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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE FLOCKMASTER OF POISON CREEK



Neither spoke, a daze over them, the dull shock of death's
close passing bewildering and deep. *Page 120*

The Flockmaster of Poison Creek

BY
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AUTHOR OF
THE DUKE OF CHIMNEY BUTTE,
THE LAND OF LAST CHANCE, ETC.

FRONTISPIECE BY P. V. E. IVORY



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The Flockmaster of Poison Creek

CHAPTER I

THE SHEEP COUNTRY

So John Mackenzie had put his foot upon the road. This after he had reasoned it out as a mathematical problem, considering it as a matter of quantities alone. There was nothing in school-teaching at sixty dollars a month when men who had to carry a rubber stamp to sign their names to their checks were making fortunes all around him in sheep.

That was the way it looked to John Mackenzie the morning he set out for Poison Creek to hunt up Tim Sullivan and strike him for a job. Against the conventions of the country, he had struck out on foot. That also had been reasoned out in a cool and calculative way. A sheepherder had no use for a horse, in the first place. Secondly and finally, the money a horse would represent would buy at least twelve head of ewes. With questioning eyes upon him when he left Jasper, and contemptuous eyes upon him when he met riders in his dusty journey, John Mackenzie had pushed on, his pack on his back.

There was not a book in that pack. John Mackenzie, schoolmaster, had been a bondslave of books in that country for four obscure, well-nigh profitless years, and he was done with them for a while. The less a sheepman knew about books, the more he was bound to know about sheep, for sheep would be the object and aim of his existence. Mackenzie knew plenty of sheepmen who never had looked into any kind of a book but a bank-deposit book in their lives. That seemed to be education enough to carry them very nicely along, even to boost them to the state legislature, and lift one of them to the United States senate. So, what was the use of worrying along on a mission of enlightenment at sixty dollars a month?

Mackenzie had not come into the West in a missionary spirit at the beginning. He had not believed the youth of that section to be in any greater depths of ignorance than elsewhere in this more or less favored land. But from his earliest years he had entertained romantic notions, adventurous desires. With his normal-school certificate in his breast pocket, tight trousers on his rather long legs, a short vest scarcely meeting them at the waistband, he had traveled into the West, seeking romance, alert for adventure.

When he arrived at Jasper, which was only the inter-mountain West, and far from the golden coast of his most fervid dreams, he found that adventure and romance apparently had packed up and gone elsewhere years ahead of him. There was nothing nearer either of them in Jasper than a tame gambling-joint in the back end of a saloon, where greasy, morose sheepherders came to stake quarters on roulette and faro, where railroaders squandered away their wages, leaving the grocery-men unpaid. And there was no romance for John Mackenzie in any such proceeding as that.

Simple, you will see he was; open-faced and guileless as the day. Farm-bred, raw-boned, slow of speech, clear of eye, no vices, no habits that pulled a man down, unless a fondness for his briar-root pipe might be so classed. But in the way Mackenzie smoked the pipe it was more in the nature of a sacrifice to his gods of romance than even a mild dissipation.

In the four years of his school-teaching at Jasper Mackenzie slowly grew out of his extreme rawness of appearance. His legs hardened from long rambles over the hills, his face browned like an outdoor man's, his rustic appearance, his clabber-days shyness, all slowly dissolved away. But the school board was not cognizant of any physical or mental strengthening in him. He was worth sixty dollars a month to that slow-thinking body when he came to Jasper; he was worth no more than sixty dollars when he threw up the job and left.

Romance and adventure had called him away to the road at last, but the romance of sheep-riches, the adventure of following a flock over the sage-gray hills. Maybe he would find it too late even to glimpse them when he arrived in the heart of the sheeplands; perhaps times had shifted since the heavy-jowled illiterates whom he had met in Jasper began their careers with a few pounds of dried apples and uncommon endurance for hardships in the open fields.

Simple, they thought him down in Jasper, in the mild simplicity of a preacher or any man who would not fight. In their classification he was a neutral force, an emasculated, mild, harmless creature who held the child's view of life from much association with children. He often had heard it said.

A man never could advance to notability in a community that rated him as mildly simple; he would have a hard time of it even to become notorious. Only one man there had taken an interest in him as man to man, a flockmaster who had come into that country twenty years before, a schoolteacher like himself.

This man had kicked up the golden dust before Mackenzie's eyes with his tales of the romance of the range, the romance of sheep-riches, the quick multiplication of a band run on the increase-sharing plan. This man urged Mackenzie to join him, taking a band of sheep on shares.

But his range was in sight of Jasper; there was no romance on his hills. So Mackenzie struck out for the headwaters of Poison Creek, to find Tim Sullivan, notable man among the sheep-rich of his day.

It was a five-days' journey on foot, as he calculated it--nobody in that country ever had walked it, as far as he could learn--to Tim Sullivan's ranch on Poison Creek. Now, in the decline of the fifth day he had come to Poison Creek, a loud, a rapid, and boisterous stream which a man could cross in two jumps. It made a great amount of noise in its going over the boulders in its bed, as a little water in a vast arid land probably was justified by its importance in doing. It was the first running water Mackenzie had met since leaving the Big Wind, clear as if it came unpolluted by a hoof or a hand from its mountain source.

But somewhere along its course Tim Sullivan grazed and watered forty thousand sheep; and beyond him were others who grazed and watered many times that number. Poison Creek might well enough merit its name from the slaver of many flocks, the schoolmaster thought, although he knew it came from pioneer days, and was as obscure as pioneer names usually are obscure.

And some day he would be watering his thousands of sheep along its rushing vein. That was John Mackenzie's intent and purpose as he trudged the dusty miles of gray hills, with their furze of gray sage, and their gray twilights which fell with a melancholy silence as chilling as the breath of death. For John Mackenzie was going into the sheeplands to become a master. He had determined it all by mathematical rule.

There was the experience to be gained first, and it was cheaper to do that at another man's expense than his own. He knew how the right kind of a man could form a partnership with a flockmaster sometimes; he had heard stories of such small beginnings leading to large ownership and oily prosperity. Jasper had examples of its own; he was familiar with them all.

Some of them began as herders on the basis of half the increase from a stated number of sheep not more than ten years past. Now they looked upon a sixty-dollars-a-month schoolteacher with the eyes of superiority, as money always despises brains which it is obliged to hire, probably because brains cannot devise any better method of finding the necessary calories than that of letting themselves out by the month.

Tim Sullivan needed herders; he had advertised for them in the Jasper paper. Besides, Tim had the name of a man who could see the possibilities in another. He had put more than one young fellow on the way of success in the twenty years he had been running sheep on the Poison Creek range. But failing to land a partnership deal with Sullivan, Mackenzie was prepared to take a job running sheep by the month. Or, should he find all avenues to experience at another man's expense closed to him, he was ready to take the six hundred dollars saved out of his years of book bondage and buy a little flock of his own. Somewhere in that wide expanse of government-owned land he would find water and grazing, and there his prosperity would increase.

Sheep had visited the creek lately at the point where Mackenzie first encountered it, but there were no dusty flocks in sight billowing over the hills. Tim Sullivan's house was not to be seen any more than sheep, from the highest hill in the vicinity. It must be several miles ahead of him still, Mackenzie concluded, remembering that Poison Creek was long. Yet he hoped he might reach it by nightfall, for his feet were growing weary of the untrodden way they had borne him for a hundred and fifty miles, more or less.

He pushed on, now and again crossing the broad trail left by bands of sheep counting two or three thousand, feeling the lonesomeness of the unpeopled land softened by these domestic signs. Sunset, and no sight of a house; nightfall, and not the gleam of a light to show him either herder's camp or permanent domicile of man.

Mackenzie lingered beside the clamoring water in a little valley where the uncropped grass was lush about his feet, considering making camp there for the night. It was a pleasant place for a land so bleak, even in summer, as that country of high table-lands and rolling gray hills. As he started to unsling his pack he caught the dim note of somebody's voice raised in song, and stood so, hand on the strap, listening.

The voice was faint, broken by the distance, yet cheering because it was a voice. Mackenzie pressed up the hill, hoping to be able to thread the voice back to its source from that eminence. As he neared the top the voice came clearer; as he paused to listen, it seemed quite close at hand. It was a woman singing, and this was the manner of her song:

*Na-a-fer a-lo-o-one, na-a-fer a-lone,
He promise na-fer to leafe me,
Na-fer to leafe me a-lone!*

The valley whence came the song was quite dark below him, and darker for the indefinite blotch of something that appeared to be trees. In that grove the house that sheltered the melancholy singer must be hidden, so completely shrouded that not even a gleam of light escaped to lead him to the door. Mackenzie stood listening. There was no other sound rising from that sequestered homestead than the woman's song, and this was as doleful as any sound that ever issued from human lips.

Over and over again the woman sang the three lines, a silence after the last long, tremulous note which reached to the traveler's heart, more eloquent in its expression of poignant loneliness than the hopeless repetition of the song. He grinned dustily as he found himself wishing, in all seriousness, that somebody would take a day off and teach her the rest of the hymn.

Mackenzie's bones were weary of the road, hard as he tried to make himself believe they were not, and that he was a tough man, ready to take and give as it might come to him in the life of the sheeplands. In his heart he longed for a bed that night, and a cup of hot coffee to gladden his gizzard. Coffee he had not carried with him, much less a coffeepot; his load would be heavy enough without them, he rightly anticipated, before he reached Tim Sullivan's. Nothing more cheering than water out of the holes by the way had passed his lips these five days.

He could forgive the woman her song if she would supply some of the comforts of those who luxuriated in houses for just this one night. He went on, coming soon to barbed wire along the way, and presently to a gap in it that let him in among the trees which concealed the house.

It was a small, low cabin, quite buried among the trees, no light showing as Mackenzie drew near, although the voice of the woman still rose in the plaintive monotony of her song.

Mackenzie put as much noise into his arrival as was possible by walking heavily, knowing very well that a surprise by night is not a good beginning for a claim of hospitality. The woman must have heard, for her song ceased in the middle of a word. At the corner of the house Mackenzie saw a dim light falling through an open door, into which the shadow of the woman came.

A little way from the door Mackenzie halted, hat in hand, giving the woman good evening. She stood within the threshold a few feet, the light of the lantern hanging in an angle of the wall over her, bending forward in the pose of one who listened. She was wiping a plate, which she held before her breast in the manner of a shield, stiffly in both hands. Her eyes were large and full of a frightened surprise, her pale yellow hair was hanging in slovenly abandon down her cheeks and over her ears.

She was a tall woman, thin of frame, worn and sad, but with a faded comeliness of face, more intelligence apparent in it than is commonly shown by Scandinavian women of the peasant class who share the labors and the loads of their men on the isolated homesteads of the Northwest. She stood so, leaning and staring, her mouth standing open as if the song had been frightened out so quickly that it had no time to shut the door.

"Good evening, madam," said Mackenzie again.

She came out of her paralysis of fright and surprise at the assuring sound of his voice. He drew nearer, smiling to show his friendly intention, the lantern light on the close, flat curls of his fair hair, which lay damp on temples and forehead.

Tall after his kind was this traveler at her door, spare of flesh, hollow of cheeks, great of nose, a seriousness in his eyes which balanced well the marvelous tenderness of his smile. Not a handsome man, but a man whose simple goodness shone in his features like a friendly lamp. The woman in the door advanced a timid step; the color deepened in her pale and melancholy face.

"I thought it was my man," she said, her voice soft and slow, a labored effort in it to speak without the harsh dialect so apparent in her song.

"I am a traveler, Mackenzie is my name, on my way to Tim Sullivan's sheep ranch. My grub has run low; I'd like to get some supper if you can let me have a bite."

"There is not much for a gentleman to eat," said she.

"Anything at all," Mackenzie returned, unslinging his pack, letting it down wearily at his feet.

"My man would not like it. You have heard of Swan Carlson?"

"No; but I'll pay for it; he'll have no right to kick."

"You have come far if you have not heard of Swan Carlson. His name is on the wind like a curse. Better you would go on, sir; my man would kill you if he found you in this house."

She moved a step to reach and lay the plate on a table close at hand. As she lifted her foot there was the sharp clink of metal, as of a dragging chain. Mackenzie had heard it before when she stepped nearer the door, and now he bent to look into the shadow that fell over the floor from the flaring bottom of the lantern.

"Madam," said he, indignantly amazed by the barbarous thing he beheld, "does that man keep you a prisoner here?"

"Like a dog," she said, nodding her untidy head, lifting her foot to show him the chain.

It was a common trace-chain from plow harness; two of them, in fact, welded together to give her length to go about her household work. She had a freedom of not more than sixteen feet, one end of the chain welded about her ankle, the other set in a staple driven into a log of the wall. She had wrapped the links with cloths to save her flesh, but for all of that protection she walked haltingly, as if the limb were sore.

"I never heard of such inhuman treatment!" Mackenzie declared, hot to the bone in his burning resentment of this barbarity. "How long has he kept you tied up this way?"

"Three years now," said she, with a weary sigh.

"It's going to stop, right here. What did you let him treat you this way for? Why didn't some of your neighbors take a hand in it?"

"Nobody comes," she sighed, shaking her head sadly. "The name of Swan Carlson is a curse on the wind. Nobody passes; we are far from any road that men travel; your face is the first I have seen since Swan put the chain on me like a wolf."

"Where does he keep his tools?"

"Maybe in the barn--I do not know. Only there never is anything left in my reach. Will you set me free, kind stranger?"

"If I can find anything to cut that chain. Let me have the lantern."

The woman hesitated, her eyes grown great with fright.

"My man, he is the one who choked two shepherders with his hands. You must have read in the paper---

"Maybe it was before my time. Give me down the lantern."

Swan Carlson appeared to be a man who got along with very few tools. Mackenzie could not find a cold-chisel among the few broken and rusted odds and ends in the barn, although there was an anvil, such as every rancher in that country had, fastened to a stump in the yard, a hammer rusting beside it on the block. As Mackenzie stood considering what could be done with the material at hand, the woman called to him from the door, her voice vibrant with anxious excitement:

"My man will come soon," she said.

Mackenzie started back to the house, hammer in hand, thinking that he might break the chain near her foot and give her liberty, at least. A pile of logs lay in the dooryard, an ax hacked into the end of one. With this tool added to the hammer, he hurried to the prisoner.

"I think we can make it now," he said.

The poor creature was panting as if the hand of her man hung over her in threat of throttling out her life as he had smothered the shepherders in the tragedy that gave him his evil fame. Mackenzie urged her to a chair, giving her the lantern to hold and, with the edge of the ax set against a link of her chain, the poll on the floor, he began hammering the soft metal against the bit.

Once she put her hand on his shoulder, her breath caught in a sharp exclamation of alarm.

"I thought it was Swan's step!" she whispered. "Listen--do you hear?"

"There's nobody," he assured her, turning his head to listen, the sweat on his lean cheek glistening in the light.

"It is my fear that he will come too soon. Strike fast, good young man, strike fast!"

If Swan Carlson had been within half a mile he would have split the wind to find out the cause of such a clanging in his shunned and proscribed house, and that he did not appear before the chain was severed was evidence that he was nowhere near at hand. When the cut links fell to the floor Mrs. Carlson stood the lantern down with gentle deliberation, as if preparing to enter the chamber of someone in a desperate sickness to whom had come a blessed respite of sleep. Then she stood, her lips apart, her breath suspended, lifting her freed foot with a joyous relief in its lightness.

Mackenzie remained on his knees at her feet, looking up strangely into her face. Suddenly she bent over him, clasped his forehead between her hands, kissed his brow as if he were her son. A great hot tear splashed down upon his cheek as she rose again, a sob in her throat that ended in a little, moaning cry. She tossed her long arms like an eagle set free from a cramping cage, her head thrown back, her streaming hair far down her shoulders. There was an appealing grace in her tall, spare body, a strange, awakening beauty in her haggard face.

"God sent you," she said. "May He keep His hand over you wherever you go."

Mackenzie got to his feet; she picked up the ax and leaned it against the table close to her hand.

"I will give you eggs, you can cook them at a fire," she said, "and bread I will give you, but butter I cannot give. That I have not tasted since I came to this land, four years ago, a bride."

She moved about to get the food, walking with awkwardness on the foot that had dragged the chain so long, laughing a little at her efforts to regain a normal balance.

"Soon it will pass away, and I will walk like a lady, as I once knew how."

"But I don't want to cook at a fire," Mackenzie protested; "I want you to make me some coffee and fry me some eggs, and then we'll see about things."

She came close to him, her great gray eyes seeming to draw him until he gazed into her soul.

"No; you must go," she said. "It will be better when Swan comes that nobody shall be here but me."

"But you! Why, you poor thing, he'll put that chain on you again, knock you down, for all I know, and fasten you up like a beast. I'm not going; I'll stay right here till he comes."

"No," shaking her head in sad earnestness, "better it will be for all that I shall be here alone when he comes."

"Alone!" said he, impatiently; "what can you do alone?"

"When he comes," said she, drawing a great breath, shaking her hair back from her face, her deep grave eyes holding him again in their earnest appeal, "then I will stand by the door and kill him with the ax!"

CHAPTER II

SWAN CARLSON

Mackenzie found it hard to bend the woman from this plan of summary vengeance. She had suffered and brooded in her loneliness so long, the cruel hand of Swan Carlson over her, that her thoughts had beaten a path to this desire. This self-administration of justice seemed now her life's sole aim. She approached it with glowing eyes and flushed cheeks; she had lived for that hour.

Harshly she met Mackenzie's efforts at first to dissuade her from this long-planned deed, yielding a little at length, not quite promising to withhold her hand when the step of her savage husband should sound outside the door.

"If you are here when he comes, then it will do for another night; if you are gone, then I will not say."

That was the compromise she made with him at last, turning with no more argument to prepare his supper, carrying the ax with her as she went about the work. Often she stood in rigid concentration, listening for the sound of Swan's coming, such animation in her eyes as a bride's might show in a happier hour than hers. She sat opposite her visitor as he made his supper on the simple food she gave him, and told him the story of her adventure into that heartless land, the ax-handle against her knee.

A minister's daughter, educated to fit herself for a minister's wife. She had learned English in the schools of her native land, as the custom is, and could speak it fairly when family reverses carried her like a far-blown seed to America. She had no business training, for what should a minister's wife know of business beyond the affairs of the parish and the economy of her own home? She found, therefore, nothing open to her hands in America save menial work in the households of others.

Not being bred to it, nor the intention or thought of it as a future contingency, she suffered in humbling herself to the services of people who were at once her intellectual and social inferiors. The one advantage in it was the improvement of her English speech, through which she hoped for better things in time.

It was while she was still new to America, its customs and social adjustments, and the shame of her menial situation burned in her soul like a corrosive acid, that she saw the advertisement of Swan Carlson in a Swedish newspaper. Swan Carlson was advertising for a wife. Beneath a handsome picture of himself he stated his desires, frankly, with evident honesty in all his representations. He told of his holdings in sheep and land, of his money in the bank.

A dream of new consequence in this strange land came to Hertha Jacobsen as she read the advertisement, as she studied the features of Swan Carlson, his bold face looking at her from the page. She had seen men, and the women of such men sharing their honors, who had risen from peasants to governors and senators, to positions of wealth and consequence in this strange land with all the romance of a tale out of a book. Perhaps fate had urged her on to this unfriendly shore only to feed her on the bitter herbs for her purification for a better life.

The minister of her church investigated Swan Carlson and his claims, finding him all that he professed to be. Hertha wrote to him; in time Swan came to visit her, a tall, long-striding man, handsomer than his picture in the paper, handsome as a Viking lord with his proud foot on the neck of a fallen foe.

So she married him, and came away with him to the sheeplands, and Swan's hand was as tender of her as a summer wind. It was shearing time when they reached home; Swan was with her every day for a little while, gathering his flocks from the range into the shearing sheds. He was master of more than fifteen thousand sheep.

When the shearing was done, and Swan had gone with his wagons to ship the clip, returning with his bankbook showing thousands in added wealth, a change came into her life, so radiant with the blossoms of a new happiness. Swan's big laugh was not so ready in his throat any more; his great hand seemed forgetful of its caress. He told her that the time of idling now was over; she must go with him in a sheep-wagon to the range and care for her band of sheep, sharing the labors of his life as she shared its rewards.

No; that was not to her liking. The wife of a rich man should not live as a peasant woman, dew in her dragged skirts to her knees, the sun browning her skin and bleaching her hair. It was not for his woman to give him *no*, said Swan. Be ready at a certain hour in the morning; they must make an early start, for the way was long.

But no; she refused to take the burden of a peasant woman on her back. That was the first time Swan knocked her senseless. When she recovered, the sheep-wagon was rocking her in its uneasy journey to the distant range. Swan's cruelties multiplied with his impatience at her slowness to master the shepherd's art. The dogs were sullen creatures, unused to a woman's voice, unfriendly to a woman's presence. Swan insisted that she lay aside her woman's attire

and dress as a man to gain the good-will of the dogs.

Again she defied his authority, all her refinement rising against the degradation of her sex; again Swan laid her senseless with a blow. When she woke her limbs were clad in overalls, a greasy jumper was buttoned over her breast. But the dogs were wiser than their master; no disguise of man's could cover her from the contempt of their shrewd senses. They would not obey her shrilled commands.

Very well, said Swan; if she did not have it in her to win even the respect of a dog, let her do a dog's work. So he took the collies away, leaving her to range her band of sheep in terrible labor, mind-wrenching loneliness, over the sage-gray hills. Wolves grew bold; the lambs suffered. When Swan came again to number her flock, he cursed her for her carelessness, giving her blows which were kinder than his words.

With the first snow she abandoned her flock and fled. Disgraceful as it was for a woman to leave her man, the frenzy of loneliness drove her on. With his companionship she could have endured Swan's cruelty, but alone her heart was dead. Three days she wandered. Swan found her after she had fallen in the snow.

His great laugh woke her, and she was home in this house, the light of day in her eyes. Swan was sitting beside her, merry in the thought of how he had cheated her out of her intention to die like an old ewe among the mountain drifts.

She was good for nothing, he said, but to sit at home like a cat. But he would make sure that she sat at home, to be there at his coming, and not running away from the bounty of a man who had taken a beggar to his bosom. Then he brought the chain and the anvil, and welded the red-hot iron upon her limb. He laughed when the smoke of her burning flesh rose hissing; laughed when he mounted his horse and rode away, leaving her in agony too great to let her die.

This summer now beginning was the fourth since that melancholy day. In the time that had passed, Swan had come into the ways of trouble, suffering a great drain upon his hoarded money, growing as a consequence sullen and somber in his moods. No more he laughed; even the distress of his chained wife, the sight of her wasting face and body, the pleading of her tortured eyes, could not move his loud gales of merriment again.

Swan had killed two of his shepherders, as she had mentioned before. It grew out of a dispute over wages, in which the men were right. That was the winter following her attempt to run away, Swan being alone with them upon the stormy range. He declared both of them set upon him at once like wolves, and that he fought only to defend his life. He strangled them, the throat of each grasped in his broad, thick hand, and held them from him so, stiff arms against their desperate struggles, until they sank down in the snow and died.

Only a little while ago the lawyers had got him off from the charge of murder, after long delays. The case had been tried in another county, for Swan Carlson's neighbors all believed him guilty of a horrible crime; no man among them could have listened to his story under oath with unprejudiced ear. The lawyers had brought Swan off, for at the end it had been his living word against the mute accusations of two dead men. There was nobody to speak for the herders; so the lawyers had set him free. But it had cost him thousands of dollars, and Swan's evil humor had deepened with the drain.

Crazy, he said of his wife; a poor mad thing bent on self-destruction in wild and mournful ways. In that Swan was believed, at least. Nobody came to inquire of her, none ever stopped to speak a word. The nearest neighbor was twelve or fifteen miles distant, a morose man with sour face, master of a sea of sheep.

All of this Swan himself had told her in the days when he laughed. He told her also of the lawyers' drain upon his wealth, starving her days together to make a pebble of saving to fill the ruthless breach.

"Tonight Swan will come," she said. "After what I have told you, are you not afraid?"

"I suppose I ought to be," Mackenzie returned, leaving her to form her own conclusion.

She searched his face with steady eyes, her hand on the ax-helve, in earnest effort to read his heart.

"No, you are not afraid," she said. "But wait; when you hear him speak, then you will be afraid."

"How do you know he is coming home tonight?"

She did not speak at once. Her eyes were fixed on the open door at Mackenzie's side, her face was set in the tensivity of her mental concentration as she listened. Mackenzie bent all his faculties to hear if any foot approached. There was no sound.

"The fishermen of my country can feel the chill of an iceberg through the fog and the night," she said at last. "Swan Carlson is an iceberg to my heart."

She listened again, bending forward, her lips open. Mackenzie fancied he heard the swing of a galloping hoof-beat, and turned toward the door.

"Have you a pistol?" she inquired.

"No."

"He is coming; in a little while he will be at the door. There is time yet for you to leave."

"I want to have a word with your man; I'll wait."

Mrs. Carlson got up, keeping the ax in hand, moved her chair to the other side of the door, where she stationed herself in such position as Swan must see her first when he looked within. She disposed the ax to conceal it entirely beneath her long apron, her hand under the garment grasping the helve.

"For your own sake, not his, I ask you not to strike him," Mackenzie pleaded, in all the earnestness he could command.

"I have given you the hour of my vengeance," she replied. "But if he curses me, if he lifts his hand!"

Mackenzie was more than a little uneasy on the probable outcome of his meeting with the tempestuous Swan. He got out his pipe and lit it, considering the situation with fast-running thoughts. Still, a man could not go on and leave that beaten, enslaved woman to the mercies of her tyrant; Swan Carlson must be given to understand that he would be held to answer to the law for his future behavior toward her.

"If I were you I'd put the ax behind the door and get his supper ready," said he.

Mrs. Carlson got up at the suggestion, with such readiness that surprised Mackenzie, put the ax back of the open door, stood a moment winding up her fallen hair.

"Yes, he is my man," she said.

Swan was turning his horse into the barn; Mackenzie could hear him talking to the animal, not unkindly. Mrs. Carlson put fresh fuel in the stove, making a rattling of the lids which must have sounded cheerful to the ears of a hungry man. As she began breaking eggs into a bowl she took up her song again, with an unconscious air of detachment from it, as one unwittingly follows the habit that has been for years the accompaniment to a task.

As before, the refinement of accent was wanting in her words, but the sweet melancholy of her voice thrilled her listener like the rich notes of an ancient violin.

*Na-a-fer a-lo-o-one, na-a-fer a-lone,
He promise na-fer to leafe me,
Na-fer to leafe me a-lone!*

Mackenzie sat with his elbow on the table, his chair partly turned toward the door, just within the threshold and a little to one side, where the flockmaster would see him the moment he stepped into the light. The traveler's pack lay on the floor at the door jamb; the smoke from his pipe drifted out to tell of his presence in the honest announcement of a man who had nothing to hide.

So Swan Carlson found him as he came home to his door.

Swan stopped, one foot in the door, the light on his face. Mrs. Carlson did not turn from the stove to greet him by word or look, but stood bending a little over the pan of sputtering eggs, which she shook gently from side to side with a rhythmic, slow movement in cadence with her song. Swan turned his eyes from one to the other, his face clouding for a moment as for a burst of storm, clearing again at once as Mackenzie rose and gave him good evening in cheerful and unshaken voice.

Mrs. Carlson had spoken a true word when she described Swan as a handsome man. Almost seven feet tall, Mackenzie took him to be, so tall that he must stoop to enter the door; lithe and sinewy of limbs, a lightness in them as of an athlete bred; broad in the shoulders, long of arms. His face was stern, his red hair long about the ears, his Viking mustache long-drooping at the corners of his mouth.

"I thought a man was here, or my woman had begun to smoke," said Swan, coming in, flinging his hat down on the floor. "What do you want, loafin' around here?"

Mackenzie explained his business in that country in direct words, and his presence in the house in the same breath. Mollified, Swan grunted that he understood and accepted the explanation, turning up his sleeves, unfastening the collar of his flannel shirt, to wash. His woman stood at the stove, her song dead on her lips, sliding the eggs from the pan onto a platter in one piece. Swan gave her no heed, not even a curious or questioning look, but as he crossed the room to the wash bench he saw the broken chain lying free upon the floor.

A breath he paused over it, his eyes fastened on it in a glowering stare. Mackenzie braced himself for the storm of wrath which seemed bursting the doors of Swan Carlson's gloomy heart. But Swan did not speak. He picked up the chain, examined the cut link, threw it down with a clatter. At the sound of its fall Mackenzie saw Mrs. Carlson start. She turned her head, terror in her eyes, her face blanched. Swan bent over the basin, snorting water like a strangling horse.

There were eight eggs on the platter that Swan Carlson's woman put before him when he sat down to his supper. One end of the great trencher was heaped with brown bacon; a stack of bread stood at Swan's left hand, a cup of coffee at his right. Before this provender the flockmaster squared himself, the unwelcome guest across the table from him, the smoke of his pipe drifting languidly out into the tranquil summer night.

Swan had said no word since his first inquiry. Mackenzie had ventured nothing more. Mrs. Carlson sat down in the chair that she had placed near the door before Swan's arrival, only that she moved it a little to bring her hand within reach of the hidden ax.

Swan had brushed his long, dark-red hair back from his broad, deep forehead, bringing it down across the tips of his ears in a savage fashion admirably suited to his grave, harsh, handsome face. He devoured his food noisily, bending low over his plate.

"You want to learn the sheep business, huh?" said he, throwing up his eyes in quick challenge, pausing a moment in his champing and clatter. Mackenzie nodded, pipe raised toward his lips. "Well, you come to the right country. You ever had any work around a ranch?"

"No."

"No, I didn't think you had; you look too soft. How much can you lift?"

"What's that got to do with sheep?" Mackenzie inquired, frowning in his habitual manner of showing displeasure with frivolous and trifling things.

"I can shoulder a steel rail off of the railroad that weighs seven hundred and fifty pounds," said Swan. "You couldn't lift one end."

"Maybe I couldn't," Mackenzie allowed, pretending to gaze out after his drifting smoke, but watching the sheepman, as he mopped the last of the eggs up with a piece of bread, with a furtive turning of his eye. He was considering how to approach the matter which he had remained there to take up with this great, boasting, savage man, and how he could make him understand that it was any of society's business whether he chained his wife or let her go free, fed her or starved her, caressed her, or knocked her down.

Swan pushed back from the table, wringing the coffee from his mustache.

"Did you cut that chain?" he asked.

"Yes, I cut it. You've got no right to keep your wife, or anybody else, chained up. You could be put in jail for it; it's against the law."

"A man's got a right to do what he pleases with his own woman; she's his property, the same as a horse."

"Not exactly the same as a horse, either. But you could be put in jail for beating your horse. I've waited here to tell you about this, in a friendly way, and warn you to treat this woman right. Maybe you didn't know you were breaking the law, but I'm telling you it's so."

Swan stood, his head within six inches of the ceiling. His wife must have read an intention of violence in his face, although Mackenzie could mark no change in his features, always as immobile as bronze. She sprang to her feet, her bosom agitated, arms lifted, shoulders raised, as if to shrink from the force of a blow. She made no effort to reach the ax behind the door; the thought of it had gone, apparently, out of her mind.

Swan stood within four feet of her, but he gave her no attention.

"When a man comes to my house and monkeys with my woman, him and me we've got to have a fight," he said.

CHAPTER III

THE FIGHT

Mackenzie got up, keeping the table between them. He looked at the door, calculating whether he could make a spring for the ax before Carlson could grapple him. Carlson read in the glance an intention to retreat, made a quick stride to the door, closed it sharply, locked it, put the key in his pocket. He stood a moment looking Mackenzie over, as if surprised by the length he unfolded when on his feet, but with no change of anger or resentment in his stony face.

"You didn't need to lock the door, Carlson; I wasn't going to run away--I didn't wait here to see you for that."

Mackenzie stood in careless, lounging pose, hand on the back of his chair, pipe between his fingers, a rather humorous look in his eyes as he measured Carlson up and down.

"Come out here in the middle and fight me if you ain't afraid!" Swan challenged, derision in his voice.

"I'll fight you, all right, after I tell you what I waited here to say. You're a coward, Swan Carlson, you're a sheepman with a sheep's heart. I turned your woman loose, and you're going to let her stay loose. Let that sink into your head."

Carlson was standing a few feet in front of Mackenzie, leaning forward, his shoulders swelling and falling as if he flexed his muscles for a spring. His arms he held swinging in front of him full length, like a runner waiting for the start, in a posture at once unpromising and uncouth. Behind him his wife shuddered against the wall.

"Swan, Swan! O-o-oh, Swan, Swan!" she said, crying it softly as if she chided him for a great hurt.

Swan turned partly toward her, striking backward with his open hand. His great knuckles struck her across the eyes, a cruel, heavy blow that would have felled a man. She staggered back a pace, then sank limply forward on her knees, her hands outreaching on the floor, her hair falling wildly, her posture that of a suppliant at a barbarian conqueror's feet.

Mackenzie snatched the heavy platter from the table and brought Carlson a smashing blow across the head. Carlson stood weaving on his legs a moment as the fragments of the dish clattered around him, swaying like a tree that waits the last blow of the ax to determine which way it will fall. Mackenzie threw the fragment that remained in his hand into Carlson's face, laying open a long gash in his cheek. As the hot blood gushed down over his jaw Carlson steadied himself on his swaying legs and laughed.

Mrs. Carlson lifted her face out of the shadows of the floor at the sound. Mackenzie glanced at her, the red mark of Swan's harsh blow across her brows, as he flew at Swan like a desert whirlwind, landing heavily on his great neck before he could lift a guard. The blow staggered Carlson over upon his wife, and together they collapsed against the wall, where Carlson stood a breath, his hand thrown out to save him from a fall. Then he shook his haughty, handsome, barbarian head, and laughed again, a loud laugh, deep and strong.

There was no note of merriment in that sound, no inflection of satisfaction or joy. It came out of his wide-extended jaws with a roar, no facial softening with it, no blending of the features in the transformation of a smile. Mrs. Carlson struggled to her knees at the sound of it, lifting her moaning cry again at the sight of his gushing blood. Swan charged his adversary with bent head, the floor trembling under his heavy feet, his great hands lifted to seize and crush.

Mackenzie backed away, upsetting the table between them, barring for a moment Swan's mad onrush. In the anger-blind movements of the man he could read his intention, which was not to strike foot to foot, knee to knee, but to grapple and smother, as he had smothered the shepherders in the snow. Across the overturned table Mackenzie landed another blow, sprang around the barrier out of the pocket of corner into which Carlson was bent on forcing him, hoping by nimble foot work to play on the flockmaster for a knockout.

Swan threw a chair as Mackenzie circled out of his reach with nimble feet, knocking down the stovepipe, dislodging a shower of tinware from the shelves behind. Carlson had him by the shoulder now, but a deft turn, a sharp blow, and Mackenzie was free, racing over the cluttered floor in wild uproar, bending, side-stepping, in a strained and terrific race. Carlson picked up the table, swung it overhead until it struck the ceiling, threw it with all his mighty strength to crush the man who had evaded him with such clever speed. A leg caught Mackenzie a glancing blow on the head, dazing him momentarily, giving Carlson the opening he desired.

In the next breath Mackenzie was down, Carlson's hand at his throat. Mackenzie could see Swan's face as he bent over him, the lantern light on it fairly. There was no light of exultation in it as his great hand closed slowly upon Mackenzie's throat, no change from its stony harshness save for the dark gash and the flood of blood that ran down his jaw and neck.

Mackenzie writhed and struggled, groping on the floor for something to strike Carlson with and break his garroting grip. The blood was singing in his ears, the breath was cut from his lungs; his eyes flashed a thousand scintillating sparks and grew dark. His hand struck something in the debris on the floor, the handle of a table knife it seemed, and with the contact a desperate accession of life heaved in him like a final wave. He struck, and struck at Swan Carlson's arm, and struck again at his wrist as he felt the tightening band of his fingers relax, heard him curse and growl. A quick turn and he was free, with a glimpse as he rolled over at Swan Carlson pulling a table fork out of his hairy wrist.

Mackenzie felt blood in his mouth; his ears were muffled as if he were under water, but he came to his feet with a leg of the broken table in his hand. Swan threw the fork at him as he rose from his knees; it struck the lantern, breaking the globe, cutting off more than half the dim light in which the undetermined battle had begun.

Over against the door Mrs. Carlson stood with the ax in her hands, holding it uplifted, partly drawn back, as if she had checked it in an intended blow. Swan tore a broad plank from the table top, split it over his knee to make it better fit his hand, and came on to the attack, bending in his slouching, bearish attitude of defiant strength. Mackenzie gave way before him, watching his moment to strike the decisive blow.

This maneuver brought Mackenzie near the door, where the wild-eyed woman stood, an ally and a reserve, ready to help him in the moment of his extremity. He believed she had been on the point of striking Swan the moment his fingers closed in their convulsive pang of death over the handle of the fork.

Swan followed, warily now, conscious of this man's unexpected strength and agility, and of his resources in a moment of desperation, making feints with his board as a batter does before the ball is thrown. Mackenzie passed Mrs. Carlson, backing away from Swan, sparring for time to recover his wind and faculties after his swift excursion to the borderland of death. He parried a swift blow, giving one in return that caught Swan on the elbow and knocked the plank out of his hand. Mackenzie sprang forward to follow up his advantage with a decisive stroke, when, to his amazement, Mrs. Carlson threw herself between them, the ax uplifted in her husband's defense.

"No, no!" she screamed; "he is my man!"

Swan Carlson laughed again, and patted her shoulder, stooping to recover his board. But he flung it down again, taking the ax in its place, pushing his woman, not without some tenderness

in his hand, back into the corner, throwing himself in front of her, his wild laugh ringing in the murky room, stifling from the smoke of lantern and stove.

Mackenzie felt his hope break like a rope of straw at this unexpected turn of the woman. With those two mad creatures--for mad he believed the isolation and cruelty suffered by the one, the trouble and terror of the law by the other, had driven them--leagued against him it seemed that he must put down all hope of ever looking again upon the day.

If there was any chance for him at all, it lay in darkness. With this thought Mackenzie made a quick dash past Carlson, smashing the lantern with a blow.

There was one window in the room, a small, single-sash opening near the stove. Even this was not apparent for a little while following the plunge into the dark; Mackenzie stood still, waiting for his eyes to adjust themselves to the gloom. No sound but Carlson's breathing came from the other side of the kitchen. The square of window appeared dimly now, a little to Mackenzie's left. He moved cautiously away from it, yet not without noise for all his care. Swan let drive with his board at the sound of movement. His aim was good; it struck Mackenzie's shoulder, but fortunately with its flat surface, doing no hurt.

Mackenzie threw himself down heavily, getting cautiously to his feet again instantly, hoping to draw Carlson over in the belief that he had put him out of the fight. But Carlson was not so rash. He struck a match, holding it up, peering under it, blinking in the sudden light.

Mackenzie was not more than eight feet away. He closed the distance in a bound, swung the heavy oak table leg, and stretched Carlson on the floor. Mrs. Carlson began wailing and moaning, bending over her fallen tyrant, as Mackenzie could gather from her voice.

"You've killed him," she said; "you've killed my man!"

"No, but I will kill him if you don't open the door!"

Mackenzie stood by Carlson as he spoke, feeling his body with his foot. He bent over Carlson, exploring for his heart, fearing that he had killed him, indeed. His first efforts to locate a pulse were not assuring, but a feeble throbbing at last announced that the great ruffian's admirable machinery was stunned, not broken.

"Open the door; he'll be all right in a little while," Mackenzie said.

Mrs. Carlson was moaning in a sorrow as genuine as if the fallen man had been the kindest husband that fate could have sent her, and not the heartless beast that he was. She found the key and threw the door open, letting in a cool, sweet breath of the night. Under it Carlson would soon revive, Mackenzie believed. He had no desire to linger and witness the restoration.

Mackenzie had a bruised and heavy feeling about him as he shouldered his pack and hurried from that inhospitable door. He knew that Swan Carlson was not dead, and would not die from that blow. Why the feeling persisted as he struck off up the creek through the dew-wet grass he could not tell, but it was strong upon him that Swan Carlson would come into his way again, to make trouble for him on a future day.

CHAPTER IV

KEEPER OF THE FLOCK

John Mackenzie, late schoolmaster of Jasper, marched on through the cool of the night, regretting that he had meddled in the domestic arrangements of Swan Carlson, the Swede. The outcome of his attempted kindness to the oppressed woman had not been felicitous. Indeed, he was troubled greatly by the fear that he had killed Swan Carlson, and that grave consequences might rise out of this first adventure that ever fell in his way.

Perhaps adventure was not such a thing to be sought as he had imagined, he reflected; hand to his swollen throat. There was an ache in his crushed windpipe, a dryness in his mouth, a taste of blood on his tongue. That had been a close go for him, there on the floor under Swan Carlson's great knee; a few seconds longer, and his first adventure would have been his last.

Yet there was a vast satisfaction in knowing what was in him. Here he had stood foot to foot with the strong man of the sheeplands, the strangler, the fierce, half-insane terror of peaceful men, and had come off the victor. He had fought this man in his own house, where a man will fight valiantly, even though a coward on the road, and had left him senseless on the floor. It was something for a schoolteacher, counted a mild and childlike man.

It had been many a year since Mackenzie had mixed in a fight, and the best that had gone before was nothing more than a harmless spat compared to this. The marvel of it was how he had developed this quality of defense in inactivity. There must have been some psychological undercurrent carrying strength and skill to him through all the years of his romantic imaginings; the spirits of old heroes of that land must have lent him their counsel and might in that desperate battle with the Norse flockmaster.

Adventure was not dead out of the land, it seemed, although this was a rather sordid and ignoble brand. It had descended to base levels among base men who lived with sheep and thought only of sheep-riches. Violence among such men as Swan Carlson was merely violence, with none of the picturesque embellishments of the olden days when men slung pistols with a challenge and a hail, in those swift battles where skill was all, bestial strength nothing.

Mackenzie hoped to find Tim Sullivan different from the general run of sheep-rich men. There must be some of the spice of romance in a man who had the wide reputation of Tim Sullivan, and who was the hero of so many tales of success.

It was Mackenzie's hope that this encounter with the wild sheepman might turn out to his profit with Tim Sullivan. He always had believed that he should win fortune fighting if it ever fell to his portion at all. This brush with Swan Carlson confirmed his old belief. If there was any good luck for him in the sheep country, it would come to him through a fight,

Mackenzie considered these things as he marched on away from Swan Carlson's homestead, thinking the safe plan would be to put several miles between himself and that place before lying down to rest. At dawn Swan would be out after him with a gun, more than likely. Mackenzie had nothing of the sort in his slender equipment. Imagine a man going into the sheep country carrying a gun! The gun days of the West were done; he had seen only one cowboy wearing one in his four years at Jasper.

Past midnight Mackenzie came to a little valley where somebody had been cutting hay. The late-risen moon discovered the little mounds of hay thick around him, the aroma of the curing herbage was blowing to him an invitation to stop and sleep. Let Swan Carlson come when he might, that was the place prepared for the traveler's repose.

Romance or no romance, riches or poverty, he was through with a woman's work, he told himself. Once there had been ideals ahead of him in educational work, but the contempt of men had dispelled them. If he could not find his beginning in the sheep country, he would turn elsewhere. A man who had it in him to fight giants wasn't cut out for teaching school.

Mackenzie sat with his back to a haycock thinking in this vein. The sound of running water was near; he went to the creek and bathed his throat, easing its burning with a deep swig. Back again to the hay, still building new victories, and nobler ones, on the foundation of this triumph over Swan Carlson, the red giant who choked men to death in the snow.

Morning discovered no habitation in reach of the eye. That little field of mown hay stood alone among the gray hills, unfenced, unfended, secure in its isolation, a little patch of something in the wilderness that looked like home. Mackenzie must have put many miles behind him since leaving Carlson's door. Looking back, he could follow the course of the creek where it snaked through the hills, dark green of willow and cottonwood fresh among the hemming slopes of sage, but no trace of Carlson's trees could he see.

Mackenzie had no flour to mix a wad of dough, and but a heel of a bacon side to furnish a breakfast. It was so unpromising in his present hungry state that he determined to tramp on a few miles in the hope of lifting Tim Sullivan's ranch-house on the prominent hilltop where, he had been told, it stood.

Two or three miles beyond the hay-field Mackenzie came suddenly upon a sheep-camp. The wagon stood on a green hillside, a pleasant valley below it where the grass was abundant and sweet. The camp evidently had been stationed in that place but a little while, for a large band of sheep grazed just below it, no bedding-ground being worn bare in the unusual verdure. Altogether, it was the greenest and most promising place Mackenzie had met in his journey, gladdening at once to the imagination and the eye.

The shepherd sat on the hillside, his dogs beside him, a little smoke ascending straight in the calm, early sunshine from his dying fire. The collies scented the stranger while he stood on the hilltop, several hundred yards above the camp, rising to question his presence bristling backs. The shepherd rose to inquire into the alarm, springing up with amazing agility, such sudden and wild concern in his manner as provoked the traveler's smile.

Mackenzie saw that he was a boy of fifteen or thereabout, dressed in overalls much too large for him, the bottoms turned up almost to his knees. Hot as the morning was beginning, the lad had on a duck coat with sheepskin collar, but in the excitement of beholding a visitor approaching his camp so early in the day, he took off his hat, standing so a moment. Then he cut out a streak for the wagon, a few rods distant, throwing back a half-frightened look as he disappeared around its side.

This was a very commodious wagon, familiar to Mackenzie from having seen many like it drawn up for repairs at the blacksmith shops in Jasper. Its heavy canvas top was stretched tightly over bows, made to withstand wind and rough weather, a stovepipe projecting through it, fended about with a broad tin, and a canvas door, with a little window in it, a commodious step letting down to the ground. Its tongue was cut short, to admit coupling it close behind the camp-mover's wagon, and it was a snug and comfortable home on wheels.

The dogs came slowly to meet Mackenzie as he approached, backs still bristling, countenances unpromising. The boy had disappeared into the wagon; Mackenzie wondered if he had gone to fetch his gun.

