin' up and down like a chimpanzee, and makin' us dizzy watchin' yer?" asked a hardened old bar-lounger. "Stand still and let me lean my eyes up against somethin' steady for a minute."

This brought DeRue Hannington to himself.

"Come out here, gentlemen, and see for yourselves!" he invited. "Everybody come and have a look. I have her outside. A beastly, dirty, rotten shame;--that's what I call it, and if there is any bally justice in this Valley, I am going to see it jolly-well performed; by George, I am!"

The idly curious crowd gathered to the doorway after Hannington. In a few seconds thereafter, the wildest shouts of laughter and a medley of caustic remarks caused Phil to get up to see what it all was about.

At the door, he looked over the heads of those on the lower steps of the veranda, and there on the sidewalk stood the dejected Hannington holding the bridle of what might have been a huge zebra gone wild on the colour scheme, or an advertisement for a barber's shop.

It was evidently DeRue Hannington's white thoroughbred, but white no longer. Phil went out to make a closer inspection.

What a sight she presented! She had been painted from head to hoofs in broad stripes of red, white and blue. The white was her own natural colour, but the red and blue were a gaudy, cheap paint still partly wet. Nevertheless, the work was the work of an artist. The body was done in graceful, sweeping lines, while the legs were circled red, white and blue alternately down to each hoof. Even the animal's head was emblazoned in the most fantastic manner.

Phil laughed uproariously. He could not help it. None could--excepting possibly the man who owned the horse. To look at the animal gave one a sensation of dizziness.

The old bar-lounger, who had been so anxious to know what the trouble was about, was the first to give way under it.

"Holy mackinaw! I've got them again. Talk about seein' snakes," he cried, turning toward the saloon door and putting his hands over his eyes as if to shut out the sight, "hydrophobey, or delirious tremblin's ain't got nothin' on that. Say, Heck!--mix me up a drink o' gasoline and Condy's Fluid, so's I kin forgit it."

"Only wan thing wrong wid her," exclaimed an Irish pig-breeder from Tipperary; "she should 'a' been painted Emerild Green."

"Yes,--or maybe Orange," commented his friend who hailed from Ulster.

But with Percival DeRue Hannington it was a serious crime and he was in no mood to see any humour in the situation.

"Gentlemen," he cried, as the crowd began to dwindle back, "I'll give one hundred dollars cash to any one of you who can tell me who did this. My offer holds good for a week."

At that particular moment, the offer of a bribe did not bring to the fore any informers, so DeRue Hannington, riding a spare horse and leading his favourite by a halter rope, jogged his way homeward.

He had hardly gone the length of a block, when the comparative quiet of a respectable western saloon was again broken in upon. There was a clatter of hoofs outside which came to an abrupt stoppage; a heavy scrambling on the wooden steps leading to the veranda which ran round the hotel, an encouraging shout from a familiar voice, a clearing of passageway;--and Jim Langford, in all his gay trappings, still astride his well-trained horse, was occupying the middle of the bar-room floor, bowing profusely right and left to the astonished onlookers, making elaborate sweeps with his hat.

Everyone stopped, open-mouthed.

"What's this now!" shouted the long-suffering Charlie Mackenzie, the husky proprietor of the Kenora, as he came in from the dining-room.

"Good evening, good sir! It is Jim Langford, and very much at your service," came the gracious reply.

"Most of the time Jim Langford is welcome--but not when he don't know the dif' between a bar and a stable. Hop it now, and tie your little bull outside," was Mackenzie's ready retort.

"Boys!" cried Jim with a laugh, "we all know Charlie. He's a jolly good fellow, which nobody can deny;--and all that sort of thing;--but we're thirsty.

"Hands up--both hands--who wants a drink?"

Half a hundred hands shot in the air.

Jim's mood changed like a summer's day before a thunder plump. He pulled a gun. "Keep them there or I'll blow your heads off," he shouted dramatically.

And every hand stayed decorously and obediently above its owner's head.

Suddenly Jim laughed and threw his gun on the floor.

"Scared you all stiff that time! The gun's empty--not a cartridge in it.

"Come on, fellows! This is on me. Line up and get it over.

"Buck up, Charlie! Get your gang busy. I'm paying the piper."

Phil kept fairly well in the background, but drew closer to the lea of the others. He caught Jim's eye once, and he fancied he detected the faintest flicker of a wink; but, otherwise, Jim's face remained inscrutable.

Sitting easily on his horse, he pulled out a roll of bills and tossed over the cost of the treat to Mackenzie.

"Listen, fellows!" said he, leaning over in his saddle, "this is my last long bat. Next time you see me on the tear, shoot me on sight."

He pulled out his watch.

"Five minutes to nine! Say,--you'll have to excuse me; I've an appointment with a lady friend for nine o'clock."

Someone laughed.

"What the devil are you laughing at? I said a *lady*; and I meant it. Now, darn you,--laugh!" he taunted.

The laugh didn't come.

"Ho, Charlie! What do your windows cost?" he asked, pointing to those fronting the main street.

"Want to buy a window?" grinned the fleshy hotel-keeper.

"Sure!"

"One--or the whole frame?"

"The entire works, the nine windows, frame and all!"

"Oh well!--to you, Jim, that would be fifty bucks, less ten percent for cash," replied Mackenzie, going over to the cash register.

"Fifty dollars, less ten percent," repeated Jim; "that's forty-five dollars." His voice rose gaily. "There she goes, Charlie!"

He threw forty-five dollars from his roll over the counter.

"The window's mine! Good-bye, boys! My little lady is waiting for me."

He swung his mare round, set his heels into her sides and, before anyone could move, the horse and its rider sprang for the window, dashed clear through it on to the roadway and away at a gallop, without so much as a stop or a stumble; leaving a shower of broken glass and splintered wood in their train.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Coat of Many Colours

Before going to work next morning, Phil peeped into Jim's bedroom, and the sight proved pleasing to his eyes.

The place looked like a rocky beach after a storm and a shipwreck; boots, hat, spurs, leather straps, riding chaps, coat, pants, everything, lay in a muddle on the carpet, while Jim, the cause of all the rummage--innocent-looking as a newly born lamb, and smiling serenely in his evidently pleasant dreams--lay in bed, fast asleep.

At noon, after lunch, Phil looked in again, pushed the door wide and entered.

Jim was in his trousers and his undershirt, and was laboriously shaving himself before the mirror. He turned round and grinned. Phil grinned back at him and sat down on the edge of the bed.

There were no recriminations. What was past was dead and buried--at least as much of it as would submit to the treatment without protest.

"Jim!"

"Ugh-huh!"

"Had a good sleep?"

"Sure!"

"Just up?"

"Ay!"

"Feeling fit?"

"You bet!"

"Going to work?"

"Yep!--maybe."

"Did you hear what some tom-fool did to Percival DeRue Hannington's horse?"

Jim stopped his shaving and grimaced before the mirror, then swung slowly round on his heel.

"No!--although something inside of me seems to denote the feeling that I must have heard somebody talk about it. Give me the yarn."

Phil did so, as briefly as possible.

"And DeRue Hannington is as mad as a caged monkey. He has this white notice placarded on every telegraph pole in town."

Phil tossed over a hand-bill, which Jim perused slowly.

ONE HUNDRED DOLLARS REWARD.

The above reward will be paid to anyone giving information that will lead to the conviction of the person, or persons, who maltreated my white mare by coating her with paint.

Percival DeRue Hannington.

Jim laughed and threw the paper back to Phil.

"Well!--I should worry about a little thing like that. Man,--I've troubles enough of my own to contend with."

"How's that?" asked Phil, looking up. "You haven't been doing anything likely to get you into hot water?"

"No--father confessor,--excepting maybe this:"

It was Jim's turn to throw over a piece of paper which he picked up from the bureau.

Phil looked it over.

It was an Agreement for Sale, between James Shallingford Dalton and James Langford, in which the former accepted from the latter nine horses--receipt of which was thereby acknowledged--as first payment of five hundred dollars on his Brantlock Ranch of sixty acres, with barns and shack, two dray-horses, one dray and one and a half tons of sacked potatoes; total purchase price thirty-five hundred dollars; second payment of two thousand dollars to be made within seven days, the balance in six months thereafter; prompt payment on due dates to be the essence of the agreement.

Phil glanced over at Jim, then turned up his nose in disgust.

"Gee!--and I thought you were a lawyer."

"So did I!" returned Jim ruefully.

"But what in the name of all that's lovely made you sign an agreement like that?"

"The Lord only knows!"

"Great snakes!--it would be all right if it weren't for that last clause. Didn't you read it? 'Prompt settlement on due dates to be the essence of the agreement.' Couldn't you see that the property reverts to Dalton immediately you fail to make any one payment on the dates agreed?"

Jim laughed in a woe-begone way.

"Ay!--Dalton put one over on me that time, all right. But it's the very last. Can't stand for this happening again. It hurts, right on my professional dignity. Won't he have the haw-haw on me?"

"Ah, well! What's done can't be undone. 'My deed's upon my head.'"

"Gosh, but he's a rotter," growled Phil. "Put a thing like that over on a drunken man!"

"Hush! Not drunk, Phil;--call it indisposed! You know I am an æsthete on these matters.

"But wasn't it some bait though, Phil?"

"Oh, great stuff all right! The ranch must be worth six or seven thousand dollars. But a fat chance you had of ever getting it. Why, he had you every way you turned. All you did was to give him a present of nine horses worth five hundred dollars."

"He'll never get his spuds back, that's one blessing."

"Go to it;--be philosophic! Lovely consolation that! A ton and a half of potatoes for five hundred bucks!"

"That's right, Shadow, dearie;--rub it in."

Phil did not answer, but sat on Jim's bed and looked at the carpet in evident disgust.

After a few minutes of silence, Jim grunted, then he began to laugh.

"You seem to be quite pleased with your performance," commented Phil sarcastically.

"Man;--I was just thinkin' what a grand thing it would be if only I could make these payments."

"A fine chance you have--about fifty dollars in the wide world and five days left in which to make two thousand. Nobody in this town will lend you a red cent. They are all too anxious putting their money in a hole in the ground themselves. Of course, you might write forty dime novels at fifty dollars apiece and make it that way;--that means just eight a day for five days."

Phil got up and clapped Jim on the shoulder. "Guess you'd best forget it, old boy! Let the tail follow the dog."

"But you must admit, Phil, that the weak spot in this deal of Rattlesnake's, after all, is right on the question of my ability to raise the dough."

"Yes!--I admit it--but the real weak point is one he never reckoned on."

"And what's that, pray?"

"He knew you had just gone on one of your crazy bouts. The law of averages informed him that you would get back to your--ahem!--sober senses in about a month's time, when the date of your second payment would be long gone by and your precious Agreement for Sale, if ever you happened to remember it again, would be simply so much waste paper. He would throw half a dozen fits, right now, if he knew you were--ahem!--*compos mentis*, with five days still to go to make two thousand dollars--maybe. But I'm wasting your precious time, Jim," he continued. "Get out your pen, and ink, and paper, and get busy;--eight dime novels of thirty thousand words apiece--two hundred and forty thousand words a day for five days! Shades of Sir Walter Scott and Balzac!"

He laughed. "I wouldn't do it, Jim;--no, not for a farm!"

And Phil went back to the smithy as Jim continued dressing, doing a little special thinking, the while, on the side.

All that day, the mystery of who painted DeRue Hannington's horse was the talk of the town.

Several painters and paper-hangers, as they went about their business in garments that betrayed their calling, were glared at in open suspicion. The reward of one hundred dollars read very good and a sort of hidden-treasure-hunt look was in the eyes of many.

The next day blue notices instead of white were tacked to the telegraph poles and the hoardings. With DeRue Hannington's anger and indignation, the reward had risen in the night. It now stood at five hundred dollars.

In unison, the keenness of the hunt for the perpetrator of the so-called dastardly outrage rose four hundred per cent.

Meanwhile, Jim did not go to work at the Court House as he had practically said, nor yet did he go outside. He sat quietly in his own room, smoking his pipe and reading Emerson and Professor Drummond, which, of course, was quite in keeping with the peculiarities of his temperament. He had little to say to Phil as the latter dropped in to see him from time to time; and the all-absorbing topic of the town--DeRue Hannington's big reward--seemed to interest him about as much as did the approaching dissolution of his hold on the ranch he had contracted to purchase from Rattlesnake Dalton.

Phil looked in vain for signs of diligence in the direction of stories from the pen of Captain Mayne Plunkett, and articles on the affairs of the heart by Aunt Christina.

In the language of the farm, Jim was simply *sawing wood*.

For two days, the signs on the telegraph poles remained blue in colour.

On the evening of that second day Jim ventured only a little into conversation.

"Phil,--do you know I'm heart sick of playing the darned idiot. I've a good mind to start work."

"Jee-rusalem! You don't say!" exclaimed his astounded friend.

"Honest to goodness! Man, I wish, though, that I could beat Dalton to it on that deal."

"I wish you could too, for he is bragging all over the town how he put one over on you, and that you're on the loose somewhere, worse than ever, too shamefaced to show up in your own town."

By way of answer, Jim twisted his gaunt face in an enigmatical smile.

"It's a good ranch!" continued Phil.

"Of course it is! That is why I'd give my head to fool him on it."

"Well!--I've a thousand bucks and one dollar in the Commercial Bank, and I'm willing to go halves if you can raise the balance."

Jim started up excitedly, but he subsided almost as quickly. He pulled out the linings of his pockets and with them came a little roll of bills.

"One hundred and sixteen dollars!" he said ruefully. "I've counted them one hundred and sixteen times, backwards, forwards and upside down, these last three days, and I can't get them to grow a dollar more."

"Won't somebody stand good for you?"

"Somebody might,--but I am not borrowing. That is one thing Jim Langford never did in his life and he is not going to start in now with it to help him out of a tom-fool boozing stunt he never should have got into. I don't mind your money so much, Phil, for it would be a partnership affair between two pals, but I am not crawling all over town begging for loans, especially after Dalton has had his say. No,--it's no good!"

At noon next day, Jim was still in the doldrums.

Phil rushed in all excitement.

"What do you know about that fool Hannington? The town is ablaze with red posters now, and he is offering a thousand dollars reward, for one day only--like a bargain sale--to anyone who will lay information that will lead to the conviction of the horse painter."

Jim laid down his book, put his pipe out by smothering it with his little finger, then got up and went to the clothes closet. He took down his hat and jacket.

"What's up now?" asked Phil.

"I'm after that thousand, sonny!"

"What?"

"I saw Hannington's horse painted. I know who did it and I'm going to lay information."

Phil gaped.

As Jim was proceeding outside, Phil ran after him and laid hold on his arm.

"Wait a bit, old man! Let me get this right," he said slowly. "Do you mean to say you are going to play informer for a thousand dirty dollars?"

"Why not? I'm the only man who saw it done. There are mighty few in town who wouldn't do the same thing if they knew what I know. Besides, the fellow who did it darned-well deserves all that he gets. I've no love for him, and I need the money. Good-bye, Philly! I'll see you anon."

He went downstairs, opened the front door cautiously and, finding few people about, he hurried along the block and down the back lanes to the rear of *The Advertiser* building. He sneaked unseen into Ben Todd's private office. There was no one inside. Ben, evidently, was in the basement in the printing shop.

The editor's desk was littered as usual with newspapers, scribbled scraps of paper, cuttings, paste-pots and such paraphernalia of the making of a country newspaper.

Jim closed the door, sat down in Todd's chair and took up the telephone receiver. He called for DeRue Hannington and got him without difficulty.

"Hullo!--is that Mr. Hannington?"

"Mr. DeRue Hannington speaking."

"Are you busy?"

"Not too much so! Who is they-ah?"

"Could you come down to *The Advertiser* office right away--Mr. Todd's place--something important in regard to what you are so worked up over?"

"Why, yes,--certainly! Of course, I can come."

"Be here in ten minutes."

"Yes! Who is calling?"

"Never mind! Come and see, and come quick!"

And Jim rang off.

In two or three minutes Ben Todd, the editor, came in, long of legs and hunched of back, trailing his arms like an ape, his handsome bearded face lit up in pleasantness and his keen brown eyes searching Jim curiously.

"Hello, Jim! Glad to see you! The boys must have miscued. I heard you had fallen off the water wagon."

"And can't a fellow climb back again as easily as he fell off?"

"Some can, but you generally take your own sweet time, my Wayward Boy. Still, I'm glad to see you. What brought you in?"

Jim swung round in the chair. "I want you to act as umpire for me in a little matter. Are you willing?"

"Of course I am! What is it?"

"Why,--here comes the other fellow," said Jim, as the handle of the door turned and the gaudy, resplendent and immaculate Percival strutted in, bringing with him an odour of pomade and scented soap.

Ben Todd looked over in surprise.

"Aw,--good day, gentlemen! Someone 'phoned me beastly hurriedly."

"Sit down, Mr. Hannington--Mr. DeRue Hannington," invited Ben. "Guess you were the one who 'phoned, Jim?"

"Yes!" acknowledged Jim, becoming alert. And he wasted no time beating about.

"You wish to know the name of the man who Union-Jacked your cayuse?"

"The name of the boundah who painted my mare!--you just jolly-well bet your boots I do, sir!"

"Well,--I know it."

"Yes--yes!"

"Does your offer of a thousand dollars still hold good?"

"Till midnight, to-night;--certainly!"

"Good! Make out a cheque now and hand it over to Mr. Todd as umpire."

"Doesn't the word of DeRue Hannington bally-well suit everyone here?" exclaimed the Englishman in a hurt tone.

"Sure!--but this is strictly business."

Hannington pulled out his cheque book, wrote out the cheque for one thousand dollars payable to "cash" and handed it over to Ben Todd who was eyeing the scene in undisguised interest; his keen mind already fathoming the secret.

"There!" remarked Hannington. "Now, give me your information, my deah Langford."

"If the man I name gets convicted, or if you fail to lay a charge against him, the money comes to me? Do I get the arrangement right?"

"You have it absolutely, my careful Scotsman. Fire away! Fire away!"

"You got that, Mr. Todd?" queried Jim.

"Absolutely!" mocked the editor.

"Well, gentleman,--the name of the man who painted Mr. Percival DeRue Hannington's mare is--James Langford, your most humble and obedient servant, and very much at the service of both of you."

Ben Todd grunted.

The Englishman sat bolt upright. His chin dropped and he gaped, his fingers running nervously up and down over the gilt metal buttons of his fancy waistcoat. He rose slowly from his chair and his face grew pale in his anger; then it became red and perspiry.

"You--you confounded scoundrel! You--you miserable individual! You--you trickster!"

"Go on,--go on!" put in Jim coolly, "the more you call me down, the better I like it. I'm a positive glutton for anathema. Mr. DeRue Hannington simply eats up elocution,--eh, Ben!"

The editor smiled dryly. "He does, but he is finding some difficulty in digesting some of yours, Jim, and I'm not surprised at it."

Jim held over the desk 'phone to Hannington.

"Better 'phone up for Palmer and get it over."

Hannington pushed the receiver away.

"I refuse,--I--I decline absolutely. I shan't prosecute,--damned if I do! It is downright blackmail. Yes,--by gad! Give me back my cheque, Mr. Todd, and let me go. I'm jolly-well sick of this."

"Give me my principal and let me go," quoted Jim in mockery.

"I can't do that, Mr. Hannington. Sorry," said the editor, "but if you decline to prosecute, the money goes to Mr. Langford."

"Then, by gad!" cried Hannington, "I shall prosecute to the utmost deuced rigour of the bally law, and be-dimned to him. You cawn't fool lightly with a DeRue Hannington,--no sirs!

"I'll have you understand we DeRue Hanningtons are fighters. My great-great-grandfathers both fought at Waterloo, DeRue on the side of the French and Hannington on the side of the British,--yes, sirs!"

"I'm thinking maybe that explains why you are not quite sure now whether you are the prosecutor or the prosecuted," pawkily remarked Jim.

Hannington glared, grabbed up the telephone and called for the police station. As usual, Palmer was up on his ranch, and Hannington had to be contented with Howden, the deputy, who got over to the *Advertiser* office almost immediately and, in a very short space of time afterwards, he had the not unwilling Jim safely locked up for the night in the town jail.

Howden, to save himself a little labour--ostensibly for the sake of his friendship with Jim, but really to leave himself free for his evening's amours with a waitress at the Kenora--offered to allow Jim to go home if he would promise to show up at the Court in the morning, but Jim was too fond of experience and too susceptible of melodrama to pass up so golden an opportunity;-- he refused to give his parole and in consequence slept soundly and innocently on a little camp bed, in a ten by five cell, at the expense of the municipality.

As soon as the news got about--which it did with astounding rapidity--the entire town was in a fit of merriment over the latest exploit of the wily Langford and the discomfiture of DeRue Hannington; and early the following morning, when the local police magistrate was still negotiating his matutinal egg, the little Courtroom was packed to overflowing.

Phil called off work for an hour or two in order to be on hand should Jim require his aid in any way.

The voluminous and cheerful judge disposed of a case of petty thieving in quick time, then called the case against James Langford for cruelty to animals and destruction of property.

When Jim appeared--his eyes twinkling, but his face as solemn as a parish minister at the funeral of a wealthy and generous member of his congregation, a muffled cheer broke out, which was promptly squelched by the magistrate, to DeRue Hannington's undisguised pleasure.

The case against Jim was read. He pleaded guilty, refusing lawyer's aid or the privilege of stepping into the witness box. There were no dramatics--at least not until the police magistrate pronounced the sentence.

"James Langford," he droned severely, "have you ever been tried before for a criminal act of any kind?"

"No, sir!"

"This is your first offence?"

"No, sir!--but the first time I've been caught."

"Now, Jim,--that'll do!" reprimanded the magistrate, forgetting his courtly dignity for the moment and breaking into a grin; for Jim and he were cronies of long standing.

"I deeply regret that I cannot give you the benefit of the First Offender's Act. These boyish pranks of yours must be put down. You will be breaking windows and riding your horse on the sidewalk next if we allow you to go on in this way, unpunished. You are a big lad now and it is high time you were beginning to take life seriously."

Hannington nodded his head approvingly, and clasped his hands over his stomach.

"In pronouncing sentence, I hope you will take this lesson to heart and that this will be your last appearance before this or any other Court of Justice.

"I fine you fifty dollars and costs, and command that you wash and scrub Percival DeRue Hannington's mare, between the hours of two and four p.m. in front of the Court House, every day, until the animal is restored to its natural colour."

A wild laugh and a great shuffling of feet greeted the sentence.

DeRue Hannington sprang up indignantly, his face bursting red with anger.

"But sir--but sir--I--I! Fifty dollars?--why--I paid one thousand dollars to get him here. Your Honour, it is a positive scandal--a perfect outrage!"

"Silence, sir!" commanded the magistrate.

"But it is an outrage, sir. I insist--it is a low, beastly trick. I appeal--I--"

"Silence!" roared the magistrate again. "One word more, sir, and I'll commit you for contempt of Court. Next case!"

At the Court House door the crowd seized upon Jim, hoisted him on their shoulders and carried him down Main Street, singing and chaffing as happily as if Jim had just won an election.

At the Commercial Bank Jim stopped them and beckoned to Phil.

"Say!--get your thousand dollars out of the Bank and we'll have the crowd take us to Dalton's office right away. I got Hannington's cheque, marked O.K., from Ben Todd in the Court House. We'll call Dalton's bluff for once--and at once."

Phil rushed into the Bank and was back in three minutes with the money in his possession.

"Now boys!" shouted Jim, "down to Dalton's office and then to the Kenora."

Off they went, shouting and singing as before, not particular as to what it was all about, but simply keen on making an uproar--and as big a one as possible--now that the opportunity presented itself.

James Dalton--sole proprietor of the Dalton Realty Company--was standing at the door of his office, watching the actions of the oncoming crowd. The moment he saw Jim, however, he hurried inside.

The mob stopped at the door. Jim jumped to the ground.

"Come on in, Phil! Stay there, boys--just for a minute or two. There are drinks for the crowd at the end of this trip."

By this time, Dalton was sitting behind his desk, his thumb in the armhole of his vest, nervously chewing at the end of an unlighted cigar.

"I bought the Brantlock Ranch from you the other day, Rattler."

"That's right,--go to it!" ventured Dalton as a try-out. "I kind of half expected something like this."

"Are you going to deny it?"

"If you mean, am I going to deny that I gave a gink, half dippy with booze, an Agreement for Sale in temporary exchange for a bunch of horses that he couldn't look after and was liable to have pinched on him; if you mean am I going to deny that I did it to save him losin' what he couldn't keep an eye on himself,--then I ain't."

Dalton leaned back, still pale from excitement but not at all unsatisfied with his vocal delivery.

Jim looked over to Phil in sheer astonishment at the man's audacity. Phil smiled in return.

"What do you think of that now;--the Rattler turned 'good Samaritan'?"

"And you did it just out of the goodness of your kind, unselfish, little, palpitating heart, Dalton?"

"I ain't throwin' any bouquets at myself," remarked Dalton.

"And where are the horses you were so kind as to look after for me?"

"I made a better sale of them hat-racks than you ever could 'a' done. I got eight hundred bucks for the bunch. And I'm ready to give you a cheque for that amount, less ten percent for puttin' the deal through;--seven hundred and twenty bucks, the minute you hand over the phoney agreement which I was dam-fool enough to give you at the time to satisfy your would-be lawyer's intooition and to keep you from yappin' all over the country."

Jim went up to the desk and leaned over toward Dalton.

Dalton leaned back in his chair, so far back that he nearly tip-tilted over it.

"Rattler," said Jim, "come off your perch. It isn't any good. "Tain't the knowing kind of cattle that is ketched with mouldy corn," he quoted roughly.

"I ain't professin' to be up to your high-falutin' talk, Langford, but I get the drift; and I guess you think I'd be batty enough to give you a ranch worth seven thousand bucks on an Agreement for Sale in exchange for a bunch of old spavined mules and three thousand bucks on time."

Jim pulled the Agreement out of his pocket and threw it on the desk, thumping his fist down hard on top of it right under Rattlesnake's sharp nose, causing Dalton to jump again.

"See that?"

"Yep,--guess I do!"

"Well,--you're going to abide by it."

"I am?--like hell!" said Dalton.

Phil took a gun from his pocket and handed it to Jim.

Jim toyed with it. "See that?"

"Can it, Langford! Gun stuff don't go down with me. It is ancient history. You'll get pinched again if you try that on."

"But you see it--don't you?"

"Sure thing! I ain't got 'stigmatism that bad yet."

"Well, Rattler,--it isn't loaded, but I am going to rap you over the koko with it if you don't be a good boy and do as you are told."

"Now,--repeat after me!"

Dalton laughed and rolled his eyes upward to the ceiling.

