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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE LAND OF STRONG MEN ***

THE LAND OF STRONG MEN

BY A. M. CHISHOLM

AUTHOR OF *"Precious Waters"* and *"The Boss of Wind River"*

**ILLUSTRATED BY
FRANK TENNEY JOHNSON**

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Before the heavy snows these bunches were rounded up and driven to the ranch.

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[Before the heavy snows these bunches were rounded up and driven to the ranch](#)

[He turned the corner, and came full upon a huge, old-man grizzly](#)

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[To Faith these trips were a novelty, opening a world new and wonderful](#)

The Land of Strong Men

CHAPTER I

LOST AND FOUND

It was light, but not yet day. The shadows of the night seemed to linger, to retreat with reluctance; and as they were beaten back by the sun, still far below the eastern curve of the earth and further blockaded by giant mountain ranges also to the eastward, the clinging, gray morning mists of early Fall came to replace them. In the pallid light, a-swim with vapor, objects loomed gigantic and grotesque.

The house which stood among the mists was of squared timbers, mortised and fitted. It was unpainted, and the interstices were neatly filled with plaster. The main part was two stories in height, but back of this and joined to it was another log building, long and low. Evidently this had been the original dwelling, to which the more pretentious structure had been added. From one window of this rear building a light glimmered.

The house was surrounded and in summer would be shaded by trees, cottonwoods and soft maples; but these had shed most of their leaves and the ground was yellowed with them. Close beside the house ran an irrigation ditch in which clear mountain water purred and gurgled softly. To the south loomed the roofs of stables, sheds, high corrals and stacks of hay and straw. Beyond these were cleared, level fields. To the northward, protected to some extent by the buildings and trees, was a small orchard in neat rows.

Now, the light in the rear window went out, and a moment later a door opened and a boy emerged. He was apparently about eighteen, but unusually tall and long of limb. At a casual glance he seemed to run to legs and arms, but a second look would have shown that his chest was broad and deep, and that his apparent ungainliness was due to age merely. His face, naturally dark, was tanned to the color of an old saddle. The cheekbones were high, the nose prominent, the mouth straight and the boyish jaw firm. The eyes were dark, steady and sombre, shaded by black eyebrows which slashed straight across the face, meeting above the nose. The darkness of complexion, the heavy brows, the straight mouth conveyed an expression almost of grimness. The boy wore a battered felt hat, a fawn mackinaw coat, pants thrust into high socks and a pair of moosehide moccasins. In his right hand he carried a rifle, in his left a small cotton bag. The wooden handle of a knife stuck from a jam-sheath in his belt.

For a moment he stood sniffing the morning air like a dog, and then with a light swiftness which gave the lie to his apparent ungainliness, made for the stables. In a few moments he led out a brown pony. He tied the cotton bag to the cantle, thrust the rifle into a saddle holster and swung up.

As he did so there was the sound of running feet, and a girl sped toward him from the house.

"Angus! Wait a minute!" she cried. She was apparently a couple of years younger than the boy, slim, brown of hair, eye, and face, delicate of feature. She held out a paper-wrapped parcel. "Here's some doughnuts for your lunch," she said.

But the boy frowned down at her. "I've got my lunch," he said tapping the cotton bag. In it there was bread and cold meat, which he esteemed manly fare.

"But you like doughnuts," said the girl, "and I thought—I thought—"

Her eyes filled with moisture which was not that of the mists, and the boy either because of that or affected by the silent argument of the doughnuts, relented.

"Oh, well, give 'em here," he said, and dismounting untied the bag, thrust in the doughnuts, made all fast again and remounted. "Tell father I'll be back in time to feed the stock to-night."

"Yes, Angus. I hope you'll get a deer."

"Sure, I'll get one," the boy replied confidently. A thought seemed to strike him. "Oh, thanks for the doughnuts."

The girl beamed at this belated recognition. She felt fully repaid for both the cooking and the early rising. For when a brother is going hunting naturally his thoughts are far above such things as doughnuts and younger sisters. Recognizing the propriety of this she turned back to the house.

The boy rode fast. He passed the boundaries of the ranch, followed a road for a mile and then, turning into a beaten cattle trail, headed eastward toward the flanks of a mountain range showing beneath the skirts of the rising mist.

The trail wound sinuously, rising from benchland to benchland, but the boy stuck to it, for he knew that cattle invariably choose the easiest way. Also he knew the country so near home like a book, or rather better than he knew any written books. To him the land, lying as yet much as it came from the hands of the Creator, carried more messages and held more interesting things than any printed pages. Grouse scuttled aside or rose with a roar of wings, and the boy eyed them regretfully. Once he caught sight of a coyote, an arrogant, bushy-tailed youngster which, apparently knowing that he was in a hurry, stood in full view watching him. Once he stopped short at a momentary glimpse of something in thick bush. But as he did not see it again, he rode on.

While he still rode in the shadow of the eastern hills, the sun from behind them struck the face of

the western range ten miles or more across Fire Valley. Behind that again it glinted on peaks still capped with the snows of the previous winter. The sunshine moved downward to the valley and eastward across it in a marching swath of gold. In that clear, thin air to the keen eyes of the boy, peaks and rocks and even trees miles away were sharply defined. Below him was a lake, pale silver where the mists that still clung to its surface had parted. Half an hour later it would take on the wondrous blue of mountain waters. But the boy did not care for that, nor just then for the great unfolding panorama of rolling, timber-clad hills, bare, gray peaks and blue sky. He was an hour late and, as everybody knows, the early morning is the best time to hunt.

He had intended to enter a pass leading into the hills and turn from it up a big draw which he knew held blacktail, but he gave up the idea and turned along the base of the mountain. He was now in a country of jackpine with huge, scattered, gloomy firs and chumps of cottonwood. Numerous little spring-fed creeks ran through it, and there were rocky coulees and small ponds. It was an ideal country for whitetail. There the boy dismounted, hung his saddle from a tree out of the reach of a possible porcupine, and put his pony on a rope. He glanced around mechanically, noting the exact position and registering landmarks. Then he levered a cartridge into the chamber of his rifle, dropped the hammer to half cock, tucked the weapon under his arm and struck off parallel with the base of the mountain.

In motion the impression of awkwardness vanished. He walked with the peculiar straight-footed, bent-kneed slouch which is the distinctive mark of the woodsman and moccasin wearer; and is, moreover, extremely easy because the weight of the body cushions on the natural shock-absorbers, the ball of the foot and the bend of the knee, and so is quite a different method of locomotion from the ordinary heel-jarring stride. Also it is much faster than it looks. And so the boy moved easily and silently, his moccasined feet automatically avoiding sticks and loose stones.

He did not hurry. Now and then he stopped, his eyes keen as a young hawk's fixed on some ill-defined object, and he remained absolutely motionless until it defined itself to his gaze. Occasionally he inspected the soft ground, but though he saw many impressions of the hoofs of deer he paid little attention to them. He followed the only practical method of still-hunting, prowling along quietly and watchfully.

But luck seemed against him. Twice, in spite of his care, he heard the thumping beat which told that deer, alarmed, were making a get-away, but he did not see them. Being pardonably proud of his eyes and his ability to move quietly, the boy was disgusted. Noon came and he had no meat. He sat down by a spring which gushed cold from the base of a hill, and ate his bread and meat and two doughnuts. Of the latter four remained. These he saved against an emergency, and stretching himself on a patch of yellow, sun-dried grass went to sleep like a young dog.

In an hour he awoke, stretched himself, drank from the spring and circling toward the mountain began to work back toward his pony. He had covered perhaps half the return distance when he came suddenly upon a young buck. At the same time the buck caught sight of him and set sail for the protection of thick brush.

Though taken by surprise, the boy was unflurried. He planted his feet solidly, swung his rifle swiftly but without hurry, caught the leaping form fair with the bead and squeezed the trigger. A second time the rifle rapped on the heels of its own echo, and the buck pitched forward sprawling, the stiffening gone from his slim limbs which kicked convulsively.

But instead of running forward eagerly, the boy scarcely shifted his position as he pumped another cartridge into place. As the deer did not rise he fed two fresh shells to the magazine methodically. There was no youthful triumph in his face. Instead it showed a certain dissatisfaction.

"Ought to have downed him first shot," he muttered, and went forward. He turned the deer over finding that the first bullet had stuck too far back. Laying the rifle aside he stuck the animal and proceeded to dress him. Completing his task he rose and scanned the brush thirty yards away for a convenient sapling on which to hang his meat.

As he looked, his eye was arrested by a movement in the bushes of something dun or brown. Without taking his eyes from the spot he stooped for his rifle, cocked it and advanced slowly.

When he was within thirty feet of the bushes they shook, and the boy halted, throwing his rifle forward, the butt halfway to his shoulders. Then, from the shelter of the bushes out stepped a girl.

She was apparently several years younger than the boy, slight, straight, fair of hair, with clear blue eyes which, however, seemed a little puffy and reddened. Her face, too, was streaked as with tears, and one sheer stocking was torn so that the flesh peeped through. She held her arms straight by her sides, her fists gripped tight. Plainly she was frightened, but though her mouth quivered a little she looked the boy straight in the face.

If it had been a grizzly he would have been less surprised. The girl was a stranger and, moreover, her dress of neat brown linen, her shoes, and even the sheer, torn stockings, showed that she did not belong in that neighborhood.

"Hallo!" he said. She gave a little, gasping sigh of relief.

"Why," she said, "you're just a white boy." She spoke with a faint little lisp, which was really enticing. But her words did not please the boy who privately considered himself a good deal of a

man.

"What did you think I was?" he asked in as gruff a voice as he could attain.

"I thought you were an In-di-an," she said, pronouncing the word in syllables; "a growed-up—I mean a grown-up-In-di-an."

Having known Indians all his life the boy found her words unflattering. "What made you think that?" he queried.

"Because you looked so black and bloody," she told him frankly.

The boy was disgusted. What business had this girl to call him black? "What's a kid like you doing away out here?" he demanded severely. And he added wickedly: "Don't you know these woods are full of grizzlies and cougars and wolves? It's a wonder you weren't eaten alive."

The girl shivered and glanced fearfully back into the gloom of the firs.

"I didn't mean to get lost, really."

"Lost, are you?"

"I was," she said, "but now, of course, you've found me. I'm not afraid now, because I know you wouldn't let anything hurt me."

At this belated tribute to his manhood the boy's expression softened.

"Well, I guess you're safe now," he admitted. "How did you get lost, and where from?"

"I got lost from Uncle Godfrey's ranch."

"Do you mean old Godfrey French's ranch?"

"I mean Mr. Godfrey French's ranch," she corrected him. "You'll take me there, won't you, like a nice boy?"

The boy snorted. The ranch in question was nearly ten miles distant. Of course she would ride his pony. He did not in the least mind the walking, but it meant that he would have to leave the deer until the next day, and meat was needed at home. However, there was no help for it.

"I suppose I'll have to," he said with the candor of his age. "How did you get lost?"

Her explanation was commonplace. She had gone for a ride in the morning, and the mountains had seemed closer than they were. Tiring she had dismounted, and had been unable to catch her pony. She had followed him until finally he had disappeared, by which time she was hopelessly confused.

"Then," she said, "I walked and walked, and I found a lot of paths, but they didn't seem to go anywhere. I—I was frightened. And then I heard two shots and I ran as hard as could, and when I saw you I was frightened again. But now of course it's all right."

The boy grunted. It was just like a girl to let her pony get away, and get lost, and follow cattle trails all over the country instead of taking her bearings and striking for home as any intelligent being would have done. Girls were fools, anyway. They were always getting into trouble, and dumping themselves down on a man to be looked after. If old Godfrey French was her uncle, why in blazes didn't some of the French boys take care of this kid? They hadn't anything else to do.

The boy had little or no use for the French family, which held itself a little aloof from most of the inhabitants of the district. It consisted of Godfrey French, his four sons and one daughter. The sons were young men. They were all big, powerful young fellows, and one of them, Gavin, was reputed to be the strongest man in the neighborhood. The daughter, a long-limbed slip of a girl who rode like a cow-puncher, was about the boy's age. Though Godfrey French had a ranch it was worked scarcely at all. The boys did not like work, and apparently did not have to. Godfrey French was reputed to have money. His ranch was a hang-out for what were known as "remittance men", young Englishmen who received more or less regular allowances from home—or perhaps to keep away from home. There were rumors of gambling and hard drinking at French's ranch.

"Well, I'll take you home," the boy said. "You can ride my pony. He's on a rope a mile from here. But I'll have to hang up this buck, or the coyotes will chew him."

He found two small saplings close together, bent them down, trimmed them and lashed their tops. Over these he placed the tied legs of the buck. With a little search he found a long dry pole. With this he had a tripod. As he hoisted with the pole the spring of the saplings raised the buck, which dangled clear, out of reach of all four-footed marauders. The girl watched him, wide-eyed. To her it seemed a marvellously clever piece of engineering.

"Well, now we'll be going," the boy announced. He started at his ordinary pace, but reduced it immediately because she seemed very tired. Coming to a creek she hesitated and stopped.

"Won't you wash your face and hands, please?" she said.

The boy stared at her, but washed obediently. So did she, and began to dry her face with a tiny handkerchief at which the boy cast a glance of contempt. He drew forth his own, which was two

feet square, and originally had been figured in red and yellow, but unfortunately the two colors had run together.

"Here, take this," he said. But the girl looked at the variegated square suspiciously.

"No, thank you. I'm afraid it's not san—sanitary."

"It ain't—what?" the boy queried.

"I mean it's not clean."

"Sure it's clean," he returned indignantly. "You're mighty particular, seems to me." Struck by a sudden thought he took the remains of his lunch from his pocket and opened it, exposing four sadly crushed doughnuts. "I don't s'pose you'd eat these, would you? Maybe they ain't sanitary enough."

But the girl who had had nothing to eat since morning, eyed the delicacies longingly.

"I—I'll take one, thank you."

"Eat the bunch," said the boy generously. "I've had all I want. Sit down and rest. There's no rush."

The girl sat down, munching the crushed doughnuts with keen enjoyment, while the boy stretched on the grass, his head pillowed in his locked hands watched her curiously. Looking up she met his gaze.

"They're awfully good," she said. "Did your mother make them?"

"My mother is dead. Jean made 'em. She's my sister."

"What is your name, please?"

"My full name is Angus Struan Mackay."

"How do you spell it?"

"M-a-c-k-a-y."

"But k-a-y spells 'K'. Why do you pronounce your name 'McKi'?"

"Because it is," young Mackay replied with finality.

"How many brothers and sisters have you?"

"There's just father, and Jean and Turkey and me."

"'Turkey!'" she exclaimed. "What a funny name! Is it a boy or a girl?"

"His real name is Torquil," young Angus explained, "after my grandfather. He's just a kid, like you. What is your own name?"

"I am Faith Winton."

"Faith Winton French?"

"No, just Winton. Uncle Godfrey isn't really my uncle. That is, he is my mother's uncle by marriage. My mother is dead, too. My father is Sewell Winton."

She stated the fact proudly; but the boy was unimpressed.

"What does your father do for a living?" he asked.

"My father is a great artist."

"Is that so," said young Mackay. "You mean he paints pictures?"

"Of course he does—great pictures. But I suppose, living here, you've never seen them." Her tone expressed pity.

"I've never seen painted pictures that looked like anything at all," Angus Mackay returned with contempt. "There was a teacher at our school that painted things, but you could not tell what it was all about. She would paint what she would call a cow, but it would look like a horse, all but the horns, and a poor horse, too. Has your father come here to paint?"

"No, he isn't well. He thought the change might do him good, but it doesn't seem to. We are going away in a few days."

But young Mackay was not interested in the painter's health, nor was he specially interested in the painter's daughter. His immediate object now that she had finished the doughnuts was to get her off his hands. And so he set a good pace toward his pony, saddled, shortened the stirrups and helped the girl up. No longer restrained by her inability to keep up with his stride, he struck a swift, swinging gait which was faster than the pony's walk. He paid little or no attention to girl or pony. It was their business to keep up with him. He led the way without hesitation, around sloughs, down coulees, through timber. When they had been traveling thus for an hour or more he stopped suddenly.

"Somebody is shouting," he said. "It will be your people looking for you, likely. We will just wait

here. You had better get down, for I am going to shoot and he might not stand still."

He fired three shots close together, and after an interval three more. Soon afterward they could hear a distant whoop. Mackay answered, and in a few minutes the search party which had been strung out combing benches and coulees, began to converge upon them.

First came Kathleen French, a dark-haired, blue-eyed girl sitting astride a slashing, blaze-faced sorrel, and following her, her three brothers, Blake, Gerald and Lawrence, the latter leading the pony which had evaded Faith Winton. The pony had come in, it appeared, with the saddle twisted down under its belly and kicked to flinders, and the Frenches had united in blaming Larry, the youngest, who had given Faith the pony and saddled it for her.

"And lucky for you she wasn't hurt," Blake told him. He was a big, powerfully built man, with a heavy, florid face which was already beginning to show signs of the life he led. "If she'd been smashed up you'd have got yours."

Larry, a rangy, hawk-faced youngster, eyed his brother insolently. "I would, hey! Well, not from you, and you can make a note of that."

"Shut up!" said the sister. "Quit your scrapping. We may as well be drifting. Climb up on this pony, Faith."

Faith Winton held out her hand. "Good-by, Angus Mackay. And thank you so much for finding me, and for the ride, and for the doughnuts."

Young Mackay shook hands limply. "That is all right," he said, embarrassed. But Kathleen French was reminded of an omission.

"We're a nice lot!" she exclaimed. "Not one of us has thanked him for looking after Faith. Well I do, anyway. It was good of you, Angus Mackay."

"Oh, sure," Gerald French concurred carelessly. Not so heavily built as his brother Blake, he was as tall and finer drawn. His face was oval, his eyes dark and lazy, and his voice a drawl. "Thanks, Mackay."

"Ditto," said young Larry.

Blake French, reaching into his pocket pulled out a roll of currency and stripped off a bill. "No, no, Cousin Blake!" Faith Winton exclaimed, but he held it out to the boy.

"Here you are, Mackay. That's better than thanks. I guess you can use it."

But the boy made no movement to take the money. "I was not bringing her home for money, nor for thanks either," he said uncompromisingly.

Blake laughed loudly. "I never heard of a Mackay refusing money."

The boy scowled at him. "There will be other things you have not heard of," he said coldly.

Blake French stared at him, and laughed again.

"Well, give him a kiss, Faith. Maybe that's what he'd like. Or has he had it?"

"Cousin Blake, you're horrid!" the girl cried indignantly.

"The kid isn't used to talk like that, Blake," Kathleen told him. "Have some sense."

"Where would he get it?" young Larry asked insolently. For answer his brother cursed him.

"Cut that out, Blake," Gerald drawled, but his tone was edged.

"Then let that young pup keep a civil tongue in his head," Blake growled.

"Pup, hey?" said young Larry. "Well, I'll never make a yellow dog, anyway." The insinuation was obvious. Blake's face blackened with fury, but wheeling his horse he rode off after the girls. Gerald and Larry with brief nods to young Mackay, followed.

The latter stood looking after them, his heavy brows drawn in a frown. Then, with a shrug of his shoulders, he lengthened his stirrups and swung up on his pony.

CHAPTER II

A DEATH BED

Deciding that it was too late to go back after the deer, Angus headed for home. The sun was down when he struck into a wagon trail a couple of miles from the ranch, and he had followed it but a few hundred yards when he heard the sound of hoofs behind him. Turning in his saddle he recognized horse and rider which were overhauling him rapidly.

"What's the rush, Dave?" he asked as they drew level.

Whatever the rush had been it seemed to be over. The rider slowed to a walk. He was a small man, apparently in the forties, wiry and sun-dried. His name was Rennie, and he was nominally a homesteader, though he did little more than comply with the statutory requirements. In winter he trapped and in summer he turned his hand to almost anything. He was a wizard with horses, he knew the habits of most wild animals thoroughly and he had seen a great deal of the old West. He and young Mackay were friends, and he had taught the boy many things from his own store of experience. As he pulled up, the boy noted that Blaze's bright coat was dark with sweat and that his head hung wearily.

"You've been combing some speed out of that cayuse," he commented.

"He's been on grass and lathers easy," Rennie returned. "But I was—I was sorter lookin' for you, kid."

"Why?"

"Well, you see—your daddy he wants you."

"He knew I was hunting. I got a two-year old buck, but it was too late to pack him in. What does he want me for?"

The question seemed to embarrass Rennie exceedingly. He gulped and went into a fit of coughing which left him red in the face.

"He wants to talk to you," he replied at last. "He—he wants to tell you something, I guess. He—he ain't right well, your daddy ain't."

"Not well!" the boy cried in amazement. "Why, what's the matter with him, Dave?"

"A little accident—just a little accident, kid. He—he—now you don't want to go worryin' about it; not yet, anyway."

But Rennie's effort to break bad news gently was too obvious. The boy's voice took on a sharp note of alarm.

"What sort of an accident?" he demanded. "Is he hurt? Talk up, can't you?"

"Well, now, durn it, kid, I'd ruther break a leg than tell you—but your daddy, he's been shot up some."

"Do you mean he's dead?" the boy cried in wide-eyed horror.

"No, he ain't dead—or he wasn't when I started out to find you. But—but he's plugged plumb center, and—and—Oh, hell, I guess you know what I'm tryin' to say!"

The boy stared at him dumbly while the slow thudding pad of the horses' feet on the soft trail smote on his ears like the sound of muffled drums. He failed at first, as the young must ever fail, to comprehend the full meaning of the message. His father dead or dying! His father, Adam Mackay, that living tower of muscle and sinew who could lift with his hands logs with which other men struggled with cant-hook and peavie, who could throw a steel-beamed breaking plow aboard a wagon as another man would handle a wheel-hoe? It was unbelievable.

But slowly the realization was forced upon him. His father had been shot, and with the knowledge came the flame of bitter anger and desire for revenge that was his in right of the blood in his veins. And the desire momentarily overwhelmed sorrow.

"Who did it?" he asked, his young voice a fierce, croaking whisper.

"I dunno. He won't tell anybody. Maybe he'll tell you."

"Come on!" Angus Mackay cried, and dug heels into his pony.

The pony was blown and gasping as they rode up to the ranch and Angus leaped from his back. Rennie's hand fell on his shoulder.

"Kid," he said earnestly, "you want to brace up and keep braced. If it's a show-down for your daddy he'll like to know you're takin' it like a man. Then there's Jean and Turkey. This here happens to everybody, and while it's tough it's a part of the game. And just one more thing: If you find out who done the shootin', let me know!"

The boy nodded, because he could not trust himself to speak, and ran into the house. It was hushed in the twilight. Already it seemed to hold a little of the strange stillness which comes with the departure of a familiar presence. As the boy paused, from a corner came a little, sniffing sob, and in the semi-darkness he saw his young brother, Torquil, curled miserably upon a skin-covered couch. Paying no attention to him he crossed the living room and as he did so his sister Jean entered. In some mysterious way she seemed years older than the girl-child who had come running after him in the gray mists of that morning. Dry-eyed, slender, quiet-moving, like the shadow of a girl in the gloom, she led him back and closed the door. He obeyed her touch without question, without a trace of his superiority of the morning. In face of sickness and death, like most of his sex he felt helpless, impotent. He put his long arm around his sister and suddenly she clung to him, her slender body shaking.

"He's not—dead—Jean?"

"Not—not yet, Angus. Dr. Wilkes is with him now. He says he won't live long. He didn't want to tell me, but I made him."

She told him all she knew. Adam Mackay had ridden away by himself that morning, no one knew whither. In the afternoon he had come home swaying in his saddle, shot through the body. Then young Turkey had climbed into the blood-soaked saddle and ridden for the doctor. As to how he had met with his hurt Adam Mackay had said no word.

The inner door opened to admit a burly, thick-bodied man with reddish hair sprinkled with gray and grizzled, bushy eyebrows. This was Dr. Wilkes. He nodded to Angus.

"You're in time. Your father wants you. Go to him, and call me if anything happens."

"He's going to—going to—"

The boy was unable to complete the sentence. The doctor put his arm over his shoulder for a moment in a kindly, elder-brotherly touch.

"I'm afraid so, my boy. In fact, I know so. Keep a stiff upper lip, old man. He'll like that."

Adam Mackay stared at his eldest son hungrily from the pillows. Above his great black beard his face was gray. He was a great frame of a man, long, lean and sinewy. The likeness of father and son was marked. He held out his hand feebly and the boy took it and choked. Then Adam Mackay spoke in a little whisper so unlike his usual deep voice that the boy was startled, and because it was near the end with him his words carried the sharp twist and hiss of the Gaelic which was the tongue of his youth; for though Adam Mackay had never seen Scotland, he had been born in a settlement which, fifty years before, was more Gaelic than the Highlands themselves.