But no. Instead of a gun, came a girl, neither timidity nor fear in her bearing, and close behind her came the boy, hat still in his hand, his long, straight hair down about his ears. Mackenzie had stopped a hundred yards or so distant, not confident of a friendly reception from the dogs.

The girl waved her hand in invitation for him to come on, and stood waiting at the wagon end.

She was as neatly dressed as the lad beside her was uncouth in his man-size overalls, her short corduroy skirt belted about with a broad leather clasped with a gleaming silver buckle, the tops of her tall laced boots lost beneath its hem. Her gray flannel waist was laced at the bosom like a cowboy's shirt, adorned at the collar with a flaming scarlet necktie done in a bow as broad as a band. Her brown sombrero was tilted, perhaps unintentionally, a little to one side of her rather pert and independently carried head.

At a word from her the dogs left the way unopposed, and as greetings passed between the sheepgirl and the stranger the wise creatures stood beside her, eyeing the visitor over with suspicious mien. Mackenzie told his name and his business, making inquiry in the same breath for Tim Sullivan's ranch.

"Do you know Mr. Sullivan?" she asked. And as she lifted her eyes Mackenzie saw that they were as blue as asters on an October morning, and that her hair was a warm reddish-brown, and that her face was refreshingly pure in its outline, strong and haughty and brown, and subtly sweet as the elusive perfume of a wild rose of the hills.

"No, I don't know Mr. Sullivan; I've never even seen him. I've heard a lot about him down at Jasper--I was the schoolteacher there."

"Oh, you're up here on your vacation?" said she, a light of quick interest in her eyes, an unmistakable friendliness in her voice. It was as if he had presented a letter from somebody well and favorably known.

"No, I've come up here to see about learning the sheep business."

"Sheep business?" said she, looking at him with surprised eyes. "Sheep business?" this time with a shading of disgust. "Well, if I had sense enough to teach school I'd never want to see another sheep!"

Mackenzie smiled at her impetuous outburst in which she revealed in a word the discontent of her heart.

"Of course you know Mr. Sullivan?"

"He's my father," she returned. "This is my brother Charley; there are eight more of us at home."

Charley grinned, his shyness still over him, but his alarm quieted, and gave Mackenzie his hand.

"The ranch is about thirteen or fifteen miles on up the creek from here," she said, "You haven't had your breakfast, have you?"

"No; I just about finished my grub yesterday."

"I didn't see any grease around your gills," said the girl, in quite a matter-of-fact way, no flippancy in her manner. "Charley, stir up the fire, will you? I can't offer you much, Mr. Mackenzie, but you're welcome to what there is. How about a can of beans?"

"You've hit me right where I live, Miss Sullivan."

The collies came warily up, stiff-legged, with backs still ruffled, and sniffed Mackenzie over. They seemed to find him harmless, turning from him presently to go and lie beside Charley, their faces toward the flock, alert ears lifted, white breasts gleaming in the sun like the linen of fastidious gentlemen.

"Do you want me to get any water, Joan?" Charley inquired.

Joan answered from inside the wagon that no water was needed, there was coffee enough in the pot. She handed the smoke-blackened vessel out to Mackenzie as she spoke, telling him to go and put it on the fire.

Joan turned the beans into the pan after cooking the bacon, and sent Charley to the wagon for a loaf of bread.

"We don't have to bake bread in this camp, that's one blessing," she said. "Mother keeps us supplied. Some of these shepherders never taste anything but their cold-water biscuits for years at a time."

"It must get kind of tiresome," Mackenzie reflected, thinking of his own efforts at bread-making on the road.

"It's too heavy to carry around in the craw," said Joan.

Charley watched Mackenzie curiously as he ate, whispering once to his sister, who flushed, turned her eyes a moment on her visitor, and then seemed to rebuke the lad for passing confidences in such impolite way. Mackenzie guessed that his discolored neck and bruised face had been the subject of the boy's conjectures, but he did not feel pride enough in his late encounter to speak of it even in explanation. Charley opened the way to it at last when Joan took the breakfast things back to the wagon.

"Have you been in a fight?" the boy inquired.

"Not much of a one," Mackenzie told him, rather wishing that the particulars might be reserved.

"Your neck's black like somebody'd been chokin' you, and your face is bunged up some, too. Who done it?"

"Do you know Swan Carlson?" Mackenzie inquired, turning slowly to the boy.

"Swan Carlson?" Charley's face grew pale at the name; his eyes started in round amazement. "You couldn't never 'a' got away from Swan; he choked two fellers to death, one in each hand. No man in this country could whip one side of Swan."

"Well, I got away from him, anyhow," said Mackenzie, in a manner that even the boy understood to be the end of the discussion.

But Charley was not going to have it so. He jumped up and ran to meet Joan as she came from the wagon.

"Mr. Mackenzie had a fight with Swan Carlson--that's what's the matter with his neck!" he said. There was unbounded admiration in the boy's voice, and exultation as if the distinction were his own. Here before his eyes was a man who had come to grips with Swan Carlson, and had escaped from his strangling hands to eat his breakfast with as much unconcern as if he had no more than been kicked by a mule.

Joan came on a little quicker, excitement reflected in her lively eyes. Mackenzie was filling his pipe, which had gone through the fight in his pocket in miraculous safety--for which he was duly grateful--ashamed of his bruises, now that the talk of them had brought them to Joan's notice again.

"I hope you killed him," she said, coming near, looking down on Mackenzie with full commendation; "he keeps his crazy wife chained up like a dog!"

"I don't think he's dead, but I'd like to know for sure," Mackenzie returned, his eyes bent thoughtfully on the ground.

"Nobody will ever say a word to you if you did kill him," Joan assured. "They'd all know he started it--he fusses with everybody."

She sat on the ground near him, Charley posting himself a little in front, where he could admire and wonder over the might of a man who could break Swan Carlson's hold upon his throat and leave his house alive. Before them the long valley widened as it reached away, the sheep a dusty brown splotch in it, spread at their grazing, the sound of the lambs' wailing rising clear in the pastoral silence.

"I stopped at Carlson's house after dark last night," Mackenzie explained, seeing that such explanation must be made, "and turned his wife loose. Carlson resented it when he came home. He said I'd have to fight him. But you're wrong when you believe what Carlson says about that woman; she isn't crazy, and never was."

That seemed to be all the story, from the way he hastened it, and turned away from the vital point of interest. Joan touched his arm as he sat smoking, his speculative gaze on the sheep, his brows drawn as if in troubled thought.

"What did you do when he said you had to fight him?" she inquired, her breath coming fast, her cheeks glowing.

Mackenzie laughed shortly. "Why, I tried to get away," he said.

"Why didn't you, before he got his hands on you?" Charley wanted to know.

"Charley!" said Joan.

"Carlson locked the door before I could get out." Mackenzie nodded to the boy, very gravely, as one man to another. Charley laughed.

"You didn't tear up no boards off the floor tryin' to git away!" said he.

Joan smiled; that seemed to express her opinion of it, also. She admired the schoolmaster's modest reluctance when he gave them a bare outline of what followed, shuddering when he laughed over Mrs. Carlson's defense of her husband with the ax.

"Gee!" said Charley, "I hope dad'll give you a job."

"But how did you get out of there?" Joan asked.

"I took an unfair advantage of Swan and hit him with a table leg."

"Gee! dad's *got* to give you a job," said Charley; "I'll make him."

"I'll hold you to that, Charley," Mackenzie laughed.

In the boy's eyes Mackenzie was already a hero, greater than any man that had come into the sheeplands in his day. Sheep people are not fighting folks. They never have been since the world's beginning; they never will be to the world's end. There is something in the peaceful business of attending sheep, some appeal in their meekness and passivity, that seems to tincture and curb the savage spirit that dwells in the breast of man. Swan Carlson was one of the notorious exceptions in that country. Even the cattlemen were afraid of him.

Joan advised against Mackenzie's expressed intention of returning to Carlson's house to find out how badly he was hurt. It would be a blessing to the country, she said, if it should turn out that Carlson was killed. But Mackenzie had an uneasy feeling that it would be a blessing he could not share. He was troubled over the thing, now that the excitement of the fight had cooled out of him, thinking of the blow he had given Carlson with that heavy piece of oak.

Perhaps the fellow was not dead, but hurt so badly that he would die without surgical aid. It was the part of duty and humanity to go back and see. He resolved to do this, keeping the resolution

to himself.

Joan told him much of the sheep business, and much about the art of running a big band over that sparse range, in which this green valley lay like an oasis, a gladdening sight seldom to be met with among those sulky hills. She said she hoped her father would find a place for him, for the summer, at least.

"But I wouldn't like to see you shut yourself up in this country like the rest of us are," she said, gazing off over the hills with wistful eyes. "A man that knows enough to teach school oughtn't fool away his time on sheep."

She was working toward her own emancipation, she told him, running that band of two thousand sheep on shares for her father, just the same as an ordinary herdsman. In three years she hoped her increase, and share of the clip, would be worth ten thousand dollars, and then she would sell out and go away.

"What would you want to leave a good business like this for?" he asked, rather astonished at her cool calculation upon what she believed to be freedom. "There's nothing out in what people call the world that you could turn your hand to that would make you a third of the money."

"I want to go away and get some education," she said.

"But you are educated, Miss Sullivan."

She turned a slow, reproachful look upon him, a shadow of sadness over her wholesome young face.

"I'm nearly nineteen; I don't know as much as a girl of twelve," she said.

"I've never met any of those precocious twelve-year-olds," he told her, shaking his head gravely. "You know a great deal more than you're conscious of, I think, Miss Sullivan. We don't get the best of it out of books."

"I'm a prisoner here," she said, stretching her arms as if she displayed her bonds, "as much of a prisoner in my way as Swan Carlson's wife was in hers. You cut her chain; nobody ever has come to cut mine."

"Your knight will come riding over the hill some evening. One comes into every woman's life, sooner or later, I think."

"Mostly in imagination," said Joan. And her way of saying it, so wise and superior, as if she spoke of some toy which she had outgrown, brought a smile again to her visitor's grave face.

Charley was not interested in his sister's bondage, or in the coming of a champion to set her free. He went off to send the dogs after an adventurous bunch of sheep that was straying from the main flock. Joan sighed as she looked after him, putting a strand of hair away behind her ear. Presently she brightened, turning to Mackenzie with quickening eyes.

"I'll make a bargain with you, Mr. Mackenzie, if you're in earnest about learning the sheep business," she said.

"All right; let's hear it."

"Dad's coming over here today to finish cutting hay. I'll make a deal with him for you to get a band of sheep to run on shares if you'll agree to teach me enough to get into college--if I've got brains enough to learn."

"The doubt would be on the side of the teacher, not the pupil, Miss Sullivan. Maybe your father wouldn't like the arrangement, anyway."

"He'll like it, all right. What do you say?"

"I don't think it would be very much to my advantage to take charge of a band of sheep under conditions that might look as if I needed somebody to plug for me. Your father might think of me as an incompetent and good-for-nothing person."

"You're afraid I haven't got it in me to learn--you don't want to waste time on me!" Joan spoke with a sad bitterness, as one who saw another illusion fading before her eyes.

"Not that," he hastened to assure her, putting out his hand as if to add the comfort of his touch to the salve of his words. "I'm only afraid your father wouldn't have anything to do with me if you were to approach him with any such proposal. From what I've heard of him he's a man who likes a fellow to do his own talking."

"I don't think he'd refuse me."

"It's hard for a stranger to do that. Your father---"

"You'll not do it, you mean?"

"I think I'd rather get a job from your father on my own face than on any kind of an arrangement or condition, Miss Sullivan. But I pass you my word that you'll be welcome to anything and all I'm able to teach you if I become a pupil in the sheep business on this range. Provided, of course, that I'm in reaching distance."

"Will you?" Joan asked, hope clearing the shadows from her face again.

"But we might be too far apart for lessons very often," he suggested.

"Not more than ten or twelve miles. I could ride that every day."

"It's a bargain then, if I get on," said he.

"It's a bargain," nodded Joan, giving him her hand to bind it, with great earnestness in her eyes.

CHAPTER V

TIM SULLIVAN

"Yes, they call us flockmasters in the reports of the Wool Growers' Association, and in the papers and magazines, but we're nothing but sheepmen, and that's all you can make out of us."

Tim Sullivan spoke without humor when he made this correction in the name of his calling, sitting with his back to a haycock, eating his dinner in the sun. Mackenzie accepted the correction with a nod of understanding, sparing his words.

"So you want to be a flockmaster?" said Tim. "Well, there's worse callin's a man, especially a young man, could take up. What put it in your head to tramp off up here to see me? Couldn't some of them sheepmen down at Jasper use you?"

"I wanted to get into the heart of the sheep country for one thing, and several of my friends recommended you as the best sheepman on the range, for another. I want to learn under a master, if I learn at all."

"Right," Tim nodded, "right and sound. Do you think you've got the stuff in you to make a sheepman out of?"

"It will have to be a pretty hard school if I can't stick it through."

"Summers are all right," said Tim, reflectively, nodding away at the distant hills, "and falls are all right, but you take it winter and early spring, and it tries the mettle in a man. Blizzards and starvation, and losses through pile-ups and stampedes, wolves and what not, make a man think sometimes he'll never go through it any more. Then spring comes, with the cold wind, and slush up to your ankles, and you out day and night lookin' after the ewes and lambs. Lambin' time is the hard time, and it's the time when a man makes it or loses, accordin' to what's in him to face hardship and work."

"I've heard about it; I know what I'm asking to go up against, Mr. Sullivan."

"You want to buy in, or take a band on shares?"

"I'd rather take a band on shares. If I put what little money I've got into it I'll go it alone."

"That's right; it's safer to let the other man take the risk. It ain't fair to us sheepmen, but we have to do it to get men. Well, when we hit on a good man, it pays better than hirin' poor ones at fifty dollars a month and found. I've had old snoozers workin' for me that the coyotes eat the boots off of while they was asleep. You look kind of slim and light to tackle a job on the range."

Mackenzie made no defense of his weight, advancing no further argument in behalf of his petition for a job. Sullivan measured him over with his appraising eyes, saying nothing about the bruises he bore, although Mackenzie knew he was burning with curiosity to go into the matter of how and when he received them.

Sullivan was a man of calm benignity of face, a placid certainty of his power and place in the world; a rugged man, broad-handed, slow. His pleasure was in the distinction of his wealth, and not in any use that he made of it for his own comfort or the advancement of those under his hand. Even so, he was of a type superior to the general run of flockmasters such as Mackenzie had met.

"I'll give you a job helpin' me on this hay for a few days, and kind of try you out," Tim agreed at last. "I don't want to discourage you at the start, but I don't believe you got the mettle in you to make a flockmaster, if you want to call it that, out of."

"All right; I'll help you on the hay. Before I start in though, I'd like to borrow a saddle-horse from you to take a ride down the creek to Swan Carlson's place. I wouldn't be long."

"Carlson's place? Do you know Swan Carlson?"

Mackenzie told in few words how much he knew of Carlson, and his reason for desiring to visit him. Tim's wonder was too large to contain at hearing this news. He got up, his eyes staring in plain incredulity, his mouth open a bit between surprise and censure, it seemed. But he said nothing for a little while; only stood and looked Mackenzie over again, with more careful scrutiny than before.

"I'll go down with you," he announced, turning abruptly away to get the horses.

It was evident to Mackenzie that Sullivan was bewildered between doubt and suspicion as they rode toward Carlson's ranch, which the sheepman said was about seven miles away. But he betrayed nothing of his thoughts in words, riding in silence mainly, looking at the ground like a man who had troubles on his mind.

The silence of abandonment was over Carlson's house as they rode up. A few chickens retreated from the yard to the cover of the barn in the haste of panic, their going being the only sound of life about the place. The door through which Mackenzie had left was shut; he approached it without hesitation--Tim Sullivan lingering back as if in doubt of their reception--and knocked. No answer. Mackenzie tried the door, finding it unlocked; pushed it open, entered.

Sullivan stood outside, one mighty hand on the jamb, his body to one side under protection of the house, his head put cautiously and curiously round to see, leaving a fairway for Swan Carlson should he rise from a dark corner, shake himself like an old grizzly, and charge.

"Is he there?" Tim asked, his voice a strained whisper.

Mackenzie did not reply. He stood in the middle of the room where his combat with Swan had taken place, among the debris of broken dishes, wrecked table, fallen stovepipe and tinware, looking about him with grim interest. There was nobody in the other room, but the blood from Swan's hurt trailed across the floor as if he had been helped to the bed. Tim took his courage in both hands and came just inside the door.

"Man! Look at the blood!" he said.

"There's nobody here," Mackenzie told him, turning to go.

"She's took him to the doctor," said Tim.

"Where is that?"

"There's a kind of a one over on the Sweetwater, sixty miles from here, but there's no good one this side of Jasper."

"He'll die on the way," Mackenzie said conclusively.

"No such luck," said Tim. "Look! There's the chain he tied that woman of his up with."

"We'd better go back and get at that hay," Mackenzie said. "There's nothing I can do for Carlson."

"There's the table leg you hit him with!" Tim picked it up, plucking off the red hairs which clung to it, looking at Mackenzie with startled eyes. Mackenzie mounted his horse.

"You'd better shut the door," he called back as he rode away.

Tim caught up with him half a mile on the way back to the hay-field. The sheepman seemed to have outrun his words. A long time he rode beside Mackenzie in silence, turning a furtive eye upon him across his long nose now and then. At last it burst from him:

"You done it!" he said, with the astonished pleasure of a man assured against his doubts.

Mackenzie checked his horse, looking at Tim in perplexed inquiry.

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"You laid him out--Swan Carlson--you done it! Man!"

"Oh, you're still talking about that," Mackenzie said, a bit vexed.

"It would be worth thousands to the rest of us sheepmen on this range if he never comes back."

"Why didn't some of you handle him long ago? A man of your build ought to be able to put a dent in Carlson."

"I'll fight any man that stands on two feet," said Tim, with such sincerity that it could not have been taken for a boast, "you can ask about me far and near, but I draw the line at the devil. I've stood up with four men against me, with meat cleavers and butcher knives in their hands, when I used to work as a sheep butcher back in the packin' house in Chicago, and I've come through with my life. But them was friends of mine," he sighed; "a man knew how they lived. Swan Carlson's got a wolf's blood in his veins. He ain't a human man."

"And this man is worth three hundred thousand dollars!" thought Mackenzie. And he knew, also, that the greatest treasure that the flockmaster could count was one not so greatly appreciated as a thousand sheep--that brave, ambitious little rebel, Joan.

"Maybe you've got the makin' of a sheepman in you," Tim said, thoughtfully, as they came in sight of the hay. "I've got an old man I could put you under till the dogs got used to you and you learnt their ways and found out something among the thousand things a man's got to know if he intends to make a success of runnin' sheep. Old Dad Frazer could put you onto the tricks of the trade quicker than any man I know. Maybe you *have* got the makin' of a sheepman in you. I'll have to think it over."

Tim took the four days they were at the hay to think about it. At the end of that time, with the hay in stack and the mowing-machine loaded into the wagon for the rough journey to the ranch, Tim unburdened his mind.

"I've decided to try you out, John," he announced, but shaking his head as he spoke, as if he doubted the wisdom of the venture. "I'll leave you here with Dad Frazer--he's over on Horsethief, about six miles across from Joan's range--and let him break you in. You understand, you don't go in on shares till you're able to handle at least two thousand head."

"I agree on that."

"And then there's another little point." Tim shifted his feet, jerked up his trousers, rubbed his chin in a truly Irish way. "That girl of mine, Joan, she's got it in her head she wants to be a lady,

and go to college and put on agonies. No use in it, as I tell her. No girl that's got money needs any of the education stuff. I got on without it, and I made my money without it. Joan she wants you to give her some lessons. She made me promise I wouldn't take you on unless you'd agree to that as part of our conditions and contract."

Mackenzie had no need to put on a face of thinking it over seriously; he was entirely sincere in the silence he held while he revolved it in his mind. He doubted whether more learning would bring to Joan the contentment which she lacked in her present state. It might only open the door to a greater longing, or it might disillusion her when her feet had left these wild, free hills, and set a pang in her heart like a flame for the things which knowledge closes the door against the return for evermore.

"I'll tell you how to handle her to be rid of her soon," said Tim, winking craftily, seeing how the wind stood. "Discourage her, tell her she ain't got the mind for books and Latin and mathematics. All the mathematics she needs is enough to count her sheep and figure her clip. Tell her to put books out of her head and stick to the range, marry some good sheepman if one turns up to her taste, or pass them all up if she likes. But tell her to stick to sheep, whatever she does. She can be the sheep queen of this country in fifteen years; she's as handy with 'em now as I am, and I tell you, John, that's something that's hard for me to say, even of my own girl. But she is; she's as good a sheepman right now as I am or ever will be. But you don't need to tell her that."

"I don't believe she'll take it, but it's the soundest advice I could give her," Mackenzie said.

"Work up to it gradual, lad; it can't be done in a day. Make the lessons hard, pile the Latin on heavy. Lord, I remember it, back in the old country, old Father MacGuire layin' it on the lads under his thumb. Devil a word of it sticks to me now, not even the word for sheep. I tried to remember some of it when they sent me up to the legislature in Cheyenne; I wanted to knock 'em over. But it had all leaked out. Discourage her, man; discourage her."

"Yes, that might be the greatest kindness I could do her in the end," Mackenzie said.

"I'll drop you off over there; you can stay in camp tonight with Charley and Joan. Tomorrow I'll come back and take you out to Dad Frazer's camp, and you can begin your schoolin' for the makin' of a master. But begin early to discourage her, John; begin at her early, lad."

CHAPTER VI

EYES IN THE FIRELIGHT

"They call it the lonesomeness here," said Joan, her voice weary as with the weight of the day. "People shoot themselves when they get it bad--green shepherders and farmers that come in here to try to plow up the range."

"Crazy guys," said Charley, contemptuously, chin in his hands where he stretched full length on his belly beside the embers of the supper fire.

"Homesick," said Mackenzie, understandingly. "I've heard it's one of the worst of all diseases. It defeats armies sometimes, so you can't blame a lone shepherd if he loses his mind on account of it."

"Huh!" said Charley, no sympathy in him for such weakness at all.

"I guess not," Joan admitted, thoughtfully. "I was brought up here, it's home to me. Maybe I'd get the lonesomeness if I was to go away."

"You sure would, kid," said Charley, with comfortable finality.

"But I want to go, just the same," Joan declared, a certain defiance in her tone, as if in defense of a question often disputed between herself and Charley.

"You think you do," said Charley, "but you'd hit the high places comin' back home. Ain't that right, Mr. Mackenzie?"

"I think there's something to it," Mackenzie allowed.

"Maybe I would," Joan yielded, "but as soon as my share in the sheep figures up enough you'll see me hittin' the breeze for Chicago. I want to see the picture galleries and libraries."

"I'd like to go through the mail-order house we get our things from up there," Charley said. "The catalogue says it covers seventeen acres!"

Mackenzie was camping with them for the night on his way to Dad Frazer's range, according to Tim Sullivan's plan. Long since they had finished supper; the sheep were quiet below them on the hillside. The silence of the sheeplands, almost oppressive in its weight, lay around them so complete and unbroken that Mackenzie fancied he could hear the stars snap as they sparkled. He smiled to himself at the fancy, face turned up to the deep serenity of the heavens. Charley blew the embers, stirring them with a brush of sage.

"The lonesomeness," said Mackenzie, with a curious dwelling on the word; "I never heard it used in that specific sense before."

"Well, it sure gets a greenhorn," said Joan.

Charley held the sage-branch to the embers, blowing them until a little blaze jumped up into the startled dark. The sudden light revealed Joan's face where she sat across from Mackenzie, and it was so pensively sad that it smote his heart like a pain to see.

Her eyes stood wide open as she had stretched them to roam into the night after her dreams of freedom beyond the land she knew, and so she held them a moment, undazzled by the light of the leaping blaze. They gleamed like glad waters in a morning sun, and the schoolmaster's heart was quickened by them, and the pain for her longing soothed out of it. The well of her youth was revealed before him, the fountain of her soul.

"I'm goin' to roll in," Charley announced, his branch consumed in the eager breath of the little blaze. "Don't slam your shoes down like you was drivin' nails when you come in, Joan."

"It wouldn't bother you much," Joan told him, calmly indifferent to his great desire for unbroken repose.

Charley rolled on his back, where he lay a little while in luxurious inaction, sleep coming over him heavily. Joan shook him, sending him stumbling off to the wagon and his bunk.

"You could drive a wagon over him and never wake him once he hits the hay," she said.

"What kind of a man is Dad Frazer?" Mackenzie asked, his mind running on his business adventure that was to begin on the morrow.

"Oh, he's a regular old flat-foot," said Joan. "He'll talk your leg off before you've been around him a week, blowin' about what he used to do down in Oklahoma."

"Well, a man couldn't get the lonesomeness around him, anyhow."

"You'll get it, all right, just like I told you; no green hand with all his senses ever escaped it. Maybe you'll have it light, though," she added, hopefully, as if to hold him up for the ordeal.

"I hope so. But with you coming over to take lessons, and Dad Frazer talking morning, noon, and night, I'll forget Egypt and its fleshpots, maybe."

"Egypt? I thought you came from Jasper?"

"It's only a saying, used in relation to the place you look back to with regret when you're hungry."

"I'm so ignorant I ought to be shot!" said Joan.

And Mackenzie sat silently fronting her, the dead fire between, a long time, thinking of the sparkle of her yearning eyes, smiling in his grim way to himself when there was no chance of being seen as he felt again the flash of them strike deep into his heart. Wise eyes, eyes which held a store of wholesome knowledge gleaned from the years in those silent places where her soul had grown without a shadow to smirch its purity.

"There's a difference between wisdom and learning," he said at last, in low and thoughtful voice. "What's it like over where Dad Frazer grazes his sheep?"

"Close to the range Swan Carlson and the Hall boys use, and you want to keep away from there."

"Of course; I wouldn't want to trespass on anybody's territory. Are they all disagreeable people over that way?"

"There's nobody there but the Halls and Carlson. You know Swan."

"He might improve on close acquaintance," Mackenzie speculated.

"I don't think he's as bad as the Halls, wild and crazy as he is. Hector Hall, especially. But you may get on with them, all right--I don't want to throw any scare into you before you meet them."

"Are they out looking for trouble?"

"I don't know as they are, but they're there to make it if anybody lets a sheep get an inch over the line they claim as theirs. Oh, well, pass 'em up till you have to meet them--maybe they'll treat you white, anyway."

Again a silence stood between them, Mackenzie considering many things, not the least of them being this remarkable girl's life among the sheep and the rough characters of the range, no wonder in him over her impatience to be away from it. It seemed to him that Tim Sullivan might well spare her the money for schooling, as well as fend her against the dangers and hardships of the range by keeping her at home these summer days.

"It looks to me like a hard life for a girl," he said; "no diversions, none of the things that youth generally values and craves. Don't you ever have any dances or anything--camp meetings or picnics?"

"They have dances over at Four Corners sometimes--Hector Hall wanted me to go to one with him about a year ago. He had his nerve to ask me, the little old sheep-thief!"

"Well, I should think so."

"He's been doubly sore at us ever since I turned him down. I looked for him to come over and shoot up my camp some night for a long time, but I guess he isn't that bad."

"So much to his credit."

"But I wish sometimes I'd gone with him. Maybe it would have straightened things out. You know, when you stay here on the range, Mr. Mackenzie, you're on a level with everybody else, no matter what you think of yourself. You can't get out of the place they make for you in their estimation of you. Hector Hall never will believe I'm too good to go to a dance with him. He'll be sore about it all his life."

"A man naturally would have regrets, Miss Sullivan. Maybe that's as far as it goes with Hector Hall, maybe he's only sore at heart for the honor denied."

"That don't sound like real talk," said Joan.

Mackenzie grinned at the rebuke, and the candor and frankness in which it was administered, thinking that Joan would have a frigid time of it out in the world if she applied such outspoken rules to its flatteries and mild humbugs.

"Let's be natural then," he suggested, considering as he spoke that candor was Joan's best defense in her position on the range. Here she sat out under the stars with him, miles from the nearest habitation, miles from her father's house, her small protector asleep in the wagon, and thought no more of it than a chaperoned daughter of the city in an illuminated drawing-room. A girl had to put men in their places and keep them there under such circumstances, and nobody knew better how to do it than Joan.

"I'll try your patience and good humor when you start out to teach me," she told him, "for I'll want to run before I learn to walk."

"We'll see how it goes in a few days; I've sent for the books."

"I'll make a good many wild breaks," she said, "and tumble around a lot, I know, but there won't be anybody to laugh at me--but you." She paused as if considering the figure she would make at the tasks she awaited with such impatience, then added under her breath, almost in a whisper, as if it was not meant for him to hear: "But you'll never laugh at me for being hungry to learn."

Mackenzie attempted neither comment nor reply to this, feeling that it was Joan's heart speaking to herself alone. He looked away over the sleeping sheeplands, vast as the sea, and as mysterious under the starlight, thinking that it would require more than hard lessons and unusual tasks to discourage this girl. She stood at the fountain-edge, leaning with dry lips to drink, her wistful eyes strong to probe the mysteries which lay locked in books yet strange to her, but wiser in her years than many a man who had skimmed a college course. There was a vast difference between knowledge and learning, indeed; it never had been so apparent to him as in the presence of that outspoken girl of the sheep range that summer night.

What would the world do with Joan Sullivan if she ever broke her fetters and went to it? How would it accept her faith and frankness, her high scorn for the deceits upon which it fed? Not kindly, he knew. There would be disillusionment ahead for her, and bitter awakening from long-wrapping dreams. If he could teach her to be content in the wide freedom of that place he would accomplish the greatest service that he could bring her in the days of her untroubled youth. Discourage her, said Tim Sullivan. Mackenzie felt that this was not his job.

"Maybe Charley's right about it," she said, her voice low, and soft with that inherited gentleness which must have come from Tim Sullivan's mother, Mackenzie thought. "He's a wise kid, maybe I would want to come back faster than I went away. But I get so tired of it sometimes I walk up and down out here by the wagon half the night, and wear myself out making plans that I may never be able to put through."

"It's just as well," he told her, nodding again in his solemn, weighty fashion; "everybody that amounts to anything has this fever of unrest. Back home we used to stack the wheat to let it sweat and harden. You're going through that. It takes the grossness out of us."

"Have you gone through it?"

"Years of it; over the worst of it now, I hope."

"And you came here. Was that the kind of an ambition you had? Was that all your dreams brought you?"

"But I've seen more here than I ever projected in my schemes, Miss Joan. I've seen the serenity of the stars in this vastness; I've felt the wind of freedom on my face." And to himself: "And I have seen the firelight leap in a maiden's eyes, and I have looked deep into the inspiring fountain of her soul." But there was not the boldness in him, nor the desire to risk her rebuke again, to bring it to his lips.

"Do you think you'll like it after you get over the lonesomeness?"

"Yes, if I take the lonesomeness."

"You'll take it, all right. But if you ever do work up to be a sheepman, and of course you will if you stick to the range long enough, you'll never be able to leave again. Sheep tie a person down like a houseful of children."

"Maybe I'd never want to go. I've had my turn at it out there; I've been snubbed and discounted, all but despised, because I had a little learning and no money to go with it. I can hide my little learning here, and nobody seems to care about the money. Yes, I think I'll stay on the range."

Joan turned her face away, and he knew the yearning was in her eyes as they strained into the starlit horizon after the things she had never known.

"I don't see what could ever happen that would make me want to stay here," she said at last. She got up with the sudden nimbleness of a deer, so quickly that Mackenzie thought she must be either startled or offended, but saw in a moment it was only her natural way of moving in the untrammelled freedom of her lithe, strong limbs.

"You'll find a soft place on the side of the hill somewhere to sleep," she said, turning toward the wagon. "I'm going to pile in. Good night."

Mackenzie sat again by the ashes of the little fire after giving her good night. He felt that he had suffered in her estimation because of his lowly ambition to follow her father, and the hundred other obscure heroes of the sheep country, and become a flockmaster, sequestered and safe among the sage-gray hills.

Joan expected more of a man who was able to teach school; expected lofty aims, far-reaching ambitions. But that was because Joan did not know the world that lifted the lure of its flare beyond the rim of her horizon. She must taste it to understand, and come back with a bruised heart to the shelter of her native hills.

And this lonesomeness of which she had been telling him, this dread sickness that fell upon a man in those solitudes, and drained away his courage and hope--must he experience it, like a disease of adolescence from which few escape? He did not believe it. Joan had said she was immune to it, having been born in its atmosphere, knowing nothing but solitude and silence, in which there was no strange nor fearful thing.

But she fretted under a discontent that made her miserable, even though it did not strain her reason like the lonesomeness. Something was wanting to fill her life. He cast about him, wondering what it could be, wishing that he might supply it and take away the shadow out of her eyes.

It was his last thought as he fell asleep in a little swale below the wagon where the grass was tall and soft--that he might find what was lacking to make Joan content with the peace and plenty of the sheeplands, and supply that want.

CHAPTER VII

THE EASIEST LESSON

"Why do they always begin the conjugations on *love*?"

There was no perplexity in Joan's eyes as she asked the question; rather, a dreamy and far-away look, the open book face-downward on the ground beside her.

"Because it's a good example of the first termination, I suppose," Mackenzie replied, his eyes measuring off the leagues with her own, as if they together sought the door that opened out of that gray land into romance that quiet summer afternoon.

"It was that way in the Spanish grammar," said Joan, shaking her head, unconvinced by the reason he advanced. "There are plenty of words in the first termination that are just as short. Why? You're the teacher; you ought to know."

She said it banteringly, as if she dared him to give the reason. His eyes came back from their distant groping, meeting hers with gentle boldness. So for a little while he looked silently into her appealing eyes, then turned away.

"Maybe, Joan, because it is the easiest lesson to learn and the hardest to forget," he said.

Joan bent her gaze upon the ground, a flush tinting her brown face, plucking at the grass with aimless fingers.

"Anyway, we've passed it," said she.

"No, it recurs all through the book; it's something that can't be left out of it, any more than it can be left out of life. Well, it doesn't need to trouble you and me."

"No; we could use some other word," said Joan, turning her face away.

"But mean the same, Joan. I had an old maid English teacher when I was a boy who made us conjugate *to like* instead of the more intimate and tender word. Poor old soul! I hope it saved her feelings and eased her regrets."

"Maybe she'd had a romance," said Joan.

"I hope so; there's at least one romance coming to every woman in this world. If she misses it she's being cheated."

Mackenzie took up the Latin grammar, marking off her next lesson, and piling it on with unsparing hand, too. Yet not in accord with Tim Sullivan's advice; solely because his pupil was

one of extraordinary capacity. There was no such thing as discouraging Joan; she absorbed learning and retained it, as the sandstone absorbs oil under the pressure of the earth, holding it without wasting a drop until the day it gladdens man in his exploration.

So with Joan. She was storing learning in the undefiled reservoir of her mind, to be found like unexpected jewels by some hand in after time. As she followed the sheep she carried her books; at night, long after Charley had gone to sleep, she sat with them by the lantern light in the sheep-wagon. Unspoiled by the diversions and distractions which divide the mind of the city student, she acquired and held a month's tasks in a week. The thirsty traveler in the desert places had come to the oasis of her dreams.

Daily Joan rode to the sheep-camp where Mackenzie was learning the business of running sheep under Dad Frazer. There were no holidays in the term Joan had set for herself, no unbending, no relaxation from her books. Perhaps she did not expect her teacher to remain there in the sheeplands, shut away from the life that he had breathed so long and put aside for what seemed to her an unaccountable whim.

"You'll be reading Caesar by winter," Mackenzie told her as she prepared to ride back to her camp. "You'll have to take it slower then; we can't have lessons every day."

"Why not?" She was standing beside her horse, hat in hand, her rich hair lifting in the wind from her wise, placid brow. Her books she had strapped to the saddle-horn; there was a yellow slicker at the cantle.

"You'll be at home, I'll be out here with the sheep. I expect about once a week will be as often as we can make it then."

"I'll be out here on the range," she said, shaking her determined head, "a sheepman's got to stick with his flock through all kinds of weather. If I run home for the winter I'll have to hire a herder, and that would eat my profits up; I'd never get away from here."

"Maybe by the time you've got enough money to carry out your plans, Joan, you'll not want to leave."

"You've got to have education to be able to enjoy money. Some of the sheepmen in this country--yes, most of them--would be better men if they were poor. Wealth is nothing to them but a dim consciousness of a new power. It makes them arrogant and unbearable. Did you ever see Matt Hall?"

"I still have that pleasure in reserve. But I think you'll find it's refinement, rather than learning, that a person needs to enjoy wealth. That comes more from within than without."

"The curtain's down between me and everything I want," Joan said, a wistful note of loneliness in her low, soft voice. "I'm going to ride away some day and push it aside, and see what it's been keeping from me all the years of my longing. Then, maybe, when I'm satisfied I'll come back and make money. I've got sense enough to see it's here to be made if a person's got the sheep to start with and the range to run them on."

"Yes, you'll have to go," said he, in what seemed sad thoughtfulness, "to learn it all; I can't teach you the things your heart desires most to know. Well, there are bitter waters and sweet waters, Joan; we've got to drink them both."

"It's the same way here," she said, "only we've got sense enough to know the alkali holes before we drink out of them."

"But people are not that wise the world over, Joan."

Joan stood in silent thought, her far-reaching gaze on the dim curtain of haze which hung between her and the world of men's activities, strivings, and lamentations.

"If I had the money I'd go as soon--as soon as I knew a little more," she said. "But I've got to stick; I made that bargain with dad--he'd never give me the money, but he'll buy me out when I've got enough to stake me."

"Your father was over this morning."

"Yes, I know."

"He thinks *my* education's advanced far enough to trust me with a band of sheep. I'm going to have charge of the flock I've been running here with Dad Frazer."

"I heard about it."

"And you don't congratulate me on becoming a paid shepherd, my first step on the way to flockmaster!"

"I don't know that you're to be congratulated," she returned, facing him seriously. "All there is to success here is brute strength and endurance against storms and winter weather--it don't take any brains. Out there where you've been and I'm going, there must be something bigger and better for a man, it seems to me. But maybe men get tired of it--I don't know."

"You'll understand it better when you go there, Joan."

"Yes, I'll understand a lot of things that are locked up to me now. Well, I don't want to go as much all the time now as I did--only in spells sometimes. If you stay here and teach me, maybe I'll get over it for good."

Joan laughed nervously, half of it forced, her face averted.

"If I could teach you enough to keep you here, Joan, I'd think it was the biggest thing I'd ever done."

"I don't want to know any more if it means giving up," she said.

"It looks like giving up to you, Joan, but I've only started," he corrected her, in gentle spirit.

"I oughtn't talk that way to you," she said, turning to him contritely, her earnest eyes lifted to his, "it's none of my business what you do. If you hadn't come here I'd never have heard of--of *amare*, maybe."

Joan bent her head, a flush over her brown cheeks, a smile of mischief at the corners of her mouth. Mackenzie laughed, but strained and unnaturally, his own tough face burning with a hot tide of mounting blood.

"Somebody else would have taught you--you'd have conjugated it in another language, maybe," he said.

"Yes, you say it's the easiest lesson to learn," she nodded, soberly now. "Have you taught it to many--many--girls?"

"According to the book, Joan," he returned; "only that way."

Joan drew a deep breath, and looked away over the hills, and smiled. But she said no more, after the way of one who has relieved the mind on a doubted point.

"I expect I'll be getting a taste of the lonesomeness here of nights pretty soon," Mackenzie said, feeling himself in an awkward, yet not unpleasant situation with this frank girl's rather impertinent question still burning in his heart. "Dad's going to leave me to take charge of another flock."

"I'll try to keep you so busy you'll not have it very bad," she said.

"Yes, and you'll pump your fount of knowledge dry in a hurry if you don't slow down a little," he returned. "At the pace you've set you'll have to import a professor to take you along, unless one strays in from somewhere."

"I don't take up with strays," said Joan, rather loftily.

"I think Dad's getting restless," Mackenzie said, hastening to cover his mistake.

"He goes away every so often," Joan explained, "to see his Mexican wife down around El Paso somewhere."

"Oh, that explains it. He didn't mention her to me."

"He will, all right. He'll cut out to see her in a little while, more than likely, but he'll come drifting back with the shearers in the spring like he always does. It seems to me like everybody comes back to the sheep country that's ever lived in it a while. I wonder if I'd want to come back, too?"

It was a speculation upon which Mackenzie did not feel called to make comment. Time alone would prove to Joan where her heart lay anchored, as it proves to all who go wandering in its own bitter way at last.

"I don't seem to want to go away as long as I'm learning something," Joan confessed, a little ashamed of the admission, it appeared, from her manner of refusing to lift her head.

Mackenzie felt a great uplifting in his heart, as a song cheers it when it comes gladly at the close of a day of perplexity and doubt and toil. He reached out his hand as if to touch her and tell her how this dawning of his hope made him glad, but withdrew it, dropping it at his side as she looked up, a lively color in her cheeks.

"As long as you'll stay and teach me, there isn't any particular use for me to leave, is there?" she inquired.

"If staying here would keep you, Joan, I'd never leave," he told her, his voice so grave and earnest that it trembled a little on the low notes.

Joan drew her breath again with that long inspiration which was like a satisfied sigh.

"Well, I must go," she said.

But she did not move, and Mackenzie, drawing nearer, put out his hand in his way of silent appeal again.

"Not that I don't want you to know what there is out there," he said, "but because I'd save you the disappointment, the disillusionment, and the heartache that too often go with the knowledge of the world. You'd be better for it if you never knew, living here undefiled like a spring that comes out of the rocks into the sun."

"Well, I must go," said Joan, sighing with repletion again, but taking no step toward her waiting horse.

Although it was a moment which seemed full of things to be said, neither had words for it, but stood silently while the day went out in glory around them. Dad Frazer was bringing his murmuring flock home to the bedding-ground on the hillside below the wagon; the wind was low as a lover's breath, lifting Joan's russet hair from her pure, placid brow.

And she must go at last, with a word of parting from the saddle, and her hand held out to him in a new tenderness as if going home were a thing to be remembered. And as Mackenzie took it

there rose in his memory the lines:

*Touch hands and part with laughter,
Touch lips and part with tears.*

Joan rode away against the sun, which was red upon the hill, and stood for a little moment sharply against the fiery sky to wave him a farewell.

"So easily learned, Joan; so hard to forget," said Mackenzie, speaking as if he sent his voice after her, a whisper on the wind, although she was half a mile away. A moment more, and the hill stood empty between them. Mackenzie turned to prepare supper for the coming of Dad Frazer, who would complain against books and the nonsense contained in them if the food was not on the board when he came up the hill.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SHEEP-KILLER

It was dusk when Dad Frazer drove the slow-drifting flock home to its sleeping place, which tomorrow night very likely would be on some hillside no softer, many miles away. Only a few days together the camp remained in one place, no longer than it took the sheep to crop the herbage within easy reach. Then came the camp-mover and hauled the wagon to fresh pastures in that illimitable, gray-green land.

Dad Frazer was a man of sixty or sixty-five, who had been an army teamster in the days of frontier posts. He was slender and sinewy, with beautiful, glimmering, silvery hair which he wore in long curls and kept as carefully combed as any dandy that ever pranced at the court of a king. It was his one vanity, his dusty, greasy raiment being his last thought.

Dad's somber face was brown and weathered, marked with deep lines, covered over with an ashy, short growth of beard which he clipped once in two weeks with sheep-shears when he didn't lose count of the days.

Frazer always wore an ancient military hat with a leather thong at the back of his head drawn tight across his flowing hair. The brim of this hat turned up in the back as if he had slept in it many years, which was indeed the case, and down in the front so low over his brows that it gave him a sullen and clouded cast, which the redundancy of his spirits and words at once denied.

For Dad Frazer was a loquacious shepherd, an exception among the morose and silent men who follow that isolated calling upon the lonely range. He talked to the dogs when there was nobody by, to the sheep as he scattered them for an even chance between weak and strong over the grazing lands, and to himself when no other object presented. He swore with force and piquancy, and original embellishments for old-time oaths which was like a sharp sauce to an unsavory dish.

Frazer was peculiar in another way. He liked a soft bed to pound the ground on after his long days after the sheep, and to that end kept a roll of sheepskins under the wagon. More than that, he always washed before eating, even if he had to divide the last water in the keg.

Now as he was employed with his ablutions, after a running fire of talk from the time he came within hearing to the moment the water smothered his voice over the basin, Mackenzie saw him turn an eye in his direction every little while between the soaping and the washing of his bearded face. The old fellow seemed bursting with restraint of something that he had not told or asked about. Mackenzie could read him like a thermometer.

"What's the matter, Dad--rattlesnakes?" he asked.

"Rattlesnakes nothin'!" returned the old man.

"I thought another one had been crawling up your leg."

"Nearer boey constructors! Anybody been here but Joan?"

"No."

Dad came over to the tail of the wagon, where Mackenzie had supper spread on a board, a box at each end, for that was a sheep-camp *de luxe*. He stood a little while looking about in the gloom, his head tipped as if he listened, presently taking his place, unaccountably silent, and uncomfortably so, as Mackenzie could very well see.

"You didn't lose a dog, did you, Dad?"

"Dog nothin'! Do I look like a man that'd lose a dog?"

"Well, Dad," Mackenzie said, in his slow, thoughtful way, "I don't exactly know how a man that would lose a dog looks, but I don't believe you do."

"Swan Carlson's back on the range!" said Dad, delivering it before he was ready, perhaps, and before he had fully prepared the way, but unable to hold it a second longer.

"Swan Carlson?"

"Back on the range."

"So they fixed him up in the hospital at Cheyenne?"

"I reckon they must 'a'. He's back runnin' his sheep, and that woman of his'n she's with him. Swan run one of his herders off the first rattle out of the box, said he'd been stealin' sheep while he was gone. That's one of his old tricks to keep from payin' a man."

"It sounds like him, all right. Have you seen him?"

"No. Matt Hall come by this evenin', and told me."

"I'm glad Swan got all right again, anyhow, even if he's no better to his wife than he was before. I was kind of worried about him."