Jim's arm darted out and the butt-end of the revolver caught Dalton such a sharp rap over the head that that individual was some seconds before he recovered.

"Now," said Jim, "are you ready?"

Dalton sat tight.

"Hi, boys!" shouted Langford sharply, a sudden inspiration seizing him. "I've got a dirty horse-

thief, red-handed and self-confessed. Bring in a rope. We can start him with a dip in the horse-trough."

Three husky individuals strode inside.

Dalton gasped. He knew just what the men in the Valley thought of horse-stealing, in general, and he was all unprepared for this sudden move of Jim's.

"Steady a minute, boys!" exclaimed Jim. "It seems that Dalton has not quite made up his mind as to whether he stole those horses of mine that he sold afterwards, or simply took them from me in part-payment of the Brantlock Ranch.

"Now, Rattler, come on, repeat your little spiel after me, or go with the boys and get what's coming to you."

Dalton saw the game was up.

"This Agreement," said Jim.

"This Agreement," repeated Dalton sheepishly.

"Is a real, genuine Agreement."

"Is a real, genuine Agreement," continued the other.

"Between Jim Langford and me, and stands good."

"Between Jim Langford and me, and stands good."

"Sorry to disappoint you, boys!--but Dalton remembers now that he didn't steal my horses,--he bought them.

"Now Rattler, darling!--Phil Ralston and I are taking up that Agreement and want possession of the ranch right away."

Dalton licked his lips.

"There's two thousand plunks due me to-day on that there agreement."

"And there's the money, my bonnie boy!"

Jim threw Hannington's marked cheque on the table. Phil followed with ten one-hundred-dollar bills.

"Make out your receipt, son,--quick!"

Rattlesnake Jim turned a sickly white and looked at the two before him in a blank kind of way, then his eyes travelled to the three men by the window and over to the crowd at the door, none of whom had any sympathy for him, but, on the contrary were all aching for the pleasure of dipping him--or anyone else for that matter--into the nearby horse-trough.

Slowly Dalton opened his drawer, took out his receipt book, made out the necessary document and handed it over.

"Guess you've won!" he said, picking up the cheque and money.

"Call off your dogs now, and get to hell out of this!"

"Gee, Rattler, but you're polite with your customers," remarked Phil with a smile.

"Ta-ta, son!" cried Jim, "another thousand little bucklets in six months and you are fully paid up. Dirty, rotten fraud,--eh, my wee mannie!"

At the door Jim raised his voice.

"Thanks, fellows! Phil and I are going ranching and we haven't time for booze any more, but you go on down to the Kenora and tell Charlie Mack to give you a couple of rounds each at my expense. I'll 'phone him as soon as we get home.

"You're a dog-goned bunch of real, live sports,--every mother's son of ye."

CHAPTER XIX

Ranching De Luxe

A team of horses and a wagon were standing at the front entrance to Mrs. Clunie's boarding house.

It was the same team and wagon that Jim Langford took over from Rattlesnake Dalton with the Brantlock Ranch.

It was early morning and still dark, but the two would-be ranchers had already loaded up the wagon with their tools, bedding and personal effects.

With a nod of satisfaction to each other, they grinned, tied their saddle horses on behind, clambered into the front of the wagon and started off.

This ranching fad was entirely Jim's, for Phil looked with Lord Nelson's blind eye when it came to seeing any quick fortune in fruit farming. But knowing that the Brantlock Ranch was a sheer give-away at the price they had paid for it and not being desirous of parting from Jim or of smothering any attempt on the part of the latter to take up some definite work, he had compromised: Jim was to remain on the ranch all the time, while Phil would keep on working at his trade with Sol Hanson, thereby giving Sol time to look about for a substitute and also ensuring a good food supply until they should realise on their next season's general produce, which Jim had decided to plant and cultivate between his fruit trees. This revolutionary plan of combining truck gardening and ranching had been a pet scheme of Jim's for a number of years. He contended, and rightly too, that despite the fact that a fruit rancher was a fruit rancher, there was no particular reason why a rancher should not be a farmer as well; rather than lay out his young trees and sit still for the next five or six years and become poor or bankrupt in the process of waiting till his trees should grow to fruition--as so many seemed to be doing--when by pocketing his pride and condescending to a little hard work in market gardening, he could at least make ends meet until the time came for the greater harvest of the big fruits.

Jim Langford was not destined to demonstrate this theory personally, although he lived to be confirmed in his wisdom and to see the plan work out to splendid success.

The Brantlock Ranch was only some two miles from town, and Phil, for company's sake, had agreed to spend his spare time there, riding in and out to work morning and evening.

When all was ready, Jim handled the reins of his team, blew a kiss in the location of the chaste and goodly Mrs. Clunie's bedroom window, and they started off.

Phil glanced up at the clouded sky, through which the grey of dawn was endeavouring to peep. Away beyond the mist, the dark outline of the cold, enveloping hills barely showed itself.

"It's a great day to start out ranching, Jim," he commented with a shiver, as he buttoned up his coat and turned up his collar.

Jim looked upward. A blob of very moist snow--the forerunner of many--splashed into his eye and blurred his vision.

"It sure is!" he agreed, squeezing it out.

"It is a good job we have Morrison's tarpaulin over our stuff."

"Ugh-huh!"

Five minutes' silence ensued, in which the grey of dawn seemed to be getting the worse of its tussle with the black of night.

"I guess the gang down town will think we're crazy starting out to ranch in the month of November."

"Ay!"

A splash of snow struck the bridge of Phil's nose, spread itself and slid slowly down to the point, where it clung precariously for a moment, then lost its hold. Another--the size of a silver dollar--landed sheer on the nape of Jim's neck just where the coat and his hair did not meet. Jim turned up his coat collar to forestall a possible repetition.

"There's one consolation, Jim, we'll have everything in apple-pie order by the spring-time."

"Ya!"

A cattleman, going townward, passed.

"Rotten weather for movin', fellows!" was his chilling comment.

Jim looked up lugubriously, but without verbal response.

Phil well understood the mood, and did not worry.

Langford might have been pondering on the comfortable bed he had left at Mrs. Clunie's and on the advisability of turning back, or he might have been figuring how much they were going to make on the next year's fruit crop. As he did not turn back, his thoughts, despite his monosyllables, were evidently bravely optimistic.

On they jogged through the enveloping mists of the vanguard of a snow-storm, huddling themselves gradually into smaller and smaller compass as the sleety snow warmed--or rather, cooled--to its task of discouragement and settled down in ghostly earnest, pushing back the already delayed dawn and casting a cheerless gloom over the countryside.

Before the budding ranchers had gone half a mile, the watery snow was running off their clothes. When a mile was completed they were soaked through, sitting like two scare-crows, their hats almost to their chins and their chins buried in their buttoned mackinaws.

They were nearing their journey's end--too miserable for words--when a horse clip-clopped on the muddy road behind them. The rider drew up alongside them.

"Gee, boys, but you started early. I thought I'd never catch up on you."

The speaker was Eileen Pederstone, snug in her riding habit and enveloped in an oilskin coat.

"In the name of all that's lovely!" ejaculated Jim. "What are you doing up at this time in the morning?"

"I'm up by this time pretty nearly every morning, Mister Impertinence."

"I thought I might be in time to catch you at Mrs. Clunie's before you left. I just heard of this enterprise late last night."

She laughed.

"My, but that was a great coup. You're a dandy pair! I just wanted to wish you both the best of luck right at the start."

"Thanks awfully!" grinned Jim, "for we sure are getting it."

"Oh, tush! This is nothing. Okanagan ranchers don't worry about a little snow in November or December. It's a good warm blanket for the roots of the trees when the cold comes along, and a fine drink for them later on in the spring-time.

"Here's something for your first meal on the ranch. Who's to be cook,--you Jim, or Phil?"

Phil glanced over quickly and Eileen's cheeks took on a rosier tint.

"Oh, Jim's to be the rancher and I've to earn a living for both in the meantime," answered Phil, "so I guess he will be cook--unless we can hog-tie one somewhere."

Eileen handed them a large parcel from under her oilskin.

"Well,--that's all, boys," she said. "I'm going to Victoria pretty soon, to be dad's house-keeper. But I'll be out to see you before I go. You're off on your own at last,--and that's the only way. If you don't like ranching, sell out. But whatever you do,--oh boys!--keep on your own. Don't ever work for the other fellow any more. Stay out on your own. One is always of most value to one's-self. I wish I could preach that from the hill-tops. Wage slaving for somebody else is the curse of the times."

"Hush!--you rascally little socialist; do you wish to ruin all the millionaires and trust companies by giving away their trade secrets in this way?" dryly commented Jim.

Eileen laughed.

"Well,--good-bye, Jim! Good-bye, Phil! And jolly good luck!"

With a whirl and a jump she turned and made off. But the cheery sunshine of her presence and her hearty greeting kept radiating over the two, leaving a warmth and a cheerfulness around them, where a few moments before had been cold and grumpiness.

They reached their destination at last, unhitched and turned the horses into a large barn in the rear of the dwelling house.

There was no doubting the splendidness of the ranch proper, with its acres of young fruit trees set out in rows with mathematical exactitude, and its pasturage which was now blanketed with snow. Neither, alas! was there any doubting the miserableness of the broken-down two-storied, log-built barn of a place that was meant for their future home.

Jim and Phil shook the icy water from their clothes, stamped their feet and went inside.

The house was damp and cheerless, and evidently had not been subjected to heating of any kind for months.

They unloaded their bedding and other effects, then set about to light a fire in the fairly business-like stove that stood in a corner of the kitchen. They were busy at it, when the smooth, greasy, grinning face of a fat Chinaman showed round the door-post.

"Hullo, John,--come on in!" greeted Jim.

The oriental obeyed, with just a little show of diffidence, although diffidence of any degree did not sit too well on the general sleek confidence of his appearance.

"Hullo!" said Phil, looking him over.

"Hullo!" said the Chinaman, familiarly. "You new bossy-man,--eh?"

"You bet! Where you come from, John?"

"Where me come? Me live here. Me stop little house way down orchard. Me work allee time nicee day;--live here allee time winter.

"You let me stop,--eh?"

The Chinaman was quick in getting to business.

"What do you say, Jim?" asked Phil.

"Sure thing,--just what we want!

"Say, John!--what your name?"

"Me,--my name? My name, Ah Sing."

"Ah Sing!" exclaimed Jim, looking upward in expectancy.

"Ya,--Ah Sing!" repeated the other with a set, Chinese grin.

"Ah Sing!"

"Ya,--Ah Sing!"

"Then, why in heaven's name, don't you? I've asked you twice," laughed Jim, showing his large teeth.

The Chinaman showed his own in return.

"Sing,--you know me?"

"Ya,--I know you. You bossy-man, Big Jim. I see you Court House plenty time."

"Well!--you catchem heap firewood, cleanem up, sweepee floor--just little bit--cookem one time every day;--and you stop. No do it;--you go away;--no get stop here,--see!"

"Me stop here long time," remonstrated Sing fearfully, "one--two--three--four bossy-man come, Sing stop allee time."

"No matter,--you work little bit, or no stop here,--see!"

The idea of winter work did not appeal to the wily Sing, but as it was "work" or "get out," he relented.

"All lite!" he agreed. "Me stop. You pay me spring-time?"

"Yes!--that's a go, Sing. I pay you all time you work outside on ranch. No pay winter time: not muchee work: just little bit."

"Me savvy! Me go catchem dly wood."

"So he is an old pal of yours, Jim?"

"Yes!--and he's a pretty wise guy at that.

"He was up before Thompson, the Government Agent, one time I was there. Thompson was trying to get him to take an oath over something. He asked Sing how he would like to swear, whether by kissing the Bible or in the Chinese way.

"Me no care," said Sing, "burnem paper, smellum book--allee same Ah Sing."

"Thompson saw how much the Chinaman cared about oaths in general, so he got busy and pretty nearly scared the daylights out of Sing."

"What did he do?" asked Phil, as both continued unpacking their gear.

"Oh,--he made Sing swear by the live chicken. You see, a Chinaman will always tell the truth when he has to cut a live chicken's head off over it. If he happens to be guilty of anything and says he isn't and cuts the fowl's koko off,--he is sure to die for his prevarication. We all die, anyway, of course," commented Jim, "but not so suddenly, evidently. Then, if John is accused by someone of doing something he didn't do and he pleads innocent and cuts the infernal bird's headpiece off--the other fellow cops off."

Phil laughed, and worked on his fingers as if endeavouring to figure the thing out.

"It's quite easy;--simple as A.B.C.," commented Jim, "only you're too darned thick skulled to savvy,--that's all."

"And I guess the chinks think we are pretty dense not to understand," put in Phil.

"Just so!"

Sing put an end to the conversation by reappearing with a big armful of wood.

A respectable fire was soon blazing in the stove and a sense of increasing comfort began to pervade the place. Eileen's eatables--meat pie and some baked fruits--were put into the oven to heat, while Jim and Phil changed into dry clothes.

They then went into the adjoining room to inspect the furnishings, which consisted solely of an iron bedstead with a fairly good spring on it; a cheap little bureau, two chairs and an oil lamp.

The walls of the place were of shiplap covering the logs, while the roof at the corners had holes in it big enough to put one's head through. Fortunately a loft of some kind separated the heavens from the occupants.

They spent the day making the house somewhat habitable, inspecting the barns and grooming and feeding their horses.

In a spirit of thankfulness for small mercies, as night drew down they got out their mattresses and bedding and prepared to make themselves as comfortable as possible. They partook of supper and went to bed early. Both were tired, and it was not long before they were sound asleep. They might have remained so until morning had not Phil wakened up with the fancy of something scampering over his face.

He sprang into a sitting posture.

"Get down, man! You're letting in the draught. It's all right. You were just dreaming," grunted Jim.

"Dreaming nothing!" cried Phil, brushing his face. "Something as big as a horse ran over my cheek."

"Lie down then and cover up your head. It'll be all right."

Phil was not so easily satisfied. He struck a match and looked about him.

"See that!" he whispered. As Jim jumped up in response, several shadowy forms scurried off in various directions. The match burned to Phil's fingers and spluttered out, as Phil swore and sucked his injured digits.

"Deevils!" whispered Jim eerily.

"Rats!" exclaimed Phil, striking another match and groping for the lamp.

"Better than bugs!" said Jim philosophically.

"Oh, you wait!" retorted Phil. "The bugs haven't found out yet that we're here. You'll make acquaintance with them later."

Jim shivered.

"Man,--I detest bugs, though! I wouldn't wonder if you are right too; the place had a musty smell; besides, that wily duck of a civilized chink would be living here if there wasn't something wrong." He shivered again. "They give me the grue. I can feel the darned little brutes already."

"Oh, forget it!" said Phil. "Whoever heard of a calculating, sober-minded, creepy bug coming out on a night like this and scaring you away before you're right settled down. Bugs have more sense than that, Jim."

Langford curled himself up in small compass, covered his head over with the blankets and dozed off again.

Phil rose, took his twenty-two rifle from his pack and set it alongside the bed. He put a light to the lamp, got into bed again and turned the light down to a peep. He lay quietly watching the hole in the corner of the roof over by the foot of the bed.

The lamplight reflected suddenly from two tiny beads at the edge of the hole. Phil reached cautiously for his rifle, raised it, aimed carefully and fired. Something fell on the floor with a thud.

Jim sprang up in alarm.

"Good heavens, man!--what's up?" he cried.

"Oh, go to sleep!" answered Phil. "I've just shot one of your bugs."

"Shoot away then," retorted Jim, "but please remember they're not *my* bugs."

In a few minutes more, Phil shot again, and another victim thumped to the floor. Half a dozen times this happened at intervals, until Jim--unable to get any sleep--grew faintly interested in the sport and volunteered to take a turn while Phil crept under the blankets for warmth.

It was only when morning began to dawn that the two got down to an honest hour's slumber.

When they rose, thirty-six dead bush rats lay in a heap directly under the hole in the roof.

"And they told us nobody lived here!" remarked Jim. "That's a great bag, though. Man,--if only they were rabbits!"

"How do you suppose they come to make this room their shelter?" asked Phil.

"Easy enough! They evidently come in from the outside between the logs and the shiplap to the loft above. They have made a run along by the beams there and down that board running from the roof to the floor and propping up the wall there; then they make over the floor to that hole, and into the stable where the litter and feed is."

"Great stuff!" commented Phil.

"Ay,--ay!" said Jim wearily, "but I can see where most of my time is going to be occupied in keeping the house to ourselves."

They were late in getting about that morning, but, fortunately, Ah Sing had been around and was putting the finishing touches to a breakfast for two.

Three ugly black cats were at the Chinaman's legs with erect tails, rubbing their backs against him in feline glee every moment he stopped shuffling over the floor.

"Hullo, Sing;--pretty early! Think maybe best you cook dinner night-time--one meal every day--no cookem breakfast. We makem breakfast," said Jim, as he picked up one cat after another by the neck and solemnly dropped them out at the front door.

"Ya,--I savvy!" said Ah Sing. "Me cookem supper every night--to-morrow--but no do'em this time to-day. My blother's wiffee, she die and get buried one year to-day. Savvy! Me want to go and put'm chicken, piecee pork, punk stick, all on grave--see!"

Phil laughed as he sat down to the table. Ah Sing looked hurt.

"What you do that for?" asked Phil.

"You no savvy?" queried the Chinaman, leaning over with arched eyebrows. "Put'm on grave so devil come and eat'm up. Devil say, 'Ah Sing good boy;--Ah Sing blother Lee, he good boy too.' Devil, heap pleased. No hurt Ah Sing and Lee Sing."

Jim ventured a cautious look up from his oatmeal and milk, as if awaiting the outcome of the discussion.

"Gee!--but they're a crazy bunch," said Phil, addressing no one in particular. Ah Sing was of the knowing school of chink and did not choose to let the remark slide by.

"You say 'heap crazy.' No crazy! White man just allee same crazy. He put'm flower on white girlie grave. You no think that crazy. Chinaman put'm chicken and pork on Chinee girlie grave,--Chinaman no crazy.

"White man look up--see angel; white man put'm flower, please angels. Angels no hurt anybody.

"Chinaman look down--see devil. Devil he can hurt everybody. Chinaman put'm chicken for devil. Devil heap pleased:--no hurt Chinaman.

"Just allee same,--allee same! White man flower;--Chinaman chicken!"

Jim laughed. "Best forget it, Phil;--he's a dyed-in-the-wool Chinaman, fully Canadianised. You can't beat him. He has a pat answer for anything you like to put up to him. And, after all, when you come to analyse the darned thing,--there is about as much sense in the pork and punk-stick stuff as there is in the flowers. Give me my bouquets when I am alive,--that's what I say."

After breakfast, Phil saddled his horse and rode to town. It was still snowing softly, but a rift of blue and a shaft of sunlight overhead gave promise of a let-up, while a wind with a nip in it prophesied a drop in the barometer and a tightening up.

When he got back in the evening, he found the front door bolted on the inside. He rapped on the panel, and Jim opened it very slightly, making a scooping motion with his foot along the floor, as if helping something out of the kitchen or trying to prevent something from coming in.

"What's up, Jim? Scared for burglars?"

"Burglars,--no! Darned black cats! The door won't stay closed without being bolted, and these ugly black devils of Sing's have taken such a fancy to the place and the heat, that I have been busy all day slinging them outside."

"That accounts for the negro shuffle you did as I came in," laughed Phil.

"Exactly! I've got the habit now."

"But what on earth does the Chinaman do with so many black cats?"

"Just another tom-fool notion these loonies have. They're plumb scared o' the dark. The dark and the devil work a sort of co-operative business against the chink. That is why Sing keeps his light burning all night."

"But where do the cats come in?" asked Phil.

"You wouldn't ask that if you had had to punt them out all day, to-day, as I did. But, punning aside:--Sing and his kind think that when there's no light, safety lies in having black cats around. Somehow, his Satanic Majesty--poor devil--is scared for black cats."

The conversation changed as Phil surveyed the interior of the house. He found a great change had come over their abode. For one thing, it was decidedly cosier. The damp, bug-like feel had gone from the place. An odour of varnish pervaded. The holes in the ceiling and floors had been boarded over, the windows were clean and had curtains on, the stove was polished, and a general air of home comfort was present.

Jim had made an auspicious start.

And every day thereafter showed an added improvement, for it was little that Langford was able to do out-of-doors in that in-between season just prior to the freezing up--and all his energies were evidently being divided between the fixing up of the house and his usual contributions to Aunt Christina's love column and Captain Mayne Plunkett's monthly "thriller."

They had hardly been three weeks on the ranch, when the winter set in for good and shackled the earth in snow and ice.

The morning and evening rides in and out to the smithy were a perfect delight to Phil and they set his blood effervescing in his veins as it had never done before.

Many an evening when it was getting late and the great whiteness around was deathly still, he and Jim would stand on the front veranda and smoke a pipe together, as they silently drank in the beauty of the scene about them.

Jim was by nature a dreamer, and it only required an occasion such as that to set him brooding.

Phil, with the call of the open born in him, preferred the out-of-doors and nature's silences to all else that the world contained.

They would stand there together, looking over the dark rows of young trees, erect and soldier-like in the orchard, against the background of white,--away down to the Kalamalka Lake, smooth and frozen over, then beyond to the low hills that undulated interminably. Quietly, they would admire the sky above them as it seemed fairly strung over with myriads of fairy lamps, twinkling and changing colour in real fairy delight. They would watch those fairy globes here and there shatter into fragments--as if with the cold--and trail earthward in a shimmering streak of silver-dust. They would wait till the moon sailed up over the hills in all her enchantment, then slowly on the heels of their boots, they would beat out the dying embers from the bowls of their pipes, take a glance down the end of the orchard to Ah Sing's shack--where a dim light, suggestive of nothing else but Orientalism, seemed ever to be burning--nod to each other and smile, then turn in without a word and go to bed.

It was in these silences that Phil got to know Jim for the true gentleman he was. It was away out there in that evening stillness that Jim, lonely and misunderstood for the most part, grasped for the first time in his life the true meaning of comradeship, and it aroused in him a fierce love for Phil that could be likened only to the mother-love of a cougar for her young.

That there was some shadow in Phil's life which Phil had never spoken of to him, Jim knew only too well, but he cared little for his friend's past. Only the present counted with men like Jim Langford. Besides, it was little after all that Phil knew of Jim. But what he did know was all to

the good.

And, were they not in the West where heredity and social caste is scoffed at, where what a man has sprung from, what he has been or done amiss, matters not at all; where only whether or not he now stands four-square with his fellows counts in the reckoning?

Yet, many times, Phil had made up his mind to confide in Jim and tell him of all his past dealings with Brenchfield; what he had suffered in his youthful folly for that creature who had only sought to do him irreparable injury in return. But, somehow, he had kept thrusting it into the background till a more favourable opportunity should present itself.

The inevitable did come, however, swift and sudden, and all unexpectedly for both of them.

CHAPTER XX

A Breach and a Confession

It was but two days from Christmas. Phil and Sol Hanson had been striving hard to cope with an accumulation of work so that they might be clear of it during the holiday season. Sol, in fact, had been slaving at nights as well as during the day, until even he was bordering on a physical exhaustion.

Jim Dalton, that evil genius, came into the smithy during a temporary absence of Phil's, proffered Sol a drink from the inevitable bottle which he always seemed to have hidden somewhere about his person, and Sol was too weak to refuse.

By the time Phil got back Sol had disappeared.

For the first time since her marriage, Betty's love and influence had failed to anchor her big, weak husband.

From past experience, Phil knew that it was useless going after the big fellow, who required only a few hours to end his carousal. He failed to return to the smithy that evening, so Phil locked up and rode home. He did not call in at Sol's home, for he hoped that the Swede would find his way there within a few hours more.

Next morning, Phil had to open up again.

Betty called in, flooded in tears. Sol had not been home. Phil counselled her to go back and wait in her little cottage for the return of her husband, for he did not wish her to be a witness of his usual reaction. She departed, but whether or not she took Phil's advice, he did not know.

About eleven o'clock, Sol staggered in, helpless, but good-natured as usual. The heat of the smithy soon did its work and the big fellow curled himself up in a corner, among some empty sacks, and dropped off to sleep.

It was the awakening that Phil dreaded, but risky as he knew it would be, he determined to give Sol a chance and leave him to wake up, without sending out to inform Royce Pederstone, who was home for a week to participate in the Christmas festivities, and the Mayor,--whose combined duty it was to see that Sol was properly secured against doing anyone any bodily injury.

But Phil's good intentions were not allowed to fructify.

Brenchfield and Royce Pederstone rode into the yard together, as if they had been aware of every move of Sol's.

They ordered Phil to lock the front door and come out by the back way. Phil pleaded Sol's cause for a little, but only got called a sentimental fool for his kindly feelings; and he had no recourse but to obey instructions, for Brenchfield and Royce Pederstone had almost unlimited power in regard to Sol's permanent freedom or confinement.

Brenchfield pitched some chunks of coal at Sol through the broken window. Sol woke with a start, cursed in a mixture of Swedish and English, then, with that terrible madness upon him--which Phil had witnessed only once before but would never forget,--he sprang for the back door, as Phil got round the gable-end of the smithy.

Sol wrestled for a few seconds with the back door and finally tore it completely from its hinges. He darted out into the yard, hurling the broken woodwork full at Brenchfield as the latter was swinging his lariat. Hanson followed his missile and, for a short space, it looked as if the Mayor's last moment had arrived. But numbers counted again and, fortunately for the big Swede, he could not be in two places at once. Royce Pederstone's rope landed deftly over his head and brought him to earth gasping for breath, half strangled.

Brenchfield recovered. His rope whirled in the air and tightened over Sol's uptilted legs. The rest was easy. Shortly afterwards, Hanson, foaming at the mouth and shouting at the pitch of his voice, was trussed securely to the stanchions supporting one of the barns.

The Mayor and Royce Pederstone were still inside the barn, and Phil was standing in the yard,

when poor, little, distraught Betty came anxiously round the building, still on her quest for her man. She heard Sol's voice, and her eyes grew wide and shone in fear and anger. She darted toward the out-house. Phil tried to stop her, but it was useless. Inside she went, and when she surveyed the scene before her--the two strong, calculating men standing watching her husband whom she loved with all the strength of her robust little being, and he roped and hog-tied like some wild animal--her whole womanly nature welled up and overflowed.

"What have you done?" she cried fiercely, her voice weakening as she went on. "Solly, dearie,--my own Sol!"

And Sol cursed, and shrieked, and struggled, unheeding. She ran forward to him and placed her arms about his great neck where the veins were swollen almost to bursting point. She patted his huge, heaving, hairy chest. She wiped away the perspiration from his forehead and the white ooze from his lips. She laid her face gently against his, tapping his cheek with her fingers; crooning to him and kissing him as she would a baby.