"It cannot be helped, son, and it is little I care for myself. When you come to face death, many years from now, please the God, you'll find it no' sic' a fearful thing. But it is you and the children that worries me now, Angus."

"Never mind us, father," the boy said. "I can look after Jean and Turkey."

The stricken giant smiled at him with a quiet pride of which the recollection years after warmed the boy's heart.

"I had hoped for twenty years of life yet, by which time you would have been settled, with children of your own. Eh, well, the young birds must fledge and fly alone, and your wings are well sprouted, Angus-lad. You have in you the makings of a man, though yet headstrong and dour by nature. And now listen, son, for my time is short: I look to you to take the place I can no longer fill. You are the Mackay, the head of the family. Remember that, and cease before your time to be a boy."

"I will, father," the boy promised.

"There is little or no money, worse luck," the man went on. "All I have had I have put into land and timber, and the fire burnt the timber: But in time the land will make you rich, though not yet awhile, maybe. But till it does, the ranch will give you a living. Sell nothing now—not an acre. Promise me, boy!"

"I promise, father," the boy replied.

"A promise to a dying father is an oath," the man went on. "But no Mackay of our Mackays ever broke his word passed for good or ill. Remember that, too. I have made a will, and all I have is left to you as the eldest son. That has ever been our custom. When the time comes, and they are older, deal generously with your sister and brother. That is our custom, too. Of this will, the man Braden is named as executor. I had intended—but it is too late now. He is a man of business and has the name of an upright man. But if you need advice, son, go to Judge Riley, drunkard and all as he is. But for that he should have been in Braden's place. That is all, I think. I feel more content now." And he closed his eyes with a sigh.

"I will remember, father," the boy said. "But who did this? Who shot you?"

The eyes opened and searched his deeply for many seconds.

"Why do you want to know?"

"I ought to know," the boy replied.

"You want to know," his father said, "so that if the law should fail, you would take the old law of the old days into your young hands. Is that it, my son?"

"Yes," the boy admitted, "that is it. And why for no, father?"

For a moment the graying face of the dying man lighted with a swift gleam of pride and satisfaction. Then he lifted his great hand feebly.

"You have bred true, lad. Ever were the Mackays good haters, bitter of heart and heavy of hand. So I have been all my days, and no man did me wrong that I did not repay it. But listen, son o' mine: Lying here with my man's strength gone from me and the shadows on my soul I see more clearly, as clearly as old Murdoch McGillivray, who is dead, and as you know had the gift while he lived. And I tell you now that hate and revenge are the things worth least in life; and,

moreover, that the things worth most in life and much more in death, are love, and work well done, and a heart clean of bitterness. And so I will tell you nothing at all."

"Please, father!" the boy pleaded, for as his father had said he had bred true.

"No and no, I tell you, no!" Adam Mackay refused. "No killing will bring me back. I will not lay a feud upon you. Blood and blood, and yet more blood I have seen come of such things. I know you, Angus, bone o' my bone and flesh o' my flesh as I know my own youth, and of the knowledge in that one thing I will not trust you. I die, and that is the end of it, for me and for all of me. Your duty is to the living. And now call you Jean and Torquil, that I may bid them farewell. And take you my blessing such as it is; for I feel the darkness closing upon me."

An hour later Adam Mackay was dead. And that day was the last of Angus Mackay's careless boyhood.

CHAPTER III

ANGUS ASSERTS HIMSELF

Though the death of Adam Mackay made a great local sensation, its cause remained unexplained. Apparently he had been unarmed, and so it seemed plain murder. But on the other hand his strange silence was puzzling. He had been on good terms with most of his neighbors, or at least not on very bad terms with anybody, save a couple of Indians whom he had caught stealing and handled roughly. But these Indians had a perfectly good alibi. There was no clew, no starting point. Nobody knew even which way Mackay had ridden on the day of his death. And so after a while it was classed with those mysteries which may be solved by time, but not otherwise.

Meanwhile, young Angus took up the burden of his responsibilities. So far as he knew he had no near relatives, and search of his father's papers confirmed this. He was rather relieved than otherwise. He found his father's will, and struggling with its verbiage, set it aside to await the return of the executor Isaac J. Braden, who was absent on a business trip.

Braden was known to Angus by sight and by reputation. He lived in Mowbray, the nearest town, which was some sixteen miles from the ranch, where he was the big frog in its little puddle. He had a good many irons in the fire. He ran a sort of private banking-loan-insurance business, dealt in real estate, owned an interest in a store, dabbled in local politics and was prominent in church matters. He was considered a very able and trustworthy man. But young Angus, though he had very misty notions of the functions of an executor, had a very clear and definite conviction that it was up to him to run the ranch and look after his sister and brother. That was his personal job. And so he took stock of the situation.

Adam Mackay had owned in all a block of nearly two thousand acres. Of this about three hundred was cultivated or in pasture. The whole block was good, very level, with ample water for irrigation. On the range was nearly a hundred head of cattle. There were horses in plenty—a couple of work team, a team of drivers, and each young Mackay had a saddle pony. The buildings were good, and the wagons, sleighs, tools and machinery in excellent condition. The ranch was a going concern, apparently in good shape. None the less it was a hard proposition for a youngster to handle. It was like putting a cabin boy on the bridge to navigate the ship.

Having been brought up on a ranch, he knew quite well how most work should be done, and he had acquired by absorption rather than by conscious thought a good deal of theory. But Adam Mackay had himself done rather more than half the work. He had had but one steady hired man, Gus Gustafson, a huge Scandinavian who was a splendid worker when told what to do, but who had no head whatever. As Angus could not do the work his father had done he had to obtain additional help, and so he made a proposition to Dave Rennie.

Rennie was not much of a farmer, but he came to the ranch temporarily at first out of his friendship for Angus, and remained.

On a certain Saturday afternoon Angus and Dave Rennie, engaged in hanging a new gate, saw a two-seated rig with three men approaching. Rennie peered at them.

"There's Braden," he said. "I heard he'd got back."

"And that's Nick Garland driving," Angus observed. "Who's the other fellow?"

"Stranger to me. Garland, huh! I never had much use for that sport."

Garland was a young man whose business, so far as he had any, was dealing in cattle. Uncharitable persons said that he dealt more poker. He was a good-looking chap, after a fashion, who affected cowboy garb, rode a good horse, was locally known and considered himself a devil among the girls, and generally tried to live up to the reputation of a dead-game sport.

The third man, whom neither Angus nor Dave recognized, was a nondescript, sandy individual with drooping shoulders, a drooping nose above a drooping moustache which but partially concealed a drooping mouth. On the whole, both Garland and this stranger seemed uncongenial

companions for Mr. Braden.

That celebrity grunted as he climbed down. He was a fleshy man of middle age, clean shaven, carefully dressed, with small, somewhat fishy eyes. He took Angus' brown, hardened paw in a soft, moist palm, putting his left hand on his shoulder in a manner which he intended to be sympathetic and protecting; but at which Angus squirmed inwardly and grew rigid outwardly, for in common with normal boys he hated the touch of a stranger.

"And so," said Mr. Braden in a short-winded, throaty voice which held an occasional curious pant like an old-time camp meeting exhorter, "and so this is Angus! It is a matter of great regret to me, my boy, that I was absent at the time of your bereavement. You and your young sister and your young brother have my heartfelt sympathy in this your time of tribulation—huh. Your father was a very dear friend of mine, a man in a thousand, one of nature's noblemen. 'We ne'er shall look upon his like again,' as the poet truly remarks. However, there is no use crying over—that is, the Lord giveth and taketh away—huh, as you have been taught, no doubt. As executor of your father's will my dear boy, I regard myself as in loco parentis, and I hope you will regard me in that way, too."

He beamed most benevolently, but Angus was unimpressed. Mr. Braden, if he had only known it, could not have made a worse start. A quiet word of sympathy or a firm grip of the hand without words would have gone far. As it was, he quite failed to inspire liking or confidence.

They went to the house together, where Mr. Braden said much the same thing over again to Jean, and patted her head. And young Turkey, unwarily peeping through the door, was called in and addressed as "my little man" and patted also; which attentions he acknowledged with a fierce scowl and a muttered word, which fortunately Mr. Braden did not hear.

But these preliminaries over, Mr. Braden got down to business at once. In a few brief but pointed questions he found out all there was to know about the ranch and the stock, and he skimmed through such papers as Angus produced, with a practised eye.

"H'm, yes, yes," he said. "Now I think I understand the situation. I have given the future of you young people the most careful consideration, because it is for the future that you must now prepare. Youth is the time of preparation. It is the building time. As we sow in youth, so we reap in age—huh. Then let us ask what to-day is the great essential of success? There is but one answer—education. And so it follows that you young people must receive the best education that your father's estate can give you; and as Art is long and Time fleeting, as the poet truly remarks, you young people must enter upon the path of learning at once."

The young people said nothing. The flow of words bewildered them. Mr. Braden then got down to brass tacks:

"I will make the necessary arrangements right away," he said. "We will rent the ranch and sell off some of the stock, and the money will be used in sending you all to some good school which will fit you for success in life."

This was definite, concrete, different from generalities. Angus stared at the executor.

"Rent the ranch!" he exclaimed. "I guess not. I'm going to run it myself."

Mr. Braden smiled tolerantly. "Your spirit is very creditable, my boy, but you are too young and inexperienced."

"I'm running it now," Angus told him, "and I'm going to keep on. I won't stand for having it rented."

"At your age, my boy, you don't know what is best for you. You must allow me to be the judge."

Youth is hot-headed, and the tongue of youth unruly.

"I will not stand for having the ranch rented," Angus repeated. "I am going to stay here and work it, and that's all there is to it."

Mr. Braden frowned at this brusque ultimatum. "I have already made arrangements with Mr. Poole, here, to take it over."

Angus looked at the drooping Mr. Poole and decided that he did not like him.

"I don't care what you have made," he said bluntly. "Renters rip the heart out of a ranch. They take everything from the land and put nothing back; and when they have worked it out they quit. That's not going to happen here, if I know it."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Mr. Poole observed.

"I think I know more about ranching than you do," Angus retorted.

"I was ranching before you was born," Mr. Poole told him loftily.

"Then why haven't you got a ranch of your own, instead of hobbing it around, renting places?" Angus demanded.

Mr. Poole reddened and scowled. "I had a blame sight better ranch than this, but I sold it," he said.

"By your looks I think the sheriff helped you," Angus said. "You look to me like a man that is too lazy to turn over in bed, like a man that would sleep in winter and never hear his stock bawling for feed. You will never have this ranch. If you try to come on it—"

"Angus," Mr. Braden broke in with dignified severity, "you are forgetting yourself. You must not talk in that way to your elders."

But by this time young Mackay's temper, which had been gradually rising, was beyond being damped off by a stern voice and dignified manner.

"I will say what I think," he declared, "to this man Poole, or to you, or to anybody else, and I will back up what I say the best way I can. You come here and talk about renting the ranch and selling stock as if I had nothing to say about it. I tell you, now, it doesn't go. I am staying here, and so are Jean and Turkey. If you try to put us off, or put this Poole or anybody else on, there will be trouble you can scoop up in a bucket."

Garland chose that moment to laugh. Angus turned on him with a scowl. He was like a young dog cornered by older ones, nervous, snarling, but quite ready to fight for his bone. He looked Garland in the eye.

"And that goes for you too," he said. "You will buy nothing with the MK brand from anybody but me. You try to take a single head of my stock off the range, and you'll do it in the smoke, do you savvy that?"

Garland laughed again, but there was a note of uneasiness in it, for next to the real "bad man," cold, experienced and deadly, comes the boy, who, bred in the traditions of the old West, has the recklessness and hot passions of extreme youth. The history of the West teems with examples.

"You're making a fool of yourself, kid," he said.

Here Dave Rennie broke the silence which had enwrapped him.

"Oh, I dunno," he observed.

"What have you got to say about it?" Garland demanded.

"I ain't said much so far," Rennie pointed out, "and I ain't goin' to. Only this: Don't nobody overplay his hand in this game—nobody at all."

"Who are you?" asked Mr. Braden.

"Me? Dave Rennie. I'm workin' for the kid."

"Then," said Mr. Braden, "I fail to see what interest you have in the matter, my friend."

"I get in this way," said Dave. "I'm a friend of the kid's, as well as a hired man. You can take what you like out of that."

Whatever Mr. Braden took out of it he did not immediately speak, but drummed with his fingers on the table.

"One of my rules of life," he said, "is to get along without friction; I trust I am a reasonable man. When I find that my views conflict with those of others, I weigh both carefully. They may be right and I may be wrong. We must have no friction at the outset, Angus, and I think that you have misunderstood me. As you object to renting the ranch I am going to give you an opportunity to think it over, and I am going to think it over myself. Then we will have another talk. Naturally, I must do what is best for the estate, but I wish to meet your wishes as far as possible. My sole desire is to do my best for all of you. No friction—no, no. We do not want friction, do we, my boy?"

"I do not want trouble at all," Angus said. "All I want is to run the ranch, and that is what I am going to do."

"Yes, yes, I understand," Mr. Braden returned. "Well, do so for the present, my boy. Then we will talk it over again."

"There is no use talking it over," Angus maintained. "I have made up my mind."

Mr. Braden looked as though he desired to express his opinion of this boyish obstinacy, but changing his mind he smiled benevolently and suggested a look around the ranch. Angus accompanied him, pointing out what was needed and what he intended to do. The executor listened, asking an occasional question, giving now and then a bit of advice. But when he had driven away Angus was thoughtful.

"You and him was gettin' to be some tillikums," Rennie observed.

"He seemed all right while I was going around with him," Angus admitted. "He wants to get that notion of renting out his head, though. I wonder how it would be on a show-down, Dave? Do you suppose he could rent the place, no matter whether I wanted to or not, or was he only running a sandy?"

"I dunno," Rennie admitted. "If I was you I'd go and have a talk with old Judge Riley, like your daddy told you to do if anything come up. You may catch him sober. Not," he added, "that the old

boy ain't pretty wise when he's drunk."

CHAPTER IV

JUDGE RILEY—DRUNK AND SOBER

"Judge" Riley had once been on the bench, but for some reason had resigned and gone back to his profession, hanging out his shingle in Mowbray. There was no doubt of his natural and professional ability, but it was the inability to let liquor alone, even when business demanded attention. Hence he had little of the latter.

He was not sober when Angus entered his untidy little office. At Angus' entrance he stared up with dull eyes from beneath a thick thatch of gray hair which had fallen across his forehead like a horse's forelock. For a moment he had difficulty in identifying his visitor, but succeeded.

"Angus," he muttered, "sure, yes, Angus Mackay. Sit down, Angus. And how is your father?"

"My father is dead, Judge Riley," Angus reminded him.

"Dead!" said the judge, "dead!" His voice altered at the repetition of the word, and his eyes lost a little of their dullness. "Why, I knew that," he muttered to himself, "I knew Mackay was dead. I—I beg your pardon, Angus. Not—not exactly right just now. A little—a little touch of something. All right, presently."

"I'll come in again," Angus said. "I wanted to see you on business."

"Bus'ness?" the judge queried. "Always 'tend to bus'ness. Not so much of it now. State your bus'ness."

Though he did not see much use in doing so in the judge's condition, Angus told him what had happened and asked what powers the executor possessed.

"Exec'tor governed by will," the judge told him. "Never give 'pinion on written instrument without seeing instrument."

"You drew the will yourself, judge—at least it has your name on it."

"Good will, then," said the judge, "perfec'ly good will."

"There's nothing in it about renting the place."

"Exec'tor's powers broad," said the judge. "Gen'ral law of trustees. Governed by will, though. Princ'ples governing construction of will—"

But just then the judge was in no condition to enunciate them. His voice trailed off into a murmur and his head dropped.

"I'll come in again," said Angus, "and pay for your advice. What do you charge, judge?"

"Charge!" muttered the judge lifting his head. "Charge, Chester, charge! On, Stan—"

"Your fee," Angus interrupted.

"Oh, fee!" said the judge. "Yes, fee. Very proper. Fund'mental princ'ple of law, never neglect fee. Fifty dollars!"

"Fifty dollars!" Angus gasped.

"Merely nom'nal fee," the judge murmured. "Avoid lit'gation, young man, 'void lit'gation!" And his head fell forward and he slept.

Disappointed in obtaining legal advice from the judge, Angus left his office. He was determined, however, to know where he stood, and two days afterward he entered the judge's office again. This time the judge was sober and busy.

"Glad to see you, Angus," he greeted cheerfully, "sit down and have a chat."

Angus sat down and, taking fifty dollars in bills from his pocket, handed the money across the desk. The judge did not take it. He frowned at the tenderer.

"What is this?" he demanded.

"Your fee," Angus explained.

"For what?"

"For telling me what I want to know."

"Indeed!" rasped the judge. "And how the devil do you know that I can or will tell you what you want to know? And who gave you the authority to fix my fee?"

"You fixed it yourself," Angus reminded him. "When I was here two days ago you told me your fee

for advice was fifty dollars; and now I have brought the money for the advice."

A dull color rose in the old lawyer's cheeks.

"You mean I was too drunk to give it," he said. "I remember that you were here, but nothing about fifty dollars. Put it back in your pocket, and tell me what you want to know."

"But I want to pay for what I get."

"Well, you won't," the judge snapped.

"Why not?"

"Because I regulate my own charges," the judge told him. "I've enjoyed your father's hospitality and yours, and not a cent would you Mackays ever accept for the time you lost, or for the hire of horses or their feed, or mine. Damned proud Highland Scotch, that must always give and never take! Put your money in your pocket, I tell you, and let me know what's worrying you."

So, seeing that he meant it, Angus put his money back and stated his case.

"H'm," said the judge. "So Braden wants to rent the ranch, does he, and sell some stock. Under certain circumstances that might be expedient. An executor's powers are broad enough, within certain limits, which you probably wouldn't understand. But what do you want to do yourself? What do you think is the best thing for you and your sister and brother?"

"I want to stay on the ranch. I can make a living there. Jean and Turkey are going to school now, and it will be some years before they are through with it. Then it will be time enough to think of another school."

"How about yourself?" the judge queried. "You are at the age when you should be laying the foundations of more education if you are to get it at all."

"I have thought of that," Angus replied, "and I do not think I have the head for books, like Jean. I might spend years learning things that might be well enough to know, perhaps, but of no real use to make a living, which is what I have to do. And meanwhile the ranch would be run down and the ground be worked out and dirty with weeds. And then there is my promise to my father. I am taking his place as well as I can; and that place is on the ranch."

"I see," said the judge thoughtfully. "You may be right, my boy. Many a good rancher has been spoiled to make a poor something else. The professions are crowded with failures. But let's go back to the point: Whether Braden has or has not the power to rent the ranch and sell stock, is immaterial so long as it is not done. I will see him, and I think I can explain the situation to him perhaps more clearly than you can. How old are you?"

"Eighteen," Angus replied. "I wish I was older."

The judge looked at him and sighed. "Believe this," he said; "that when you are older—much older—you will wish much more and just as vainly to be eighteen. It's three years before you come of age. Even then—" He broke off and for a moment was silent. "Angus, you are a close-mouthed boy. If in the future you have any trouble with Braden, or if he or anybody else makes you any proposition involving the ranch, will you come to me with it?"

"I'll be very glad to," Angus told him gratefully.

"All right. And, Angus, I'm going to give you a word of advice, which may sound strange from me. Never drink. Never start. Not only not now, but five years hence, nor ten, nor thirty, nor forty."

"I don't intend to," Angus said, in surprise. "I don't think I'd ever drink much. There isn't anything in it, it seems to me."

"You're wrong," the judge told him gravely. "You know nothing about it. In youth there is pleasure in it, and good fellowship that warms the heart, and bright eyes and soft lips—which you know nothing about yet—and dreams of ambition and temporary equality with the gods; and later in life there are the faces and voices of old friends, of men and women dead before their time, and the golden past and golden youth leaps and lives again, and the present is forgotten. And at last—Do you know what there is at last, Angus?"

"No, sir," said the boy with equal gravity. "What is there?"

"Damnation!" the judge replied slowly. "Damnation, deep and living. The damnation of those who knowing the better have chosen the worse; who living the worse can yet see the better and the great gulf fixed between. The hell of the hereafter—phutt!" And the judge snapped his fingers.

The boy stared at him wonderingly. The judge interpreted his thought.

"The gulf is fixed, because the will, which is the only thing that can bridge it, is the first thing to be destroyed. Where there is no will to fight there is no fight. And you think, too, that this advice comes strangely from me. But who can speak with greater authority—I, or the man who never took a drink in his life?"

"You, of course," Angus admitted.

"Yes, I," said the judge. "And I tell you who are on the threshold of manhood to let liquor alone;

not because there is nothing in it, as you say in your ignorance, but because there are most things—or the semblance of most things—in it that the heart of man desires. Remember not to prove these things. That's all I have to say on the subject. And now clear out, for I am busy."

But when Angus had gone the judge did not appear to be very busy. He filled a disreputable old pipe with a somewhat shaky hand, and lighting it passed into a period of reflection. At the end of it he put on his hat and proceeded up the street to Mr. Braden's office.

Mr. Braden, spick and span and freshly shaven, enjoying a very good cigar, looked with surprise and some distaste at the rumpled, unpressed clothes, unshaven cheeks and untidy hair of the old lawyer. He had little or no use for him.

"And what is it this morning, judge?" he asked.

"Mackay estate," said the judge.

Mr. Braden's eyes closed a little.

"Yes, I know you drew Mackay's will," he admitted, "but Crosby and Parks do all my business, and of course—"

"Wrong foot," said the judge, "I'm not asking for any of your business, Braden. Angus Mackay tells me you were speaking of renting the ranch, and he wanted to know if you had the power to do it."

"Of course I have," Mr. Braden asserted. "The boy—"

"I told him," the judge went on, "that whether you had the power or not, it was most unlikely that you would exercise it."

"What do you know about it?" Mr. Braden demanded brusquely.

"Not a great deal just yet; but enough to tell him that."

"Well, that may be your personal opinion. I haven't made up my mind yet. But if I consider it in the interests of the estate to rent the ranch to a competent man I shall most certainly do so."

"Poole a competent man?" the judge queried.

"I believe so. What do you know about him?"

"Not a great deal—yet," the judge returned again. "What makes you think it would be best to rent the place—to a competent man?"

"Under the circumstances I should think it would be obvious."

"If it is obvious why isn't your mind made up?"

"Look here," Mr. Braden snapped, "you aren't cross-examining me, Riley!"

The judge smiled blandly, but somehow the smile reminded Mr. Braden of the engaging facial expression of a scarred old Airedale.

"Perhaps you'll explain the obvious, Braden."

"I don't know why I should explain anything to you. I don't recognize your right to ask me any questions whatever."

"Pshaw!" said the judge. "Think a little, Braden."

Whatever Mr. Braden thought he saw fit to adopt a different tone.

"Just look at the situation from my standpoint," he said. "By their father's untimely death these children are thrown on the world with no ready money whatever. Their only source of income is the ranch, which they are too young and inexperienced to make pay. The only sensible thing to do is to put it into the hands of some competent man, so that it will yield a steady income. Isn't that common sense?"

"As you state it—yes," the judge admitted.

"Ha, of course it is," said Mr. Braden triumphantly. "Then as to the children themselves, I feel my responsibility. They must not be allowed to grow up wild like—er—cayuses, as it were. They must have an education to fit them for the Battle of Life, and as you know they can't get that at a country school. The rental of the ranch, plus the proceeds of a sale of some of the stock could not be better employed than in sending them to some first-class institution. In these days education is the right of every child. It is the key to Success, which, when Opportunity knocks at the door—What the devil are you grinning at?"

"Go on."

"Well, that's all I was going to say," said Mr. Braden whose wings of fancy had suddenly dragged before the old lawyer's cynical smile. "Rent the place; get money; apply the money to educate the children. That's it in a nutshell. Any court would approve such action of an executor."

"Possibly—on an *ex parte* application. But meantime who pays the mortgage?"

"Mortgage?" said Mr. Braden.

"The mortgage Adam Mackay made to you on the ranch to obtain money to enable him to buy timber limits which were subsequently fire-swept. That's subsisting, isn't it?"

"Certainly it is." There was a shade of defiance in Mr. Braden's tone. "I hope I am not a harsh creditor. The interest might run along and all the rental go toward educating the children."