"Yes, and I'll bet he's meaner than he ever was, knockin' that woman around like a sack of sawdust the way he always did. I reckon he gets more fun out of her that way than he does keepin' her tied."

"He can hang her for all I'll ever interfere between them again, Dad."

"That's right. It don't pay to shove in between a man and his wife in their fusses and disturbances. I know a colonel in the army that's got seventeen stitches in his bay winder right now from buttin' in between a captain and his woman. The lady she slid a razor over his vest. They'll do it every time; it's woman nature."

"You talk like a man of experience, Dad. Well, I don't know much about 'em."

"Yes, I've been marryin' 'em off and on for forty years."

"Who is Matt Hall, and where's his ranch, Dad? I've been hearing about him and his brother, Hector, ever since I came up here."

"Them Hall boys used to be cattlemen up on the Sweetwater, but they was run out of there on account of suspicion of rustlin', I hear. They come down to this country about four years ago and started up sheep, usin' on Cottonwood about nine or twelve miles southeast from here. Them fellers don't hitch up with nobody on this range but Swan Carlson, and I reckon Swan only respects 'em because they're the only men in this country that packs guns regular any more."

"Swan don't pack a gun as a regular thing?"

"I ain't never seen him with one on. Hector Hall he's always got a couple of 'em on him, and Matt mostly has one in sight. You can gamble on it he's got an automatic in his pocket when he don't strap it on him in the open."

"I don't see what use a man's got for a gun up here among sheep and sheepmen. They must be expecting somebody to call on them from the old neighborhood."

"Yes, I figger that's about the size of it. I don't know what Matt was doin' over around here this evenin'; I know I didn't send for him."

"Joan spoke of him this afternoon. From what she said, I thought he must be something of a specimen. What kind of a looking duck is he?"

"Matt's a mixture of a goriller and a goose egg. He's a long-armed, short-legged, gimlet-eyed feller with a head like a egg upside down. You could split a board on that feller's head and never muss a hair. I never saw a man that had a chin like Matt Hall. They say a big chin's the sign of strength, and if that works out Matt must have a mind like a brigadier general. His face is all chin; chin's an affliction on Matt Hall; it's a disease. Wait till you see him; that's all I can say."

"I'll know him when I do."

"Hector ain't so bad, but he's got a look in his eyes like a man that'd grab you by the nose and cut your throat, and grin while he was doin' it."

Mackenzie made no comment on these new and picturesque characters introduced by Dad into the drama that was forming for enactment in that place. He filled his pipe and smoked a little while. Then:

"How many sheep do they run?" he asked.

"Nine or ten thousand, I guess."

Silence again. Dad was smoking a little Mexican cigarette with corn-husk wrapper, a peppery tobacco filling that smarted the eyes when it burned, of which he must have carried thousands when he left the border in the spring.

"Tim was over today," said Mackenzie.

"What did he want?"

"About this business between him and me. Is it usual, Dad, for a man to work a year at forty dollars a month and found before he goes in as a partner on the increase of the flock he runs?"

"What makes you ask me that, John?"

"Only because there wasn't anything said about it when I agreed with Tim to go to work here with you and learn the rudiments of handling a band of sheep. He sprung that on me today, when I thought I was about to begin my career as a capitalist. Instead of that, I've got a year ahead of me at ten dollars a month less than the ordinary herder gets. I just wanted to know."

"Sheepmen are like sand under the feet when it comes to dealin' with 'em; I never knew one that was in the same place twice. You've got a lot of tricks to learn in this trade, and I guess this is one of them. I don't believe Tim ever intends to let you in on shares; that ain't his style. Never did take anybody in on shares but Joan, that I know of. It looks to me like Tim's workin' you for all he can git out of you. You'll herd for Tim a year at forty dollars, and teach Joan a thousand dollars' worth while you're doin' it. You're a mighty obligin' feller, it looks like to me."

Mackenzie sat thinking it over. He rolled it in his mind quite a while, considering its most unlikely side, considering it as a question of comparative values, trying to convince himself that, if nothing more came of it than a year's employment, he would be even better off than teaching school. If Tim was indeed planning to profit doubly by him during that year, Joan could have no knowledge of his scheme, he was sure.

On Joan's account he would remain, he told himself, at last, feeling easier and less simple for the decision. Joan needed him, she counted on him. Going would be a sad disappointment, a bitter discouragement, to her. All on Joan's account, of course, he would remain; Joan, with her russet hair, the purity of October skies in her eyes. Why, of course. Duty made it plain to him; solely on account of Joan.

"I'd rather be a foot-loose shearer, herdin' in between like I do, than the richest sheepman on the range," said Dad. "They're tied down to one little spot; they work out a hole in their piece of the earth like a worm. It ain't no life. I can have more fun on forty dollars than Tim Sullivan can out of forty thousand."

Dad got out his greasy duck coat with sheepskin collar, such as cattlemen and sheepmen, and all kinds of outdoor men in that country wore, for the night was cool and damp with dew. Together they sat smoking, no more discussion between them, the dogs out of sight down the hill near the sheep.

Not a sound came out of the sheep, bedded on the hillside in contentment, secure in their trust of men and dogs. All day as they grazed there rose a murmur out of them, as of discontent, complaint, or pain. Now their quavering, pathetic voices were as still as the wind. There was not a shuffle of hoof, not a sigh.

Mackenzie thought of Joan, and the influence this solitary life, these night silences, had borne in shading her character with the melancholy which was so plainly apparent in her longing to be away. She yearned for the sound of life, for the warmth of youth's eager fire beyond the dusty gray loneliness of this sequestered place. Still, this was what men and women in the crowded places thought of and longed toward as freedom. Loose-footed here upon the hills, one might pass as free as the wind, indeed, but there was something like the pain of prison isolation in these night silences which bore down upon a man and made him old.

A sudden commotion among the sheep, terrified bleating, quick scurrying of feet, shook Mackenzie out of his reflections. The dogs charged down the hill and stood baying the disturber of the flock with savage alarm, in which there was a note of fear. Dad stood a moment listening, then reached into the wagon for the rifle.

"Don't go down there!" he warned Mackenzie, who was running toward the center of disturbance. "That's a grizzly--don't you hear them dogs?"

Mackenzie stopped. The advance stampede of the terrified flock rushed past him, dim in the deeper darkness near the ground. Below on the hillside where the sheep bedded he could see nothing. Dad came up with the gun.

The sheep were making no outcry now, and scarcely any sound of movement. After their first startled break they had bunched, and were standing in their way of pathetic, paralyzing fear, waiting what might befall. Dad fired several quick shots toward the spot where the dogs were charging and retreating, voices thick in their throats from their bristling terror of the thing that had come to lay tribute upon the flock.

"Don't go down there!" Dad cautioned again. "Git the lantern and light it--maybe when he sees it he'll run. It's a grizzly. I didn't think there was one in forty miles."

Mackenzie took hold of the gun.

"Give it to me--hand me another clip."

Dad yielded it, warning Mackenzie again against any rash movement. But his words were unheeded if not unheard. Mackenzie was running down the hillside toward the dogs. Encouraged by his coming, they dashed forward, Mackenzie halting to peer into the darkness ahead. There was a sound of trampling, a crunching as of the rending of bones. He fired; ran a little nearer, fired again.

The dogs were pushing ahead now in pursuit of whatever it was that fled. A moment, and Mackenzie heard the quick break of a galloping horse; fired his remaining shots after it, and called Dad to fetch the light.

When the horse started, the dogs returned to the flock, too wise to waste energy in a vain pursuit. At a word from Mackenzie they began collecting the shuddering sheep. Dad Frazer came bobbing down the hill with the lantern, breathing loud in his excitement.

"Lord!" said he, when he saw the havoc his light revealed; "a regular old murderin' stock-killer. And I didn't think there was any grizzly in forty miles."

Mackenzie took the lantern, sweeping its light over the mangled bodies of several sheep, torn

limb from limb, scattered about as if they had been the center of an explosion.

"A murderin' old stock-killer!" said Dad, panting, out of breath.

Mackenzie held up the light, looking the old man in the face.

"A grizzly don't hop a horse and lope off, and I never met one yet that wore boots," said he. He swung the light near the ground again, pointing to the trampled footprints among the mangled carcasses.

"It was a man!" said Dad, in terrified amazement. "Tore 'em apart like they was rabbits!" He looked up, his weathered face white, his eyes staring. "It takes--it takes--Lord! Do you know how much muscle it takes to tear a sheep up that a-way?"

Mackenzie did not reply. He stood, turning a bloody heap of wool and torn flesh with his foot, stunned by this unexampled excess of human ferocity.

Dad recovered from his amazement presently, bent and studied the trampled ground.

"I ain't so sure," he said. "Them looks like man's tracks, but a grizzly's got a foot like a nigger, and one of them big fellers makes a noise like a lopin' horse when he tears off through the bresh. I tell you, John, no human man that ever lived could take a live sheep and tear it up that a-way!"

"All right, then; it was a bear," Mackenzie said, not disposed to argue the matter, for argument would not change what he knew to be a fact, nor yet convince Dad Frazer against his reason and experience. But Mackenzie knew that they were the footprints of a man, and that the noise of the creature running away from camp was the noise of a galloping horse.

CHAPTER IX

A TWO-GUN MAN

"You know, John, if a man's goin' to be a sheepman, John, he's got to keep awake day and night. He ain't goin' to set gabbin' and let a grizzly come right up under his nose and kill his sheep. It's the difference between the man that wouldn't do it and the man that would that makes the difference between a master and a man. That's the difference that stands against Dad Frazer. He'd never work up to partnership in a band of sheep if he lived seven hundred years."

So Tim Sullivan, a few days after the raid on John Mackenzie's flock. He had come over on hearing of it from Dad Frazer, who had gone to take charge of another band. Tim was out of humor over the loss, small as it was out of the thousands he numbered in his flocks. He concealed his feelings as well as he could under a friendly face, but his words were hard, the accusation and rebuke in them sharp.

Mackenzie flared up at the raking-over Tim gave him, and turned his face away to hold down a hot reply. Only after a struggle he composed himself to speak.

"I suppose it was because you saw the same difference in me that you welched on your agreement to put me in a partner on the increase of this flock as soon as Dad taught me how to work the sheep and handle the dogs," he said. "That's an easy way for a man to slide out from under his obligations; it would apply anywhere in life as well as in the sheep business. I tell you now I don't think it was square."

"Now, lad, I don't want you to look at it that way, not at all, not at all, lad." Tim was as gentle as oil in his front now, afraid that he was in the way of losing a good herder whom he had tricked into working at a bargain price. "I don't think you understand the lay of it, if you've got the impression I intended to take you in at the jump-off, John. It's never done; it's never heard of. A man's got to prove himself, like David of old. There's a lot of Goliaths here on the range he's got to meet and show he's able to handle before any man would trust him full shares on the increase of two thousand sheep."

"You didn't talk that way at first," Mackenzie charged, rather sulkily.

"I took to you when I heard how you laid Swan out in that fight you had with him, John. That was a recommendation. But it wasn't enough, for it was nothing but a chance lucky blow you got in on him that give you the decision. If you'd 'a' missed him, where would you 'a' been at?"

"That's got nothing to do with your making a compact and breaking it. You've got no right to come here beefing around about the loss of a few sheep with a breach of contract on your side of the fence. You've put it up to me now like you should have done in the beginning. All right; I'll prove myself, like David. But remember there was another fellow by the name of Jacob that went in on a livestock deal with a slippery man, and stick to your agreement this time."

"I don't want you to feel that I'm takin' advantage of you, John; I don't want you to feel that way."

"I don't just feel it; I know it. I'll pay you for the seven sheep the grizzly killed, and take it out of

his hide when I catch him.”

This offer mollified Tim, melting him down to smiles. He shook hands with Mackenzie, all the heartiness on his side, refusing the offer with voluble protestations that he neither expected nor required it.

“You’ve got the makin’ of a sheepman in you, John; I always thought you had. But---”

“You want to be shown. All right; I’m game, even at forty dollars and found.”

Tim beamed at this declaration, but the fires of his satisfaction he was crafty enough to hide from even Mackenzie’s penetrating eyes. Perhaps the glow was due to a thought that this schoolmaster, who owed his notoriety in the sheeplands to a lucky blow, would fail, leaving him far ahead on the deal. He tightened his girths and set his foot in the stirrup, ready to mount and ride home; paused so, hand on the saddle-horn, with a queer, half-puzzled, half-suspicious look in his sheep-wise eyes.

“Wasn’t there something else that feller Jacob was workin’ for besides the interest in the stock?” he asked.

“Seems to me like there was,” Mackenzie returned, carelessly. “The main thing I remember in the transaction was the stone he set up between the old man and himself on the range. ‘The Lord watch between thee and me,’ you know, it had on it. That’s a mighty good motto yet for a shepherd to front around where his boss can read it. A man’s got to have somebody to keep an eye on a sheepman when his back’s turned, even today.”

Tim laughed, swung into the saddle, where he sat roving his eyes over the range, and back to the little band of sheep that seemed only a handful of dust in the unbounded pastures where they fed. The hillsides were green in that favored section, greener than anywhere Mackenzie had been in the sheeplands, the grass already long for the lack of mouths to feed. Tim’s face glowed at the sight.

“This is the best grazin’ this range has ever produced in my day,” he said, “too much of it here for that little band you’re runnin’. I’ll send Dad over with three thousand more this week. You can camp together--it’ll save me a wagon, and he’ll be company. How’s Joan gettin on with the learnin’?”

“She’s eating it up.”

“I was afraid it’d be that way,” said Tim, gloomily; “you can’t discourage that girl.”

“She’s too sincere and capable to be discouraged. I laid down my hand long ago.”

“And it’s a pity to ruin a good sheepwoman with learnin’,” Tim said, shaking his head with the sadness of it.

Tim rode away, leaving Mackenzie to his reflections as he watched his boss’ broad back grow smaller from hill to hill. The shepherd smiled as he recalled Tim’s puzzled inquiry on the other consideration of Jacob’s contract with the slippery Laban.

What is this thou hast done unto me? Did not I serve with thee for Rachel? Wherefore then hast thou beguiled me?

“Tim would do it, too,” Mackenzie said, nodding his grave head; “he’d work off the wrong girl on a man as sure as he had two.”

It was queer, the way Tim had thought, at the last minute, of the “something else” Jacob had worked for; queer, the way he had turned, his foot up in the stirrup, that puzzled, suspicious expression in his mild, shrewd face. Even if he should remember on the way home, or get out his Bible on his arrival and look the story up, there would be nothing of a parallel between the case of Jacob and that of John Mackenzie to worry his sheepman’s head. For though Jacob served his seven years for Rachel, which “seemed to him but a few days, for the love he had to her,” he, John Mackenzie, was not serving Tim Sullivan for Joan.

“Nothing to that!” said he, but smiling, a dream in his eyes, over the thought of what might have been a parallel case with Jacob’s, here in the sheeplands of the western world.

Tim was scarcely out of sight when a man came riding over the hills from the opposite direction. Mackenzie sighted him afar off, watching him as each hill lifted him to a plainer view. He was a stranger, and a man unsparing of his horse, pushing it uphill and down with unaltered speed. He rode as if the object of his journey lay a long distance ahead, and his time for reaching it was short.

Mackenzie wondered if the fellow had stolen the horse, having it more than half in mind to challenge his passage until he could give an account of his haste, when he saw that the rider had no intention of going by without speech. As he mounted the crest of the hill above the flock, he swung straight for the spot where Mackenzie stood.

The stranger drew up with a short grunt of greeting, turning his gaze over the range as if in search of strayed stock. He was a short, spare man, a frowning cast in his eyes, a face darkly handsome, but unsympathetic as a cougar’s. He looked down at Mackenzie presently, as if he had put aside the recognition of his presence as a secondary matter, a cold insolence in his challenging, sneering eyes.

“What are you doing over here east of Horsethief?” he inquired, bending his black brows in a frown, his small mustache twitching in catlike threat of a snarl.

"I'm grazing that little band of sheep you see down yonder," Mackenzie returned, evenly, running his eyes over the fellow's gear.

This was rather remarkable for a land out of which strife and contention, murder and sudden death were believed to have passed long ago. The man wore two revolvers, slung about his slender frame on a broad belt looped around for cartridges. These loops were empty, but the weight of the weapons themselves sagged the belt far down on the wearer's hips. His leather cuffs were garnitured with silver stars in the Mexican style; he wore a red stone in his black necktie, which was tied with care, the flowing ends of it tucked into the bosom of his dark-gray flannel shirt.

"If you're tryin' to be funny, cut it out; I'm not a funny man," he said. "I asked you what you're doing over here east of Horsethief Cañon?"

"I don't know that it's any of your business where I run my sheep," Mackenzie told him, resentful of the man's insolence.

"Tim Sullivan knows this is our winter grazing land, and this grass is in reserve. If he didn't tell you it was because he wanted to run you into trouble, I guess. You'll have to get them sheep out of here, and do it right now."

The stranger left it to Mackenzie's imagination to fix his identity, not bending to reveal his name. Hector Hall, Mackenzie knew him to be, on account of his pistols, on account of the cold meanness of his eyes which Dad Frazer had described as holding such a throat-cutting look. But armed as he was, severe and flash-tempered as he seemed, Mackenzie was not in any sort of a flurry to give ground before him. He looked up at him coolly, felt in his pocket for his pipe, filled it with deliberation, and smoked.

"Have you got a lease on this land?" he asked.

"I carry my papers right here," Hall replied, touching his belt.

Mackenzie looked about the range as if considering which way to go. Then, turning again to Hall:

"I don't know any bounds but the horizon when I'm grazing on government land that's as much mine as the next man's. I don't like to refuse a neighbor a request, but my sheep are going to stay right here."

Hall leaned over a little, putting out his hand in a warning gesture, drawing his dark brows in a scowl.

"Your head's swelled, young feller," he said, "on account of that lucky thump you landed on Swan Carlson. You've got about as much chance with that man as you have with a grizzly bear, and you've got less chance with me. You've got till this time tomorrow to be six miles west of here with that band of sheep."

Hall rode off with that word, leaving a pretty good impression that he meant it, and that it was final. Mackenzie hadn't a doubt that he would come back to see how well the mandate had been obeyed next day.

If there was anything to Hall's claim on that territory, by agreement or right of priority which sheepmen were supposed to respect between themselves, Tim Sullivan knew it, Mackenzie reflected. For a month past Tim had been sending him eastward every time the wagon was moved, a scheme to widen the distance between him and Joan and make it an obstacle in her road, he believed at the time. Now it began to show another purpose. Perhaps this was the winter pasture claimed by the Hall brothers, and Tim had sent him in where he was afraid to come himself.

It seemed a foolish thing to squabble over a piece of grazing land where all the world lay out of doors, but Hector Hall's way of coming up to it was unpleasant. It was decidedly offensive, bullying, oppressive. If he should give way before it he'd just as well leave the range, Mackenzie knew; his force would be spent there, his day closed before it had fairly begun. If he designed seriously to remain there and become a flockmaster, and that he intended to do, with all the sincerity in him, he'd have to meet Hall's bluff with a stronger one, and stand his ground, whether right or wrong. If wrong, a gentleman's adjustment could be made, his honor saved.

So deciding, he settled that matter, and put it out of his head until its hour. There was something more pleasant to cogitate--the parallel of Jacob and Laban, Tim Sullivan and himself. It was strange how the craft of Laban had come down to Tim Sullivan across that mighty flight of time. It would serve Tim the right turn, in truth, if something should come of it between him and Joan. He smiled in anticipatory pleasure at Tim's discomfiture and surprise.

But that was not in store for him, he sighed. Joan would shake her wings out in a little while, and fly away, leaving him there, a dusty sheepman, among the husks of his dream. Still, a man might dream on a sunny afternoon. There was no interdiction against it; Hector Hall, with his big guns, could not ride in and order a man off that domain. A shepherd had the ancient privilege of dreams; he might drink himself drunk on them, insane on them in the end, as so many of them were said to do in that land of lonesomeness, where there was scarcely an echo to give a man back his own faint voice in mockery of his solitude.

Evening, with the sheep homing to the bedding-ground, brought reflections of a different hue. Since the raid on his flock Mackenzie had given up his bunk in the wagon for a bed under a bush on the hillside nearer the sheep. Night after night he lay with the rifle at his hand, waiting

the return of the grisly monster who had spent his fury on the innocent simpletons in his care.

Whether it was Swan Carlson, with the strength of his great arms, driven to madness by the blow he had received, or whether it was another whom the vast solitudes of that country had unhinged, Mackenzie did not know. But that it was man, he had no doubt.

Dad Frazer had gone away unconvinced, unshaken in his belief that it was a grizzly. Tim Sullivan had come over with the same opinion, no word of doubt in his mouth. But Mackenzie knew that when he should meet that wild night-prowler he would face a thing more savage than a bear, a thing as terrible to grapple with as the saber-tooth whose bones lay deep under the hills of that vast pasture-land.

CHAPTER X

WILD RIDERS OF THE RANGE

Joan missed her lessons for three days running, a lapse so unusual as to cause Mackenzie the liveliest concern. He feared that the mad creature who spent his fury tearing sheep limb from limb might have visited her camp, and that she had fallen into his bloody hands.

A matter of eight or nine miles lay between their camps; Mackenzie had no horse to cover it. More than once he was on the point of leaving the sheep to shift for themselves and striking out on foot; many times he walked a mile or more in that direction, to mount the highest hill he could discover, and stand long, sweeping the blue distance with troubled eyes. Yet in the end he could not go. Whatever was wrong, he could not set right at that late hour, he reasoned; to leave the sheep would be to throw open the gates of their defense to dangers always ready to descend upon them. The sheep were in his care; Joan was not. That was what Tim Sullivan would say, in his hard way of holding a man to his bargain and his task.

Joan came late in the afternoon, rising the nearest hilltop with a suddenness quite startling, waving a cheerful greeting as if to assure him from a distance that all was well. She stood looking at him in amazement when she flipped to the ground like a bird, her face growing white, her eyes big.

"Well, what in the world! Where did you get those guns?" she said.

"A fellow left them here the other day."

"A fellow?" coming nearer, looking sharply at the belt. "That's Hector Hall's belt--I've seen him wearing it! There his initials are, worked out in silver tacks! Where did you get it?"

"Mr. Hall left it here. What kept you, Joan? I've been worried about you."

"Hector Hall *left* it here? With both of his guns?"

"Yes, he left the guns with it. What was the matter, Joan?"

Joan looked him up and down, her face a study between admiration and fear.

"Left his guns! Well, what did you do with *him*?"

"I suppose he went home, Joan. Did anything happen over your way to keep you?"

"Charley was sick," she said, shortly, abstractedly, drowned in her wonder of the thing he told with his native reluctance when questioned on his own exploits. "Did you have a fight with Hector?"

"Is he all right now?"

"Charley's all right; he ate too many wild gooseberries. Did you have a fight with Hector Hall, Mr. Mackenzie?"

She came near him as she questioned him, her great, soft eyes pleading in fear, and laid her hand on his shoulder as if to hold him against any further evasion. He smiled a little, in his stinging way of doing it, taking her hand to allay her tumult of distress.

"Not much of a fight, Joan. Mr. Hall came over here to drive me off of this range, and I had to take his guns away from him to keep him from hurting me. That's all there was to it."

"All there was to it!" said Joan. "Why, he's one of the meanest men that ever lived! He'll never rest till he kills you. I wish you'd let him have the range."

"Is it his?"

"No, it belongs to us; we've got a lease on it from the government, and pay rent for it every year. Swan Carlson and the Hall boys have bluffed us out of it for the past three summers and run their sheep over here in the winter-time. I always wanted to fight for it, but dad let them have it for the sake of peace. I guess it was the best way, after all."

"As long as I was right, my last worry is gone, Joan. You're not on the contested territory, are you?"

"No; they lay claim as far as Horsethief Cañon, but they'd just as well claim all our lease--they've got just as much right to it."

"That ends the matter, then--as far as I'm concerned."

"I wonder what kind of an excuse Hector made when he went home without his guns!" she speculated, looking off over the hills in the direction of the Hall brothers' ranch.

"Maybe he's not accountable to anybody, and doesn't have to explain."

"I guess that's right," Joan said, still wandering in her gaze.

Below them the flock was spread, the dogs on its flanks. Mackenzie pointed to the sun.

"We'll have to get to work; you'll be starting back in an hour."

But there was no work in Joan that day, nothing but troubled speculation on what form Hector Hall's revenge would take, and when the stealthy blow of his resentment would fall. Try as he would, Mackenzie could not fasten her mind upon the books. She would begin with a brave resolution, only to wander away, the book closed presently upon her thumb, her eyes searching the hazy hills where trouble lay out of sight. At last she gave it up, with a little catching sob, tears in her honest eyes.

"They'll kill you--I know they will!" she said.

"I don't think they will," he returned, abstractedly, "but even if they do, Rachel, there's nobody to grieve."

"Rachel? My name isn't Rachel," said Joan, a little hurt. For it was not in flippancy or banter that he had called her out of her name; his eyes were not within a hundred leagues of that place, his heart away with them, it seemed, when he spoke.

He turned to her, a color of embarrassment in his brown face.

"I was thinking of another story, Joan."

"Of another girl," she said, perhaps a trifle resentfully. At least Mackenzie thought he read a resentful note in the quick rejoinder, a resentful flash of color in her cheek.

"Yes, but a mighty old girl, Joan," he confessed, smiling with a feeling of lightness around his heart.

"Somebody you used to know?" face turned away, voice light in a careless, artificial note.

"She was a sheepman's daughter," he said.

"Did you know her down at Jasper?"

"No, I never knew her at all, Rach--Joan. That was a long, long time ago."

Joan brightened at this news. She ceased denying him her face, even smiled a little, seeming to forget Hector Hall and his pending vengeance.

"Well, what about her?" she asked.

He told her which Rachel he had in mind, but Joan only shook her head and looked troubled.

"I never read the Bible; we haven't even got one."

He told her the story, beginning with Jacob's setting out, and his coming to the well with the great stone at its mouth which the maidens could not roll away.

"So Jacob rolled the stone away and watered Rachel's sheep," he said, pausing with that much of it, looking off down the draw between the hills in a mind-wandering way. Joan touched his arm, impatient with such disjointed narrative.

"What did he do then?"

"Why, he kissed her."

"I think he was kind of fresh," said Joan. But she laughed a little, blushing rosily, a bright light in her eyes. "Tell me the rest of it, John."

Mackenzie went on with the ancient pastoral tale of love. Joan was indignant when she heard how Laban gave Jacob the weak-eyed girl for a wife in place of his beloved Rachel, for whom he had worked the seven years.

"Jake must have been a bright one!" said she. "How could the old man put one over on him like that?"

"You'll have to read the story," said Mackenzie. "It's sundown; don't you think you'd better be going back to camp, Joan?"

But Joan was in no haste to leave. She walked with him as he worked the sheep to their bedding-ground, her bridle-rein over her arm. She could get back to camp before dark, she said; Charley would not be worried.

Joan could not have said as much for herself. Her eyes were pools of trouble, her face was anxious and strained. She went silently beside Mackenzie while the dogs worked the sheep along with more than human patience, almost human intelligence. Frequently she looked into his face with a plea dumbly eloquent, but did not again put her fear for him into words. Only when she stood beside her horse near the sheep-wagon, ready to mount and leave him to his solitary supper, she spoke of Hector Hall's revolvers, which Mackenzie had unstrapped and put

aside.

"What are you going to do with them, John?"

She had fallen into the use of that familiar address only that day, moved by the tenderness of the old tale he had told her, perhaps; drawn nearer to him by the discovery of a gentle sentiment in him which she had not known before. He heard it with a warm uplifting of the heart, all without reason, he knew, for it was the range way to be familiar on a shorter acquaintance than theirs.

"I'm going to give them back to him," he said. "I've been carrying them around ever since he left them in the hope he'd get ashamed of himself and come for them."

Joan started at the sound of galloping hoofs, which rose suddenly out of complete silence as the riders mounted the crest behind them.

"I guess he's coming for them now," she said.

There were two riders coming down the slope toward them at a pace altogether reckless. Mackenzie saw at a glance that neither of them was Hector Hall, but one a woman, her loose garments flapping as she rode.

"It's Swan Carlson and his wife!" he said, unable to cover his amazement at the sight.

"What do you suppose they're doing over here?" Joan drew a little nearer as she spoke, her horse shifting to keep by her side.

"No telling. Look how that woman rides!"

There was enough in her wild bearing to excite admiration and wonder, even in one who had not seen her under conditions which promised little of such development. She came on at Swan's side, leaning forward a little, as light and sure in the saddle as any cowboy on the range. They bore down toward the sheep-wagon as if they had no intention of halting, jerking their horses up in Indian fashion a few feet from where Mackenzie and Joan stood. The animals slid on stiff legs, hoofs plowing the soft ground, raising a cloud of dust which dimmed the riders momentarily.

Neither of the abrupt visitors spoke. They sat silently staring, not a rod between them and the two on foot, the woman as unfriendly of face as the man. And Swan Carlson had not improved in this feature since Mackenzie parted from him in violence a few weeks before. His red hair was shorter now, his drooping mustache longer, the points of it reaching two inches below his chin. He was gaunt of cheek, hollow of eyes, like a man who had gone hungry or suffered a sorrow that ate away his heart.

His wife had improved somewhat in outward appearance. Her face had filled, the pathetic uncertainty had gone from her eyes. She was not uncomely as she sat astride her good bay horse, her divided skirt of corduroy wide on its flanks, a man's gray shirt laced over her bosom, the collar open, showing the fairness of her neck. Her abundant hair was braided, and wound closely about her head like a cap. Freedom had made a strange alteration in her. It seemed, indeed, as if Swan Carlson had breathed into her the breath of his own wild soul, making her over according to the desire of his heart.

Mackenzie stepped out in invitation for Swan to state the occasion of his boisterous visit, and stood waiting in silence while the two strange creatures continued to stare. Swan lifted his hand in a manner of salutation, no change either of friendship or animosity in his lean, strong face.

"You got a woman, huh? Well, how'll you trade?"

Swan glanced from his wife to Joan as he spoke. If there was any recollection in him of the hard usage he had received at Mackenzie's hands, it did not seem to be bitter.

"Ride on," said Mackenzie.

Mrs. Carlson urged her horse with sudden start close to where Joan stood, leaned far over her saddle and peered into the girl's face. Joan, affronted by the savage impertinence, met her eyes defiantly, not giving an inch before the unexpected charge.

In that pose of defiant challenge Swan Carlson's woman peered into the face of the girl whose freshness and beauty had drawn the wild banter from her man's bold lips. Then, a sudden sweep of passion in her face, she lifted her rawhide quirt and struck Joan a bitter blow across the shoulder and neck. Mackenzie sprang between them, but Mrs. Carlson, her defiance passed in that one blow, did not follow it up. Swan opened wide his great mouth and pealed out his roaring laughter, not a line of mirth softening in his face, not a gleam of it in his eyes. It was a sound without a note to express human warmth, or human satisfaction.

Joan flamed up like a match in oil. She dropped her bridle-reins, springing back a quick step, turning her eyes about for some weapon by which she might retaliate. Hector Hall's pistols hung on the end-gate of the sheep-wagon not more than twenty feet away. It seemed that Joan covered the distance in a bound, snatched one of the guns and fired. Her own horse stood between her and the wild range woman, which perhaps accounted for her miss. Mackenzie was holding her wrist before she could shoot again.

Swan let out another roar of heartless laughter, and together with his woman galloped down the hill. Ahead of them the sheep were assembled, packed close in their huddling way of seeking comfort and courage in numbers, just beginning to compose themselves for the night. Straight into the flock Swan Carlson and his woman rode, trampling such as could not rise and leap aside, crushing such lambs as were not nimble enough or wise enough to run.

"I'll kill her, I'll kill her!" said Joan.

She panted, half crying, struggling to free her arm that she might fire again.

"All right, let 'em have it!" Mackenzie said, seeing the havoc among the sheep.

Swan and his woman rode like a whirlwind through the flock, the dogs after them with sharp cries, the frightened bleating of the lambs, the beating of two thousand hoofs, adding to the confusion of what had been a peaceful pastoral scene but a few minutes before. Joan cut loose at the disturbers of this peace, emptying the revolver quickly, but without effect.

Half way through the herd Swan leaned down and caught a lamb by the leg, swung it around his head as lightly as a man would wave his hat, and rode on with it in savage triumph. Mackenzie snatched the rifle from the wagon. His shot came so close to Swan that he dropped the lamb. The woman fell behind Swan, interposing herself as a shield, and in this formation they rode on, sweeping down the narrow thread of green valley, galloping wildly away into the sanctuary of the hills.

Mackenzie stood, gun half lifted, and watched them go without another shot, afraid to risk it lest he hit the woman. He turned to Joan, who stood by, white with anger, the empty revolver in her hand.

"Are you hurt, Joan?" he asked, in foolish weakness, knowing very well that she was.

"No, she didn't hurt me--but I'll kill her for it!" said Joan.

She was trembling; her face was bloodless in the cold anger that shook her. There was a red welt on her neck, purple-marked on its ridge where the rawhide had almost cut her tender skin.

"Swan Carlson has pulled his woman down to his savage level at last," Mackenzie said.

"She's worse than he is; she's a range wolf!"

"I believe she is. But it always happens that way when a person gets to going."

"With those two and the Hall boys you'll not have a ghost of a chance to hold this range, John. You'd better let me help you begin working the sheep over toward my camp tonight."

"No, I'm going to stay here."

"Swan and that woman just rode through here to get the lay of your camp. More than likely they'll come over and burn you out tonight--pour coal oil on the wagon and set it afire."

"Let 'em; I'll not be in it."

"They'll worry you night and day, kill your sheep, maybe kill you, if you don't come away. It isn't worth it; dad was right about it. For the sake of peace, let them have it, John."

Mackenzie stood in silence, looking the way Swan and his woman had gone, the gun held as if ready to lift and fire at the showing of a hat-crown over the next hill. He seemed to be considering the situation. Joan studied his face with eager hopefulness, bending forward a bit to see better in the failing light.

"They've got to be shown that a master has come to the sheep country," he said, in low voice, as if to himself. "I'll stay and prove it to all of them at once."

Joan knew there was no use to argue or appeal. She dropped the matter there, and Mackenzie put the gun away.

"I'm sorry I haven't anything to put on it," he said, looking at the red welt on her neck.

"I'm sorry I missed her," said Joan.

"It isn't so much the sting of a blow, I know," he comforted, "as the hurt of the insult. Never mind it, Joan; she's a vicious, wild woman, jealous because Swan took notice of you."

"It was a great compliment!"

"I wish I had some balm for it that would cure it in a second, and take away the memory of the way it was done," said he, very softly.

"I'll kill her," flared Joan.

"I don't like to hear you say that, Joan," he chided, and reached and laid his hand consolingly upon the burning mark.

Joan caught her breath as if he had touched her skin with ice. He withdrew his hand quickly, blaming himself for the rudeness of his rough hand.

"You didn't hurt me, John," she said, her eyes downcast, the color of warm blood playing over her face.

"I might have," he blamed himself, in such seriousness as if it were the gravest matter he had risked, and not the mere touching of a blood-red welt upon a simple maiden's neck.

"I'll be over early in the morning to see if you're all right," she told him as she turned again to her horse.

"If you can come, even to show yourself on the hill," said he.

"Show myself? Why, a person would think you were worrying about me."

"I am, Joan. I wish you would give up herding sheep, let the share and the prospect and all of it go, and have your father put a herder in to run that band for you."

"They'll not hurt me; as mean as they are they'll not fight a woman. Anyway, I'm not over the deadline."

"There's something prowling this range that doesn't respect lines, Joan."

"You mean the grizzly?"

"Yes, the grizzly that rides a horse."

"Dad Frazer thinks you were mistaken on that, John."

"I know. Dad Frazer thinks I'm a better schoolteacher than I'll ever be a sheepman, I guess. But I've met bears enough that I don't have to imagine them. Keep your gun close by you tonight, and every night."

"I will," she promised, moved by the earnestness of his appeal.

Dusk was thickening into darkness over the sheeplands; the dogs were driving the straggling sheep back to the bedding-ground, where many of them already lay in contentment, quickly over the flurry of Swan Carlson's passing. Joan stood at her stirrup, her face lifted to the heavens, and it was white as an evening primrose under the shadow of her hat. She lingered as if there remained something to say or be said, something to give or to take, before leaving her friend and teacher alone to face the dangers of the night. Perhaps she thought of Rachel, and the kiss her kinsman gave her when he rolled the stone from the well's mouth, and lifted up his voice and wept.

Mackenzie stood a little apart, thinking his own swift-running thoughts, quickening under the leap of his own eager blood. But no matter for Jacob's precedent, Mackenzie had no excuse of even distant relationship to offer for such familiarity. The desire was urging, but the justification was not at hand. So Joan rode away unknissed, and perhaps wondering why.

CHAPTER XI

HECTOR HALL SETS A BEACON

Mackenzie sat a long time on his hill that night, his ear turned to the wind, smoking his pipe and thinking the situation over while listening for the first sound of commotion among the sheep. He had pledged himself to Tim and Joan that he would not quit the sheep country without proving that he had in him the mettle of a flockmaster. Hector Hall had been given to understand the same thing. In fact, Mackenzie thought, it looked as if he had been running with his eyes shut, making boastful pledges.

He might have to hedge on some of them, or put them through at a cost far beyond the profit. It came that way to a boaster of his intentions sometimes, especially so when a man spoke too quickly and assumed too much. Here he was standing face to a fight that did not appear to promise much more glory in the winning than in the running away.

There had been peace in that part of the sheep country a long time; Mackenzie had come to Jasper, even, long after the feuds between the flockmasters and cattlemen had worn themselves out save for an outbreak of little consequence in the far places now and then. But the peace of this place had been a coward's peace, paid for in money and humiliation. A thing like that was not to be expected of Tim Sullivan, although from a business reasoning he doubtless was right about it.

It was Mackenzie's work now to clean up the camp of the Hall brothers, along with Swan Carlson, and put an end to their bullying and edging over on Tim Sullivan's range, or take up his pack and trudge out of the sheep country as he had come. By staying there and fighting for Tim Sullivan's interests he might arrive in time at a dusty consequence, his fame, measured in thousands of sheep, reaching even to Jasper and Cheyenne, and perhaps to the stock-yards commission offices in Omaha and Chicago.

"John Mackenzie, worth twenty thousand, or fifty thousand sheep."

That would be the way they would know him; that would be the measure of his fame. By what sacrifice, through what adventure, how much striving and hard living he might come to the fame of twenty thousand sheep, no man would know or care. There in the dusty silences of that gray-green land he would bury the man and the soul that reached upward in him with pleasant ambitions, to become a creature over sheep. Just a step higher than the sheep themselves, wind-buffed, cold-cursed, seared and blistered and hardened like a callous through which the urging call of a man's duty among men could pierce no more.

But it had its compensations, on the other hand. There must be a vast satisfaction in looking back over the small triumphs won against tremendous forces, the successful contest with wild winter storm, ravaging disease, night-prowling beasts. Nature was the big force arrayed against a flockmaster, and it was unkind and menacing seven months out of the year. That must be the secret of a flockmaster's satisfaction with himself and his lot, Mackenzie thought; he could count himself a fit companion for the old gods, if he knew anything about them, after his victory

over every wild force that could be bent against him among those unsheltered hills.

The Hall brothers were a small pest to be stamped out and forgotten in the prosperity of multiplying flocks. As for Swan Carlson, poor savage, there might be some way of reaching him without further violence between them. Wild and unfeeling as he seemed, there must be a sense of justice in him, reading him by his stern, immobile face.

As he sat and weighed the argument for and against the sheep business, the calling of flockmaster began to take on the color of romantic attraction which had not been apparent to him before. In his way, every flockmaster was a hero, inflexible against the unreckoned forces which rose continually to discourage him. This was true, as he long had realized, of a man who plants in the soil, risking the large part of his capital of labor year by year. But the sheepman's risks were greater, his courage immensely superior, to that of the tiller of the soil. One storm might take his flock down to the last head, leaving him nothing to start on again but his courage and his hope.

It appeared to Mackenzie to be the calling of a proper man. A flockmaster need not be a slave to the range, as most of them were. He might sit in his office, as a few of them did, and do the thing like a gentleman. There were possibilities of dignity in it heretofore overlooked; Joan would think better of it if she could see it done that way. Surely, it was a business that called for a fight to build and a fight to hold, but it was the calling of a proper man.

Mackenzie was immensely cheered by his reasoning the sheep business into the romantic and heroic class. Here were allurements of which he had not dreamed, to be equaled only by the calling of the sea, and not by any other pursuit on land at all. A man who appreciated the subtle shadings of life could draw a great deal of enjoyment and self-pride out of the business of flockmaster. It was one of the most ancient pursuits of man. Abraham was a flockmaster; maybe Adam.

But for all of the new comfort he had found in the calling he had adopted, Mackenzie was plagued by a restless, broken sleep when he composed himself among the hillside shrubs above the sheep. A vague sense of something impending held him from rest. It was present over his senses like a veil of drifting smoke through his shallow sleep. Twice he moved his bed, with the caution of some haunted beast; many times he started in his sleep, clutching like a falling man, to sit up alert and instantly awake.

There was something in the very tension of the night-silence that warned him to be on the watch. It was not until long after midnight that he relaxed his straining, uneasy vigil, and stretched himself to untroubled sleep. He could steal an hour or two from the sheep in the early morning, he told himself, as he felt the sweet restfulness of slumber sweeping over him; the helpless creatures would remain on the bedding-ground long after sunrise if he did not wake, waiting for him to come and set them about the great business of their lives. They hadn't sense enough to range out and feed themselves without the direction of man's guiding hand.

Mackenzie had dipped but a little way into his refreshing rest when the alarmed barking of his dogs woke him with such sudden wrench that it ached. He sat up, senses drenched in sleep for a struggling moment, groping for his rifle. The dogs went charging up the slope toward the wagon, the canvas top of which he could see indistinctly on the hillside through the dark.

As Mackenzie came to his feet, fully awake and on edge, the dogs mouthed their cries as if they closed in on the disturber of the night at close quarters. Mackenzie heard blows, a yelp from a disabled dog, and retreat toward him of those that remained unhurt. He fired a shot, aiming high, running toward the wagon.

Again the dogs charged, two of them, only, out of the three, and again there was the sound of thick, rapid blows. One dog came back to its master, pressing against his legs for courage. Mackenzie shouted, hoping to draw the intruder into revealing himself, not wanting the blood of even a rascal such as the night-prowler on his hands through a chance shot into the dark. There was no answer, no sound from the deep blackness that pressed like troubled waters close to the ground.

The dog clung near to Mackenzie's side, his growling deep in his throat. Mackenzie could feel the beast tremble as it pressed against him, and bent to caress it and give it confidence. At his reassuring touch the beast bounded forward to the charge again, only to come yelping back, and continue on down the hill toward the flock.

Mackenzie fired again, dodging quickly behind a clump of bushes after the flash of his gun. As he crouched there, peering and straining ahead into the dark, strong hands laid hold of him, and tore his rifle away from him and flung him to the ground. One came running from the wagon, low words passed between the man who held Mackenzie pinned to the ground, knees astride him, his hands doubled back against his chin in a grip that was like fetters. This one who arrived in haste groped around until he found Mackenzie's rifle.

"Let him up," he said.

Mackenzie stood, his captor twisting his arms behind him with such silent ease that it was ominous of what might be expected should the shepherd set up a struggle to break free.

"Bud, I've come over after my guns," said Hector Hall, speaking close to Mackenzie's ear.

"They're up at the wagon," Mackenzie told him, with rather an injured air. "You didn't need to make all this trouble about it; I was keeping them for you."

"Go on up and get 'em," Hall commanded, prodding Mackenzie in the ribs with the barrel of his

own gun.

The one who held Mackenzie said nothing, but walked behind him, rather shoved him ahead, hands twisted in painful rigidity behind his back, pushing him along as if his weight amounted to no more than a child's. At the wagon Hall fell in beside Mackenzie, the barrel of a gun again at his side.

"Let him go," he said. And to Mackenzie: "Don't try to throw any tricks on me, bud, but waltz around and get me them guns."

"They're hanging on the end of the coupling-pole; get them yourself," Mackenzie returned, resentful of this treatment, humiliated to such depths by this disgrace that had overtaken him that he cared little for the moment whether he should live or die.

Hall spoke a low, mumbled, unintelligible word to the one who stood behind Mackenzie, and another gun pressed coldly against the back of the apprentice sheepman's neck. Hall went to the end of the wagon, found his pistols, struck a match to inspect them. In the light of the expiring match at his feet Mackenzie could see the ex-cattleman buckling on the guns.

"Bud, you've been actin' kind of rash around here," Hall said, in insolent satisfaction with the turn of events. "You had your lucky day with me, like you had with Swan Carlson, but I gave you a sneak's chance to leave the country while the goin' was good. If you ever leave it now the wind'll blow you out. Back him up to that wagon wheel!"

Mackenzie was at the end of his tractable yielding to commands, seeing dimly what lay before him. He lashed out in fury at the man who pressed the weapon to his neck, twisting round in a sweep of passion that made the night seem to burst in a rain of fire, careless of what immediate danger he ran. The fellow fired as Mackenzie swung round, the flash of the flame hot on his neck.

"Don't shoot him, you fool!" Hector Hall interposed, his voice a growl between his teeth.

Mackenzie's quick blows seemed to fall impotently on the body of the man who now grappled with him, face to face, Hector Hall throwing himself into the tangle from the rear. Mackenzie, seeing his assault shaping for a speedy end in his own defeat, now attempted to break away and seek shelter in the dark among the bushes. He wrenched free for a moment, ducked, ran, only to come down in a few yards with Hector Hall on his back like a catamount.

Fighting every inch of the way, Mackenzie was dragged back to the wagon, where his captors backed him against one of the hind wheels and bound him, his arms outstretched across the spokes in the manner of a man crucified.

They had used Mackenzie illy in that fight to get him back to the wagon; his face was bleeding, a blow in the mouth had puffed his lips. His hat was gone, his shirt torn open on his bosom, but a wild rage throbbed in him which lifted him above the thought of consequences as he strained at the ropes which held his arms.