Slowly the big fellow melted under her influence. His struggling gradually ceased. Betty kept on calling his name again and again. Her tears dropped on to his upturned, distorted face, and those tears did what knotted lariats and wooden beams had failed to do--they brought peace and sanity back to the eyes of big Sol Hanson.

His head cradled back in his Betty's arms and he panted, looked up at her, and, after a few minutes, smiled crookedly.

"Loosen them ropes!" Betty commanded of Brenchfield and Royce Pederstone.

"We daren't do it," answered the Mayor.

"You loose them quick," she cried again, "or I'll kill you.

"Them fellows is skeered you'll hurt them, Sol. Tell them Solly you won't touch 'em,--will you, Solly?"

Sol shook his head.

Phil came forward to do the needful. At the same instant, Royce Pederstone's good sense took in the situation better than Brenchfield's dogged mind could.

"Guess we might take a chance, Graham!" he said quietly.

"You ain't takin' any chances with my Solly. Give me a knife and beat it, both of you. I ain't skeered o' my man."

The Mayor opened his jack-knife and handed it to Betty. He and Royce Pederstone went into the yard together. Phil stood watching by the barn door.

Shortly afterwards, Sol came out, his big hand clasped over Betty's little one. He looked away from the men in the yard, shame-facedly, but Betty's eyes shone defiance and her head kept up, and the two lovers walked on to the highway and along in the direction of their own home.

"Well I'll be darned!" exclaimed Pederstone. "It takes a woman every time to know how to handle a man."

Brenchfield scoffingly curled his lip.

"Coming my way, Graham?"

"Not yet awhile," said the Mayor; "I want to see Ralston here about a little matter that's been on my mind for a while."

Phil was already back working on the furnace bellows and stirring his irons in the red-hot coals.

Mayor Brenchfield came over to him, his fat but handsome face leering a little under his bushy eyebrows.

"So, Philly,--you're still earning your daily bread by the sweat of your blooming brow!"

The young man looked his tormentor over contemptuously, and continued his work without comment.

"Gee, but some men are damned fools though!" continued the other.

"And some are damned curs," answered Phil.

Brenchfield bit his lip, then grinned.

"Say, Phil!--I'm sorry for all I did. Honest, I am. I want you to forget the past and forgive me. I treated you, as you say, like a cur. I'm willing to make amends and do the right thing by you as far as that is humanly possible. You and I were brought up together, Phil. That should count some."

"It should," agreed Phil, in a non-committal way, wondering what was behind this change of front on the part of Brenchfield.

"I am willing to have my holdings appraised and to make you a present of one half."

"You mean you are willing to let me have the half that belongs to me?"

"If you care to put it that way,--yes!"

"Half of the proceeds of your theft?"

"Oh, forget that! Can't you have a little sense, if only in your own interests?"

Phil smiled.

"I was always a bit of a fool, Brenchfield, where my own interests were concerned. But I am gaining wisdom as I go along."

"Then, in heaven's name, take this chance when it is offered you. No man can do more than I am willing to do now. You won't have to work another stroke in your life."

Phil's eyebrows raised in surprise.

"Gee,--but that *would* be a pleasant prospect,--I don't think!"

Brenchfield held out his hand. "Is it a go?"

Phil was almost convinced by the sincere ring in Brenchfield's voice. He glanced into the latter's face, but the Mayor's eyes failed to play up to the sound he had put into his voice.

"Do you honestly mean all you say?" asked Phil.

"Every word of it!"

"Well,--since you have raised the white flag, here are my terms:--

"I don't want a cent of your money. Sell out and turn every nickel you have over to somebody or some institution that needs it. Come with me before a magistrate and make an honest confession, and take your chance of a new start, like a man would do. I'll shake hands then and call it quits, but not until."

The Mayor glared at Phil as if he considered the latter had suddenly become bereft of his reason.

"Oh, pshaw!" he exclaimed in disgust, turning on his heel, "no use bargaining with a lunatic."

"Wait a bit!" cried Phil. "If I accept all you offer, what do you want in return?"

"Nothing!--nothing but that little piece of paper I was fool enough to leave lying about a few years ago."

"In other words,--your price is the proof of my innocence and your own guilt."

"The question of innocence and guilt has been settled between you and me long ago. You paid the price;--why not take your share of the proceeds?"

Phil shook his head.

"No!" blurted Brenchfield angrily, "but you prefer to use the cipher note for blackmail and to satisfy your own dirty designs for revenge when your own time comes."

Phil pointed to the door.

"Get out!--and don't bring up this subject to me again. I am sick of it--and you."

Suddenly the Mayor laughed in relief, and he snapped his thumb and forefinger under Phil's nose.

"Go to it! Do your worst!" he exclaimed. "I've found out all I wanted to find. You are an arrant bluffer, Phil Ralston, but you're not quite smart enough. You haven't got that note. Damn you!--you never had it for longer time than it took you that morning to burn it.

"It was ashes before the police came.

"Now, Philip Ralston,--it was you who committed the crime you got rightly jailed for. You didn't get half what was coming to you, dirty thief and blackmailer that you are. You should have had ten years---"

Brenchfield got no further. Phil was on him quick as an avalanche. The Mayor, in his haste to get out of the way, toppled backward against the anvil. Phil's left arm shot out and finished the job. He caught Brenchfield straight on the point of the chin, sending him hurtling head first over the anvil and on to the floor on the other side.

Phil vaulted over on top of him, but when he saw the huddled form, limp and insensible, and the face livid and drawn, his better judgment flashed through and mastered his terrible anger. He caught the inert Mayor by the arms, dragged him across the soft flooring of hoof shavings and metal-dust, to the outside, slinging him unceremoniously on to the heap of broken iron beside the frozen horse-trough. He next went back into the smithy, damped down the fires, dipped a pail into the vat--filling it with water--then shut up shop, for it was growing dark and near to the usual closing time. He went into the yard and looked over his still senseless but heavily breathing antagonist. He dashed the icy contents of the pail contemptuously over the head and shoulders of Brenchfield, tossing the empty receptacle on the ground. He next loosened his horse from the stall in the barn, mounted and rode down town to Morrison of the O.K. Supply Company to purchase the balance of the supplies he and Jim required for their next day's Christmas dinner--their first Christmas dinner on a ranch; Phil's first Christmas dinner in six outside of a prison.

And, as he jogged homeward over the hard, frozen snow--his saddlebags on either side choking full of good things to eat--he tried, again and again, but without success, to discover at which point in his conversation with Brenchfield he had given himself away and thereby disclosed to him that his cipher confession was a myth.

And Graham Brenchfield, as he took the back lanes home,--after having regained his scattered senses and put his upset toilet into half-respectable shape--cursed himself for his folly and

wished that what he had tried to draw Ralston on were really true; that the document he so much dreaded and desired to possess were really ashes long since strewn to the winds.

But he could not be certain on the point, for Phil had not sufficiently betrayed himself; so he cursed again and made up his mind that there was only one course now open to make surety doubly sure;--and Phil Ralston or any others who tried to come in his path must accept the consequences of their folly and rashness.

Phil reached the ranch in good time and, considering all he had gone through, in fairly good spirits. He stabled the horse, and after brushing three or four of Ah Sing's black cats from the door-step he went inside, greeting Jim in his usual hearty way.

The table was set in the kitchen and the pots were steaming on the stove top, all ready for the evening meal.

Jim was in the adjoining room, apparently absorbed over some of his alleged literary work. He raised his head as Phil greeted him, but his face remained solemn. He kept at the table while Phil washed and dried his face and hands. Phil went in to him at last and sat down on the bed watching Jim intently.

"Come on, old cock!" he cried, "wake up. These dime 'bloods' are getting your goat. Cut loose from them--it's Christmas Eve, and, glory be! we are not in the workhouse.

"Hullo!--what have you been doing with my old gum boots? Gee,--I haven't seen them for a dog's age."

That gave Jim his opening. He rose and went over to the bed, holding out his hand to his partner.

"Phil, old boy, if you get angry with me I'm going to be dog-goned sorry. I've got something on my chest and I've got to get it off.

"You won't get mad!"

The big, rugged, raw-boned Scot caught Phil in his arms and hugged him as if he were a sweetheart.

Usually so undemonstrative, Phil was taken aback at Jim's behaviour; and Jim, immediately ashamed for his outward show of emotion, sat down beside Phil and looked at the floor between his legs.

Phil clapped him on the back and Jim drew himself together.

"How long ago is it since you had these boots on, Phil?"

"Oh,--I guess I haven't had them on since before---" He reddened. "Oh!--four or five years, maybe. They never fitted me very well."

"My own broke on the soles yesterday and I simply had to have something of the kind when cleaning out the stable to-day, so I hunted out yours from your old kit bag."

"You're heartily welcome to them, Jim,--if that is all."

Jim turned a curious glance at Phil.

"You good old scout!" he said. Then he changed quickly. "Och,--what's the use o' me beating about. Phil,--that--that fell out of the toe of one of the boots when I was trying to get them on."

He held out a dirty, crumpled piece of paper.

Phil took it from him and looked it over casually.

"It was twisted up, almost to the size of a marble."

Suddenly Phil's face took on an ashy hue and he gasped.

"Great God; I--I---"

He jumped up, then caught at the bed-post for support as he tried to gather his wits and to quiet his wildly thumping heart.

"You--you---It is all right, Jim," he stammered. "It is of no importance."

Jim rose and placed his arm round his chum.

"Phil, old chap,--it isn't any good to pretend. I'm an interfering lout, I know, and I shouldn't have done it. I have made out all that it says, and, oh God!--but you're a game sport--even if you have been a darned fool about it."

Phil stood helpless.

"Heavens!" continued Jim, "five years in jail for that pig! And you never split on him. The dirty sewer-rat!

"I remember every point of that case now. Being a lawyer, I followed it closely. It struck me as one of purely damned, damning circumstantial evidence and it interested me at the time."

"And--and you found this in--in my old boot?" asked Phil, pulling himself up.

"Ay!--and pretty nearly didn't pay any heed to it. I unrolled it without thinking, then the queer mix-up of letters and numbers got me. I wasn't so very busy--I never am when something crops up that attracts the curiosity part of me. I wondered what it could all mean. I sat down there and got it in two hours, beginning at the end and working backwards. I should have stopped,

laddie, when I got a certain length, but it dealt with you and I didn't think I would be right in stopping.

"Edgar Allen Poe's 'Gold Bug' gave me the incentive for deciphering such like conundrums. I found it easy enough starting in with his method of deduction.

"You're no' angry wi' me, Phil?" asked Jim, taking refuge in his favourite Doric.

"No--no--I'm not, Jim! I meant to--to tell you--someday. I--this has caught me unexpectedly and I can't just think right. But I thought this had been burned long ago. Brenchfield thinks so too. The police had these boots all the time I was in jail, and they didn't discover it.

"Let's sit down, Jim! I've got to tell you all about it now. Supper can wait. We'll both feel the better for it afterwards."

They sat down together on the bed in that little back room.

"It's a common enough story, Jim. I was born in Toronto. There were four of us, my dad, my mother, my little sister Margery and myself. A happier quartette no one ever heard of. But my mother died suddenly. To my mind, she took all the fun of life with her. Dad moved us to Texas, where he became engaged in some mining or oil projects. A year after my mother's death, he married again. I did not understand a thing about it, until he told me I had a new mother. In a fit of boyish resentment, I packed my clothes together, took my small hoard of savings, went into my little sister's bedroom one night as she lay asleep, kissed her, cried over her, and ran away.

"Silly, Jim,--wasn't it? But from that day to this I have not seen a relative of mine.

"I worked my way north, back into Canada, to Campbeltown, where I remembered having visited the Brenchfields as a little fellow with my mother. Brenchfield's mother and mine had been school companions in the old days. I had had a good time on that earlier visit and the memory of it, more than anything else, prompted me to make for Campbeltown again.

"Mrs. Brenchfield showed me every kindness and made a home for me. She or her husband must have sent word to my dad, who evidently decided to let me cool my heels. He mailed me a draft for three hundred dollars and promised a further hundred dollars a month for my keep and education during the time I preferred to deny myself of the pardon and loving welcome that would await me any time I cared to return home. That was where the mistake was made. Jim, he should have insisted on my being returned home at once and when I got home he should have given me a right good hiding.

"I indignantly returned his draft and wrote him declining all aid from one whom I, in my juvenile heroics, felt I could no longer respect as a father.

"Gee!--what fools we are sometimes! And how often have I longed and ached to hear from my dear old dad again! But I was proud, and I fear I am still a little that way.

"I was thrown into the constant companionship of Graham Brenchfield and despite our great dissimilarity in make-up and his three years' advantage over me in age, we got on well together. He was different then.

"The Brenchfields educated me, as they did Graham. I put it all down, for a long time after, to the great goodness of their hearts, but I have had every reason to believe lately that they were secretly in receipt of that hundred dollars a month which I so dramatically declined from my dad. I feel certain now that it was my stay with the Brenchfields that so materially aided them in the education of their own, for they had little enough money in their own right for educational purposes.

"I pulled up on Graham at school and in a few years we were ready to start out to conquer the world. It was then that we decided on the Great Adventure to the Golden West, in search of fame and chiefly fortune.

"Youthful-like, we made a vow. We were to work together if we could, but, no matter what took place, we were to meet at the end of five years, pool our profits and make a fair divide.

"Brenchfield had five hundred dollars in cash. I had a similar amount coming to me from a farmer named Angus Macdonald in payment of two summers' work I had put in on his place. Macdonald promised to send the money on to me at a certain date and, as his name and word were gold currency in and around Campbeltown, we set out on Graham Brenchfield's five hundred. We got to Vancouver, did odd jobs there for a bit; then Graham got something more promising to do on a cattle ranch in the Okanagan Valley and he left me clearing land in Carnaby, in the suburbs of Vancouver.

"Well, Jim,--Brenchfield had been only a few months gone, when I received letters from him urging me to send along the money I had coming from Angus Macdonald, as he had obtained a month's option on some land in which he declared there was a positive fortune. As it turned out, Brenchfield was right in his surmise, as he seemed to be in almost everything else he touched for years following. It was ranch property, evidently right on the survey line of a new railroad. He was wildly excited over it in all his letters. Macdonald's money was due, but it did not come to hand, so I had to keep on putting Brenchfield off and meantime I made a draft on Macdonald, putting it through the Carnaby branch of the Commercial Bank for collection. Three days before Brenchfield's option was up he dropped in on me unexpectedly, by the first inter-urban train one morning. At that time, I was living by myself in a little rented two-roomed shack a few hundred yards outside of Carnaby.

"Graham Brenchfield raged and ranted in a terrible way, getting purple in the face in his

disappointment and anger. He called Macdonald all the skin-flinting names he could think of and incidentally expressed himself of my unbusiness-like qualities. I told him what I had done, how I had written to Macdonald repeatedly, wired him and finally drawn on him; that I had called at the bank until Maguire the banker got sick at the sight of me and declared I haunted him like a damned ghost.

"I left Brenchfield that morning in my place, promising to be back by noon. I worked for two hours, then left off for fifteen minutes to run over to the bank, for I had a hunch that there was something there. Maguire the Agent was in a nasty mood.

"He declared there was nothing for me. I told him he hadn't looked to see, and I waited around, whistling and shuffling my feet till he got exasperated. It was the end of the month and he was busy, so perhaps I should have been more considerate, but I was nineteen years old then and consideration did not weigh very heavily on me. Besides, I was badly in need of the money.

"He finally threatened to throw me out for the 'kite-flier' I evidently was. That angered me; I picked up a heavy ruler and threatened to knock his head in. At last, my eye caught sight of the postal stamp of Campbeltown on a letter among his unopened mail lying on the counter. And, sure enough, it contained Macdonald's payment. I got the money from Maguire and left immediately, as happy as a king.

"Before going home to break the good news to Brenchfield, I returned to my job in order to tell Macaskill the foreman that I intended taking the afternoon off. When I got there, they used me to clear off some fallen timber from the right-of-way and that delayed me quite a bit. I didn't see Macaskill, so left without saying anything in particular to anyone.

"When I got back home, Brenchfield was sitting at the kitchen table with his head resting on his hands. He had been writing on a sheet of paper. I ran over to him and clapped my hand on his back. I threw my roll of bills on the table right under his nose. He stared at the bundle stupidly, then sprang up with an oath on his lips. Jim, I can see it all again as if it had taken place ten minutes ago. I can hear him word for word as if my mind had become for the time being a recording phonograph.

"I could see at a glance that there was something very far wrong. His eyes were bloodshot and he was deathly white.

"'Good God!' he cried, pushing his fingers through his hair.

"'Graham,--whatever is the matter with you?' I asked. 'You surely haven't been drinking? You're ill.'

"He laughed.

"'I'm all right! Nothing wrong with my health! Guess it's my morals that have gone fluey. So you got the money? My God!--if I'd only known that.'

"He put his hand in his back pocket, drew out a bundle of bills and tossed it on the table beside mine. It was money, Jim,--money by the heap.

"'Good heavens, man!--where did you get it?' I cried.

"'Ay!--you may well ask. I had to have it--you know; so I went out and got it. Stole it--or rather, borrowed it when the other fellow wasn't looking. See that over there!' He pointed to a basin on the wash-stand. 'Look inside, Phil. It's red. Look at your shirt lying in the corner there. It's bloody too. God!--the damned stuff is still all over me. It sticks like glue. It won't come off.'

"His voice was gradually getting louder, so I went to him and clapped my hand over his mouth. I cautioned him to be quiet. For the first time in my memory, Graham Brenchfield broke down and cried like a baby. Little wonder,--for it was his first great offence against society and law.

"I led him to a chair and sat quietly beside him until the worst of his wildness seemed to be over.

"'Graham,--you must pull yourself together,' I said. 'Tell me what it is you have done. Maybe it is not so bad. Maybe we can fix it up.'

"'Phil, I got tired waiting for you and went out three-quarters of an hour ago,' he replied. 'I went over the fields to the village. I didn't mean any wrong then. I had no thought of it. I went the back way toward the bank. The back door was open and I looked in. The banker was figuring. There was money--stacks of it. The sight of the damned stuff made me crazy. I had little hope of you getting yours. It seemed an easy way. Something gripped me and I saw nothing after that but the money. There was no one about. I crept in, and under that counter that lifts up. He never saw or heard me. I picked up something--a poker, a ruler maybe. God only knows what it was! I hit him over the head with it. It didn't drop him. I had to hit him again and again. Then blood spurted. He fell on the floor. I grabbed as much money as I thought I needed and I came away hoping to get out from here before you got back. I was just writing to you now to tell you what I had done. I put it in the old cipher we made up together at school. I knew you'd fathom it and understand. It is on the table there.'

"'Now you've come back,' he continued. 'They'll be after me. What am I to do, Phil? It'll break the dad's and mother's hearts if the police get me for this. Honest, Phil!--I didn't mean to. I can't think right. You tell me what to do. You fix it up and get me away from here.'

"He was on the point of breaking down again, Jim, when I brought him up with a jerk.

"'I can help any man but a murderer,' I said. 'You didn't kill Maguire?'

"No, no! I swear it,' he answered. 'The knocks I gave him could not kill him.'

"Well, if he dies, Graham, I'll have to tell. If he doesn't, you can bank on me. Your folks have been too good to me for me to forget and we've been too good friends for me to give you away. Does anybody know you are in Carnaby?' I asked further.

"Not a soul,' he said.

"Has anyone seen you here?'

"Not that I know of!'

"Quick then,' I cried. 'Take this money Angus Macdonald sent. It's ours. There are five hundred dollars. That's all you need to meet your present obligations. Leave the blood money where it is. I'll put it in an envelope and some time late to-night I'll drop it, unaddressed, into the bank letter-box. They'll never guess what has happened, and, if Maguire recovers and they get their money back, no one--no one but you, Graham--will be any the worse for it.'

"This was one time that Brenchfield allowed himself to be advised and led.

"Here,--take the back way,' I went on, 'the way you came, through the timber. Walk till you get to Newtown, then drop on to a Vancouver car and in. Then up the main line by to-night's train, and lie quiet.'

"Brenchfield stopped at the door and offered me his hand.

"You won't hold a grudge against me for this?' he asked.

"Never a grudge!' I said.

"You won't let it interfere with our plans for the future, Phil?'

"No,--for you'll have learned your lesson.'

"And we're still partners?'

"I wasn't quite so sure about that part of it, but a look in Brenchfield's face made me relent.

"Partners,--yes, Graham,--if you still wish it,' I said.

"Wish it,--sure I wish it, Phil.'

"Right-o.'

"And whatever happens between you and me, in five years' time we'll pool everything we have, as we promised, and make a fair divide?'

"Yes, yes!--all right! For heaven's sake get away quickly. You're wasting precious time, and time with you is everything. One can never tell.'

"When will you come up to the Okanagan?' he asked next.

"Just as soon as this blows over and I get squared away. Maybe in three weeks' time--not later than a month.'

"We shook hands and I watched him as he hurried away across the fields."

Phil stopped and looked into space.

"Go on, go on, man," exclaimed Jim, his face tense.

"After that, the first thing that caught my eye was Brenchfield's note on the table. I had the key to it in my mind, so it was easy enough to decipher. You have it Jim, word for word:--

"Dear Phil,

I have gone back to Vernock. I have borrowed the money I needed and I fear I have hurt the banker in the borrowing. Forgive me, but there was no other way out. Whatever you hear, keep silent. Join me as soon as you can. Burn this.

Graham Brenchfield."

"Pretty damning stuff, Jim, even if it is in cipher. Well, the last I remember of that note was crumpling it up till it was a mere nothing at all. I must have tossed it away unconsciously and it got lodged in the toe of my gum boot, although I always felt certain within myself till now that I had burned it along with every other scrap of paper I could find in the shack coming from Brenchfield. My next job was to cover up all other traces he had left behind. There was the basin of discolored water on the wash-stand. I threw the water out at the back door and scoured the basin. I next put the stolen money in a large blue envelope and thrust it between my trunk and the wall, out of sight until I should be able to get rid of it through the bank letter-box when night came. I thought I was through then, when I found my dirty shirt in the corner--the twin of the one I was then wearing. It was smeared with blood-stains. Evidently Graham had used that first on his hands, and the water afterwards. I held up the tell-tale garment between my fingers, intending to set it ablaze in the stove. I changed my mind, for shirts were shirts in those days and somewhat scarce. I decided to give it a thorough washing instead. Somewhere, I had heard that hot water would not remove blood-stains, so I emptied some cold water into the basin and got my soap ready to begin. I was just in the act of dipping the shirt into the water when the screen door rattled and three men stepped into the kitchen. My heart jumped, for one of them was Jim Renfrew, Carnaby's Police Chief. The other two I guessed as plain-clothes men from Vancouver.

"Sorry to disturb you, Ralston,--but we want you at the Station for a few minutes. You don't

mind coming, eh!' asked Renfrew.

"'What do you want me for?' I asked.

"'Oh, come and see!' said the Chief. 'Just want to ask you something about something! We won't eat you.'

"Two of them laid hands on me and before I knew just exactly how it happened, cold metal snapped over my wrists and held me secure. The stained shirt was snatched out of my hand. I turned angrily, but a wrench of the handcuffs pulled me up.

"'Cut that out now! Come along quiet! Shut your trap, and say nothing you might be sorry for later. Come on!'

"One of the plain-clothes men remained behind, while the other and the Chief took me through the town to the local jail.

"It was some little time before I grasped the awful seriousness of my position and began to realise how events which I had never thought of might possibly involve me in this affair at the bank. I was totally ignorant of how much the police knew; that was the straining and nerve-racking part.

"The following morning I was brought before the local magistrate, charged with attempted murder and robbery, and was immediately committed for trial to the Assizes. And that evening, handcuffed between two policemen, I was transferred to the Provincial Prison at Ukalla, to await trial.

"God alone knows what I suffered during all that dreadful time, Jim, but I had made up my mind that it was my duty to take the blame on myself, for Brenchfield would never have committed the crime had I fulfilled my share of the bargain at the outset and put my money in when it was due. I thought of the goodness of the Brenchfields, of all they had done for me, of what it would mean to them if Graham were convicted. I only dreamed of a few months' imprisonment at the outset, so I decided I would keep my mouth shut.

"During all the time I remained awaiting trial, no one visited me but a parson and an exasperated lawyer who had been appointed to defend me, but who could get nothing out of me.

"I was tried. I refused to speak, and in so doing, I hadn't the ghost of a chance for liberty.

"Macaskill the foreman swore that I had been absent from my work for a time on the morning of the assault; I had been expecting money which hadn't arrived and I seemed badly in need of it.

"Doctor Rutledge of Carnaby had stopped at the door of the bank that morning and had seen me inside. He had heard Maguire and I in dispute and had heard further my threat to crack Maguire over the head with the very ruler with which the assault had been committed.

"Maguire, swathed in bandages but apparently little the worse, recounted our dispute. He swore that I had committed the assault on him, as it had happened just after he had paid over the money to me and turned back to his work.

"Chief Renfrew and his two detectives had caught me, red-handed, in my shack, washing my blood-stained shirt--a shirt similar to the one I was wearing at the time of my arrest. They even found the entire proceeds of the theft in a blue envelope behind my trunk; although they had to admit having been unable to trace the additional five hundred dollars which Maguire stated he had given to me.

"It was great stuff, Jim. Circumstantially damning as could be. They gave me five years in hell for my share in it, also a nice long harangue from the judge about behaving myself when I came out."

During this long, clear-cut, passionless recital, Jim Langford had sat beside Phil, glooming into space, his face like chiselled grey granite.

"My God!" he exclaimed at last and only his lips moved.

"Yes, Jim,--and Graham Brenchfield sat among the spectators all through the trial, heard me sentenced, rose and went out into his merry world without as much as a twitch of his eyelid for Phil Ralston.

"Ah, well! it's over and done with. But can you blame me, Jimmy, for a little bitterness in my heart against that fine gentleman for his cowardice and treachery?"

"Blame you," exclaimed Jim, passionately. "Great God! if he had done this with me, Phil, I would have schemed and plotted till I succeeded in getting him away to some lonely shack, then I would have tied him up and cut little pieces out of him every day till there was nothing left of him but his sense of pain and his throbbing black heart."

Phil laughed, rose and stretched himself.

"That's just the penny-dreadful part of you talking, Jim; the Captain Mayne Plunkett. You know quite well you wouldn't do anything of the kind."

But Jim was in no mood for flippancy.

"Sit down!" he commanded. "Now that you have told me so much, tell me everything. We are in this together now and I want to know what has passed between you and that scum since you came up here."