"Very creditable to your heart," said the judge. "But practically the result would be that the interest would accumulate and compound, and that when these young people had received the education which is the key to Success the property would be saddled with a very heavy encumbrance, more, in fact, than they might care to assume."

"Well," snapped Mr. Braden, "what would you have me do? Insist on my interest and rob these poor children of their chance of life?"

"Very hard situation, isn't it?" said the judge blandly. "It is just as well to look it in the face, though. If, some years hence, the children couldn't pay off these mortgage arrears the property would have to be sold. In fact you might be forced to buy it in to protect yourself."

"Do you suggest—"

"I don't suggest anything. Let us look at another angle of it. Suppose the place is rented and a crop or two fails and the lessee proves incompetent. Then the time comes when, to educate the children, the property, or some of it, must be sold. Again you might be forced to buy it in to protect yourself."

"I don't want the ranch," Mr. Braden said.

"No, of course not. But that is the situation. Now young Angus is a well-grown boy. I think he can run the ranch fairly well. The other children are going to a school which is good enough for their present needs. Angus feels very strongly about the matter. In fact I think he would ask me to oppose any endeavor to rent the place."

"Are you threatening me with a lawsuit?"

"Not at all. There can be no action unless there are grounds for one, and of course a wise trustee walks very carefully. That's all I have to say. Good morning, Braden."

Mr. Braden from his window looked after the bulky, square-set figure of the old lawyer as he made his way down the street.

"You will, will you, you old bum!" he muttered. Then his gaze shifted to a large map of the district which hung on the wall. For some minutes he contemplated it, and then his pudgy finger tapped the exact spot which represented the Mackay ranch. Then half aloud he uttered an eternal truth. "There's sev'ral ways," said Mr. Braden, "of skinning a cat."

CHAPTER V

ANGUS IN LOVE AND WAR

The judge merely told Angus that if he could work the ranch properly it would not be rented; and thus encouraged he buckled into the work. The responsibility thrust on him changed his outlook even more than he himself realized.

Jean felt her responsibilities as much as he. She was fond of books, but she grudged the time spent at school, and from before daylight till long after dark she was as busy as a young hen with a brood of chicks. The boys helped her with the hard tasks, and on the whole she got along very well.

But though Angus and Jean felt their responsibilities and endeavored to live up to them, young Turkey did not. He was a curious combination, with as many moods and shifts as an April day. By turns he was headstrong and impulsive, and then coldly calculating. If he felt like it, he would be industrious; but if not, he would be deliberately and provokingly idle. In the days of Adam Mackay these qualities had been not so apparent; but with the passing of his father he recognized no authority and he resented bitterly the least suggestion of control.

He would soon have gotten completely out of hand had Angus permitted it. Matters came to a show-down one morning when Turkey, snug between his blankets, delivered a flat ultimatum to his brother's command that he get up and help pick potatoes.

"You go plum!" said Turkey. "Saturday's a holiday, and I'm goin' fishin'. Pick spuds yourself!"

The next moment he was yanked out of his nest by the ankle and, fighting like a young wildcat, was thrown on the floor.

"Will you pick those spuds?" Angus demanded.

"No!" Turkey shouted, and Angus whirled him over on his face and reaching out acquired a

leather slipper.

"Get this straight," he said. "You'll pick spuds, or I'll lick you till you do."

"You lick me, and I'll kill you," roared Turkey, emphasizing the threat with language gleaned from certain teamsters of his acquaintance, but which was cut short by the slipper.

"Will you come to work now?" Angus asked after a heated interval.

"No!" yelled Turkey, sobbing more with rage than with pain, "no, I won't, you big—"

But again the slipper cut him short, and this time his brother put his full strength into it. Finally, Turkey recognized the old-time doctrine of force, and gave up. That day he picked potatoes with fair diligence, and though he would not speak to Angus for a week, he did as he was told.

And so that Fall the young Mackays were very busy, and the threshing was done, and the roots dug and got in, and some fall plowing, before the frosts hardened the earth and the snow came to overlie it.

With winter the work of the ranch lightened—or at least its hours shortened. But still there was plenty to do.

But there were the long evenings, when all the work was done, and supper over and the lamps lit, and they sat by the big, airtight heater, and Angus at least enjoyed the warmth the more because, well-fed and comfortable himself, he knew that every head of his stock was also full-bellied and contented in pen and stable and stall and shed, and the wind might blow and the snow drift and not matter at all.

A year passed uneventfully. The ranch paid its way, though Angus could not meet the mortgage interest. In that year Angus had grown physically. Adam Mackay had been a strong man, and his son was beginning to show his breed, and the results of the good plain food and open air and hard exercise which had been his all his life.

He was yet lanky and apparently awkward, being big of bone, but long ropes of muscle were beginning to come on his arms and thighs, and bands and plasters of it lay on his shoulders and along his back and armored ribs. He took pride in the strength that was coming upon him, rejoicing in his ability to shoulder a sack of grain without effort, to lift and set around the end of a wagon, to handle the big breaking plow at the end of a furrow, and he was forever trying new things which called for strength and activity. At nineteen he could, though he did not know it, have taken the measure of any ordinary man. And about this time an incident occurred which nearly turned out disastrously.

Angus had delivered a load of potatoes at a hotel much frequented by lumberjacks, and, seeking its proprietor, he entered the bar. A logging camp had broken up, and its members, paid off, were celebrating in the good old way. As Angus approached the bar he passed between two young men. These, with one telepathic glance, suddenly administered to the unsuspecting youth the rite known as the "Dutch flip." Although the humor of the "flip" is usually more apparent to perpetrators and onlookers than to the victim, Angus merely grinned as he found himself on his feet again, and all would have been well if, in his involuntary parabola, his feet aforesaid had not brushed a huge tie-maker. This tie-maker was a Swede, "bad," with a reputation as a fighter and the genial disposition of a bear infested with porcupine quills. Also he was partly drunk. In this condition he chose to regard the involuntary contact of Angus' heels as a personal affront. With a ripping blasphemy he slapped the boy in the face, and as instantly as a reflex action Angus lashed back with a blow clean and swift as the kick of a colt, and nearly as powerful.

The logger recovered from his surprise, and with a roar sprang and caught him. Strong for a boy, Angus was as yet no match for such an adversary. The weight of the man, apart from fighting experience, made the issue undoubted. But suddenly the Swede was twisted, wrenched loose, and sent staggering ten feet. Straight down the length of the room the big tie-maker shot, landing with a terrific crash, and lay groaning.

"Let the kid alone!" a deep voice commanded.

Angus' rescuer was Gavin French, the eldest of the brothers. The largest of a family of big men, Gavin stood three inches over six feet in his stockings, and tapered from shoulders to heels. He was long of limb, long of sinew, and so beautifully built that at first sight his real bulk and weight were not apparent. His hair, reddish gold, was so wavy that it almost curled, his eye a clear blue, but as hard as newly-cut ice. He nodded to Angus.

"All right, Mackay; I won't let him hurt you."

Gavin French surveyed his handiwork with cold satisfaction.

"Give the boys a drink," he said. And when the drink had been disposed of he walked out without a second glance at his late adversary who was sitting up. Angus followed him.

"Thanks for handling him," he said. "He was too strong for me."

The cold blue eyes rested on him appraisingly.

"You'll be all right when you're older. Better keep out of trouble till then."

"He struck me," Angus said, "and no man will ever do that without getting back the best I have, no matter how big he is. That was my father's way."

Gavin French made no reply. He nodded, and turning abruptly left Angus alone.

This episode, trivial in itself, gave Angus food for thought. For long months the sight of the big Swede hurtling through the air was before his eyes, and he admired and envied the mighty strength of Gavin French. By contrast his own seemed puny, insignificant. He set himself deliberately to increase it.

The second fall after Adam Mackay's death the school which Jean and Turkey attended had a new teacher. Jean fell in love with her from the start, and even Turkey, who had regarded teachers as his natural enemies, was inclined to make an exception. Jean brought this paragon to the ranch over Sunday. Alice Page was a clear-eyed young woman of twenty-four, brown of hair and eye as Jean herself, full of quiet fun, but with a dignity which forbade familiarity. She was the first person who had ever given Angus a handle to his name. This was at dinner, and Turkey yelped joyously:

"Ah, there, 'Mister' Mackay!" he cried. "A little more meat, 'Mister' Mackay, and a dose of spuds and gravy, 'Mister' Mackay. I see you missed some of the feathers by your left ear when you was shavin', 'Mister' Mackay!"

Having just begun the use of the razor, Angus reddened to the ear aforesaid. Like most taciturn, reserved people he was keenly sensitive to ridicule.

"'Meester' Mackay! Haw-haw!" rumbled big Gus through a mouthful of food. "He's shave hees viskers! Das ban purty good von. Ho-ho!"

Dave Rennie grinned. Angus' black brows drew down, but just then he choked on a crumb of bread which went the wrong way.

"Pat 'Mister' Mackay on the back!" shrieked Turkey.

"I'll pat you, young fellow!" Angus wheezed.

But Alice Page saw how the land lay; saw also that the black-browed, awkward boy was in danger of losing his temper.

"Shall I call you 'Angus'?" she asked, and there was something in her tone and friendly smile which calmed him.

"That would be fine," he said. "And if you would lick Turkey Monday morning it would be a great favor."

A month afterward Alice Page came to live at the ranch. Her companionship meant much to Jean. It meant more to Angus, who presently suffered a severe attack of calf-love.

Being in love, Angus began to suffer the pangs of jealousy, for there were others who found Alice Page attractive. Chief among these was Nick Garland, the young man who had accompanied Mr. Braden on his first visit to the ranch. His visits became frequent, and he made himself very much at home at the ranch, treating Angus with a careless superiority and seniority which the latter found intensely irritating.

Now Garland, who esteemed himself a devil of a fellow, was merely attempting a flirtation with the pretty school teacher. He could not but notice Angus' attitude toward himself, and in a flash of perception divined the cause. He found it humorous, as no doubt it was. He did not like Angus, which made it the more amusing. He intended to tell Alice Page the joke, but in the meantime kept it to himself.

He rode up one moonlight night while Angus was in the stable dressing by the light of a lantern the leg of a horse which had calked himself, put his mare in a stall and forked down hay as a matter of course. Angus, after a short greeting, maintained silence. Then picking up his lantern, he left the stable. Garland thought his chance had come.

"They tell me you're going to school this winter," he observed.

"No," Angus replied.

"Mighty pretty teacher," Garland insinuated. "If I had the chance, I'd sure go. I think I could learn a lot from her."

"There would be lots of room," Angus retorted.

"What!" Garland demanded, stopping short.

"Ay," Angus said grimly, setting his lantern on the ground and facing him. "You might learn to mind your own business."

Garland peered at him in the moonlight.

"I'm not used to talk like that, young fellow."

"You need not take it unless you like," Angus said.

Garland laughed contemptuously. "Sore, are you? This is the funniest thing I ever came across. I'm on to you, kid. It's too good to keep. I'll have to tell her."

Angus scowled at him in silence for a moment. Then, deliberately, bitterly, he gave him what is usually regarded as a perfectly good *casus belli*.

Garland began to realize that he had made a mistake. He had anticipated fun, but found this serious. If he thrashed Angus he could not very well continue to call at the ranch. Also, looking at the tall, raw-boned youth confronting him, he had an uneasy feeling that he might have his hands full if he tried. He had not realized till then how much the boy had grown. At bottom Garland was slightly deficient in sand. And so he tried to avert the break he had brought about.

"That's no way to talk," he said. "You'll have to learn to take a joke, some day."

"Maybe," Angus retorted. "But I will never learn to take what you are taking."

Garland flushed angrily. The element of truth in the words stung.

"I'd look well, beating up a boy," he said loftily. "I'm not going to quarrel with you. When you're older maybe you'll have more sense."

He left Angus, and marched away to the house. Angus looked after him till the door closed, and then struck straight away across the bare fields for the timber.

These night rambles by moonlight were a habit which fitted well with his nature. He was taciturn, reserved, with an infinite capacity, developed by circumstance for solitude. But that night, as he covered mile after mile with a swift, springy stride, his mood was as sinister as the black shadows the great firs threw across his path. His naturally hard, bitter temper, usually controlled, was in the ascendant. His long dislike of Garland had come to a head. And yet there was Garland seated in his house with Alice Page, while he was forced to walk in the night. It amounted to that in his estimation.

At last he turned back, in no better temper. It was late, and he was sure that Garland had gone. But as he came to the road leading to the house he saw figures black in the moonlight approaching. Just then he was in no mood to meet any one. An irrigation ditch bordered by willows paralleled the road. He jumped the ditch and, concealed by the willows, waited till whoever it was should go by.

It was Alice Page, and Garland, leading his horse. Opposite him they halted. Snatches of conversation blurred by the gurgle of running water came to his ears. Garland moved closer to her. Suddenly he caught her in his arms. She strained back, pushing him away, but he kissed her, and at that moment Angus leaped the ditch, landing beside them. The suddenness of his appearance startled them. The horse snorted and pulled back. Garland released Alice with an oath and turned to face the intruder.

"It's you, is it?" he said angrily.

"You had better get out of here," Angus told him, "and be quick about it."

But Garland, being angry, forgot his prudence. He was not going to be ordered off by a boy, especially before Alice Page.

"Be civil, you young fool!" he said. "I've taken enough from you to-night."

"Will you get on your horse and pull out?" Angus demanded between his teeth.

"When I get good and ready, and not before," Garland replied.

Without another word Angus went for him. Garland was older, heavier and presumably stronger, and furious as Angus was he felt that probably he was in for a licking. But he went in hard, like a forlorn hope, and like a forlorn hope he intended to do as much damage as he could.

Garland tried to fend him off with a push, and failing, hit. But his blow glanced from Angus' head and the latter slashed up under the ribs with a vicious right hand, and was amazed at the depth his fist sank in the body and the rasping gasp it brought forth. Angus' knowledge of offensive and defensive was not great. But at school he had engaged in various rough-and-tumble affairs and one winter a lithe young fellow hired by the elder Mackay had shown him how to hold his hands. But these things were quite forgotten for the moment. Like his claymore-wielding ancestors, his one idea was to get to close quarters and settle the matters there. He caught Garland around the middle and was gripped in return.

For a moment he thought Garland was not trying, was not doing his best; and then, suddenly and joyfully, he realized that he *was* doing it, and that it was not good enough. He was stronger than Garland. He had the back, and the legs, and the arms and the lungs of him, man though he was. With the knowledge he snarled like a young wolf, and suddenly strength swelled in him like the bore of a tide. He ran Garland back half a dozen paces, and wrenched and twisted him. Getting his right hand free he smashed him again under the ribs, and as Garland, gasping, clinched, he locked his long arms around him, and with his shoulder against the stomach, his legs propped and braced, and every muscle from jaw to heel tautening, he squeezed him like a young python.

Garland tried to hold the walls of his body against the grip, and failed. Angus heard him pant, and felt the tremors of the man's frame as the strength oozed out of him. Garland's grip weakened

and loosened, and he tried for Angus' throat and failed, for the boy's chin was tucked home on his breast-bone, and he beat him over the back and head wildly with his fists and caught at his arms; and then his head and body began to go backward.

Angus heard Alice Page's voice as from a great distance, for that locked grip of his was like the blind one of a bulldog.

"Angus! Angus! let him go!"

And he plucked Garland from his footing easily, for the latter was now little more than dead weight, and threw him on his back into the running ditch. He stood above him, his chest heaving, like a young wolf above his first kill.

Garland splashed into the chilly water, and drew himself out of it gasping and cursing with returning breath. Angus tapped him on the mouth with the toe of his moccasin.

"That is no talk for a woman to hear," he said. "Get out, or I'll throw you back in the ditch."

Garland got to his feet unsteadily, and went to his horse.

"I'll fix you for this," he said as he got into the saddle.

"You are a bluff," Angus told him, "and you know it as well as I do. Get out!"

When horse and rider were indistinct, Angus turned to Alice Page.

"You saw him—kiss me, Angus?" she said.

"Yes," he admitted, "but I didn't mean to. I had words with him to-night, and I was waiting till you would go past, but you stopped right in front of me."

"I'm very glad you were there. I don't want you to think I am the sort of girl who is kissed by moonlight."

"I'd never think that," Angus said. "I think you are the finest girl in the world."

She stared at him in amazement, as much at his tone as at the words.

"Why, Angus!" she exclaimed.

"I do," he asseverated, "the very finest! I've wanted to tell you so, but I hadn't the nerve. I—I think an awful lot of you."

So there it was at last, blurted out with boyish clumsiness.

"Good heavens!" cried Alice Page. "I never—why, Angus, my dear boy—" She laughed and checked herself, and the laugh turned into a little hysterical sob, and without any further warning she began to cry.

Utterly dismayed Angus stood helpless. And then, because it always seemed to comfort Jean when in trouble, he put his arm around her. For a moment Alice Page leaned against him, just as Jean did, but somehow the sensation was quite different. Very hesitatingly and awkwardly, but doing it as well and carefully as he knew how, he kissed her. Whereupon Alice Page jumped as if he had bitten her.

"You, too!" she cried. "O Angus! Oh, good heavens, what a night! Let me go, Angus!"

He let her go, feeling all palpitant and vibrant, for he had never kissed any girl, save Jean, who naturally did not count, but glad that at any rate he had stopped her crying. And Alice Page, who had a large store of common sense, did the very best thing possible. Sitting down on the bank of the ditch she made him sit beside her, and talked to him so gently and frankly that after a while, though he still considered himself to be in love, he felt resigned to its hopelessness, and in fact rather proud of his broken heart and blighted life, as boys are apt to be. Indeed, with his knowledge that he had squared the account with Garland, he was almost happy.

CHAPTER VI

GAIN AND LOSS

Alice Page was but an episode in the life of the Mackays, but her influence was far-reaching, at least with Angus and Jean. She stimulated in the former a taste for reading, dormant and unsuspected. She made him see that he was wasting his evenings, and she got him books of history and travel and voyages, with a sprinkling of the classics of English fiction. Angus, who had been unaware that such books existed, took to them like a young eagle to the air, for they opened the door to the romances of the world.

Though nobody save Alice Page suspected it, the grim-faced boy was full of the romance of youth. At heart he was an adventurer, of the stuff of which the old conquistadores were made.

Jean needed no encouragement to study. Outwardly, Angus was hard and practical. Outwardly,

Jean was thoughtful and at times dreamy. Inwardly the reverse was true. Jean was more practical than he, less inclined to secret dreams. She intended to fit herself to teach, and her studies were a means to that end. But most of Angus' reading, apart from technical works, was the end itself. He was not conscious that it was developing him, broadening his outlook, replacing to some extent more intimate contact with the outer world of men and affairs.

Thus time passed and another year slid around. Alice Page was gone, teaching in a girls' residential small college on the coast. The ranch was beginning to respond to the hard work. Stock on the range was increasing in numbers and value. More settlers were coming in, and land which had been a drug on the market was beginning to find purchasers.

Angus had grown into a young man, tall and lean, quite unstiffened by his hard work. Turkey was a youth, slimmer of build and smaller of bone than his brother, but wiry and hard and catlike in quickness. Jean had grown from a slip of a girl into a slender, brown-eyed maid. She was through with the local school, and though she never hinted at it, Angus knew quite well that she desired to attend the college where Alice Page taught. It was characteristic of him that he said nothing until he could speak definitely. But one night he told her she had better get ready to go. Jean was startled.

"How on earth did you know I was thinking of that?"

"It didn't need the second sight of old Murdoch McGillivray," her brother returned. "You had better get such things as you want."

"But—can you afford it?" she asked doubtfully.

"Yes. You write to Alice to-night."

So in the early fall Jean went away, and her brothers missed her very much; Turkey, because he had now to mend his own clothes and take a turn at the cooking, and Angus because he had confided in her more than in anybody else.

When the fall grew late and the snow near, Rennie rode the range for stock, which was usually split up into small bands, scattered here and there in valleys and pockets along the base of the hills. Each bunch had its own territory, from which it seldom strayed unless feed got short. Therefore any given lot could usually be found by combing a few square miles. Before the heavy snows these bunches were rounded up and driven to the ranch to winter there. But this time Rennie could find no trace at all of one bunch.

"It's them three-year-old steers," he said, "that used in between Cat Creek and the mountain. They sure ain't on the range."

"They must have drifted off. Maybe the feed got short."

"The feed's good yet—never saw it better this time of the year."

"Likely they've gone up one of the big draws off the pass," Angus suggested.

"Well, I wish you'd tell me which. I've rode every draw for ten miles each way, and darn' if I can find a hoof."

This was serious. It was up to them to find those steers before the snow came. Angus had no mind to see them come staggering in in mid-winter, mere racks of bones; and apart from that he had counted on the proceeds of their sale to pay Jean's expenses and some of the interest on Braden's mortgage. Accordingly, he turned himself loose on the range with Dave and Turkey. They spent the better part of a week in the saddle and rode half a dozen ponies to a show-down, but of the missing stock they found never a trace.

"I'll bet somebody's rustled them," Turkey decided.

"Bosh!" said Angus.

"If you're such a darn' wise gazabo, why don't you find 'em?" Turkey retorted. "What do you think, Dave?"

"Don't know," said Rennie. "Blamed if it don't look like it."

"Rustled—nothing!" Angus exclaimed contemptuously. "There aren't any rustlers here."

"There never was no rustlers no place till folks began to miss stock," Rennie pointed out mildly.

"But who would rustle them?"

"Well, of course that's the thing to find out."

It was a puzzle. Every steer wore the MK, and mistakes of ownership were out of the question. From calthood they had summered on that range, coming in fat and frisky to winter by the generous stacks. There was no good reason why they should have left it. Not only had the entire range been combed carefully, but none of the other cattle owners had seen them.

"If they been rustled," Rennie decided, "it's good bettin' it's Injuns. Some of the young Siwashes is plenty cultus."

"What could they do with them? They couldn't range them with their own stock."

"No, but they could drive them south if they was careful about it, and mix 'em up with the stock of them St. Onge Injuns, and nobody'd be apt to notice. I've sent word to a feller down there to ride through and take a look."

In due course Rennie heard from the "feller." The steers were not on the St. Onge reserve. Thus Angus was up against a blank wall. Nobody would deal openly in stock plainly branded. Garland knew as much as anybody of transactions in stock, but he had heard nothing which might give a clew to the missing steers.

With the passage of time Garland and Angus were on terms again, though naturally there was little cordiality. But apparently Garland retained no active ill-feeling. The occurrences of that night were known to nobody but the three participants. As for Garland himself having had anything to do with the steers, it seemed out of the question. He had never been mixed up in any shady transactions, and apart from that, handling stolen stock would be too risky for him. There were only a few white men who were not above all suspicion; and these there was no reason at all to suspect. But for that matter there was no more reason to suspect any Indian. Rennie, however, had a species of logic all his own.

"No reason!" he grunted. "Why, you say yourself there ain't no reason to suspect a white man. Then it's got to be an Injun, ain't it? Sure! On gen'ral principles it's a cinch."

But Angus did not hold with this view. Though he had no special affection for Indians—as few people who know them have—in his opinion they were no worse than other people in the matter of honesty. The older men he would trust with anything. Some of them, especially the chief, a venerable and foxy old buck named Paul Sam, had been friends of his father.

"I'll have a talk with old Paul Sam the first time I see him," he told Rennie. "He's as straight as they make them."

"Well, I guess he's the best of the bunch," Rennie admitted.

A day or two afterward Angus met Paul Sam on the range, looking for ponies. Though the Indian was old, he sat his paint pony as easily as a young man. In his youth he must have been as straight and clean-cut as a lance, and even the more than three score and ten snows which had silvered his hair had bent his shoulders but little. He was accompanied by his granddaughter, Mary, a girl of Jean's age, who, being his last surviving relative, was as the apple of his eye. He had sent her to mission school and denied her nothing. As he owned many horses and a large band of cattle, Mary had luxuries unknown to most Indian girls. She was unusually good-looking and a good deal spoiled, though Paul Sam, being of the old school, cherished certain primitive ideas concerning women.

He listened in silence to Angus' statement regarding the missing stock, surveying him with a shrewd old eye.

"You think Injun kapswalla them moos-moos?" he asked with directness.

"I didn't say anybody stole them. I'm just trying to find out what's become of them."

Paul Sam grunted. "All time white man lose moos-moos, lose kuitan, him tumtum Injun steal um," he said. "All time blame Injun. Plenty cultus Injun; plenty cultus white man, too."

"That's true," Angus admitted.

"You nanitch good for them moos-moos? Him all got brand?"