They left his feet free, as if to mock him with half liberty in the ordeal they had set for him to face. One mounted the front wagon wheel near Mackenzie, and the light of slow-coming dawn on the sky beyond him showed his hand uplifted as if he sprinkled something over the wagon sheet. The smell of kerosene spread through the still air; a match crackled on the wagon tire. A flash, a sudden springing of flame, a roar, and the canvas was enveloped in fire.

Mackenzie leaned against his bonds, straining away from the sudden heat, the fast-running fire eating the canvas from the bows, the bunk within, and all the furnishings and supplies, on fire. There seemed to be no wind, a merciful circumstance, for a whip of the high-striving flames would have wrapped him, stifling out his life in a moment.

Hall and the other man, who had striven with Mackenzie in such powerful silence, had drawn away from the fire beyond his sight to enjoy the thing they had done. Mackenzie, turning his fearful gaze over his shoulder, calculated his life in seconds. The fire was at his back, his hair was crinkling in the heat of it, a little moving breath of wind to fill the sudden vacuum drew a tongue of blaze with sharp threat against his cheek.

In a moment the oil-drenched canvas would be gone, the flaming contents of the wagon, the woodwork of box and running gears left to burn more slowly, and his flesh and bones must mingle ashes with the ashes, to be blown on the wind, as Hector Hall had so grimly prophesied. What a pitiful, poor, useless ending of all his calculations and plans!

A shot at the top of the hill behind the wagon, a rush of galloping hoofs; another shot, and another. Below him Hall and his comrade rode away, floundering in haste through the sleeping flock, the one poor dog left out of Mackenzie's three tearing after them, venting his impotent defiance in sharp yelps of the chase.

Joan. Mackenzie knew it was Joan before she came riding into the firelight, throwing herself from the horse before it stopped. Through the pain of his despair--above the rebellious resentment of the thing that fate had played upon him this bitter gray morning; above the anguish of his hopeless moment, the poignant striving of his tortured soul to meet the end with resolution and calm defiance worthy a man--he had expected Joan.

Why, based on what reason, he could not have told, then nor in the years that came afterward. But always the thought of Joan coming to him like the wings of light out of the east.

And so Joan had come, as he strained on his bound arms to draw his face a few inches farther from the fire, as he stifled in the smoke and heavy gases of the burning oil; Joan had come, and

her hand was cool on his forehead, her voice was tender in his ear, and she was leading him into the blessed free air, the east widening in a bar of light like a waking eye.

Joan was panting, the knife that had cut his bonds still open in her hand. They stood face to face, a little space between them, her great eyes pouring their terrified sympathy into his soul. Neither spoke, a daze over them, a numbness on their tongues, the dull shock of death's close passing bewildering and deep.

Mackenzie breathed deeply, his brain clearing out of its racing whirl, and became conscious of Joan's hand grasping his. Behind them the ammunition in the burning wagon began to explode, and Joan, shuddering as with cold, covered her white face with her hands and sobbed aloud.

Mackenzie touched her shoulder.

"Joan! O Joan, Joan!" he said.

Joan, shivering, her shoulders lifted as if to fend against a winter blast, only cried the harder into her hands. He stood with hand touching her shoulder lightly, the quiver of her body shaking him to the heart. But no matter how inviting the opening, a man could not speak what rose in his heart to say, standing as he stood, a debtor in such measure. To say what he would have said to Joan, he must stand clear and towering in manliness, no taint of humiliation on his soul.

Mackenzie groaned in spirit, and his words were a groan, as he said again:

"Joan! O Joan, Joan!"

"I knew they'd come tonight--I couldn't sleep."

"Thank God for your wakefulness!" said he.

She was passing out of the reefs of terror, calming as a wind falls at sunset. Mackenzie pressed her arm, drawing her away a little.

"That ammunition--we'd better--"

"Yes," said Joan, and went with him a little farther down the slope.

Mackenzie put his hand to his face where the flames had licked it, and to the back of his head where his scorched hair broke crisply under his palm. Joan looked at him, the aging stamp of waking and worry in her face, exclaiming pityingly when she saw his hurts.

"It served me right; I stumbled into their hands like a blind kitten!" he said, not sparing himself of scorn.

"It's a cattleman's trick; many an older hand than you has gone that way," she said.

"But if I'd have waked and watched like you, Joan, they wouldn't have got me. I started to watch, but I didn't keep it up like you. When I should have been awake, I was sleeping like a sluggard."

"The cowards!" said Joan.

"I let one of them sneak up behind me, after they'd clubbed two of the dogs to death, and grab me and get my gun! Great God! I deserve to be burned!"

"Hush!" she chided, fearfully. "Hush!"

"One of them was Hector Hall--he came after his guns. If I'd been a man, the shadow of a man, I'd made him swallow them the day I took--the time he left them here."

"Matt was with him," said Joan. "You couldn't do anything; no man could do anything, against Matt Hall."

"They handled me like a baby," said he, bitterly, "and I, and I, wanting to be a sheepman! No wonder they think I'm a soft and simple fool up here, that goes on the reputation of a lucky blow!"

"There's a man on a horse," said Joan. "He's coming this way."

The rider broke down the hillside as she spoke, riding near the wreckage of the burning wagon, where he halted a moment, the strong light of the fire on his face: Swan Carlson, hatless, his hair streaming, his great mustache pendant beside his stony mouth. He came on toward them at once. Joan laid her hand on her revolver.

"You got a fire here," said Swan, stopping near them, leaning curiously toward them as if he peered at them through smoke.

"Yes," Mackenzie returned.

"I seen it from over there," said Swan. "I come over to see if you needed any help."

"Thank you, not now. It's gone; nothing can be done."

"I smelt coal oil," said Swan, throwing back his head, sniffing the air like a buck. "Who done it?"

"Some of your neighbors," said Mackenzie.

"I knowed they would," Swan nodded. "Them fellers don't fight like me and you, they don't stand up like a man. When I seen you take that feller by the leg that day and upset him off of his horse and grab his guns off of him, I knowed he'd burn you out."

Joan, forgetting her fear and dislike of Swan Carlson in her interest of what he revealed, drew a little nearer to him.

"Were you around here that day, Swan?" she asked.

"Yes, I saw him upset that feller, little bird," Swan said, leaning again from his saddle, his long neck stretched to peer into her face. "He's a good man, but he ain't as good a man as me."

Swan was barefooted, just as he had leaped from his bunk in the sheep-wagon to ride to the fire. There was a wild, high pride in his cold, handsome face as he sat up in the saddle as if to show Joan his mighty bulk, and he stretched out his long arms like an eagle on its crag flexing its pinions in the morning sun.

"Did he--did Hector Hall sling a gun on Mr. Mackenzie that time?" she asked, pressing forward eagerly.

"Never mind, Joan--let that go," said Mackenzie, putting his arm before her to stay her, speaking hastily, as if to warn her back from a danger.

"He didn't have time to sling a gun on him," said Swan, great satisfaction in his voice as he recalled the scene. "Your man he's like a cat when he jumps for a feller, but he ain't got the muscle in his back like me."

"There's nobody in this country like you, Swan," said Joan, pleased with him, friendly toward him, for his praise of the one he boldly called her man.

"No, I can roll 'em all," Swan said, as gravely as if he would be hung on the testimony. "You ought to have me for your man; then you'd have somebody no feller on this range would burn out."

"You've got a wife, Swan," Joan said, with gentle reproof, but putting the proposal from her as if she considered it a jest.

"I'm tired of that one," Swan confessed, frankly. Then to Mackenzie: "I'll fight you for her." He swung half way out of the saddle, as if to come to the ground and start the contest on the moment, hung there, looking Mackenzie in the face, the light of morning revealing the marks of his recent battle. "Not now, you've had a fight already," said Swan, settling back into the saddle. "But when you brace up, then I'll fight you for her. What?"

"Any time," Mackenzie told him, speaking easily, as if humoring the whim of some irresponsible person.

With a sudden start of his horse Swan rode close to Joan, Mackenzie throwing himself between them, catching the bridle, hurling the animal back. Swan did not take notice of the interference, only leaned far over, stretching his long neck, his great mustaches like the tusks of an old walrus, and strained a long look into Joan's face. Then he whirled his horse and galloped away, not turning a glance behind.

Joan watched him go, saying nothing for a little while. Then:

"I think he's joking," she said.

"I suppose he is," Mackenzie agreed, although he had many doubts.

They turned to look at the wagon again, the popping of ammunition having ceased. The woodwork was all on fire; soon it would be reduced to bolts and tires. Joan's spirits seemed to have risen with the broadening of day, in spite of Swan Carlson's visit and his bold jest, if jest he meant it to be. She laughed as she looked at the sheep, huddled below them in attitude of helpless fright.

"Poor little fools!" she said. "Well, I must go back to Charley. Don't tell dad I was over here, please, John. He wouldn't like it if he knew I'd butted in this way--he's scared to death of the Halls."

"I don't see how I'm to keep him from knowing it," Mackenzie said, "and I don't see why he shouldn't know. He'd have been out a cheap herder if it hadn't been for you."

"No, you mustn't tell him, you mustn't let anybody know I was here, John," she said, lifting her eyes to his in an appeal far stronger than words. "It wouldn't do for dad--for anybody--to know I was here. You don't need to say anything about them tying--doing--*that*."

Joan shuddered again in that chilling, horrified way, turning from him to hide what he believed he had read in her words and face before.

It was not because she feared to have her father know she had come riding to his rescue in the last hours of her troubled night; not because she feared his censure or his anger, or wanted to conceal her deed for reasons of modesty from anyone. Only to spare him the humiliation of having his failure known, Mackenzie understood. That was her purpose, and her sole purpose, in seeking his pledge to secrecy.

It would hurt him to have it go abroad that he had allowed them to sneak into his camp, seize him, disarm him, bind him, and set the fire that was to make ashes of him for the winds to blow away. It would do for him with Tim Sullivan entirely if that should become known, with the additional humiliation of being saved from this shameful death by a woman. No matter how immeasurable his own gratitude, no matter how wide his own pride in her for what she had done, the sheep country never would be able to see it with his eyes. It would be another smirch for him, and such a deep one as to obscure him and his chances there forever.

Joan knew it. In her generosity, her interest for his future, she wanted her part in it to remain unknown.

"You must promise me, John," she said. "I'll never come to take another lesson unless you promise me."

"I promise you, God bless you, Joan!" said he.

CHAPTER XII

ONE COMES TO SERVE

An hour after midday there came riding over the hills Tim Sullivan and a stranger. They stopped at the ruins of the sheep-wagon, where Tim dismounted and nosed around, then came on down the draw, where Mackenzie was ranging the sheep.

Tim was greatly exercised over the loss of the wagon. He pitched into Mackenzie about it as soon as he came within speaking distance.

"How did you do it--kick over the lantern?" he inquired, his face cloudy with ill-held wrath.

Mackenzie explained, gruffly and in few words, how the wagon was fired, sparing his own perilous adventure and the part that Joan had borne in it. This slowed Tim down, and set him craning his neck over the country to see if any further threat of violence impended on the horizon.

"Them Hall boys ought to be men enough not to do me a trick like that after the way I've give in to them on this side of the range," he said. Then to Mackenzie, sharply: "It wouldn't 'a' happened if you hadn't took Hector's guns away from him that time. A sheepman's got no right to be fightin' around on the range. If he wants to brawl and scrap, let him do it when he goes to town, the way the cowboys used to."

"Maybe you're right; I'm beginning to think you are," Mackenzie returned.

"Right? Of course I'm right. A sheepman's got to set his head to business, and watchin' the corners to prevent losses like this that eats up the profit, and not go around with his sleeves rolled up and his jaw slewed, lookin' for a fight. And if he starts one he's got to have the backbone and the gizzard to hold up his end of it, and not let 'em put a thing like this over on him. Why wasn't you in the wagon last night watchin' it?"

"Because I've been expecting them to burn it."

"Sure you've been expectin' 'em to burn you out, and you hid in the brush with your tail between your legs like a kicked pup and let 'em set my new wagon afire. How did you git your face bunged up that way?"

"I fell down," Mackenzie said, with a sarcasm meant only for himself, feeling that he had described his handling of the past situation in a word.

"Runnin' off, I reckon. Well, I tell you, John, it won't do, that kind of business won't do. Them Hall boys are mighty rough fellers, too rough for a boy like you that's been runnin' with school children all his life. You got some kind of a lucky hitch on Hector when you stripped that belt and guns off of him--I don't know how you done it; it's a miracle he didn't nail you down with lead--but that kind of luck won't play into a man's hands one time in a thousand. You never ought 'a' started anything with them fellers unless you had the weight in your hind-quarters to keep it goin'."

"You're right," said Mackenzie, swallowing the rebuke like a bitter pill.

"Right? You make me tired standin' there and takin' it like a sick cat! If you was half the man I took you to be when you struck this range you'd resent a callin' down like I'm givin' you. But you don't resent it, you take it, like you sneaked and let them fellers burn that wagon and them supplies of mine. If you was expectin' 'em to turn that kind of a trick you ought 'a' been right there in that wagon, watchin' it--there's where you had a right to be."

"I suppose there's where I'd been if I had your nerve, Sullivan," Mackenzie said, his slow anger taking place of the humiliation that had bent him down all morning like a shameful load. "Everybody on this range knows you're a fighting man--you've fought the wind gettin' away from this side of the range every time you saw smoke, you've got a reputation for standing out for your rights like a man with a gizzard in him as big as a sack of bran! Sure, I know all about the way you've backed out of here and let Carlson and the Halls bluff you out of the land you pay rent on, right along. If I had your nerve---"

Tim's face flamed as if he had risen from turning batter-cakes over a fire. He made a smoothing, adjusting, pacificating gesture with his hands, looking with something between deep concern and shame over his shoulder at the man who accompanied him, and who sat off a few feet in his saddle, a grin over his face.

"Now, John, I don't mean for you to take it that I'm throwin' any slur over your courage for the way things has turned out--I don't want you to take it that way at all, lad," said Tim.

"I'm not a fighting man"--Mackenzie was getting hotter as he went on--"everybody in here knows that by now, I guess. You guessed wrong, Sullivan, when you took me for one and put me over here to hold this range for you that this crowd's been backing you off of a little farther each spring. You're the brave spirit that's needed here--if somebody could tie you and hold you to face the men that have robbed you of the best range you've got. I put down my hand; I get out of the way for you when it comes to the grit to put up a fight."

"Oh, don't take it to heart what I've been sayin', lad. A man's hot under the collar when he sees a dirty trick like that turned on him, but it passes off like sweat, John. Let it go, boy, let it pass."

"You sent me in here expecting me to fight, and when I don't always come out on top you rib me like the devil's own for it. You expected me to fight to hold this grass, but you didn't expect me to lose anything at all. Well, I'll hold the range for you, Sullivan; you don't need to lose any sleep over that. But if I'm willing to risk my skin to do it, by thunder, you ought to be game enough to stand the loss of a wagon without a holler that can be heard to Four Corners!"

"You're doin' fine holdin' my range that I pay solid money to Uncle Sam for, you're doin' elegant fine, lad. I was hasty, my tongue got out from under the bit, boy. Let it pass; don't you go holdin' it against an old feller like me that's got the worry of forty-odd thousand sheep on his mind day and night."

"It's easy enough to say, but it don't let you out. You've got no call to come here and wade into me without knowing anything about the circumstances."

"Right you are, John, sound and right. I was hasty, I was too hot. You've done fine here, you're the first man that's ever stood up to them fellers and held 'em off my grass. You've done things up like a man, John. I give it to you--like a man."

"Thanks," said Mackenzie, in dry scorn.

"I ain't got no kick to make over the loss of my wagon--it's been many a day since I had one burnt up on me that way. Pass it up, pass up anything I've said about it, John. That's the lad."

So John passed it up, and unbent to meet the young man who rode with Tim, whom the sheepman presented as Earl Reid, from Omaha, son of Malcolm Reid, an old range partner and friend. The young man had come out to learn the sheep business; Tim had brought him over for Mackenzie to break in. Dad Frazer was coming along with three thousand sheep, due to arrive in about a week. When he got there, the apprentice would split his time between them.

Mackenzie received the apprentice as cordially as he could, but it was not as ardent a welcome as the young man may have expected, owing to the gloom of resentment into which Sullivan's outbreak had thrown this unlucky herder on the frontier of the range.

Reid was rather a sophisticated looking youth of twenty-two or twenty-three, city broke, city marked. There was a poolroom pallor about this thin face, a poolroom stoop to his thin shoulders, that Mackenzie did not like. But he was frank and ingenuous in his manner, with a ready smile that redeemed his homely face, and a pair of blue eyes that seemed young in their innocence compared to the world-knowledge that his face betrayed.

"Take the horses down there to the crick and water 'em," Tim directed his new herder, "and then you'll ride back with me as far as Joan's camp and fetch over some grub to hold you two fellers till the wagon comes. Joan, she'll know what to give you, and I guess you can find your way back here?"

"Surest thing you know," said Earl, with easy confidence, riding off to water the horses.

"That kid's no stranger to the range," Mackenzie said, more to himself than to Tim, as he watched him ride off.

"No, he used to be around with the cowboys on Malcolm's ranch when he was in the cattle business. He can handle a horse as good as you or me. Malcolm was the man that set me up in the sheep business; I started in with him like you're startin' with me, more than thirty years ago. He was the first sheepman on this range, and he had to fight to hold his own, I'm here to say!"

"You'd better send the kid over into peaceful territory," Mackenzie suggested, crabbedly.

"No, the old man wants him to get a taste of what he went through to make his start--he was tickled to the toes when he heard the way them Hall boys are rarin' up and you standin' 'em off of this range of mine. 'Send him over there with that man,' he says; 'that's the kind of a man I want him to break in under.' The old feller was tickled clean to his toes."

"Is he over at the ranch?"

"No, he went back home last night. Come down to start the kid right, and talk it over with me. It was all a surprise to me, I didn't know a thing about it, but I couldn't turn Malcolm down." Tim winked, looked cunning, nodded in a knowing way. "Kid's been cuttin' up throwin' away too much money; gettin' into scrapes like a boy in town will, you know. Wild oats and a big crop of 'em. The old man's staked him out with me for three years, and he ain't to draw one cent of pay, or have one cent to spend, in that time. If he breaks over, it's all off between them two. And the kid's sole heir to nearly half a million."

Mackenzie turned to look again at the boy, who was coming back with the horses.

"Do you think he'll stick?" he asked.

"Yes, he promised the old man he would, and if he's anything like Malcolm, he'll eat fire before he'll break his word. Malcolm and me we come to terms in ten words. The kid's to work three

years for me without pay; then I'll marry him to my Joan."

Mackenzie felt his blood come up hot, and sink down again, cold; felt his heart kick in one resentful surge, then fall away to weakness as if its cords had been cut. Tim laughed, looking down the draw toward the sheep.

"It's something like that Jacob and Laban deal you spoke about the other day," said he. "Curious how things come around that way, ain't it? There I went ridin' off, rakin' up my brains to remember that story, and laughed when it come to me all of a sudden. Jacob skinned them willow sticks, and skinned the old man, too. But I don't guess Earl would turn a trick like that on me, even if he could."

"How about Joan? Does she agree to the terms?" Mackenzie could not forbear the question, even though his throat was dry, his lips cold, his voice husky at the first word.

"She'll jump at it," Tim declared, warmly. "She wants to go away from here and see the world, and this will be her chance. I don't object to her leavin', either, as long as it don't cost me anything. You go ahead and stuff her, John; stuff her as full of learnin' as she'll hold. It'll be cheaper for me than sendin' her off to school and fittin' her up to be a rich man's wife, and you can do her just as much good--more, from what she tells me. You go right ahead and stuff her, John."

"Huh!" said John.

"Earl, he'll look after your sheep while you're teachin' Joan her books. Stuff her, but don't founder her, John. If any man can fit her up to prance in high society, I'd bet my last dollar you can. You're a kind of a gentleman yourself, John."

"Thanks," said John, grinning a dry grin.

"Yes," reminiscently, with great satisfaction, "Malcolm made the proposition to me, hit me with it so sudden it nearly took my breath. 'Marry him to your Joan when you make a man of him,' he says. I said maybe he wouldn't want to hitch up with a sheepman's daughter that was brought up on the range. 'If he don't he can go to work and make his own way--I'll not leave him a dam' cent!' says Malcolm. We shook hands on it; he said he'd put it in his will. And that's cinched so it can't slip."

When Tim mounted to leave he looked round the range again with a drawing of trouble in his face, as if he searched the peaceful landscape for the shadow of wings.

"I ain't got another sheep-wagon to give you right now, John; I guess you'll have to make out with a tent till winter," he said.

"I'd rather have it," Mackenzie replied.

Tim leaned over, hand to one side of his mouth, speaking in low voice, yet not whispering:

"And remember what I said about that matter, John. Stuff, but don't founder."

"Stuff," said John, but with an inflection that gave the word a different meaning, quite.

CHAPTER XIII

A FIGHT ALMOST LOST

Dad Frazer was not overly friendly toward the young man from Omaha who had come out to learn the sheep business under the threat of penalties and the promise of high rewards. He growled around about him continually when he and Mackenzie met, which was not very often, owing to their being several miles apart. Tim had stationed Dad and his big band of sheep between Mackenzie and Joan, leaving the schoolmaster to hold the frontier. No matter for old man Reid's keenness to have his son suffer some of the dangers which he had faced in his day, Tim seemed to be holding the youth back out of harm's way, taking no risks on losing a good thing for the family.

Reid had been on the range about two weeks, but Mackenzie had not seen a great deal of him, owing to Tim's plan of keeping him out of the disputed territory, especially at night. That the young man did not care much for the company or instruction of Dad Frazer was plain. Twice he had asked Mackenzie to use his influence with Tim to bring about a change from the old man's camp to his. In Mackenzie's silence and severity the young man found something that he could not penetrate, a story that he could not read. Perhaps it was with a view to finding out what school Mackenzie had been seasoned in that Reid bent himself to win his friendship.

Dad Frazer came over the hills to Mackenzie's range that afternoon, to stretch his legs, he said, although Mackenzie knew it was to stretch his tongue, caring nothing for the miles that lay between. He had left Reid in charge of his flock, the young man being favored by Tim to the extent of allowing him a horse, the same as he did Joan.

"I'm glad he takes to you," said Dad. "I don't like him; he's got a graveyard in his eyes."

"I don't think he ever pulled a gun on anybody in his life, Dad," Mackenzie returned, in mild amazement.

"I don't mean that kind of a graveyard; I mean a graveyard where he buried the boy in him long before his time. He's too sharp for his years; he's seen too much of the kind of life a young feller's better off for to hear about from a distance and never touch. I tell you, John, he ain't no good."

"He's an agreeable kind of a chap, anyhow; he's got a line of talk like a saddle salesman."

"Yes, and I never did have no use for a talkin' man. Nothin' to 'em; they don't stand the gaff."

In spite of his friendly defense of young Reid, Mackenzie felt that Dad had read him aright. There was something of subtle knowledge, an edge of guile showing through his easy nature and desire to please, that was like acid on the teeth. Reid had the faculty of making himself agreeable, and he was an apt and willing hand, but back of this ingenuous appearance there seemed to be something elusive and shadowy, a thing which he tried to keep hidden by nimble maneuvers, but which would show at times for all his care.

Mackenzie did not dislike the youth, but he found it impossible to warm up to him as one man might to another in a place where human companionship is a luxury. When Reid sat with a cigarette in his thin lips--it was a wide mouth, worldly hard--hazy in abstraction and smoke, there came a glaze over the clearness of his eyes, a look of dead harshness, a cast of cunning. In such moments his true nature seemed to express itself unconsciously, and Dad Frazer, simple as he was in many ways, was worldly man enough to penetrate the smoke, and sound the apprentice sheepman to his soul.

Reid seemed to draw a good deal of amusement out of his situation under Tim Sullivan. He was dependent on the flockmaster for his clothing and keep, even tobacco and papers for his cigarettes. If he knew anything about the arrangement between his father and Sullivan in regard to Joan, he did not mention it. That he knew it, Mackenzie fully believed, for Tim Sullivan was not the man to keep the reward sequestered.

Whether Reid looked toward Joan as adequate compensation for three years' exile in the sheeplands, there was no telling. Perhaps he did not think much of her in comparison with the exotic plants of the atmosphere he had left; more than likely there was a girl in the background somewhere, around whom some of the old man's anxiety to save the lad revolved. Mackenzie hoped to the deepest cranny of his heart that it was so.

"He seems to get a good deal of humor out of working here for his board and tobacco," Mackenzie said.

"Yes, he blatters a good deal about it," said Dad. "'I'll take another biscuit on Tim Sullivan,' he says, and 'here goes another smoke on Tim.' I don't see where he's got any call to make a joke out of eatin' another man's bread."

"Maybe he's never eaten any man's bread outside of the family before, Dad."

"I reckon he wouldn't have to be doin' it now if he'd 'a' been decent. Oh well, maybe he ain't so bad."

This day Dad was maneuvering around to unload the apprentice on Mackenzie for good. He worked up to it gradually, as if feeling his way with his good foot ahead, careful not to be too sudden and plunge into a hole.

"I don't like a feller around that talks so much," Dad complained. "When he's around a man ain't got no time to think and plan and lay his projec's for what he's a goin' to do. All I can do to put a word in edgeways once in a while."

It appeared plain enough that Dad's sore spot was this very inability to land as many words as he thought he had a right to. That is the complaint of any talkative person. If you are a good listener, with a *yes* and a *no* now and then, a talkative man will tell your friends you are the most interesting conversationalist he ever met.

"I don't mind him," Mackenzie said, knowing very well that Dad would soon be so hungry for somebody to unload his words upon that he would be talking to the sheep. "Ship him over to me when you're tired of him; I'll work some of the wind out of him inside of a week."

"I'll send him this evenin'," said Dad, eager in his relief, brightening like an uncovered coal. "Them dogs Joan give you's breakin' in to the sound of your voice wonderful, ain't they?"

"They're getting used to me slowly."

"Funny about dogs a woman's been runnin' sheep with. Mighty unusual they'll take up with a man after that. I used to be married to a Indian woman up on the Big Wind that was some hummer trainin' sheep-dogs. That woman could sell 'em for a hundred dollars apiece as fast as she could raise 'em and train 'em up, and them dad-splashed collies they'd purt' near all come back home after she'd sold 'em. Say, I've knowed them dogs to come back a hundred and eighty mile!"

"That must have been a valuable woman to have around a man's camp. Where is she now, if I'm not too curious?"

"She was a good woman, one of the best women I ever had." Dad rubbed his chin, eyes reflectively on the ground, stood silent a spell that was pretty long for him. "I hated like snakes to lose that woman--her name was Little Handful Of Rabbit Hair On A Rock. Ye-es. She was a

hammer on sheep-dogs, all right. She took a swig too many out of my jug one day and tripped over a stick and tumbled into the hog-scaldin' tank."

"What a miserable end!" said Mackenzie, shocked by the old man's indifferent way of telling it.

"Oh, it didn't hurt her much," said Dad. "Scalded one side of her till she peeled off and turned white. I couldn't stand her after that. You know a man don't want to be goin' around with no pinto woman, John." Dad looked up with a gesture of depreciation, a queer look of apology in his weather-beaten face. "She was a Crow," he added, as if that explained much that he had not told.

"Dark, huh?"

"Black; nearly as black as a nigger."

"Little Handful, and so forth, must have thought you gave her a pretty hard deal, anyhow, Dad."

"I never called her by her full name," Dad reflected, passing over the moral question that Mackenzie raised. "I shortened her down to Rabbit. I sure wish I had a couple of them sheep-dogs of her'n to give you in place of them you lost. Joan's a good little girl, but she can't train a dog like Rabbit."

"Rabbit's still up there on the Big Wind waiting for you, is she?"

"She'll wait a long time! I'm done with Indians. Joan comin' over today?"

"Tomorrow."

"I don't guess you'll have her to bother with much longer--her and that Reid boy they'll be hitchin' up one of these days from all the signs. He skirmishes off over that way nearly every day. Looks to me like Tim laid it out that way, givin' him a horse to ride and leavin' me and you to hoof it. It'd suit Tim, all right; I've heard old Reid's a millionaire."

"I guess it would," Mackenzie said, trying to keep his voice from sounding as cold as his heart felt that moment.

"Yes, I think they'll hitch. Well, I'd like to see Joan land a better man than him. I don't like a man that can draw a blinder over his eyes like a frog."

Mackenzie smiled at the aptness of Dad's comparison. It was, indeed, as if Reid interposed a film like a frog when he plunged from one element into another, so to speak; when he left the sheeplands in his thoughts and went back to the haunts and the companions lately known.

"If Joan had a little more meat on her she wouldn't be a bad looker," said Dad. "Well, when a man's young he likes 'em slim, and when he's old he wants 'em fat. It'd be a calamity if a man was to marry a skinny girl like Joan and she was to stay skinny all his life."

"I don't think she's exactly skinny, Dad."

"No, I don't reckon you could count her ribs. But you put fifty pounds more on that girl and see how she'd look!"

"I can't imagine it," said Mackenzie, not friendly to the notion at all.

As Dad went back to unburden himself of his unwelcome companion, Mackenzie could not suppress the thought that a good many unworthy notions hatched beneath that dignified white hair. But surely Dad might be excused by a more stringent moralist than the schoolmaster for abandoning poor Rabbit after her complexion had suffered in the hog-scalding vat.

Toward sundown Earl Reid came riding over, his winning smile as easy on his face as he was in the saddle. The days were doing him good, all around, toughening his face, taking the poolroom pastiness out of it, putting a bracer in his back. Mackenzie noted the improvement as readily as it could be seen in some quick-growing plant.

Mackenzie was living a very primitive and satisfactory life under a few yards of tent canvas since the loss of his wagon. He stretched it over such bushes as came handy, storing his food beneath it when he slept, save on such nights as threatened showers. Reid applauded this arrangement. He was tired of Dad Frazer's wagon, and the greasy bunk in it.

"I've been wild to stretch out in a blanket with my feet to a little fire," he said, with a flash of the eagerness belonging to the boyhood buried away too soon, as Dad had remarked. "Dad wouldn't let me do it--fussed at me three days because I sneaked out on him one night and laid under the wagon."

"Dad didn't want a skunk to bite you, I guess. He felt a heavy responsibility on your account."

"Old snoozer!" said Reid.

Reid was uncommonly handy as a camp-cook, far better in that respect than Mackenzie, who gladly turned the kitchen duties over to him and let him have his way. After supper they sat talking, the lusty moon lifting a wondering face over the hills in genial placidity as if sure, after all its ages, of giving the world a surprise at last.

"Joan told me to bring you word she'd be over in the morning instead of tomorrow afternoon," said Reid.

"Thanks."

Reid smoked in reflective silence, his thin face clear in the moonlight.

"Some girl," said he. "I don't see why she wants to go to all this trouble to get a little education."

That stuff's all bunk. I wish I had the coin in my jeans right now the old man spent on me, pourin' stuff into me that went right on through like smoke through a handkerchief."

"I don't think it would be that way with Joan," Mackenzie said, hoping Reid would drop the discussion there, and not go into the arrangement for the future, which was a matter altogether detestable in the schoolmaster's thoughts.

Reid did not pursue his speculations on Joan, whether through delicacy or indifference Mackenzie could not tell. He branched off into talk of other things, through which the craving for the life he had left came out in strong expressions of dissatisfaction with the range. He complained against the penance his father had set, looking ahead with consternation to the three years he must spend in those solitudes.

"But I'm goin' to stick," he said, an unmistakable determination in his tone. "I'll show him they're making as good men now as they did when he was a kid." He laughed, a raucous, short laugh, an old man's laugh, which choked in a cigarette cough and made a mockery of mirth. "I'll toughen up out here and have better wind for the big finish when I sit in on the old man's money."

No, Joan was not cast for any important part in young Reid's future drama, Mackenzie understood. As if his thoughts had penetrated to the young man's heart, making fatuous any further attempt at concealment of his true sentiments, Reid spoke.

"They've sewed me up in a sack with Joan--I guess you know about it?"

"Tim was telling me."

"A guy could do worse."

With this comforting reflection Reid stretched himself on his blanket and went to sleep. Mackenzie was not slow in following his example, for it had been a hard day with the sheep, with much leg work on account of the new dogs showing a wolfish shyness of their new master most exasperating at times. Mackenzie's last thought was that Reid would take a great deal of labor off his legs by using the horse in attending the sheep.

A scream woke Mackenzie. He heaved up out of his sleep with confusion clouding his senses for the moment, the thought that he was on water, and the cry was that of one who drowned, persistent above his struggling reason. It was a choking cry, the utterance of a desperate soul who sees life fleeing while he lifts his voice in the last appeal. And between him and his companion Mackenzie saw the bulk of a giant-shouldered man, who bent with arm outstretched toward him, whose hand came in contact with his throat as he rose upright with the stare of confusion in his eyes.

Mackenzie broke through this film of his numbing sleep, reaching for the rifle that he had laid near his hand. It was gone, and across the two yards intervening he saw young Reid writhing in the grip of the monster who was strangling out his life.

Mackenzie wrenched free from the great hand that closed about his throat, tearing the mighty arm away with the strength of both his own. A moment, and he was involved in the most desperate struggle that he had ever faced in his life.

This interference gave Reid a new gulp of life. The three combatants were on their feet now, not a word spoken, not a sound but the dull impact of blows and the hard breathings of the two who fought this monster of the sheeplands for their lives. Swan Carlson, Mackenzie believed him to be, indulging his insane desire for strangling out the lives of men. He had approached so stealthily, with such wild cunning, that the dogs had given no alarm, and had taken the gun to insure against miscarriage or interruption in his horrible menu of death.

A brief tangle of locked arms, swaying bodies, ribs all but crushed in the embrace of those bestial arms, and Mackenzie was conscious that he was fighting the battle alone. In the wild swirl of it he could not see whether Reid had fallen or torn free. A little while, now in the pressure of those hairy, bare arms, now free for one gasping breath, fighting as man never fought in the sheeplands before that hour, and Mackenzie felt himself snatched up bodily and thrown down from uplifted arms with a force that must have ended all for him then but for the interposition of a sage-clump that broke the fall.

Instantly the silent monster was upon him. Mackenzie met him hand to hand, fighting the best fight that was in him, chilled with the belief that it was his last. But he could not come up from his knees, and in this position his assailant bent over him, one hand on his forehead, the other at the back of his neck, a knee against his breast.

Mackenzie tore at the great, stiff arms with his last desperate might, perhaps staying a little the pressure that in a moment more must snap his spine. As the assassin tightened this terrible grip Mackenzie's face was lifted toward the sky. Overhead was the moon, clear-edged, bright, in the dusk of the immensities beyond; behind the monster, who paused that breath as in design to fill his victim's last moment with a hope that he soon would mock, Mackenzie saw young Reid.

The youth was close upon the midnight strangler, stooping low. As the terrible pressure on forehead and neck cracked his spine like a breaking icicle, Mackenzie believed he shouted, putting into his voice all that he felt of desperate need of help. And he saw young Reid strike, and felt the breaking wrench of the cruel hands relax, and fell down upon the ground like a dead man and knew no more.

Reid was there with the lantern, putting water on Mackenzie's head when he again broke

through the mists and followed the thread of his soul back to his body. Reid was encouraging him to be steady, and to take it easy, assuring him that he never saw a man put up such a fight as the schoolmaster had all but lost.

Mackenzie sat up presently, with throbbing head, a feeling of bulging in his eyeballs, his neck stiff from the wrenching it had received. The great body of the man whom he had fought lay stretched in the moonlight, face to the ground. The camp butcher knife was sticking in his back. Mackenzie got to his feet, a dizziness over him, but a sense of his obligation as clear as it ever was in any man.

"I owe you one for that; I'll not forget it in a hurry," he said, giving Reid his hand.

"No, we're even on it," Reid returned. "He'd 'a' broke my neck in another second if you hadn't made that tackle. Who is he, do you know?"

"Turn him over," Mackenzie said.

Reid withdrew the knife, sticking it into the ground with as little concern as if he had taken it from a butcher's block, and heaved the fellow over on his back. The moonlight revealed his dusty features clearly, but Mackenzie brought the lantern to make it doubly sure.

"He's not the man I thought he was," said he. "I think this fellow's name is Matt Hall. He's the sheep-killer you've heard about. Look--he's all over blood--there's wool on his shirt."

"Matt Hall, huh?" said Reid. He wiped the butcher knife on the dead sheep-killer's shirt, making a little whistling, reflective sound through his teeth. "I'll have to scour that knife before we cut bacon with it in the morning," he said.

CHAPTER XIV

THE LONESOMENESS

"He's got the lonesomeness," said Dad, "and I tell you, John, when that gits a hold of a man he ain't responsible. It's the same as shuttin' a man up in jail to break him off of booze--say, he'll claw the rocks out of the wall with his finger nails to git out where he can take a snort."

"I never had the lonesomeness, so I don't know, but there's something the matter with the kid."

"Yes, I see him tearin' around the country ridin' the head off of that horse, never lookin' where he's goin' any more than a bat. He's been clean over to Four Corners after the mail twice this week. A feller must want a letter purty bad when he'll go to all that fuss for it."

"I'm afraid it's going to be hard for him; he hasn't any more than bitten into his three years yet; he don't really know how they taste."

"It'll break him; he'll go all to pieces, I tell you John. When the lonesomeness takes a hold of a feller that way something pops in his head after a while; then he either puts a bullet through his heart or settles down and gits fat. That feller ain't got it in him to put on loco fat."

Dad had slicked himself up pretty well that day before cutting across the range for a chat with Mackenzie. His operations with the sheep-shears on his fuzzy whiskers had not been uniform, probably due to the lack of a mirror. Dad trusted to the feel of it when he had no water by to look into and guide his hand, and this time he had cut close to the skin in several places, displaying his native color beneath the beard. But whatever he lacked in his chin-hedge he made up for in careful arrangement of his truly beautiful hair.

There was a sniff of perfume about him, a nosegay of wild flowers pinned in the pocket of his shirt. Mackenzie marveled over these refinements in the old man's everyday appearance, but left it to his own time and way to tell what plans or expectations prompted them.

"Hector Hall showed up?"

"No."

"Reid wouldn't make any more than a snap and a swaller out of that feller, I guess. But it ain't good for a man like him to start out killin'; it goes to his liver too quick and drives him mooney."

"I don't suppose it's very healthy for any man, Dad."

"You said it! I've went fifty miles around a range to skip a feller that was lookin' for my skelp, and I'd go a thousand before I'd crowd a fight. I never was much on the fight, and runnin' sheep took what little was in me out a long time ago."

Dad got out his red box of corn-husk cigarettes, offering it silently to Mackenzie, who shook his head, knowing very well that Dad did it to observe conventions rather than out of a desire to have him help himself. The stock of Mexican smokes was running low; Dad had spoken of it only the day before, and his feet were itching for the road to the border, he said.

"Well, he's got a name and a fame in this country he can travel on," said Dad.

Which was true enough. Mackenzie's fight with Swan Carlson had taken second place, his

reputation as a fighting man in the sheeplands had paled almost to nothing, after Reid's swift-handed dealing with Matt Hall. The fame of his exploit ran through the country, fixing his place in it at once, for Matt Hall was known as a man who had the strength of seven in his long, gorilla arms.

Hector Hall, brother of the slain man, seemed to accept the tragedy with a sorrowful resignation in which no shadow of revenge appeared. He let it be known that Matt had been irresponsible at times, given to night-prowlings and outbreaks of violence of strange and fantastic forms. How much truth there was in this excuse for the dead man, Hector alone knew. But no matter for his passivity, Mackenzie did not trust him. He made a requisition on Tim Sullivan at once for revolvers for himself and Reid, which Tim delegated the young man to go to Four Corners and buy.

"Well, I come over to see if you'll lend Reid to me three or four days while I make a trip to town," said Dad. "I've got a little business over there to tend to I've been puttin' off for more than a month."

"Yes, if it's all right with Tim you can have him. What's up, getting married?"

"Kind of arrangin', John, kind of arrangin'. There's a widow-lady over at Four Corners I used to rush that needs a man to help her with her sheep. A man might as well marry a sheep ranch as work on one, I reckon."

"It's a shorter cut, anyhow. When do you want Reid?"

"I was aimin' to rack out this evenin', John."

"I'll send him over this afternoon. I don't know where he is, but he'll be back for dinner."

Dad went away well satisfied and full of cheer, Mackenzie marveling over his marital complexities as he watched him go. Together with Rabbit, and the Mexican woman down El Paso way whom John had mentioned, but of whom Dad never had spoken, and no telling how many more scattered around the country, Dad seemed to be laying the groundwork for a lively roundup one of his days. He said he'd been marrying women off and on for forty years. His easy plan seemed to be just to take one that pleased his capricious temper wherever he found her, without regard to former obligations.

Mackenzie grinned. He did not believe any man was so obscure as to be able to escape many wives. Dad seemed to be a dry-land sailor, with a wife in every town he ever had made in his life. Mackenzie understood about Mexican marriages. If they were priest marriages, they were counted good; if they were merely justice of the peace ones they were subject to wide and elastic infringement on both sides. Probably Indian marriages were similar. Surely Dad was old enough to know what he was about.

Reid came to camp at noontime, and prepared dinner in his quick and handy way. Mackenzie did not take up the question of his acting as relief for Dad while the old scout went off to push his arrangements for marrying a sheep ranch, seeing that Reid was depressed and down-spirited and in no pleasant mood.

They were almost independent of the camp-mover, owing to their light equipment, which they could carry with them from day to day as the sheep ranged. Supplies were all they needed from the wagon, which came around to them twice a week. After dinner Reid began packing up for the daily move, moody and silent, cigarette dangling on his lip.

"It's a one-hell of a life!" said he, looking up from the last knot in the rope about the bundle of tent.

"Have you soured on it already, Earl?"

Reid sat on the bundle of tent, a cloud on his face, hat drawn almost to the bridge of his nose, scowling out over the sheep range as if he would curse it to a greater barrenness.

"Three years of this, and what'll I be? Hell! I can't even find that other Hall."

"Have you been out looking for him?"

"That big Swede over there was tellin' me he's put me down in his book for a killin'. I thought I'd give him a chance to get it over with if he meant it."

"Has Carlson been over?"

"No, I rode over there the other evening. Say, is that the woman you found chained up when you struck this country?"

"She's the one."

Mackenzie looked at Reid curiously as he answered. There was something of quick eagerness in the young man's inquiry, a sudden light of a new interest in his face, in sharp contrast with the black mood of a moment before.

"She looks like an Ibsen heroine," said Reid. "Take that woman out of this country and dress her right, and she'd be a queen."

"You'd better keep away from there," said Mackenzie, dryly.

"Oh, I guess I can take care of Swan if you could," Reid returned, with a certain easy insolence, jerking his hip to hitch his gun around in suggestive movement.

Mackenzie dropped the matter without more words, seeing too plainly the humor of the youth.

Maybe Dad had diagnosed his ailment aright, but to Mackenzie it appeared something more than plain lonesomeness. The notoriety attending the killing of Matt Hall had not been good for Reid. He wanted more of it, and a bigger audience, a wider field.

If this was a taste of the adventure of the West's past romantic times, Mackenzie felt that he was lucky he had come too late to share it. His own affair with Swan Carlson had been sordid enough, but this unlucky embroilment in which Reid had killed a man was a plain misfortune to the hero of the fight. He told Reid of Dad's request.

"You go and run his sheep for him," Reid suggested. "It'll take you a little nearer Joan."

This he added as with studied sneer, his face flushing darkly, his thin mouth twisted in an ugly grin.

Mackenzie passed it, but not without the hurt of the unkind stab showing in his face. It was so entirely unjustified as to be cruel, for Mackenzie was not in Reid's way even to the extent of one lurking, selfish thought. Since Reid had saved his life from Matt Hall's murderous hands, Mackenzie had withdrawn even his most remote hope in regard to Joan. Before that he had spun his thread of dreams, quite honestly, and with intent that he would not have denied, but since, not at all.

He owed Reid too much to cross him with Joan; he stepped aside, denying himself a thought of her save only in relation of teacher and pupil, trying to convince himself that it was better in the end for Joan. Reid had all the advantage of him in prospects; he could lift up the curtain on his day and show Joan the splendors of a world that a schoolmaster could point out only from afar. Mackenzie seemed to ignore the youth's suggestion that he go and tend Dad's flock.

"If I had a thousand dollars I'd dust it for Mexico tomorrow," said Reid. He turned to Mackenzie, pushing his hat back from his forehead, letting the sun on his savagely knotted face. "I haven't got money to send a telegram, not even a special delivery letter! Look at me! A millionaire's son and sole heir, up against a proposition like this for three years!"

Mackenzie let him sweat it out, offering neither water for his thirst nor wood for his fire. Reid sat in surly silence, running his thumb along his cartridge belt.

"A man's friends forget him out here," he complained; "he's the same to them as dead."

"It's the way everywhere when a man wants to borrow money," Mackenzie told him, not without the shade of a sneer.

"I've let them have enough in my time that they could afford to come across with what I asked for!"

"I think you'd better stick to the sheep business with Tim," Mackenzie advised, not unkindly, ashamed of his momentary weakness and scorn. "A man's prospects don't look very good back home when a bunch of parasites and grafters won't come over with a little loan."

"They can go to the devil! I can live without them."

"And get fat on it, kid. Three years here will be little more to you than as many days, if you get--interested."

Reid exclaimed impatiently, dismissing such assurance with a testy gesture.

"How much will you give me for my chances?" he asked.

"Nobody else can play your hand, kid."

"On the square, Mackenzie. Will you give me a thousand dollars?"

"I'm not sole heir to any millionaire," Mackenzie reminded him, taking the proposal in the jesting spirit that he supposed it was given.

"On the dead, Mackenzie--I mean it. Will you give me a thousand dollars for my place in the sheep game, girl and all? If you will, I'll hit the breeze tonight for Mexico and kick it all over to you, win or lose."

"If I could buy you out for a dime we couldn't trade," Mackenzie told him, a coldness in tone and manner that was more than a reproof.