"You know the most of it; there isn't much more to tell," said Phil, but obedient to his friend's

wishes, he sat down again and starting in with his first meeting, as a fugitive, with Eileen Pederstone, he told of all the attempts that Brenchfield had made on his life, of his wild schemes and endeavours to recover this very paper that lay on the counterpane beside them, the existence of which Phil had been unaware but had bluffed and double-bluffed at in order to keep Brenchfield in his place. Right down to what had taken place that afternoon in the forge--not a detail did Phil miss out--and last of all, he confided to Jim the great longing in his heart that had been with him since first he had met Eileen Pederstone, and the hope that some day, after he had honestly achieved, he might be privileged to tell her what his feelings were toward her.

"If you are not altogether an idiot," answered Jim bluntly, "you will tell her the very next time you meet her. Does the lassie know that you were jailed for something you didn't do?"

"No,--I--I didn't tell her that. But she is aware that we met some time in the past:--that there is some kind of secret between Brenchfield and me."

"Are you going to have that two-faced hypocrite arrested?" asked Jim.

"No, siree!"

"And why not, pray?"

Phil gave Jim all his reasons "why not," and, despite Jim's cajolings and threatenings, he remained obdurate on the point.

"Well," exclaimed Langford at last, "you're positively the *sentimentalest* ass I ever met. But maybe after all you are right. Brenchfield has had this thing eating at his liver like a cancer for six years now and the longer it eats the worse he'll suffer. He is on the down-grade right now, or else I am sadly mistaken. He is up to the ears in it with the worst crooks in the Valley:--cattle rustlers, warehouse looters, horse thieves, jail birds, bootleggers and half-breeds. Some of these fellows some day are going to get sore with him. Oh, you may be sure his sins are going to find him out;--and the higher he goes the farther he will have to fall.

"It certainly will be one hell of a crash when it comes, and Jimmy Langford hopes to be there with bells on at the funeral of Mayor Brenchfield and his hoggish ambitions."

Phil crumpled up the paper in his palm.

"Here!" cried Jim. "What are you doing that for?"

Phil smiled a little sadly.

"I suppose you will be putting it in the stove next?"

"I guess so!"

"Well, you'd better guess again. It is just like the crazy thing you would try to do in one of your soft moments. Give it to me! I'll take mighty good care of it. It is all that may lie between your guilt or innocence some day, even if it is after Brenchfield is dead and gone to his well-earned reward. A whole lot hinges on that little bit of paper. It has got to be kept good and secure. Come on, softy,--hand it over!"

"If I do, will you promise never to use it in any way unless I consent, or unless I am not in a position to give you either my assent or dissent?"

"Yes!--I promise that."

"There you are then." Phil handed it to Langford, who opened a pocket in his belt and put it carefully inside.

"Guess we might have a bite of supper now,--eh, what!"

They drew in to the table; and that Christmas Eve supper was almost hilarious, for now there was no shadow between, and it meant an intense relief to both.

When the supper was nearing its end, Ah Sing, accompanied by two of his faithful feline devil-chasers, came in. He seemed somewhat sadder and more bland than usual.

"What's the matter, Sing?" queried Jim.

"Oh,--me plenty mad,--me feel heap swear."

He sat down very disconsolately, and the cats took immediate advantage of the shining moment by rubbing and purring pleasantly round and against their master's legs.

"Tell us about it then. We savvy, Sing."

"Oh,--my wifee--you know--she allee way live China. She make me angly. My fliend in China he send me photoglyph Chinee girlie. Me want get another wifee,--see!"

Sing handed over a picture of a typical country Chinese maid.

"Gee!--she's a fine looker,--isn't she, Phil?" exclaimed Jim with a wink, handing it over for Phil to examine.

"You bet she is!" conceded Phil.

Sing did not seem to enthuse.

"Oh, may be! Not too bad! Not velly muchee good! She thirteen year old. Her father he want me pay two hundled and fifty dollar for me catch her. I no likee velly much. I catch another. See! That one, she fourteen;--she cost four hundled dollar."

The second picture was that of a decidedly prettier girl with a much more refined appearance

than the first.

"Oh, she best. Sure thing!" said Jim.

"Yes,--she pletty good."

"You catch her, Sing?"

Sing shook his head ruefully.

"No!--I no catch her. Make me heap swear. I save up four hundled dollar; I send allee money my wiffee. I tell her buy that one for me,--see!"

"She send me letter. I get him to-day. She tell me she get money, but she no buy other wiffee for me. She buy house and ten acres land. Next time I go China, I tell her 'Damn!'--see. I plenty heap swear."

"I think she was a darned good judge," remarked Phil, as he and Jim laughed loudly.

But Ah Sing could not see the joke nor could he grasp wherein came his wife's good wisdom.

"What l'matter, you laugh?" he said. "Chinaman first wiffee, she boss;--second wiffee she do allee work. I catchee second wiffee help my first wiffee--see!"

"Pshaw! That's all right for a bluff, Sing, but it won't go down," cried Phil. "Come on;--cheer up, and have a drink! This is Christmas time."

"What you got?" asked Sing, brightening,--"Scotch whisky?"

"No siree! This is none of your sheebeens," replied Phil.

"You catchem sam souey?" returned Sing, his voice high and piping. "Sam souey pletty good."

"No sam souey,--you tough nut! Here!"

Phil handed the Chinaman a bottle of lemonade. Sing's face fell.

"Ah,--no good! He cleam soda."

"Well--what's the matter with it? I suppose you want something with a kick in it."

"Kick? No savvy kick! Allee same, cleam soda you pullem cork--plup--whee--phizz--he jump out all over and he run allee way down stair before you catchem."

"Feed'm chicken cleam soda. No good Chinaman!"

"Yes,--you slit eyed Mongolian! That reminds me," exclaimed Jim, his mouth half-full of apple-pie. "Talking about chickens,--what you do with all our chickens?"

"Chickens? No savvy!" innocently commented Sing, as he replaited and tied the black silk cords at the end of his pig-tail.

"You savvy all right,--you son-of-a-gun!"

"Phil,--when we came here there were thirty-six chickens in our pen. We've had two to eat ourselves. I counted only fourteen there to-day. That's twenty chickens gone somewhere."

Ah Sing still shook his head.

"I know, I savvy!" he exclaimed suddenly. "Coyote catchem!"

"Coyote hell!" shouted Jim.

"Ya,--you bet! Coyote hell evely night. You hear'm?"

"Sure we hear them. The darned brutes howl and laugh and keep us off our sleep every night the moon is up."

"Well!--coyote catchem," was all Sing would say.

"Yes!--and I suppose coyote leave bones in the garbage heap at your back door? Look here, Sing!--next time Chinese coyote take any more chicken, I fill him up buck shot out of that gun. No more chicken for you,--see!"

"All light!" conciliated the wily Chinaman, rising to go now that the discussion had come a bit too near home for his comfort. "I tell you quick next time coyote come--you fill him belly buck shot, heap plenty."

Two hours later, when the moon came up, the coyotes certainly provided entertainment. They howled and laughed, taunting an old terrier dog which belonged to the ranch and had neither the speed nor the inclination to try its mettle against its vicious enemies. It growled and barked a-plenty, but the coyotes sensed their safety and ventured the closer and yelped the louder in sheer deviltry.

Jim and Phil got down their guns, in the hope of bagging at least one of the brutes, but before they got outside, a wild frightened squawking and a tremendous to-do of fluttering told its own story. They raced round, but by the time they got to the rear of the house the squawking was quite a bit away, and the moon, ere it shot behind a cloud, showed two distant, shadowy forms scurrying quickly over the hill with their kill.

Phil fired a shot, but it did not seem to take any effect.

"I guess we put too much blame on poor old Sing after all," said Jim, "but I could have sworn he was meddling with these hens. I never knew the chink yet that could resist a chicken coop. He's even worse than the nigger is for that."

"I can hear music down at Sing's now; let us go quietly along and see what he is up to."

They went on to Sing's shack and peeped cautiously in at the window.

The Chinaman was sitting in a chair before his stove, scraping away on a Chinese fiddle, bringing the most unearthly cat-calls from the thing and singing to himself in a thin falsetto voice.

"He's nothing if he is not musical," remarked Jim.

Suddenly Sing stopped and laid down his fiddle. He rose, opened the oven door and brought out two beautifully roasted chickens, laid the pan down on top of the stove and rubbed his hands in pleasant anticipation.

"Well I'll be darned!" whispered Jim.

"And we blamed it on the coyotes," answered Phil. "Let us go in and scare the daylights out of him."

For a moment Jim seemed inclined to follow Phil's suggestion, but he relented.

"Och!--what's the good? The poor deevil hasna a body to make frien's o', nor a thing to do to keep himsel' out o' mischief. Besides it is Christmas Eve. Let us bide in the spirit o' it and leave the poor heathen to enjoy himsel' for this once.

"Come on up hame to our virtuous cots!"

CHAPTER XXI

A Maiden, a Lover and a Heathen Chinee

Next morning, while inspecting the ravaged chicken coop and endeavouring to follow the trail of the light-footed coyotes, Jim and Phil discovered a trickle of blood here and there on the snow on top of the knoll, telling them that Phil's flying shot had come much nearer its billet than they had at first surmised.

"By jove!--what do you think of that, Philly, my boy? You pinked one of those brutes after all. What do you say to following up a bit?"

Sing had promised to look after the cooking of the Christmas dinner, so, as there was nothing in particular for them to do for the next few hours, Phil readily agreed. They went back for their rifles, muffled themselves up a bit more and donned their heavy boots.

It was a glorious morning when they set out from the ranch. A fresh fall of snow the night before had already been crusted over by the cold north wind which so often tore in through the rifts in the hills at that time of the year, squeezing the thermometer almost to disappearing point at twenty-five to thirty below. The sun's brightness looked eternal. The sky was never so blue. Great fleecy clouds rolled and frolicked in well-nigh human abandon. Almost everywhere, when looking upward, the eyes rested against snow-white hills with their black reaching spars of sparse fir trees; while below and stretching away for miles--winding and twisting between the hills--the flat, solidly-frozen Kalamalka Lake, with its fresh, white coating, caught the sun's rays and threw them back in a defiant and blinding dazzle. At intervals, in unexpected places and along the shore line, smoke curled up cheerily from the snug little homes of the neighbouring ranchers and settlers.

As the two men trudged along, with the old terrier dog at their heels, the frozen air crackled in their nostrils. They smoked their pipes, however, and threw out their chests in sheer joy of living, for a winter's day, such as this was, did not freeze young blood, but rather sent it sparkling and effervescing like ten-year-old champagne.

They followed the red stains on the snow and finally came to a spot in a gulley where the coyote evidently had disposed of its steal, for feathers lay about in gory profusion. They continued through the thicket, where they lost all track of further blood-stains. To add to their worries, the old terrier disappeared.

"He must have got scared and beat it for home," said Phil.

"Looks like it! I guess we should follow his lead, for Mister Coyote seems to have got pretty well away."

"Let us go down toward the lake then and home along the shore line. It is easier travelling that way."

They went down the incline together, digging with their heels at times to stop them up, and slipping in fifteen feet lengths at other times. When they neared the bottom they heard a loud yelp, as of a dog suddenly hit by a missile of some kind. They looked out in the direction of the lake and away in the middle of it, half a mile from shore, their eyes sighted two dark objects rolling over and over each other.

A yelp, sharper than the first, came again.

"By jingo!" shouted Jim, "what do you know about that? It's our supposed yellow-livered terrier. He's got the coyote. Come on! The brute will have him eaten alive."

They plunged down the remainder of the hill, through another thicket of pines, along the shore and out on to the lake. The ice was several feet thick and as solid as the land itself. Time and again both Phil and Jim stepped up in order to try a shot, but it was impossible to get one in without endangering the life of the plucky old dog.

They slid and scurried along, full speed--while the terrier seemed to be hanging on gamely to the coyote, or else the coyote had such a hold on the terrier that the latter was unable to shake it. They continued to roll over and over in a whirling bundle of fur.

"Better try a shot anyway, Phil," cried Jim in desperation. "You are surer with the gun than I am. The dog is all in and it looks as if it didn't really matter now which you hit anyway."

Phil threw the gun to his shoulder, took almost careless aim and fired. It was a long shot and a difficult one for even an expert.

For a moment, it looked as if the bullet had gone wide. The next moment it could be seen that something had been hit, but it was hard to tell what. Then out of the scurry and whirl, the old terrier was observed to get on top.

"Good boy!" cried Jim. "You got the right one!"

As they came up on the scene of the fight, they found their dog mauled almost to ribbons, but he was still clinging gamely and worrying at the throat of the dead coyote.

Jim spoke a word of praise to that remnant of a dog and separated it from its late antagonist.

The excitement over, it wagged its stump of a tail, staggered for a little, trembled, then lay down on the ice with a little whimper, in absolute exhaustion.

The coyote was a huge brute of its kind and its coat was in perfect condition.

Phil's shot of the previous night had passed through a fleshy part of its hind quarters, without breaking any bones on its journey, but the coyote had evidently bled almost to death before the terrier got at it. This alone accounted for its inability to beat the old dog at the very first turn of the encounter. The shot which killed it had gone clean through its eye and out behind its ear.

Jim got out his knife and started in to skin the animal, while Phil did what he could in the matter of lending first aid to the wounded terrier.

On glancing casually along the surface of the ice, then away toward their ranch, Phil noticed a vehicle drawn up at the front door.

"Jim,--there's a rig of some kind at our door. Looks as if we had visitors!"

"Now who the Dickens can it be?" queried Jim, scratching his head as he knelt beside the carcass of the coyote. "It's a sleigh. Christmas Day and nobody to welcome them! Phil, you beat it back. I'll finish this job and follow after you with the dog. He won't be able to get fast and it is no use both of us waiting."

"All right!"

"Whoever they are, keep them till I come."

"Sure!"

And off Phil went at a run.

When he was about a quarter of a mile from the house, he saw Ah Sing amble round from the far side of the house and go in at the front door. This had hardly taken place, when he heard the scream of a woman in fear. A flying figure darted out and down the trail, up which Phil was now hurrying from the beach. He failed at first to make out who the figure was. It was followed closely by the Chinaman, crying out his incoherent Chinese jibberish and broken English, and, despite his years and apparent shuffling gait, he was bear-like in his agility and gained at every step on the woman he was pursuing. She turned her head in fear, and seeing how close to her he was she screamed again, then collapsed in a heap.

Ah Sing stooped over her, looking down, still muttering and shaking his fists angrily, but evidently in a quandary. He did not notice the oncomer until he was almost by his side. Phil tossed his gun from him, caught the Chinaman by the neck with his two hands, lifted him off his feet and nearly shook his greasy head off in the process. He then got him by the collar in one hand and the loose pants in the other, raised him sheer over his head and hurled him ten feet away, against the foot of an apple tree where he crashed and lay in stupid semi-consciousness.

Of all the unexpected persons to Phil, the young lady who lay on the ground was Eileen Pederstone. He raised her gently in his arms and carried her up the pathway through the orchard and back into the house. He set her on a camp cot and fetched her a glass of water. And it was not long before she sat up. But the dread of something was still upon her. She was pale and she trembled spasmodically.

She clung to Phil's arm, keeping close to him as they sat on the edge of the cot, as if afraid that his presence were not quite the substantial reality it seemed.

He tried his best to soothe her and to get her to explain what had happened, but she did not answer him. He patted her back, he put his arm about her. He pushed her hair up from her

eyes. But she sat and trembled, and would not be comforted.

She had a large towel pinned about her waist, and from the broom which lay on the floor near the door it looked to Phil as if she had been sweeping out the place when the Chinaman had entered.

"But you must tell me what happened!" said Phil. "Did you say or do anything to Sing to make him angry?"

"Oh, I don't know! I have no idea!" returned Eileen at last brokenly. "He--he--when I came--there was no one here.--I started in to sweep up.--I was sweeping at the door when he came in suddenly--he frightened me.--I must have swept some of the dust over him, for he ran right into the broom.--He swore at me and started to jibber.--He caught me by the arm.--He swore again.--I--I struggled free and ran out--and--and he followed me--shouting he would--he would kill me."

Phil's brows wrinkled in perplexity, for he could not make the thing out at all.

Ah Sing he knew for a peculiar individual and a wily one, with considerable standing among the other Orientals in the neighbourhood, but he had always heard of him as being meek and docile enough with those for whom he worked and, like most Chinamen, had a wholesome respect for the power of the white man's law. That he should suddenly break out in this outrageous way, for no apparent cause, was beyond Phil's comprehension.

Quietly and without speaking further, Phil and Eileen sat together, then tears of relief came to Eileen. Her shuddering ceased. She gazed up at Phil timidly and, as she gazed, she must have noticed the anxiety and yearning in his eyes for she laid her head on his breast and wept quietly. Phil did not try to stop her tears. He sat there, smoothing her glossy brown hair with his big hand and talking soothingly to her the while.

At last her sobbing spent itself and she slowly raised her head and wiped her eyes with her handkerchief. Phil caught her face in both his hands and gazed searchingly into it for a while. Helplessly, Eileen braved his look and, when a faint trembling smile played about the corners of her mouth, Phil drew her face close to his and his lips touched hers.

Eileen blushed, and jumped up suddenly with a cry of alarm. She rushed over to the stove and lifted up the lid of a pot, the contents of which were bubbling over.

"Come on, boy!" she cried with a strange tone of possession in her voice which set Phil's heart jumping, "help me get dinner out. Big, lanky, fail-me-never Jim will be here pretty soon."

They had hardly put the finishing touches to the table, when Langford ran in. He seemed to have sensed something wrong before he got inside, for his face wore an anxious look.

"Merry Christmas, Eileen! Awfully glad you came out to see us. Hullo!--what has been wrong? I saw you, and Phil, and Sing in a mix-up and I hurried along. What was the trouble, Phil? Has Sing been playing any monkey-doodle business?"

"It was nothing at all! Hurry and get a wash up, Jim! Dinner's ready," smiled Eileen. "We'll tell you all you want to know when we are having something to eat."

They sat down to a pleasant little meal, but, somehow, the earlier proceedings had cast a damper over the usual gaiety of the trio and their conversation for once was desultory and of a serious nature.

Phil explained as best he could what had taken place between Eileen and Sing. Eileen could throw no further light on Phil's story. But Jim did not seem to require any, for a look of perfect understanding showed in his big, gaunt, honest face.

"Do you know, Eileen,--you could not have heaped a worse insult on Sing than you did," he remarked.

"But I didn't say a word, Jim!"

"No!--but you demonstrated on him with that broom."

"And what of that? Anybody is liable to get a little dust swept over him by a busy housewife."

Jim rose. "Wait a bit!" he remarked. He went to the door and whistled a loud note that Ah Sing was familiar with.

Shortly afterwards, the Chinaman, very much bruised up--his eye swollen, and limping--came in. An expression of the deepest humility and cringe was on his battered countenance.

"I heap solly! I velly solly! I no mean hurt lady. I no do him any more. You no tell policeman Chief! You no tell him, Bossee Man Jim, Bossee Man Phil, Lady Misse Pedelston. Ah Sing he velly solly. Heap much plenty velly solly!" He grovelled and cringed.

"What you do that for anyway? you slit-eyed son of Confucius!"

"You know, Bossee Jim;--you know all about Chinaman. Lady, she sweepee bloom all over Sing. Bloom he sweepee up dirt. She pointem bloom; she touch Ah Sing with bloom. Allee same call Ah Sing dirty pig,--see! Me no dirty pig--me no dirty pig."

"Anytime pointem bloom, somebody b'long me die. One time, white man hit me bloom,--my lil boy he die same day away China. Pointem bloom Chinaman, somebody b'long him die evely time."

"Now maybe my wiffee she die--maybe my blotther, maybe my mama. I no savvy yet! Ah Sing get

heap mad,--see!

"You no pointem bloom Chinaman any more, Missee Eileen. Makem heap angly. He get mad all up in him inside."

"Well, folks!--do you get it?" asked Jim.

Phil nodded.

"Yes!--evidently another of their Chinese superstitions," returned Eileen.

"Just so!" said Jim. "Sing,--all right! You beat it,--quick!"

The Chinaman went like a shot.

"And that is the kind of material--just as it stands, sometimes not half so civilised--that we allow into our country to over-run it by the thousands, allowing it to rub shoulders with us, to come into speaking distance with our women folks; their children--out of homes and hovels fathered by beings like that--sitting side by side with our own dear little mites at school."

"Yes! but, after all, who brings them here?" commented the practical Jim.

"Who?"

"The farmers and the ranchers who are too mean to pay high enough for decent white labour; and the ordinary white labour itself who refuse to condescend to the more menial work on the farm. They have been the means of their coming here and--and now they are kicking themselves for their short-sighted stupidity, for John Chinaman is beating them to a frazzle at their own game and he is crowding us out of house and shelter like the proverbial camel did.

"John always was a better truck farmer anyway. He can make a fortune off a piece of land that a white man would starve on. He will outbid the white man every time in the matter of price when renting land for farming purposes and the land-owner doesn't give a darn then whether he rents to white or yellow--so long as he gets the highest bidder's money. The chink spends hardly anything on clothes, he lives in a hovel; eats rice, works seven days in the week, pays no taxes except a paltry Road Tax of something like four dollars a year--and generally manages to evade even that;--doesn't contribute to Church, Charity or Social welfare, and sends every gold coin he can exchange for dollar bills over to Hongkong where it is worth several times its value here. And--when all is said and done--he is still the best of three classes of Orientals our Province is being flooded with. There is the Jap, with his quiet, monkey-like imitation of white folks' ways, yet all the time hanging on to his Japanese schools right in the midst of us; and the Hindoo who, as a class, prefers to herd like cattle in a barn and never will assimilate anything of this country but its roguery."

"Well, it oughtn't to be too late to work a remedy," put in Eileen.

"It may not be too late--it is not too late--but it seems to be much too big a proposition for any of our own politicians to tackle single-handed; while our politicians in the East and Over-seas haven't the faintest notion of the menace. You have to live among it and see just what we have seen to-day to get a glimpse of it.

"Why, even your own dad, Eileen, would be afraid to burn his political fingers with it,--and he understands it too."

"Oh, yes,--I know! He is in the party, like they all get. He has to do as they do. If he doesn't, he is either hounded out or has to play a lone hand and become 'a voice crying in the wilderness.'"

"Good for you, lassie!" laughed Jim.

"And I suppose," put in Jim, "if we did get them out--the very first time there would be a labour shortage or a wage dispute those same farmers and ranchers would be the first to forget their previous experiences, would raise a holler about white imposition and claim a fresh coolie importation. Here we are ourselves,--took Sing on in his old job without giving the matter a thought--all because we have got used to their presence."

"And the startling thing about it is this," said Jim, "almost every School Examination Report in the Province tells us one story:--the sons and daughters of these same ignorant, superstitious Chinamen head the lists in open competition; our own white youngsters tailing hopelessly in the rear. Not only that, but once in a while we find one of these Canadian educated Chinese kids--despite his education--while working as kitchen help in some of our homes, committing a most atrocious murder of our white women folks."

"Well--what are we going to do about it?" asked Eileen, rising.

"God knows!" answered Jim, "and nobody seems to lose any sleep over it. It just goes on,--and on,--and on."

"I guess I'll have to be going on too, boys!" smiled Eileen. "Dad's here for the holidays, you know. We are having our Christmas dinner eight o'clock to-night. I promised dad I would be back by three this afternoon.

"I'm terribly glad you two have got away from the 'herd' as it were. I won't see you again for quite a while. I'm going back with daddy Royce Pederstone again to Victoria, and I'll be there looking after his well-being all the time the House is sitting."

Phil's face fell in disappointment. Eileen noticed it and was glad. Jim noticed also, and wondered what had been going on that he was unaware of.

"It will be a dandy change. I suppose, all the same, all the time I am there I shall have a picture of Vernock and the Valley at the back of my mind, and I won't be really and truly happy till I'm back again."

"You are not the first one I have heard say he felt that way about this little countryside. It just sort of tacks itself on as part of you."

"It is always that way with me anyway," said Eileen. "As for Phil, he hasn't been here long enough to feel the same."

"Maybe Phil will be having a little picture of Victoria in his mind's eye!" was Jim's caustic comment, to which he received no answer.

"Well!--aren't you going to see the lady home?" he continued, addressing Phil.

"I guess one of us should," answered Phil with alacrity.

"Off you go then! Hitch your own nag on behind, Phil. By the time you get back I'll have the dishes washed up and everything looking lovely."

Eileen went up to the big fellow and patted his cheek.

"You're just a dear old grouchy grandpa."

"And my age is exactly twenty-eight," he grinned.

Eileen jumped and threw her arms round his broad shoulders. She pinned him in a flying hug, then jumped back again.

Jim pulled out his pipe and struck a match in studied indifference, but there was an expression in his deep, brown eyes that spoke of an inward merriment and pleasure.

And as Eileen and Phil drove off for town, Jim--with one long, slender leg crossed over the other--leaned lazily against the door-post, smoking dreamily and waving his hand.

"I guess Jim has never had a real sweetheart," said Eileen.

"It doesn't seem very like it," answered Phil.

"And yet, as you can see, he really is a lady's man from the sole of his big foot to his bronze hair."

"Then, either he has had a sweetheart and the course didn't run smoothly, or he has still to encounter the real Princess Charming. I have waited quite a long time for mine, you know, Eileen."

The young lady blushed and looked away.

"And do you think you have really found her at last?" she asked.

"Do I think I have! Ah, Eileen!--*you* would ask me that after our little---"

"Now, Phil,--you mustn't say a word about that, or I'll cancel the next. You caught me at a weak moment and, just like a man, you took fullest advantage," she smiled.

Phil pulled the horse to a stop and stared blankly at Eileen.

"But--but you meant it, Eileen? We really *are* sweethearts now?" he asked seriously.

"Why, of course,--you great big boy!" she laughed, "but you don't have to stop the horse over it. We are on the public highway, too."

"And some day---?" he continued, starting up the horse again.

"Maybe,--if you don't hurry me. You won't hurry me, Phil? Will you--dear? For I am terribly happy, and I--I don't quite seem to have got everything properly laid out in my mind."

"You just take your own good time, Eilie. I have my career to make first; but I am going to do it now that I have you to think of---"

"That's the way I like to hear a man talk," she returned, with an enthusiasm that carried contagion. "I don't think there is a thing in this world impossible to any man if he only makes up his mind to attain it. If a man has health--and he can have that if he goes about it the right way--and is willing to throw aside the hundred and one little time-wasters that surround all of us; if he will work and work and do the very best he knows, he is sure to gain his object in the end."

"Even in the winning of a young lady?"

"Yes!--even in that," she answered. "Why,--you can see that happen every day. Men whom young ladies actually repulse at first, often attract these same ladies in the end by their devotion, determination and singleness of purpose, and they gain the love they seek in the end, too."