"Yes."

The old man reflected. "Spose man kapswalla um no sell um here," he announced. "Drive um off—si-a-a-ah—then sell um."

This was precisely Rennie's reasoning.

"Where?" Angus queried. But on this point Paul Sam had no theory. Nobody could tell, but some day it might be cleared up.

"Well, if you hear anything of my steers, let me know," continued Angus.

Paul Sam nodded. "Your father my tillikum," he said. "Him dam' good skookum man. S'pose me hear, me tell you."

But the young eyes of Mary had sighted ponies to the left. She announced this to her grandfather in soft, clucking gutturals.

"Goo'-by," said Paul Sam.

"Good-by," said Angus. "Good-by, Mary."

The girl nodded, with a flash of white teeth and a glance which dwelt for an instant admiringly on Angus' long, lean body. Then she shook up her fast pony and sailed away through the timber of the benchland to round up the bunch of half-wild cayuses, while her grandfather followed at a pace better suited to his years.

But the fall went and the snow came, and Angus got no news. It was a heavy loss just then, which

he could not afford. Somehow it must be made up, and the only way he saw to do it was to cut cordwood. The price was low and the haul was long, but it was a case, for he had to have the money.

So all that winter he and Gus cut and split, while Rennie hauled and Turkey looked after the house and the feeding. And so all through the cold weather they made cordwood. It did not make up for the loss of the steers, but it helped, and he was able to send money to Jean.

The long winter passed. The days lengthened and the sun mounted higher, so that it was warm on the south side of house and barn and stack. The snow went in a glorious, booming Chinook wind that draped the ranges with soft, scudding clouds, and set every gulch roaring with waters. The ground thawed, and earth-smells struck the nostrils again. Up against the washed blue of the sky flocks of geese bore their way northward. One morning they heard the liquid notes of a meadow-lark. Then came robins and bluebirds, and a new season opened with a rush.

CHAPTER VII

THE FRENCHES AGAIN

That spring Angus kept three teams going steadily on plows and disks while the high winds dried the soil to a powder, raising dust clouds that choked and blinded, so that they came in black and gritty to a shower bath of Angus' invention. He had accomplished this by a primitive water wheel operated by the swift water of the irrigation ditch back of the house. The water was always cold, and invigorated accordingly. But it was icy in the morning. Rennie tried it once and gave it up, while big Gus scornfully refused to experiment with a morning bath.

"It'll brace you up," Turkey urged.

"Vatter ent brace nobody," Gus replied with contempt. "Dees all-over vash by mornin' ban no good. Ay ent need him. It ent make me dirty to sleep."

But the dust vanished with the spring rains, and the grain sprouted in the drills. One day the fields lay bare and bald and blank; and the next, as it seemed, they were covered with a film of tender green. Then all hands began to clear and repair the irrigation ditches, so that when dry weather came the fields should have water in plenty.

So the early summer came and with it Jean's holidays. Her return, Angus recognized, necessitated some preparation.

"She'll have a fit when she sees the house," he told Turkey.

"What's the matter with it?" that young man asked.

"She'll find plenty the matter with it," Angus predicted apprehensively. "We'd better clean up a little."

"Well, maybe we had," Turkey admitted.

They gave the house what they considered a thorough cleaning, which consisted in sweeping where it seemed necessary, and removing some of the pot-black from kitchen utensils which Jean had never set down on the fire. Angus eyed the rusty-red kitchen range, which Jean had kept black and shining.

"I wonder if we hadn't better give that a touch of polish," he said. "Where is the polish, anyway?"

"Search me," Turkey replied. "I've never seen any. What's the use? It cooks all right."

They could not find Jean's polish, and experimented with black harness dressing. But the smoke when the fire was lit drove them out of the house, and they let it go.

Angus drove into town to meet Jean behind a pair of slashing, upstanding, bright-bay three-year-olds, of which he was very proud. Jean had never seen them in harness—indeed they had been harnessed less than a dozen times—and he anticipated her pleasure in them, for she loved horses. He put up and fed the colts at the livery stable, had his dinner, made some purchases, and as it was nearly time for the river steamer on which Jean would arrive, turned toward the stable to hitch up.

As he turned a corner he met Garland, Blake French, and several other young men. Apparently they were out on a time, for none of them were entirely steady upon their legs. Blake French, however, was much the worst.

In the years that had passed the French family had not changed their habits. The ranch was still a hang-out for every waster in the country. But the young men were away a great deal in the summer and fall, following the various local races. They had two or three good horses, and seemed to find the sport profitable. Also they had achieved a rather unenviable notoriety. They had all been mixed up more or less in various rows, but somehow these matters had been hushed up. Nobody desired to incur the enmity of a family which was supposed to have money, and one way and another a good deal of influence.

Angus would have passed, but Garland stopped him, asking him to come and have a drink. Angus refused civilly, and Blake sneered.

"It won't cost you anything," he said thickly.

"I don't drink," Angus said shortly.

"Do you do anything?" Blake sneered. "Do you have any fun at all?"

"What I have is my own business," Angus returned, his temper beginning to ruffle.

Blake French, his brow lowering, caught him by the lapel of the coat. "Are you telling me to mind my own business?" he demanded.

"That will be plenty of that sort of thing," Angus told him. "Let go, now, and don't pull me about."

But Blake, being surly and quarrelsome even when sober, gave the lapel a savage jerk, and reached out with his other hand. Angus caught his wrist, and brought a stiffened forearm across his throat. At the same moment he stepped forward, crooked his right leg behind Blake's left knee and threw his full weight against him. Blake went down hard, but was up in an instant and made a staggering rush. Angus dodged.

"Take care of him, you!" he said to Garland. "I don't want to hit him."

Blake's friends closed in on him, and Angus made his escape. He was glad to get clear so easily, for he had no mind to be mixed up in a fight on the street. He hooked up the colts and drove down to the landing, hearing as he did so the deep bellow of the river steamer's whistle. When he got the colts tied and went out on the wharf the boat had already docked. Behind a group of passengers a girl was bending over a couple of grips. Her back was toward Angus, and never doubting that it was Jean, he reached down with one hand for a grip, while he slipped his other arm around her waist.

"Hello, old girl!" he said. But to his utter amazement, as she snapped erect in the crook of his arm, it was not Jean at all. This girl was taller, black of hair and blue of eye. For a moment he did not recognize her, and then he knew her for Kathleen French, whom he had not seen for more than a year. "Oh," he said blankly, "it's you!"

"I think so," she said dryly. "I can stand without being held, thanks."

Angus dropped his arm from her waist, blushing.

"I thought you were Jean. I'm awfully sorry."

Kathleen French's dark blue eyes looked him up and down, and to his relief she seemed more amused than angry.

"But your sister wasn't on the boat. It's nice to be welcomed by somebody." She frowned, glancing down the wharf. "Have you seen any of my brothers? Somebody should be here to meet me."

"Blake is in town. I haven't seen any of the other boys."

"Then why isn't Blake here?" she demanded.

"I don't know," Angus returned. "It's not my fault, is it?"

"No, of course not. He was to be here—or somebody was—and drive me out. I suppose I'll have to go somewhere and wait his pleasure. Where is he, do you know?"

"Why—" Angus began doubtfully, and stopped.

"Look here," said Kathleen French, "has Blake been drinking?"

"I think he could drive all right."

"Pig! Brute!" Blake's sister ejaculated viciously. "He couldn't keep sober, even to meet me. Didn't think I mattered, I suppose. I'll show him. Able to drive, is he? Well, he isn't able to drive me. I'll get a livery rig."

"I will drive you out."

"That's good of you. But it's out of your way."

"It will do the colts good—take the edge off them. But I don't know what to do about Jean. She was to have come on this boat."

"She must have missed it. Likely she will be on the next."

This seemed probable. As there was nothing to be done about it, Angus went for Kathleen's trunk. He wheeled it on a truck to the rig, picked it up and deposited it in the wagon back of the seat without apparent effort. As the trunk went up Kathleen French's eyes widened a little. He turned to her.

"The step is broken and if you climb in the mud will get on your dress," he said. "I had better lift you over the wheel, if you don't mind."

"Of course I don't mind."

He lifted her up as one holds a child aloft to see a passing parade, until her feet set on top of the wheel. As she seated herself she glanced at him with a queer expression of puzzlement. He unhitched the colts, gathered up the lines and came up over the wheel beside her. As he dropped into the seat the team got away with a plunge and they went townward with slack tugs, the reins and Angus' arms pulling the load.

"They're a little frisky," he said. "They'll be all right when they get out of town."

"You don't think I'm afraid, do you?" she said.

"No, I guess you are not nervous of horses."

Angus hoped they would see nothing of Blake. But as they clattered up the main street, the colts dancing and fighting the bits and Angus holding them with a double wrap and talking to them steadily to quiet them, Blake and his companions were crossing from one side to the other. He recognized Angus and his sister, and probably remembered that he was to meet her. With the memory of his recent encounter surging in his fogged brain he lurched out into the roadway and called on Angus to stop; and as the latter did not do so, he made an unsteady rush for the colts' heads.

Just then Angus could not have stopped the colts if he had wished to, and he did not wish it. He knew that if Blake got hold of them it meant a wrangle on the street, and so he loosed a wrap and clicked a sharp command. The colts went into their collars with a bound.

As they did so Kathleen French reached swiftly across and plucked the whip from its socket on the dash. Angus had time for just one glance. The nigh forewheel was just grazing Blake, so that he jumped back. His flushed, scowling face was upturned, his mouth open in imprecation. Then with a vicious swish and crack the lash of the blacksnake curled down over his head and shoulders, and he went out of sight.

Angus was too fully occupied with the colts to look back. They missed a wagon and a buggy by inches merely, and were a mile out of town before he was able to pull them down to an ordinary gait; and he was in no sweet temper at them, at Blake, and even at Blake's sister; for that young lady's swishing cut with the whip had put the finishing touch to the colts' nerves.

Kathleen herself had not uttered a word, nor had she grasped the seat rail, even when in danger of collision. Now she sat upright, an angry color in her cheeks, her mouth set in a straight line, and the whip still in her hand. She met Angus' eyes with a defiant stare.

"Well?" she said.

"I didn't say anything."

"You're thinking a lot, though."

"Am I?"

"Yes, you are! And don't you say a word of it to me. I can't stand it."

"I am not going to say anything," Angus told her, and stared ahead over the colts' ears, in which companionable fashion they drove for nearly two miles. Then he felt her hand on his arm.

"I'm sorry, Angus. I was utterly rude. Let it go, won't you?"

"Of course," he assented. "I wasn't any too polite myself. The team nearly got away from me."

"And then you think I shouldn't have taken the whip to Blake."

"You might have taken an ax to him for all I'd care," Angus admitted.

"Hello!" she said. "Have you had any trouble with Blake?"

"No real trouble." He told her what had occurred.

"Well, I'm glad I used the whip," she commented. "He won't be proud of it—before his friends. Wait till I see the boys! A nice lot, sending Blake—Blake!—to meet me." Her teeth clicked over the words. "I suppose," she went on bitterly after a pause, "there's a black sheep in every family. But in some families—What do you think of our family?"

Angus stared at her. He had never thought much about the Frenches, who were outside his orbit. Being young, one side of him had at times envied their easy life; but another side of him held for them the grim, bitter scorn of the worker for the idler and waster. These things, however, were far below the surface.

"I don't know your family very well," he said.

She did not press the question.

"That is so. Angus—I hope you don't mind being called that, any more than I mind being called by my first name—we've known each other for years, but not very well. Perhaps we'll know each other better. I'm home for good. I'm supposed to be a young lady, now."

"Are you?" said Angus. She laughed.

"My education—polite and otherwise—is finished. That is what I mean. I am now prepared to settle down to the serious business of life—of a young woman's life."

"And what is that?"

"If you don't know I won't tell you. Never mind about me. Tell me about yourself."

"Myself? Oh, I've just been living on the ranch."

She considered him gravely, and he stared back. Whatever she saw, he found her decidedly good to look upon, not only because of her eyes and hair and clear, satiny skin, but because of the lithe, clean-run shape of her, which he admired as he would that of a horse, or an athlete's in training. She broke the silence abruptly.

"Do you know what my trunk weighs?"

He glanced back at it, shaking his head. "No. It's riding all right there."

"Do you know what I weigh?"

"Perhaps a hundred and thirty."

"Ten pounds more. And the trunk weighs more than two hundred."

"Well, what about it?" Angus asked, puzzled.

"What about it? Are you in the habit of picking up trunks like that as if they were meat platters, and girls as if they were babies? I was watching you, and you didn't even breathe hard."

"Oh, is that it?" Angus laughed. "That's nothing. Any of your brothers could handle that trunk."

"Gavin could, of course. But he's very strong."

"Well?" said Angus, smiling at her.

"Why, yes, you must be. But I've always thought of you as a boy. And I suppose you've thought of me as a gawky, long-legged girl."

"I haven't thought of you at all," Angus told her.

"Now I know I'm going to like you," she laughed. "I don't know a man—except my brothers, who of course don't count—who would have told me that."

Angus flushed, but stuck to his guns.

"Well, why should I think of you?"

"No reason. You don't know much about girls, do you?"

"Not a thing. I have had no time for them."

"And no use for them!"

"I did not say that."

"But you looked it, Angus. I'll never forget the look of relief on your face years ago when we appeared to take poor, little lost Faith Winton off your hands—and off your pony. And yet she liked you. She speaks still of how good and kind you were to her, though you frightened her at first."

"She must be thinking of Jean's doughnuts," Angus grinned. "I had forgotten all about it. Where is she now?"

"I don't know. She and her father were in Italy when I heard from her last."

"She would be grown up," Angus deduced. "I wonder if I would know her?"

But the French ranch hove in sight, its big two-story house and maze of stables in a setting of uncared-for fields, which Angus never saw without something akin to pain. A chorus of dogs greeted the sound of wheels, and half a dozen of them shot around the corner of the house.

Angus liked dogs, but not when he was driving colts. But just as they began to dance and the night bay had lashed out with a vicious hoof, Gavin French came around the corner, and at his command the dogs shrank as if he had laid a whip across them. Just then Gavin was wearing riding breeches, moccasins, and a flannel shirt wide open at the throat and staggled off at the sleeves, so that the bronzed column of his neck and the full sweep of his long, splendidly muscled arms were revealed. He strode softly, cat-footed, gripping with his toes, and the smoke of the short pipe which was his inseparable companion, drifted behind him.

"Hello, Kit!" he said, and nodded to Angus. "Where is Blake? He went for you."

"Blake's drunk," Kathleen replied.

"Drunk, is he?" Gavin said without surprise.

"And you're a nice bunch of brothers to send him! Couldn't one of you have come?"

"Oh, well, he was going, anyway," said Gavin carelessly. "Did you see him?"

"Yes, I saw him. He tried to stop Angus' team on the main street, and I slashed him back with the whip."

"You little devil!" said her brother, but with a certain admiration in his voice. "But that's pretty hard medicine, Kit!"

"And what sort of medicine is it for me to have a drunken blackguard of a brother run out on the street to hold up the rig I'm driving in?" she flared. "I'm entitled to ordinary respect; even if I am a sister, and Blake and all of you had better understand it now."

"Pshaw!" said Gavin. "The trouble with you, Kit, is that you've got a wire edge. You're set on a hair-trigger."

"And the trouble with Blake and the whole lot of you is that you've run wild," she retorted. "You've got so that you don't care for anything or anybody. You're practically savages. But I can tell you, you'll remember some of the ordinary usages of civilization now I'm home."

"And a sweet temper you've come back in!" said Gavin. He lifted his sister down over the wheel and reached for the trunk.

"It's heavy, Gan," she said, with a glance at Angus.

"Is it?" said Gavin, gripping the handles. He lifted it without apparent effort, and set it on his right shoulder. "I may be able to stagger along with it," he told her ironically. "Would you like me to carry you, too?"

"You can't!"

"Can't I?" laughed the blond giant. "Have you any money left to bet on that?"

"Five dollars that you can't carry me and the trunk—upstairs and to my room."

"My five," said her brother. "Come here." With the trunk on his shoulder he bent his knees till he squatted low on the balls of his feet. "Now sit on my shoulder and put your right arm around my neck. Give me your left hand. All set?"

"All set."

Angus watched with interest, doubtful if he could do it. But slowly, steadily, without shake or tremor the knees of the big man began to straighten, and his shoulders topped by girl and trunk to rise, until he stood upright. Upright he hitched to get a better balance, and strode off for the house as easily as Angus himself would have carried a sack of oats. Kathleen looked back at him and laughed.

"Good-by, Angus. Thank you ever so much—and come and see me."

The last thing Angus saw as he wheeled the colts for home, was the burdened bulk of Gavin French stooping for the doorway.

CHAPTER VIII

OLD SAM PAUL MAKES A PROPOSITION

Jean arrived on the next boat three days later, with a tragic tale of missed connections. It seemed to Angus that the few months of absence had made quite a difference. She seemed, in fact, almost a young lady, even to his brotherly eye.

But however she had changed she had not lost her grip on practical things, and when she began to look around the house Angus and Turkey found that their trouble in cleaning up had been wasted. For Jean dug into corners, and under and behind things where, as Turkey said, nobody but a girl would ever think of looking; and in such obscure and out-of-the-way places she found some dirt, some articles discarded or lost, and the more or less permanent abode of Tom and Matilda.

Tom and Matilda were mice, which had become thoroughly tame and domesticated. In the evenings Rennie fed them oatmeal and scraps of cheese, chuckling to see them sit up on their hunkers and polish their whiskers and wink their beady, little eyes, and all hands had united in keeping the cats out. Everybody had regarded Tom and Matilda as good citizens; and they had developed a simple and touching trust in mankind. But Jean broke up their home ruthlessly, with exclamations of disgust; and commandeering all the men for a day, turned the house inside out, beat, swept, washed and scrubbed; and then put everything back again. She professed to see a great difference, but nobody else agreed with her.

"The only difference I see," said Turkey, "is that I don't know where to find a darn thing."

"Well, you won't find it on the floor, or under a heap of rubbish six months old," Jean told him.

"Oh, all right," Turkey grumbled. "Now you've got all our things mixed up maybe you'll be satisfied."

Jean appealed to Angus, who agreed with Turkey. Whereat Jean sniffed and left them to their opinions.

Angus was a little apprehensive of his first meeting Blake French, but to his relief the latter chose to ignore what had occurred. Rather to his surprise Kathleen rode over to call on Jean, and the two girls struck up a certain friendship. Thus Angus saw more of Kathleen and her people than he had ever done before, including the head of the family, Godfrey French himself.

Godfrey French, though well on in years, was still erect and spare. He had a cold, blue eye, much like Gavin's, but now a trifle weary, and a slightly bent cynical mouth beneath a white moustach. He was invariably courteous and dignified, and whatever might be said of his sons, there was no doubt that the father possessed the ingrained manner of a gentleman. Yet Angus did not like him, and he thought that old French had little or no use for him. Somehow, French put him in mind of a gray-muzzled old fox.

One day in mid-summer as Angus sat in the shade of the workshop mending a broken harness, old Paul Sam on his single-footing pony drew up at the door.

"Al-lo!" he greeted.

"Hello, Paul Sam," Angus returned. "You feel skookum to-day?"

"Skookum, me," the Indian replied. "Skookum, you?"

"Skookum, me," Angus told him.

The old man got off his pony, sat down on an empty box, and drew out an old buckskin, bead-worked fire-bag. From this he produced a stone pipe bowl and a reed stem. Fitting the two together he filled the bowl and smoked.

This, Angus knew, was diplomacy. Whatever the Indian had come for, not a word concerning it would he say till he had had his smoke. Then it would probably be unimportant. So Angus waited in silence, and Paul Sam smoked in silence. Finally the latter tapped out and unjointed his pipe and put it away in his fire-bag.

"Me got cooley kuitan," he announced.

"Cooley" is apparently a corruption of the French word "courir," to run. "Kuitan" is a horse. Hence a "cooley kuitan" in Chinook signifies a race horse.

Angus shook his head. He knew very well what Sam Paul intended doing with this race horse. There was a local race meet each year, in connection with the local fair. The race meet out-sized the fair, dwarfed it in interest. It drew tin horns and sure-thing gamblers as fresh meat draws flies. These gentry ran various games, open when they could and under cover when they could not. Then there were men with a seasoned old ringer under a new name, or a couple of skates with which to pull off a faked match race. There were various races, but the big event was a mile for horses locally owned. There was some excellent stock in the country, and great rivalry developed.

In this race each year the Indians had entered some alleged running horse and backed it gamely. But each year they lost, their horses being neither trained nor ridden properly, and being completely outclassed as well; for as a rule they were merely good saddle cayuses and overweighted at that. This year French's horse, a beautiful, bright bay named Flambeau, seemed likely to win. Angus had seen him and admired him. Therefore he shook his head.

"You only think you've got a cooley kuitan," he said. "Keep out of that race, Paul Sam. You'll only lose money."

"Him good," the Indian insisted. "S'pose him get good rider him win. Injun boy no good to ride. Injun boy all right in Injun race; no good in white man's race."

"That's true enough," Angus agreed. "Injun boy don't kumtux the game. Well, what about it?"

"Mebbe-so you catch white boy to ride um?" Paul Sam suggested.

"Do you mean Turkey?" Angus queried.

"Ha-a-lo," Paul Sam negatived. "White boy, all same ride white man's horse."

"A jockey! Where would I get you a jockey?"

But that detail was none of Paul Sam's business.

"You catch um jock!" he said hopefully.

"But I don't know where to get one. A jockey would cost money, and you wouldn't win, anyway. You Injuns start a horse every year, and you never have one that has a lookin. You'd better get the idea out of your head."

But an idea once implanted in an Indian's head is apt to stay. Paul Sam grinned complacently.

"Me got dam' good cooley kuitan. Me kumtux kuitan."

He told Angus the history of his horse, as he knew it. Stripped of details, it amounted to this: Some five years before a fine English mare which had been the property of a deceased remittance man, had been auctioned off. She was in foal, and the colt in due course had been sold, and in some obscure and involved cattle deal had become the property of Paul Sam, who had let him run with his cayuses. When he broke him to the saddle he found him remarkably fast. Being a real fox, he said nothing about the colt's turn of speed, but bided his time. Now, in his opinion, he could make a killing and spoil the Egyptian, alias the white man, if only the colt were properly trained and ridden. He applied to Angus for help, as being the son of his tillikum, Adam Mackay. He invited him out to inspect the horse.

Angus went and took Dave Rennie. The horse which Paul Sam led forth for inspection was a big, slashing four-year-old, with a good head, an honest eye, deep chest and clean, flat limbs. Every line of him told of power and endurance; and to the eye which could translate power into terms of speed, of the latter as well. Rennie whistled softly.

"He looks to me like he had real blood in him. He's a weight carrier. English hunting stock, I sh'd say. Some of 'em can run, all right. If the mare was in foal when she was brought out, I wouldn't wonder if this boy's sire was real class. He looks it." The big horse reached out a twitching muzzle to investigate. Rennie stroked the velvet nose. "Kind as a kitten, too. He seems to have the build, but that don't say he can run."

"Him run," Paul Sam affirmed. "You ride him."

He cinched an old stock saddle on the chestnut, and Rennie mounted. He cantered easily across the flat and back.

"He's easy as an old rocker and light as a driftin' cloud," he said. "The bit worries him, though. He needs rubber. You get on him, and see what a real horse feels like."

Angus lengthened the stirrups and swung up. As soon as he felt the motion he knew he was astride a wondrous piece of mechanism. The undulating lift of the big chestnut was as easy and effortless and sustained as a smooth, rolling swell. Of his own accord the horse quickened his pace from the easy sling of the canter to a long, stretching, hand-gallop, drawing great lungfuls of air, shaking his head, rejoicing in his own motion, glad to be doing the work he was fitted for. At the end of the little flat Angus pulled up and turned. Rennie's distant shout came faintly:

"Let him come!"

Breathing the horse for a moment, Angus loosed him from the canter to the gallop and then, as he felt the coil and uncoil of the splendid muscles, and the swell and quiver of the body, and the increasing reach and stretch of the ever-quickening stride, he let him run.

All his life Angus had ridden ponies, cayuses, but now he had a new experience. The big chestnut, as he was given his head, made half a dozen great bounds and then, steadying himself, he stretched his neck, his body seemed to sink and straighten, and with muzzle almost in line with his ears he began to put forth the speed that was in him. The rapid drum of his hoofs quickened to a roar; the wind sang in Angus' ears; the figures of Paul and Sam and Rennie seemed to come toward him, and he shot past them and gradually eased the willing horse to canter and walk.