"Joan ought to be worth that much to you!" Reid sneered.

Mackenzie got up, walked a few steps away, turned back presently, his temper in hand.

"It's not a question open to discussion between gentlemen," he said.

Reid blinked up at him, an odd leer on his sophisticated face, saying no more. He made a pack on his saddle of the camp outfit, and started off along the ridge, leaving Mackenzie to follow as he pleased. A mile or more along Reid pitched upon a suitable camping place. He had himself established long before Mackenzie came to where he sat smoking amid his gloomy, impatient thoughts.

"I'm not going over to relieve that old skunk," Reid announced, "not without orders from Sullivan. If he gets off you'll have to relieve him yourself. I don't want that Hall guy to get it into his nut that I'm runnin' away from him."

"All right, Earl," said Mackenzie, good-naturedly, "I'll go."

"You'll be half an hour nearer Joan's camp--she'll have that much longer to stay," said Reid, his mean leer creeping into his wide, thin lips again.

Mackenzie turned slowly to look him squarely in the eyes. He stood so a few seconds, Reid coloring in hot resentment of the silent rebuke.

"I've heard enough of that to last me the rest of your three years," Mackenzie said, something as hard as stones in a cushion under his calm voice.

Reid jerked his hip in his peculiar twisting movement to shift his pistol belt, turned, and walked away.

If it was the lonesomeness, Mackenzie thought, it was taking a mighty peculiar turn in that fellow. He was more like a cub that was beginning to find itself, and bristle and snarl and turn to bite the hand that had fended it through its helpless stage. Perhaps it would pass in a little while, or perhaps it would get worse on him. In the latter case there would be no living on the range with Reid, for on the range Mackenzie believed Reid was destined to remain. He had been trying to borrow money to get away, with what view in his dissatisfied head Mackenzie could not guess. He hadn't got it; he wouldn't get it. Those who had fattened on him in his prosperity were strangers to him in his time of penance and disgrace.

Mackenzie put off his start to Dad's camp until dusk, knowing the old man would prefer to take the road at night, after his mysterious way. He probably would hoof it over to Sullivan's and borrow a buckboard to make a figure in before the widow-lady upon whom he had anchored his variable heart.

Reid was bringing in the sheep when Mackenzie left, too far away for a word. Mackenzie thought of going down to him, for he disliked to part with anything like a shadow between them, feeling that he owed Reid a great debt indeed. More than that, he liked the kid, for there seemed to be a streak of good in him that all his ugly moods could not cover. But he went his way over the hills toward Dad's camp, the thought persisting in him that he would, indeed, be thirty minutes nearer Joan. And it was a thought that made his heart jump and a gladness burn in his eyes, and his feet move onward with a swift eagerness.

But only as a teacher with a lively interest in his pupil, he said; only that, and nothing more. On a hilltop a little way beyond his camp he stopped suddenly, his breath held to listen. Over the calm, far-carrying silence of the early night there came the sound of a woman singing, and this was the manner of her song:

*Na-a-fer a-lo-o-one, na-a-fer a-lone.
He promise na-fer to leafe me,
Na-fer to leafe me a-lone!*

CHAPTER XV

ONLY ONE JACOB

Joan came riding over the next morning from Reid's camp, not having heard of Mackenzie's shift to oblige Dad Frazer. She was bareheaded, the sun in her warm hair, hat hanging on her saddlehorn.

"Dad might have come by and told me," she said, flinging to the ground as lightly as a swallow. "It would have saved us half an hour."

"We'll have to work harder to make it up," Mackenzie told her, thinking how much more a woman she was growing every day.

Joan was distraught again that day, her eyes fixed often in dreamy speculation as her teacher explained something that she found hard, against her wonted aptness, to understand. When the rather disjointed lesson came to an end Joan sighed, strapping her books in a way that seemed to tell that she was weary of them.

"Do you still think you'll stick to the sheep business, John?" she asked, not lifting her eyes to his face, all out of her frank and earnest way of questioning.

"I'm only on probation, you know, Joan; something might happen between now and this time next year to change things all around. There's a chance, anyhow, that I may not make good."

"No, nothing will ever happen to change it," said Joan, shaking her head sadly. "Nothing that ought to happen ever happens here. I don't know whether I can stand it to carry out my contract with dad or not. Three years between me and what I'm longing for!"

"It's not very long when one's young, Joan. Well, I don't know of any short cuts to either fame or fortune, or I'd have taken them myself."

"Yes, but you're free to pick up and go whenever you want to. A man don't have to have money to strike out and see the world--I don't see why a woman should. I could work my way as well as anybody."

"They're harder masters out there than the range is to you here, Joan. And there's the insolence

of mastery, and the obloquy of poverty and situation that I hope you'll never feel. Wait a little while longer with the probationers among the sheep."

"Earl never will stay it out," she said, lifting her eyes for a moment to his. "He's sick of it now--he'd throw everything over if he had the money to get away."

"He'd be a very foolish young man, then. But it's like breaking off smoking, I guess, to quit the things you've grown up with on short notice like he had."

"Maybe in about a year more my interest will amount to enough to let me out," said Joan, pursuing her thought of winning to freedom in the way she had elected. She seemed innocent of any knowledge of the arrangement whereby Earl Reid was working for his reward. Mackenzie wondered if it could be so.

"If dad'll buy me out then," she said, speculatively, doubtfully, carrying on her thought in a disjointed way. "It would be like him to turn me down, though, if I want to quit before my time's up. And he wouldn't let me divide the sheep and sell my share to anybody else."

No, Joan could not yet know of Tim's arrangement with Earl Reid's father. It would be like Tim, indeed, to bargain her off without considering her in the matter at all. To a man like Tim his sons and daughters were as much his chattels as his sheep, kind as he was in his way. The apprenticeship of Joan to the range was proof of that. Somewhere out in that gray loneliness two younger daughters were running sheep, with little brothers as protectors and companions, beginning their adventures and lessons in the only school they were ever likely to know.

Tim made a great virtue of the fact that he had taught all of them to read and write. That much would serve most of them satisfactorily for a few years, but Mackenzie grinned his dry grin to himself when he thought of the noise there would be one day in Tim Sullivan's cote when the young pigeons shook out their wings to fly away. It was in the breed to do that; it looked out of the eyes of every one.

"I sent and got a Bible from the mail-order house," said Joan, looking up with lively eyes.

"Has it come already?"

"Charley got it yesterday. I found that story about Jacob and Rachel and the weak-eyed girl. It's awful short."

"But it tells a good deal, Joan."

Joan seemed thinking over how much the short story really told, her eyes far away on the elusive, ever-receding blue curtain that was down between her and the world.

"Yes, it tells a lot," she sighed. "But Jake must not have been very bright. Well, he was a cowman, anyhow; he wasn't running sheep."

"I think he went into the sheep business afterwards," Mackenzie said, diverted by her original comment on the old tale.

"Yes, when his girls got big enough to do the work!" The resentment of her hard years was in Joan's voice, the hardness of unforgiving regret for all that had been taken from her life.

Mackenzie felt a sweep of depression engulf him like a leaping wave. Joan was in the humor to profit by any arrangement that would break her bondage to sheep; Tim Sullivan had been bringing her up, unconsciously, but none the less effectively, to fit into this scheme for marrying her to his old friend's rakish son. When the day came for Joan to know of the arrangement, she would leap toward it as toward an open door.

Still, it should not concern him. Once he had believed there was a budding blossom on his hitherto dry branch of romance; if he had been so ungenerous as to take advantage of Joan's loneliness and urge the promise to florescence, they might have been riding down out of the sheeplands together that day.

It would have been a venture, too, he admitted. For contact with the world of men must prove a woman, even as the hardships of the range must prove a man. Perhaps the unlimited variety displayed before her eyes would have made Joan dissatisfied with her plain choice.

At that moment it came to him that perhaps Joan was to be tested and proved here, even as he was being tested in Tim Sullivan's balance for his fitness to become a master over sheep. Here were two fair samples of men out of the world's assorted stock--himself and Reid. One of them, deliberate, calm, assured of his way, but with little in his hand; the other a grig that could reel and spin in the night-lights, and flutter to a merry tune.

With Mackenzie the rewards of life would come to her slowly, but with a sweet savor of full understanding and appreciation as they were won. Many of them most desired might never be attained; many more might be touched and withdrawn in the mockery that fate practices so heartlessly upon men. Reid could convey her at once over the rough summits which men and women wear their hearts threadbare to attain. With Reid the journey would begin where, with the best hoping, it must in his own company almost end.

"It was unlucky for Earl that he killed Matt Hall," said Joan, taking up another thread of thought in her discursive, unfixed humor of that day.

"It's unfortunate for any man to have to kill another, I guess. But it has to be done sometimes."

"Matt deserved it, all right--he ought have been killed for his mean face long ago--but it's turned Earl's head, haven't you noticed? He thinks he's got one foot on each side of this range,

herdin' everybody between his legs."

"He'll get over it in a little while."

"He's not got brains enough to hold him down when the high winds begin to blow. If he's a fair sample of what they've got in Omaha, I'll cross it off my map when I begin to travel."

"Dad says he's got the lonesomeness."

"More of the cussedness."

Her words warmed Mackenzie like a precious cordial. At every one of them in derogation of Reid his heart jumped, seeming to move him by its tremendous vibration a little nearer to her. He felt that it was traitorous exultation at the expense of one who had befriended him to a limit beyond which it is hard for a man to go, but he could not drown the exhilaration of a reborn hope in even the deepest waters of his gratitude.

Somebody ought to tell Joan what they had designed for her in company with Earl Reid; somebody ought to tell her, but it was not his place. It was strange that she had read the young man's weakness so readily. Mackenzie had noted more than once before in his life that those who live nearest to nature are the most apt in reading all her works.

"He'll never stay here through a winter," Joan predicted, with certainty that admitted no argument. "Give him a touch of twenty-two below, and a snow on a high wind, and send him out to bed down the sheep where it'll blow over them! I can see him right now. You'll do it, all right, and I'll have to, like I have done many a time. But we're not like Earl. Earl's got summer blood."

Mackenzie took her hand, feeling it tremble a little, seeing her face grow pale. The sun was red on the hill, the sheep were throwing long shadows down the slope as they grazed lazily, some of them standing on knees to crop the lush bunch grass.

"Yes, Joan, you and I are of different blood," he said. "We are of the blood of the lonesome places, and we'll turn back to them always from our wandering and seeking contentment among the press of men. He can't have you--Earl Reid can't have you--ever in this world!"

So it was out, and from his own mouth, and all his reserve was nothing, and his silent pledging but as an idle word. Joan was looking at him with wide and serious eyes.

"Earl Reid?"

"Earl Reid," he nodded. "I'd be a coward to give you up to him."

Joan was not trembling now. She put her free hand over Mackenzie's where it gripped her fingers so hard that Earl Reid might have been on the opposite side of her, trying to rive her away from him by force; she looked up into his eyes and smiled. And there were flecks of golden brown in Joan's eyes, like flakes of metal from her rich hair. They seemed to increase, and to sparkle like jewels struck through placid water by strong sunbeams as she looked up into his face.

"I thought dad had made some kind of a deal with him," she said, nodding in her wise way, a truant strand of hair on her calm forehead. "They didn't tell me anything, but I knew from the way dad looked at me out of the corners of his eyes that he had a trade of some kind on. Tell me about it, John."

There was no explanation left to Mackenzie but the degrading truth, and he gave it to her as Tim Sullivan had given it to him.

"They had their nerve!" said Joan, flushed with resentment.

"It's all off, as far as it affects you and me," Mackenzie said, fetching his brows together in a frown of denial. "Reid can't have you, not even if he comes into two million when the old man dies."

"No," said Joan softly, her hand stroking his, her eyes downcast, the glow of the new-old dawn upon her cheek; "there's only room for one Jacob on this range."

"I thought I owed it to Reid, as a matter of honor between men, to step aside and let him have you, according to the plan. But that was a mistake. A man can't pay his debts by robbing his heart that way."

"I saw something was holding you back, John," said the wise Joan.

Mackenzie started as if she had thrust him with a needle, felt his telltale blood flare red in his face, but grinned a little as he turned to her, meeting her eye to eye.

"So, you saw through me, did you, Joan?"

"When you called me Rachel that day."

"I nearly told you that time," he sighed.

"You might have, John," said she, a bit accusingly; "you didn't owe him anything then--that was before he came."

"I respected you too much to take advantage of your coming to me that way for your lessons day by day, Joan. I had to fight to keep it back."

"I tried to pull it out of you," Joan said, as serious as a penitent, although there was a smile breaking on her lips as she turned her face away.

"I'd never want to do anything, or say anything, that would lower your respect for me one little

degree, Joan," he said, still clinging to her hand as though he feared he had not quite won her, and must hold her fast by his side for the final word.

"I know you wouldn't, John," said she, her voice shaking a little, and low beneath her breath.

"I wouldn't want to--to--go as far as Jacob went that first time he saw Rachel," said he in desperation, his grip tightening on her fingers, sweat bursting on his brow. "I wouldn't want to--I'd *want* to, all right, but I wouldn't even--even--"

Joan looked up at him with calm, placid eyes, with pale cheeks, with yearning lips, a flutter in her heart that made her weak. She nodded, anxious to help him to his climax, but not bold, not bolder than himself, indeed, and he was shaking like a sick man in the sun.

"Unless I could make it holy, unless you could understand it so, I wouldn't even--I wouldn't so much as--" He took her face between his hands, and bent over her, and a glad little sob trembled between Joan's lips as she rested her hands on his shoulders for the benediction of his kiss.

Joan did not stay to help him bring in the sheep that day, for there was nothing left for her to wonder over, or stand wistfully by her saddle waiting to receive. Neither was there any sound of weeping as she rode up the hill, for the male custom of expressing joy in that way had gone out of fashion on the sheep ranges of this world long before John Mackenzie's day.

Nothing that he could owe a man could equal what he had gained that hour, Mackenzie thought, standing there with heart as light as the down of cottonwood. With his great debt paid to Earl Reid, even to the measure of his own life, he would still leave the world a rich man. He had come into the fresh pastures of romance at last.

Joan waved him good-bye from the hilltop and went on, the understanding of his fortune growing on him as he recalled her eyes in that moment when she closed them to his salute upon her lips. She gave up that first kiss that she ever had yielded to any man as though he had reached down and plucked it out of her heart.

Let them go on planning for years of labor, let them go on scheming for inheritances, and piece their broken arrangements together as they might when they found he had swept Joan out of their squalid calculations as a rider stoops and lifts a kerchief from the ground. There would be bitterness and protestations, and rifts in his own bright hopes, as well.

But if Tim Sullivan would not give her up to him with the good grace of a man, Mackenzie said, smiling and smiling like a daft musician, he would take her from both of them and ride away with her into the valleys of the world which she was so hungry in her young heart to behold.

He rounded his sheep to their hillside, and made his fire, a song in his heart, but his lips sealed, for he was a silent man. And at dusk there came riding into his camp a man, whose coat was at his cante, who was belted with pistols, who roved his eye with cautious look as he halted and gave the shepherd good evening. Mackenzie invited him down to the hospitality of the camp, which the stranger accepted with hearty grace.

"I was lookin' for a young feller by the name of Reid; you're not the man," the stranger said with finality, after one more shrewd look into Mackenzie's face.

"My name's Mackenzie--Reid's running a band of sheep for the same outfit about five miles east of here."

The stranger said nothing more, being busy at that moment unsaddling his horse, which he hobbled and turned to graze. He came over to the fire where Mackenzie was baking biscuits in a tilted pan, and sat down, dusty from his day's ride.

"I'm the sheriff of this county," he announced, not going into the detail of his name. Mackenzie nodded his acknowledgment, the sheriff keeping his hungry eye on the pan. "I took a cut across here from servin' some subpoenas in a murder case on some fellers up on Farewell Creek," he explained, "to see how that feller Reid's behavin'."

"I haven't heard any complaint," Mackenzie told him, wondering why this official interest. The sheriff seemed satisfied with what he heard, and made no further inquiry or explanation until after he had eaten his supper. As he smoked a cracked cigar which he took from the pocket of his ornate vest, he talked.

"I didn't know anything about that boy when Sullivan put him in here on the range," he said, "but the other day I got a letter from the sheriff in Omaha askin' me to keep my eye on him. The news of Reid's killin' Matt Hall got over to Omaha. You know Reid, he's under sentence of three years in the pen."

"I didn't know."

"Yeah. Daddy got him paroled to Sullivan's sheep ranch to serve it. If he breaks over here he goes to the pen. That's the way *he* stands."

"In that case, he'll more than likely stay it out."

"He will if he's wise. He's been a kind of a streak of wildness, the sheriff in Omaha said. Sent me his full history, three pages. Married somebody a year or so ago, but the old man got him out of that by buyin' off the girl. Then he started out forgin', and pushed it so hard the old man refused to make good any more. But he didn't want to see the kid go to the pen, and he's here. I got to keep my eye on him to see he don't break over."

The sheriff stretched out when he had finished his cigar and went to sleep in a blanket provided

by his host. He was up with dawn, ready to resume his journey. Mackenzie pressed him to stay for breakfast, but he said he wanted to make a start before the sun and reach Sullivan's ranch-house.

"Does Sullivan know how things stand with Reid?" Mackenzie inquired.

"I reckon he must. If he don't he soon will. Kind of watch that feller, will you, and slip me word if he shows any signs of streakin' out of the country."

"No, I've got my eye full looking after two thousand sheep. That's up to Sullivan, he's responsible for Reid."

The sheriff turned a sharp look of suspicion on Mackenzie, but said nothing. He led his horse down to the little stream for water, and came leading it back, a cast of disfavor in his face.

"You're a bad bunch up in here," he said, "you and Carlson and Hall. If there's any more killin' and fightin' up this way I'll come in and clean you all out. Where did you say that feller was at?"

Mackenzie told him again, and he rode off to take a look at Reid, and put what caution into his ear he had a mind to give. Mackenzie saw him blend into the gloom of early morning with a feeling of self-felicitation on his act of yesterday. He was inspired yesterday when he took Joan under his protection and laid claim to her in his own right.

CHAPTER XVI

REID BEGINS HIS PLAY

Dad Frazer came back after five days, diminished in facial outline on account of having submitted his stubble beard to the barber at Four Corners. In reverse of all speculation on Mackenzie's part, this operation did not improve the old man's appearance. Dad's face was one of the kind that are built to carry a beard; without it his weaknesses were too apparent to the appraising eye.

Dad made glowing report of his success with the widow at Four Corners. Preliminaries were smoothed; he had left the widow wearing his ring.

"We'll jump the broomstick in about a month from now," Dad said, full of satisfaction for his business stroke. "I aim to settle down and quit my roamin', John."

"And your marrying, too, I hope, you old rascal!"

"Yes, this one will be my last, I reckon. I don't mind, though; I've had doin's enough with women in my day."

"Is she a good looker, Dad?"

"Well, I've seen purtier ones and I've seen uglier ones, John. No, she ain't what you might call stylish, I guess, but she's all right for me. She's a little off in one leg, but not enough to hurt."

"That's a slight blemish in a lady with money in the bank, Dad."

"I look at it that way, on the sensible side. Good looks is all right in a woman, but that ain't all a man needs to make him easy in his mind. Well, she did lose the sight of her left eye when she was a girl, but she can see a dollar with the other one further than I can see a wagon wheel."

"No gentleman would stop at the small trifle of an eye. What else, Dad?"

"Nothing else, only she's carryin' a little more meat right now than a woman likes to pack around in hot weather. I don't mind that; you know, I like mine fat; you can't get 'em too fat for me."

"I've heard you say so. How much does she weigh?"

"Well, I guess close to three hundred, John. If she was taller, it wouldn't show so much on her--she can walk under my arm. But it's surprisin' how that woman can git around after them sheep!"

Dad added this hopefully, as if bound to append some redeeming trait to all her physical defects.

"How many does she own?"

"About four thousand. Not much of a band, but a lot more than I ever could lay claim to. She's got a twelve-thousand acre ranch, owns every foot of it, more than half of it under fence. What do you think of that? Under fence! Runs them sheep right inside of that bull-wire fence, John, where no wolf can't git at 'em. There ain't no bears down in that part of the country. Safe? Safer'n money in the bank, and no expense of hirin' a man to run 'em."

"It looks like you've landed on a feather bed, Dad."

"Ain't I? What does a man care about a little hobble, or one eye, or a little chunk of fat, when he can step into a layout like that?"

"Why didn't you lead her up to the hitching-rack while you were there? Somebody else is likely to pick your plum while your back's turned."

"No, I don't reckon. She's been on the tree quite a spell; she ain't the kind you young fellers want, and the old ones is most generally married off or in the soldiers' home. Well, she's got a little cross of Indian and Mexican in her, anyway; that kind of keeps 'em away, you know."

It was no trouble to frame a mental picture of Dad's inamorata. Black, squat, squint; a forehead a finger deep, a voice that would carry a mile. Mackenzie had seen that cross of Mexican and Indian blood, with a dash of debased white. They were not the kind that attracted men outside their own mixed breed, but he hadn't a doubt that this one was plenty good enough, and handsome enough, for Dad.

Mackenzie left the old man with this new happiness in his heart, through which a procession of various-hued women had worn a path during the forty years of his taking in marriage one month and taking leave the next. Dad wasn't nervous over his prospects, but calm and calculative, as became his age. Mackenzie went smiling now and then as he thought of the team the black nondescript and the old fellow would make.

He found Reid sitting on a hilltop with his face in his hands, surly and out of sorts, his revolver and belt on the ground beside him as if he had grown weary of their weight. He gave a short return to Mackenzie's unaffected greeting and interested inquiry into the conduct of the sheep and the dogs during his absence.

Reid's eyes were shot with inflamed veins, as if he had been sitting all night beside a smoky fire. When Mackenzie sat near him the wind bore the pollution of whisky from his breath. Reid made a show of being at his ease, although the veins in his temples were swollen in the stress of what must have been a splitting headache. He rolled a cigarette with nonchalance almost challenging, and smoked in silence, the corners of his wide, salamander mouth drawn down in a peculiar scoffing.

"I suppose that guy told you the whole story," he said at last, lifting his eyes briefly to Mackenzie's face.

"The sheriff, you mean?"

"Who else?" impatiently.

"I don't know whether he told me all or not, but he told me plenty."

"And you've passed it on to Joan by now!"

"No."

Reid faced around, a flush over his thin cheeks, a scowl in his eyes. He took up his belt; Mackenzie marked how his hands trembled as he buckled it on.

"Well, you keep out of it, you damned pedagogue!" Reid said, the words bursting from him in vehement passion. "This is my game; I'll play it without any more of your interference. You've gone far enough with her--you've gone too far! Drop it; let her alone."

Mackenzie got up. Reid stood facing him, his color gone now, his face gray. Mackenzie held him a moment with stern, accusing eyes. Then:

"Have you been over there spying on me?"

Reid passed over the question, leaving Mackenzie to form his own conclusions. His face flushed a little at the sting of contempt that Mackenzie put into his words. He fumbled for a match to light his stub of cigarette before he spoke:

"I played into your hands when I let you go over there, and you knew I'd play into them when you proposed it. But that won't happen twice."

"I'll not allow any man to put a deliberately false construction on my motives, Reid," Mackenzie told him, hotly. "I didn't propose going over to let Dad off, and you know it. I wanted you to go."

"You knew I wouldn't," Reid returned, with surly word.

"If you've been leaving the sheep to go over there and lie on your belly like a snake behind a bush to spy on Joan and me, and I guess you've been doing it, all right--you're welcome to all you've found out. There aren't any secrets between Joan and me to keep from anybody's eyes or ears."

Reid jerked his thin mouth in expression of derision.

"She's green, she's as soft as cheese. Any man could kiss her--I could have done it fifteen minutes after I saw her the first time."

If Reid hoped to provoke a quarrel leading up to an excuse for making use of the gun for which his hand seemed to itch, he fell short of his calculations. Mackenzie only laughed, lightly, happily, in the way of a man who knew the world was his.

"You're a poor loser, Earl," he said.

"I'm not the loser yet--I'm only takin' up my hand to play. There won't be room on this range for you and me, Mackenzie, unless you step back in your schoolteacher's place, and lie down like a little lamb."

"It's a pretty big range," Mackenzie said, as if he considered it seriously; "I guess you can shift whenever the notion takes you. You might take a little vacation of about three years back in a

certain state concern in Nebraska."

"Let that drop--keep your hands off of that! You don't know anything about that little matter; that damned sheriff don't know anything about it. If Sullivan's satisfied to have me here and give me his girl, that's enough for you."

"You don't want Joan," said Mackenzie, speaking slowly, "you only want what's conditioned on taking her. So you'd just as well make a revision in your plans right now, Reid. You and Sullivan can get together on it and do what you please, but Joan must be left out of your calculations. I realize that I owe you a good deal, but I'm not going to turn Joan over to you to square the debt. You can have my money any day you want it--you can have my life if you ever have to draw on me that far--but you can't have Joan."

Mackenzie walked away from Reid at the conclusion of this speech, which was of unprecedented length for him, and of such earnestness that Reid was not likely to forget it soon, no matter for its length. The dogs left Reid to follow him.

That Reid had been fraternizing with Swan Carlson, Mackenzie felt certain, drinking the night out with him in his camp. Carlson had a notoriety for his addiction to drink, along with his other unsavory traits. With Reid going off in two different directions from him, Mackenzie saw trouble ahead between them growing fast. More than likely one of them would have to leave the range to avoid a clash at no distant day, for Reid was in an ugly mood. Loneliness, liquor, discontent, native meanness, and a desire to add to the fame in the sheep country that the killing of Matt Hall had brought him, would whirl the weak fellow to his destruction at no distant day.

Yet Reid had stood by him like a man in that fight with Matt Hall, when he could have sought safety in withdrawal and left him to his unhappy end. There was something coming to him on that account which a man could not repudiate or ignore. Whatever might rise between them, Mackenzie would owe his life to Reid. Given the opportunity, he stood ready and anxious to square the debt by a like service, and between men a thing like that could not be paid in any other way.

Reid remained a while sitting on the hilltop where Mackenzie had found him, face in his hands, as before. After a time he stretched out and went to sleep, the ardent sun of noonday frying the lees of Swan Carlson's whisky out of him. Toward three o'clock he roused, got his horse, saddled it, and rode away.

Mackenzie believed he was going to hunt more whisky, and went to the rise of a ridge to see what course he took. But instead of striking for Carlson's, Reid laid a course for Sullivan's ranch-house. Going to Tim with a complaint against him, Mackenzie judged, contempt for his smallness rising in him. Let him go.

Tim Sullivan might give him half his sheep if he liked him well enough, but he could not give him Joan.

CHAPTER XVII

HERTHA CARLSON

Swan Carlson or his woman was running a band of sheep very close to the border of Tim Sullivan's lease. All afternoon Mackenzie had heard the plaint of lambs; they had lifted their wavering chorus all during Joan's lesson, giving her great concern that Carlson designed attempting a trespass on her father's land.

Joan had come shortly after Reid's unexplained departure, and had gone back to her flock again uninformed of Reid's criminal career. Mackenzie felt that he did not need the record of his rival to hold Joan out of his hands. The world had changed around for him amazingly in the past few days. Where the sheeplands had promised little for him but a hard apprenticeship and doubtful rewards a little while ago, they now showered him with unexpected blessings.

He ruminated pleasantly on this sudden coming round the corner into the fields of romance as he went to the top of the hill at sunset to see what Swan Carlson was about. Over in the next valley there spread a handful of sheep, which the shepherd was ranging back to camp. Mackenzie could not make sure at that distance whether the keeper was woman or man.

Reid had not returned when Mackenzie plodded into camp at dusk. His absence was more welcome, in truth, than his company; Mackenzie hoped he would sulk a long time and stay away until he got his course in the sheep country plainly before his eyes. If he stayed his three years there it would be on account of sheep, and whatever he might win in his father's good graces by his fidelity. Joan was not to figure thenceforward in any of his schemes.

Three years on the sheep range with no prospect of Joan! That was what Reid had ahead of him now.

"I think I'd take mine in the pen," Mackenzie said, leaning back to comfort with his pipe. Night came down; the dogs lay at his feet, noses on forepaws. Below him the sheep were still. So, for a

long time, submerged in dreams.

One of the dogs lifted its head, its bristles rising, a low growl in its throat. The other rose cautiously, walking away crouching, with high-lifted feet. Mackenzie listened, catching no noise to account for their alarm. A little while, and the sound of Hertha Carlson's singing rose from the hill behind him, her song the same, the doleful quality of its air unmodified.

*Na-a-fer a-lo-o-one, na-a-fer a-lone,
He promise na-fer to leafe me,
Na-fer to leafe me a-lone!*

"Strange how she runs on that," Mackenzie muttered, listening for her to repeat, as he had heard her the night her singing guided him to her melancholy door. A little nearer now the song sounded, the notes broken as if the singer walked, stumbling at times, so much sadness in it, so much longing, such unutterable hopelessness as to wring the listener's heart.

Swan was beating her again, neglecting her, subjecting her to the cruelties of his savage mind; there was no need for the woman to come nearer to tell him that. Only grief for which there was no comfort, despair in which there was no hope, could tune a human note to that eloquent expression of pain. Perhaps she was wandering in the night now for the solace of weariness, pouring out the three lines of her song in what seemed the bitterness of accusation for a promise unfulfilled.

The dogs came back to Mackenzie's side, where they sat with ears lifted, but with no expression of hostility or alarm in their bearing now. They were only curious, as their master was curious, waiting to see if the wandering singer would come on into camp.

There was no glow of lantern to guide her, and no moon, but she came straight for where Mackenzie sat. A little way off she stopped.

"Hello!" she hailed, as if uncertain of her welcome.

Mackenzie requested her to come on, lighting the lantern which he had ready to hand. Mrs. Carlson hesitated, drawing back a little when she saw his face.

"I thought it was Earl," she said.

"Earl's not here tonight. Sit down and rest yourself, Mrs. Carlson. You don't remember me?"

"I remember. You are the man who cut my chain."

"I thought you'd forgotten me."

"No, I do not forget so soon. A long time I wanted to kill you for the blow you gave Swan that night."

"As long as Swan was good to you," said he, "of course you would. How do you feel about it now?"

"I only cry now because he did not die. He was different a little while after he got well, but again he forgets. He beats me; he leaves me alone with the sheep."

"I knew he was beating you again," Mackenzie nodded, confirming his speculation of a little while before.

"Sheep!" said she. "Swan thinks only of sheep; he is worse since he bought Hall's flock. It is more than I can endure!"

Mrs. Carlson was worried and worn, fast losing all she had gained in flesh and color during Swan's period of kindness when she had thrown herself into his wild ways and ridden the range like a fighting woman at his side. Much of her comeliness remained in her sad face and great, luminous, appealing eyes, for it was the comeliness of melancholy which sorrow and hard usage refined. She would carry her grace with her, and the pale shred of her youthful beauty, down to the last hard day. But it was something that Swan was insensible to; it could not soften his hand toward her, nor bend his wild thoughts to gentleness. Now he had denied her again the little share he had granted her in his wild life, and must break the thing he had made, going his morose way alone.

"I hadn't heard he'd bought Hall's sheep," Mackenzie said. "Is he going to run them on this range?"

"No, he says I shall go there, where the wolves are many and bold, even by daylight, to watch over them. There I would be more alone than here. I cannot go, I cannot go! Let him kill me, but I will not go!"

"He's got a right to hire a man to run them; he can afford it."

"His money grows like thistles. Where Swan touches the earth with the seed of it, money springs. Money is a disease that he spreads when he walks, like the scales that fall from a leper. Money! I pray God night and day that a plague will sweep away his flocks, that a thief will find his hiding place, that a fire will burn the bank that locks in his gold, and make him poor. Poor, he would be kind. A man's proud heart bends down when he is poor."

"God help you!" said Mackenzie, pitying her from the well of his tender heart.

"God is deaf; he cannot hear!" she said, bitter, hopeless, yet rebellious against the silence of heaven and earth that she could not penetrate with her lamentations and bring relief.

"No, you shouldn't let yourself believe any such thing," he chided, yet with a gentleness that

was almost an encouragement.

"This land is a vacuum, out of which sound cannot reach him, then," she sighed, bending her sad head upon her hands. "I have cried out to him in a sorrow that would move a stone on the mountain-side, but God has not heard. Yes, it must be that this land is a vacuum, such as I read of when I was a girl in school. Maybe--" looking up with eager hopefulness--"if I go out of it a little way, just on the edge of it and pray, God will be able to hear my voice?"

"Here, as well as anywhere," he said, moved by her strange fancy, by the hunger of her voice and face.

"Then it is because there is a curse on me--the curse of Swan's money, of his evil ways!" She sprang up, stretching her long arms wildly. "I will pray no more, no more!" she cried. "I will curse God, I will curse him as Job cursed him, and fling myself from the rocks and die!"

Mackenzie was on his feet beside her, his hand on her shoulder as if he would stay her mad intention.

"No, no!" he said, shocked by the boldness of her declaration. "Your troubles are hard enough to bear--don't thicken them with talk like this."

She looked at him blankly, as if she did not comprehend, as though her reason had spent itself in this rebellious outbreak against the unseen forces of her sad destiny.

"Where is your woman?" she asked.

"I haven't any woman."

"I thought she was your woman, but if she is not, Swan can have her. Swan can have her, then; I do not care now any more. Swan wants her, he speaks of her in the night. Maybe when he takes her he will set me free."

Mrs. Carlson sat again near the lantern, curling her legs beneath her with the facility of a dog, due to long usage of them in that manner, Mackenzie believed, when chained to the wall in her lonely house among the trees. Mackenzie stood a little while watching her as she sat, chin in her hands, pensive and sad. Presently he sat near her.

"Where is Swan tonight?" he asked.

"Drinking whisky beside the wagon with Hector Hall. They will not fight. No."

"No," he echoed, abstractedly, making a mental picture of Carlson and Hall beside the sheep-wagon, the light of a lantern on their faces, cards in their fists, a jug of whisky in the middle ground within reach from either hand. It was such diversion as Swan Carlson would enjoy, the night around him as black as the shadows of his own dead soul.

"Earl did not come to me this night," she said, complaining in sad note. "He promised he would come."

"Has he been going over there to see you?" Mackenzie asked, resentful of any advantage Reid might be seeking over this half-mad creature.

"He makes love to me when Swan is away," she said, nodding slowly, looking up with serious eyes. "But it is only false love; there is a lie in his eyes."

"You're right about that," Mackenzie said, letting go a sigh of relief.

"He tries to flatter me to tell him where Swan hides the money he brought from the bank," she said, slowly, wearily, "but him I do not trust. When I ask him to do what must first be done to make me free, he will not speak, but goes away, pale, pale, like a frightened girl."

"You'd better tell him to stay away," Mackenzie counseled, his voice stern and hard.

"But you would not do that," she continued, heedless of his admonition. She leaned toward him, her great eyes shining in the light, her face eager in its sorrowful comeliness; she put out her hand and touched his arm.

"You are a brave man, you would not turn white and go away into the night like a wolf to hear me speak of that. Hush! hush! No, no--there is no one to hear."

She looked round with fearful eyes, crouching closer to the ground, her breath drawn in long labor, her hand tightening on his arm. Mackenzie felt a shudder sweep coldly over him, moved by the tragedy her attitude suggested.

"Hush!" she whispered, hand to her mouth. And again, leaning and peering: "Hush!" She raised her face to him, a great eagerness in her burning eyes. "Kill him, kill Swan Carlson, kind young man, and set me free again! You have no woman? I will be your woman. Kill him, and take me away!"

"You don't have to kill Swan to get away from him," he told her, the tragedy dying out of the moment, leaving only pity in its place. "You can go on tonight--you never need to go back."

Hertha came nearer, scrambling to him with sudden movement on her knees, put her arm about his neck before he could read her intention or repel her, and whispered in his ear:

"I know where Swan hides the money--I can lead you to the place. Kill him, good man, and we will take it and go far away from this unhappy land. I will be your woman, faithful and true."

"I couldn't do that," he said gently, as if to humor her; "I couldn't leave my sheep."

"Sheep, sheep!" said she, bitterly. "It is all in the world men think of in this land--sheep! A

woman is nothing to them when there are sheep! Swan forgets, sheep make him forget. If he had no sheep, he would be a kind man to me again. Swan forgets, he forgets!"

She bent forward, looking at the lantern as if drawn by the blaze, her great eyes bright as a deer's when it stands fascinated by a torchlight a moment before bounding away.

"Swan forgets, Swan forgets!" she murmured, her staring eyes on the light. She rocked herself from side to side, and "Swan forgets, Swan forgets!" she murmured, like the burden of a lullaby.

"Where is your camp?" Mackenzie asked her, thinking he must take her home.

Hertha did not reply. For a long time she sat leaning, staring at the lantern. One of the dogs approached her, bristles raised in fear, creeping with stealthy movement, feet lifted high, stretched its neck to sniff her, fearfully, backed away, and composed itself to rest. But now and again it lifted its head to sniff the scent that came from this strange being, and which it could not analyze for good or ill. Mackenzie marked its troubled perplexity, almost as much at sea in his own reckoning of her as the dog.

"No, I could not show you the money and go away with you leaving Swan living behind," she said at last, as if she had decided it finally in her mind. "That I have told Earl Reid. Swan would follow me to the edge of the world; he would strangle my neck between his hands and throw me down dead at his feet."

"He'd have a right to if you did him that kind of a trick," Mackenzie said.

"Earl Reid comes with promises," she said, unmindful of Mackenzie; "he sits close by me in the dark, he holds me by the hand. But kiss me I will not permit; that yet belongs to Swan." She looked up, sweeping Mackenzie with her appealing eyes. "But if you would kill him, then my lips would be hot for your kiss, brave man--I would bend down and draw your soul into mine through a long, long kiss!"

"Hush!" Mackenzie commanded, sternly. "Such thoughts belong to Swan, as much as the other. Don't talk that way to me--I don't want to hear any more of it."

Hertha sat looking at him, that cast of dull hopelessness in her face again, the light dead in her eyes.

"There are strange noises that I hear in the night," she said, woefully; "there is a dead child that never drew breath pressed against my heart."

"You'd better go back to your wagon," he suggested, getting to his feet.

"There is no wagon, only a canvas spread over the brushes, where I lie like a wolf in a hollow. A beast I am become, among the beasts of the field!"

"Come--I'll go with you," he offered, holding out his hand to lift her.

She did not seem to notice him, but sat stroking her face as if to ease a pain out of it, or open the fount of her tears which much weeping must have drained long, long ago.

Mackenzie believed she was going insane, in the slow-preying, brooding way of those who are not strong enough to withstand the cruelties of silence and loneliness on the range.

"Where is your woman?" she asked again, lifting her face suddenly.

"I have no woman," he told her, gently, in great pity for her cruel burden under which she was so unmistakably breaking.

"I remember, you told me you had no woman. A man should have a woman; he goes crazy of the lonesomeness on the sheep range without a woman."

"Will Swan be over tomorrow?" Mackenzie asked, thinking to take her case up with the harsh and savage man and see if he could not be moved to sending her away.

"I do not know," she returned coldly, her manner changing like a capricious wind. She rose as she spoke, and walked away, disappearing almost at once in the darkness.

Mackenzie stood looking the way she went, listening for the sound of her going, but she passed so surely among the shrubs and over the uneven ground that no noise attended her. It was as though her failing mind had sharpened her with animal caution, or that instinct had come forward in her to take the place of wit, and serve as her protection against dangers which her faculties might no longer safeguard.

Even the dogs seemed to know of her affliction, as wild beasts are believed by some to know and accept on a common plane the demented among men. They knew at once that she was not going to harm the sheep. When she left camp they stretched themselves with contented sighs to their repose.

And that was "the lonesomeness" as they spoke of it there. A dreadful affliction, a corrosive poison that gnawed the heart hollow, for which there was no cure but comradeship or flight. Poor Hertha Carlson was denied both remedies; she would break in a little while now, and run mad over the hills, her beautiful hair streaming in the wind.

And Reid had it; already it had struck deep into his soul, turning him morose, wickedly vindictive, making him hungry with an unholy ambition to slay. Joan must have suffered from the same disorder. It was not so much a desire in her to see what lay beyond the blue curtain of the hills as a longing for companionship among them.

But Joan would put away her unrest; she had found a cure for the lonesomeness. Her last word

to him that day was that she did not want to leave the sheep range now; that she would stay while he remained, and fare as he fared.

Rachel must have suffered from the lonesomeness, ranging her sheep over the Mesopotamian plain; Jacob had it when he felt his heart dissolve in tears at the sight of his kinswoman beside the well of Haran. But Joan was safe from it now; its insidious poison would corrode in her heart no more.

Poor Hertha Carlson, deserving better than fate had given her with sheep-mad Swan! She could not reason without violence any longer, so often she had been subjected to its pain.

"It will be a thousand wonders if she doesn't kill him herself," Mackenzie said, sitting down with new thoughts.

The news of Swan's buying Hall out was important and unexpected. Free to leave the country now, Hall very likely would be coming over to balance accounts. There was his old score against Mackenzie for his humiliation at the hands of the apprentice shepherder, which doubtless had grown more bitter day by day; and there was his double account against Reid and Mackenzie for the loss of his sheep-killing brother. Mackenzie hoped that he would go away and let matters stand as they were.

And Swan. It had not been all a jest, then, when he proposed trading his woman for Mackenzie's. What a wild, irresponsible, sheep-mad man he was! But he hardly would attempt any violence toward Joan, even though he "spoke of her in the night."

From Carlson, Mackenzie's thoughts ran out after Reid. Contempt rose in him, and deepened as he thought of the mink-faced youth carrying his deceptive poison into the wild Norseman's camp. But insane as she was, racked by the lonesomeness to be away from that unkindly land, Hertha Carlson remained woman enough to set a barrier up that Reid, sneak that he was, could not cross.

What a condition she had made, indeed! Nothing would beguile her from it; only its fulfilment would bend her to yield to his importunities. It was a shocking mess that Reid had set for himself to drink some day, for Swan Carlson would come upon them in their hand-holding in his hour, as certainly as doom.

And there was the picture of the red-haired giant of the sheeplands and that flat-chested, sharp-faced youth drinking beside the sheep-wagon in the night. There was Swan, lofty, cold, unbending; there was Reid, the craft, the knowledge of the world's under places written on his brow, the deceit that he practiced against his host hidden away in his breast.

Mackenzie sighed, putting it from him like a nightmare that calls a man from his sleep by its false peril, wringing sweat from him in its agony. Let them bind in drink and sever in blood, for all that he cared. It was nothing to him, any way they might combine or clash. Joan was his; that was enough to fill his world.

CHAPTER XVIII

SWAN CARLSON'S DAY

Dad Frazer came over the hills next morning after the dew was gone. Mackenzie saw him from afar, and was interested to note that he was not alone. That is to say, not immediately accompanied by anybody, yet not alone for a country where a quarter of a mile between men is rather close company.

Somebody was coming on after the old shepherd, holding about the same distance behind him in spite of little dashes down slopes that Dad made when for a moment out of sight. Mackenzie's wonder over this peculiar behavior grew as the old man came near, and it was discovered to the eye that his persistent shadow was a woman.

Dad wasted neither words nor breath on his explanation when he came panting up the slope that brought him to the place where Mackenzie stood above his sheep.

"It's that dad-burned Rabbit!" he said.

There was something between vexation and respect in Dad's voice. He turned to look back as he spoke. Rabbit had mounted the hilltop just across the dip, where she stood looking over at her shifty-footed lord, two sheep-dogs at her side.

"How did she locate you?" Mackenzie inquired, not in the least displeased over this outreaching of justice after the fickle old man.

"She's been trailin' me four years!" Dad whispered, his respect for Rabbit's powers on the scent unmistakable.

"That's a long time to hold a cold trail. Rabbit must be some on the track!"

"You can't beat them Indians follerin' a man if they set their heads to it. Well, it's all off with the

widow-lady at Four Corners now--Rabbit's got me nailed. You see them sheep-dogs? Them dogs they'd jump me the minute Rabbit winked at 'em--they'd chaw me up like a couple of lions. She's raised 'em up to do it, dad-burn her! Had my old vest to learn 'em the scent."

"A man never ought to leave his old vest behind him when he runs away from his wife," said Mackenzie, soberly. "But it looks to me like a woman with the sticking qualities Rabbit's got isn't a bad one to stay married to. How in the world could a reservation squaw find her way around to follow you all this time?"

"She's educated, dang her; she went to the sisters' mission. She can read and write a sight better than me. She's too smart for a squaw, bust her greasy eyes! Yes, and I'll never dast to lay a hand on her with them dogs around. They'd chaw me up quicker'n a man could hang up his hat."

Rabbit composed herself after her patient but persistent way, sitting among the bushes with only her head showing, waiting for Dad's next move.

"You're married to her regularly, are you, Dad?"

"Priest marriage, dang it all!" said Dad, hopelessly.

"Then it *is* all off with the one-eyed widow."

"Yes, and them four thousand sheep, and that range all under fence, dang my melts!"

"What are you going to do about Rabbit?"

"It ain't what am I goin' to do about her, John, but what she's goin' to do about me. She'll never leave me out of her sight a minute as long as I live. I reckon I'll have to stay right here and run sheep for Tim, and that widow-lady wonderin' why I don't show up!"

"You might do worse, Dad."

"Yes, I reckon I might. Rabbit she's as good as any man on the range handlin' sheep, she can draw a man's pay wherever she goes. I guess I could put her to work, and that'd help some."

Dad brightened a bit at that prospect, and drew his breath with a new hope. Even with the widow gone from his calculations, the future didn't promise all loss.

"But I bet you I'll shoot them two dogs the first time I can draw a bead on 'em!" Dad declared.

"Maybe if you'll treat Rabbit the right way she'll sell them. Call her over, Dad; I'd like to get acquainted with her."

Dad beckoned with his hand, but Rabbit did not stir; waved his hat to emphasize his command; Rabbit remained quiet among the bushes, the top of her black head in plain view.

"She's afraid we've hatched up some kind of a trick between us to work off on her," said Dad.