"But that must just be destiny."

"I don't know. If you mean by destiny, that if a man strives all that is in him to attain a laudable object or ambition, and allows of no permanent rebuffs, but comes back at it, again and again--the result is absolutely certain and he need have no worry as to the ultimate success, because it is up to him to use and develop his talent, but the result is with his Creator who first gave him his talent to work on and first prompted his ambition for the materially hidden but ultimate good of the Universe--then I agree with you:--it is destiny."

After she spoke, Phil and she glided on in silence, for both felt somehow that they had been verging on a new understanding, as it were--a sixth sense--a tuning up and a telepathic communication with the Infinite.

Tears started in Eileen's eyes which Phil did his best to banish.

"Oh,--I know I am foolish," she said. "Sometimes I feel so strong; at other times so--so feminine. It is my dear, old daddy I worry over, Phil. He is not what he used to be before he got mixed up with this political crowd, with Mayor Brenchfield, with all these land schemes he has afoot. He used to be just my dear old daddy: now I seem to be losing him. That--that is why I have insisted on going with him to Victoria."

"I am sorry--very, very sorry, Eileen! If I could help, I would, gladly. Brenchfield I know is far from straight. He is educated, wealthy, influential, smooth,--but he is crooked."

"What do you know of Graham Brenchfield?" she asked suddenly. "When was it that you met him before coming here? What did he do to you? That time you met in my little home up on the hill was not your first acquaintance."

Phil was completely taken aback by the suddenness of her query, and he did not answer.

Eileen laid her hand over his.

"Phil,--I--I've a right to know;--I--we--"

Phil's hand closed tightly on hers and, as they glided rapidly over the snow toward Vernock, he told her what he had told Jim only the night before.

"Oh, the brute! The coward!" was all Eileen's bloodless lips allowed to pass, as she sat staring blankly ahead of her, her face pale and her hands working together on her lap.

"And that--that snake had the impertinence to ask me to marry him," she continued later, "still thinks he may induce my father to agree to a marriage between us. I think that he is working up some scheme now to get daddy too heavily involved, so that we may have to use him. The miserable hound!--as if my dad would think of coercing me into marrying him!"

"You aren't afraid of Brenchfield, Eileen? Because, if you are, I'll throttle the life out of him."

"No, no! I am not a bit afraid of Mayor Brenchfield,--not now. But I am afraid for my father.

"Brenchfield has a scheme for grabbing the land in the Valley whenever, wherever, and by whatever means he can. He has infected father with the same desire. They buy, and buy, and buy--vying each other in their daring. No one knows--they hardly know themselves--how much they really have."

"But don't they turn it over?"

"No! Everyone else does and gets rich in the process. They buy, and buy, and when offered a big advance on their purchase price they refuse to sell. They think this advancing in prices will go on for ever. The bank keeps on lending them money when they run short, taking their holdings as security in return. After all, daddy really owns but an interest in the properties--and a precarious interest at that. The banks won't lose. Allow them! But they have no right to encourage this kind of business;--it is bad for the country at large."

"That is true enough, but still, I think property will go on advancing for quite a little time yet," said Phil. "Every tendency points that way. Settlers from Ontario and Manitoba farms are coming in here by the hundreds to ranch, on account of the less rigorous climate. The Valley is the favourite in Canada for Old Country people with capital who are anxious to do fruit farming, and they are pouring in all the time. I can see nothing but increases in values for some time to come, Eileen."

"Well,--maybe I am wrong, but it looks to me as if the West were going mad and that there will be one wild, hilarious fling and then--the deluge.

"God help daddy, Brenchfield or anybody else who gets caught in the maelstrom.

"Phil,--promise me one thing;--you won't get caught in this? Buy and sell for others if you wish. Yes!--gamble with a little if you have it to spare, but you won't,--promise me you won't get involved in this awful business in such a way that a turn of the tide would leave you broken and dishonoured."

"I never was lucky in mines, oils or land, Eilie, dear;--and you have my promise. If ever I have anything to do with real estate, believe me, it will be simply--as you suggest--in buying and selling for the other fellow. That game has always had a great fascination for me."

"Why, yes!--you can get all the excitement without the far-reaching consequences. But what worries me about daddy is that he has so many unfinished ends lying everywhere. That was always his weakness; now it seems to be his obsession. He has ranches stocked with the best animals in the country. He has the best implements, but he has no real record of them and they disappear all the time. Some of his foremen are getting marvellously well-to-do suddenly. Why, the other day a man brought in a herd of pigs and sold them to daddy for cash. The pigs were daddy's own--stolen from one of his ranches the night before--and daddy didn't know them. Last spring, one of his foremen told daddy, just before the snow went, that they would require new machinery for this particular ranch he was working; ploughs, reapers, binders, et cetera. Dad ordered them for him and, when the snow went, he discovered all kinds of the same machinery there which had been left lying out all winter and simply ruined--really enough machinery to work a dozen ranches."

"And didn't he fire the foreman?"

"Not he! He said he couldn't put a married man out in that way. And that same married man came in here penniless four years ago, has been working for dad all the time for wages; and he could retire to-morrow and live on the interest of his invested capital.

"Daddy Royce Pederstone doesn't see it at all. He says some men are lucky speculators. Oh,--it makes me furious!"

In that short drive to town Phil got confirmed in a great many things he had previously considered merely gossip and conjecture.

At the entrance to Eileen's home he handed over the reins.

"Are you going to clear yourself with the police regarding Mayor Brenchfield, Phil?" asked Eileen.

"That is just what Jim asked, girlie. I may, some day. And I may never require to. Meantime, Brenchfield is stewing in his own juices. I prefer, for a while at any rate, to let him work away--as you said not so very long ago--and leave the result or issue to his Creator. What is it the Great Book says?--'Vengeance is mine. I will repay.'"

Eileen sighed and turned her head away to hide a tell-tale tear.

"Well--I shall not see you again for a long time, little girlie. Good-bye, and--and, God bless you!"

And there among the shade trees of the avenue Eileen threw the reins aside and sprang down beside Phil. His arms went about her agile little body, as her fingers clung to him. He kissed her lips, her eyes and her hair. Then he caught her face in his hands again, as he had done out at the ranch, looked deeply into the heart of her eyes, and her eyes answered him bravely.

He kissed her solemnly on the lips once more and let her go.

When she looked back at the turn of the avenue, he was still standing there where she had left him.

CHAPTER XXII

Fire Begets Hot Air

Late one afternoon three months after Eileen's departure for the coast, just as the dark was beginning to come down and as Phil was turning off the main road by the trail leading to the ranch, he noticed a man in sheepskin chaps making for the trees a hundred yards behind the farmhouse. He stopped his horse and watched him quietly, for there was something in the fellow's gait that seemed familiar to him. The man mounted a horse among the trees, came out boldly, cantered through the orchard on to the main road and away.

The spring thaw was on, mud was everywhere, and the stranger's beast ambled away with the silence of a ghost.

Phil did not know what to make of it, so he questioned Jim on the subject.

"Were any of that Redmans gang in seeing you?" he asked.

"Seeing me? Good land, no! Why?"

"Oh, I saw what looked like one of them getting on his horse among the trees at the back there, and riding away."

"Uhm!" said Jim, rubbing his chin.

"I thought it was Skookum, but I couldn't be quite sure.

"I wonder what the devil he could be up to, so far from home?"

"Might have been along by the lake a bit seeing some of that bunch at Larry Woodcock's place. Larry's gang and the Redmans lot are pretty much of the same kidney."

"Well," said Phil, dismissing the subject, "I guess it is up to us to keep our eyes peeled, anyway."

It was two weeks after this, following a run to town, that Jim came in with an angry look in his eyes.

"Say, Phil!--there's some darned monkey-doodle business afoot. I wish I could get to the bottom of it."

"What is it now?"

"I saw Red McGregor on the main road yesterday, and to-night I met him, Stitchy Summers and Skookum full in the teeth, jogging into town. Darned funny thing,--I never saw them on this road before."

"Well,--it is a good job we haven't started in with any stock yet. Like enough somebody will be

hollering again about being shy a few fat steers or calves. There were three hundred head of cattle reported missing off the ranges last year and about that much or more every year for a dog's age--if all reports be true. Funny thing they can't lay the rustlers by the heels and hang them by the necks in the good old-fashioned way."

"Yes!" commented Jim, "if that crowd are mean enough to thieve feed and grain, I wouldn't care to turn them loose among anybody's cattle, especially now the feed and grain stealing business is unhealthy."

"But how can they get away with it, Jim? The cattle are branded."

"Sure thing, Simple Simon! But they are not branded under their hides."

"How do you mean?"

"Only one thing I can think of:--the thieves must be driving off the cattle, two or three at a time, and killing them in some lonely spot out over the ranges; skinning them and burying or burning the hides. They could then sell the fresh meat to butchers in some of the border towns who might buy it from them innocently enough through the breeds, or who might be in the ring and getting their meat dirt cheap.

"However,--let's forget it. It is none of our funeral. And I promised Mrs. Clunie for both of us that we'd take a run back to her place at nine o'clock. She is having a birthday party for all her old friends, and wants us help her celebrate."

"I guess we had better go then, Jim, or we'll never hear the end of it."

Half an hour later, they set out. Five hours later still, after a merry time--as merry times went at Mrs. Clunie's--they returned, and it was a much speedier return than their going had been, for there was a great glare of red in the sky, near to the lake, that was suspiciously close to their own ranch.

Neither spoke a word, but, as the feeling of idle curiosity gave way to one of interest, interest to suspicion and suspicion to anxiety, their horses--as if sensing their masters' feelings--started off themselves from a walk to a canter, from a canter to a gallop and from a gallop to a hell-bent-for-leather race which never slackened until the two riders threw themselves breathlessly from their backs, among a crowd of neighbouring ranchers who had been doing their best to combat the flames in the absence of the owners.

But it was all over. The heavy horses had been saved, the barns were practically uninjured, but the dwelling house itself was but a charred heap of smoking debris.

Phil looked dumbly at Jim. Jim threw out his hands, palms up and showed his big teeth.

"Well, Philly, old cock!--there, there, by the grace of God, goes up in smoke my ambitions to be the greatest fruit rancher and stock breeder the world has ever known."

"Aren't we going to start and build up on the ruins?" asked Phil.

"We? Start all over? Good Lord, man,--not me, anyway! Not on your tin-tacks! This is the best excuse I ever had for a thing in my life. It's a heller of a game, this ranching stuff, to one who doesn't know a darned thing about it. Great Scot, man!--we were never made for it, anyway."

"I can't say that we have done very much so far," replied Phil.

"Do you want to have another go?"

Phil shook his head.

"No,--can't say I'm aching for it. If we could only sell the blessed place as it stands."

A voice at Phil's elbow broke into the conversation.

The speaker was old Ralph Mawson, the man who owned the adjoining ranch on the right.

Phil and Jim woke up as it were to find themselves surrounded by their neighbours.

"You boys want to sell out? I'll make you a bid for her as she stands--spot cash."

"Yes!" said Jim.

"Five thousand bucks," said Mawson.

"Haud yer horrrses!" said another voice, which simply romped with delight every time it struck the letter "r."

Alick McAdam, the rancher on the left, was also on the job.

"I'll gi'e ye fifty-five hunnerrr."

"Six thousand!" topped Mawson in ministerial tones.

Things began to get interesting, and the crowd saw possibilities of an auction.

Jim immediately turned from Mawson to McAdam.

"Sixty-five hunnerrr," dourly droned the Scot.

"Seven thousand!" said Mawson.

There was a stop.

"Seven thousand I'm offered!" cried Jim suddenly. "Seven thousand:--any advance on seven thousand? Seven thousand:--going once,--seven thousand,--going twice;--for the third and last

time---”

“Seven thousand and five hunnerrr, and no’ a currrrdy mairrr,” put in McAdam, pulling at his long whiskers.

Mawson stuck his hands in his pockets and started off.

“I’m through!” he remarked.

“Sold for seven thousand five hundred dollars, cash,” concluded Jim, with a friendly nod to McAdam, who rubbed his hands together and grinned.

“The fule!--he doesna ken a barrrgain when he sees it. This rrrranch is worrrrth ten if rrrrightly managed, and no’ by a wheen schule-bairrrns that would plant tatties upside doon. Come awa’ owerrr tae my place and we’ll put this on paperrr.”

Jim drew up the agreement in McAdam’s kitchen at three o’clock that morning, got McAdam’s cheque for seven thousand five hundred dollars and, despite the old fellow’s cordial invitation to spend the remainder of the night with him, Jim and Phil set out again for Mrs. Clunie’s.

“We’re making money,” said Phil.

“We would have made more if we had had that old fire-trap of a place insured,” answered Jim, Scotslike.

“That’s what that Redmans gang have been up to;--not cattle this time.”

“Looks like it.”

“Well,--the artful Mr. Brenchfield, if he couldn’t get me one way, got me another,” remarked Phil.

“What do you mean?” asked Jim, as they cantered along.

“He didn’t succeed in buying back his confession, but he took mighty good care nobody else would get it. It is burned up now all right.”

“Is it?” replied Jim; “not if Jimmy Langford knows it!”

“What! Do you mean to say you have it? that you have been carrying that thing with you all this time?”

“Sure! I never change without changing it, too. It is in my belt here. So we still have one on Mayor Brenchfield if he cuts up nasty. My, but he will be chuckling this morning over his fine stroke of business. I would dearly love to show it to him, but I daresay I better hadn’t.”

“You’re right!” said Phil, “you just better hadn’t,--meantime.

“But do you really think, Jim, that he would get his gang to burn up the place for that?”

“Would he? Great Heavens, man!--that paper means social and material life or death to your former side-kicker and sparring partner, Graham Brenchfield.”

“And what can we do?”

“Not a thing! The men from Redmans have as much right to roam around as we have. We haven’t a vestige of definite proof that they set our house ablaze, although we both know, darned well, that they and nobody else did it.”

Next morning early, shortly after the bank opened, Rattlesnake Dalton nearly threw the proverbial fit in his office, when confronted by Phil and Jim and presented with a certified cheque for one thousand dollars, plus interest, with a demand for the deed to the Brantlock Ranch.

Dalton knew better than try any more nonsense, so he had the deed made out in proper form and handed over.

McAdam drove in to town shortly afterwards and had the transfer of the property made to himself and completed the deal, thus ending the careers of two would-be ranchers before they had properly begun.

“Over six thousand dollars in the bank, and nothing to do with it,” exclaimed Jim, as soon as they were together in the street, and alone. “That won’t do, Phil. I have the fever now. We’ve got to make it sixty thousand.”

“I’m with you on that,” answered Phil. “Let’s go down to the Kenora and talk it over in a corner over a real swell dinner. I haven’t had one for a month of Sundays--and I have a six thousand dollar appetite.”

That dinner at the corner table of the Kenora dining-room was the birthplace of many future events. Jim talked volubly and he talked often, for despite his nationality and its proverbial proneness to caution, he was bubbling with enthusiasm over the new plan for progress which he had conceived. Truth to tell, for the first time for many a long day, he was the proud possessor of a half interest in six thousand dollars and it was burning a hole in his pocket; but with all his persuasiveness he had a hard task in converting his less mercurially disposed partner to his cause.

The dinner was a masterpiece, but it took second place to the conversation.

“Good night, bairn!” exclaimed Jim at last, “there is McWilliams--two years ago he was city garbage man. Look at him now--luxuriates in his five-thousand-dollar car; has his town

residence and his ranch; winters in California every year. Think of Fraser & Somerville:--three years ago Fraser borrowed twenty-five cents from me to buy a meal in the Chinese restaurant the day he blew in here, and he hasn't paid it back, either, although both he and Somerville are a considerable way up Easy Street. Peter Brixton was the conductor on the C.P.R. train running into the Valley from Sicamous--now he would think nothing of hiring a special to take him up to Sicamous if he took the fool notion. The only men at the game in town who had money when they started are McIntyre & Anderson,--and they've made the least of any because they lack the necessary pep. Even that lizard Dalton, is worth fifty thousand dollars, and all in selling real-estate. Man!--it makes me wearied to think of it. And besides, the early Spring Season is just opening up. We can be in right at the start of it."

Jim rose.

"Phil,--I don't want to, but I'm going to try this thing out alone if you won't come in. I'll show them in this town. If you don't come, you'll rue it once and that'll be all your life."

He stood looking down on Phil, who was resting his elbows on the table with his head on his upturned palms.

"Who said I wasn't coming in?" he murmured slowly.

Jim was round the end of the table and on him with a bound. He tilted up Phil's head.

"You're in on it! Whee-he!" he yelled, and to the astonishment of the remainder of the diners he dragged his partner to his feet and danced him round till both were dizzy and staggering.

That afternoon they took a year's lease of the front offices that had been the Commercial Bank before the bank had moved to their new premises further down Main Street. It was a bigger place than that of any other two real-estate brokers in town combined. They took it as it was; counters, desks, chairs and fixtures, and contracted to pay two hundred and fifty dollars a month for it. They paid three months' rent in advance; not because they had to but as a token of good faith and to establish some foundation of financial stability.

Jim scoured the main thoroughfares, spending half an hour at every window of every real-estate office in town, examining their cards and taking copious notes therefrom; and in the process brought McIntyre, Fraser, McWilliams and others out to their respective doors to inquire if there was any property they could show him; but all they could get out of Jim was:--"Maybe later on. I'm just looking around."

While he was thus engaged, Phil was commissioning the best sign-writers in Vernock to do a hurry-up job of absolutely first-class workmanship and have it in place above their office windows the next morning, regardless of cost.

He was too late to get a full-page advertisement in the *Advertiser*, which came out the next day, but he arranged it for the next issue and, on the strength of it, succeeded in inducing McQuarrie--Ben Todd's advertising manager--to rush off two thousand dodgers and insert them between the sheets of each copy of the current weekly, although not exactly a legal thing to do.

He ordered five thousand letter forms announcing the new business partnership and he had McQuarrie send them next day to every name on his special mailing list. This job alone, including the mailing, local and foreign, cost them three hundred dollars; but, for the time being, money was no object.

Two card writers, each at three dollars an hour, worked all night on Jim's purloined information, making out window cards which offered every available and unavailable piece of land in the Valley for sale, at a figure. A whole army of fat, lean and guttural-speaking charladies, behind carefully drawn blinds, worked all night long on the office floors, desks, counters and windows. Luxurious carpets and new filing cabinets were rushed in.

A typewriter was purchased. The prettiest stenographer in town was engaged to operate it--or, at least, to sit behind it for effect--regardless of expense. Two telephones, which had not been removed since the Bank's occupancy, were arranged for and retained. The dull electric lights were taken down and powerful oxygen lamps put in place. There was going to be nothing dull in the Langford-Ralston Financial Corporation.

A joint visit by Phil and Jim was made to the tailor's and each got fitted out in a new suit of the latest model, with fancy and somewhat garish waistcoats. Cigars of the best brand--five boxes of them--and two thousand cigarettes were purchased for the purpose of camaraderie and general corruption.

A new auto, not too sporty but brave and dazzling in its unscratched varnish and untarnished nickel-plated lamps and rods, value fifteen hundred dollars, was purchased on terms:--five hundred dollars down and the balance in equal payments, three and six months.

Everything but that automobile was fully paid for on the nail, for Jim contended, and rightly too, that cash with a first order very often assured credit with the order to follow.

It was strenuous work, and exciting while it lasted, but they had the satisfaction of accomplishing almost everything they had set out to do.

Next morning the town was jolted with surprise at finding a new business in full operation on one of the chief sites on Main Street. The new Catteline-Harvard car was standing at the kerb before the door, shrieking its newness. A great sign over the door told the world at large, and in no uncertain manner, that the Langford-Ralston Financial Corporation was doing business below. The two windows were a dainty display of the show-card writers' art, hanging above and

around a miniature fruit ranch, complete with trees, house and barns in the one, and a miniature townsite in the making in the other. "Come in and Talk It Over," said one card. "Nothing in Land We Cannot Buy for You. Nothing We Cannot Sell," proclaimed another. "If you have tried all the others and have not got what you want--try Us." "Better Save Yourself Time and Worry by Trying Us First." "The Recognised, Reliable Okanagan Land Agents." "Our Time and Our Cars are at Your Disposal."

In addition to these were dozens of neat cards in plain letters and figures, offering wonderful values in Ranches, Wild Land, Homes and New Sub-divisions, the real owners of which the Langford-Ralston Financial Corporation could no more than make a guess at.

It was not long before the windows were attracting the early morning passers-by in the dozens.

Someone telephoned McWilliams, who came along and had a look at the display. He went away in high dudgeon to inform Somerville, Brixton, McIntyre and the rest of them that the new outfit had been getting next to their customers and had succeeded in getting the listings of almost every piece of property in the Valley.

Meantime, Phil and Jim were comfortably ensconced in easy chairs behind their new desks, each smoking a fine brand of cigar, but busy poring over a profusion of maps and blue-prints, in a belated endeavour to get some notion--however indistinct--of how the land lay according to numbers. They knew where Kickwillie Loop was; they could go blindfold to Blear-eyed Monaghan's Ranch, or Mudflats, or Sunset Avenue, but when it came to driving out to, say, lot 21 sub-division 16, district lot 218--well, that was quite another matter and called for deep and urgent concentration.

Jim kept his brand-new, high-tension, low-g geared stenographer busy typing and re-typing forms of Agreements for Sale and Deeds, in anticipation of later business.

Several prominent citizens came in to compliment them on their enterprise and to wish them good luck. The numbers of these well-wishing citizens increased as the news went round, and the Langford-Ralston stock of cigars and cigarettes decreased correspondingly, but the new concern had the pleasure of listing at least a dozen pieces of property direct from the owners.

An alarming piece of information vouchsafed itself just before lunch time, when, for the first time, the bank book of the Financial Corporation was consulted. Out of their original six thousand dollars, there were three thousand left.

"Holy Mackinaw!" breathed Phil, in prayer to some Esquimo god.

"Great Andrew Carnegie!" muttered Jim, wetting the glowing end of his cigar and putting it carefully into his upper vest pocket for future use when a client might be around.

Receipts and jotted notes were gathered together and hastily consulted, but they were unable to reduce their outlay or swell the credit side of their bank book.

"Good job we noticed it in time!" grinned Jim.

"I should say so! And we have to start in right now with a proper system; card indices, loose-leaf, cash book, ledgers, everything up to the minute. You're the lawyer, Jim, the silver tongue, the eloquently persuasive. Me for the books, the financing, the adjusting and the accounts;--with a help out on the buying and selling end when required."

"Right-o,--that's the stuff!"

And so it was arranged.

At noon Phil ran over to break the news to Sol Hanson that he had quit,--for a season at least.

The big, good-natured fellow almost shed tears at the news, although he had known that Phil would be leaving him one of these days--but, as he had fancied, for the purpose of ranching, not buying and selling property.

"Well, I been guess you ain't no fool, Phil. You know your business pretty good. Jim too! You make dam-fine real-estate ginks."

He scratched his head.

"Only I been left with one hell-job. Can't get nobody take your place. You dam-fine blacksmith all shot toboggan to the devil."

"Say, old man!" put in Phil. "I know a man that will suit you down to the ground."

"What you call him?" asked Sol.

"Smiler Hanson!"

Sol laughed.

"Aw, go on! You crazy! Smiler dam-fine little rotter all right, but he no good, no work, headpiece all shot toboggan to blazes."

"Don't you believe it? Why, he only wants to be given a show."

Sol shook his head.

"Shake away!" continued Phil. "Smiler's getting a big fellow and he is as strong as a bull. He is simply foolish over horses. Why--I can't chase him out of this place at times."

As Phil was going on with his eulogy, the head of the grinning Smiler popped round the door-post.

"Hi, there;--come here!" shouted Phil.

Smiler came in, tattered and unkempt as usual, but wiry and sinewed, as anyone could see at a glance. A different Smiler from what he was only a short year ago before he was regularly fed! The open air and the unfettered life, in conjunction with Mrs. Sol Hanson's wholesome fare had worked miracles on his constitution.

"I'll bet you five dollars, Sol, that this young rascal can make a horse shoe right now from a straight piece of steel, and do it better too than a whole lot of journeymen blacksmiths that I know."

"Aw, go on!" laughed Sol.

"Why, man!--that kid's been in and around this shop for years. Everybody thinks he is crazy and calls him crazy. How could he be anything else but crazy? with such a bunch of mean thought from his fellow men to contend with? You would be crazy yourself under similar circumstances.

"Give the boy one real chance."

"Forget it! No good!" said Sol.

Phil took out his purse and pulled out a bill.

"All right!--there's my five dollars. Cover it,--and we'll prove it right here."

"I take you!" cried Sol.

"And if Smiler makes a tolerable shape at it, you'll start him in?"

"You bet!"

"Here, Smiler! You show Sol how to make a horse shoe."

Smiler stood and grinned, shaking his head in the direction of Sol, who had always shown a tradesman's rooted objection to anyone handling any of his tools at any time and had more than once chased Smiler out of the premises for touching a hammer.

"It is all right, son! Sol won't say a word. Go to it; and, if you do it right that ten dollars there are yours and you'll get working here with Sol all the time and will make plenty of money."

Smiler threw off his ragged coat in a second, tied on one of Phil's old aprons in a business-like way, rolled up his sleeves--what was left of the lower parts of them--picked up a piece of steel, thrust it into the heart of the fire and started the bellows roaring.

And in time--before the bewildered face of Sol Hanson--he took out the almost white-hot iron, tested it, hammered it and turned it, with the skill of a master-craftsman, heeding no one; all intent on his work. He chiselled it, he beat it, he turned it and holed it, then tempered the completed shoe, handing it over finally with a crooked smile on his begrimed and sweat-glistening face.

Sol was positively dazed. When he did come to a true realisation of what Smiler had done, he sprang on him, hugging him and god-blessing him until Phil began to fear for the youngster's personal safety.

"Well," said Phil, picking up the ten dollars and handing them over to Smiler, "I guess, Sol, you have found your man?"

"Found him! You bet your life, I got him. Yiminy crickets!--and I make him one dam-fine fellow now, I tell you what. He my son now--my little Smiler."

And Smiler smiled, as Phil hurried back to relieve Jim at the office.

When Phil got back there, he found Jim on tenterhooks of excitement awaiting his arrival, for he had had a prospective buyer just off the train, who wanted Jim to drive him out to inspect a few ranches in the neighbourhood, immediately after he had a wash-up and some lunch at the Kenora; and Jim had been fearing that Phil would not get back in time.

"He's a farmer from the Prairies--so I mean to land him. They are the kind that ha'e the bawbees!"