"Him cooley kuitan, hey?" Paul Sam grinned. "You catch um jock?"

"But I don't know where to get one," Angus replied.

"Well," said Rennie, "I don't know where to get no regular jockey, but I know an old has-been that used to ride twenty years ago, before he got smashed up. I dunno 's he'd ride now, in a race, but he could put the horse in shape. He's got a fruit and chicken ranch somewheres on the coast. Me and him was kids together, and he might come if I asked him. Only he wouldn't do it for nothing."

"You catch um," said Paul Sam. "Me pay um. Mebbe-so me win hiyu dolla!"

CHAPTER IX

DORGAN

In due course a small, clean-shaven man who walked with a slight limp surveyed the big chestnut with a shrewd, bright eye. This was Rennie's friend, the ex-jockey.

"Like his looks, Pete?" Rennie queried.

Pete, whose surname was Dorgan, nodded. "I like 'em some ways," he admitted. "He's got power to burn, and that'll give him speed—some. In five miles he'd be runnin' strong, but he might not be fast enough at a mile. 'Course, I don't know nothin' about what he'll be up ag'inst. What time has this race been run in, other years?" When Angus told him he grunted. "Good as that? Must be some real horses here. You're sure he ain't stolen? I wouldn't want to be mixed up in a deal like that, even if I am out of the game."

"He ain't stolen. This old Injun is as straight as you are."

"Well, I've been called crooked before now," Dorgan grinned. "But if you say so, Dave, I guess this old boy is all right. You can tell him I'll put the horse in the best shape I can, and maybe I'll ride him. If I don't, I'll get a boy. But I ain't goin' to live with a bunch of Injuns while I'm doin' it, and the horse has to be taken out of here." He eyed Paul Sam's primitive stable arrangements with disgust. "He's ruinin' his feet."

Paul Sam made no objection, and the big chestnut which Dorgan christened "Chief," was brought to the Mackay ranch. There he was installed in a disused building which lay behind the other stables and some distance from them.

"The way I get it," said Dorgan, "we better keep this horse under cover as long as we can. From what you say, there ain't been no class to the hay-hounds the Siwashes has started other years, and so an Injun entry is a joke entry. Nobody knows this horse, and seein' him the way he is now, not many'd pipe what he really is unless they was wised up. But you let some of these wise local birds lamp him after I've had him a couple of weeks, and they might smell something. Then I may's well keep dark myself. Not that I'm ashamed of myself more'n I ought to be, but somebody might remember me, though I ain't ridden for years. So I'll be an extra hand you've hired, see? Me and Chief will take our work-outs on the quiet as long as we can."

So Dorgan gave the horse his exercise on a little prairie a mile back of the ranch. As he had predicted, a couple of weeks made a vast difference in his appearance. Groomed till his chestnut coat was gleaming, dappled satin, his feet trimmed and cleaned and polished and shod by Dorgan himself, fed bright, clean grain and savory mashers and bedded to the knees nightly in sweet straw, Chief tasted for the first time the joys of the equine aristocracy to which he belonged.

But somehow the rumor that the Indians had a mysterious horse and rider got going, and one day Dorgan, who had been to town, came to Angus.

"Say," he said, "do you know a hard-faced bird, near as big as you are but older and heavier, that looks like a bad actor and likes the juice? He seems to be the king-pin of a bunch of young rye-hounds that think they're sports."

"Do you mean Blake French?"

"That's the outfit that owns this Flambeau horse, ain't it?"

"Yes. What about it?"

"Nothin' much. He'd have bought me a lot of friendship sealers if I'd let him. Then there was a feller, name of Garland, that thinks he's a warm member, and claimed he'd seen me ridin' long ago when he was a kid. He might of, at that. They sorter fished around to find out what I was doin' here. But they know, all right. If I was crooked I b'lieve I could do business with them two."

"I've never heard that they would do anything crooked. Of course they might try to find out all they could."

"If I'd taken all the crooked money I've been offered," said Dorgan, "and got away with it, I wouldn't need to be worryin' about apples and chickens now. I know when a feller's feelin' me out, same as I know when a couple of young burglars is holdin' a pocket open for me to ride into."

"But they don't know if Paul Sam's horse can run or not."

"That's their trouble. But if they can fix somebody, they don't need to care."

A couple of days after this, Angus, coming around Chief's quarters from the rear, overheard Dorgan earnestly assuring Kathleen French that Chief was quarantined for threatened influenza; and further that he was a saddle horse, pure and simple, with no more speed than a cow. With a glance at Angus which was intended to convey grave warning, he beat a retreat.

"Who is the remarkable liar?" Kathleen asked.

"Is he that? His name is Pete Dorgan."

"If you have a deadline on the place you ought to put up a sign," she told him. "How did I know I was butting in?"

"How do you know it now?"

"Because I have average intelligence. I didn't know there was a horse here at all. I was looking for Jean, and when I saw a perfectly splendid, strange animal, naturally I stopped to look at him. I also saw a little, flat pigskin saddle, and I saw that the horse was wearing plates. Then this Dorgan appeared and lied straight ahead without the least provocation, looking me in the face without the quiver of an eyelash. I didn't ask him a single question, I give you my word."

"There's no special reason why you shouldn't. The horse isn't mine. But the fact is, his owner and Dorgan aren't saying anything about him."

"Angus! he isn't—but no, of course he isn't!"

"Isn't what?"

"A ringer. I'm sorry. I know you wouldn't go into anything like that if you knew it."

Angus laughed. "He's no ringer. He belongs to Paul Sam." He told her as much as he thought necessary of the animal's history.

"Thanks for the confidence," she nodded. "I'll say nothing about it. If you had treated me as Dorgan did, I should have felt hurt."

"He didn't know you. He thinks this horse will give you a race."

"What, beat Flambeau!" she cried. "Nonsense!"

"Well, he seems to be a pretty good horse."

"Then I'll bet you an even hundred now!" she challenged.

"No, no. I don't want to bet with you."

"Oh, you needn't have any scruples. The boys take my money—when they can get it."

"But I don't think I'll bet at all."

"Then what on earth are you doing with the horse?" she asked in frank astonishment.

"He is just stabled here."

"But I don't see why you won't bet if you think the horse has a good chance."

"Because I can't afford to lose."

"But that makes it all the more exciting."

"It makes it all the more foolish," Angus told her grimly. "It is all very well for you; you people can afford to play with money."

"How do you know we can?"

"Well, I've always heard so."

"And therefore it must be so." She switched the grass, looking down. "Well, whether it is or not, we're born gamblers—the whole family. Perhaps we can't help it. But sometimes—sometimes I wish it were different. I wish the boys would work as you work; and—and that I were a home girl with a nice big brother."

"You have enough big brothers," Angus told her. "I think myself it would do them no harm to work, but it is none of my business. I did not mean to seem curious about your affairs. Anyway, some day you will be marrying and leaving them."

"Perhaps," she admitted. "The chief end of—woman! Oh, I suppose so—some day. Well?"

"That's all. You will likely marry somebody with plenty of money, and then you will go away."

"Do you mean that I shall marry for money?"

"No, but if your husband has it, it will be no drawback. Lots of these young fellows who go to your ranch are well fixed—or will be when somebody dies."

"How nicely you arrange my future. Which one of them am I to marry, please?"

"Whichever one you love best."

"What on earth do you know about love, Angus Mackay?"

"Nothing at all. But that is why people get married, isn't it?"

"I think I have heard so," she said dryly. "Will that be why you will marry—some day?"

"Why else?"

"Oh, Scotch! A question with a question! Would you marry for any other reason?"

"I would not marry a girl because she had money," said Angus, "because the money would not be worth the nuisance of her if I didn't love her."

Kathleen laughed at this frank statement, and went to find Jean. Angus' reflections as to Kathleen were broken by the reappearance of Dorgan.

"What did I tell you?" said the little man. "I guess my dope was poor, huh!"

"Your dope on what?"

"On what? On them fellers I was talkin' to yesterday. Now here's French's sister comes on the scout. When I seen her she was sure gettin' an eyeful of Chief."

"She was looking for my sister. She told me how it happened."

"I'll gamble she did," Dorgan returned skeptically, "and I s'pose you fell for it, like young fellers do. When a crook can't get the real dope any other way, he plants a woman. That skirt—"

"Go easy," Angus warned him. "That young lady is a friend of mine."

"She ain't a friend of mine, and I got my own idea of what she was here for. If you don't like it I'll keep it to myself."

"You're barking up the wrong tree," Angus laughed. "She's as straight as they make them. She says you're a remarkable liar, if you want to know."

Dorgan grinned. "I said she was wise. Maybe my work was a little raw, but she took me by surprise, and I was just doin' the best I could off-hand."

"You can't keep the horse cached forever."

"That's all right. There's no use tellin' what you know most times. This Flambeau from what I hear will carry a whole bunch of money for them Frenches. They're givin' as good as five to three against the field. That means they got the field sized up, or fixed. But they ain't got a line on Chief, nor they ain't got me fixed, so their calculations has been clean upset. Somebody's been watchin' me exercise, the last day or two, but whoever it is ain't had a chance to clock nothin', because they don't know the distances, and anyway I didn't let him out. They ain't wise to him, but they're wise to me. They dope it out I wouldn't be wastin' time on a horse that hadn't a chance. See what I'm gettin' at? A pill or the needle would put Chief out of the money."

"Nobody around here would do that," Angus told him.

"They wouldn't hey?" said Dorgan with sarcasm. "Let me tell you that right in the bushes is the place they put over stuff they couldn't get by with nowheres else. The things I've seen pulled at these little, local races would chill your blood. There's a bunch of murderers follows 'em up that'd hamstring a horse or sandbag an owner for a ten-case note."

"But—" Angus began.

"But—nothing," Dorgan interrupted with contempt. "Don't you s'pose I've been in the game long enough to know it? There'll be a bunch of tinhorns and a wreckin' crew of crooked racin' men with a couple of outlaw horses, all workin' together to skin the suckers. All them Frenches have to do is to say it's worth fifty to fix any horse. You can maybe tell me things about raisin' alfalfa, but not about racin'. When a woman gets into the game, it's serious. After this I'm goin' to sleep right here."

CHAPTER X

BEFORE THE RACE

A few days before the race Dorgan moved Chief to one of half a dozen sheds on the fair grounds, which a load of lumber and another of straw made comfortable. There he dwelt with him, giving him easy exercise and sizing up the other horses.

"Outside this Flambeau there ain't much to worry about," he concluded. "Only with a field of seven, like there will be in this race, there's always the chance of something going wrong. Chief ain't wise to starts, nor to running in company."

"You catch 'um good start," Paul Sam advised.

"You're a wise Injun," Dorgan told him. "I'll try to be somewhere's on the line—or in front of it. Still, I ain't quite burglar-proof."

At the fair Angus had a number of exhibits of ranch produce, cattle, and his team of young drivers. The night before the race he had been arranging his exhibits. This done he had supper, strolled around for an hour, and then returned to the National House, which was the leading hotel, in search of a man to whom he hoped to sell a few head of cattle. He got the number of his prospective customer's room, but apparently he had been misinformed, for the room held a poker game in full blast, the players being Gavin and Gerald French, two somewhat hard-faced strangers, and a young fellow about his own age whom he set down as an Englishman.

The French boys nodded a greeting.

"Hold on a minute," said Gerald as Angus would have withdrawn. "I want to see you."

So Angus remained, and standing behind Gerald watched the play.

One of the strangers dealt. On the draw Gerald held a full house; and yet he dropped out, as did Gavin. The Englishman who stayed lost most of his remaining stack. But the winning stranger did not seem elated. He scowled at the pot as he took it in.

Wondering what intuition had bade Gerald lay down a full—for the pot had been won by fours—Angus continued to watch the game. The deal came to Gerald, who riffled the cards.

"Time we had a drink," said he and rising brushed past Angus to touch a wall button. Reseating himself he began to deal.

One of the strangers opened. Gerald, as Angus could see, had nothing. Nevertheless he stayed, drawing three cards. Everybody stayed. The betting was brisk, and the pile of chips in the center grew. Gerald was the first to drop out. One of the strangers and the Englishman followed suit. Thus it was between the remaining stranger and Gavin. They proceeded to raise each other.

"If the limit was something worth while," said the stranger, "I could get proper action on this hand."

"It's high enough for these ranchers," the other stranger observed. "They don't like a hard game."

"What would you like?" Gavin queried.

"If you're game to lift it, you can come after a hundred."

Gavin, reaching into his pocket, brought forth a sheaf of currency from which he stripped two bills.

"*And* a hundred," he said.

The stranger's breath sucked hard through his teeth. His companion glanced swiftly and suspiciously at him and then at Gerald.

"This started out as a friendly game," he observed, a note of warning in his voice.

"Well, there's his hundred," the player said. "What you got? Come on—show 'em." He leaned forward.

"All the bullets," Gavin replied. He spread four aces face up, while his other hand reached for the pot.

The other stranger leaned forward, also, peering at the cards. Suddenly he started and his hand shot toward them. But Gavin's fell on it, pinning it to the table.

"What are you trying to do?" he demanded. Beneath the coldness of his tone there was something hard and menacing. The stranger wrenched to free his hand. It remained pinned in Gavin's grasp.

"I want to see those cards!" he cried with an oath.

"Where do you come in?" Gavin asked. "You didn't call me."

"But I did," the losing stranger broke in. "I want to see those cards, and I'm going to."

"You're looking at them now," Gavin pointed out.

Gerald coolly swept up the cards.

"I dealt them," he said. "They look all right to me. Four aces and a club seven. Take a look at them, Mackay, and see if this man has anything to kick at."

Thus appealed to, Angus took the cards. "I don't see anything wrong with them," he said.

"You don't, hey?" cried the loser. "I'm wise to you now. You did it, did you?"

"Did what?" Angus queried.

"Slipped him a cold deck!" the other roared. "You did it when he got up to press the button."

"I did nothing of the sort!" Angus denied in amazement.

"You're a liar!" the other shrilled. "D'ye think we're going to be cold-decked by a bunch of hicks?" He turned to Gavin. "Come through with that money, or——"

"Or what?" Gavin asked.

By way of bluff or otherwise the stranger resorted to the old, cogent argument. His right hand dropped swiftly. But as it did so Gavin thrust the table forward violently. The man went backward, chair and all. Gerald pounced on him like a leopard, caught his arm and twisted a short-barreled gun from the clutching fingers. Gavin, with equal quickness and less effort, caught and disarmed the other man, who without a word had reached for his gun to back his friend.

"Bad actors, you two!" Gerald sneered. "Gamblers—gunmen. Shocking! What'll we do with them, Gan?"

"Let 'em go," said the big man contemptuously, releasing his captive and flipping the cartridges from the gun. "Beat it, you blighters, and pick out easier marks next time."

"You big crook!" snarled the owner of the gun, "I'll get you——"

He never finished the sentence, for Gavin was on him. He caught him by the clothes above his breast, lifted him clear and slammed him back against the wall. There he held him, pinned with one hand, like a moth in a show-case.

"Get me, will you?" he growled hoarsely. "If I hit you, you cheap tinhorn, you'd never get me or anybody else. Try to get me, and I'll break your back over my knee. Like this!"

He plucked the man away from the wall as if he had been a doll, and threw him, back down,

across his knee. For an instant he held him, and then set him on his feet. The man's face was the dead gray of asbestos paper.

"Git!" Gavin commanded. "Don't fool around here or make any more bluffs. Get out of town."

When the two strangers had gone, Gerald laughed gently.

"This breaks up our game, I guess," he said. "By the way—Angus Mackay—Mr. Chetwood."

The two young men shook hands. Chetwood was a long-limbed young fellow with the old-country color fresh in his cheeks, frank blue eyes with a baby stare which would have been a credit to any ingenué, but which held an occasional twinkle quite at variance with their ordinary expression. Angus was inclined to like him. Chetwood, on his part, eyed the lean, hard, sinewy bulk of Angus with admiration.

"I say, what was all the row about?" he asked Gerald. "They accused you of cheating, what?"

"Old game," said Gerald carelessly. "They went up against an unbeatable hand, lost more than they could afford, and tried to run a bluff. They were both crooks, anyway."

"But if you knew that, why the deuce did you play with them?"

"You can't be too particular if you want a game," Gerald laughed.

"You do things so dam' casual out here," Chetwood complained whimsically. "Now when they tried to draw revolvers—'guns' you call them out here—I should have given them in charge."

"Too much trouble and no police force handy," said Gerald. "But I wanted to ask you about that horse you've been training for the Indians, Mackay. Are you betting on him?"

"I haven't been training him, and I don't think I'll bet. The Indians will, though."

"Tell 'em we'll take all the money they have, at evens."

"Even money against the field?"

"Exactly. You'd better take a little yourself."

But Angus refused, principally because he had no money to lose. They went down to the lobby. This was crowded. Blake French, standing on a chair, was flourishing a sheaf of bills, offering even money as his brothers had done. He had been drinking, and his remarks seemed to be directed at some certain person or persons.

Looking over the heads of the crowd, Angus saw Dorgan and Paul Sam standing together. The old Indian, bare-headed, his gray braids hanging in front of either shoulder, wearing a blanket coat, skin-tight leggins and brand-new moccasins, made an incongruous figure. The two, seeing Angus, made their way toward him.

"That bird," said Dorgan nodding toward Blake, "is makin' a cinch offer. Take all you can get. The old boy, here, was just waitin' for you to hold the bets."

"S'pose you hold money, me bet him now," Paul Sam confirmed.

"Come on, come on!" Blake vociferated from his perch. "Put up a bet on your—cayuse. Here's real money. Come and get it!"

Dorgan turned to face him.

"You're makin' a whole lot of noise on that handful of chicken feed," he observed.

"Come and take it then," Blake retorted. "They tell me you used to ride for white men once."

"Well, that never gave *you* no first call on me!" Dorgan shot back.

Somebody laughed, and Blake's temper, always ugly, flared up.

"Keep a civil tongue in your head, you down-and-outer, or I'll throw you out!" he rasped.

But Dorgan was not awed by the threat, nor by the size of the man who made it.

"Your own tongue ain't workin' none too smooth," he retorted. "Throw me out, hey? About all you'll throw will be a D. T. fit. A hunk of mice bait, that's about what you are, color and all."

With an oath Blake leaped from his chair, sending it crashing behind him. Perfectly game, little Dorgan crouched to meet the rush, in an attitude which showed a certain experience.

But Angus, cursing the luck which seemed to lead him athwart Blake, stepped between them.

"Hold on, now," he said. "You mustn't—"

"Get out of my way!" Blake roared.

"Now wait!" Angus insisted pacifically. "It wouldn't—"

But Blake struck at him. Angus dodged and clinched. But as he began to shove Blake back Gavin's great arms were thrust between them.

"Let go, Mackay," he said. "Quit it!" he commanded Blake.

"I'll show that runt he can't insult me!" the latter frothed. "Yes, and Mackay, too. Turn me loose, Gan——"

"You can't beat up their jockey before the race," his brother told him. "Too raw. Mackay? Mackay'd make a mess of you. Quit it, I tell you."

"I'll——" Blake began. But Gavin suddenly cursed him.

"Do you want me to handle you?" he demanded. In his voice came the hoarse, growling note it had held when he had spoken to the man pinned against the wall. His hand clamped his brother's wrist and his eyes blazed. Half drunk as he was, Blake apparently recognized these danger signals.

"Let go," he said. "I won't start anything."

His brother eyed him for a moment and turned to Paul Sam.

"How much do you want to bet?"

For answer the Indian pulled forth a huge roll of bills bound by a buckskin thong. They represented sales of steers, cayuses, skins of marten, beaver, bear and lynx, bounties on coyotes and mountain lion.

"Bet um all!" he announced succinctly.

"See what he's got," Gavin said to Angus, "and we'll cover it."

Angus sorted out the currency. It was in bills of various denominations and various stages of dilapidation. The amount totaled a little over twelve hundred dollars.

"We'll put up a check," said Gerald.

But when this was explained to Paul Sam, he interposed a decided negative. He himself was putting up real, tangible money, that could be handled and counted. Similar money must be put up against it. And when this was procured, with considerable difficulty at that time of night, he would not hear of it being put in the hotel safe, but insisted that Angus should hold it literally.

"Ha-a-lo put um in skookum box," he declared positively. "Me know you. S'pose you keep money, s'pose me win, me catch um sure. S'pose him put in skookum box, mebbe so me no catch um. You keep um money."

Reluctantly, Angus accepted its custody, but privately he made up his mind to deposit it in the safe as soon as the old Indian had gone. Soon after, Chetwood drew him aside.

"I've a fancy to have a little on the old buster's horse," he announced. "What do you say?"

"I don't say anything; it's your money."

"Quite so. But what sort of a run do you think I'll get for it?"

"The best the horse has in him, whatever that is."

"Then I've a notion to have a go at it."

"Do you know anything about the horses?"

"Not a thing," Chetwood replied cheerfully. "In the expressive language of the country, I'm playing a hunch. That old Indian takes my eye, rather."

"He's foxy enough. But the Indians have entered a horse every year, and never won yet."

"But a chap can't lose all the time," Chetwood observed. "And then the Frenches are offering even money against the field. No end sporting of 'em, but risky. That little ex-jockey knows his business?"

"I think so. Perhaps you'd like to have a talk with him and see the horse. He's going out now, and we'll go with him, if you care to."

"Thanks," Chetwood acknowledged. "That's very decent of you, Mackay. I'd like it very much."

CHAPTER XI

A HOLD-UP

The road to the track, which was nearly a mile beyond the town, was lonely and dark. Most of the way it ran through a wooded flat, and the tree shadows overlay it with denser gloom. But at last they emerged from the trees upon the natural prairie which held track and fair grounds. Along one side was a row of sheds, and here and there a lantern gleamed. Toward one of these lights Dorgan led them.

Dave Rennie, reading beside a lantern, nodded silently and, introduced to Chetwood, regarded him with disfavor, as a remittance man, one of the balloon-pants brigade.

"Everything all right, Davy?" Dorgan asked.

"Quiet now. There was a row down among the sheds a while ago. A pair of drunks mixed it, till we pulled 'em apart."

Dorgan picked up the lantern and illuminated a stall at the rear. Chief seemed uneasy, sidling away from the light, snorting and shaking his head. Chetwood moved with him, inspecting him closely.

"I should say that he has plenty of staying power," he observed. "At the distance I'd back him rather than any weedy, greyhound stock."

"And you'd be a good judge," Dorgan agreed, regarding Chetwood with more respect. Chief blew noisily, shaking his head and rubbing his nose against the feed-box. "How long's he been actin' that way, Dave?"

"Maybe an hour. I thought it might be a fly or a bit of foxtail in his feed."

"Not a bit of foxtail in his hay or beddin'. Might be a fly. Hold the lantern a minute."

He passed his hand over Chief's muzzle, and the horse thrust against his body, twisting and shaking his head. Dorgan examined his ears.

"Seems all right. What's worryin' you, old boy?"

The horse nosed him again, and exhaled a deep breath. Chetwood uttered an exclamation.

"How was his wind to-day when you exercised him?"

"Wind? Good. Why?"

"No cold—no stoppage of the nostrils?"

"No. What you gettin' at?"

"Listen to his breathing. There's something about it—not clear—a little, straining wheeze——"

Eyes narrowing, vibrant with quick suspicion, Dorgan took the horse's head on his shoulder and leaned his ear to the nostrils, listening intently. Suddenly he swore, a single, tremendous expletive, deep with venom, turning on Rennie.

"Did you go to see that fight you was speakin' of?"

"Sure. But I wasn't away five minutes."

"Was the horse uneasy before that?"

"I didn't notice it till I come back," Rennie admitted, and Dorgan swore again.

"They got to us somehow. Wait now. Hold still, Chief. So—o, lad! Quiet, boy!" Gently he laid his face against the muzzle. "By——, it's sponges!" he exclaimed suddenly.

"Sponges?" Angus repeated, puzzled.

"Sure—sponges! One of the bloody, dirtiest, meanest, surest-fire tricks in the whole box. A little, soft sponge shot up each nostril. A horse can't blow 'em out. He can breathe all right when he's quiet, but when he starts to run he can't get wind enough through 'em to feed his lungs, and they choke him off. It don't take a minute to work the trick on a quiet horse. It can be put over five minutes or a day before a race. A rider can do his best and get no speed. A crooked owner can fix his own horse and tell his boy to ride to win. That's what somebody's put over on us, and I'll gamble on it. Dave, fetch me my little black bag."