"You can't blame her for being a little distrustful, Dad. But let her go; I'll meet her at your camp one of these days."

"Yes, you'll meet her over there, all right, for she's goin' to stick to me till I'm under ground. That's one time too many I married--just one time too many!"

"I suppose a man can overdo it; I've heard it said."

"If I hadn't 'a' left that blame vest!"

"Yes, that seems to be where you blundered. You'll know better next time, Dad."

"Yes, but there never will be no next time," Dad sighed.

"Have you seen Reid over your way this morning?"

"No, I ain't seen him. Is he still roamin' and restless?"

"He left yesterday; I thought he was going to the ranch."

"Didn't pass my way. That feller's off, I tell you, John; he's one of the kind that can't stand the lonesomeness. Leave him out here alone two months, and he'd put a bullet in his eye."

"It seems to me like it's a land of daftness," Mackenzie said.

"You'll find a good many cracked people all over the sheep country--I'm kind o' cracked myself. I must be, or I never would 'a' left that vest."

Dad took off his hat to smooth his sweeping curled locks, as white as shredded asbestos, and full of the same little gleams that mineral shows when a block of it from the mine is held in the sun. His beard was whitening over his face again, like a frost that defied the heat of day, easing its hollows and protuberances, easing some of the weakness that the barber's razor had laid so pitilessly bare. In a few days more he would appear himself again, and be ready for the sheep-shears in due time.

"I reckon I'll have to make the best of the place I'm in, but for a man of puncture, as the feller said, like I used to think I was, I sure did miscumbobble it when I married that educated squaw. No woman I ever was married to in my life ever had sense enough to track a man like that woman's follered me. She sure is a wonder on the scent."

Patiently Rabbit was sitting among the bushes, waiting the turn of events, not to be fooled again, not to be abandoned, if vigilance could insure her against such distress. Mackenzie's admiration for the woman grew with Dad's discomfiture over his plight. There was an added flavor of satisfaction for him in the old man's blighted career. Wise Rabbit, to have a priest

marriage, and wiser still to follow this old dodger of the sheeplands and bring him up with a short halter in the evening of his days.

"I'll go on back and look after them sheep," said Dad, with a certain sad inflection of resignation; "there's nothing else to *be* done. I was aimin' to serve notice on Tim to find another man in my place, but I might as well keep on. Well, I can set in the shade, anyhow, and let Rabbit do the work--her and them blame dogs."

Dad sighed. It helped a great deal to know that Rabbit could do the work. He looked long toward the spot where his unshaken wife kept her watch on him, but seemed to be looking over her head, perhaps trying to measure all he had lost by this coming between him and the one-eyed widow-lady of Four Corners.

"I wonder if I could git you to write a letter over to that widow and tell her I'm dead?" he asked.

"I'll do it if you want me to. But you're not dead yet, Dad--you may outlive Rabbit and marry the widow at last."

"I never was no lucky man," said Dad, smoothing his gleaming hair. "A man that's married and nailed down to one place is the same as dead; he might as well be in his grave. If I'd 'a' got that widow-lady I'd 'a' had the means and the money to go ridin' around and seein' the sights from the end of one of them cars with a brass fence around it. But I'm nailed down now, John; I'm cinched."

Dad was so melancholy over his situation that he went off without more words, a thing unheard of for him. He gave Rabbit a wide fairway as he passed. When he was a respectable distance ahead the squaw rose from her bush and followed, such determination in her silent movements as to make Dad's hope for future freedom hollow indeed. The old man was cinched at last; Mackenzie was glad that it was so.

The sound of Carlson's sheep was still near that morning, and coming nearer, as whoever attended them ranged them slowly along. Mackenzie went a little way across the hill in that direction, but could not see the shepherd, although the sheep were spread on the slope just before him. It was a small flock, numbering not above seven hundred. Mackenzie was puzzled why Swan wanted to employ his own or his wife's time in grazing so small a number, when four times as many could be handled as easily.

This question was to be answered for him very soon, and in a way which he never had imagined. Yet there was no foreboding of it in the calm noonday as he prepared his dinner in the shade of some welcome willows, the heat glimmering over the peaceful hills.

It was while Mackenzie sat dozing in the fringe of shade such as a hedge would cast at noonday that the snarl of fighting dogs brought him up to a realization of what was going forward among the sheep. His own flock had drifted like a slow cloud to the point of the long ridge, and there Swan Carlson's band had joined it. The two flocks were mingling now, and on the edge of the confused mass his own dogs and Carlson's were fighting.

Swan was not in sight; nobody seemed to be looking after the sheep; it appeared as if they had been left to drift as they might to this conjunction with Mackenzie's flock. Mackenzie believed Mrs. Carlson had abandoned her charge and fled Swan's cruelty, but he did not excuse himself for his own stupidity in allowing the flocks to come together as he ran to the place where his dogs and Carlson's fought.

The sheep were becoming more hopelessly mingled through this commotion on their flank. Mackenzie was beating the enraged dogs apart when Swan Carlson came running around the point of the hill.

Swan immediately took part in the mêlée of gnashing, rolling, rearing dogs, laying about among them with impartial hand, quickly subduing them to obedience. He stood looking stonily at Mackenzie, unmoved by anger, unflushed by exertion. In that way he stood silent a little while, his face untroubled by any passion that rolled in his breast.

"You're runnin' your sheep over on my grass--what?" said Swan.

"You're a mile over my range," Mackenzie accused.

"You've been crowdin' over on me for a month," Swan said, "and I didn't say nothing. But when a man tries to run his sheep over amongst mine and drive 'em off, I take a hand."

"If anybody's tryin' such a game as that, it's you," Mackenzie told him. "Get 'em out of here, and keep 'em out."

"I got fifteen hundred in that band--you'll have to help me cut 'em out," said Swan.

"You had about seven hundred," Mackenzie returned, dispassionately, although it broke on him suddenly what the big flockmaster was trying to put through.

Counting on Mackenzie's greenness, and perhaps on the simplicity of his nature as they had read it in the sheep country, Swan had prepared this trap days ahead. He had run a small band of the same breed as Sullivan's sheep--for that matter but one breed was extensively grown on the range--over to the border of Tim's lease with the intention of mingling them and driving home more than he had brought. Mackenzie never had heard of the trick being worked on a green herder, but he realized now how simply it could be done, opportunity such as this presenting.

But it was one thing to bring the sheep over and another thing to take them away. One thing

Mackenzie was sure of, and that was the judgment of his eyes in numbering sheep. That had been Dad Frazer's first lesson, and the old man had kept him at it until he could come within a few head among hundreds at a glance.

"I'll help you cut out as many as you had," Mackenzie said, running his eyes over the mingled flocks, "they're all alike, one as good as another, I guess. It looks like you got your stock from this ranch, anyhow, but you'll not take more than seven hundred this trip."

"My dogs can cut mine out, they know 'em by the smell," Swan said. "I had fifteen hundred, and I bet you I'll take fifteen hundred back."

The dogs had drawn off, each set behind their respective masters, panting, eyeing each other with hostility, one rising now and then with growls, threatening to open the battle again. The sheep drifted about in confusion, so thoroughly mingled now that it would be past human power to separate them again and apportion each respective head to its rightful owner.

"Seven hundred, at the outside," Mackenzie said again. "And keep them off of my grass when you get 'em."

Carlson stood where he had stopped, ten feet or more distant, his arms bare, shirt open on his breast in his way of picturesque freedom. Mackenzie waited for him to proceed in whatever way he had planned, knowing there could be no compromise, no settlement in peace. He would either have to yield entirely and allow Carlson to drive off seven or eight hundred of Sullivan's sheep, or fight. There didn't seem to be much question on how it would come out in the latter event, for Carlson was not armed, and Mackenzie's pistol was that moment under his hand.

"You got a gun on you," said Swan, in casual, disinterested tone. "I ain't got no gun on me, but I'm a better man without no gun than you are with one. I'm goin' to take my fifteen hundred sheep home with me, and you ain't man enough to stop me."

Carlson's two dogs were sitting close behind him, one of them a gaunt gray beast that seemed almost a purebred wolf. Its jaws were bloody from its late encounter; flecks of blood were on its gray coat. It sat panting and alert, indifferent to Mackenzie's presence, watching the sheep as if following its own with its savage eyes. Suddenly Carlson spoke an explosive word, clapping his great hands, stamping his foot toward Mackenzie.

Mackenzie fired as the wolf-dog sprang, staggering back from the weight of its lank body hurled against his breast, and fired again as he felt the beast's vile breath in his face as it snapped close to his throat.

Mackenzie emptied his pistol in quick, but what seemed ineffectual, shots at the other dog as it came leaping at Carlson's command. In an instant he was involved in a confusion of man and dog, the body of the wolfish collie impeding his feet as he fought.

Carlson and the other dog pressed the attack so quickly that Mackenzie had no time to slip even another cartridge into his weapon. Carlson laughed as he clasped him in his great arms, the dog clinging to Mackenzie's pistol hand, and in a desperate moment it was done. Mackenzie was lying on his back, the giant sheepman's knee in his chest.

Carlson did not speak after ordering the dog away. He held Mackenzie a little while, hand on his throat, knee on his chest, looking with unmoved features down into his eyes, as if he considered whether to make an end of him there or let him go his way in added humiliation and disgrace. Mackenzie lay still under Carlson's hand, trying to read his intention in his clear, ice-cold, expressionless eyes, watching for his moment to renew the fight which he must push under such hopeless disadvantage.

Swan's eyes betrayed nothing of his thoughts. They were as calm and untroubled as the sky, which Mackenzie thought, with a poignant sweep of transcendent fear for his life, he never had beheld so placid and beautiful as in that dreadful moment.

Carlson's huge fingers began to tighten in the grip of death; relax, tighten, each successive clutch growing longer, harder. The joy of his strength, the pleasure in the agony that spoke from his victim's face, gleamed for a moment in Carlson's eyes as he bent, gazing; then flickered like a light in the wind, and died.

Mackenzie's revolver lay not more than four feet from his hand. He gathered his strength for a struggle to writhe from under Carlson's pressing knee. Carlson, anticipating his intention, reached for the weapon and snatched it, laying hold of it by the barrel.

Mackenzie's unexpected renewal of the fight surprised Carlson into releasing his strangling hold. He rose to sitting posture, breast to breast with the fighting sheepman, whose great bulk towered above him, free breath in his nostrils, fresh hope in his heart. He fought desperately to come to his feet, Carlson sprawling over him, the pistol lifted high for a blow.

Mackenzie's hands were clutching Carlson's throat, he was on one knee, swaying the Norseman's body back in the strength of despair, when the heavens seemed to crash above him, the fragments of universal destruction burying him under their weight.

Mackenzie returned to conscious state in nausea and pain. Not on a surge, but slow-breaking, like the dawn, his senses came to him, assembling as dispersed birds assemble, with erratic excursions as if distrustful of the place where they desire to alight. Wherever the soul may go in such times of suspended animation, it comes back to its dwelling in trepidation and distrust, and with lingering at the door.

The first connected thought that Mackenzie enjoyed after coming out of his shock was that somebody was smoking near at hand; the next that the sun was in his eyes. But these were indifferent things, drowned in a flood of pain. He put them aside, not to grope after the cause of his discomfort, for that was apart from him entirely, but to lie, throbbing in every nerve, indifferent either to life or death.

Presently his timid life came back entirely, settling down in the old abode with a sigh. Then Mackenzie remembered the poised revolver in Swan Carlson's hand. He moved, struggling to rise, felt a sweep of sickness, a flood of pain, but came to a sitting posture in the way of a man fighting to life from beneath an avalanche. The sun was directly in his eyes, standing low above the hill. He shifted weakly to relieve its discomfort. Earl Reid was sitting near at hand, a few feet above him on the side of the hill.

Reid was smoking a cigarette, his hat pushed back, the shadows of his late discontent cleared out of his face. Below them the sheep were grazing. They were all there; Mackenzie had wit enough in him to see that they were all there.

Reid looked at him with a grin that seemed divided between amusement and scorn.

"I don't believe you're cut out for a sheepman, Mackenzie," he said.

"It begins to look like it," Mackenzie admitted. He was too sick to inquire into the matter of Reid's recovery of the sheep; the world tipped at the horizon, as it tips when one is sick at sea.

"Your hand's chewed up some, Mackenzie," Reid told him. "I think you'd better go to the ranch and have it looked after; you can take my horse."

Mackenzie was almost indifferent both to the information of his hurt and the offer for its relief. He lifted his right hand to look at it, and in glancing down saw his revolver in the holster at his side. This was of more importance to him for the moment than his injury. Swan Carlson was swinging that revolver to strike him when he saw it last. How did it get back there in his holster? Where was Carlson; what had happened to him? Mackenzie looked at Reid as for an explanation.

"He batted you over the head with your gun--I guess he used your gun, I found it out there by you," said Reid, still grinning as if he could see the point of humor in it that Mackenzie could not be expected to enjoy.

Mackenzie did not attempt a reply. He looked with a sort of impersonal curiosity at his hand and forearm, where the dog had bitten him in several places. That had happened a good while ago, he reasoned; the blood had dried, the marks of the dog's teeth were bruised-looking around the edges.

And the sheep were all there, and Reid was laughing at him in satisfaction of his disgrace. There was no sound of Swan Carlson's flock, no sight of the sheepman. Reid had come and untangled what Mackenzie had failed to prevent, and was sitting there, unruffled and undisturbed, enjoying already the satisfaction of his added distinction.

Perhaps Reid had saved his life from Carlson's hands, as he had saved it from Matt Hall's. His debt to Reid was mounting with mocking swiftness. As if in scorn of his unfitness, Reid had picked up his gun and put it back in its sheath.

What would Joan say about this affair? What would Tim Sullivan's verdict be? He had not come off even second best, as in the encounter with Matt Hall, but defeated, disgraced. And he would have been robbed in open day, like a baby, if it hadn't been for Reid's interference. Mackenzie began to think with Dad Frazer that he was not a lucky man.

Too simple and too easy, too trusting and too slow, as they thought of him in the sheep country. A sort of kindly indictment it was, but more humiliating because it seemed true. No, he was not cut out for a sheepman, indeed, nor for anything but that calm and placid woman's work in the schoolroom, it seemed.

Mackenzie looked again at his hand. There was no pain in it, but its appearance was sufficient to alarm a man in a normal state of reasonableness. He had the passing thought that it ought to be attended to, and got up on weaving legs. He might wash it in the creek, he considered, and so take out the rough of whatever infection the dog's teeth had driven into his flesh, but dismissed the notion at once as altogether foolish. It needed bichloride of mercury, and it was unlikely there was such a thing within a hundred and fifty miles.

As he argued this matter of antiseptics with himself Mackenzie walked away from the spot where Reid remained seated, going aimlessly, quite unconscious of his act. Only when he found himself some distance away he stopped, considering what to do. His thoughts ran in fragments and flashes, broken by the throbbing of his shocked brain, yet he knew that Reid had offered to do something for him which he could not accept.

No, he could not place himself under additional obligation to Reid. Live or die, fail or succeed, Reid should not be called upon again to offer a supporting hand. He could sit there on the hillside and grin about this encounter with Carlson, and grin about the hurt in Mackenzie's hand and arm, and the blinding pain in his head. Let him grin in his high satisfaction of having turned another favor to Mackenzie's account; let him grin until his face froze in a grin--he should not have Joan.

Mackenzie went stumbling on again to the tune of that declaration. Reid should not have Joan, he shouldn't have Joan, shouldn't have Joan! Blind from pain, sick, dizzy, the earth rising up before him as he walked, Mackenzie went on. He did not look back to see if Reid came to help him; he would have resented it if he had come, and cursed him and driven him away. For he should not have Joan; not have Joan; Joan, Joan, Joan!

How he found his way to Dad Frazer's camp Mackenzie never could tell. It was long past dark when he stumbled to the sheep-wagon wherein the old herder and his squaw lay asleep, arriving without alarm of dogs, his own collies at his heels. It was the sharp-eared Indian woman who heard him, and knew by his faltering step that it was somebody in distress. She ran out and caught him as he fell.

CHAPTER XX

A MILLION GALLOPS OFF

Joan was returning to camp, weighed down by a somber cloud. Dad Frazer had carried word to her early that morning of Mackenzie's condition, the old man divided in his opinion as to whether man or beast had mauled the shepherd and left him in such melancholy plight.

"Both man and beast," Rabbit had told Joan, having no division of mind in the case at all. And so Joan believed it to be, also, after sitting for hours in the hot sheep-wagon beside the mangled, unconscious schoolmaster, who did not move in pain, nor murmur in delirium, nor drop one word from his clenched, still lips to tell whose hand had inflicted this terrible punishment.

And the range seemed bent on making a secret of it, also. Dad had gone hot-foot on Joan's horse to seek Earl Reid and learn the truth of it, only to ride in vain over the range where Mackenzie's flock grazed. Reid was not in camp; the sheep were running unshepherded upon the hills. Now, Joan, heading back to her camp at dusk of the longest, heaviest, darkest day she ever had known, met Reid as she rode away from Dad Frazer's wagon, and started out of her brooding to hasten forward and question him.

"How did it happen--who did it?" she inquired, riding up breathlessly where Reid lounged on his horse at the top of the hill waiting for her to come to him.

"Happen? What happen?" said Reid, affecting surprise.

"Mr. Mackenzie--surely you must know something about it--he's nearly killed!"

"Oh, Mackenzie." Reid spoke indifferently, tossing away his cigarette, laughing a little as he shaped the shepherd's name. "Mackenzie had a little trouble with Swan Carlson, but this time he didn't land his lucky blow."

"I thought you knew all about it," Joan said, sweeping him a scornful, accusing look. "I had you sized up about that way!"

"Sure, I know all about it, Joan," Reid said, but with a gentle sadness in his soft voice that seemed to express his pity for the unlucky man. "I happened to be away when it started, but I got there--well, I got there, anyhow."

Joan's eyes were still severe, but a question grew in them as she faced him, looking at him searchingly, as if to read what it was he hid.

"Where have you been all day? Dad's been looking high and low for you."

"I guess I was over at Carlson's when the old snoozer came," Reid told her, easy and careless, confident and open, in his manner.

"Carlson's? What business could you---"

"Didn't he tell you about it, Joan?"

"Who, Dad?"

"Mackenzie."

"He hasn't spoken since he stumbled into Dad's camp last night. He's going to die!"

"Oh, not that bad, Joan?" Reid jerked his horse about with quick hand as he spoke, making as if to start down at once to the camp where the wounded schoolmaster lay. "Why, he walked off yesterday afternoon like he wasn't hurt much. Unconscious?"

Joan nodded, a feeling in her throat as if she choked on cold tears.

"I didn't think he got much of a jolt when Swan took his gun away from him and soaked him over the head with it," said Reid, regretfully.

"You were there, and you let him do it!" Joan felt that she disparaged Mackenzie with the accusation as soon as the hasty words fell from her tongue, but biting the lips would not bring them back.

"He needs *somebody* around with him, but I can't be right beside him all the time, Joan."

"Oh, I don't mean--I didn't--I guess he's able to take care of himself if they give him a show. If you saw it, you can tell me how it happened."

"I'll ride along with you," Reid offered; "I can't do him any good by going down to see him. Anybody gone for a doctor?"

"Rabbit's the only doctor. I suppose she can do him as much good as anybody--he'll die, anyhow."

"He's not cut out for a sheepman," said Reid, ruminatively, shaking his head in depreciation.

"I should *hope* not!" said Joan, expressing in the emphasis, as well as in the look of superior scorn that she gave him, the difference that she felt lay between Mackenzie and a clod who might qualify for a sheepman and no questions asked.

"I'll ride on over to camp with you," Reid proposed again, facing his horse to accompany her.

"No, you mustn't leave the sheep alone at night--it's bad enough to do it in the day. What was the trouble between him and Swan--who started it?"

"Some of Swan's sheep got over with ours--I don't know how it happened, or whose fault it was. I'd been skirmishin' around a little, gettin' the lay of the country mapped out in my mind. Swan and Mackenzie were mixin' it up when I got there."

"Carlson set his dogs on him!" Joan's voice trembled with her high scorn of such unmanly dealing, such unworthy help.

"He must have; one of the dogs was shot, and I noticed Mackenzie's hand was chewed up a little. They were scuffling to get hold of Mackenzie's gun when I got there--he'd dropped it, why, you can search me! Swan got it. He hit him once with it before I could--oh well, I guess it don't make any difference, Mackenzie wouldn't thank me for it. He's a surly devil!"

Joan touched his arm, as if to call him from his abstraction, leaning to reach him, her face eager.

"You stopped Swan, you took the gun away from him, didn't you, Earl?"

"He's welcome to it--I owed him something."

Joan drew a deep breath, which seemed to reach her stifling soul and revive it; a softness came into her face, a light of appreciative thankfulness into her eyes. She reined closer to Reid, eager now to hear the rest of the melancholy story.

"You took the gun away from Swan; I saw it in his scabbard down there. Did you have to--did you have to--do anything to Carlson, Earl?"

Reid laughed, shortly, harshly, a sound so old to come from young lips. He did not meet Joan's eager eyes, but sat straight, head up, looking off over the darkening hills.

"No, I didn't do anything to him--more than jam my gun in his neck. He got away with thirty sheep more than belonged to him, though--I found it out when I counted ours. I guess I was over there after them when Dad was lookin' for me today."

"You brought them back?" Joan leaned again, her hand on his arm, where it remained a little spell, as she looked her admiration into his face.

"Nothing to it," said Reid, modestly, laughing again in his grating harsh way of vast experience, and scorn for the things which move the heart.

"It's a good deal, I think," said she. "But," thoughtfully, "I don't see what made him drop his gun."

"You can search me," said Reid, in his careless, unsympathetic way.

"It might have happened to anybody, though, a dog and a man against him."

"Yes, even a better man."

"A better man don't live," said Joan, with calm decision.

Reid bent his eyes to the pommel of his saddle, and sat so a few moments, in the way of a man who turns something in his thoughts. Then:

"I guess I'll go on back to the sheep."

"He may never get well to thank you for what you did, Earl," and Joan's voice threatened tears in its low, earnest tremolo, "but I--"

"Oh, that's all right, Joan." Reid waved gratitude, especially vicarious gratitude, aside, smiling lightly. "He's not booked to go yet; wait till he's well and let him do his own talking. Somebody ought to sneak that gun away from him, though, and slip a twenty-two in his scabbard. They can't hurt him so bad with that when they take it away from him."

"It might have happened to you!" she reproached.

"Well, it might," Reid allowed, after some reflection. "Sure, it might," brightening, looking at her frankly, his ingenuous smile softening the crafty lines of his thin face. "Well, leave him to Rabbit and Dad; they'll fix him up."

"If he isn't better tomorrow I'm going for a doctor, if nobody else will."

"You're not goin' to hang around there all the time, are you, Joan?"

Reid's face flushed as he spoke, his eyes made small, as if he looked in at a furnace door.

Joan did not answer this, only lifted her face with a quick start, looking at him with brows lifted, widening her great, luminous, tender eyes. Reid stroked her horse's mane, his stirrup close to her foot, his look downcast, as if ashamed of the jealousy he had betrayed.

"I don't mind the lessons, and that kind of stuff," said he, looking up suddenly, "but I don't want the girl--oh well, you know as well as I do what kind of a deal the old folks have fixed up for you and me, Joan."

"Of course. I'm going to marry you to save you from work."

"I thought it was a raw deal when they sprung it on me, but that was before I saw you, Joan. But it's all right; I'm for it now."

"You're easy, Earl; dad's workin' you for three good years without pay. As far as I'm concerned, you'd just as well hit the breeze out of this country right now. Dad can't deliver the goods."

"I'm soft, but I'm not that soft, Joan. I could leave here tomorrow; what's to hold me? And as far as the old man's cutting me out of his will goes, I could beat it in law, and then have a pile big enough left to break my neck if I was to jump off the top of it. They're not putting anything over on me, Joan. I'm sticking to this little old range because it suits me to stick. I would go tomorrow if it wasn't for you."

Reid added this in a low voice, his words a sigh, doing it well, even convincingly well.

"I'm sorry," Joan said, moved by his apparent sincerity, "but there's not a bit of use in your throwing away three years, or even three more months, of your life here, Earl."

"You'll like me better when you begin to know me, Joan. I've stood off because I didn't want to interfere with your studies, but maybe now, since you've got a vacation, I can come over once in a while and get acquainted."

"Earl, it wouldn't be a bit of use." Joan spoke earnestly, pitying him a little, now that she began to believe him.

"Why, we're already engaged," he said; "they've disposed of us like they do princes and princesses."

"I don't know how they marry them off, but if that's the way, it won't work on the sheep range," said Joan.

"We've been engaged, officially, ever since I struck the range, and I've never once, never even--" He hesitated, constrained by bashfulness, it seemed, from his manner of bending his head and plucking at her horse's mane.

"We're not even officially engaged," she denied, coldly, not pitying his bashfulness at all, nor bent to assist him in delivering what lay on the end of his tongue. "You can't pick up a sheepwoman and marry her off--like some old fool king's daughter."

Reid placed his hand over hers where it lay idly on the saddle-horn, the reins loosely held. He leaned closer, his eyes burning, his face near her own, so near that she shrank back, and drew on her hand to come free.

"I don't see why we need to wait three years to get married, Joan," he argued, his persuasive voice very soft and tender. "If the old man saw I meant business--"

"Business!" scorned Joan.

"Sheep business, I mean, Joan," chidingly, a tincture of injury in his tone.

"Oh, sheep business," said Joan, leaning far over to look at the knotting of her cinch.

"Sure, to settle down to it here and take it as it comes, the way he got his start, he'd come across with all the money we'd want to take a run out of here once in a while and light things up. We ought to be gettin' the good out of it while we've got an edge on us, Joan."

Joan swung to the ground, threw a stirrup across the saddle, and began to tighten her cinch. Reid alighted with a word of protest, offering his hand for the work. Joan ignored his proffer, with a little independent, altogether scornful, toss of the head.

"You can find plenty of them ready to take you up," she said. "What's the reason you have to stay right here for three years, and then marry me, to make a million dollars? Can't you go anywhere else?"

"The old man's picked on this country because he knows your dad, and he settled on you for the girl because you got into his eye, just the way you've got into mine, Joan. I was sore enough about it at first to throw the money and all that went with it to the pigs, and blow out of here. But that was before I saw you."

"Oh!" said Joan, in her pettish, discounting way.

"I mean every word of it, Joan. I can't talk like--like--some men--my heart gets in the way, I

guess, and chokes me off. But I never saw a girl that I ever lost sleep over till I saw you."

Joan did not look at him as he drew nearer with his words. She pulled the stirrup down, lifted her foot to it, and stood so a second, hand on the pommel to mount. And so she glanced round at him, standing near her shoulder, his face flushed, a brightness in his eyes.

Quicker than thought Reid threw his arm about her shoulders, drawing her to him, his hot cheek against her own, his hot breath on her lips. Surging with indignation of the mean advantage he had taken of her, Joan freed her foot from the stirrup, twisting away from the impending salute, her hand to Reid's shoulder in a shove that sent him back staggering.

"I thought you were more of a man than that!" she said.

"I beg your pardon, Joan; it rushed over me--I couldn't help it." Reid's voice shook as he spoke; he stood with downcast eyes, the expression of contrition.

"You're too fresh to keep!" Joan said, brushing her face savagely with her hand where his cheek had pressed it for a breath.

"I'll ask you next time," he promised, looking up between what seemed hope and contrition. But there was a mocking light in his sophisticated face, a greedy sneer in his lustful eyes, which Joan could feel and see, although she could not read to the last shameful depths.

"Don't try it any more," she warned, in the cool, even voice of one sure of herself.

"I ought to have a right to kiss my future wife," he defended, a shadow of a smile on his thin lips.

"There's not a bit of use to go on harping on that, Earl," she said, in a way of friendly counsel, the incident already past and trampled under foot, it seemed. "If you want to stay here and work for dad, three years or thirty years, I don't care, but don't count on me. I guess if you go straight and prove you deserve it, you'll not need any girl to help you get the money."

"It's got to be you--nobody else, Joan."

"Then kiss your old million--or whatever it is--good-bye!"

Joan lifted to the saddle as if swept into it by a wave, and drew her reins tight, and galloped away.

CHAPTER XXI

TIM SULLIVAN BREAKS A CONTRACT

"And that will be the end of it," said Tim Sullivan, finality in his tone, his face stern, his manner severe. "I've passed my word to old Malcolm that you'll have his boy, and have him you will."

"Boy!" said Joan.

"In experience he's no lad, and I'm glad you've discovered it," said Tim, warming a little, speaking with more softness, not without admiration for her penetration. "He'll be the better able to look after you, and see they don't get his money away from him like some simpleton."

"Oh, they'll get it, all right."

Tim had arrived that morning from a near-by camp as Joan was about to set out for Dad Frazer's. From his way of plunging abruptly into this matter, which he never had discussed with her before, and his sharpness and apparent displeasure with her, Joan knew that he had seen Reid overnight. They were beside the sheep-wagon, to a wheel of which Joan's horse was tied, all saddled and ready to mount. The sun was already high, for Joan had helped Charley range the flock out for its day's grazing, and had put all things to rights in the camp, anxious as her mind was over Mackenzie's state.

"I'll not have you treat the lad like a beggar come to ask of you, Joan; I'll not have it at all. Be civil with him; use him kindly when he speaks."

"He's a thousand years older than I am; he knows things that you never heard of."

"Somebody's been whisperin' slanders of him in your ear. He's a fine lad, able to hold his own among men, take 'em where they're found. Don't you heed what the jealous say about the boy, Joan; don't you let it move you at all."

"I wouldn't have him if he brought his million in a wheelbarrow and dumped it at my feet."

"It's not a million, as I hear it," Tim corrected, mildly, even a bit thoughtfully, "not more nor a half."

"Then he's only half as desirable," smiled Joan, the little gleam of humor striking into her gloomy hour like a sudden ray of sun.

"You'd run sheep till you was bent and gray, and the rheumatiz' got set in your j'int's, me gerrel, before you'd win to the half of half a million. Here it comes to you while you're young, with the

keenness to relish it and the free hand to spend the interest off of it, and sail over the seas and see the world you're longin' to know and understand."

Joan's hat hung on the saddle-horn, the morning wind was trifling with light breath in her soft, wave-rippled hair. Her brilliant necktie had been put aside for one of narrower span and more sober hue, a blue with white dots. The free ends of it blew round to her shoulder, where they lay a moment before fluttering off to brush her cheek, as if to draw by this slight friction some of the color back into it that this troubled interview had drained away.

She stood with her head high, her chin lifted, determination in her eyes. Thorned shrubs and stones had left their marks on her strong boots, the little teeth of the range had frayed the hem of her short cloth skirt, but she was as fresh to see as a morning-glory in the sun. Defiance outweighed the old cast of melancholy that clouded her eyes; her lips were fixed in an expression which was denial in itself as she stood looking into the wind, her little brown hands clenched at her sides.

"I want that you should marry him, as I have arranged it with old Malcolm," said Tim, speaking slowly to give it greater weight. "I have passed my word; let that be the end."

"I've got a right to have a word, too. Nobody else is as much concerned in it as me, Dad. You can't put a girl up and sell her like a sheep."

"It's no sale; it's yourself that comes into the handlin' of the money."

Tim took her up quickly on it, a gleam in his calculative eye, as if he saw a convincing way opening ahead of him.

"I couldn't do it, Dad, as far as I'd go to please you; I couldn't--never in this world! There's something about him--something---

"It'll wear off; 'tis the strangeness of him, but three years will bring him closer; it will wear away."

"It'll never wear away, because he isn't--he isn't *clean!*"

"Clean?" Tim repeated, turning in amazement as if to seek a witness to such a preposterous charge. And again: "Clean? He's as fresh as a daisy, as clean as a lamb."

"It's the way he seems to me," she insisted, with conviction that no argument would shake. "I don't know any other name for it--you can see it in his eyes."

"Three year here will brace him up, Joan; he'll come to you as fresh as lumber out of the mill."

"No, all the wind in the world can't blow it out of him. I can't do it, I'll never do it!"

"And me with my word passed to old Malcolm!" Tim seemed to grieve over it, and the strong possibility of its repudiation; his face fell so long, his voice so accusing, so low and sad.

"You'll not lose any money; you can square it up with him some way, Dad."

"You've been the example of a dutiful child to me," Tim said, turning to her, spreading his hands, the oil of blarney in his voice. "You've took the work of a man off of my hands since you were twelve year old, Joan."

"Yes, I have," Joan nodded, a shading of sadness for the lost years of her girlhood in her tone. She did not turn to face him, her head high that way, her chin up, her nose in the wind as if her assurance lay in its warm scents, and her courage came on its caress.

"You've been the gerrel that's gone out in the storm and the bitter blast to save the sheep, and stood by them when their poor souls shook with the fright, and soothed down their panic and saved their lives. You've been the gerrel that's worked the sheep over this range in rain and shine, askin' me nothing, not a whimper or a complaint out of ye--that's what you've been to me, Joan. It's been a hard life for a lass, it's been a hard and a lonesome life."

Joan nodded, her head drooping just a little from its proud lift. Tears were on her face; she turned it a bit to hide them from his eyes.

"You mind the time, Joan, four years ago it was the winter past, when you stood a full head shorter than you stand today, when the range was snowed in, and the sheep was unable to break the crust that froze over it, and was huddlin' in the cañons starvin' wi' the hunger that we couldn't ease? Heh--ye mind that winter, Joan, gerrel?"

Joan nodded again, her chin trembling as it dropped nearer to the fluttering necktie at her warm, round throat. And the tears were coursing hotter, the well of them open, the stone at the mouth of it rolled away, the recollection of those harsh days almost too hard to bear.

"And you mind how you read in the book from the farmer college how a handful of corn a day would save the life of a sheep, and tide it over the time of stress and storm till it could find the grass in under the snow? Ah-h, ye mind how you read it, Joan, and come ridin' to tell me? And how you took the wagons and the teams and drove that bitter length in wind and snow to old Wellfleet's place down on the river, and brought corn that saved to me the lives of no less than twenty thousand sheep? It's not you and me, that's gone through these things side by side, that forgets them in the fair days, Joan, my little darlin' gerrel. Them was hard days, and you didn't desert me and leave me to go alone."

Joan shook her head, the sob that she had been smothering breaking from her in a sharp, riving cry. Tim, feeling that he had softened her, perhaps, laid his hand on her shoulder, and felt her body trembling under the emotion that his slow recital of past hardships had stirred.

"It'll not be that you'll leave me in a hole now, Joan," he coaxed, stroking her hair back from her forehead, his touch gentle as his heart could be when interest bent it so.

"I gave you that--all those years that other girls have to themselves, I mean, and all that work that made me coarse and rough and kept me down in ignorance--I gave you out of my youth till the well of my giving has gone dry. I can't give what you ask today, Dad; I can't give you that."

"Now, Joan, take it easy a bit, draw your breath on it, take it easy, gerrel."

Joan's chin was up again, the tremor gone out of it, the shudder of sorrow for the lost years stilled in her beautiful, strong body. Her voice was steady when she spoke:

"I'll go on working, share and share alike with you, like I'm doing now, or no share, no nothing, if you want me to, if you need me to, but I can't--I can't!"

"I was a hard master over you, my little Joan," said Tim, gently, as if torn by the thorn of regret for his past blindness.

"You were, but you didn't mean to be. I don't mind it now, I'm still young enough to catch up on what I missed--I *am* catching up on it, every day."

"But now when it comes in my way to right it, to make all your life easy to you, Joan, you put your back up like a catamount and tear at the eyes of me like you'd put them out."

"It wouldn't be that way, Dad--can't you see I don't care for him? If I cared, he wouldn't have to have any money, and you wouldn't have to argue with me, to make me marry him."

"It's that stubborn you are!" said Tim, his softness freezing over in a breath.

"Let's not talk about it, Dad," she pleaded, turning to him, the tears undried on her cheeks, the sorrow of the years he had made slow and heavy for her in her eyes.

"It must be talked about, it must be settled, now and for good, Joan. I have plans for you, I have great plans, Joan."

"I don't want to change it now, I'm satisfied with the arrangement we've made on the sheep, Dad. Let me go on like I have been, studying my lessons and looking after the sheep with Charley. I'm satisfied the way it is."

"I've planned better things for you, Joan, better from this day forward, and more to your heart. Mackenzie is all well enough for teachin' a little school of childer, but he's not deep enough to be over the likes of you, Joan. I'm thinkin' I'll send you to Cheyenne to the sisters' college at the openin' of the term; very soon now, you'll be makin' ready for leavin' at once."

"I don't want to go," said Joan, coldly.

"There you'd be taught the true speech of a lady, and the twist of the tongue on French, and the nice little things you've missed here among the sheep, Joan darlin', and that neither me nor your mother nor John Mackenzie--good lad that he is, though mistaken at times, woeful mistaken in his judgment of men--can't give you, gerrel."

"No, I'll stay here and work my way out with the sheep," said she.

Tim was standing at her side, a bit behind her, and she turned a little more as she denied him, her head so high she might have been listening to the stars. He looked at her with a deep flush coming into his brown face, a frown narrowing his shrewd eyes.

"Ain't you that stubborn, now!" he said.

"Yes, I am," said Joan.

"Then," said Tim, firing up, the ashes of deceit blowing from the fire of his purpose at once, "you'll take what I offer or leave what you've got! I'll have no more shyin' and shillyin' out of you, and me with my word passed to old Malcolm Reid."

Joan wheeled round, her face white, fright in her eyes.

"You mean the sheep?" she asked.

"I mean the sheep--just that an' no less. Do as I'll have you do, and go on to school to be put in polish for the wife of a gentleman, or give up the flock and the interest I allowed you in the increase, and go home and scrape the pots and pans!"

"You'd never do that, Dad--you'd never break your word with me, after all I've gone through for you, and take my lambs away from me!"

"I would, just so," said Tim. But he did not have the courage to look her in the face as he said it, turning away like a stubborn man who had no cause beneath his feet, but who meant to be stubborn and unjust against it all.

"I don't believe it!" she said.

"I will so, Joan."

"Your word to Malcolm Reid means a whole lot to you, but your word to me means nothing!" Joan spoke in bitterness, her voice vibrating with passion.

"It isn't the same," he defended weakly.

"No, you can rob your daughter--"

"Silence! I'll not have it!" Tim could look at her now, having a reason, as he saw it. There was a solid footing to his pretense at last.

"It's a cheap way to get a thousand lambs," said she.

"Then I've got 'em cheap!" said Tim, red in his fury. "You'll flout me and mock me and throw my offers for your good in my face, and speak disrespectful---"

"I spoke the truth, no word but the---"

"I'll have no more out o' ye! It's home you go, and it's there you'll stay till you can trim your tongue and bend your mind to obey my word!"

"You've got no right to take my sheep; you went into a contract with me, you ought to respect it as much as your word to anybody!"

"You have no sheep, you had none. Home you'll go, this minute, and leave the sheep."

"I hope they'll die, every one of them!"

"Silence, ye! Get on that horse and go home, and I'll be there after you to tend to your case, my lady! I'll have none of this chargin' me to thievery out of the mouth of one of my childer--I'll have none of it!"

"Maybe you've got a better name for it--you and old man Reid!" Joan scorned, her face still white with the cold, deep anger of her wrong.

"I'll tame you, or I'll break your heart!" said Tim, doubly angry because the charge she made struck deep. He glowered at her, mumbling and growling as if considering immediate chastisement.

Joan said no more, but her hand trembled, her limbs were weak under her weight with the collapse of all her hopes, as she untied and mounted her horse. The ruin of her foundations left her in a daze, to which the surging, throbbing of a sense of deep, humiliating, shameful wrong, added the obscuration of senses, the confusion of understanding. She rode to the top of the hill, and there the recollection of Mackenzie came to her like the sharp concern for a treasure left behind.

She reined in after crossing the hilltop, and debated a little while on what course to pursue. But only for a little while. Always she had obeyed her father, under injunctions feeling and unfeeling, just and unjust. He was not watching to see that she obeyed him now, knowing well that she would do as he had commanded.

With bent head, this first trouble and sorrow of her life upon her, and with the full understanding in her heart that all which had passed before this day was nothing but the skimming of light shadows across her way, Joan rode homeward. A mile, and the drooping shoulders stiffened; the bent head lifted; Joan looked about her at the sun making the sheeplands glad. A mile, and the short breath of anger died out of her panting lungs, the long, deep inspiration of restored balance in its place; the pale shade left her cold cheeks, where the warm blood came again.

Joan, drawing new hope from the thoughts which came winging to her, looked abroad over the sunlit sheeplands, and smiled.

CHAPTER XXII

PHANTOMS OF FEVER

"That was ten or twelve days ago," Dad explained, when Mackenzie found himself blinking understandingly at the sunlight through the open end of the sheep-wagon one morning. "You was chawed and beat up till you was hangin' together by threads."

Mackenzie was as weak as a young mouse. He closed his eyes and lay thinking back over those days of delirium through which a gleam of understanding fell only once in a while. Dad evidently believed that he was well now, from his manner and speech, although Mackenzie knew that if his life depended on rising and walking from the wagon he would not be able to redeem it at the price.

"I seem to remember a woman around me a good deal," he said, not trusting himself to look at Dad. "It wasn't--was it---?"

Mackenzie felt his face flush, and cursed his weakness, but he could not pronounce the name that filled his heart.

"Yes, it was Rabbit," said Dad, catching him up without the slightest understanding of his stammering. "She's been stickin' to you night and day. I tell you, John, them Indians can't be beat doctorin' a man up when he's been chawed up by a animal."

"I want to thank her," Mackenzie said, feeling his heart swing very low indeed.

"You won't see much of her now since you've come to your head, I reckon she'll be passin' you over to me to look after. She's shy that way. Yes, sir, any time I git bit up by man or beast, or

shot up or knifed, I'll take Rabbit ahead of any doctor you can find. Them Indians they know the secrets of it. I wouldn't be afraid to stand and let a rattlesnake bite me till it fainted if Rabbit was around. She can cure it."

But Mackenzie knew from the odor of his bandages that Rabbit was not depending on her Indian knowledge in his case, or not entirely so. There was the odor of carbolic acid, and he was conscious all along that his head had been shaved around the wound in approved surgical fashion. He reasoned that Rabbit went about prepared with the emergency remedies of civilization, and put it down to her schooling at the Catholic sisters' hands.

"Was there anybody--did anybody else come around?" Mackenzie inquired.

"Tim's been by a couple of times. Oh, well--Joan."

"Oh, Joan," said Mackenzie, trying to make it sound as if he had no concern in Joan at all. But his voice trembled, and life came bounding up in him again with glad, wild spring.

"She was over the day after you got hurt, but she ain't been back," said Dad, with such indifference that he must have taken it for granted that Mackenzie held no tenderness for her, indeed. "I met Charley yesterday; he told me Joan was over home. Mary's out here with him--she's the next one to Joan, you know."

Mackenzie's day clouded; his sickness fell over him again, taking the faint new savor out of life. Joan was indifferent; she did not care. Then hope came on its white wings to excuse her.

"Is she sick?" he inquired.

"Who--Mary?"

"Joan. Is she all right?"

"Well, if I was married to her I'd give up hopes of ever bein' left a widower. That girl's as healthy as a burro--yes, and she'll outlive one, I'll bet money, and I've heard of 'em livin' eighty years down in Mexico."

Dad did not appear to be cognizant of Mackenzie's weakness. According to the old man's pathology a man was safe when he regained his head out of the delirium of fever. All he needed then was cheering up, and Dad did not know of any better way of doing that than by talking. So he let himself go, and Mackenzie shut his eyes to the hum of the old fellow's voice, the sound beating on his ears like wind against closed doors.

Suddenly Dad's chatter ceased. The silence was as welcome as the falling of a gale to a man at sea in an open boat. Mackenzie heard Dad leaving the wagon in cautious haste, and opened his eyes to see. Rabbit was beside him with a bowl of savory-smelling broth, which she administered to him with such gentle deftness that Mackenzie could not help believing Dad had libeled her in his story of the accident that had left its mark upon her face.

Rabbit would not permit her patient to talk, denying him with uplifted finger and shake of head when he attempted it. She did not say a word during her visit, although her manner was only gentle, neither timid nor shy.

Rabbit was a short woman, turning somewhat to weight, a little gray in her black hair, but rather due to trouble than age, Mackenzie believed. Her skin was dark, her face bright and intelligent, but stamped with the meekness which is the heritage of women of her race. The burn had left her marked as Dad had said, the scar much lighter than the original skin, but it was not such a serious disfigurement that a man would be justified in leaving her for it as Dad had done.

When Rabbit went out she drew a mosquito netting over the opening in the back of the wagon. Mackenzie was certain that Dad had libeled her after that. There was not a fly in the wagon to pester him, and he knew that the opening in the front end had been similarly screened, although he could not turn to see. Grateful to Rabbit, with the almost tearful tenderness that a sick man feels for those who have ministered kindly to his pain, Mackenzie lay with his thoughts that first day of consciousness after his tempestuous season of delirium.

They were not pleasant thoughts for a man whose blood was not yet cool. As they surged and hammered in his brain his fever flashed again, burning in his eyes like a desert wind. Something had happened to alienate Joan.

That was the burden of it as the sun mounted with his fever, heating the enclosed wagon until it was an oven. Something had happened to alienate Joan. He did not believe her weak enough, fickle enough, to yield to the allurements of Reid's prospects. They must have slandered him and driven her away with lies. Reid must have slandered him; there was the stamp of slander in his wide, thin mouth.

It would be many days, it might be weeks, before he could go abroad on the range again to set right whatever wrong had been done him. Then it would be too late. Surely Joan could not take his blunder into Carlson's trap in the light of an unpardonable weakness; she was not so sheep-blind as that. Something had been done outside any act of his own to turn her face and her sympathies away.

Consumed in impatience to be up, anxiety for the delay, Mackenzie lay the throbbing day through like a disabled engine spending its vain power upon a broken shaft. Kind Rabbit came frequently to give him drink, to bathe his forehead, to place a cool cloth over his burning eyes. But Dad did not come again. How much better for his peace if the garrulous old rascal had not come at all!