"Have the what?" asked Phil; for despite his long contact with Jim, the latter was constantly springing a Scotticism on him that he had not heard before.

"Bawbee, man!--sillar,--ha'pennies,--one cent pieces!"

"A fat lot of good one cent pieces will do when it comes to buying a ranch in British Columbia."

Jim threw up his hands at Phil's apparent lack of wit, then he laughed and rushed across the road for a bite of lunch at a small restaurant.

He was back in a few minutes and before his prairie farmer returned.

Jim introduced the farmer to his partner as "Mr. Phil Ralston, one of the most shrewd financial men in the West," loaded him up with cigars, then got him into his Catteline-Harvard, drove him slowly past every other real-estate office in town, then out into the country. He took so long on that trip that Phil was on the point of closing up for the day ere he returned.

He was bubbling over with excitement and perspiring freely. He clapped Phil on the back, then sat down with a show of collapse.

"Come on! Tell me all about it, you clam."

"Great Scot!" said Jim, "and they say that it is a 'lotus eater's' job selling real-estate. I've shown

that hard-headed old son-of-a-gun nine ranches this afternoon. I've talked climate, position, irrigation, soil, seed and production for six solid hours. I would rather write a 'dime novel' every day in my life, than this." He mopped his brow. "It is a great life if you stay with it!"

"Did you sell him?" asked the matter-of-fact Phil.

"Did I? Sure I did! I've sold old Eddie Farleigh's sixty acres for thirty thousand dollars cash--one of the best orchards in the Valley. The old fellow is coming in to-morrow morning to close the deal."

"But can you deliver the goods? We really haven't the listing of it. It is one of Peter Brixton's."

"We'll make a bold try at it. Thirty thousand dollars is Peter's listed price, and old Eddie got the property years ago for a song. I happen to know he is extremely anxious to clean up and go to his daughter at the Coast.

"Five per cent of thirty thousand dollars is fifteen hundred dollars. Peter is a good-natured sort. He isn't going to turn down half or even a third of that commission."

Jim took up the telephone and got into communication with Peter Brixton then and there.

"Hullo! 276? This is the Langford-Ralston Company. That you, Peter?"

"Yes!"

"Have just been commissioned by eastern capital to purchase a sixty acre ranch. Got anything in sight?"

"Yes!--there's the Metford Place on the B.X."

"No good, Peter! They want it in the Coldcreek district. I have several good prospects in view, but I rather fancy Eddie Farleigh's ranch. I hear it is up for sale."

"It is too!"

"What does he want for it?"

"Thirty thousand,--a third cash, the balance in twelve and twenty-four months!"

"Uhm! She's kind of high. Still,--it might be worth considering. What commission do you want out of it?"

"It's a five per cent deal, and I'm willing to split it with you;--if you'll do the same when the shoe's on the other foot."

Peter did not tell Jim that the actual price set by Farleigh was twenty-eight thousand dollars and whatever could be got above that figure would be reckoned as the broker's commission.

Jim thought for a moment. Again the voice came.

"Or I'll take a third and you get two-thirds. I'll get the double portion any time I sell any of yours."

"That's a go!--the agent who sells gets two-thirds of the commission. Well!--run down, Peter, and give me the exact lay-out and maybe we can close the deal. I want to put the sale through first thing in the morning and it has to show as coming direct through the Langford-Ralston Company."

"Right! I'll come now," answered Brixton, putting up the receiver.

Jim's grin was a treat to behold as he jumped up and caught Phil by both arms.

"Two-thirds of fifteen hundred dollars,--one thousand dollars! Oh, boy!--we're on the upgrade already."

The prairie farmer would have been inclined to question the wisdom of his purchase had he seen the Langford-Ralston Financial Corporation hopping round its office like a pair of dancing bears. But he did not see it, and, what was more to the point, he never rued his bargain.

CHAPTER XXIII

So Deep in Love am I

It was not long before Phil and Jim found out that although few people in Vernock were willing to lend hard cash, many of them were friendly, even indulgent, and quite ready to encourage any honest enterprise, and brotherly enough to give a new man a fighting chance.

A week had not gone before outsiders began to see that Jim Langford had at last found himself. He did not develop, but rather he utilised what he had always possessed, the powers of winning confidence, of persuasion, of argument; combined with a shrewdness for sizing up his clients and knowing instinctively what they wanted, what they were prepared to go in price, and consequently, what to show them.

And Phil was not a whit behind, for the spirit of emulation was rife in him. He had been born

with a burning ambition to succeed, and now that he saw a lifetime chance, he exerted all his power of mind and body to take advantage of it to the full.

The banking account of the Langford-Ralston Company did not fall lower than that consternation mark of three thousand dollars, and it rapidly increased with the advent of the spring sunshine and the incoming settlers who in ever-increasing numbers had heard of the fertility and the climatic perfection of the Valley; and hearing, came to see; and seeing, succumbed to Dame Nature's seductiveness. Sales increased; so did the new company's listings. So rapidly did the Langford-Ralston Financial Corporation go ahead that the other real-estate men in town began to sit up and gasp. They had given the "mushroom outfit" anything from a week to six weeks in which to crumple up, but they rapidly withdrew the time-limit, contenting themselves with wait-and-see, wise-acre nods of their heads.

For the first time since leaving his home, Jim took it upon himself to communicate with his father, who was the head of an old firm of Edinburgh Solicitors and Lawyers. True, his method of communication was somewhat impersonal, consisting as it did solely of a continuous weekly bombardment of pamphlets on the fruit-growing possibilities of the Okanagan Valley, with the Langford-Ralston Corporation writ large on the advertisements thereon; printed dodgers of subdivisions and ranching first mortgage propositions issued by the Company every few days; and copies of the *Vernock and District Advertiser* containing the Langford-Ralston Company's regular full-page advertisement.

"Why don't you write to him?" asked Phil one day.

Jim laughed.

"Because I know him!" he answered. "If I wrote to him, he'd smell a rat. But the constant drip will have its effect, laddie. His firm has money by the train-load to lend out on good security,--but the security has got to be good. It won't be long before he is making inquiries through some of the banks. Why, man!--I know that Fraser & Somerville placed a quarter of a million dollars for him on first mortgages a year or so ago. Why shouldn't we have it?"

In response to Phil's peculiar look, Jim went on.

"Oh, ay!--you may glower. I know I've been a rotter, and I don't think I deserve any confidences from my old dad. I never played the game with him. All the same, I'm not going to crawl to him for all the money on earth. I've come to myself at last and I mean to show him I am still worthy to be called his son,--as the Good Book says. If he is interested in our legitimate business and cares to get in touch in a business-like way, we'll be mighty glad to show him what we've got and accept his fatted calf, or should I say, golden calf, with becoming dignity."

"Well, Jim,--you're lucky," reflected Phil. "I doubt if my father knows now that I am alive. He was a mighty good dad to me, but he doesn't seem to have allowed much for youthful impetuosity and indiscretion. Evidently, he has never forgiven me for refusing to accept a new mother on a moment's notice. You may say what you like about Brenchfield, but if it hadn't been for the kindness of his father and mother, God only knows what and where I would have been to-day."

"Yes, Sentimental Tommy! And you paid all of it back, a thousand per cent,--so forget that part! A fat lot Graham Brenchfield did for you, personally."

"Oh, yes!--but still--"

"Oh, you make me tired with your excuses for that coyote;--forget it! But, if your dad was so good to you when you were a kiddie, for the life of me I'm darned if I can understand where his paternal instinct has got to. If I had a laddie,--God save me for indulging in such a fantasy!--but, if I did have, I'd go after him if he were in hell itself. Think o' it, Phil! Your own flesh and blood, of the woman you have loved well enough to make your wife--the combination transfused--to grow, and develop, and work out to prove before God and his fellow-man the wisdom or folly of the choice the father and mother of him made when they took each other for better or worse."

"Yes,--when you put it that way, Jim, it makes a man think hard of the tremendous seriousness of the step."

Jim grinned again.

"You needn't worry, anyway. If you keep on as you are doing, you'll win the best and bonniest lassie in this Valley."

Phil quickly changed the subject, but a tell-tale ruddiness added to the confirmations that Jim had been accumulating along that particular line.

"Talking about my dad, Jim!" reverted Phil, "it is strange the longings I have at times to see him and to patch up the old breach, even if I might never be permitted to see him again after that. But,--oh, well!--what's the use? I won't trouble inquiring about him now--it is too late. And I guess he isn't worrying about me. All the same, I'd give my right hand to see my little sister, Margery. When I ran away, she was a bright, mischievous, fair-haired, little girl, just starting school. She and I were the great chums. She will be growing quite a young lady now.

"I fight the feeling, Jim,--but some day I fear the pulling from her end will be too strong for me and I'll go back and hunt them up--if only to stand in the shadows and watch her pass."

Jim looked at his watch and got up to fulfil a business engagement.

"Well, old man!--I never had a little sister. If I had had, I fancy I wouldn't be here to-day. So

that's how it goes. But we have a good year ahead of us to buy and sell and loan for a fare-you-well; to make a stake as big as all the others have made together in the last three or four years. And we are going to do it, too. I feel it in the air.

"I don't know what will happen after that--some of the big fellows, Royce Pederstone, Brenchfield and Arbuthnot are overloaded now, but they keep on mortgaging and buying more. The newer ranchers here have planted their orchards and are sitting still for the 'seven lean years' till their orchards begin to bear, instead of getting busy with truck stuff, poultry and pigs to keep them going. Some of them are feeling the pinch already, for it costs like the devil to live here--especially the way these fellows insist on living. They also are mortgaging heavily. Man, if any kind of a slump came in realty, or a shortage of money, and the banks shut down and the money-lenders started to draw in their capital, there would be a veritable stampede.

"I give it a year, boy; then, if we've got the money, that's the time to put it in, for, a few years more and all these baby orchards about the Valley will be paying for themselves over and over again.

"Half of the ranchers in the meantime are going to get cold feet, because they won't be able to get their stuff to the paying markets, while, if they only organised--as they undoubtedly will do later--they could get their fruit anywhere and at a big price, too.

"But--that's where we can get in."

And as Jim went off, Phil sat for a while thinking--a dreamer and a visionary--until he was jolted out of his reverie by the pressing inquiries of his recently augmented staff.

One day the inevitable, according to Jim's notion of things, happened. A letter arrived, bearing the heading of Langford & Macdonald, Solicitors and Attorneys, Princes Street, Edinburgh, making inquiry as to the possibility of placing trust funds on gild-edged first mortgage security, requesting bank references and inviting correspondence from the Langford-Ralston Financial Corporation.

The letter was straight business. There were no paternal greetings; not a word to suggest that either Langford had ever known of the other's existence.

Jim, with his usual long-headedness, insisted on Phil replying to it and signing it on behalf of the firm.

Phil demurred.

"Why, man alive!--give me credit for knowing my own father. Do you suppose he doesn't know all about us already?--more than we know ourselves. Just go ahead and answer that. Doing it that way will humour him.

"It is by far the biggest thing we have landed yet. Unlimited capital to lend on good security is a grand foundation for a Financial Corporation. But we have to see that everything is absolutely right--absolutely straight--absolutely secure. One mistake with Langford & Macdonald and that's the end of it."

And the banks knew of the stabilising of the Langford-Ralston Company almost before the L. R. Company realised it themselves, and they vied with one another for the privilege of handling their bank account, putting inquiring clients in touch with them direct as a sop for future business. What the banks did became the fashion in town. And in such days as the West was then passing through, that meant much indeed, for everyone was thinking, talking, handling and dreaming Real Estate. Even Percival DeRue Hannington forgot his former hurt and gave them his business. All were making money--nobody lost. They bought at a price and sold for more, and the difference in value was debited and redebited to old Mother Earth. Prosperity vaunted itself in rolling wheels, cigar smoke, late orgies and rare wines; costly winter trips to the South; dress, diamonds, foolishness and mining and oil stocks.

Yet through that wildest year of all, Phil and Jim stood firm to the principles of their business--they bought and sold for their clients, they loaned on first-class security--they paid as they went and they banked their commissions. Not once, but a hundred times, could they have doubled their savings by speculation with a quick turn-over, but they held fast; and their savings increased faster than their wildest dreams had ever pictured.

They did more advertising than all the others combined. Their staff of salesmen and stenographers increased in numbers by rapid jumps. They had correspondents in every city of importance in the Dominion and the United States. They had the best stand in town. Anyone coming in by train could not fail to see it and could not fail to be impressed by its importance and apparent prosperity, even when they had not been previously apprised of it.

When early June arrived with its continuous sunshine, when the older ranches revelled in miles of pink and white apple blossom, when the small, wild sunflowers spread themselves like a sea of gold over the hills and valleys bursting in fairy splendour even through the hard roads and the rock fissures; when the air was redolent with the hypnotising, cloying sweetness of Nature's perfume from a hundred million blossoms and charged with the melody of her gaily bedecked feathered choristers,--Eileen Pederstone came back to her beloved "Valley of Tempestuous Waters."

In the six short months she had been away, she had written only occasionally to Phil and then it had been superficially, for she was not one given to expressing her feelings in pen and ink.

And Phil, in the rush of the new enterprise, had been something of a desultory correspondent.

He had refrained from mentioning business in any of his letters to her--despite her many questions to him regarding his endeavours and his progress--intending, thereby, to spring the greater surprise when she should return. But he might have saved himself such thoughts, for Eileen was fully posted on every move he and Jim had made.

She came in on them one day with the brightness and impetuosity of the June sun bursting through the early morning clouds over Blue Nose Mountain, causing everything but the sun she emulated to stand still for half an hour and breathe in the added sweetness in the atmosphere.

All the hunger in Phil's being welled up at the very sight of her; smart, neat, healthy, radiant, vivacious, and pretty as the bursting red roses on her bosom.

He caught her two hands in his and looked down at her; and as she gave a little pleasure-laugh far down in her throat, he almost drew her up to his breast, when a cough from Jim startled him back to the cold truth that he was in the open office of the Langford-Ralston Financial Corporation, among half a dozen salesmen and as many stenographers.

Jim and Phil escorted Eileen into their private office, and there they fired back their answers to her queries until she gasped in sheer bewilderment at the tremendous success of their daring enterprise.

"And, oh, boys!--you're making good. I knew you would. Glad!--I'm so glad, because you are just like two big brothers of mine."

"Now, Eileen," put in Jim, "kindly dispense with the 'brother' stuff. You can't tell me that you are going to be a mere sister to both of us."

She blushed.

"Does he know?" she queried at Phil.

"He thinks he does," said Phil. "I haven't told him a thing."

"Oh, haven't you?" remarked Jim.

"Shall we tell him, Phil?"

"Doesn't look as if he required any telling,--but go on, fire away!"

"Well!" she commenced, nodding her head and putting out her lips, "some day--Phil and I--we two--both of us--"

"Yes! Yes! Go on!" hurried Jim in mock excitement.

She sighed and sat back.

"That's all! Just that, Jim!"

"Did you get it?" asked Phil, laughing.

Jim nodded quietly for a moment, then he bent over, with an expression of almost motherly softness in his big, rugged face. He got Eileen's hand in his left hand and Phil's in his right.

"The best of God's good luck!" he said quietly.

He looked at his watch. "I have an appointment at three o'clock.

"Why don't you take the lady for a spin, Phil?"

"Would you like to come, Eileen?" asked Phil.

"Would I? Oh, boy!"

Jim went over to her and put his hand on her shoulder as an older brother would do. He tilted up her chin, bent down and kissed her on the cheek.

"You don't mind, old Phil!" he said.

He left her and jumped over to Phil with a laugh and a shout.

"And you beat him to it, laddie!--money, duplicity, hum-bug and all! You beat him! Man,--you're great!"

And he was into the outer office, out on the street and away in his car before they could properly grasp his meaning.

Phil and Eileen followed out shortly afterwards, out into the sunshine, and soon they were driving up the steep hill from the town, leading to the Kelowna highway. It was some time before either spoke.

"I wonder what Jim meant by the remark he made when he left us, Eileen?"

"Don't wonder about anything just now, boy,--excepting me. Don't let us think about a thing that isn't pleasant and in keeping with the glorious day. We can do our 'trouble talks' on the way back."

She snuggled up close to her big companion who, as they reached the top of the hill, opened up and sent the car speeding along. At one of the sharp turns, he slowed up and stopped to admire the ever-changing delight of the scenery.

"Did you ever see anything so beautiful?" exclaimed Eileen, "and yet some folks want to go away from here when they have a holiday."

They were on the thin line of roadway which was cut half-way on the face of the hillside. All the

ranges were a spread of golden sunflowers; away below, sheer three hundred feet down, the blue waters of the Kalamalka Lake reflected the blue, cloudless sky, while here and there it seemed to throw back the sun's rays in a golden spray.

On the other side of the water, as far as the eye could scan--until it rested again on the background of hills of gold, purple and green--the long, regular lines of old orchard-land shone a riot of pink and white. The air was laden with the perfume of bursting flowers.

Far up the Lake, alongside which the road ran in a brown, winding thread, were little wooded and grassy promontories sitting like islands upon the water and suggesting the last peaceful reservation of all the fairies, wood-elves and brownies who might be crowded out from the cities and the busy lands now over-run and exploited by the unpoetical humans.

A little, warm hand placed itself over Phil's as he held the steering wheel and it roused him from his reverie. He gazed at Eileen's upturned face. He put his arms about her, drew her closer to him and kissed her on the lips.

She laughed--that same little, happy laugh away down in her throat, then she clapped her hands with pleasure.

"My, but I'm glad!" she cried. "My Phil is a dreamer after all."

"Didn't you know that before, girlie?"

"No! I always hoped--and fancied sometimes--but I know now and I am ever so glad about it." Her face became solemn.

"Phil,--you won't ever let money, and business, and success steal your love to dream away from you?"

"I should say not! Did you think I would?"

"Oh,--so many men lose their love for the beautiful things, for poetry, music, pictures, pretty scenery---

"And their sweethearts," put in Phil.

"Yes,--sometimes. But more often their wives. They do not lose their love exactly, but rather they forget to use it in their over-absorption in business, and it gradually slips away from them like a child's belief in fairies and in Santa Claus."

Phil started up the car again and they bowled merrily along to the village of Oyama, the half-way rest between Vernock and Kelowna, at the division of the two lakes.

"Take Jim now," said Phil, continuing the line of thought, "I'll bet he believes in sprites, and ghosts, and Santa Claus, right to-day. He is the kind that never grows away from his boyhood."

"And why should he? His boyhood was doubtless the happiest period of his life, and he is just staying with it like a wise man."

Eileen sighed.

"Phil,--I wish Jim could get a real, nice sweetheart. Did you ever hear of him having one?"

"Never!--at least not a real one. Did you?"

"No! He doesn't seem ever to get any further with the young ladies than mere acquaintance. Yet I know lots--and nice girls, too--who would be glad to have a man like Jim."

"I guess he is just waiting on 'till the right girl comes along,' as the poet says. I hope she will prove worthy of him. His kind are so apt to get fooled at the finish. What shall we do with him when we get married, Eileen?"

Eileen blushed. "It is a hard problem, but we've just got to mother, and sister, and brother him until he gets settled."

"If he ever does!"

"If he doesn't, I am going to keep on mothering him--that's all. So it is up to you, Phil, to find him a real, nice girl."

"No, thanks! It has been a hard job finding one for myself."

"And you are quite satisfied?" she queried again, solemnly.

"Quite!"

"And you'll never grow tired of me?"

"Never! Why, dearie,--how could I?"

"Oh, I don't know! Men do, sometimes. I guess I am just foolish. But, if I don't measure up, you will promise to be lenient with me?"

"You'll always measure up with me, Eileen. It is my measuring up with you that I am afraid of."

"And if I don't just grasp things quickly;--if I can't climb the mountains of thought and progress as fast as you can,--you won't grow impatient?"

"No!"

"You'll wait for me, and help me over the boulders, and even if I wish to sit down and rest for a while, you'll sit down with me and rest also until I am ready to climb on? You won't run ahead--as so many husbands do--so far ahead that I shall not be able to catch up?"

"No, dearie, no! Your speed is just going to be my speed unless it is too much for me, and we'll both get up to the top of the hill together."

"Kiss me then, Phil,--and let us turn for home. I am happy at last,--just ever so happy."

"Eileen, I think I'd better come along and make my peace, et cetera, et cetera, with your dad," said Phil, as they neared Vernock again. "Does he know anything of our plans?"

"No, Phil! I have told him of our good friendship, but I have been waiting and waiting in the hope that a chance would come for us to talk to him when he was not absorbed, body, soul and spirit, in business and politics. But the time seems to get farther and farther off than ever. I guess you had better come along now.

"And don't I wish you could advise him to give up his silly notions for acquiring land. He might listen to you, Phil. You might be able to induce him to sell part of what he has in order to bolster up what remains. If a slump of any kind comes, he will be without a prop to lean on. No man has any right to involve himself in this way, no matter how good the ultimate prospects may look."

"I can't understand it, Eileen, for it appears to be a kind of contagious disease, attacking the ablest and otherwise most business-like men in the Province. Your father is by no means alone."

"I know; Mr. Brenchfield, Mr. Arbutnot, the Victoria and the Vancouver political gang,--they are all more or less in it the same way. I can't think what has come over them. The danger signals ahead stand out so brightly to me, although I may be wrong. I hope,--oh, I hope I am!

"They have got to think so much prosperity and progress that they have hypnotised themselves into believing that it is permanent. And they all imagine, whatever comes, that they will be able to see before the man in the street does and so be able to get out from under, leaving someone else with the load of unrealisable property."

"I am afraid, though, your dad would hardly listen to me. He would put any advice I might give him down to gratuitous impertinence and cubbish presumption."

Eileen sighed again.

"Don't you worry though, dearie! If the opportunity turns up I will speak my mind."

As they ran in at the gateway and up through the avenue of trees, they found John Royce Pederstone seated in a garden chair on the front lawn.

The old man's greeting to his daughter and to Phil was cordiality itself, for John Royce Pederstone was always a cheerful man, believing good of all whom he met, shutting his ears to all slander and quick to recognise enterprise and ability.

"Well, young man!--you've been making rapid progress since I saw you last," he remarked, by way of greeting.

"More ways than one," put in Eileen a little shyly.

Phil lost no time in stating his case in plain words to the politician. And his very plain words were what struck the responsive chords, for John Royce Pederstone was of all things a plain man. And the great pity of it all was that he had not stayed with plain blacksmithing or plain ranching.

So many men find out after the act that they have left the substance to chase the shadow.

John Royce Pederstone, however, had not yet come to the point of recognising this very great truth.

"What does my Eileen say to all this?" he asked, by way of answer.

"Eileen says, 'Ugh-huh!' daddy," she put in roguishly.

Royce Pederstone held out his hand and gripped Phil's, with a slightly tired smile.

"If my Eileen says, 'Ugh-huh!' my son, then 'Ugh-huh!' it is."

Eileen threw her arms round her father's neck and hugged him.

"I don't know anything much about you, Ralston, but your record is clean since you came here--despite some attempts to blacken it. I like your face--and if you can make my motherless girl happy when I'm gone, you'll have an old man's blessing.

"If you don't, though" (his blue eyes flashed temporary fire), "God help you! There have been more than one who wanted my Eileen, but I have told all of them that the choice of a man must be Eileen's.

"By the way, Phil,--is it true what they say,--that the Langford-Ralston Company buy and sell for everybody but themselves?"

"Yes,--quite true!" answered Phil.

The old man laughed. "Doesn't seem much like being very fond of their own cooking, Eileen."

"One doesn't have to eat what he cooks, daddy,--and somebody's got to cook."

"That's an old song of yours, girlie. But, seriously, Phil, you and Jim Langford could double and re-double your money if you only put it into some of the land you buy for others. You would save commission too, which is quite an item."

"Well, sir!--it is a policy we settled on when we started in, and it is a policy that has gained for us very many clients and has been the means of getting us considerable Old Country capital for

investment in first mortgages. If we had not been on this conservative basis, we should never have received the agency for Langford & Macdonald's wealthy clientele."

"You would never have needed it, man."

"But we are doing pretty well, and at the finish we shall be on top. That is more than every land speculator will be able to say when the finish comes."

"If we ever see it! But meantime, you could make your stake and be out of it. That's what I mean to do myself."

"Don't you think it is getting near to the time when one should start in unloading; at least when he should stop acquiring more? This has been a fairly long boom."

"Boom? Did you say boom? Man, alive!--this isn't a boom, it is the natural growth to real values. I saw this coming fifteen years ago. And it is good for a long time yet. Why!--this is an investment in industry. This is a Fruit Valley;--the best fruit growing country in British Columbia. This isn't a mushroom townsite proposition. You can't compare this with ordinary realty wild-catting."

"I agree with you, sir, and I guess my puny opinion does not carry much weight, but the unfortunate thing is that we are beginning to produce the fruit here in the Valley and the harvest is becoming greater and greater every year, but Mr. Apple Grower has not created an outlet for his production; he has no great organisation to market for him; no central control for his prices;--and the result is that for years--unless he wakes up--he is going to get a miserable pittance for his crop from travelling jobbers, or it is going to rot on his hands. He is going to suffer loss and possible bankruptcy if we can't hold up until he co-operates, unionises, and makes his own market and prices from a central control."

"All in due season, son, when the time comes. But that is away from buying and selling of land. Personally, I raise cattle, pigs, horses;--I never have any trouble finding a market."

"And trust me, when you see *me* getting quietly from under, follow suit and you won't go far wrong. I am not in Victoria with both eyes shut. The upgrade is absolutely good for three more years and the big prices will be next year. Get in when you can and make what you can. It is a great life!

"However, this doesn't interest Eileen a bit."

"Oh, yes it does!" she put in quickly.

"Well,--it is business, and we fellows oughtn't to talk shop in a lady's company."

"Phil,--you won't rob me of my little girl for a while yet? I require her badly when the House is sitting at Victoria. I'd like to have her with me next session at any rate."

"We had thought of eighteen months from now, daddy dear. Will that do?" inquired Eileen.

The old man's eyes brightened up and his ruddy cheeks curved in a smile.

"That will be just fine! I'll have eighteen months of you in which to get used to doing without you. And, who knows, maybe that is all the time I shall want."

"Now, daddy, don't say that. Besides, you won't be losing me; you'll just be finding Phil."

John Royce Pederstone put one arm on Phil's shoulder and the other round his daughter's slight waist, as he turned with them toward the house.

"Well, we'll have dinner and a glass of wine over it, anyway."

CHAPTER XXIV

The Landslide

The apple blossoms fell like flakes of snow; the sunflowers faded and were no more; the sun blazed on in all its radiant glory; the lakes stood in a glassy calm;--and still the rush and scramble went on--buying at a price and selling for more--still came the cry for more money on mortgage to cover up and extend, pulling conservative men into the gamble--their money providing the stake with no chance for them to win more than their seven or eight per cent. Prices soared; everyone lived within a multi-coloured bubble of prosperity.