The bag contained a kit of veterinary instruments, and from them Dorgan selected a pair of long, slender forceps. But Chief objected and had to be thrown. Angus sat on his head while Dorgan worked. In the end he got the sponges, and Chief released, struggled up snorting, but apparently relieved and glad to be able to fill his lungs full once more.

"And a devil of a note a night before a race!" Dorgan commented. "Some horses it would put clean up in the air. But I'll bet Chief will fix this French bunch now, in spite of their dirty work."

"What makes you think they did it?"

"Ain't they givin' even money against the field? That means they think they got us fixed. That big stiff that tried to beat me up to-night would have fixed me if he could. They framed that fight to get Dave away from here. Well, there's no use makin' a roar, because we got nothin' on them. We're lucky to get wise." He nodded to Chetwood. "I dunno's we would if it hadn't been for you. I didn't think you knew a thing about the game, but I guess you do."

"Even if I am a pilgrim?" Chetwood laughed. "But you know we have horses and a few races in England."

"The smoothest crook I ever come across in the racin' game was an Englishman," Dorgan

admitted generously.

Chetwood laughed at this ambiguous testimonial, and Angus liked him the better for it. Leaving Dorgan and Rennie to look after the horse, they took their townward way. The darkness seemed more intense. They stumbled on the deeply-rutted road.

"We should have borrowed a lantern," Chetwood observed. "The bally trees make it black as the devil. I think—Look out, Mackay! 'Ware foot-pads!"

As he spoke a dry stick cracked sharply. Angus whirled to his right. Three black figures were almost on top of them. He had no time to dodge or brace himself. An arm swung around his neck, and he got his chin down just in time. He grasped the arm, tore it down across his shoulder, and would no doubt have broken it with the next wrench; but just then something descended on his head, and he went down unconscious in the dust of the trail.

He came back to the world of affairs with a ripple of artistic English swearing in his ears, and sat up.

"That you, Chetwood?" he asked.

"Right-o, old chap!" Chetwood replied, in tones of relief. "You've been in dreamland so long I was afraid the blighters had jolly well bashed in your coco."

"What happened?" Angus demanded.

"Well, it's a bit thick to me," the Englishman admitted. "There were four of the beggars, and three of them went for you while the other gave me all I could do. They floored you, and then rapped me on the head with a sandbag, I should say." He felt his cranium tenderly. "Laid us both out side by side like a pair of blinking babes in the wood. I came around first, and that's some minutes ago. You're sure you're quite all right, old man?"

But struck by a sudden, horrible suspicion, Angus put his hand in his pocket and gasped.

"What's the matter?"

"Matter enough," he replied. "They have rustled all the money I was holding for Paul Sam and the French boys!"

"My aunt!" Chetwood ejaculated. "We must have been followed."

Angus nodded gloomily, cursing his own folly. Why had he been such a fool to carry nearly twenty-four hundred dollars in his pocket? He had fully intended to deposit it in the safe, but had neglected to do so. Now it was gone, and naturally he was responsible.

"I guess we were," he agreed. "You didn't recognize any of them, of course?"

"No. Too dark. I say, Mackay, this is beastly rotten luck."

"Worse than that for me. I'll have to make good."

"Yes, 'fraid you will. I say—you'll pardon me, I'm sure—but in the expressive idiom of the country, will it throw a crimp into you to do it?"

"Will it?" Angus replied grimly. "I have no more than three hundred dollars in the bank, and it keeps me scratching gravel with both feet to make ends meet on the ranch and pay what I have to pay. It puts me in a devil of a hole, if you want to know."

"Hard lines!" Chetwood sympathized. "In the breezy phraseology of the country, it's sure hell. But buck up, old chap! Let me be your banker."

"You mean you'll lend me the money?" Angus exclaimed.

"Like a shot."

"Are you that strong?"

"Strong?" Chetwood queried.

"I mean that well fixed financially."

"Another delightful idiom!" Chetwood laughed. "Must remember it. Well, I have some money to invest, and this looks like my chance."

"It looks to me like a mighty poor investment," Angus told him. "I couldn't pay you for the Lord knows how long."

"Shouldn't expect you to."

"No, I can't do it," Angus decided, "though it's mighty white of you, and I am just as much obliged. I'll get it from somebody who is in the loaning business."

"Back your paper, if you like."

"Nor that either. I will kill my own snakes."

"Obstinate beggar!" Chetwood commented. "Highland blood, and all that sort of thing." He was

silent for a moment. "By George, I've got it!" he exclaimed. "I know how we'll turn the corner. Simplest thing in the world. I'll bet the amount you've lost, we win it, and there we are. Rippin' idea, what!"

"Suppose we don't win?"

"Don't be a bally pessimist. It's more than a sportin' chance; it's a sound declaration. I'll have a go at it."

Seeing that he was thoroughly in earnest, Angus endeavored to dissuade him, and at last apparently succeeded.

"But we'll find some way out," he said. "Never say die. No surrender. Yard-arm to yard-arm, and keep the ruddy flag flying, Mackay."

But Angus slept little that night. The problem of raising the money worried him. He thought he could get it from Mr. Braden, but he was not sure. And what worried him just as much was that eventually it must come out of the ranch. His carelessness had saddled it with a fresh load of debt. Then there was Jean. Whatever happened, her education must not be interrupted, her way must be paid. He would see to that if he had to sell every head of stock on the range. The first pale dawn was rousing the birds to sleepy twitterings when he finally forgot his problems in troubled slumber.

CHAPTER XII

THE RACE

Mr. Braden regarded Angus Mackay severely across his desk. "Tut, tut, tut!" he said. "A very bad business, indeed. Bad company. Evil communications, horse racing, gambling. Very bad!"

"But all I did was to hold the stakes," Angus protested.

"That was just what you didn't do," Mr. Braden pointed out. "It is a large sum."

"I know that, but I have to have it. I am good for the money. Chetwood offered to lend it to me or endorse my note, but——"

"Chetwood, hey?" said Mr. Braden with sudden interest. "Why should he do that?"

"No reason at all. That's why I wouldn't let him."

"Do you know what he is going to do in this country?"

"He spoke of ranching."

"Ha!" said Mr. Braden. "Has he bought any land yet?"

"I don't think so."

"He should be careful," said Mr. Braden. "He should go to some reliable person. Too many irresponsible dealers. He might get—er—stung. I have some very attractive propositions. Did he mention any amount that he was prepared to invest?"

"No. He's going to look around before he buys."

"Glad to show him around," said Mr. Braden heartily. "Bring him to me, Angus, and he won't regret it. Neither—er—neither will you."

"How about lending me this money?" Angus asked.

"Oh—ah—yes, the money. H'm. Well, under the circumstances I will advance it on your note. Not business, but to help *you* out—Well, don't forget about Chetwood. Bring him in. He might get into wrong hands, you know. Bring him in, my boy, and you won't regret it."

With the settlement of the money question Angus was greatly relieved. He was saddled with an additional debt, but at least he was in a position to pay the winner, which as he looked at it was the main thing.

With Jean he went out to the track early in the afternoon. Here and there in the crowd he noted the tall figures of the French brothers. Apparently, they were still taking all the money they could get. On their way to the stand to secure seats, they came upon Chetwood, who was eying the motley crowd whose costumes ranged from blankets to Bond Street coats, with pure delight. But being introduced to Jean, the young Englishman lost all interest in the crowd, and accompanied them. Kathleen French waved greeting to them, and they found seats beside her. It appeared that she had met Chetwood.

"Well, Angus, do you want any Flambeau money?" she laughed.

"I wouldn't bet much, if I were you," he advised her seriously.

"I will bet every dollar I can. That's what the boys are doing, and they're good judges of a horse."

"I think Dorgan is a better one."

"What does he know about Flambeau?" she asked.

"He seems to be satisfied with knowing Chief."

A little line came between Kathleen's eyes, but she shook her head. "Flambeau carries all the money we can get up."

Angus having given her his advice said no more, and went to have a final look at Chief.

"I've had Dave bet my roll for me," Dorgan told him. "I ain't a regular rider no more, and I need the money. Barring accidents, Chief wins handy."

"The Frenches are just as sure of Flambeau."

"Yeh," Dorgan replied calmly. "I just seen the boy burglar that's ridin' for 'em. There's tracks he couldn't work on, but I ain't makin' no kick. If he puts anything over on me, it'll be new stuff. But I guess they figure they got the race won in the stable."

When Flambeau came on the track, Angus admitted to himself that he justified Kathleen's confidence. Knowing quite well what he had to do, the horse was eager. Up on his withers crouched a hard-faced boy in maroon and silver, who eyed the other horses and riders with cool contempt.

But Chief was being led through the gate, and up on his back flashed Dorgan's old black-and-yellow silk. The big horse stepped forward, looking at track and crowd with surprised and inquiring but quite calm eyes. Dorgan patted his neck and spoke to him, and he came past the stand in the long, singing, stretching canter which was deceptive by its very ease. Angus looked at Kathleen.

"He's a grand horse!" she admitted, and once more the little line lay between her eyes.

It became evident at the start that it was a fight between Dorgan and French's boy. Neither would concede the slightest advantage. Both were warned. As they wheeled back, after half a dozen abortive starts, French's boy was spitting insults from the corner of his mouth, and old Dorgan was grinning at him. Side by side, watching each other like boxers, they wheeled and came down on the line. Crouched, arms extended, the harried starter caught the bunch fair at last.

"G'wan!" he yelled as his flag swept. "G'wan outa here!" And the dust of the flurrying hoofs hid him.

At the turn Flambeau was running third, and slightly behind and a little wide and thus out of a possible danger zone, was the black and yellow. But in the stretch on the first round Flambeau had drawn level with the leading horse. As they swept past the stand, Chief, still behind and well out, was running like a machine. Dorgan turned his face, twisted in a grin, up to the stand.

"By George, the old boy thinks he has the race on toast!" Chetwood exclaimed.

"He can't catch Flambeau now!" Kathleen asserted.

But to Angus came the recollection of a piece of the old jockey's wisdom.

"Not every jock that knows pace is a good jock," he had said; "but no jock is a good jock that don't. If you know pace and know you're makin' the time, you don't need to worry. Your leaders will come back to you. I never was no star rider, but pace is one thing I do know."

At the turn it was plainly a fight between the two horses. Angus saw French's boy turn his head, and then sit down to ride. Dorgan was motionless, lying flat, but the gap began to close. Angus glanced at Kathleen. She was leaning forward, tense, eager, her lips drawn straight, the color pinched from them. When he looked at the horses again Chief's head was lapping Flambeau. French's boy went to his bat. It rose and fell. At the same moment Dorgan seemed to sink into and become part of his horse's neck.

For an instant they seemed to be running together. Then steadily, surely, inch by inch the black and yellow crept past the maroon and silver, and the chestnut head appeared in front of the bay. Into the stretch they came, French's boy riding it out and fighting it out to the last inch with Flambeau game to the core under terrific punishment. But as they thundered past the stand Dorgan, his ear hugging Chief's neck, was looking back beneath his arm, and there was clear daylight between the horses.

Once more Angus glanced at Kathleen. She smiled as she met his eye.

"Well, you were right," she said.

"I hope you didn't lose much."

"We—I lost—plenty, thanks. Anyway, I'm proud of Flambeau. He was outrun, but he ran game to the last foot."

With Chetwood, Angus went to see Dorgan. On the way they came upon Gavin and Gerald

French. The latter was tearing up a bunch of tickets. At sight of them he laughed, tossing the fragments aloft.

"Good paper—once," he observed. "Give you a check to-night, Chetwood."

"Give you mine, too," said Gavin, lighting his pipe. "Good race, wasn't it?"

"Rippin'," Chetwood agreed. "No hurry about settlements, you know."

"Oh, we may as well clean up," Gerald returned carelessly. "See you later."

"So you did bet," Angus observed to his companion as they moved on.

"I told you it was a sound scheme to get back what you lost. I was jolly right, too. The money is quite at your service if you need it."

"I've raised the money, thanks all the same."

"In the quaint idiom of the country, far be it from me to horn in, but if I'm not impertinent, how did you do it?"

"Borrowed it on my note."

"Oh, my sacred aunt!" Chetwood groaned. "Now listen to reason, old chap. Here's this money, just the same as if I'd found what you lost. Take it and—"

"Cut it out!" Angus interrupted. "That doesn't go."

"What an obstinate beggar you are!" Chetwood observed in disappointment. "Well, we'll say no more about it, then. Do you know, I fancy the Frenches have come rather a cropper to-day. Of course, I don't know anything of their finances, but they were doing some dashed heavy betting. I fancied Miss French was hard hit."

"So did I," Angus agreed.

"Stood up to it like a major," Chetwood nodded. "Like to see 'em game."

They found Dorgan and Rennie rubbing and sponging the big horse, fussing over him like two hens with one chick.

"Well, I win me a whole barrel of kale," Dorgan chuckled. "I'll bet them Frenches will find her a hard winter unless they're well fixed." He eyed the big chestnut contemplatively for a moment. "And yet, mind you, he ain't a racin' horse," he said, "and don't you never fool yourself that he is. He can run now, and he'll always run as long as an eight-day clock, because he's got the works. But he's a weight carrier, that's what he is. He's a white man's horse, and I hate like poison to see him go back to them Lo's. Why don't you buy him? He'd carry your weight, and you'd be ridin' a real horse."

"I haven't the money," Angus replied regretfully, for in his heart he had coveted Chief from the time he had first mounted him.

Later, when he had handed over his winnings to Paul Sam, Angus drove homeward with Jean. The day had been fine, but in the west a blue-black sky, tinged with copper, bore promise of storm. He sent the team along at a lively clip to reach home before it should break.

He reflected that it had been a most expensive race for him. He did not know when he would be able to repay the money he had borrowed. But his crops were looking well, and his grain was almost ready to cut. His hay was already in. This year he could pay interest on Braden's mortgage. Jean would require more money. She was going to take a special, qualifying course, after which she would be able to teach. But he rather hoped she would not. Undoubtedly, she livened up the ranch.

Recently Jean had developed. She had grown not only physically but mentally. She was, Angus realized, a young woman. He had heard Chetwood ask permission to call at the ranch.

"How do you like this Chetwood?" he asked.

"Where did you meet him?" Miss Jean countered.

"With a couple of the French boys."

"Oh," said Miss Jean, who was under no delusions as to the boys aforesaid, "then he's apt to need his remittances."

"He seems a decent chap," her brother observed.

"He may be," Miss Jean returned nonchalantly, "but I'm not strong for these remittance men."

But the black cloud was mounting higher and higher. A gust of cold wind struck their faces. The dust of the trail rose in clouds, and behind it they heard the roar of the wind. Beyond that again, as they topped a rise and obtained a view, a gray veil, dense, opaque, seemed to have been let down.

"I'm afraid we can't make the ranch without a wetting," Angus said.

"And my best duds, too!" Jean groaned.

A quarter of a mile ahead there was the wreck of an abandoned shack which might suffice to keep Jean dry, and Angus sent his team into their collars; but they had not covered half the distance when with a hissing rush the gray barrier was upon them. And it was not rain, but hail!

The stones varied in size from that of buckshot to robin's eggs. Under the bombardment the dust puffed from the trail. The horses leaped and swerved at the pelting punishment, refusing to face it.

"Throw the lap-robe over your head," Angus told Jean, and thereafter was occupied exclusively with his team.

The colts swung around, cramping the wheel, almost upsetting the rig. Angus avoided a capsize by a liberal use of the whip, but with the punishment and the sting and batter of the icy pellets the animals were frantic. They began to run.

Not being able to help it, Angus let them go, having confidence in his harness and rig. Just there the road was good, without steep grades or sharp turns. He let them run for half a mile under a steady pull, and then after reminding them of their duty by the whip, he began to saw them down. Inside a few hundred yards he had them under control, and pulled them, quivering and all a-jump, under the shelter of two giant, bushy firs.

There Jean, peeping from beneath the robe, saw her brother by the colts' heads.

"Thanks for the ride!" she observed with mild sarcasm. Angus stiffened arm and body against a sudden lunge.

"Stand still, you!" he commanded, "or I'll club you till you'll be glad to!" And to Jean: "They wouldn't face it, and I don't blame them. I thought we were over once."

"Some hail!" Jean commented. "I never saw anything like it."

But already the storm was passing. Came a tail-end spatter of rain, and the sky began to clear. But as he wheeled his team out from shelter Angus' face was very grave, and a sudden thought struck his sister.

"Why," she exclaimed, her brown eyes opening wide, "do you suppose that hail struck the ranch?"

"I don't know," he replied, "but if it did, there won't be any threshing this year. It was bad."

As they drove on there was evidence of that. The grass was beaten flat, bushes were stripped of leaves. They passed the body of a young grouse which, caught in the open and confused, had been pelted to death. It was without doubt very bad hail.

When they came in sight of the ranch, Jean, unable to restrain her impatience, rose to her feet and, holding her brother's shoulder, took a long look. He felt her hand tighten, gripping him hard. Then she dropped back into the seat beside him.

"It—it hit us!" she said.

In a few moments Angus could see for himself. The fields of grain which, as they had driven away that morning, had rippled in the fresh wind, nodding full, heavy heads to the blue sky, were beaten flat. The heads themselves were threshed by the icy flail of the storm. He knew as he looked at the flattened ruin that there would be no threshing. He was "hailed out"!

Though the event assumed the proportions of a disaster, Angus said not a word. His black brows drew down and his mouth set hard. That was all. He felt Jean's arm go beneath his and press it.

"I'm sorry, old boy!" she said. "We needed the money, didn't we!"

"Yes," he replied.

"Oh, well, it can't be helped," she said. "I'll stay home this winter, of course. I can do that much to help, anyway."

"You will do nothing of the sort," her brother declared.

"But——"

"I will find the money. You will finish what you have begun, and that is all there is to it."

"I won't——"

"You *will*!" Angus said in a voice his sister had never heard before. "I say you will. You have a right to your education, and you shall have it. If I cannot give it to you, I am no man at all!"

CHAPTER XIII

MAINLY ABOUT CHETWOOD

When Angus came to investigate the damage wrought by the hail, he found it very complete. There would be no grain to thresh. It turned out that his had been the only ranch to suffer, the swath of the storm having missed his neighbors. It seemed the climax of the bad luck which had attended that twenty-four hours.

Jean, when she saw that her brother was absolutely determined that she should have another year of study, gave in, knowing nothing of the money he had borrowed. In the fortnight that elapsed before her departure, she was very busy, not only with her own preparations, but with preserving, pickling and mending for the ranch.

During this time Chetwood was an intermittent visitor. On these visits most of his time was spent in Jean's vicinity. Thus, on the eve of her departure, when she was very busy with a final batch of preserves, he appeared in the door. In his eyes, Jean, uniformed in a voluminous blue apron, her face flushed and her strong young arms bare, made a very charming picture. But Jean did not know that. She was extremely hot and somewhat sticky, and believed herself to be untidy. She felt all the discomfort and none of the dignity of labor. Hence her greeting was not cordial.

"I haven't time to stop," she said, indicating preserving kettle and jars with a wave of a dripping ladle. "You had better go and find the boys."

"Please let me stay. I like to watch you."

"I don't like being watched. You can't find much amusement in watching me work."

"Very jolly thing, work," Chetwood observed gravely.

"Bosh!" Miss Jean returned. She eyed her guest with pardonable irritation. "What do you know about work?" she demanded.

"Why—er—not a great deal, I'm afraid," he admitted.

"Then don't talk nonsense."

"But it isn't nonsense. I mean to say work keeps one occupied, you know."

"I notice it keeps me occupied," Miss Jean retorted, still more irritated by this profound observation.

"I mean one gets tired of doing nothing."

"Then why doesn't one do something?" she snapped.

Chetwood regarded her whimsically. "I'm afraid you mean me."

"Well," said Miss Jean, "I would like to see you busy at something, instead of looking so blessed cool and—and lazy."

"Oh, I say!"

"A man who doesn't work in this country," Jean stated severely, "is out of place."

"But a man who is out of a place doesn't work, does he?"

"I'm not joking," Miss Jean said with dignity. "I believe in work for everybody."

"So do I. Admire it immensely, I assure you."

"Bah!" Miss Jean ejaculated. "I don't believe you could do a day's work on a bet. You're like all the rest of—of—"

"Go on," Chetwood encouraged as she came to a stop in some confusion.

"Well, I will," said Miss Jean with sudden determination. "You're like all the rest of the remittance men. That's what I was going to say."

"One would gather that your opinion of what you call 'remittance men,' is not high."

"High!" Miss Jean's tone expressed much.

"H'm! Wasters, rotters, what?"

"And then some."

"And I'm like them, you think?"

"Oh, well, I didn't mean just that," Miss Jean admitted under cross-examination. "But you *don't* work, you know."

"Would you like me to work?"

"Why should I care whether you work or not?"

"It *is* strange," Chetwood murmured.

"I *don't*!" snapped Miss Jean. "I don't care a—darn! But I'll bet when I come back in the spring, if you're here you'll be doing just what you're doing now."

"I'm sorry you're going away. I thought if we were better acquainted we should be rather pals."

"We might be," Miss Jean admitted, "but we have our work to do—at least I have."

"I see plainly," said Chetwood, "that this demon of work will get me yet."

"Well, it won't hurt you a little bit," Miss Jean told him, and thereafter gave her exclusive attention to her preserving.

With the going of Jean, Angus buckled down in earnest. The next year must make up for his loss, and with this in view he began to clear more land. He threw himself into the labor, matching his strength and endurance against the tasks and the time. He worked his teams as mercilessly as he worked himself, and for the first time he began to drive others.

But to this speeding-up Turkey did not take kindly. By nature he was impatient of steady work, of control, of all discipline. He craved motion, excitement. He would ride from daylight to dark in any sort of weather rounding up stock, and enjoy himself thoroughly, but half a day behind a plow would send him into the sulks. He had broken a fine, young blue mare for his own use, and he took to being out at night, coming in late. He never told Angus where he went, but though the latter asked no questions the youngster could feel his disapproval. But as he possessed a vein of obstinacy and contrariness, this merely confirmed him in his course.

Angus maintained grim silence, repressing a strong desire to speak his mind. He recognized that the boy was becoming increasingly impatient of his authority, and desired to avoid a clash. As he let things go, Turkey took more and more rope. Angus learned accidentally that he consorted with a number of men older than himself, of whom Garland and Blake French were leading spirits. He knew that this was no company for the boy, but as reference to it would inevitably lead to unpleasantness, he put it off. But Turkey's deliberate slacking of work, just when it was most necessary, got on his nerves to an extent greater than he knew.

It was necessary to explain to Mr. Braden that he was unable to meet the mortgage payments. To his relief, the mortgagee made no difficulty about it. Indeed he was most genial.

"I heard you had been hit by the hail," he said. "Well, well, these things will happen, and I am not a harsh creditor. I will carry you along."

"That's very good of you," Angus acknowledged. "I am doing considerable breaking, and next year, if I don't bump into more hard luck, I'll be able to make a good payment."

Mr. Braden nodded. "Meanwhile there is something you can do for me. I am selling a piece of land to young Chetwood—about five hundred acres—but before closing the deal he wants your opinion of it."

Angus had not seen Chetwood for nearly a fortnight. He had not introduced him to Mr. Braden, but it appeared that they had become acquainted otherwise.

"Do I know the land?" he asked.

"I think so. It's about five miles from your ranch, on Canon Creek. There is a little cleared, and an old shack, but otherwise it is mostly unimproved. A splendid opportunity for an energetic young man to build up an excellent ranch."

"Do you mean the old Tetreau place?" This was a piece of land long since abandoned by a man of that name.

"Why—er—yes, I believe that is what it is called," Mr. Braden replied. "It's good, level land—most of it. I am offering it at a very low figure—all things considered—twenty dollars."

"And I particularly want this deal to go through," he concluded. "I should not mind paying you a little commission, my boy—say five per cent."

"I couldn't take a commission from you for valuing land for a buyer."

"Nonsense! Done every day. I might—er—stretch it a little. You are not to worry about that note of yours and the mortgage money, my boy. One good turn deserves another, hey?"

"I know the place," Angus said, "but I never thought of putting a value on it. How about water?"

"Tetreau had a record of eight hundred inches on Canon Creek. That goes with the place. And there's a good spring creek."

"That little spring wouldn't irrigate more than a few acres," Angus objected. "Seems to me I heard the old man quit because he couldn't bring water from the main creek."

Mr. Braden frowned. "Nonsense! Plenty of water. Tetreau was too lazy to run a ditch, that's all. Lots of water. Never mind that. The main thing is the land, which is good. I'll depend on you for a good report, and I'll tell Chetwood to run out and see you."