And then with the thought of Joan there came mingling the vexing wonder of the train of violence that had attended him into the sheeplands. He had come there to be a master over flocks, not expecting to encounter any unfriendly force save the stern face of nature. He had begun to muddle and meddle at the outset; he had continued to muddle, if not meddle, to the very end.

For this would be the end. No sheepman would countenance a herder who could not take care of his flock in summer weather on a bountiful range. His day was done in that part of the country so far as his plans of becoming a sharing herdsman went. Earl Reid, a thin, anemic lad fresh from city life, had come in and made much more a figure of a man.

So his fever boiled under the fuel of his humiliating thoughts. The wagon was a bake-oven, but there was no sweat in him to cool his parching skin. He begged Rabbit to let him go and lie under the wagon, where the wind could blow over him, but she shook her head in denial and pressed him down on the bunk. Then she gave him a drink that had the bitterness of opium in it, and he threw down his worrying snarl of thoughts, and slept.

CHAPTER XXIII

CONCERNING MARY

"Yes, I've heard tell of sheepmen workin' Swan's dodge on one another, but I never took no stock in it, because I never believed even a sheepman was fool enough to let anybody put a thing like that over on him."

"A sheepman oughtn't to be," Mackenzie said, in the bitterness of defeat.

"Swan knew you was an easy feller, and green to the ways of them tricky sheepmen," said Dad. "You let him off in that first fight with a little crack on the head when you'd ought to 'a' laid him out for good, and you let Hector Hall go that time you took his guns away from him. Folks in here never could understand that; they say it was like a child playin' with a rattlesnake."

"It was," Mackenzie agreed.

"Swan thought he could run them sheep of his over on you and take away five or six hundred more than he brought, and I guess he'd 'a' done it if it hadn't been for Reid."

"It looks that way, Dad. I sure was easy, to fall into his trap the way I did."

Mackenzie was able to get about again, and was gaining strength rapidly. He and Dad were in the shade of some willows along the creek, where Mackenzie stretched in the indolent relaxation of convalescence, Dad smoking his miserable old pipe close at hand.

And miserable is the true word for Dad's pipe, for it was miserable indeed, and miserable the smell that came out of it, going there full steam on a hot afternoon of early autumn. Dad always carefully reamed out the first speck of carbon that formed in his pipe, and kept it reamed out with boring blade of his pocket knife. He wanted no insulation against nicotine, and the strength thereof; he was not satisfied unless the fire burned into the wood, and drew the infiltrations of strong juice therefrom. When his charge of tobacco burned out, and the fire came down to this frying, sizzling abomination of smells at last, Dad beamed, enjoying it as a sort of dessert to a delightful repast of strong smoke.

Dad was enjoying his domestic felicity to the full these days of Mackenzie's convalescence. Rabbit was out with the sheep, being needed no longer to attend the patient, leaving Dad to idle as he pleased. His regret for the one-eyed widow seemed to have passed, leaving no scar behind.

"Tim don't take no stock in it that Swan planned before to do you out of a lot of your sheep. He was by here this morning while you was wanderin' around somewhere."

"He was by, was he?"

"Yeah; he was over to see Reid--he's sent him a new wagon over there. Tim says you and Swan must both 'a' been asleep and let the two bands stray together, and of course it was human for Swan to want to take away more than he brought. Well, it was sheepman, anyhow, if it wasn't human."

"Did Sullivan say that?"

"No, that's what I say. I know 'em; I know 'em to the bone. Reid knew how many sheep him and you had, and he stuck out for 'em like a little man. More to that feller than I ever thought he had in him."

"Yes," Mackenzie agreed. He lay stretched on his back, squinting at the calm-weather clouds.

"Yeah; Tim says both of you fellers must 'a' been asleep."

"I suppose he'll fire me when he sees me."

"No, I don't reckon he will. Tim takes it as a kind of a joke, and he's as proud as all git-out of the way Reid stacked up. If that boy hadn't happened up when he did, Swan he'd 'a' soaked you another one with that gun of yours and put you out for good. They say that kid waltzed Swan around there and made him step like he was standin' on a red-hot stove."

"Did anybody see him doing it?"

"No, I don't reckon anybody did. But he must 'a' done it, all right, Swan didn't git a head of sheep that didn't belong to him."

"It's funny how Reid arrived on the second," Mackenzie said, reflecting over it as a thing he had pondered before.

"Well, it's natural you'd feel a little jealous of him, John--most any feller would. But I don't think he had any hand in it with Swan to run him in on you, if that's what you're drivin' at."

"It never crossed my mind," said Mackenzie, but not with his usual regard for the truth.

"I don't like him, and I never did like him, but you've got to hand it to him for grit and nerve."

"Has he got over the lonesomeness?"

"Well, he's got a right to if he ain't."

"Got a right to? What do you mean?"

Dad chuckled, put both hands to the back of his head, smoothed his long, bright hair.

"I don't reckon you knew when you was teachin' Joan you was goin' to all that trouble for that feller," he said.

"Sullivan told me him and old man Reid had made an agreement concerning the young folks," Mackenzie returned, a sickness of dread over him for what he believed he was about to hear.

"Oh, Tim told you, did he? Never said nothin' to me about it till this mornin'. He's goin' to send Joan off to the sisters' school down at Cheyenne."

Mackenzie sat up, saying nothing for a good while. He sat looking at the ground, buried in his thoughts as deep as a grave. Dad turned curious eyes upon him, but yet not eyes which probed to the secret of his heart or weighed his loss.

"I guess I didn't--couldn't teach her enough to keep her here," Mackenzie said.

"You could teach her a danged sight more than she could remember. I think Tim and her had a spat, but I'm only guessin' from what Charley said. Reid was at the bottom of it, I'll bet a purty. That feller was afraid you and Joan might git to holdin' hands out here on the range so much together, heads a touchin' over them books."

Mackenzie heard the old man as the wind. No, he had not taught Joan enough to keep her in the sheeplands; she had not read deeply enough into that lesson which he once spoke of as the easiest to learn and the hardest to forget. Joan's desire for life in the busy places had overbalanced her affection for him. Spat or no spat, she would have come to see him more than once in his desperate struggle against death if she had cared.

He could not blame her. There was not much in a man who had made a failure of even shepherding to bind a maid to him against the allurements of the world that had been beckoning her so long.

"Tim said he'd be around to see you late this evening or tomorrow. He's went over to see how Mary and Charley're makin' out, keepin' his eye on 'em like he suspicioned they might kill a lamb once in a while to go with their canned beans."

"All right," said Mackenzie, abstractedly.

Dad looked at him with something like scorn for his inattention to such an engrossing subject. Mackenzie was not looking his way; his thoughts seemed to be a thousand leagues from Tim Sullivan's range and the lambs on it, let them be alive or slaughtered to go with canned beans.

But Joan would come back to the sheeplands, as she said everybody came back to them who once had lived in their silences and breathed their wide freedom. She would come back, not lost to him, but regained, her lesson learned, not to go away with that youth who wore the brand of old sins on his face. So hope came to lift him and assure him, just when he felt the somber cloud of the lonesomeness beginning to engulf his soul.

"I know Tim don't like it, but me and Rabbit butcher lambs right along, and we'll keep on doin' it as long as we run sheep. A man's got to have something besides the grub he gits out of tin cans. That ain't no life."

"You're right, Dad. I'd been in a hole on the side of some hill before now if it hadn't been for the broth and lamb stew Rabbit fed me. There's nothing like it."

"You right they ain't!" said Dad, forgetting Mackenzie's lapse of a little while before. "I save the hides and turn 'em over to him, and he ain't got no kick. If I was them children I'd butcher me a lamb once a week, anyhow. But maybe they don't like it--I don't know. I've known sheepmen that couldn't go mutton, never tasted it from one year to another. May be the smell of sheep when you git a lot of 'em in a shearin' pen and let 'em stand around for a day or two."

But what had they told Joan that she would go away without a word, leaving him in a sickness from which he might never have turned again? Something had been done to alienate her, some crafty libel had been poured into her ears. Let that be as it might, Joan would come back, and he

would wait in the sheeplands for her, and take her by the hand and clear away her troubled doubts. The comfort of this thought would drive the lonesomeness away.

He would wait. If not in Tim Sullivan's hire, then with a little flock of his own, independent of the lords of sheep. He would rather remain with Sullivan, having more to prove now of his fitness to become a flockmaster than at the beginning. Sullivan's doubt of him would have increased; the scorn which he could not quite cover before would be open now and expressed. They had no use in the sheeplands for a man who fought and lost. They would respect him more if he refused to fight at all.

Dad was still talking, rubbing his fuzzy chin with reflective hand, looking along the hillside to where Rabbit stood watch over the sheep.

"Tim wanted to buy that big yellow collie from Rabbit," he said. "Offered her eighty dollars. Might as well try to buy me from that woman!"

"I expect she'd sell you quicker than she would the collie, Dad."

"Wish she would sell that dang animal, he never has made friends with me. The other one and me we git along all right, but that feller he's been educated on the scent of that old vest, and he'll be my enemy to my last day."

"You're a lucky man to have a wife like Rabbit, anyhow, dog or no dog. It's hard for me to believe she ever took a long swig out of a whisky jug, Dad."

"Well, sir, me and Rabbit was disputin' about that a day or so ago. Funny how I seem to 'a' got mixed up on that, but I guess it wasn't Rabbit that used to pull my jug too hard. That must 'a' been a Mexican woman I was married to one time down by El Paso."

"I'll bet money it was the Mexican woman. How did Rabbit get her face scalded?"

"She tripped and fell in the hog-scaldin' vat like I told you, John."

Mackenzie looked at him severely, almost ready to take the convalescent's prerogative and quarrel with his best friend.

"What's the straight of it, you old hide-bound sinner?"

Dad changed hands on his chin, fingering his beard with scraping noise, eyes downcast as if a little ashamed.

"I guess it was me that took a snort too many out of the jug that day, John," he confessed.

"Of course it was. And Rabbit tripped and fell into the tub trying to save you from it, did she?"

"Well, John, them fellers said that was about the straight of it."

"You ought to be hung for running away from her, you old hard-shelled scoundrel!"

Dad took it in silence, and sat rubbing it into his beard like a liniment. After a while he rose, squinted his eye up at the sun with a quick turn of his head like a chicken.

"I reckon every man's done something he ought to be hung for," he said.

That ended it. Dad went off to begin supper, there being potatoes to cook. Sullivan had sent a sack of that unusual provender out to camp to help Mackenzie get his strength back in a hurry, he said.

Tim himself put in his appearance at camp a little later in the day, when the scent of lamb stew that Dad had in the kettle was streaming over the hills. Tim could not resist it, for it was seasoned with wild onions and herbs, and between the four of them they left the pot as clean as Jack Spratt's platter, the dogs making a dessert on the bones.

Dad and Rabbit went away presently to assemble the sheep for the night, and Tim let his Irish tongue wag as it would. He was in lively and generous mood, making a joke of the mingling of the flocks which had come so dearly to Mackenzie's account. He bore himself like a man who had gained something, indeed, and that was the interpretation put on it by Mackenzie.

Tim led up to what he had come to discuss presently, beaming with stew and satisfaction when he spoke of Joan.

"Of course you understand, John, I don't want you to think it was any slam on you that I took Joan off the range and made her stop takin' her book lessons from you. That girl got too fresh with me, denyin' my authority to marry her to the man I've picked."

Mackenzie nodded, a great warmth of understanding glowing in his breast.

"But I don't want you to feel that it was any reflection on your ability as a teacher, you understand, John; I don't want you to look at it that way at all."

"Not at all," Mackenzie echoed, quite sincerely.

"You could 'a' had her, for all the difference it was to me, if I hadn't made that deal with Reid. A man's got to stick to his word, you know, lad, and not have it thwarted by any little bobbin of a girl. I'd as soon you'd have one of my girls as any man I know, John."

"Thanks."

"Of course I could see how it might turn out between you and Joan if she kept on ridin' over to have lessons from you every day. You can't blame Earl if he saw it the same way, lad."

"She isn't his yet," said Mackenzie confidently.

"Now look here, John"--Sullivan spoke with a certain sharpness, a certain hardness of dictation in his tone, "you'd just as well stand out of it and let Earl have her."

Mackenzie's heart swung so high it seemed to brush the early stars. It was certain now that Joan had not gone home without a fight, and that she had not remained there throughout his recovery from his wounds without telling protest. More confidently than before he repeated:

"She isn't his yet!"

"She'll never get a sheep from me if she marries any other man--not one lone ewe!"

"How much do you value her in sheep?" Mackenzie inquired.

"She'll get half a million dollars or more with Earl. It would take a lot of sheep to amount to half a million, John."

"Yes," said Mackenzie, with the indifference of a man who did not have any further interest in the case, seeing himself outbid. "That's higher than I'll ever be able to go. All right; let him have her." But beneath his breath he added the condition: "If he can get her."

"That's the spirit I like to see a man show!" Tim commended. "I don't blame a man for marryin' into a sheep ranch if he can--I call him smart--and I'd just as soon you as any man'd marry one of my girls, as I said, John. But you know, lad, a man can't have them that's sealed, as the Mormons say."

"You're right," Mackenzie agreed, and the more heartily because it was sincere. If he grinned a little to himself, Tim did not note it in the dusk.

"Now, there's my Mary; she's seventeen; she'll be a woman in three years more, and she'll make two of Joan when she fills out. My Mary would make the fine wife for a lad like you, John, and I'll give you five thousand sheep the day you marry her."

"All right; the day I marry Mary I'll claim five thousand sheep."

Mackenzie said it so quickly, so positively, that Tim glowed and beamed as never before. He slapped the simpleton of a schoolmaster who had come into the sheeplands to be a great sheepman on the back with hearty hand, believing he had swallowed hook and all.

"Done! The day you marry Mary you'll have your five thousand sheep along wi' her! I pass you my word, and it goes."

They shook hands on it, Mackenzie as solemn as though making a covenant in truth.

"The day I marry Mary," said he.

"It'll be three years before she's old enough to take up the weight of carryin' babies, and of course you understand you'll have to wait on her, lad. A man can't jump into these things the way he buys a horse."

"Oh, sure."

"You go right on workin' for me like you are," pursued Tim, drunk on his bargain as he thought it to be, "drawin' your pay like any hand, without favors asked or given, takin' the knocks as they come to you, in weather good and bad. That'll be a better way than goin' in shares on a band next spring like we talked; it'll be better for you, lad; better for you and Mary."

"All right," Mackenzie assented.

"I'm thinkin' only of your own interests, you see, lad, the same as if you was my son."

Tim patted Mackenzie's shoulder again, doubtless warm to the bottom of his sheep-blind heart over the prospect of a hand to serve him three years who would go break-neck and hell-for-leather, not counting consequences in his blind and simple way, or weather or hardships of any kind. For there was Mary, and there were five thousand sheep. As for Joan, she was out of Tim's reckoning any longer. He had a new Jacob on the line, and he was going to play him for all he was worth.

"All right; I've got a lot to learn yet," Mackenzie agreed.

"You have, you have that," said Tim with fatherly tenderness, "and you'll learn it like a book. I always said from the day you come you had in you the makin' of a sheepman. Some are quick and some are slow, but the longer it takes to learn the harder it sticks. It's been that way wi' me."

"That's the rule of the world, they say."

"It is; it is so. And you can put up a good fight, even though you may not always hold your own; you'll be the lad to wade through it wi' your head up and the mornin' light on your face. Sure you will, boy. I'll be tellin' Mary."

"I'd wait a while," Mackenzie said, gently, as a man who was very soft in his heart, indeed. "I'd rather we'd grow into it, you know, easy, by gentle stages."

"Right you are, lad, right you are. Leave young hearts to find their own way--they can't miss it if there's nobody between them. I'll say no word to Mary at all, but you have leave to go and see her as often as you like, lad, and the sooner you begin the better, to catch her while she's young. How's your hand?"

"Well enough."

"When you think you're able, I'll put you back with the sheep you had. I'll be takin' Reid over to

the ranch to put him in charge of the hospital band."

"I'm able to handle them now, I think."

"But take your time, take it easy. Reid gets on with Swan, bein' more experienced with men than you, I guess. Well, a schoolteacher don't meet men the way other people do; he's shut up with the childer all the day, and he gets so he measures men by them. That won't do on the sheep range, lad. But I guess you're findin' it out."

"I'm learning a little, right along."

"Yes, you've got the makin' of a sheepman in you; I said you had it in you the first time I put my eyes on your face. Well, I'll be leavin' you now, lad. And remember the bargain about my Mary. You'll be a sheepman in your own way the day you marry her. When a man's marryin' a sheep ranch what difference is it to him whether it's a Mary or a Joan?"

"No difference--when he's marrying a sheep ranch," Mackenzie returned.

CHAPTER XXIV

MORE ABOUT MARY

Mackenzie took Tim at his word two days after their interview, and went visiting Mary. He made the journey across to her range more to try his legs than to satisfy his curiosity concerning the substitute for Joan so cunningly offered by Tim in his Laban-like way. He was pleased to find that his legs bore him with almost their accustomed vigor, and surprised to see the hills beginning to show the yellow blooms of autumn. His hurts in that last encounter with Swan Carlson and his dogs had bound him in camp for three weeks.

Mary was a smiling, talkative, fair-haired girl, bearing the foundation of a generous woman. She had none of the shyness about her that might be expected in a lass whose world had been the sheep range, and this Mackenzie put down to the fact of her superior social position, as fixed by the size of Tim Sullivan's house.

Conscious of this eminence above those who dwelt in sheep-wagons or log houses by the creek-sides, Tim's girls walked out into their world with assurance. Tim had done that much for them in rearing his mansion on the hilltop, no matter what he had denied them of educational refinements. Joan had gone hungry on this distinction; she had developed the bitterness that comes from the seeds of loneliness. This was lacking in Mary, who was all smiles, pink and white in spite of sheeplands winds and suns. Mary was ready to laugh with anybody or at anybody, and hop a horse for a twenty-mile ride to a dance any night you might name.

Mackenzie made friends with her in fifteen minutes, and had learned at the end of half an hour that friend was all he might ever hope to be even if he had come with any warmer notions in his breast. Mary was engaged to be married. She told him so, as one friend to another, pledging him to secrecy, showing a little ring on a white ribbon about her neck. Her Corydon was a sheepman's son who lived beyond the Sullivan ranch, and could dance like a butterfly and sing songs to the banjo in a way to melt the heart of any maid. So Mary said, but in her own way, with blushes, and wide, serious eyes.

Mackenzie liked Mary from the first ingenuous word, and promised to hold her secret and help her to happiness in any way that a man might lift an honorable hand. And he smiled when he recalled Tim Sullivan's word about catching them young. Surely a man had to be stirring early in the day to catch them in the sheeplands. Youth would look out for its own there, as elsewhere. Tim Sullivan was right about it there. He was wiser than he knew.

Mary was dressed as neatly as Joan always dressed for her work with the sheep. And she wore a little black crucifix about her neck on another ribbon which she had no need to conceal. When she touched it she smiled and smiled, and not for the comfort of the little cross, Mackenzie understood, but in tenderness for what lay beneath it, and for the shepherd lad who gave it. There was a beauty in it for him that made the glad day brighter.

This fresh, sprightly generation would redeem the sheeplands, and change the business of growing sheep, he said. The isolation would go out of that life; running sheep would be more like a business than a penance spent in heartache and loneliness. The world could not come there, of course. It had no business there; it should not come. But they would go to it, those young hearts, behold its wonders, read its weaknesses, and return. And there would be no more straining of the heart in lonesomeness such as Joan had borne, and no more discontent to be away.

"I hoped you'd marry Joan," said Mary, with a sympathetic little sigh. "I don't like Earl Reid."

"Mary?" said Mackenzie. Mary looked up inquiringly. "Can you keep a secret for me, Mary?"

"Try me, John."

"I *am* going to marry Joan."

"Oh, you've got it all settled? Did Joan wear your ring when she went home?"

"No, she didn't wear my ring, Mary, but she would have worn it if I'd seen her before she was sent away."

"I thought you were at the bottom of it, John," the wise Mary said. "You know, dad's taken her sheep away from her, and she had a half-interest in at least a thousand head."

"I didn't know that, but it will not make any difference to Joan and me. But why hasn't she been over to see me, Mary?"

"Oh, dad's sore at her because she put her foot down flat when she heard it was fixed for her to marry Earl. She told dad to take his sheep and go to the devil--she was going to go away and work somewhere else. He made her go home and stay there like a rabbit in a box--wouldn't let her have a horse."

"Of course; I might have known it. I wonder if she knows I'm up?"

"She knows, all right. Charley slips word to her."

"Charley's a good fellow, and so are you," Mackenzie said, giving Mary his hand.

"You'll get her, and it's all right," Mary declared, in great confidence. "It'll take more than bread and water to tame Joan."

"Is that all they're giving her?"

"That's dad's idea of punishment--he's put most of us on bread and water one time or another. But mother has ideas of her own what a kid ought to have to eat."

Mary smiled over the recollection, and Mackenzie joined her. Joan would not grow thin with that mother on the job.

They talked over the prospects ahead of Joan and himself in the most comfortable way, leaving nothing unsaid that hope could devise or courage suggest. A long time Mackenzie remained with his little sister, who would have been dear to him for her own sweet sake if she had not been dearer because of her blood-tie to Joan. When he was leaving, he said:

"If anybody gets curious about my coming over to see you, Mary, you might let them think I'm making love to you. It would help both of us."

Mary turned her eyes without moving her head, looking at him across her nose in the arch way she had, and smiled with a deep knowingness.

"Not so bad!" said she.

They let it go at that, understanding each other very well indeed.

Mackenzie returned to Dad's camp thinking that the way to becoming a flockmaster was a checkered one, and filled with more adventures, harsh and gentle, than he ever had believed belonged to his apportionment in life. But he could not blame Tim Sullivan for placing Reid above him in rating on account of the encounters they had shared, or for bending down a bit in his manner, or taking him for a soft one who could be led into long labors on the promise of an uncertain reward.

Truly, he had been only second best all the way through, save for that "lucky blow," as Tim called it, that had laid Swan out in the first battle. Now Swan and he were quits, a blow on each side, nobody debtor any more, and Reid was away ahead of anybody who had figured in the violence that Mackenzie had brought into the sheeplands with him as an unwelcome stranger lets in a gust of wind on a winter night.

In spite of all this, the vocation of sheepman never appeared so full of attractive possibilities to Mackenzie as it looked that hour. All his old calculations were revived, his first determination proved to him how deeply it had taken root. He had come into the sheep country to be a flockmaster, and a flockmaster he would be. Because he was fighting his way up to it only confirmed him in the belief that he was following a destined course, and that he should cut a better figure in the end, somehow, than he had made at the beginning.

Tim Sullivan thought him simple; he looked at him with undisguised humor in his eyes, not taking the trouble to turn his back when he laughed. And they had taken Joan away out of his hands, like a gold-piece snatched from a child. But that was more to his credit than his disgrace, for it proved that they feared him more than they scorned him, let them laugh as they might.

But it was time for him to begin putting the credits over on the other side of the book. Mackenzie took it up with Dad Frazer that evening, Rabbit sitting by in her quiet way with a nod and a smile now and then when directly addressed.

"I don't think you're able to go over there and let that feller off," Dad objected. "You can't tell about Swan; he may come round lookin' for more trouble, and you not half the man you was before him and that dog chawed you up that way."

"I think I'll make out, Dad. I'll keep my eyes open this time, anyhow."

"He may not be able to slip up on you any more, but if he crowds a fuss where'll you be at, with that hand hardly able to hold a gun?"

"It will be different this time if he does. I'm going back to the sheep in the morning, Dad. I've got to get busy, and keep busy if I ever make good at this game."

Dad grunted around his pipestem, his charge being burned down to the wood, and the savor too

sweet on his tongue to lose even a whiff by giving room for a word in the door of his mouth. Presently the fire fried and blubbered down in the pipe to the last atrocious smell, and there followed the noise of more strong twist-tobacco being milled between the old shepherd's rasping palms. Rabbit toddled off to bed without a word; Dad put a match to his new charge, the light making him blink, discovering his curiously sheared face with its picturesque features strong, its weakness under the shadows.

"What did you think of Mary?" he inquired, free to discuss the ladies, now Rabbit was gone.

"Mary's a little bit of all right, Dad."

"Yes, and not such a little bit, either. Mary's some chunk of a girl; she'll grow up to a woman that suits my eye. You could do worse than set your cap for that little lady, it seems to me, John."

"Any man could. She's got a lively eye, and wise head, too, if I'm not away off."

"She looks soft when you first glance her, but she's as deep as a well. Mary ain't the build of a girl that fools a man and throws him down. Now, you take Joan, a kind of a high-headed touch-me-not, with that gingerbread hair and them eyes that don't ever seem to be in fifty-five mile of you when you're talkin' to her. I tell you, the man that marries her's got trouble up his sleeve. He'll wake up some morning and find her gone off with some other man."

"What makes you think that, Dad?"

"Not satisfied with what she's got, always lookin' off over the hill like a breachy cow calculatin' on how much better the grazin'd be if she could hop the fence and go tearin' off over there. Joan ain't the kind that settles down to nuss babies and make a man a home. Mary is. That's the difference between them two girls."

"Maybe you're right about it, Dad--I expect you are. You ought to know women if any man does."

"Well, neither one of 'em ain't a woman in the full meanin' of the word," Dad reflected, "but they've got the marks on 'em of what they'll turn out to be. The man that marries Mary he'll play safe; the feller that gits Joan takes on a gamble. If she ever does marry Reid he'll not keep her seven months. Shucks! I married a red-headed woman one time back in Oklahomey, and that blame woman run off with a horse-doctor inside of three months. I never did hear tell of that fool woman any more."

"I don't agree with you on the way you've got Joan sized up, no difference if your wife did run off with a horse-doctor. Her hair ain't red, anyway."

"Might as well be. You ain't so much of a hand at readin' people, anyhow, John; before you marry you ought to see a fortune-teller and have your hand read. You got away off on Reid, holdin' up for him agin' my judgment when he first come here on the range--don't you remember?"

"I didn't want to pass judgment on him in advance; that was all, Dad."

"Course, you couldn't be expected to know men and women like us fellers that's batted around among 'em all our lives, and you shut up with a houseful of kids teachin' 'em cipherin' and spellin'. I never did see a schoolteacher in my life, man or woman, that you couldn't take on the blind side and beat out of their teeth, not meanin' any disrespect to you or any of 'em, John."

"Oh, sure not. I understand what you mean."

"I mean you're too trustful, too easy to take folks at their word. You're kids in your head-works, and you always will be. I advise you strong, John, to have somebody read your hand."

"Even before marrying Mary?"

"We-el-l, you *might* be safe in marryin' Mary. If I'd 'a' had my hand read last spring before I come up here to this range I bet I'd 'a' missed the trap I stumbled into. I'd 'a' been warned to look out for a dark woman, like I was warned once before, and I bet you a dime I'd 'a' *looked* out, too! Oh, well, it's too late now. I guess I was fated."

"Everybody's fated; we're all branded."

"I've heard it said, and I'm beginnin' to believe it. Well, I don't know as I'd 'a' been any better off if I'd 'a' got that widow-lady. Rabbit ain't so bad. She can take care of me when I git old, and maybe she'll treat me better'n a stranger would."

"Don't you have any doubt about it in the world. It was a lucky day for you when Rabbit found you and saved you from the Four Corners widow."

"Yes, I expect that woman she'd 'a' worked me purty hard--she had a drivin' eye. But a feller's got one consolation in a case where his woman ribs him a little too hard; the road's always open for him to leave, and a woman's nearly always as glad to see a man go as he is to git away."

"There's no reason why it shouldn't work both ways. But fashions are changing, Dad; they go to the divorce courts now."

"That costs too much, and it's too slow. Walk out and leave the door standin' open after you; that's always been my way. They keep a lookin' for you to come back for a month or two; then they marry some other man. Well, all of 'em but Rabbit, I reckon."

"She was the one that remembered."

"That woman sure is some on the remember, John. Well, I ought 'a' had my hand read. A man's a fool to start anything without havin' it done."

Dad nursed his regret in silence, his face dim in the starlight. Mackenzie was off with his own thoughts; they might have been miles apart instead of two yards, the quiet of the sheeplands around them. Then Dad:

"So you're thinkin' of Mary, are you, John?"

Mackenzie laughed a little, like an embarrassed lover.

"Well, I've got my eye on her," he said.

"No gamble about Mary," Dad said, in deep earnestness. "Give her a couple of years to fill out and widen in and you'll have a girl that'll do any man's eyes good to see. I thought for a while you had some notions about Joan, and I'm glad to see you've changed your mind. Joan's too sharp for a trustin' feller like you. She'd run off with some wool-buyer before you'd been married a year."

CHAPTER XXV

ONE MAN'S JOKE

Mackenzie went across the hills next morning to relieve Reid of his watch over the sheep, feeling almost as simple as Dad and the rest of them believed him to be. He was too easy, he had been too easy all along. If he had beaten Hector Hall into a blue lump that day he sent him home without his guns; if he had pulled his weapon at Swan Carlson's first appearance when the giant Swede drove his flock around the hill that day, and put a bullet between his eyes, Tim Sullivan and the rest of them would have held him in higher esteem.

Reid would have held him in greater respect for it, also, and it might not have turned out so badly for Joan. He wondered how Reid would receive him, and whether they would part in no greater unfriendliness than at present.

Reid was not with the sheep when Mackenzie arrived where they fed. The flock was widely scattered, as if the shepherd had been gone a long time, the dogs seemingly indifferent to what befell, showing a spirit of insubordination and laziness when Mackenzie set them about their work. Mackenzie spent the morning getting the flock together, noting its diminished numbers with quickly calculating eye.

Reid must have been leaving the sheep pretty much to themselves for the wolves to take that heavy toll. Strange that Sullivan had not noticed it and put a trustworthy herder in charge. But Sullivan was more than a little afraid to show himself for long on that part of his lease, and perhaps had not taken the time to run his eye over the sheep. It was a matter to be laid before his attention at once. Mackenzie did not want this loss charged against him as another example of his unfitness to become a master over sheep on the profit-sharing plan.

It was past noon when Reid returned, coming riding from Swan Carlson's range. He came only near enough to Mackenzie to see who it was, galloping on to the wagon. There he unsaddled his horse and turned it to graze, setting about immediately to get his dinner. Mackenzie waited for a summons when the meal was ready, but received none. Presently he saw that Reid had no intention of calling him in, for he was sitting down selfishly alone.

Mackenzie determined there was not going to be any avoidance on his part. If unpleasantness must rise between them Reid would be the one to set it stewing, and it looked from a distance as if this were his intention. Mackenzie went to camp, his coat on his arm.

Reid had finished his dinner when Mackenzie arrived. He was sitting in the shade of some low bushes, his hat on the ground, smoking a cigarette. He looked up at the sound of Mackenzie's approach, smiling a little, waving his cigarette in greeting.

"Hello, Jacob," he said.

Mackenzie felt the hot blood rush to his face, but choked down whatever hot words rose with it. But he could not suppress the indignation, the surprise, that came with the derisive hail. It seemed that the range, vast, silent, selfish, melancholy as it was, could not keep a secret. What did Reid know about any Jacob and Rachel romance? How had he learned of that?

"How're you makin' it, Earl?" Mackenzie returned, pleasantly enough. And to himself: "He listened, the scoundrel--sneaked up on us and heard it all!"

"Oh, well enough," said Reid, coughing huskily.

If well enough, a little more of it would do for him, Mackenzie thought, noting with surprise the change that had come over Reid since they last met. The improvement that had begun in him during his first weeks on the range had not continued. Opposed to it, a decline appeared to have fastened upon him, making his flaccid cheeks thinner, his weary eyes more tired, his slight frame lighter by many pounds. Only his voice was unchanged. That was hearty and quick,

resonant of enjoyment in life and a keenness in the pursuits of its pleasures. Reid's voice was his most valuable possession, Mackenzie knew; it was the vehicle that had carried him into the graces of many transitory friends.

"I thought Tim had sent some old taller-heel over to let me off--I didn't know it was you," said Reid, lying with perfect ease.

"Taller-heel enough, I guess," Mackenzie returned, detached and inattentive as it seemed, his mind fixed on dinner.

"I didn't think you'd be able to get out so soon from what Dad told me. Been havin' some trouble with your hand?"

"It's all right now." Mackenzie was making use of it to shake the coffeepot, only to find that Reid had drained it to the grounds.

"If I'd recognized you, Jacob, I'd made a double allowance," Reid said, lifting the corner of his big, unfeeling mouth in a twitching grin.

"You might cut out that Jacob stuff, wherever you got it," Mackenzie told him, not much interested in it, apparently.

"Can't you take a joke, Mackenzie?" Reid made the inquiry in surprised voice, with a well-simulated inflection of injury.

"But I don't want it rubbed in, Reid."

Reid grunted, expressive of derision and contempt, smoking on in silence while Mackenzie threw himself together a hasty meal. Frequently Reid coughed, always cupping his hand before his mouth as if to conceal from himself as well as others the portentous harshness of the sound.

"Did Sullivan send you over?" Reid inquired at last.

"He said for me to come when I was able, but he didn't set any time. I concluded I was all right, and came."

"Well, you can go back; I don't need you."

"That's for Sullivan to say."

"On the dead, Mackenzie, I don't see how it's going to be comfortable with me and you in camp together."

"The road's open, Earl."

"I wish it was open out of this damned country!" Reid complained. In his voice Mackenzie read the rankling discontent of his soul, wearing itself out there in the freedom that to him was not free, chafing and longing and fretting his heart away as though the distant hills were the walls of a prison, the far horizon its bars.

"Sullivan wants you over at the ranch," Mackenzie told him, moved to pitying kindness for him, although he knew that it was wasted and undeserved.

"I'd rather stay over here, I'd rather hear the coyotes howl than that pack of Sullivan kids. That's one-hell of a family for a man to have to marry into, Mackenzie."

"I've seen men marry into worse," Mackenzie said.

Reid got up in morose impatience, flinging away his cigarette, went to the wagon, looked in, slammed the little canvas door with its mica window shut with a bang, and turned back.

There seemed little of the carelessness, the easy spirit that had made him so adaptable at first to his surroundings, which Reid had brought with him into the sheeplands left in him now. He was sullen and downcast, consumed by the gnawing desire to be away out of his prison. Mackenzie studied him furtively as he compounded his coffee and set it to boil on the little fire, thinking that it required more fortitude, indeed, to live out a sentence such as Reid faced in the open than behind a lock. Here, the call to be away was always before a man; the leagues of freedom stretched out before his eyes. It required some holding in on a man's part to restrain his feet from taking the untrammelled way to liberty under such conditions, more than he would have believed Reid capable of, more than he expected him to be equal to much longer.

Reid came slowly over to where he had left his hat, took it up, and stood looking at it as if he had found some strange plant or unusual flower, turning it and regarding it from all sides. It was such strange behavior that Mackenzie kept his eye on him, believing that the solitude and discontent had strained his mind.

Presently Reid put the hat on his head, came over to Mackenzie's fire, and squatted near it on his heels, although the sun was broiling hot and the flare of the ardent little blaze was scorching to his face. So he sat, silent as an Indian, looking with fixed eyes at the fire, while Mackenzie fried his bacon and warmed a can of succotash in the pan. When Mackenzie began to eat, Reid drew back from the fire to make another cigarette.

"But will it pay a man," he said ruminatively, as if turning again a subject long discussed with himself, "to put in three years at this just to get out of work all the rest of his life? That's all it comes to, even if I can keep the old man's money from sifting through my hands like dry sand on a windy day. The question is, will it pay a man to take the chance?"

Reid did not turn his eyes toward Mackenzie as he argued thus with himself, nor bring his face about to give his companion a full look into it. He sat staring across the mighty temptation that

lay spread, league on league before him, his sharp countenance sharper for the wasting it had borne since Mackenzie saw him last, his chin up, his neck stretched as if he leaped the barriers of his discontent and rode away.

"It's a long shot, Mackenzie," he said, turning as he spoke, his face set in a cast of suffering that brought again to Mackenzie a sweep of pity which he knew to be a tribute undeserved. "I made a joke about selling out to you once, Mackenzie; but it isn't a thing a man can joke about right along."

"I'm glad it was only a joke, Earl."

"Sure it was a joke."

Reid spoke with much of his old lightness, coming out of his brooding like a man stepping into the sun. He laughed, pulling his hat down on the bridge of his nose in the peculiar way he had of wearing it. A little while he sat; then stretched himself back at ease on his elbow, drooling smoke through his nose in saturnine enjoyment.

"Sullivan will double-cross you in the end, Jack; he'll not even give you Mary," Reid said, speaking lazily, neither derision nor banter in his way.

"Maybe," Mackenzie returned indifferently.

"He'd double-cross me after I'd put in three years runnin' his damned sheep if it wasn't for the old man's money. Tim Sullivan would pick dimes off a red-hot griddle in hell as long as the devil would stand by and heat them. He's usin' his girls for bait to draw greenhorns and work their fool heads off on promises. A man that would do that would sell his wife."

Mackenzie made no comment. He was through his dinner and was filling his pipe, mixing some of Dad Frazer's highly recommended twist with his own mild leaf to give it a kick.

"He played you into the game with Joan for a bait, and then I got shipped out here and spoiled that," said Reid. "Now he's stringin' you on for Mary. If you're as wise a guy as I take you to be, Jack, you'll cut this dump and strike out in business for yourself. There's a feller over east of Carlson wants to sell out--you can get him on the run."

"I couldn't buy one side of a sheep," Mackenzie replied, wondering why this sudden streak of friendly chatter.

Mackenzie ground Dad's twist in his palm, poured a charge of his pale mixture into it, ground them again together under the heel of his fist, Reid looking on with languid eyes, hat down on his nose.

"What did you do with that roll you used to carry around out here?" Reid inquired, watching the compounding of the tobacco.

"It was a mighty little one, Earl," Mackenzie returned, laughing pleasantly.

"It's big enough for me--hand it over!"

Reid flipped his gun from the scabbard, his elbow pressed close to his side as he reclined in the lazy, inoffensive pose, holding the weapon down on Mackenzie with a jerk which he must have practiced long to give it the admirable finish and speed.

CHAPTER XXVI

PAYMENT ON ACCOUNT

Mackenzie raised his eyes slowly from his task of blending tobacco, looked for a moment into Reid's determined face, remembering with a falling heart that he had taken his own revolver off and hung it in the wagon when he came in, to relieve himself of the weight.

"Hurry--hand it out!"

Reid lifted himself slightly, elbow still pressed close to his side, raising his face a foot nearer Mackenzie's, his eyes drawn small, the corners of his mouth twitching.

Mackenzie's hands were poised one above the other, as he had suspended his milling operations. As quickly as the hand of a prestidigitator flashes, Mackenzie swept the one that held the tobacco, dashing the powdered mixture into Reid's eyes.

Reid fired as he sprang to his feet, gasping and choking, momentarily blinded by the fiery tobacco. Mackenzie felt the bullet lift his hair as it passed his temple, and before it was many rods on its way through the canvas top of the wagon he had grappled with Reid and wrenched his gun away.

Reid had no hands for a fight, even if it had been in him to attempt it, being busy with his streaming eyes. He cursed Mackenzie as he sputtered and swabbed.

"Damn it all, Mackenzie, can't you take a joke?" he said.

"No, I don't get you--you're too funny for me," Mackenzie returned. "Here--wash your eyes."

Mackenzie offered the water pail, Reid groping for it like a blind man, more tears streaming down his face than he had spent before in all his life together. He got the rough of it out, cursing the while, protesting it was only a joke. But Mackenzie had read human eyes and human faces long enough to know a joke when he saw it in them, and he had not seen even the shadow of a jest in the twitching mask of Reid's unfeeling countenance as he leaned on his elbow holding his gun.

"You were right about it a little while ago," Mackenzie told Reid when he looked up with red, reproachful eyes presently; "this range isn't big enough for you and me." Mackenzie jerked his hand toward the saddle and bridle which Reid had lately taken from his horse. "Get to hell out of here!"

Reid went without protest, or word of any kind, wearing his belt and empty scabbard. Mackenzie watched him saddle and ride over the ridge, wondering if he would make a streak of it to Sullivan and tell him what a poor hand his school-teaching herder was at taking a joke. Curious to see whether this was Reid's intention, Mackenzie followed him to the top of the hill. Reid's dust was all he could trace him by when he got there, and that rose over toward Swan Carlson's ranch, whence he had come not more than an hour ago.

Pretty thick business between that precious pair, Mackenzie thought, and of a sort not likely to turn out of much profit to either them or anybody else. Carlson was a plain human brute without any sense of honor, or any obligation to the amenities of civilized society; Reid was simply an unmoral sharper.

It didn't make any difference where Reid went, or what he planned; he would have to stay away from that camp. That Mackenzie vowed, meaning it to the last letter. Tim Sullivan would be informed of this latest pleasantry at their first meeting, also, and hear a chapter from Mackenzie's heart on the matter of Joan.

Joan! If that leper Reid ever came near Joan, or ever blew the pollution of a word to her, he would nail him to the ground with a bullet, no matter that he was in debt to him for his life.

Mackenzie found the rifle that Sullivan had provided Reid for his defense under the bunk in the wagon, with ammunition enough to withstand a siege. Reid evidently had not been using the gun in practice very much, confining his rehearsals to the quick slinging of his pistol, rather, as the cunning of his hand in the attempted robbery that afternoon seemed to prove. Not wanting Reid to have any weapon to his hand in case he came back, Mackenzie buckled on the revolvers, hid the rifle near the wagon, and went back to guard the sheep.

Mackenzie felt himself softening in his judgment of Reid as the day drew toward evening. He feared he had been a little severe with him, taking his gun away and sending him off, surly and vindictive. Perhaps it was only a joke, as Reid had protested, although there had been no glimmer of jest in his eyes when he had slung out his gun.

Still, the boy was hardly responsible, oppressed by his load of dissatisfaction, harrassed and disturbed by that unbalancing ailment they called the lonesomeness. If he had come at it right, Mackenzie reflected, he could have had a hundred dollars or so, even though in staking him to it he would have been helping a criminal to escape.

He began to hope Reid would come back and try to square it. If he wanted the money to leave the country on then he could have it. Holding him there in the sheep country would not work his reformation, but would breed and store the virus of resentment, making him a truly dangerous man to set free to prey upon society when his term was done.

But Reid never would remain to finish his three years of penance there. Joan had seen it, even before his malady had fastened upon him so deeply. It might be a merciful deed to finance his going, and speed him toward the land of his desire. But how he would live in Mexico would be another matter. Perhaps he would work. At any event, he would be free.

Mackenzie had ranged his flock a considerable distance from the wagon, keeping to the hilltops above the sheep, according to the custom of herders. He was sitting in a gully, his back against the bank, feeling a weariness over him that he blamed mainly to the weight of the revolvers and cartridge belt in his weakened state, when he saw Reid coming back.

Reid broke over the hill beyond the sheep-wagon at a gallop, hatless, riding low, and the sound of shots behind him beat the tune to which he traveled. Mackenzie got to his feet, his weariness gone on the surge of concern that thrilled him. Hector Hall had come to collect his outstanding account at last.

And Reid was unarmed. Because of this he had been forced to flee before his enemy like a coward, against his nature, to his humiliation, Mackenzie knew. He should not have allowed Reid to leave camp without his gun, he would not have done it if he had reflected a moment on the risk of going unarmed when there was one abroad on the range who sought his life. If Reid should fall, Mackenzie felt he would be an accessory to the crime.

Two men were pursuing Reid. They drew up a moment on the hilltop, then came down the long slope at reckless speed, not wasting any more ammunition at that distance, which was not above two hundred yards, but dividing to cut off Reid's retreat, draw in on him then, and make an end of it at close range.

Reid halted at the wagon, where he made a hasty search for the rifle without dismounting, hidden for a moment from his pursuers. He was too far away to hear Mackenzie's shouted

directions for finding the gun. On again toward Mackenzie he came, halting a little way along to look back at the men who were maneuvering to cut off any swerving or retreat that he might attempt. Mackenzie beckoned him on, shouting, waving his hat, running forward to his relief.

Mackenzie's thought was to give Reid his revolver, split the ammunition with him, each of them take a man, and fight it out. But Reid sat straight in the saddle, looking back at the two who came pressing on, seeming to fear them less than he hated the humiliation of seeking shelter under Mackenzie's protection. Mackenzie understood his feeling in the matter, and respected Reid for it more than for anything he ever had done.

While Mackenzie was yet a hundred yards from Reid he saw him swing from the saddle and shelter himself behind his horse. Hall and his companion were standing off warily, a good pistol shot from Reid, distrustful of this sudden change in his tactics, apparently believing he had come to the place he had selected to make his defensive stand. A little while they stood waiting for him to fire, then separated, the stranger circling to come behind Mackenzie, Hall moving a little nearer to Reid, who kept his horse before him with the craft of an Indian.

Hall stood a little while, as if waiting for Reid to fire, then rode forward, throwing a stream of lead as he came. Reid's horse reared, ran a few rods with head thrown wildly high, its master clinging to the bit, dragging over shrub and stone. Suddenly it collapsed forward on its knees, and stretched dead.

Reid flung himself to the ground behind the protection of its carcass, Hall pausing in his assault to reload. The man who had ridden a wide and cautious circuit to get behind Mackenzie now dismounted and began firing across his saddle. Mackenzie turned, a pistol in each hand, indecisive a moment whether to return the fellow's fire or rush forward and join Reid behind the breastworks of his beast.

The stranger was nearer Mackenzie by many rods than Hall, but still so far away that his shots went wide, whistling high over Mackenzie's head, or kicking dirt among the shrubs at either hand. Hall was charging down on Reid again, but with a wariness that held him off a distance of comparative safety.

In the moment that he paused there, considering the best and quickest move to make to lessen Reid's peril, the thought shot to Mackenzie like a rending of confusing clouds that it was not so much Reid's peril as his own. These men had come to kill him; their sighting Reid on the way was only an incident. It was his fight, and not Reid's, for Reid was safe behind his horse, lying along its body close to the ground like a snake.