The Langford-Ralston Financial Corporation became a corporation indeed. To do business with them was the rage of the Valley, for their work from end to end was business-like and honest. And even the thief and the crook like to do business with honest men.

Then came the Valley's harvest; the greatest harvest it had ever known; but, alas for the rancher, there was no market in which to place his produce. He was at the mercy of the jobber, the kerb-stone broker, the pedlar in fruit. He could not sell--he had to forward his merchandise on consignment to the nearest large centre and, in consequence, he often lost his entire shipment. Not only that, but at times was saddled with storage and freight charges to boot.

Little wonder he grew tired; little wonder he grumbled. Who, after all, could blame him for fathering thoughts that ranching was not all it was supposed to be?

Yet the land was the best in the country; the conditions for fruit growing--with a proper system of irrigation--unsurpassed in the Province; the climate, the surroundings for home-making, ideal.

It was simply the lull time in the era of progress; simply the time in between small things and things of magnitude; the time when the little man was liable to be forced to the wall and the big man would have to cling on despairingly; the time when organisation and brains would have to step in and take the reins.

Autumn faded and early winter promised with its damp fogs which, in the night time, froze quickly, covering houses, trees and fences with a white crystalline hoar which dropped like snow at the first faint blush of the next morning's sun. But oblivious of winter and without forebodings, men continued to buy at a price and sell for more.

The winter came, with its snow fence-high, and its cold north wind compressing the thermometer to twenty below and binding the earth as with an iron crust; the winter came with its days of dazzling sunshine and its cloudless skies over a pall of white; with its nights when great fleecy clouds scudded across the face of a brilliant moon, causing long shadows and streaks of pale light to chase each other across the white, frozen fields and over the undulating ranges;--but the majority of the men who lived by buying and selling heeded it not nor did they admire its beauties. Some were browsing in the warmer clime of California and those who remained behind sat in the comfort of their clubs, still buying at a price and selling for more, or planning their early spring campaigns.

Graham Brenchfield was in Los Angeles. John Royce Pederstone held office in Victoria, and Eileen--but for an occasional flying visit--remained with her father.

Phil and Jim--no longer the Swede's apprentice and the irresponsible, occasional drunk, but men whose opinions counted, whose lead was worth following, whose actions carried force--continued to paddle quietly and cautiously down the Stream of Conditions toward the Cataract of Consequences. Far away they could hear the roar of the rushing, falling waters which, so far, others failed or refused to hear.

With the first blink of spring, the old frenzy of the previous few years reasserted itself, and business in land and ranches and town property showed early signs of breaking all previous records.

The Langford-Ralston Company were in almost every transaction; but it was not until the blossoms were again on the trees that someone suddenly realised a strange fact.

The private-exchange girl in the L.-R. Company switched the call to Phil's desk.

"Hullo! Brixton talking. That you, Jim?"

"No, Pete! Jim's out. This is Ralston."

"Well,--I guess you'll do. Say!--what's the matter with that outfit of yours, anyway?"

"Don't know, Peter. Tell me, and I'll try to fix it."

"Oh, no, you won't! But why the devil don't you fellows buy some real-estate once in a while?"

"What have you got, Pete? Any snaps?"

"Come off the perch, Phil! You know what I'm gettin' at. Are you fellows trying to create a slump or some such damned thing?"

"No,--certainly not! That would be poor business for a real-estate agent."

"Well,--why the devil are you the bear in every transaction you put through? It didn't used to be that way. Every broker in town's been buying from you fellows all this year."

"Somebody's got to sell, if there's to be any buying. Now,--don't get rattled, Pete. It is up to you. Sell if you want to. Nobody will stop you."

Peter Brixton's voice grew more conciliatory.

"What do you fellows know, anyway? You might let me in on it. We've done lots of business together."

"We don't know a thing, Peter; just surmise. And everyone knows it, for we haven't hidden anything."

"That there's going to be a tightening up for a while?"

"Yes!"

"That it is coming soon?"

"No!"

"What then?"

"That it has come."

Peter laughed a little hilariously, then his laugh ended with a touch of nervousness.

"Say!--is that straight goods, Phil?"

"Just our private opinion, Pete!"

"Well,—I think you're about two years out in your guess, but I'm going to try a little selling just to be in the fashion. Thanks, old man!"

"You'd better hurry up then, Peter."

Phil had hardly hung up the receiver, when Jim rushed in, his rugged face full of excitement.

"Read that!" he shouted, thrusting a cablegram under Phil's nose. "By gad!--but we've been lucky; every client of ours has had a chance to sell. If he wouldn't do it, he has only himself to blame now."

The message was in code, with the interpretation scrawled underneath by Jim. It was from Jim's father's firm, Langford & Macdonald of Edinburgh.

"Extend no more loans in behalf this firm meantime. Informed Canadian Banks about to cease practice of extending credit on security of realty purchases. Letter follows."

Phil rose slowly and extended his hand to his partner.

"Jim, you're a wonder--a blooming wizard."

Jim grinned, but he was well pleased.

"If it hadn't been for your opinion, rammed well down my throat morning, noon and night, I guess the Langford-Ralston Financial Corporation would not be quite so well thought of after this comes out, as it will be in the light of the quiet but persistent advice it has given its clients. And to think of it--your father wires as if he were the absolute and only detector of this information, while it was your letter of six months ago that set him on the hunt for it and started him on his conservatism regarding loans in general."

Jim laughed.

"That's just my old dad's way, Phil. He knows who put him on to it and what's more, he knows we know. You never heard of a Scots business man admitting that his son knew anything he didn't--at least, admitting it to his son.

"How much money have we in the bank?"

Phil beckoned the accountant, who brought the desired information.

"Two hundred and fifty thousand, six hundred and twenty dollars."

"Great Scotland Yard! And all straight commissions on realty and loans. Isn't it a corker though, how it grows?"

"Well,—it represents a turn-over of over six million dollars one way and another. That's something any two-year-old firm might be proud of."

"And two years ago I was---You know what, Jim!"

"And two years ago I was Captain Mayne Plunkett of dime novel repute--or disrepute--with glazed pants and a celluloid collar."

"And Aunt Christina of 'Love Notes' fame," Phil reminded.

Jim put up his hand. "Hush! Let the dead bury their dead.

"But it beats the Dutch all the same how offers keep coming in on a man when he doesn't require them; yet, when he's nearly down and out, he can't even get a political speech to report."

"That's simple enough too, Jim. You know the reason; you have preached it in this business long enough.

"Think failure and you bring every brooding failure carrion-crow in the Universe to roost on the top rail of your iron bedstead. Think success, look success, live success,—and success walks in at your front door, while everyone helps you along the same way with each thought he gives your apparent success, even if his thought be simply one of envy."

"Yes!--and as you are aware, my one object in life when I was slightly younger was to be a successful novelist. But no publisher would look at me. Then I got my nose in on this penny-a-line Deadwood Dick stuff--which I shall never despise, for many a square meal I have had to fill a round hole off the fifty dollars a book they netted me.

"To-day I have a letter from the publishers of these same paper 'Horribles,' enclosing six of my poor, starved, mental offsprings. They are the pick of fifty which they say I have written."

Jim took off his hat and passed his fingers through his hair.

"Lord! I didn't know, Phil,—honest to goodness!--I didn't know I had written so many.

"They say these six, with a little toning up in language, a little toning down in cold-blooded murder and exclamatory remarks, would make ideal, cloth-bound books for boys, for Sunday School prizes and junior libraries. They offer me royalties on each if I execute the work for them under my real name."

"Aren't you going to take it on? I really think you should. It would give you a certain amount of literary permanency. I've told you all along that you ought to be doing nobler work in that line than ten-cent 'hair-raisers.'"

"Me? No, thanks! Captain Mayne Plunkett is as dead a deader as Aunt Christina. *Requiescat in pace.*"

He waved his hand in dismissal of the subject.

"On with the dance--let joy be unconfined."

"Phil," said Jim seriously, half an hour afterwards, "Royce Pederstone is going to come a terrible cropper over this business. He is mortgaged up to the neck and, singly or with some of the political gang, he is in almost every realty proposition we hear of."

"I know it. I've tried my best to make him see it, but he says if he doesn't have faith in the Valley, who will."

"But this isn't a question of faith;--it is a shortage of money and a tightening up of foreign capital chiefly."

"I've told him. I am worried sick over it. But he refuses to move."

"Let's send him a wire now," suggested Jim.

In five minutes the message in cipher was on the way.

"Definite information banks closing down immediately with loans on realty. Mortgagees not renewing. Advise prompt sale. Wire lowest prices."

The reply came in an hour and a half.

"Think information canard. Sell Remington Ranch eighty thousand dollars, Pedloe Ranch fifty thousand dollars, Bonnington Ranch forty thousand dollars."

Phil and Jim scoured the town, but there were no buyers at the figures, for they were rocket-high.

They wired again, quoting best offers, but no answer came that afternoon.

On the day following, Graham Brenchfield, stout and prosperous-looking as ever, stepped inside the office for the first time, as bold as brass too.

"Nice day, boys!" he shouted familiarly. "Would like to see you two for a minute."

To Phil's inquiring eyes, he appeared slightly flustered.

"Come in here!" said Jim, beckoning him to the inner office, where Phil followed, closing the door behind him.

"You fellows have a pretty fine lay-out here," the Mayor began, chewing at his cigar.

"Pretty fine!"

"Guess you've got us all skinned now, Phil. Wouldn't like to take me in on that old fifty-fifty proposition?" he inquired sarcastically.

"If you have come in on any funny stuff," answered Phil, rising, "then you'd better get outside. We haven't the time for it."

"Shucks! Don't get sore! I don't want to make you mad to-day. I've had a scrap with the bank this morning and I'm going to make them sit up for a while and guess."

"That is quite a big proposition."

"All the better! I hear you folks have lots of money to loan?" he queried.

"Yes!--and what?" put in Jim.

"I wish to borrow some."

"Yes!"

"I'm paying eight percent, with first-class security."

"Ugh-huh!"

"I want forty thousand dollars for two years."

"Ay!"

"Can I have it?"

"No!"

Brenchfield looked sidelong at Jim, then at Phil; and back again at Jim.

"Good Lord! You can have the best ranch in the country as security."

"On second mortgage?"

"Sure! Why not? The first mortgage don't amount to a hill of beans. You could buy it out any old time."

"No, thanks! Not to-day! Man, but you've got your nerve! What do you think we are, anyway?--a charity institution?" growled Jim.

Brenchfield flushed, but he swallowed his anger.

"Would the bank loan you on second mortgage?" pursued Jim.

"No!--guess not!"

"Well,--neither will the Langford-Ralston Company."

"I'll give you ten percent."

"Not if you made it twenty percent."

Brenchfield sat in silence for a moment. Suddenly he seemed to make a resolve.

"Will you lend me forty thousand dollars on first mortgage on my Redmans Ranch?"

Jim gasped, and Phil sucked with his lips, for the Redmans Ranch was Brenchfield's one best bet; it was one of the finest and largest ranches on that side of the Okanagan Lake.

Jim winked to Phil.

"Would the bank lend you forty thousand dollars on it?" asked Phil.

"Sure!" braved the Mayor. "They'd be tickled to death to do it."

Phil got up.

"I guess you'd better make friends with them and get their loan. We haven't any desire for the name of Graham Brenchfield on our books;--it wouldn't look good."

The Mayor jumped up, his face livid.

"What's that?" he cried. "You--you would say that to me who could squeeze you like this---"

"No good! You tried hard to do it several times, but it wouldn't work."

"Haven't you got a say in this, Langford?"

"Yes!--and my say's the same as Phil's."

"By God! I'll fix both of you good and plenty before I'm through. You--you pair of Real Estate sharks!"

Jim pounced on him and pinned him against the door before he could say another word. Brenchfield was impotent.

"Another word o' that, and I'll bang your heid through the panel," exclaimed Jim, rising as usual in his anger to his beloved native tongue.

Brenchfield quieted down, lamblike, and Jim released him.

He spoke to Jim and pointed his finger at Phil.

"You wouldn't feel so mighty bad about what I say, if you knew you had a ticket-of-leave jailbird for a partner."

"Yes, you dirty, black-mailing thief!" answered Jim. "I know--and if you open your trap here or anywhere else, I'll put you where you belong, whether Phil agrees to it or not,--see!"

"You're broke, Brenchfield. The bank has got you, and got you good. They'll show you what squeezing is; damn you for what you are!"

"Here's your hat! Get out! And, by Heck!--as I open the door for you,--smile; for heaven's sake, smile, and delude the staff that we've had a nice, genial, conversational love-feast."

But Mayor Brenchfield's jaunty air had departed. He tried hard to appear unconcerned as he hurried away, but the smile was frozen at the tap and refused to turn on.

"Things are getting lively," remarked Jim. "Here are some more!"

The outer office was filled with inquirers.

All morning Phil and Jim were kept busy turning prospective money buyers down.

The news of the banks' new attitude regarding the advancing of money on the security of realty had spread quickly. Property values flopped like a house of cards and interest rates soared sky-high.

At the end of the week, Eileen's father telegraphed his acceptance of the offers made for his property the previous Monday. But these offers were already withdrawn, and even ridiculous prices were hard to get, as everyone was keen on selling and no one at all anxious to purchase.

It was the old story, which had repeated itself time and again in almost every new town and settlement on the American Continent. Someone had to bear the burden of it at the finish. No one was particularly anxious to be that one. All were scrambling to get out from under. Mother Earth and Father Money had put their feet down, as they always do, sooner or later.

In the midst of the excitement, Phil and Jim had a strange visitor. For the first time to their knowledge, he was Canadianised in appearance. His slippers were substituted for boots, his loose-fitting clothes were in the discard for a second-hand suit of European model, several sizes too big for him, and he was minus his pig-tail.

At first glance, Jim was unable to recognise him, then he laughed.

"Good land, Phil! See what the breeze has blown in. Ah Sing!"

"How-do, Ah,--or is it, Sing!"

"Ya! You lember me,--Ah Sing! Me allee same Canadian."

The Chinaman was brazen as brass. But evidently he had something on his mind.

"Me no work any more lanch. Bossee man no likee Chinaman!"

"I don't blame him!" answered Jim, across the polished counter.

"Me go back next week my old job. Me go back work in big bank. Me be janitor. Me washee window, washee floor; watchman allee night-time,--see!"

"You be heap scared, Sing! Devil he get you in bank."

"No,--me no scared! Me bling three, four black cat. Me losem pig-tail,--me Canadian,--me no scared no more."

"Canadian,--but still hanging on to the black cat theory,--eh! That's just typical of what we have to suffer, Phil, in this country."

"Well, the bank has a lot to answer for. Man, Phil, but it would serve them rightly if they got let in some day, employing that kind of labour when they could get decent white if only they cared to pay the price."

"Sing!--what you want? We heap busy."

"I catchem letter my uncle,--see!"

He handed a paper to Jim which was brushed over with black Chinese characters.

"Maybe you are a Canuck, Sing, but I'm no blooming Chinaman. What does this say?"

"I catchem this letter from China to-day. He say allee place my wiffee and my mama live, rain come down allee time. No come down water."

Ah Sing's face was solemn as a priest's.

"It come down blood--pigs' hair, too; one, two feet deep, all over. Heap bad! I want catchem money send my uncle so he, and my wiffee, my mama, all go away other place."

"If I no send, they die,--see! I need one hundled dollar. I no have him. You give me one hundled dollar. I pay back one, two, thlee month after I work bank."

Jim shook his head.

"Yes!--you givem me. I pay back, sure!"

"No, siree,--not a darned cent! Your uncle, he fool you, Sing."

Sing paid no attention to the remark.

"You no givem?"

"No!"

"All lightee. I guess me tly Mayor Blenchfield. He know me heap good. Maybe he lendem."

And off he went.

"A fat chance he has of getting a hundred dollars from Brenchfield at this stage of the game," exclaimed Jim.

"But what's the crazy lunatic's idea, anyway?" asked Phil.

"Oh, this raining pigs' hair and blood stuff is an old gag. Something like the Spanish prisoner business. It is just a put-up job by relatives in China to get money out of their superstitious friends over here. They play on one another's credulity for a fare-you-well."

"And he fancies he is now a Canadian. Gee!--but we're the easy marks in this country:--Chinks, Japs, Hindoos, Doukhobors, niggers and God only knows what else. It sure is the melting pot. But some of them will have a great time melting,--believe me!"

Phil went back to his desk and opened up the day's mail. In it there was a letter from Eileen, full of love, but overloaded with sorrow, for it contained the disquieting news that her father had been taken suddenly ill in the House and had had to be conveyed home. The doctors at Victoria had recommended a speedy return to the Valley, and Eileen and her father were taking that advice and following by the next day's train.

Phil drove down to meet them on arrival, and he was terribly shocked to see the change that had come over the recently hale, hearty, healthy, ruddy-complexioned old rancher and politician. He seemed absolutely broken down and full of anxiety to be in his own home. He talked all the way there in a most disjointed manner regarding his property and his business affairs, which to Phil was anything but reassuring, for John Royce Pederstone, although careless in regard to many things, was for the most part shrewd and at all times polished, connected and logical in his speech and argument.

Poor little Eileen was broken-hearted. Phil tried hard to make light of her father's condition, but she remained inconsolable; he endeavoured to convince her that business affairs might really not be half so bad as they seemed, but it was against his own personal opinion, consequently it was unconvincing, and Eileen was not deceived.

"It isn't any good, boy!" she remarked sadly, as they sat together. "It is just as bad as it can be. Everything he has is held as security by the bank. He is in it also with property in Vancouver, Victoria, New Westminster and Prince Rupert. I have gone through it--and it is absolutely hopeless. There is nothing left for him in honour to do but to assign everything. This house and ranch is all that will be left, because it was made over to me over a year ago--but it will have to go, too."

"Oh, no, it won't! They can't touch it if it is yours."

"Phil, boy!--do you think I would hold it if daddy owed a cent? Shame for you!"

"But I tell you, dearie, it would be madness to throw this place in. It wouldn't save your dad any, for it isn't nearly enough."

Eileen simply shook her head sadly.

"It is no good! If I let this go, it will mean so much less that poor daddy will owe. And that will be something, after all.

"Eileen Pederstone means to be able to hold her head up, and she could never do it if she clung on to this."

"Have you any idea how much he would require to tide things over, Eileen?"

"I am not sure, but with this place sold even at a sacrifice, maybe a hundred thousand dollars more might stop the gap till the pendulum swings back a little. And--it might not! It might simply be throwing good money after bad."

"Eileen,--Jim and I have made two hundred and fifty thousand dollars between us in cold cash. It is in the bank, thanks to you and the promise you got me to make when we started in. Half of that money is mine. I don't require it. Won't you let me come into this; it means you and me anyway in the finish. Your father can secure me in any way he likes. My money would satisfy the bank's claim and steady his holdings. Won't you let me do this for you and your father?"

"And leave you with a lot of unsaleable property instead of hard cash? No, Phil,--absolutely no! And if you make this offer to my dad, it will mean the end for you and me, for I could never feel otherwise towards you than that I had in some way been bought."

"Eileen!" remonstrated Phil, hurt at her words.

She burst into tears and hid her face on his shoulder.

"Oh,--I just can't bear it. I hardly know what I have been saying. I didn't mean it quite that way, Phil. But you must not suggest putting your money into this. People would never finish talking over it."

"Yet you were willing to take me, Eileen, when your father's position looked secure as the country itself and I had hardly one nickel to rub against another."

"But you had ambition. You were brimming over with it. Nothing could ever have stopped you from making progress sooner or later. And I knew that. Lack of money means nothing to a young man with the ambition which you had, and still have. As for me, I shall have nothing now but myself."

"And me, Eileen, for I'll never let you back out. Why,--if you wish it, I'll leave everything here as it stands, or I'll give it away,--and we can go somewhere else and start all over."

"But that wouldn't be fair, if I did agree."

"Then, dearie, just let me help."

"No,--no,--no!"

"But the land should be saved,--at least, as much of it as we can save. It is of the best, and when the real merits of the fruit of this Valley are known, when the markets are opened up for us and transportation facilities are improved, the land will be worth much more than it is now, for the younger orchards will be bearing heavier and heavier year by year. Eileen, we want to hold what we can of your father's property, unhampered."

"Oh, yes!--you are terribly logical and convincing, but I won't love you any more if you get mixed up in this;--it is too, too hopeless."

"Immovable as Vancouver Island! and yet they talk of frail femininity. Ah, Eileen! as difficult to understand as, as any other lady!"

Eileen sighed, went over to the window and parted the curtains, as she looked out over the peaceful Valley. Phil went to her side.

Up on the hill as they were, overlooking the surrounding country, they almost forgot their troubles under Nature's hypnotism. The sky overhead was opalescent; the ranges, dotted with grazing cattle and unbroken horses, were bathed in sunshine. Away below them, the little town, with its long Main Street of business houses and its stretch of regular shade trees, drowsed in an adolescent contentment. All around lay farm houses surrounded by fields in cultivation with parallel lines of fruit trees. In the distance, due west between the hills, the blue waters of the Okanagan Lake sparkled in a winding streak which melted into the sky.

Phil put his arm round Eileen and drew her to him.

"And we talked about leaving all this, dearie!"

She looked up at him with moist eyes, and her voice trembled.

"Oh, Phil!--I couldn't--I just couldn't! If I did, I should be leaving part of me behind."

He stooped and kissed her.

"And you won't, sweetheart;--not if I know it!"

A streak of dust rose from the roadway and an automobile turned quickly in to the avenue.

"Here comes the doctor, Phil, to see daddy."

"I'll be off then, girlie! I'll 'phone later to find out how he is progressing."

CHAPTER XXV

The Bank Robbery

Phil was sound asleep in bed when a noise of some kind brought him partly back to sensibility. He turned uneasily. The noise came again. Someone was throwing gravel up at his window. He jumped out of bed, pulled out the sliding screen-window and looked over.

A man on horseback was below.

"That you, Phil?"

"Yes!"

The horseman was Howden, the recently promoted Police Chief.

"Big things doing! If you're game for a night ride, wake Jim and both of you come down quick. We're shy of men and you two have a pair of good horses."

"What is it?"

"Tell you when you come. Bring a gun, and hurry, for every minute counts."

Phil went to Jim's room across the passage. Jim, ever ready for an adventure, was on the floor in a second; and both were dressed and downstairs in five minutes.

"Won't a car take us quicker?"

"No!" replied Howden. "It is likely to be a chase over the ranges."

They saddled their horses and lined up on each side of the Police Chief, who immediately started off.

"Cattle thieves?" asked Jim.

"Worse'n that! The Commercial Bank's been broken into, the safe blowed up and every blamed bill in the institootion pinched."

"Well, I'll be-darned!"

"Just our blasted luck, too!" said Howden quickly and in excitement as they trotted on, "Jamieson, my deputy, is in Vancouver, sick; Hardie went to Kamloops yesterday with a couple of prisoners. There is hardly a real policeman in town,—only me, Downie and McConnachie.

"The Mayor left on the train two days ago for the Coast.

"Downie, who for once wasn't boozed, noticed someone slip over the back window at the Bank. There were half a dozen of them in the lane, he says. He couldn't do a thing but watch. Three of them took off by the B.X. way on horseback; two of them made for the Coldcreek Road, and the other two made for the Okanagan Landing. Downie thinks there is another, but he isn't sure."

"Where are they all now?" asked Jim.

"Tell you later.

"We've to go up along the Kelowna Road, case any of them double back and try that way. They've got a hell of a haul among them. We'll be coverin' nearly every road, for Downie has scared up a bunch and is off up the B.X. route. McConnachie got three with him on to the Landing. Thompson, the Government Agent, is away hell-for-leather with Morrison on the Coldcreek Road.

"Gee!--but it'll be great dope if I land them."

"It will be further promotion and highly commended," remarked Phil.

Howden grinned, but the grin could only be surmised by the others, for it was dark just preceding the dawn. They cantered quickly up the hill and on to the level winding road cut along the side of the hills, with the endless ranges on the right and a sheer drop into the Kalamalka Lake on the immediate left.

"But how did they pull it off, Howden? Didn't the bank have a watchman on the premises?"

"Sure they had!--that greasy Chink, Ah Sing, and half a dozen black cats."

Jim laughed.

"We found Sing gagged and tied up to one of the big desks."

Jim whistled.

"Where is Sing now?"

"Where we can get him when we want him," answered Howden. "I put him under lock and key right away."

"The best place for him," remarked Jim.

"He's whimpering like a baby-monkey, too. We'll get all we want out of him before he's long

there."

"Did you find out how they got into the bank?"

"That's the fishy bit! Sing says he opened the door and looked out for a breath of air, when someone hit him over the nut. The next he says he remembers was being tied up. His head is cut open all right, but all the same, I wouldn't wonder if the Chink's a liar."

"They say they have a reputation for that kind of thing," put in Phil.

Jim's brain was busy, but he remained silent.

They galloped hard along that part of the road which diverged from the Lake, keeping their eyes to the right in the direction of the old trail between the hills to the Landing, and straight ahead also where the road ran parallel again three hundred feet above the water.

There was no moon. The night was dark, but away over Blue Nose Mountain the grey of dawn was slowly creeping.

Like a writhing snake, the Kelowna Road turned and twisted round the hills which almost precipitated into the dark waters below.

The riders were now going Indian file owing to the darkness and the narrowness of the path. Phil, who was ahead--for he had a horse that refused to stay in the rear of any other horse--turned the first bend. He reined back suddenly, causing the others to do the same. He held up a warning hand.

Cautiously they looked ahead round the crumbling rock.

Half-way between where they were and the next turn, a lone horseman was standing, intent on the adjusting of the girths and heavy saddlebags on his steaming horse. He looked over his shoulder every second or so in the direction of the Landing, as if he feared he might be suddenly surprised.

"By God!" whispered Howden, atremble with excitement, "one of them!"

"Sssh!" cautioned Phil.

Gathering for a dash, they sprang round the turn with a yell, Phil's horse fairly leaping ahead of the others.

The man by the horse looked up in astonishment. Evidently he had not been anticipating pursuit from that quarter. With an astounding agility for a man of his apparent bulk, he sprang clear from the ground into the saddle of his tall horse, and he was off like a whirlwind.

The three followed after at breakneck speed, but neither Jim's horse nor Howden's was a match for the great striding beast in front of them. Phil's speedy little mare was the only one that could in any way hold its own.

They covered a mile in a heart-breaking pace, and by that time Phil was three hundred yards in front of Jim and Howden, with the hunted man two hundred yards further ahead still.