Angus rode home, none too well pleased with the prospect. He could just remember Felix Tetreau, a stooped old Frenchman, and he had a vague recollection that the latter had given up the place after a vain attempt to make water run up hill. But it was possible that he had been wrong in his levels, or, as Mr. Braden had suggested, too lazy to put in a ditch. Anyway, he had gone years before, and it appeared that Mr. Braden who owned a big block of land in that

vicinity, had acquired his holding. The clearing had grown back to wild, which as there had not been much of it, mattered the less. But the question of water mattered a great deal.

For in that district water was a *sine qua non*. Angus was no victim of the dry-farming delusion. Water and plenty of it, was essential in most years to grow paying crops. Therefore the value of the land, no matter what the quality of the soil, was conditional upon whether water could be brought upon it. It was that question which, in spite of Mr. Braden's airy dismissal, must be investigated in justice to Chetwood. Therefore when the latter came to the ranch, Angus took with them a hand level.

The land in question lay close to the foothills, and back of it a small, round mountain rose, but this was evidently not part of the parcel. The soil was a dark, sandy loam, which would give good result if properly fed, watered and cultivated. Angus pointed out these facts to the prospective buyer.

"Then you think it a good investment?" Chetwood queried.

"I did not say just that," Angus replied. "You have to add the cost of clearing to your purchase price. Then there will be your buildings and fencing and ditches. You have to figure on raising enough to pay interest on your total investment, and wages as well."

"I meant to ask you about the price. Is it fair, or shall I jew old Braden down a bit? Fancy I could, you know."

"The price is high—as land sells," Angus told him. "You can get good, wild land now for ten dollars an acre. Five years ago you could have got it for two dollars, and five years before that for fifty cents."

Chetwood whistled. "In the noble language of the country, I was about to be stung."

"Well," Angus explained, "if land values keep climbing, it might be a good investment, after all. I would not say it might not be. But you can buy just as good land cheaper."

"Then why does Braden ask so much?"

"I suppose he thinks he can get it."

Chetwood grinned. "In the terse vernacular of the land, 'I get you, Steve.' Shall I offer him ten dollars?"

"That would depend on the water supply."

"Oh, that's absolutely all right. I've seen the government certificate. Eight hundred miners' inches. That's ample, what?"

"Yes—if you can get it on the land."

"But surely that sort of thing was looked into long ago, when the record was made."

Angus shook his head. "A water record isn't a guarantee of water. It's merely a right to take it if you can get it. Water is one thing you can't take for granted. We have time to run a line to the creek, and see where we come out. As for the spring here, it wouldn't water more than ten acres or so."

There is nothing more deceptive, even to the trained eye, than levels in a broken country. The unaided eye can tell nothing about them. To all appearances, in many places, water runs up hill. Nothing but the level can prove whether it can be brought upon any given area.

Starting from the upper end of the block they began to take sights. The distance to the creek was further than Angus had supposed. They ran into a broken country where the ground was rocky and less adapted to ditching. There were sidehills, which are dangerous because they have an annoying habit of sliding when water-soaked, and gulches which would necessitate fluming. All the time they drew nearer and nearer to the base of the round mountain. Unless the line could run around the lower foot of it the way was barred to water. And finally the line ran into the base of the hill. There was no going around it. It definitely settled the question of water. The land, then, was non-irrigable.

"I wonder if that old blighter, Braden, knew this?" Chetwood speculated.

"He might not," Angus replied, though he had his own ideas on the subject.

"And then again he might," Chetwood grinned. "*Caveat emptor*, and all that sort of thing. I'm awfully obliged to you, you know."

"That is all right."

"Left to myself I might have bought." He hesitated. "I wish there were some way for me to show my appreciation."

"Any one who knew the country would have told you the same thing."

"I'm not so sure of that. For instance, there is a rancher named Poole—know him?"

"Yes," Angus returned, for Poole to whom Braden had once purposed renting the Mackay ranch,

had now some sort of place on the other side of town.

"Well, friend Braden, when I spoke of getting the opinion of some practical rancher, suggested Poole. Took a look at Poole, and thought I'd rather have you. Braden didn't seem to take kindly to my counter-suggestion, which naturally confirmed me in it. It's a sound system to play the game your opponent doesn't like. I'll tell the old blighter you didn't recommend the buy."

"That will be the truth."

Chetwood glanced at him keenly.

"I say," he exclaimed, "I don't wish to seem impertinent, but is there any personal reason why I should let Braden suppose I am doing this on my own?"

Angus hesitated. "I owe him more money than I can pay just now," he said, "but you may tell him what you like."

"Oh, thunder!" Chetwood ejaculated. "I'm afraid I've let you in for something. I'll say we never mentioned water, and quite on my own I'll tell him I must have an engineer's report on that."

But perhaps Chetwood did not tell his story convincingly. Or perhaps Mr. Braden was too old a bird. At any rate, when he next saw Angus he asked him what he had told Chetwood. Angus replied bluntly. Whereupon, Mr. Braden in high indignation accused him of blocking the sale.

"I merely told him what is so," Angus said.

"You brought up the water question yourself."

"Land is no good without water. You know that as well as I do."

"I don't admit that water can't be got on this land. Now, see here, I'm going to have a surveyor run the line of a ditch, and I want you to tell Chetwood you were mistaken in your levels. Understand?"

"If you can show me I'm mistaken, I'll be glad to tell him. But I'm certain of them. I've checked them up since."

"Dammit!" Mr. Braden exploded angrily, "do you know I hold a mortgage on your ranch? Do you know I hold your note? Hey?"

Angus stared at him for a moment, his black brows drawing down, his eyes narrowing. "And what has that got to do with the levels of this land?" he asked with disconcerting directness.

But Mr. Braden shirked the show-down.

"Do with it, do with it!" he sputtered. "Oh, not a thing, not a damned thing, of course. You were my agent to conclude this sale, and you threw me down."

"I wasn't your agent. I was acting for Chetwood."

"You were to get a commission from me."

"I told you I couldn't take one."

"Well, you won't get one," Mr. Braden snapped. "Levels! What do you know about levels? I'll get somebody that does."

But for some reason Mr. Braden did not do so.

It was nearly a week after this interview, that old Paul Sam rode up on his paint pony, leading Chief.

"Me sell um cooley kuitan," he announced.

"Who bought him?" Angus asked. For answer the old Indian drew forth from the recesses of his garment a slip of paper, which he handed to Angus. The latter read:

"Dear Mackay: I want you to let me have the pleasure of presenting a good horse with a good owner. This, not by way of payment for the service you did me, but in token of my appreciation of kindness to a pilgrim and a stranger here. Am leaving for a few weeks, and will look you up on my return. Faithfully,

"E. W. F. CHETWOOD.

"P. S.—Don't be a bally ass. Keep the horse."

From this surprising letter Angus lifted his eyes to the big chestnut. As he did so he realized that he had wanted him very badly. He took the lead rope from the old Indian.

"All right, Paul Sam," he said. "Thanks for bringing him over. Put your cayuse in the stable and come up to the house and have some muckamuck."

CHAPTER XIV

A FIGHT WITH A GRIZZLY

Now, though Angus was working hard under pressure, the hard part of it was not the work but the things he wanted to do and could not. Though he plugged away steadily at his tasks, his thoughts were not of them, but of lonely trails, and steep hills, and deep timber, and the surging waters tumbling down in nameless creeks from hoary old glaciers; and he would have given all he owned if he could with a clear conscience have quit the ranch work and taken a holiday. But as he could not, he worked on grimly.

Occasionally, however, he rode the range after stock, and on these occasions he carried a rifle, on the chance of getting a shot at a deer. Invariably now he rode Chief, who was becoming a most dependable saddle horse. And so one bright fall morning he rode along the foothills to find, if he could, a small bunch of cattle which he himself had not seen since Spring.

Shortly after mid-day he found himself near the site of an old logging camp, where several creeks united to form a muskeg, and at the foot of it a little lake. Out of the lake a larger creek ran, and across it stood the old camp buildings, now worn and weatherbeaten and roofless. The banks were steeply cut and the old pole bridge was rotten. Therefore Angus put Chief on a rope where the grazing was good, and taking his lunch and rifle, crossed the creek, intending to eat beside an excellent spring which was better than the creek water.

He leaned his rifle against one end of the ancient bunkhouse, went the length of it, turned the corner, and came full upon a huge, old-man grizzly.



He turned the corner, and came full upon a huge, old-man grizzly.

The bear had been digging at a rotten stump, which strewed the ground in fragments, and the brawl of the creek had drowned whatever noise Angus had made. Thus it was a case of mutual surprise. As Angus turned the corner the bear's senses brought him warning. He turned his great, flat head, and at sight of the intruder his mane roached and bristled, and he swung about with unbelievable quickness. Being more or less penned by the wall of the eating camp and an old pole fence, he probably believed himself cornered. He half rose, with a snort, and his fierce, little eyes lit with a green flare.

Angus had had no first-hand experience with grizzlies, though he had seen them at a distance. Nevertheless, he knew a good deal about them from men who had, and his information amounted to this: The ordinary grizzly will run if he can; but if he is wounded or believes himself cornered, there is no telling just what he will do. Also there are "bad" bears, just as there are "bad" bulls or stallions.

The bear was a complete surprise to Angus. He was so close that he could almost smell him, could see the little pieces of rotten, wet wood and slaver on his jaws, the red of his mouth and the white of his tusks all speckled with dirt from his grubbing. For a moment his heart almost

stopped beating, his hair prickled, and stood on end, and his knees knocked together. For an instant he stood frozen in his tracks, and then as he saw the great brown bulk gather itself he came to life and action. With an involuntary yell he leaped into the air like a scared lynx, turned and hit the ground running.

Behind him he heard a short, coughing roar, and it nearly doubled the stretch of his stride. He made the length of the bunkhouse, turned it and grabbed for his rifle. But his fingers merely brushed the barrel and knocked it down. There was no time to pick it up. He doubled the next corner like a rabbit and after him came the grizzly, with most infernal persistence.

For a short distance a grizzly is as fast as a good pony, and all that had saved Angus was dodging around corners. But that could not go on indefinitely. The walls of the roofless bunkhouse were of logs, closely mortised, but inside he knew there were the remains of some old, double-decked bunks. It was taking a chance, but he ducked through the door opening, scrambled up on the bunks, the old poles crashing beneath him, and straddled the top log just in time to escape the swipe of a steel-garnished paw which actually brushed his leg.

From this strategic position, rather out of breath and somewhat shaky, he looked down at the grizzly, and the bear looked up at him, rumbling and grumbling to himself, his wicked, little eyes burning with unholy lights. He was a big bear, shaggy and rough, with a sprinkle of gray in his mane, and there was no doubt that he was annoyed. As a beginning he knocked a bunk to pieces with one lift and bat of a paw, and rearing he reached for Angus. Luckily the wall was high, and the big claws raked bark and slivers below him. Not being able to reach his enemy, the bear dropped back with a grunt, and stood swinging to and fro gently.

It occurred to Angus that he might drop over the wall, get his rifle and call for a show-down, but as he waited to get back some of his breath and steadiness, meanwhile hitching along the wall to get closer to the gun, the bear shambled through the door. He trotted around the bunkhouse, and coming to the rifle sniffed at it and took a wide circle. Perhaps he knew the smell of steel, and suspected a trap. But after prowling up and down for a few minutes eying the treed man, he did not go away, which was quite contrary to what Angus had heard of the habits of bears under similar circumstances. He lay down like a dog, apparently prepared to camp there indefinitely.

From where Angus sat he could see Chief, standing hip-shot and half asleep, quite unconscious of the bear, and he was glad that the latter was equally unconscious of the horse, for he seemed full of racial prejudice against man and his possessions. All Angus could do was wait it out. An hour passed, and he grew weary of his position, and indignant at being forced to lie along a log like a lizard by a low-grade proposition like a bear. He tore off bark and pelted him with it. The grizzly merely eyed him evilly and sniffed at what he threw; so Angus gave it up, and more time passed.

In spite of his position the sun and wind made him sleepy. Perhaps he dozed. He had seen and heard nothing. But suddenly as he turned his head he saw a girl a few yards away from the old eating-camp.

For a moment Angus did not believe his eyes. It seemed one of those vague visions which flit across the mental retina in that dim shadowland between wakefulness and slumber. She was looking down into the finder of a camera, while back of her, reins lying on its neck instead of a trail, stood a pony. She was tall and straight, and a crown of hair shone to the slope of the afternoon's sun, for she was using a pony hat to shield the camera's lens.

Angus gaped and blinked, and then he knew it was no dream vision, but real flesh and blood. Just then she got her picture and took a step or two in his direction, winding up the film.

"Hi!" Angus hailed, "don't come here. Get on your pony, quick."

Being very much in earnest, voice and words were harsh, peremptory. The girl stopped short and looked around. Then for the first time she saw him perched on the wall.

"I beg your pardon!" she said, her voice carrying clear and full, a touch of hauteur in her tone answering the harshness of Angus' command. "I'm not to come there, you say. Why not?" Her chin lifted as she spoke and she took another step forward.

"Bear!" Angus returned. "Get back, I tell you. I'm treed by a bad grizzly. Get on your pony and pull out before he sees you."

The girl stopped. "Do you mean that?" she demanded incredulously.

"Do I mean it?" Angus yelled, exasperated by her delay and frightened at her very real danger. "Get a move on you, woman, if you have any sense! He hears you now!"

His tone left no doubt of his sincerity, and the girl, turning, ran toward her pony. But the animal, not being anchored by the reins, sidled away at her swift approach.

"Hurry up!" Angus shouted, for the big savage below him, hearing another voice, was bristling afresh and suddenly started around the corner of the building to investigate. Just then the pony either sighted or smelt the bear, for he snorted, wheeled and broke into a gallop. "Run!" Angus yelled. "Get behind that eating-camp. Try to climb it, quick!" And not having time for more words he dropped from his perch, lit sprawling alongside his rifle, seized it, and jumped around the corner into the open in the wake of the grizzly, his hand hooked into the lever, while a long soft-nose snicked home in the chamber.

The girl, now fully alive to her danger, was running for the corner of the eating camp, and the grizzly, halfway between, was after her. So much Angus saw at a glance, and then he caught the lumbering but swift bulk fair center with the bead, and unhooked.

With the high-pitched, smacking voice of the rifle mingled the roar of the wounded grizzly. He went heels over head like a shot rabbit, came on his feet again facing the gun, took a second bullet as if it had been a pellet of bird-shot, and coughing out a fighting roar that seemed to hold all the bestial ferocity of the ages, came for Angus like a furry tornado.

There is this about a grizzly which entitles him to respect: When he charges, he charges home. This fact Angus knew very well. The bear was a scant forty yards away. Angus caught the center of him with his sights, and began to pump steadily. His entire attention was concentrated on holding the sights, and otherwise the gun seemed to shoot itself. Missing was next to impossible at that range, but so also was choice of aim. "When anything's comin' for you close up," Rennie had once advised him, "don't try to hit nowhere's special, but just hold plum' center and keep shootin'." While Angus did not consciously remember this advice, he followed it, with a dull wonder that the stream of soft-noses tearing through the great brute's vitals did not stop him. His last shot was fired at ten feet, and the hammer clicked down on an empty chamber. As the brown bulk hurled itself upon him, he lunged the rifle barrel with all his force into the yawning, white-tusked, red mouth. But as he tried to leap aside a huge paw blurred for an instant before his eyes and then blotted out the world. He went down, crushed and smothered as by the weight of mountains.

CHAPTER XV

FAITH WINTON TURNS UP

Angus came out of the darkness slowly with the weight still upon him. There was a strange, salt taste in his mouth and a rank smell in his nostrils. His head seemed pillowed, but his eyelids were gummed, and when he threw up his hand to clear them his fingers touched wetness. Then through a raw, red fog he saw a girl's face bending above him, and blue eyes that seemed misty as an April sky through showers, though perhaps it was only his uncertain vision that made them so.

"Please say something—if you can hear me!" said a low, clear voice as his senses came back fully.

"All right," he said. "I'm all right, I guess. What's holding me? What's on me?"

As his eyes shifted downward, a huge mound of brown fur rose against them, hiding the landscape. It was the carcass of the bear which lay across his legs, burying them from the waist down.

"I can't move it," the girl told him. "Oh, are you badly hurt? Can you take a drink of water? I'll lift your head!" She spoke all in a breath, tremulously, for she had considered him almost a dead man. She lifted his head from where it lay in her lap, and held an old tin can full of spring water to his lips.

Angus drank and felt better.

"I don't think I'm hurt much," he said. "Where is all the blood coming from?" He put his hand to his head, touching gingerly a four-inch rip in his scalp. There was a pain in his side which was worse when he moved, but he said nothing about that and otherwise he could find nothing wrong.

"You must get out from under that brute," the girl told him. "I've tried to pull it off, and I've tried to pull you out, but I'm not strong enough."

She stooped behind him, her hands beneath his shoulders, and he drew his legs clear of the weight. When he got to his feet he was giddy for a moment and leaned against her for support. With her assistance he got to the spring, and washed off the coagulated blood, while she made a bandage of their handkerchiefs and fitted it deftly. The icy water cleared away the last of the fog, and save for a growing stiffness and soreness he felt well enough. He looked at the girl who sat beside him on the brown grass and wondered who she was and where on earth she had come from.

The girl was tall, and clean and graceful as a young pine. She carried her head well lifted, which Angus considered a good sign in horses and human beings. A mass of fair hair was coiled low at the base of it and drawn smoothly back from a broad forehead. Her eyes were a clear blue which reminded Angus of certain mountain lakes, and yet a little weary and troubled as if some shadow overcast them. Her smooth cheeks, too, were pale, with but little of the color that comes from the kiss of wind and sun. She was an utter stranger to him, and yet there was something vaguely familiar.

The fact was that he was staring at her. She met his gaze evenly.

"Do you know that you are lucky not to be badly hurt?" she said.

"It would have served me right if I had been."

"Why?"

"For leaving my rifle in the first place, and for rotten shooting in the second," he replied seriously. "I should have stopped him, and so I would if I had taken my time about it. I guess I got rattled."

"Is that your trouble?" she laughed. "The bear is simply riddled with bullets."

"Is that so?" he returned with obvious pleasure. "Tell me what happened."

"I stopped running when you fired the first shot," she said. "You and the bear seemed to go down together, and he rolled clean over you. It was only in his last flurry that he threw himself across your legs."

"Lucky he didn't claw me up in that flurry. He was a tough old boy."

"If you had been killed it would have been my fault," she said seriously. "You were quite safe, and you attacked him to save me."

"I would have come down, anyway, the first chance he gave me to get hold of my rifle."

"It was stupid of me," she persisted. "At first, you see, I couldn't believe there was a bear. I thought you were trying to frighten me. And then I just *couldn't* catch that pony. I'm not used to horses, I'm afraid."

Now, as she spoke, something in her voice struck a chord in Angus' recollection. Where had he heard that faint lisp, that slurring of the sibilants? For a moment he puzzled, groping for an elusive memory. And then suddenly it leaped at him out of the one day, years before, whose happenings, even the least of them, he never forgot. And he saw a little girl, frightened but trying to be brave, and a lanky boy confronting her with a rifle.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed, "you are little Faith Winton!"

She frowned, drawing herself up a little.

"I am Faith Winton, but how do you know? Have I ever—" She broke off, staring at him. "Why, it's impossible. You can't be *that* boy!"

"I used to be," he told her. "I've grown a little, since."

"Angus! Angus Mackay!" she cried, her face lighting swiftly. "Oh, I know you now. I've never forgotten. And your sister's doughnuts! How good they were, and how good you were to me!" She leaned forward, catching his great, brown, work-hardened paws in her slim hands. "Oh, I'm so glad to see you again, Ang—I mean Mr. Mackay."

"My name is still Angus."

"Oh, but that was years ago. How did you recognize me? I was such a little girl. To think of meeting you again—like this!"

"I knew you by your lisp," he told her. "And I wish you would call me 'Angus.'"

"Well—Anguth!" She said it with the old lisp. "I can't help it sometimes," she confessed. "I struggle and struggle, and then I forget myself and—lithp. Do you mind it very much?"

"I like it."

"Tho nithe of you to thay tho!" she exaggerated laughing. "No, I won't lisp any more—until I forget myself. But how big you are—almost as big as Gavin himself."

"I am big enough," Angus admitted. "I get in my own way sometimes." For the first time he noticed a black band on her sleeve. She caught the glance.

"My father died two months ago." Her voice broke, and Angus looked away.

"I am sorry," he said awkwardly.

"I can't talk about it very well yet," she said. "I didn't mean to. One shouldn't—to a stranger."

"But I'm not a stranger. You seem like—well—like an old friend."

"I'm glad of that," she said, smiling a trifle sadly. "You see, father and I were always together, and it's new and—and hard to be alone. But I suppose I shall get used to it after a while."

"You have your kin here," he ventured.

"Yes, I have them," she agreed. "But they are not really my kin. And then I won't be with them very long."

"You are going away?" For some reason Angus experienced a sensation of regret.

"No, I am going to stay here. I am thinking of ranching."

"Ranching!" he exclaimed.

"Yes. Why not?"

"Do you know anything about it?"

"No, but I could learn, I suppose."

"I suppose you might. But the work is hard—man's work. I wouldn't buy a ranch, if I were you."

"But I have one—or the makings of one. A few years ago Uncle Godfrey bought nearly a thousand acres for father. I'm afraid there isn't much of it cleared, and there is no house fit to live in. I had been to look at it, and was riding back by this old logging camp. That's how I happened to be here."

"Where is this land?" Angus asked.

Her reply gave him almost as much of a shock as he had received from the bear; for as she described it, the land, or at least part of it, was none other than the old Tetreau place which Mr. Braden had painstakingly tried to unload on Chetwood. But if it belonged to her or to her father how could Braden sell it? And then, again, she had spoken of nearly a thousand acres, while the old Tetreau place comprised some five hundred only. Something of his thoughts reflected in his face.

"Do you know the land?" she asked.

"Yes, I know it," he admitted. "Have you ever thought of selling the land instead of ranching it? Has any one ever tried to sell it for you?"

"Oh, no," she replied. "I don't want to sell it—yet, a while, anyway. Father's idea was to hold it till land increased very much in value. Uncle Godfrey told him that was bound to occur. It was an investment, you see. It cost only ten dollars an acre."

"You mean your father paid ten thousand dollars for the land!" Angus exclaimed.

"Yes, in round figures. He never saw it. Uncle Godfrey said it was well worth that, and of course he knows."

There was little that Angus could say. He was no stranger to wild-cattling in lands, but he held to the old idea that agricultural land is worth what it will grow and no more: a maxim which, if remembered by prospective purchasers, would cut down both sales and disappointments. But the puzzling thing was that Godfrey French, who wasn't an easy mark by any means, should have advised his relative to pay ten dollars an acre for land half of which was too rough to cultivate and of which all was non-irrigable; and this at a time when good, wild land was to be had in plenty for from three to five dollars an acre. Added to that was the abortive Braden-Chetwood deal. The one clear thing was that Faith Winton had a bunch of worthless land. He hoped that it did not represent her entire patrimony.

"You will find it hard work starting a ranch," he said. "Clearing, breaking, fencing and so on are expensive, too."

"But whatever I spend will make the place worth that much more, and then if I wish to sell I would have a better chance. People always prefer to buy improved properties, I'm told."

Angus had neither the heart nor the nerve to tell her the truth. Everything went to show that her father had been deliberately stung by Godfrey French. Never in the world would he have paid ten dollars of his own money for such a property. Had he paid ten dollars of Winton's money? Angus doubted it. In plain language, his thought was that French had paid about three dollars an acre, and either pocketed the difference or split it with the seller.

"What does your uncle think about it?" he asked.

"He doesn't want me to try ranching. He says the place is increasing in value anyway, and that I should not be in a hurry to sell."

Naturally, thought Angus, that would be French's advice. Perhaps he had had the handling of the property, and Braden had been acting for him when trying to sell to Chetwood. If that sale had gone through, half the property would have been sold for what had been paid for the whole, and the remainder, worthless or not, would have been velvet. But as it was French was in a tight box, and the only thing he could do was to advise the girl to let the place alone, and hope that nothing would occur to arouse her suspicions. Angus half wished for her sake that he had not blocked the sale to Chetwood.

"You see," she said, "I have to do something for a living. I haven't enough to keep me in idleness, and anyway I don't want to be idle. But I didn't mean to bother you with my worries. I don't know why it is, but I find myself talking to you just as frankly as when I was the little, lost girl and you were the big boy. Perhaps I am a little lost, still. You—you seem comforting, somehow." She considered for a moment. "Perhaps it's the bigness of you. But I don't talk to Gavin as I do to you, and I know him much better. Why is it?"