This understanding of the situation cleared the air tremendously. Where he had seen in confusion, with a sense of mingling and turning but a moment before, Mackenzie now beheld things with the sharpness of self-interest, calculating his situation with a comprehensive appraisement of every yard that lay between him and his enemies. He was steady as a tree, light with a feeling of relief, of justification for his acts. It was as if putting off the thought that he was going into this fight for Earl Reid had taken bonds from his arms, leaving him free to breathe joyously and strike with the keenness of a man who has a wild glory in facing tremendous odds.

All in a moment this clearing of brain and limb came to him, setting him up as if he had passed under an icy torrent and come out refreshed and clear-eyed into the sun. He bent low behind a shrub and rushed down the hillside toward the man who stood reloading his pistol, his hat-crown showing above the saddle.

Reid was all right back there for a little while, he knew; Hall would hold off a bit, not knowing what he might meet by rushing in with precipitation. This one first, then Hall. It was not Reid's fight; it was his fight, Reid but an incident in it, as a sheep might run between the combatants and throw its simple life in peril.

The fellow behind the horse, too sure of his safety, too contemptuous of this shepherd schoolmaster whose notorious simplicity had gone abroad in the sheeplands exciting the rough risibilities of men, was careless of whether his target stood still or ran; he did not lift his eyes from the reloading of his gun to see. And in those few precious moments Mackenzie rushed down on him like a wind from the mountain, opening fire with not more than twenty yards between.

Mackenzie's first shot knocked leather from the saddle-horn. The horse squatted, trembling, snorted its alarm, trampled in panic, lifting a cloud of dust. And into this rising dust Mackenzie sent his lead, not seeing where it struck, quickly emptying one revolver, quickly shifting weapons from hand to hand, no pause in his hot assault.

The stranger cursed his frightened horse, both hands busy with the beast to stay it from plunging away and leaving him exposed to something he had not counted on meeting. Mackenzie pushed on, firing at every step. The horse partly turned, head toward him, partly baring the scoundrel who was that moment flinging his leg over the saddle to seek a coward's safety. It was a black mare that he rode, a white star in its forehead, and now as it faced about Mackenzie, not thirty feet away, threw a bullet for the white spot between the creature's eyes. It reared, and fell, coming down while its rider's leg still lay across the saddle, his other foot held in the stirrup.

A moment Mackenzie stood, the smoking pistol in his hand, leaning forward like a man who listened into the wind, his broad hat-brim blown back, the smoke of his firing around him. The horse lay still, its rider struggling with one leg pinned under it, the other across the saddle, the

spur of that foot tearing the dead creature's flesh in desperate effort to stir in it the life that no cruelty could awaken.

Leaning so, the wind in his face, the smoke blowing away behind him, Mackenzie loaded his revolvers. Then he ran to the trapped invader of his peace and took away his guns, leaving him imploring mercy and assistance, the dead horse across his leg.

Mackenzie was aware of shooting behind him all this time, but only as one is conscious of something detached and immaterial to the thing he has in hand. Whether Hector Hall was riding down on him in defense of his friend, or whether he was trying to drive Reid from the shelter of his fallen horse, Mackenzie did not know, but from that moment Hall was his business, no matter where he stood.

Putting out of the fight the man who lay pressed beneath his horse had been a necessary preliminary, a colorless detail, a smoothing away of a small annoyance in the road of that hour's great work. For the end was justified beforehand between him and Hall. It was not a matter of vengeance, but of justice. This man had once attempted to take away his life by the most diabolical cruelty that human depravity could devise.

This passed through Mackenzie's thoughts like the heat of a fire that one runs by as he swung round to face Hall. Apparently unconcerned by what had befallen his friend, Hall was circling Reid's dead horse, holding tenaciously to his intention of clearing the ground before him as he advanced. Reid snaked himself on his elbows ahead of his enemy's encircling movement, keeping under cover with admirable coolness and craft.

Mackenzie ran forward, throwing up his hand in command to Hall, challenging him as plainly as words to turn his efforts from a defenseless man to one who stood ready to give him battle. Hall drew off a little from Reid's concealment, distrustful of him even though he must have known him to be unarmed, not caring to put a man behind his back. Still drawing off in that way, he stopped firing to slip more cartridges into his automatic pistol, watching Mackenzie's rapid advance, throwing a quick eye now and then toward the place where Reid lay out of his sight.

Hall waited in that sharp pose of watchful indecision a moment, then spurred his horse with sudden bound toward Reid. He leaped the carcass of Reid's animal at a gallop, firing at the man who huddled close against its protection as he passed over. Mackenzie could not see Reid from where he stood, but he felt that his peril was very great, his chances almost hopeless in the face of Hall's determination to have revenge on his brother's slayer in defiance of what might come to himself when the thing was done.

Mackenzie ran a little nearer, and opened fire. Heedless of him, Hall swung his horse back at a gallop, firing at Reid as he advanced. Reid came rolling round the carcass of his horse to place himself in the protection of the other side, so nimble in his movements that Mackenzie drew a breath of marveling relief. If Reid was touched at all by Hall's vicious rain of lead, it could be only slightly.

Hall's headlong charge carried him several rods beyond Reid, the horse springing high over the barrier. Again Reid escaped, again he came rolling back to shelter, his body as close to the ground as a worm's. When Hall pulled up his sliding, stiff-legged horse and turned in the cloud of dust to ride once more upon his defenseless enemy, it was to face Mackenzie, who had run up and posted himself directly in his way.

Reid's dead horse lay not more than twenty feet behind Mackenzie. Hector Hall leaned glowering at him through the dust perhaps twice that distance ahead. A moment Hall leaned in that way, then came spurring on, holding his fire as if his purpose were to ride Mackenzie down in contempt.

Mackenzie fired, steady against the onrushing charge as a rock in the desert wind. He was thrilled by a calm satisfaction in meeting this man who had contemned and despised him, whose cold eyes spoke insults, whose sneering lips were polluted with the blasphemies of his filthy heart.

When Hall returned the fire he was so close that the flame of his weapon struck hot against Mackenzie's face. Mackenzie leaped aside to avoid the horse, untouched save by the spurting flame, emptying his pistol into Hall's body as he passed. A little way on Hall wheeled the horse and came riding back, but the blindness of death was in his face, his rapid shots fell wild among the shrubs at Mackenzie's side.

On past Mackenzie the horse galloped, Hall weaving in the saddle, the reins hanging free, his hands trailing at his sides. Mackenzie put his pistol in the scabbard with slow and deliberate hand, feeling that the battle was done, watching Hall as he rode blindly on.

A little way, and the horse, whether through some wild caprice of its own, or some touch of its dying rider, circled back, galloping down the long slope toward the man who had come to help Hall adjust his differences with these contemptible sheepmen. Hall's hat fell off as his head sank forward; he bent, grappling his horse's mane. So for a little way he rode, then slipped from the saddle, one foot entangled in the stirrup.

The horse stopped suddenly, as if a weighted rein had been dropped. Mackenzie ran down the hill to disengage Hall's foot. But his merciful haste was useless; Hall was beyond the torture of dragging at a stirrup.

Mackenzie released the foot with a sad gentleness, composed the dusty body, drew the reins over the horse's head and left it standing beside its dead master. Hall's companion in the raid

was still struggling under his fallen horse, and from the vigor of his attempts to free himself Mackenzie gathered that he was not much hurt.

A moment's work set the scoundrel on his feet, where he limped on a whole bone, whole enough to ride on many a rascally foray again. Mackenzie said nothing to him, only indicated by a movement of the hand what he was to do. Limping painfully, the fellow went to Hall's horse, lifted his friend's body across the empty saddle, mounted behind it with a struggle, and rode in humiliation from the field, glad enough to be allowed to go.

Reid was standing beside his dead horse, watching the fellow ride away. So for a little he stood, as if he debated some movement against the man who had sought his life with such hot cruelty but a few minutes past, not turning to see whether Mackenzie came or went. Presently he took his coat from the saddle, slung it over his shoulder, looked after the retreating man again, as if debating whether to follow.

Mackenzie came up, Reid's pistol in his hand. This he offered, apology in his manner, but no words on his lips. Reid took it, silent and unmoved, shoved it into his scabbard, walked away.

From the manner of his going, Mackenzie knew he was not hurt. It was a comfortable thought for Mackenzie that his interference had at least saved Reid a wound. Doubtless he had saved him more. In that last charge, Hector Hall would have had his life.

A part of his tremendous obligation to Reid was paid, and Reid understood it so. But the knowledge of it seemed to gall him, so deeply, indeed, that it appeared he rather would have died than have Mackenzie succeed in his defense.

Reid stopped where Hector Hall's hat had fallen. He turned it with his foot, looking down at it, and presently picked it up. He made as if he would put it on, but did not, and passed on carrying it in his hand.

Mackenzie wondered what his plans might be, and whether he ought to go after him and try to put their differences out of the way. Reid did not stop at the wagon. He continued on to the top of the hill, defiant of the man who rode away with Hall's body, his pistol again on his thigh. There he stood looking this way and that a little while, as a man looks who is undecided of his road. Then he passed on. When Mackenzie reached the spot where Reid had stood, he was no longer in sight.

Mackenzie thought Reid might be going deliberately to seek the battle from which he had been obliged so lately to flee unarmed. Mackenzie waited on the eminence, listening for the sounds of fight, ready to hasten to Reid's assistance if he should stand in need of it again. So the last hour of the afternoon passed. Mackenzie turned back to his flock at length, believing Reid had gone on his way to the freedom he had weighed against his inheritance only a few hours before.

It was just as well then as another day, Mackenzie reflected, as he turned the sheep from their grazing. Not that he had meant to drive Reid out of the country when he told him to go, but it was just as well. Soon or late it would have to come to a show-down between them, and one would have been compelled to leave.

But how would Sullivan view this abrupt ending of the half-million-dollar penance, and the loss of three years' unpaid labor? Not kindly, certainly. It probably would result in the collapse of all Mackenzie's own calculations as well, and the blighting of his sheep-wealth dreams.

And that day he had slain a man in defense of Earl Reid's life, as Reid had killed in defense of his.

From the first hour he set his feet on the trail to the sheep country this culmination of his adventures had been shaping. Little by little it had been building, the aggression pressed upon him, his attitude all along one of defense. Perhaps when trouble is heading for a man, as this was inevitably directed, the best thing to do is rush to meet it with a club in the hand.

That was the way it looked to John Mackenzie that evening. Trouble will put things over on a man who is bent to compromise, every time. Undoubtedly it looked that way. But he had killed a man. It was a heavy thing to carry on his soul.

This depressing shadow thickened over him as the sun drew down to the hills, and he went working his flock slowly to the night's bedding-ground. The complaint of the lambs, weary from following and frisking the day through, was sadder to him than it ever had fallen on his ears before. It seemed a lament for the pollution of his hands in human blood, moving a regret in his heart that was harder to bear than fear.

Mackenzie sat above the resting sheep as the shadows drew toward him between the hills, a glow as of a distant city where the sun went down an hour past. The rifle was beside him, his pistol in his belt, for regret of past violence would not make the next hour secure. If trouble should lift its head in his path again, he vowed he would kill it before it could dart and strike.

No, it was not a joke that Reid had pulled on him that afternoon. Reid had meant to rob him, urged on to the deed by his preying discontent and racking desire to be away. Reid was on his way out of the country now, and if they caught him and took him before the judge who had sentenced him to this unique penance, he would have the plea that Mackenzie drove him out, and that he fled to save his life.

That might be sufficient for the judge; certainly it would be enough for Tim Sullivan. Sullivan would bring him back, and Mackenzie would be sent to pick up the trail of his fortunes in another place, with years of waiting between him and Joan, perhaps.

So Mackenzie sat with his moody thoughts, depressed, downhearted, regretting bitterly the necessity that had risen for taking away a fellow-creature's life. It bore on him heavily now that the heat of his blood had subsided; it stood before him an awful accusation. He had killed a man! But a man who had forfeited his right to live, a man who had attempted to take his life in the past, who had come again that day to hunt him like a coyote on the hills. The law would exculpate him; men would speak loudly of his justification. But it would stand against him in his own conscience all his days. Simple for thinking of it that way, he knew; simple as they held him to be in the sheep country, even down to old Dad Frazer, simplest among men.

He had no desire in his mouth for supper, although he set about preparing it, wanting it over before dark. No need of a blaze or a glow of a coal to guide anybody that might be prowling around to drop a bullet into him. That surly rascal who bore Hector Hall's body away might come back to do it, but the man who stood first in his thoughts and caution was Earl Reid, out there somewhere in the closing night with a gun on him and an itch in his hand to use it.

CHAPTER XXVII

A SUMMONS IN THE NIGHT

Somebody was calling on the hill behind the sheep-wagon. Mackenzie sat up, a chill in his bones, for he had fallen asleep on watch beside the ashes of his supper fire. He listened, the rack of sleep clearing from his brain in a breath.

It was Dad Frazer, and the hour was past the turn of night. Mackenzie answered, the sound of a horse under way immediately following. Dad came riding down the hill with loose shale running ahead of him, in such a hurry that he took the sharp incline straight.

"What's the matter?" Mackenzie inquired, hurrying out to meet him.

"I don't know," said Dad, panting from excitement as if he had run the distance between the camps on foot. "Mary come over on her horse a little while ago and roused me out. She said somebody just passed her camp, and one of 'em was Joan."

"Joan? What would she--what does Mary---?"

"That's what I said," Dad told him, sliding to the ground. "I said Joan wouldn't be trapsin' around this time of night with nobody, but if she did happen to be she could take care of herself. But Mary said she sounded like she was fussin' and she thought something must be wrong, and for me to hop her horse and come hell-for-leather and tell you."

"How many--which way were they going?"

"Two horses, Mary said, from the sound, but she didn't hear nobody's voice but Joan's. She got Charley up, and they run out and hollered, but she didn't hear nothing more of Joan. The poor kid's scared out of her 'leven senses."

"Which way did they go--did Mary say?"

"Towards Swan Carlson's ranch, she said."

Mackenzie swung into the saddle and galloped off, leaving Dad listening to the sound of his going.

"Nutty, like the rest of 'em," said Dad.

Carlson's house was not more than eight miles from the range where Mackenzie was running his sheep. He held his course in that direction as he rode break-neck up hill and down. He had little belief that it could have been Joan who passed Mary's camp, yet he was disturbed by an anxiety that made his throat dry, and a fear that clung to him like garments wet in the rain.

Reid could not have anything to do with it in any event, Joan or somebody else, for Reid was horseless upon the range. But if Joan, he was at entire loss to imagine upon what business she could be riding the country that hour of the night. Joan had no fear of either night or the range. She had cared for her sheep through storm and dark, penetrating all the terrors that night could present, and she knew the range too well to be led astray. It must have been a voice that Mary had heard in a dream.

Mackenzie felt easier for these reflections, but did not check his pace, holding on toward Carlson's house in as straight a line as he could draw. He recalled curiously, with a prickling of renewed anxiety, that he always expected to be called to Carlson's house for the last act in the sheeplands tragedy. Why, he did not know. Perhaps he had not expected it; maybe it was only a psychological lightning-play of the moment, reflecting an unformed emotion. That likely was the way of it, he reasoned. Surely he never could have thought of being called to Carlson's ranch.

In that fever of contradiction he pushed on, knees gripping his horse in the tensivity of his desire to hasten, thinking to hold the animal up from stumbling as an anxious rider in the night will do. Now he believed it could not have been Joan, and felt a momentary ease; now he was convinced that Mary could not have mistaken her sister's voice, and the sweat of fear for her burst on his

forehead and streamed down into his eyes.

From the side that he approached Carlson's house his way lay through a valley at the end, bringing him up a slight rise as he drew near the trees that stood thickly about the place. Here he dismounted and went on, leading his horse. A little way from the house he hitched his animal among the trees, and went forward in caution, wary of a dog that might be keeping watch beside the door.

There was no moon. The soft glow of a few misty, somnolent stars gave no light among the trees, no light shone from the house. Mackenzie recalled the night he had first approached that door and come suddenly around the corner into the pale beam of Hertha Carlson's lantern. Now the kitchen door might be shut, and there was no window on that side.

Mackenzie stopped to listen, his senses as keen as a savage's under his strain. One who has not approached danger and uncertainty, listening and straining in the night, cannot conceive the exquisite pitch to which human nerves can be attuned. The body then becomes a tower set with the filaments of wireless telegraphy, each of the thousand nerves straining forth to catch the faintest sound, the most shadowy disturbance. Even premonitions become verities; indistinct propositions tangible facts.

In that exalted pitch of nervous sensibility Mackenzie stood listening, fifty feet or less from the kitchen door. No sound, but a sharp scent of cigarette smoke came blowing from the dark house. Mackenzie's heart seemed to gorge and stop. Earl Reid was there. Perhaps Mary had not heard a voice in a dream.

At the closed door Mackenzie listened. For a little, no sound; then a foot shifted on the floor. Almost immediately someone began walking up and down the room, pushing a chair aside as if to clear the way. Mackenzie remembered the window high in the wall beside the stove and went hastily around the house to it, restraining himself from bursting precipitately into something which might be no concern of his or warrant his interference at all. It seemed so preposterous even to suspect that Joan was there.

Reid was pacing up and down the room, a lantern standing on the floor beside the chair from which he had risen. The place had been readjusted since the ruin that fell over it in Mackenzie's fight with Swan; the table stood again in the place where he had eaten his supper on it, the broken leg but crudely mended.

Reid seemed to be alone, from what of the interior of the house Mackenzie could see, shifting to bring the door of the inner room to view. It was closed; Joan was not there.

Mackenzie watched Reid as he paced up and down the kitchen floor. There was a nervousness over him, as of a man who faced a great uncertainty. He walked with bent head, now turning it sharply as he stood listening, now going on again with hands twitching. He threw down his cigarette and stamped it, went to the kitchen door, opened it and stood listening.

A little while Reid stood at the door, head turned, as if he harkened for the approach of somebody expected. When he turned from the door he left it open, rolled a cigarette, crossed to the door of the inner room, where he stood as if he debated the question of entering. A little while in that uncertain, hesitant way; then he struck a match on the door and turned again to his pacing and smoking.

Mackenzie almost decided to go to the open door and speak to Reid, and learn whether he might be of assistance to him in his evident stress. He was ready to forgive much of what had passed between them, blaming it to Reid's chafing against the restraint that was whetting him down to a bone.

Mackenzie felt now that he had not handled Reid in the right way. Reid was not of the slow, calculative, lead-balanced type of himself. He was a wolf of civilization, to whom these wilds were more galling than the bars of a prison. The judge who had agreed to this sentence had read deeply in the opaque soul of the youth.

Prison would not have been much of a penance for Reid. There he would have found intrigue, whispering, plottings; a hundred shadowy diversions to keep his perverted mind clear and sharp. Here he met only the silence of nature, the sternest accuser of a guilty soul. Reid could not bear the accusation of silence. Under it his mind grew irritable with the inflammation of incipient insanity. In a little while it would break. Even now he was breaking; that was plain in his disordered eyes.

Still Mackenzie hesitated to speak to him, watching him as he went with increasing frequency to the open door to listen. It was not his affair; Joan could not be there. Even if she were there, she must have come for a purpose good and justifiable, and of her own free will. But she was not there, and Reid was waiting for somebody to come. Swan Carlson or his wife, it must be, and what business they had before them in this unrighteous hour Mackenzie could not imagine. But plainly it had nothing to do with Joan.

Mackenzie's thoughts reverted to the night he came to that cabin among the trees, guided thither by the plaintive melody of Hertha Carlson's song. What a fool he had been to linger on there that night waiting to see Swan, in the mistaken kindness to the woman the wild fellow had made his slave. If he had gone on that night, leaving the still waters of trouble unstirred, he would have walked in peace through his apprenticeship. Surely his crowding of trouble at Swan Carlson's door that night was the beginning of it all.

There was that door closed now on the inner room; on that night it stood open, the long chain

that bound the Swede's wife running through it from the staple driven into the log. Mackenzie had not noticed the thickness of the door's planks that night, or the crudity of its construction. The handiwork of Swan Carlson was proclaimed from that door; it was rough and strong, like himself, without finish, loosely joined. Its planks were oak; great nails in them marked the Z of its brace.

Then Mackenzie turned his eyes upon Reid again. Reid went back to the inner door, pushed it, tried it with his foot. It seemed to be fastened within. Perhaps there was a reason for its strength; maybe Swan kept his crude treasures locked there in that small stronghold of logs while he roamed the range after his sheep. Reid did not appear greatly interested in the door, or what lay behind it. He turned from it almost at once, drew his chair in front of it, sat down, his right hand toward Mackenzie, the lantern light strong on the lower part of his body, his face in shadow from the lantern's top. Mackenzie quickened with a new interest, a new speculation, when he saw that Reid's holster hung empty at his belt.

At once Mackenzie decided to speak to Reid, certain that he had been through some misadventure in which he had suffered loss. He drew away from the window, going around the front part of the house to come to the kitchen door, thinking it might be wise to know the way the land lay around those premises.

This part of the house was little larger than the shack of boards that had been built to it. There was no opening in its solid log walls, neither of window or door save alone the door opening into the kitchen. The place was a vault.

Somebody was approaching, riding rapidly up the valley. There was more than one horse, Mackenzie could well make out as he stood at the corner of the house, listening. He saw Reid's shadow fall in the light that spread through the open door, and turned back to keep his watch at the window.

It was not the moment to offer friendship or sympathy to Reid. Something of Reid's own brewing was coming to a boil there, some business of his own was drawing to a head in that lonely cabin among the whispering trees.

Reid took up the lantern, stood a moment as if indecisive, placed it on the stove. Not satisfied with the way the light of it struck him there, apparently, he removed it and stood it in a corner. Whoever was coming, Reid did not want it known at a glance that his scabbard was empty. Mackenzie pressed a little nearer the window. When a man prepared for a meeting with that caution, he would do to watch.

Reid went to the open door, where he stood like a host to receive his guests. The riders were among the trees; coming on more slowly. Now they stopped, and Reid turned to light a fresh cigarette. The flash of the match showed his face white, hat pulled down on his brows, his thin, long gamester's fingers cupped round the blaze.

There fell a moment of silence, no sound of word, no movement of horse or foot upon the ground. Insects among the trees were grinding their scythes for tomorrow's reaping, it seemed, whirring in loud, harsh chorus such as one never heard out on the grazing lands.

Now the sound of footsteps approaching the door. Reid came back into the room, where he stood drawing a deep breath of smoke like a man drinking to store against a coming thirst. He dropped the cigarette, set his foot on it, crushed it to sparks on the floor.

Swan Carlson was in the door, the light dim on his stern, handsome face. Behind him stood his woman, a white wimple bound on her forehead like a nun.

CHAPTER XXVIII

SWAN CARLSON LAUGHS

"So, you are here?" said Swan, standing in the door, looking about him as if he had entered an unfamiliar place.

"Didn't you look for me?" Reid returned. He stood between Carlson and the closed inner door, foot on a rung of the chair in which he lately had sat, his attitude careless, easy.

"A man never knows," Carlson replied, coming into the room.

Hertha Carlson lingered just outside the door, as if repelled by the recollection of old sufferings there. Swan reached out, grasped her wrist, drew her roughly inside, pointed to a chair. The woman sat down, her eyes distended in fright, her feet drawn close to the chair as if to hide them from the galling chain that she had dragged so many weary months across the floor of her lonely prison.

Swan pulled a chair to the table and sat down, elbows on the board, facing Reid, a question in his attitude, his face, to which he at once gave words:

"Where's your woman?"

"Where's the money?" Reid countered, putting out his hand. "You threw me down after I delivered you three hundred sheep--you didn't come across with a cent--on the plea that one thief couldn't collect from another. All right, Swan; we'll forget the sheep deal, but this is another matter. Put your money in my hand; then we'll talk."

"Is she in there?" Swan pointed to the door behind Reid, half rising from his chair.

Reid put his hand to his empty holster, his body turned from Carlson to conceal his want of a weapon. Carlson jerked his head in high disdain, resumed his chair, his great hand spread on the table.

Mackenzie stepped back from the window, leveling his pistol at Reid's head. Joan was the subject of this infamous barter.

A moment Mackenzie's finger stiffened to send a bullet into Reid's brain, for he considered only that such depravity was its own warrant of death. But Reid was unarmed, and there was something in his attitude that seemed to disclose that it was a bluff. Joan was not there.

Joan was not there. She would not remain silent and unresisting, shut in a room while a cold-blooded scoundrel bargained to deliver her for a price like a ewe out of his flock. Reid was playing to even the deceit Carlson had put over on him in dealing for the stolen sheep. It was a bluff. Joan was not there.

Mackenzie let down the weapon. It was not the moment for interference; he would allow the evidence to accumulate before passing sentence and executing it with summary hand.

"Come across with the money before we go any further," said Reid, firm in his manner, defiantly confident in his bearing. "I've got to get out of this country before morning."

"I wouldn't give five hundred dollars for her," Swan declared. "How do I know she'd stay with me? She might run off tomorrow if I didn't have a chain on her."

Reid said nothing. He backed a little nearer the door as if he had it in mind to call the negotiations off. Swan looked at him with chin thrust forward, neck extended.

"She ain't here--you're a liar!" he charged.

"All right; there's a pair of us, then."

"I've brought my woman--" Swan stretched out his hand to call attention to her where she cowered in her chair--"fixed up to meet you like a bride. Woman for woman, I say; that's enough for any man."

"I don't want your woman, Carlson."

"You tried to steal her from me; you was lovin' her over on the range."

"What do you care? You don't want her."

"Sure I don't," Swan agreed heartily; "if I did I'd 'a' choked your neck over there that night. Woman for woman, or no trade."

"That's not our bargain, Carlson."

Reid spoke sharply, but with a dry quaver in his voice that betrayed the panic that was coming over him on account of this threatened miscarriage of his plans. Mackenzie was convinced by Reid's manner that Swan had read him right. Joan was not there.

The thought that Joan would accompany Reid in the night to Swan Carlson's house on any pretext he could devise in his crafty mind was absurd. It was all a bluff, Reid playing on Swan's credulity to induce him to hand over the money, when he would make a dash for the door and ride away.

Mackenzie stood close to the window, pistol lifted, thinking it all out between Reid's last word and Carlson's next, for the mind can build a castle while the heart is pausing between throbs.

"My woman for yours, that's a fair trade," said Swan. "I don't want to put no money in a wild colt that maybe I couldn't break. Open the door and bring her to me, and take my woman and go."

"Nothing doin'," said Reid, regaining his nonchalance, or at any rate control of his shaking voice.

"You're a liar, you ain't got no woman here."

"She's in there, all right--come across with the money and take her."

"How do I know you've got any right to make a trade? Have you got the papers to show she's yours?"

"I've got all the papers you'll ever need."

"You ain't got no papers--she's as much mine as she is yours. Open the door!"

Carlson got up, towering above Reid in his great height. He took off his hat and flung it on the table, stood a little while bending forward in his peculiar loose droop with arms swinging full length at his sides. Reid backed away from him, standing with shoulders against the door as if to deny him passage, hand thrown to his empty holster.

"You ain't got no gun!" Swan said, triumphantly. "I seen the minute I come in the door you didn't have no gun. I wouldn't fight a feller like you--you couldn't stand up to me like that other

feller done here in this house one night.”

Swan looked round the room, the memory of that battle like a light upon his stony face. He stood in silence, turning his head slowly, as if he found a pleasure in the stages of the past battle as recalled to him by the different locations in the place.

“You wanted me to kill that feller so he couldn’t take your woman away from you, didn’t you?” Swan said, contemptuously. “Over there that day me and you made that joke on him runnin’ my sheep over into his. But he didn’t take that joke--what? He stood up to me and fought me like an old bear, and he’d ‘a’ whipped me another time if it hadn’t been for them dogs helpin’ me. You bet your hat he would! Yes, and then you come up, and you said to me: ‘Soak him another one!’ And I looked at you, with red in my eyes. ‘Soak him, put him out for good this time!’ you says. And I looked at you another time, my eye as red as blood.

“‘No,’ I says, ‘damn your skin, I’ll not soak him when he’s down, and you’ll not do it, and no man ain’t a goin’ to do it! He’s the only man on this range that can stand up to me,’ I told you, ‘and I’m goin’ to save him to fight!’ That’s what I said to you. Well, he’ll come after me when I take his woman away from him--he’ll come after me so hard he’ll make the ground shake like a train--and he’ll fight me for her, a fight that men will remember! We’ll roar like the wind, him and me, when we stand up and fight for his woman that I took away from him this night.”

Reid drew away from him, seeming to contract upon himself against the door, and whether Swan read it Mackenzie could not tell, but he could see from the window the sickness of fear spread over Reid’s pale face.

“You ain’t got no gun on you,” Swan mocked, taking joy from that moment. “Hell! my old woman can lick you, and I’m goin’ to make her do it. Then I’ll take that feller’s woman away from you and kick you to hell out of here!”

Swan turned to Hertha, who had left her chair on his first threatening move toward Reid. She had advanced a little way into the room, a wild fury in her face against the man who had bargained to bring another woman between her and her fierce, harsh-handed lord. Swan took her by the arm, his hand at her back as if to give her courage.

“Go on--lick him--choke him the way I showed you how to choke a man!”

Swan clapped his hands, stamping his foot sharply, as he had clapped and stamped to urge on the dog against Mackenzie that day they fought on the range. And like a dog that has strained on a leash the woman leaped, flinging herself upon Reid with a wild, high-shrilling cry.

Reid tried to guard his face against her fury, attempted to grapple her arms and hold her. She broke away, clawing his face, screaming her maniacal cry. In a moment they were a whirling tangle of arms, wild-flying hair, swaying bodies bent in fierce attack and desperate defense. The furious creature had Reid by the throat in the grip Swan had taught her, strangling out his life.

Reid clung to her wrists, struggling to tear her hands from his throat, thrashing wildly about before the closed door, his head striking it now as the woman flung him, now his shoulders as she bent him to force him to the floor.

Swan stood by, leaning forward in a pose of deep interest, deep satisfaction, savage enjoyment, his loose-hanging arms at his sides, his long mustaches down beside his mouth. He said nothing to encourage his woman in her mad combat, only seemed waiting the issue, ready to lay his hand to finishing it in the event that she should fail.

The fighting woman, still screaming above the din of their trampling feet, struggled to lift her knee to Reid’s chest. Mackenzie turned from the window to interfere, not caring to see Reid go that way, no matter what sins lay upon his young soul. As he came running to the door, he saw Reid struggle to his feet, tear the mad woman’s hands away, and strike her a sharp blow in the face.

There must have been surprising power in that slender arm, or else its strength was multiplied by the frenzy of the strangling man, for the woman dropped as if she had been struck with an ax. Swan Carlson, standing there like a great oaf, opened his immense mouth and laughed.

Reid staggered against the wall, hands at his throat, blood streaming from his nostrils, bubbling from his lips as he breathed with wide-gasping mouth. He stood so a little while, then collapsed with sudden failing, no strength in him to ease the fall.

Carlson turned to face Mackenzie, his icy mirth spent.

“It’s you?” he said. “Well, by God, it’s a man, anyhow!”

Carlson offered his hand as if in friendship. Mackenzie backed away, watchful of him, hand to his pistol.

“Who’s in that room, Carlson?” he asked.

“Maybe nobody,” Swan replied. “We’ll fight to see who opens the door--what?”

There was an eager gleam in Carlson’s face as he made this proposal, standing between Mackenzie and the closed door, his arm stretched out as if to bar the schoolmaster’s nearer approach. He bent toward Mackenzie, no hostility in his manner or expression, but rather more like a man who had made a friendly suggestion, the answer to which he waited in pleasurable anticipation.

Mackenzie looked at him coldly, measuring his great strength, weighing his magnificent body down to the last unit of its power. Carlson’s shirt was open at his throat, his laced boots came to

his knees over his baggy corduroy trousers, his long red hair hung over his temples and ears.

"No, there's been fighting enough," Mackenzie said, thinking that Joan must be bound and gagged if in that room. Surely she would have spoken otherwise at the sound of his voice.

Hertha Carlson rose to her hands and knees, where she remained a spell like a creeping child, almost at Mackenzie's feet. Reid lay where he had sunk down, pitched forward in front of the closed door.

"I'll open it, then," said Swan in the same glowing eagerness. "It'll be a game--whatever I find I'll keep!"

"Don't touch it!" Mackenzie warned, drawing a little nearer, his weapon half out of the scabbard.

Mrs. Carlson rose between them, tall, disheveled, dress torn open at her bosom. She seemed dazed and oblivious to what was passing, stood a moment, hands pressed to her face as one racked by an agony of pain, went to the door, and out. Carlson stood staring after her a breath, his bold chin lifted high, a look of surprise passing like a light over his eyes.

"What I find will be mine," Carlson said, almost happily. "Come on--we'll fight like a couple of men!"

Carlson thrust his hand into the bosom of his shirt as he spoke, and drew out a revolver with a long sweep of his mighty arm, throwing his body with the movement as if he rocked with a wild, mad joy. Mackenzie fired as Carlson lifted the weapon to throw it down for a shot. Carlson's pistol fell from his shattered hand.

Swan stood a moment, that flickering light of surprise flashing in his eyes again. Then he threw back his head and shouted in the mad joy of his wild heart, his great mouth stretched wide, his great mustaches moving in his breath. Shouting still, as his Viking forebears shouted in the joy of battle, the roar of his great voice going far into the night, Swan rushed upon Mackenzie like a wounded bear.

Mackenzie gave back before him, leaping aside, firing. Checked a moment, more by the flash of the discharge in his eyes than by the bullet, it seemed, Swan roared a wilder note and pressed the charge. His immense, lunging body was dim before Mackenzie through the smoke, his uninjured hand groping like a man feeling for a door in a burning house.

Swan fell with the mad challenge on his tongue, and cried his defiance still as he writhed a moment on his back, turning his face to the open door and the peace of the night at last, to die. To die in greater heroism than he had lived, and to lie there in his might and wasted magnificence of body, one hand over the threshold dabbling in the dark.

Mackenzie took the lantern from the corner where Reid had set it in his studious play for the advantage that did not come to his hand, and turned back to the closed door. Reid lay as he had fallen, Carlson's revolver by his side. Mackenzie stepped over him and tried the door. It was unlocked, fastened only by the iron thumb-latch.

A moment Mackenzie stood, lifting the lantern to light the small room to its corners, then went in, peering and exploring into every shadow.

"Great God! She wasn't here at all! And I've killed a man for that!" he said.

He turned to the open door, stifled by remorse for what he had done, although he had done it in a fight that had been pushed upon him, as all his fights in the sheeplands had been pushed. He might have taken Swan at his manly offer to fight hand-to-hand to see who should open the door; or he might have allowed him to open it, and saved all violence between them.

And this was the end of Earl Reid's bluff to Carlson that he would deliver Joan to him there, bargained for and sold after the wild and lawless reasoning of the Norse flockmaster. And Swan had drawn his weapon with a glad light in his face, and stood up to him like a man.

"Throw it down here, Mackenzie--you can't get by with it this time!"

Mackenzie looked up from his daze of remorseful panic, slowly, amazedly, not fully realizing that it was a human voice he heard, to see Reid where he had scrambled to his knees, Carlson's gun in one hand, the other thrown out to support his unsteady body.

"You can have it, Earl," Mackenzie said, with the relief in his voice of a man who has heard good tidings.

"Hurry!" said Reid, in voice strained and dry.

"My gun's empty; you can have it too. I'm through," Mackenzie said.

As he spoke, Mackenzie jerked the lantern sharply, putting it out. Reid fired. Mackenzie felt the shot strike his thigh like the flip of a switch when one rides through a thicket. He threw himself upon Reid, and held his arm while the desperate youth fired his remaining shots into the wall.

Mackenzie shook Reid until he dropped the empty revolver, then took him by the neck and pushed him to the open door. And there the morning was spreading, showing the trees outlined against the east.

"Come out here and we'll talk it over, Reid." Mackenzie said.

Reid had nothing to say. He was sullen, uncontrite. Mackenzie waited a little while for him to speak, holding him harshly by the collar.

"Well, there's the road out of this country," Mackenzie said, seeing he would not speak. "This is the last trick you'll ever try to throw here on me or anybody else. I suppose you came here on one of Carlson's horses; go and get it, and when you start, head south."

Mackenzie felt the leg of his trousers wet from the blood of his wound, and began to have some concern lest an artery had been cut. But this he put off investigating until he heard Reid ride out to the dim road in front of Carlson's cabin, and go his way out of the sheeplands to whatever destiny lay ahead.

Then Mackenzie looked himself over, to find that it was not a serious wound. He bound up the hurt with his handkerchief, and turned his face away from that tragic spot among the cottonwoods, their leaves moving with a murmur as of falling rain in the cool morning wind.

CHAPTER XXIX

SHEEPMAN--AND MORE

"So I just took his gun away from him and slapped him and sent him on," said Joan.

"I thought that must have been the way of it," Mackenzie said, sighing as if his last trouble had left him.

"When he tried to make me believe I wasn't within seven miles of Dad Frazer's camp I got my suspicions up. The idea of that little town rat trying to mix me up on my range! Well, I was a little off on my estimate of where the wagons were, but that was because they'd been moved so many times while I was over home."

"I figured it that way, Joan."

"But what do you suppose he was tryin' to pull off on me, John, bringing me out here on the pretense you'd been all shot up in the fight with Hector Hall and wanted me?"

"I don't know, Joan," Mackenzie said, lying like the "kind of a gentleman" he was.

"I thought maybe the little fool wanted to make me marry him so he could get some money out of dad."

"Maybe that was it, Joan; I pass it up."

"Dad Frazer says Earl was crazy from the lonesomeness and killing Matt Hall."

"I think he must have been, Joan. It's over--let's forget it if we can."

"Yes, you haven't done a thing but fight since you struck this range," Joan sighed.

Mackenzie was lying up in Rabbit's hospital again, undergoing treatment for the bullet wound in his thigh. He had arrived at Dad Frazer's camp at sunrise, weak from the drain of his hurt, to find Joan waiting for him on the rise of the hill. She hurried him into Rabbit's hands, leaving explanations until later. They had come to the end of them now.

But Mackenzie made the reservation of Reid's atrocious, insane scheme in bringing Joan from home on the pretext that the schoolmaster had fallen wounded to death in the fight with Hector Hall, and lay calling for her with his wasting breath. Mackenzie knew that it was better for her faith in mankind for all her future years, and for the peace of her soul, that she should never know.

"My dad was here a little while ago--he's gone over to put a man in to take care of your sheep, but he'll be along back here this evening. He wants to talk some business with you, he said."

"Well, we're ready for him, Joan," Mackenzie said. And the look that passed between them, and the smile that lighted their lips, told that their business had been talked and disposed of already, let Tim Sullivan propose what he might.

"I'll leave it to you, John," said Joan, blushing a little, her eyes downcast in modesty, but smiling and smiling like a growing summer day.

Tim Sullivan arrived toward evening, entering the sheep-wagon softly, his loud tongue low in awe for this fighting man.

"How are you, John? How are you, lad?" he whispered, coming on his toes to the cot, his face as expressive of respect as if he had come into the presence of the dead.

Mackenzie grinned over this great mark of respect in the flockmaster of Poison Creek.

"I'm all right," he said.

Tim sat on an upended box, leaning forward, hat between his knees, mouth open a bit, looking at Mackenzie as if he had come face to face with a miracle.

"You're not hurted much, lad?" he inquired, lifting his voice a little, the wonder of it gradually passing away.

"Not much. I'll be around again in nine or ten days, Rabbit says."

"You will," said Tim, eloquently decisive, as though his heart emptied itself of a great responsibility, "you will that, and as good as a new man!"

"She's better than any doctor I ever saw."

"She is that!" said Tim, "and cheaper, too."

His voice grew a little louder, coming thus to familiar ground in the discussion of values and costs. But the awe of this man who went fighting his way was still big in the flockmaster's eyes. He sat leaning, elbows on thighs, mouth still open, as respectfully awed as if he had just come out of a church. Then, after a little while, looking around for Joan:

"What was he up to, John? What was he tryin' to do with my girl?"

Mackenzie told him, in few words and plain, pledging him to keep the truth of it from Joan all his days. Tim's face grew pale through the deep brown of sun and wind. He put his hand to his throat, unbuttoning his collar with trembling fingers.

"But she was too smart for him!" he said. "I've brought her up a match for any of them town fellers--they can't put anything like that over on my little Joan. And you didn't know but she was there, locked in and bound hand and foot, lad? And you fought old Swan and laid him cold at last, hand to hand, man to man! Lord! And you done it for my little Joan!"

"Let's forget it," Mackenzie said, uncomfortable under the praise.

"It's easy said, lad, but not so easy done. A man remembers a thing the like of that with gratitude to his last hour. And we thought you an easy-goin' man, that could be put on and wasn't able to hold your own," said Tim, confessing more in his momentary softness than he would have done on reflection.

"We thought you was only a schoolteacher, wrapped up in rhymes and birds!"

"Just a plain simpleton that would eat out of anybody's hand," Mackenzie grinned.

"Not a simpleton, lad; not a simpleton. But maybe soft in your ways of dealin' with other men, lettin' 'em go when you ought to knocked 'em cold, the way you let Hall go the day you took his guns off of him. But we couldn't see deep in you, lad; you're no simpleton, lad--no simpleton at all."

Tim spoke in soothing conciliation, as if he worked to salve over the old hurts of injustice, or as if he dealt with the mishap of a child to whom words were more comforting than balm. He was coming back to his regular sheepman form, crafty, conciliatory; never advancing one foot without feeling ahead with the other. But the new respect that had come over him for Mackenzie could not be put wholly aside, even though Tim might have the disposition to do it. Tim's voice was still small in his mouth, his manner softened by awe.

"You've shown the mettle of a sheepman," Tim said, "and more. There'll be peace and quiet on this range now."

"I brought nothing but trouble to it. You had peace and quiet before I came."

"Trouble was here, lad, but we dodged it. There wasn't a man of us had the courage to face it and put it down like you've done it. Carlson and them Halls robbed me year in and year out, and stole the range I paid rent on from under my feet. Swan stole sheep from me all the time that boy was runnin' them next him there--I miss about three hundred from the flock today."

"Reid sold them to him, but didn't get his money. He complained about it to Swan last night."

"He'd do it," nodded Tim; "his father before him done it. It runs in the blood of them Reids to steal. I'll have them three hundred sheep back out of Swan's widow tomorrow."

"Is she over there with the sheep?"

"I didn't see her around."

"The poor creature's crazy from her hard usage and suffering. I think somebody ought to go over there and help her straighten things out."

"I'll see to it," Tim promised. "Yes, it must be done. Now that wild devil's dead we must be neighborly with the widow and give her a chance. I'll see to it tomorrow. Where's my Joan?"

"She's making some broth for my supper."

"That's right, that's right--she'll care for you, lad; I'll leave her here with Rabbit to care for you. Sure. She was for you, all along. I couldn't see it."

"Well, you've got it right this time," Mackenzie said.

Tim beamed. He rubbed his hands, great satisfaction in his face.

"I'll find somebody else for my Mary--we'll consider her no more," he said. "Let you go on with Joan in the bargain in place of Mary, and give me three years for her, and the day you marry her I'll drive over to you a thousand sheep."

"Nothing doing," said Mackenzie.

"Two years, we'll say--two instead of three, John. Joan will be her own man in two years; she'll be twenty-one. And the day you marry her I'll make it fifteen hundred sheep."

"She's her own man now under the laws of this state, and I'm taking her without a single head

of sheep. You can keep them all--Joan is enough for me."

Tim was a greatly injured man. His face lengthened two inches, a look of reproach came into his eyes; he seemed on the point of dissolving in tears.

"You're not goin' to quit me and take away my girl, the best one of my flock, my ewe lamb, my Joan? I didn't think you'd turn on me like that, lad; I didn't think you had it in your heart!"

"You took away Joan's ewe lambs, and her buck lambs, and all her lambs, more than a thousand of them, after she'd served you through sun and storm and earned them like a man. No, I don't think I could trust you two years, Mr. Sullivan; I don't believe your memory would hold you to a bargain that long, seeing that it would be in the family, especially."

"I'll give Joan back her flock, to run it like she was runnin' it, and I'll put it in writin' with you both. Two years, we'll say, John--two short easy years."

"No."

"Don't you throw away your chances now, John, don't you do it, lad. If you marry my Joan now I'll give you not a sheep, not one blind wether! But if you'll stay by me a year for her I'll give you a weddin' at the end of that time they'll put big in the papers at Cheyenne, and I'll hand over to you three thousand sheep, in your own name."

"I'm not thinking as much about sheep as I was three months ago," said Mackenzie, yawning as though he had grown tired of the subject. "Joan and I have made our plans; you can approve them or turn them down. We're going away when we're married."

"Goin' away!" said Tim, his voice betraying the hollowness of his heart.

"But we're coming back---"

"Comin' back?" said Tim, gladness in every note.

"Joan's heart is in the sheep range--she couldn't tear it away if she tried. She thought she wanted to go, but I'll have hard work to get her farther than Jasper. Joan had the lonesomeness; she's cured now."

"She had, poor gerrel! I didn't see it, but I see it now. But you'll be comin' back!"

"Yes. Joan and I belong on the sheep range--we're both too simple and confiding to run around loose in the world."

Tim was looking at Mackenzie, his head tipped to one side a little in his great, new interest, his greater, newer understanding.

"You'll come back and make it home?" said he.

"Home," Mackenzie nodded. "There's no other place that calls. You can welcome us or turn us away, but we'll find a place on the range, and I've got money enough to buy us a little band of sheep."

"No need, lad, no need for that. What I have I'll divide with you the day you come home, for I've made a place in my heart for you that's the place of a son," said Tim.

Mackenzie knew the flockmaster had reached a point at last where he would stand, writing or no writing, for there was the earnestness of truth in his voice, the vibrant softness of affection. He gave the flockmaster his hand, saying no word. Tim took it between his own as if he held a woman's, and held it so while he spoke:

"And the place is here for you when you come back be it a year from now or five years. You're a sheepman now, John."

"And I'm more," said Mackenzie, with a contented sigh. "I'm a sheepwoman's man."

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