At every bend and turn, Phil's heart stood still in the fear of an ambush, but he could do nothing but take that chance, if he ever wished to keep his quarry in sight. The lone rider, however, had evidently only one thought and that was to shake his pursuers.

The light was creeping up every minute. Phil looked away behind him and fancied he saw other riders tailing in behind Jim and Howden,--which was true, for the two had been joined by McConnachie and one other who had pursued the horseman but had been outridden by him over the old road from Okanagan Landing.

Phil began to realise that he was slowly gaining. The man ahead also became anxiously aware of the fact, for he cast a critical glance over his shoulder every now and again as if measuring the space between.

Through the part gloom, Phil noticed that he was masked and heavily bearded. He was unable to identify the figure with any he had seen in the Valley, and it flashed through his mind in a sub-conscious way that possibly a gang from the other side of the Line had engineered the bank robbery. Yet there was something in the gait of the great, striding, shadowy horse that was strangely familiar to him, even in the darkness that still held almost undisputed sway.

Twice that great brute ahead stumbled as if almost spent. Foot by foot Phil gained, until a bare fifty yards divided them.

The horseman rounded another bend in the road. Phil dashed along in hot chase.

He slowed up a bit, for the turning was treacherous. From the shadow of one of the great, shelving, cut-away rocks, the horseman in waiting jumped out on him. Phil's mare plunged its fore feet into the soft earth, then reared in terror. The robber pulled a gun and fired. The shot nicked a tiny piece from Phil's ear as it sang past. The man shot again, this time without any apparent effect. He wheeled round, spurred his horse and dashed off once more along the narrow path, making for the last turn in the precipitous highway ere it ran from the side of the Lake across a cut in the hills and into the thickly wooded country.

Phil shook his reins. His mare sprang forward eagerly and held her own for a little. But suddenly she began to swing in her stride, then she stumbled, almost throwing her rider. Phil pulled her in and jumped to the ground, just in time, for she collapsed in a quivering heap, with blood oozing from a tiny hole in her chest and from her foaming mouth and distended nostrils.

Something rose in Phil's throat, almost choking him. In his chagrin, he raised his fist and shook it at the retreating horseman, who, as if sensing his opponent's impotence at the same time as he became exultant over his triumph and escape, stood up in his stirrups, turned completely in his saddle, pulled off his hat and waved it defiantly.

It was thus that he mirrored himself on Phil's mind as he disappeared momentarily round that dangerous bend.

But it was only for the flash of a second that the picture was shut out. There was a shout and the sound of a crash. The great horse reappeared at the sharp angle of the path, rearing high on its hind legs, with its rider clinging precariously to its perpendicular body as he struggled frantically with the stirrups as if trying to kick free. The animal backed wildly against the frail wooden rail on the left--erected there simply for the safety of pedestrians in the dark. The fence gave way like matchwood, the rearing figure of the horse with its rider balanced on the edge for a moment, then slowly toppled backward amid a rush of loose, falling debris, sheer two hundred feet to the rocky bed of the shallow water of the Lake below.

Phil was petrified at the sight, but he quickly regained his composure, left his dying horse and ran forward to the scene of the accident.

Jim Langford, Howden, McConnachie and the ever-ready Morrison of The O.K. Company came racing along behind, reaching the place simultaneously with him.

Immediately on the other side of the cut-away, an old Chinaman was lying nursing a damaged and bloody head, and about him was littered the wreckage of his broken wagon and scattered vegetables; while his ramshackle horse was grazing unconcernedly a few yards farther along.

"By God!--we got him," again exclaimed Howden, mopping his face as he got off his horse.

They peered over the edge of the precipice.

"Dead, I guess, from the looks of that tangle down there!" said Jim.

"Have you any idea who he is?"

"No!" answered Phil. "An old, hard-nut, evidently. He is masked and wears a beard. I am positive, though, that the horse is Brenchfield's. They must have known its matchless speed and stolen it. He sure was some rider to take a chance with that brute."

"Gee!--the Mayor'll have a cat-fit when we tell him. He was bugs on that horse o' his," said Howden.

"Who is going down to bring him up?" asked McConnachie.

"I'll go," put in Howden.

"No!--better let Phil go! He is not quite so heavy as you are, Howden, and he has more spring to him."

Ropes were taken from the saddles and joined together. Phil was lowered slowly over the side and down. He reached the bottom in safety, but was unable to do anything single-handed, for the great dead horse was lying completely on top of the dead rider.

"Better come down, Jim," he shouted up. "It is more than a one man job."

He sent up his rope, and soon Jim was down beside him. Together they partly dragged and partly rolled the horse from off the dead man. Its neck had apparently been broken in the fall.

Every bone in the body of the bank robber was crushed and broken with the weight of the horse falling on top. But his masked and bearded face appeared to be unmarred. Life was completely gone.

Phil stooped down and removed the mask. As he did so, his face turned ashy pale and his breath began to come in gulps. Quickly and nervously he put his fingers through the man's black beard and tugged. The hair came away in his hands, and he gazed in horror at a face he was well familiar with.

He rose from his knee, passed his hand over his eyes and his brow, then staggered against the damp bank.

"Great God, Jim! It's--it's Brenchfield!" he gasped.

Jim stood looking silently at the corpse on the ground, his face peculiarly unperturbed. He stepped over to Phil and put his arm comfortingly over his shoulder.

"Well, old man! his sins have found him out at last. He had to come back to it,--a thief always does. He's got the last hair out of the dog that bit him.

"Brace up, old fellow! I hate to ask you to handle him, but--well--the hate part of it is gone now."

Phil recovered himself and quietly assisted Jim in adjusting the rope round the great, limp body.

They did not shout their discovery to those above, but left the surprise of it to the arrival.

But they had to wait some time and had to shout several times before the rope was lowered by the half-stupefied men above.

Jim and Phil loosened the saddlebags from the dead horse. These were stuffed to overflowing with bills of all denominations; seemingly the entire theft from the Commercial Bank.

One after the other, each carrying a bag, Phil and Jim were pulled up on to the roadway.

"The dirty, two-faced son-of-a-gun!" was the only remark made, and it came from Howden. No other words were necessary, for that phrase expressed their opinions concretely.

Brenchfield's body was hoisted and swung across Howden's horse in front of the Chief, and the man-hunters proceeded homeward at a canter.

"How did you get over from the Landing?" asked Jim of McConnachie.

"Oh,--we got there in good time and didn't meet a darned thing all the way. We got to Allison's wharf. The old man's launch was there, tied up for the night. But there was another one alongside of it. We were just comin' back to have a look about, when him and two more came bang into us from over the hill. We jumped to our nags, and they turned and beat it back. God knows where the other two got to. They looked like breeds to me. We made after him because he had full saddlebags and looked like the head-boss man.

"But that she-devil of a horse,--it left us a mile behind. We hadn't the ghost of an idea he was anyways near when we hit your bunch.

"But where in the name of Pete the darn-fool idiot was making for, gets my goat. Who would make for Kelowna when there's miles of ranges to roam in?"

"Aw!--get off your foot!" exclaimed the knowing Howden. "He meant to get that launch at the Landing first of all and make for his ranch at Redmans, or maybe for Penticton and down over the Line. When you guys fooled him, he came up over here, meaning to beat it back Vernock way, down Kickwillie Loop, I guess, on to the shore road at the head of the Lake and out the Coldcreek to the foot-hills, and over to the Other Side that way.

"If he had ever gotten a head start, we'd never have seen skin or hair of him."

"But why didn't he? Wasn't you ginks chasin' him to Kelowna?"

"Sure!--but weren't we between him and the road he wanted to get onto,--simp?"

McConnachie let the sense of it sink, but it seemed to take a long time.

When the procession reached the awakening town he remarked, "I see now! You guys blocked him same as we did at the Landing."

"Just exactly!" remarked Jim. "We all saw it two hours ago." As for Howden, he was past remarking anything.

The news of the robbery, of the escape of all but one, and of the dead-capture--and the climax in regard to the identity of that dead robber--caused a tremendous sensation throughout the Valley. It was the talk of the entire country for very many days to follow. A number of respectable citizens, of course, were shocked beyond words; others shook their heads and said it was just what they had expected. But the great fact remained:--Graham Brenchfield, several times Mayor of Vernock, Rancher, Cattle breeder, Wholesale Produce Dealer and Political Boss had been caught red-handed in the biggest bank robbery the Province had ever known.

CHAPTER XXVI

The Dawn of a New Day

Phil was busily engaged going over the day's mail early one afternoon, on a sweltering day in the month of August of that same eventful year, when his attention was drawn to an envelope addressed to himself and bearing the Government imprint.

He opened it and read the contents of the letter slowly. He laughed softly in the gurgling, boyish way he used to laugh years before. That letter awakened something in him that seemed to have been asleep. And it gave him an irresponsibly happy sort of feeling.

He read the letter over again. It was perfectly plain:

Mr. Philip Ralston,
Vernock, B. C.

Dear Sir,

Among the papers left by the late Graham Brenchfield, late Mayor of Vernock, was one addressed to The Attorney General, in which he confessed to being the sole culprit in the assault on the bank official and in the robbery of the branch bank at Carnaby several years ago. For this crime, you were tried by jury and sentenced to a term of five years imprisonment. You served the full term of this sentence at the penitentiary at Ukalla.

The whole matter has been carefully gone into by me and I find that Brenchfield's statements are borne out by every point in the case and that you were convicted on purely circumstantial evidence, although this evidence was of a most damning nature.

The Government can accept no responsibility for the mistake of your incarceration on account of the fact that you could have cleared yourself at the time had you chosen to do so, instead of which you aided and abetted the escape of the real criminal.

I have much pleasure, however, in advising you that your conviction has been quashed; your name has been struck out entirely from the criminal records of the Province and from the books of Ukalla Penitentiary.

We have known for some time of your residence in Vernock and have watched with interest your splendid business achievements.

Your obedient servant,

J. GALBRAITH SAMUELS,

Attorney General.

Phil was still in his chair with the letter in his hand, dreaming and wondering at the strange cycle about which every human being turns, when Jim,--wayward, devil-may-care Jim--came in, with a grin on his face and his hat set jauntily over one side of his head. He sat down at his own desk, turned over a few papers impatiently, then started to dream also. Suddenly he threw the papers aside and commenced to walk the office floor, going to the door every once in a while and looking up the street in the direction of the Railway Station.

From the door he shouted suddenly:--

"Say, Phil!--I'm going up the length of the Station Hotel to see a man about a dog. I'll be back shortly." And he hurried off.

In fifteen minutes he returned, and he tried hard to settle down to the dictation of a few letters, but he was a dismal failure in his attempt, for he sighed and remarked to the stenographer: "Oh, pshaw! I'm on the blink for work to-day. Cancel that! I'll give you the remainder to-morrow."

He went over to the window and gazed out into the street.

Phil picked up the letter he had received and went over to Jim with it, intending to let him read it. He clapped Jim on the back, making the latter jump.

"Wake up, Jim! What's got you this time?"

Jim turned to him. "Gee, Phil!--positively and absolutely, the most charming piece of femininity I have ever seen is in Vernock to-day."

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Phil. "Why didn't you tell me that Eileen was down town?"

"Look here, old man!--I said, the most charming lady that *I* had ever seen, not that *you* had ever seen."

"Oh!" apologised Phil, "I--I see."

"No,--but straight goods! I was up at the station when the train came in, and she came off, with her mother and dad, I guess they were."

"Strangers?"

"Yes! They went right to the Station Hotel. But I tell you---" He stopped. "Oh, well!--what's the good? Guess she's married, or engaged, or something like that! Just my rotten luck!"

"And what has that got to do with you, anyway? Who are they? Did you get introduced?"

"Me? Good land, no!"

"Well,--did she look at you, or smile?"

"No, siree! She's not that kind. Maybe she gave me a look, but say!--she glided along as if--well, just as if she knew she had a right to."

"And you are making all this fuss about a little thing like that," laughed Phil.

"But it isn't a little thing, man!"

"Do you know her name?"

"No! I went up to the hotel to get a glimpse of the register, but she was around the desk there, waiting, I guess, for her dad to come down. So I just had to beat it back.

"Oh,--I'll find out before long, though. Believe me!"

Phil laughed, for this was a new phase in the make-up of Jim Langford, whom he had always considered impervious to the charms of any lady.

"Laugh, you crazy nut! Who would expect you to understand, anyway?"

Suddenly he sobered.

"You've got something there you want to show me."

Phil handed over the letter he was holding.

Jim read it, and his big, honest face beamed in delight. He pounced on Phil and wrung his hand.

"Man,--isn't that great now? He owned up,--the dirty sinner. But he waited till he was a dead one before he did it.

"Well!--better late than never. And here was I, thrusting my new notions on to you when you had good news like that to spring on me. Man, but I'm a selfish rotter!"

"But, say, Phil!--honest!" he reverted dreamily, "she was a positive vision."

There is no saying how long the conversation would have gone on, had not a telephone message come from the bank requesting Jim's attendance there immediately.

He hurried off, and was away most of the afternoon.

Towards closing time, Phil was standing at the kerb-stone, beside his car, when a tall young lady, fashionably attired and using a sunshade to tantalising advantage, crossed the road in front of him and stopped before one of the office windows. She stepped back a little, looked up at the sign over the doorway, "The Langford-Ralston Financial Corporation," and walked inside.

Phil followed, and was just in time to hear her inquiry.

"May I see Mr. Ralston or Mr. Langford, please?"

"Mr. Ralston is just behind you, miss."

The lady turned round.

She was tall, fair-skinned and, as Jim had said,--charming; for Phil knew in a second that she must be the same young lady of whom his partner had spoken.

Phil raised his hat and went forward to her. She smiled, and was about to address him when she stopped up. Her eyes grew wide and her face blanched. For almost a minute she stood staring at him, then she almost tottered to him. She put her hand on his sleeve, and her fingers ran loosely along his arm, as she still held his eyes with hers.

Her voice came at last, broken and in the faintest of whispers:--

"Philly,--oh, Philly! It is you! Don't you know me? Sister Margery!" Her voice rose. She threw her arms around his neck and cried:--"I've found you! Phil,--Phil,--my own, dear brother, Phil! Oh,--I've found you!"

And Phil, with a heart too full to speak, and a mind too astonished to grasp the situation thoroughly, held her to him as tears ran down his cheeks and on to her hair.

At last he led her into his own room, until both of them should regain their composure.

Years and years rolled back in these last few minutes.

She and Phil were happy little playmates together again.

"Oh, brother!" she said at last, "don't tell me any more. I can't hold it. Daddy is here. Let's wait for him. Poor old daddy! he's been starving for you, Philly, and heart-broken because he could not get news of you anywhere. He felt sure Graham Brenchfield would know,--and we have just heard of the dreadful things that he did. Daddy was afraid---"

She picked up the telephone, rang up the hotel and got into communication with her parents.

"Oh, daddy!--come down the Main Street to number one hundred and fifty-six. Come quick! Big, big news, daddy! Run all the way! Bring mother!"

She rang off again, lest she should be tempted to tell her father more.

Shortly afterwards, when the office staff had gone for the day, a tall, grey-haired, straight-backed gentleman came in, accompanied by a sweet-faced, motherly lady.

Phil stood waiting, with just a little reserve, but there was to be no waiting.

The big, kindly-faced man ran to his boy and hugged him in his arms. He then held him out from him, gazed on his face for a long time, then hugged him again.

"And I almost believed what they told me in the East. Oh, my boy! As if my own boy could be anything but straight, and clean, and honest!"

And there, in the little private room, Phil made his peace with the dear old lady he had wronged so long ago in his boyish idea of chivalry to his own departed mother.

One hour, two hours, three hours passed like so many seconds, as he told them of all his wanderings, his hardships, his disappointments, his ambitions and his ultimate success.

When he told them of how he had suffered five years in prison for Brenchfield because of the kindness Brenchfield's father and mother had shown in caring for him, in giving him a home and paying for his education--his old father's anger was almost at white heat.

"Paying, did you say, boy? By the Lord Harry!--not a cent did they ever pay for you. Why, boy!--it was you who kept them,--through me."

"That's what I've felt myself of late," said Phil, "but at that time I thought differently."

"For shame, Phil! Do you think I would let anyone provide for my boy, no matter where he might be, or what he might be? When you would not have the money I sent, I sent it to them regularly for your upkeep;--and much more besides, for they always had something to tell me of what you needed extra. I doubled the allowance when they sent you to college. Yes!--and it was three years after you had gone West before I knew of it, and then only through the death of Brenchfield's father and an inquiry I made through a firm of lawyers.

"We planned, not once but a hundred times, to go ourselves to Campbeltown in search of you. But I couldn't get away from my business affairs in Texas and your mother was too ill to travel

alone. Last winter, however, I sold all my interests for cash, your mother made a great recovery, and we came away for a double purpose. First, to find you, if we could; next, to see if we should like to make a home out here, for we had heard much about this part of the country.

"For years Margery has pined her heart out for her old playmate, until she threatened to come herself if I would not come with her. But, Phil, boy!--there was little need for her threat, for your daddy could not have gone to his long rest without making peace with his boy.

"We heard that you had separated from Graham Brenchfield several years ago; that you had gone to the bad; and that nobody knew of your whereabouts.

"Of course, that rascal's wonderful, would-be success was well-known in his native town. We came on here to get what information we could from him, in the hope of being able to follow you up. And we found--well--he is gone now, so we'll say no more. But we found you, well and in a position I would expect my boy to make for himself."

Then Phil told them of his quaint, whimsical and brilliant partner, Jim Langford, but not a word, of course, of what Jim had said to him in regard to Margery.

At last he came to what was nearest to his heart, after all,--his love for Eileen Pederstone--following it hard with a recount of the tide of misfortune that had swept over her father.

"Jim and I have two hundred and fifty thousand dollars in solid cash, dad,--and, if you have anything to put in, it would be the finest investment in the world to clear that property of its mortgages and put it in a position to earn its own keep.

"But, say!--aren't you folks hungry? It is eight-thirty, and I'm just beginning to feel I want dinner."

"Come on then, Phil,--we'll all go to the hotel and have a bite there, then you can 'phone for this wonderful Jim Langford and we can have a session."

At the hotel, while the ladies and Phil's father were upstairs, he was standing idly in the rotunda when Jim pushed out from the swing doors of the billiard room.

"Hullo, old boy!" he cried. "Sorry I couldn't get back before closing time. Say!--I've found out who the lady is."

"Allow you for that," remarked Phil.

"Funny though!--they have the same name as yourself,--Ralston. They are from some distant clime down Texas way. Man!--I wish they were cousins or something of yours. Can't you work up an acquaintance on the name, Phil? They've gone down town and haven't come back yet."

At that moment, the trio came down the carpeted stairway. Phil, who was facing them, quietly beckoned them forward, and before Jim knew how, he was surrounded.

"Meet my mother, Mr. Langford--Mrs. Ralston."

Jim gasped.

"My sister! Mr. Langford--Margery."

Jim's face underwent a series of changes. He stood and bowed stiffly, and was quite inarticulate.

"My dear old dad,--Jim."

And it was all over.

Phil enjoyed the joke immensely, but Jim was limp with the excitement of it and remained so for several courses of that interesting little dinner, although, towards the finish of it, he made ample amends with his dry humour and his brilliant sallies. He took possession of Margery finally, and Margery seemed greatly to enjoy being possessed, for to her Jim Langford was a type distinctly new, absolutely original and delightfully amusing.

Jim arranged a motor trip for the ladies for the next morning, and was reluctant indeed to wish them "Good night," in order to take part in the long business talk which Phil and Mr. Ralston, Senior, had arranged.

Right on until the early morning the three men sat in the smoking room of the Station Hotel discussing the country, the conditions and future possibilities.

Phil and Jim furnished the local information, until father Ralston became almost as well posted as they were themselves. He was a keen business man, one who knew good opportunities when they were presented and who was never afraid to grasp them.

Next morning early, as soon as he got up, Phil telephoned Eileen the wonderful news, but that alert little lady already knew, for the news had travelled quickly over the little town.

Soon thereafter, two cars--one containing the two ladies and Jim, and the other Phil and his father--ran up to Royce Pederstone's. Eileen and her father came out, were introduced, and the cheerful little party set out for a tour of inspection over the neighbourhood. Every ranch of importance was visited, particular attention being given to the many possessed by Royce Pederstone, who, although greatly improved in health, was still far from well; and the visit to the beautiful places he possessed in name only, the great areas of wonderful property that would have to pass out of his keeping to satisfy his bank creditors, seemed to cast fresh gloom over the old man.

They lunched in the open, and they visited the lakes.

While the elderly folks sat and talked together, Phil wandered off with Eileen down among the trees by the lake side. There in the shade, sitting on a grassy knoll, he told her of the plans his father and Jim and he were formulating. He cajoled her, he coaxed her, then he bullied her; but it was only when he proved to her that everything was purely in the nature of an investment, that there was no question of bolstering a tottering edifice, that it was only because of its great possibilities that they were anxious to be in it; it was only then that he won her over to their way of thinking.

Meantime Jim and Margery were away out on the lake in a motor boat, and they were both so loth to return that much hallooing and horn-honking had to be done before they swung round shoreward.

After dinner at Royce Pederstone's, the ladies gathered together for music and conversation, while the four men closeted themselves over their cigars, in order to thrash out the burning question.

"That, gentlemen, is my exact financial position, as far as I know it," said John Royce Pederstone, after a lengthy explanation. "This is the bank's statement of my indebtedness to them. I received it yesterday."

They studied the figures closely for a time, then Phil's father--shrewd business man, quick to grasp a situation; clear-visioned, frank, lucid and brief--put the proposition in a nut-shell.

"Mr. Pederstone,--the boys have two hundred and fifty thousand dollars eating their paper heads off in idleness in the bank. I have,--well--as much as I require at any time. I have come out West to settle, and I mean to do so. If we don't come to an arrangement with you, we intend buying from someone else.

"We have been all over your properties to-day and they comprise some of the most valuable land in the Valley. The ranches are well laid out, the fruit varieties are of the best. Unfortunately, these ranches have not been too well looked after. The reason for this is not far to seek. From what I can gather, there has been no proper supervision of your various ranch foremen, who, evidently, have been devoting most of their time to the places they themselves own, fattening and growing rich meanwhile in some mysterious way, while you grew poor.

"The boys and I are willing to enter into joint partnership with you for the purpose of paying off your entire indebtedness to the bank and any others, so that the properties may be absolutely unencumbered.

"Between us, we can see to the proper future supervision of the farms. We can get rid of all your useless help, hire competent foremen and ranch-hands at good wages, and so have the trees properly cared for and new ones planted to replace those that have been killed by the winter cold or have died from neglect.

"Are you agreeable to the proposition?"

"No!" put in Royce Pederstone, "because there isn't a market for the fruit when you have it harvested."

"Wait a moment! I am getting to that.

"There is a market; but there is no organisation to command it.

"When we jointly own and work these properties, we can immediately approach every rancher in the Valley, as one of themselves with mutual interests. We can organise--we shall organise--for I know how. We shall have a large, central warehouse for the segregation of the Valley's produce, for grading, for packing and for distributing. This will at once eliminate unfair competition and the highway robber in the guise of jobber. Only first-class fruit will be allowed to go out. We will ship out under the Valley's special brand, with the grower's own name underneath. We will make our own way into the markets and demand fair prices for our harvests.

"Again, a single individual--or individuals crying separately--can do little or nothing with the Powers that be, as you well know; but once we are organised we can and shall insist on the Government introducing a proper system of irrigation throughout the entire Valley,--not a hit or a miss scheme such as presently obtains, for, if we would insure ourselves against periodical failure, if we would have annual uniformity of quality in our fruit, we must have proper irrigation. So far as the Government is concerned, our battle is more than half over, for we have in you a representative who knows the requirements of the Valley as no other member of parliament does.

"And in regard to the water,--look at the unlimited supply we have of it right at our very doors. If only some clear-minded inventor would devise a cheap, feasible scheme for getting the water up from these great, but low-lying lakes, on to the higher ranch levels! Failing that--we still have the lesser lakes up on the surrounding hills, as well as the numerous waterways in the neighbourhood.

"This glorious Valley is practically free from blight; the codling moth is under perfect control. There is nothing, Mr. Pederstone, and you know it too, nothing in the world to prevent the Valley's production of fruit from increasing year by year as the younger orchards come to bearing age and fresh orchards are planted.

"There is no reason why we should not be able ultimately to take care of the entire Canadian requirements, with a surplus for export trade.

"As a vast fruit-growing organisation, we can demand and get all the transportation facilities we require.

"I tell you, the land is here, and the climate. All that is required now is cohesion and enterprise. Mr. Pederstone, we are going to see that this is supplied here and now.

"These are the facts. There is our partnership proposition to you in black and white. Read it over carefully and give us your decision to-morrow afternoon."

John Royce Pederstone rose.

"Thank you, gentlemen! I shall do so. I would give you my answer now, but I would like to go over the whole matter with my daughter Eileen. Had I consulted her more often in the past, things would have been better for me to-day."

And next day, John Royce Pederstone shook hands with his three new partners, and sealed the compact. He had a brighter look in his eye, a more erect head, and a laugh on his lips that Eileen heard from the next room and thanked God for. She was standing at the front window, as she had so often stood--as she and Phil had occasionally done--looking out over the sun-kissed little town, with the ranges, the ranches, the settlers' cottages; the gardens, the trees, the lakes; the blue sky and the bright sunshine; all co-mingling in a merry-go-round of fairy delight and harmony and peace.

As Jim Langford hastened below, Phil stole to Eileen's side. He did not have to tell her, for she knew already.

They stood together, hand in hand, dreaming in happy contentment.

"My dear little, brave little lady," said he, as he drew her close; "The big game is just ahead of us. And we are going to win."

"You have won," she answered. "The real victory is always in the decision, Phil."

He stroked her breeze-blown curls, for the window was open and the summer wind, warm and fresh, was coming in over the hills.

The sound of a voice, sweet and mirthful; and another, low, melodious, and charming in its enunciation, came up from below, breaking in on their conversation.

Phil looked over the window-sill, then, smilingly he beckoned to Eileen.

They both leaned over.

Down there, on a summer-seat, in the arbour of trailing vines at the end of the veranda, close together and evidently day-dreaming, were Margery and Jim.

Phil was about to shout to them, but Eileen put her finger on his lips.

Then once more came the musical, alluring, deep-toned, yet crooning voice of Jim Langford;-- great-hearted, apparently wayward and devil-may-care, but at all times really serious--as he recited to the lady by his side, in his own inimitable way:--

"And the night shall be filled with music
And the cares that infest the day
Shall fold their tents like the Arabs,
And as silently steal away."

THE END

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