"I don't know, but I'm glad of it," Angus told her. "I want to help you if I can."

"Now, I believe that's why," she said. "You want to help folks who need it. That's the secret of it."

"Nothing of the sort," Angus told her. Suddenly he realized that the sun was low above the

western ranges and that the early fall evening was coming. "We'll have to be moving if we're to get home by dark," he said. "To-morrow I'll skin out the bear."

"Oh—my pony!" she exclaimed. "I never thought of him."

"No use looking for him. Likely he headed for home. You'll ride my horse."

"And let you walk? Indeed, no!"

"Of course you will."

"But I won't. You're hurt—"

"Not a bit," Angus lied cheerfully.

"Yes, you are. There, you see, you're almost too stiff to walk. I won't have it, Angus, really I won't."

Angus did not argue the point further. He was accustomed to having his own way with girls, or at least with Jean. He was sore and stiff, and when he first moved a sharp pain in his side made him catch his breath, but he knew that the best cure for stiffness is movement. They crossed the creek and he saddled Chief, and without a word began to take up the stirrups.

"Angus," said Faith Winton, "I meant what I told you. I rode your pony years ago, when I was a little, lost girl—"

"What are you now?"

"A pedestrian," she said with determination.

"Now, see," Angus urged. "It's over five miles. Your shoes would be cut to pieces on the rocks, and you'd be tired out. So you're going to ride."

"I'm *not*, Angus! What are you—Oh!"

For Angus, finding that argument was a waste of time had picked her up and put her in the saddle. Thence she stared down at him, and now there was no lack of color in her cheeks.

"Angus Mackay! What—what do you mean?"

"You are going to ride," Angus told her with finality, "and that is all there is to it."

"I'm not used to being thrown about like a sack of oats!" she flashed, and would have dismounted, but he stopped her. "How dare you!" she cried. "Let me down! Take your hands off me, Angus Mackay!"

"Then behave sensibly!" said Angus.

"Sensibly! My heavens! do you think I'm a child?"

"A child would be glad to ride."

"Do you think you can make me do things merely because you're stronger?"

"Yes," Angus told her flatly, "some things. This, for one."

"Admitting that—you're brutal!"

"And admitting that," Angus returned, "will you act like a sensible girl?"

For a moment she frowned at him, her eyes stormy, dark with anger. And then, slowly, she bent low over the saddle horn, and turned her face away, while a sob shook her slight figure. At which awful spectacle Angus' resolution suddenly melted to contrition.

"Don't do that!" he pleaded. "Don't cry. I didn't mean it. Come on and walk. Walk all you like. Walk a lot. I'll help you down."

She turned her face to him and he gasped; for in place of tears there was laughter, mocking laughter.

"You—you fraud!" he exclaimed.

"You—you bluff!" she retorted. "This was one of the things you could make me do because you were stronger, was it? Oh, Angus Mackay, what a soft heart you have in that big body!"

"It would serve you right if I made you walk!" he told her indignantly.

"Yes, wouldn't it? But you won't. I'll ride—if you'll promise to tell me if you get tired."

And so they went down the old tote road in the wan light of the fall sunset.

"It's exactly like that day so many years ago," she said.

But Angus, though he agreed with her, was privately conscious of a vast difference. On that far-away day he had considered the little, lost girl a nuisance and an imposition. Now he felt a strange, warm glow and thrill as he walked beside her, and a sense of contentment strange to him. He was conscious of this feeling. But, quite honestly, he attributed it to the fact that he had

just got his first grizzly, and what was more, centered him, charging, with every shot; which, as he looked at it, ought to be a source of satisfaction to any properly constituted man, and adequately explained the sense of contentment aforesaid.

CHAPTER XVI

A TALK WITH JUDGE RILEY

Dr. Wilkes investigated the naked torso of Angus Mackay with skilled fingers.

"Two ribs cracked," he announced, "and you're lucky at that, young man. The scalp wound is nothing. The ribs will be all right in a few weeks, if you give them a chance. Mind, you, Angus, no hard riding, no lifting; move gently and rest all you can."

"But the fall work—" Angus began. The doctor cut him short.

"Work!" he exploded irritably. "There's that word again. By heaven, you all say it! It's 'I can't go away, doc, I can't take a holiday, I can't rest. I've got to work.' Lord knows how many times I've heard it, and from men who wouldn't work a sick or lame horse on a bet. You'd think health was the least important thing on earth, something to be fixed up in a day or two with a Blaud's pill. Work is a fine thing to keep folks out of mischief, but it isn't the chief end of man, and it isn't a damned fetich that demands human sacrifice. Who'll do your work when you're dead?" He glared at Angus ferociously beneath shaggy, red-and-gray brows.

"Well, I won't worry about that," Angus laughed. "I hope it's a long way off."

"It missed your head by about an inch yesterday," Wilkes told him. "There you stand, over six feet, and nearly two hundred pounds of as fine bone and sinew and flesh and blood as I've ever seen, every organ of you, as far as I can tell, as sound as clear pine. And you may be good for seventy years more—or seventy hours. A long way off! Your horse steps in a hole, or a team bolts and you happen to fall wrong, or a little drop of blood clots somewhere. And puff! away you go like a pinch of dust on the trail, which is exactly what you are. A long way off! Of all the blasted but blessed cocksureness of youth!" And he grumbled and growled as he strapped up the injured side.

But Angus paid little attention to the doctor's homily. From the latter's office he went to see Judge Riley who, much to everybody's surprise, had cut his drinking down if not out, and in consequence was much busier than of old. Before him Angus laid the puzzle of Faith Winton's property, Godfrey French's connection therewith, and Braden's attempt to sell part of it.

"There may be a perfectly good explanation," said the lawyer. "For instance, there may have been other properties or other transactions involved. Then as to Braden's attempt to sell to Chetwood, he may have been acting for French, who may be Winton's executor. In any event, if half of this land could be sold for as much as was paid for the whole, nobody but the purchaser would be apt to make subsequent objection."

"But if French paid only about three dollars for the land and split the difference with somebody, couldn't Miss Winton claim the difference?"

"Undoubtedly. But you have no evidence of that. If you like, I'll search the title and find out who sold the land and what consideration is stated in the conveyance to Winton. Drop in some time next week."

Angus waited the week with impatience. Convinced that there had been crooked work somewhere, he was anxious to get at the facts. Also he chafed at the comparative inactivity imposed on him by his injured ribs.

"Well," said the judge, when Angus sought him again, "I haven't found out very much. But Braden apparently owns this property."

"Braden!" Angus exclaimed.

"Yes, he is the registered owner of a large block of land which seems to include this. So far as most of the land is concerned, he is the original grantee. As to the Tetreau land, Tetreau was the original grantee of that. Five hundred acres was granted to Tetreau, and sold by him to Braden for an expressed monetary consideration of one thousand dollars and certain other considerations not specified. When he acquired that land from Tetreau, Braden then had a compact block, and apparently he has it still."

"But there must be a deed to Winton."

"If so it isn't registered. Braden can convey and give a good registered title. There is nothing to show any interest of Winton's. Are you sure this is the property his daughter meant?"

"From her description, it can't be any other."

"Then probably there is an unregistered conveyance from Braden to Winton, or to French as the latter's trustee. As to the price paid, it may have been high, but it does not prove nor even raise

the presumption of fraud. You can't tell the girl your suspicions, when they are mere suspicions, especially while she is under French's roof."

"I believe both Braden and French are crooks. I never liked Braden, but up to a little while ago, I thought he was straight. And I always thought old French was a gentleman."

"So he is."

"Not if he is a crook."

"Nonsense!" the judge returned. "Gentlemen have been pirates, outlaws and highwaymen. A gentleman may be a blackguard, just as a well-bred dog may be a sheep-killer, or run wild with wolves. It's one word, not two. It's a name for a breed, not a descriptive term for qualities such as honesty, courtesy or the like."

"If a man has those qualities, isn't he a gentleman?"

"No," said the judge, "though he may be something a good deal better. I'm as democratic as they make 'em, but it is an undoubted fact that there are strains of men, just as there are strains of animals. Considered as a strain of mankind, a gentleman is a gentleman, no matter how big a rascal he is. The Frenches are all gentlemen—that is, all but Blake."

"Why not Blake, if it is a breed?"

"God knows," the judge replied. "Blake is a full brother to the rest, but he's not the same breed. He's a throwback to something that crept in somehow, maybe a century or so ago, when nobody was looking. He has the body, but not the heart. He is a cur, while the rest are—wolves." He drummed on his blotter. "In confidence, Angus, I am going to tell you one or two things: The first is that the Frenches have little or no money left. They have been going down hill steadily for years. This horse racing and gambling is not amusement, but their living. Their ranch is mortgaged for all it will stand, and more. So you see, it's not likely French could repay the girl, even if we proved he cheated Winton."

"And now for Braden:" He paused for a moment, and his bushy brows drew down. "If there is one thing I despise," he said with emphasis, "it is a hypocrite. More repulsive to me than even sordid crime is hypocrisy, snivelling righteousness, a lip-and-broadcloth service of the Almighty, the broad phylacteries of the Pharisee. All my life I have hated such things. And Braden, mark you, is a hypocrite. Outwardly, he is full of good works. Your father was deceived in him, and I told him so when he would have made Braden his executor, but I had merely my own opinion."

"Well, when your father died, Braden conceived an ingenious plan to get hold of the ranch, knowing that it would increase in value very much, eventually. The first step was to get you children off it, to put somebody else on, to allow the rent to get into arrears, to let the place run down a little. With the accumulating interest on the mortgage, ownership would involve a heavy financial burden. Then a straw man would have made an offer for the place, d'ye understand me? And to get money for your education and maintenance Braden would have accepted, and to keep his skirts clean he would have got a court order approving the sale. Afterward the straw man would have transferred to Braden. Is that clear to you?"

Angus nodded, amazed.

"Also absence from the place would have weaned you youngsters away from it," the judge continued. "When you came to me for advice I went to Braden and read his mind to him, and his face told me I had read it aright. Since then he has hated me for knowing him for what he knows himself to be. So, in course of time, he laid a trap for me with a pretended client and monies for a certain investment. The idea was that the man with whom I was to invest the monies was to deny it, and they thought they had it arranged so that I could not produce evidence of what had become of it. But they were wrong. I had evidence, and with a very little more I'd have had a clear case of conspiracy against them. However, I fell short of that and let it go. But one thing it did for me: It showed me that I needed a clear head, and it gave me the will to fight the habit that had a grip on me. So there's information in confidence for you, Angus. Now Braden and French are working together. French and his sons get the confidence of young fellows with more money than experience, steer them to Braden who sells them land, and the commissions are split. Perhaps that is what happened in the Winton case. Only we can't prove it."

"No," Angus admitted. For the first time he told the judge of the money he had borrowed from Braden. The old jurist whistled softly.

"What with that and the mortgage arrears, you are not in good shape, my boy. If I were you, I should make every effort to get clear as soon as possible."

"The hail hit me badly, but next year, with a good crop and all the new land I have broken, I ought to be able to make a good payment. Then you think nothing can be done to help Miss Winton?"

"Braden tried once to find a purchaser for part of it, and he may try again." The judge's eyes twinkled. "In that case would you consider it your duty to warn the intending purchaser?"

Angus grinned, flushing a little. "If it would help Miss Winton I would consider it my duty to mind my own business."

"It seems to me about the only chance she has to get back part of the money," said the judge. "While that chance exists, it is just as well to say nothing to anybody."

CHAPTER XVII

A CRISIS

Winter came with the going of the last brigades of the geese. The sloughs and lakes froze, and the ground hardened to iron, ringing hollowly beneath hoofs, rumbling dully to wagon wheels. It was cold, but there was no snow in the valleys, though it lay white well down the flanks of the ranges. On the benchlands there was nothing to relieve the dark gloom of the firs, the bareness of the deciduous trees, the frost-burnt dead of the grasses.

Angus had seen little of Faith Winton. At the French ranch he felt like a cat in a strange garret. He had little or nothing in common with the French boys, and certainly nothing with the young men who made the place a hang-out. Though old Godfrey French was polite enough, Angus felt or thought he felt a certain cool contempt. Kathleen was the only one of the family with whom he was at ease.

He was now able to ride, and help round up the cattle for the winter. But to his annoyance there were several head which could not be found. Again they were steers, beef cattle. As in the case of the others, some years before, they seemed to have vanished utterly. Rennie was sure they had been rustled, and again he blamed the Indians. In the end he took his rifle and an outfit, and Angus knew that very little would escape his methodical combing. On top of his other hard luck Angus felt the loss badly. He was going to be very hard run for money. None too cheerfully he went at the various tasks of snugging up for the winter.

In these he had little or no assistance from Turkey. The youngster was absent more than ever, and, one morning when, instead of helping with fencing, he led out his mare saddled, Angus ventured remonstrance.

"There are a whole lot of things to do," he observed.

"No rush," Turkey returned. "Let 'em wait."

"I am not waiting."

"Well, I am," Turkey said, his tone suddenly truculent. "I've worked all summer and fall, and I want some fun. I'm going to have it, too."

"Perhaps I want some myself," Angus suggested, holding his temper.

"Oh, you!" Turkey's voice held careless scorn of Angus' desire for recreation. "Well, if you want it, go and get it. Nobody's stopping you. And nobody's going to stop me."

Angus shut his lips grimly over the words which rose to them. He saw his brother ride away, defiance in the set of his shoulders, and he turned to his work, bitterness in his heart. That, he reflected sourly, was what he got for sticking to work. He was the steady, reliable old horse. Nobody suspected him of a longing for other things. A working machine, that's what he was. For Jean he did not mind, but for Turkey! Why, in weeks the boy had made a mere bluff at working, for months he had slacked. Instead of doing a man's work as he should, he had been barely earning his grub. In sudden anger Angus sank a staple with a blow which snapped the hammer handle like a stick of candy. He threw the fragment from him with a curse. But the action and the oath did not relieve. Instead of acting as a safety valve, his self-control slipped by that much. A black mood descended on him and persisted through the day. That night he ate in glum silence, smoked in silence, and went to bed without uttering half a dozen words to Gus, who, Turkey not having returned, was his sole companion.

He slept badly. In a period of wakefulness he heard the drum hoofs on the frozen ground and knew that Turkey was coming home at last. Looking at his watch by the light of a match he saw that it was nearly two o'clock in the morning. A nice time for a fellow to come home who expected to do any work the next day. But perhaps Turkey didn't intend to.

Turkey took his time putting up his mare. When he entered the house he tripped over a chair, coming down with a crash. Whereat he swore, and something in his voice made Angus jump out of bed and light his lamp. With it in his hand he entered Turkey's room.

One look confirmed his suspicions. Turkey was more than half drunk. Angus stared at him in angry amazement, and Turkey stared back, sullen and defiant, the butt of a cigarette between his lips.

"Well," he said, "what you lookin' at?"

"At you," Angus returned. "Who got you drunk?"

"I ain't drunk," Turkey denied. "If I want a drink I guess I can take it without asking you."

"Who were you with?" Angus persisted.

"None of your dam' business!" Turkey told him flatly.

Angus hesitated. He felt a strong desire to man-handle his young brother, but finally he decided against it. He went back to bed, but not to sleep. His anger struggled with a feeling of responsibility for Turkey. The boy must not be allowed to make a fool of himself; but he was difficult to handle. He realized that he himself was the last person from whom he would take advice, but something had to be done.

Puzzling over his course he became aware that the room was no longer dark. It was not the dim light of dawn, but a reddish, reflected glow. With the realization he bounded from his bed and into the living room. There the light was brighter, and through a window which faced the stables he saw a shaft of flame lick high in the air.

"Gus!" he shouted. "Fire!"

As he dashed for his room and pulled on trousers and moccasins, he heard the weight of Gus hit the floor above. Not waiting for him, he ran for the stables.

The stable yard and corrals were drenched in a red glare, and smoke and leaping sheets of flame were driving with a bitter south wind. The stock in corrals and sheds was bawling; in the stable horses were stamping and whinnying. For a moment he thought the stable was on fire, but as he vaulted a five-foot gate, not waiting to open it, he saw that it was not the stable but the great stack of hay close to it and directly to wind-ward.

Nothing could save the stack. The fire had a good hold and the flame sheets were leaping and smothering in hot smoke with the noise of a hundred flapping blankets. The fire and the sparks were driving directly at the stable. Its walls were of peeled logs, which offered little hold for fire, but its roof was of split shakes and its mow full of hay.

He threw the doors wide and began to turn the horses loose. But frightened by the glare and the smoke and the roar and crackle of flames, they hung back snorting, cowering in their stalls.

It was no time for half measures. Gus joined him, a fiendish figure in red flannel underclothes, which he wore day and night all the year round, for the big Swede had waited only to pull on a pair of moccasins. With whip and pitchfork they slashed and prodded the animals out.

"By the Yumpin' Yudas!" Gus cried, "Ay tank dae stable ban go."

It looked like it. The flames were reaching and snapping back, and flying streams of sparks were now driving upon the weather-worn, dry shakes. If the roof caught, or if a vagrant spark reached the hay with which the mow was filled, nothing could save it. But Angus was not inclined to lose his stable without an effort.

"Get all the horse blankets and wagon covers, soak 'em, and throw 'em up to me," he ordered. "I'm going up on the roof. Help me with the ladder."

A ladder hung on the north wall of the stable. Together they shot it up. Angus grabbed a coil of lash rope and a couple of lariats, and ran up the ladder. Making the rope fast to the top rung and taking the coil over his arm he crawled up the steep slope of the roof. As he put his head over the ridge smoke stung his eyes and bit at his lungs. The pitch was fairly bubbling from the old shakes on the southern exposure.

Behind him Gus staggered up the ladder with an armful of dripping horse blankets which he had soaked in the ditch. Angus ripped off a bit of loose lining and tied it over his nose and mouth. Then, taking the wet blankets on one arm and a turn of rope around the other, he drew a full breath of good air and went over the ridge into the smoke and flying red cinders.

Down close to the eaves he saw a little, blue flame start and die, and start again and live. He went down, his body at right angles to the pitch of the roof against the pull of the rope, and spread a dripping blanket on it. As he did so a big fluff of burning hay lit above him. He extinguished that. Little, creeping lizards of fire began to glow, and he beat them out and yelled for more blankets. The moisture was being sucked from his body, his eyes stabbed with pain and his lungs ached. Sparks clung to him and burned through to the skin, the heat of the roof struck through the soles of his moccasins. The little, creeping flames, starting everywhere, seemed personal enemies, and he beat upon them with wet blankets, and stamped upon them and croaked curses at them. Then Gus was beside him, a very welcome demon in his red garments, working like a maniac and swearing strange oaths. Together they kept the roof till the heat lessened, and the tongues and sheets of flame snapped no more in their faces, and blackened and gray ashes instead of red cinders powdered them, and where Angus' fine stack of bright hay had been was a red and glowing heap.

They came down from the roof and drank deeply from the running ditch, and the cold wind striking their overheated bodies through burnt and insufficient clothing, cut to the bone.

In the house, changing his burnt garments for warm clothes, Angus for the first time thought of his brother and looked into his room. The boy slept. He had known nothing of the fire.

"By Yimminy, dat kid sleep like a mudsill," Gus commented. "Ay holler at him when Ay go out, too."

"Let him sleep," Angus said. "Come on and get the horses into the stable again."

He spoke quietly, but there was bitter anger in his heart. It was bad enough that Turkey should lie in drunken slumber; but far worse than that he was the last person who had been near the stable and stack. Neither Angus nor Gus had been out of the house for five or six hours before the fire. As they put the horses back Angus found Turkey's mare's manger full of hay. Drunk or sober the boy would look after the animal's needs. But to get hay he had either to fork it down from the mow or get it from the stack. As the mow was dark, with a ladder to climb, there wasn't much doubt that he had got it from the latter. Then at the stack he had either dropped the butt of a cigarette or the end of a match. There was no doubt in Angus' mind as to the origin of the fire.

But as was his custom, he kept his thoughts to himself. He sent Gus to the house to get what sleep he could, and he remained on guard against chances from stray sparks.

As he stared at the heap of black and gray and red which had been his stack his anger hardened. In the heart of the heap he seemed to see the fields where the hay had grown, green and tender in the spring, laced with the silver threads of irrigation waters; and lush and high and waving in the summer winds, tipped and tinged with the pink and red of clover and alfalfa and the purple bloom of timothy. He thought of the labor that had gone into it—the careful irrigation, the mowing, the raking, the hauling, the stacking—all to the end that the stock should be full-bellied and fat-clad against the cold and snow that shrinks ill-nourished stock to racks of hide-tied bone. He looked ahead—two months, three—and he could hear the hunger-bawling of the cattle clustered by the corral bars, and see them hump-backed and lean and shivering, and weak and dying of cold and hunger. He could see their eyes, looking to him for the food man should provide.

Unless he would see that picture become grim reality he must buy feed, and he had no money to spare. His straw was quite insufficient to winter his stock on. Then he had counted on selling some of the hay. It all meant that his debt must be increased. In the breath of the fire the fruits of his hard work had been wiped out. As he thought of all these things he was filled with bitterness against his brother.

When dawn came and all danger was over he went in to breakfast. Turkey still slept. Angus let him slumber, and going to the workshop went to work repairing a set of sleighs.

He had worked for an hour or more when Turkey emerged from the house, his hands in his pockets, his back hunched. At first he did not notice the absence of the stack. When he did, being almost at the stable, he stopped short, staring at the black heap, at the frozen blankets and covers hanging on the fence. He entered the stable, came out again, and hearing Angus' hammering, made for the workshop. As he came in Angus saw that his mouth was set, his face flushed, his brow scowling.

"Say—" he began and stopped. "Say—"

"Well?" Angus returned, coldly.

"The stack!"

"You can see for yourself, can't you?"

"Why didn't you call me?"

"You'd have been a lot of use!"

The boy flushed darkly.

"What started it?"

"You ought to know," Angus replied, "whether you do or not."

"What do you mean?" Turkey cried.

"I mean that you started the fire yourself."

"What?" Turkey exclaimed. "I didn't! What do you take me for?"

"Where did you get the hay to fill Dolly's manger?"

"From the stack," Turkey admitted.

"I thought so. And you dropped a butt or a match. Nobody else had been near there for hours."

"I didn't. I didn't light a cigarette till after I came out of the stable."

"I don't think you know what you did. The stack is gone. We have to buy feed now, and we haven't the money to pay for it."

"That's not my fault," Turkey asseverated. "I won't be blamed for what I didn't do."

"No," Angus returned grimly, "but for what you did do."

"If you say I started that fire you're a —— liar!" Turkey flared.

Angus looked at him with narrowing eyes.

"You had better go slow, Turkey," he warned. "I don't feel like taking much from anybody this morning. And I'll take less from you than anybody."

"Then don't say I started that fire!" Turkey cried "The hay was mine as well as yours. You act as if you were boss here, and I won't stand for it any longer."

Under ordinary circumstances Angus would have let that go. But now he was sore and worried and angry. He had worked hard, denied himself a good deal to hold the ranch together and make a living for them all. It seemed that a show-down had to come and he was ready for it.

"We may as well settle this now," he said. "I am boss. I mean to stay boss, and while you're on this ranch you'll toe the mark after this, understand?"

"Is that so?" Turkey sneered.

"It is so," Angus repeated. "Let me tell you something: I've given you the easy end right along, and you haven't held up even that. You've shirked and loafed every chance you've had. This has got to stop. And there will be no more of this coming in at all hours of night."

"I'll come in when I like and go where I like," Turkey declared defiantly, "and I'd like to see you stop me."

"You will see it," Angus told him grimly. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself. You've burnt up our stack—"

"You're a liar!" Turkey cried hotly. "Don't you tell me that again!"

"Tell you again!" Angus said contemptuously. "I'll not only tell you again, but for two pins I'd hand you something to make you remember it."

"Then fly at it!" Turkey cried, and struck him in the face.

For an instant Angus was so surprised that he did nothing at all. Then, taking another blow, he caught his brother by wrist and shoulder and slammed him back against the wall with a force which shook the frame building. He was white-hot with anger, and all that restrained him was fear—fear that if he once lost grip of himself he would go too far. As he held the boy pinned and helpless he fought his fight and won it. His grip relaxed and he stepped back.

"Don't ever do that again, Turkey," he said quietly.

Turkey, freed, stared at him. "I called you a liar and hit you twice."

"I know it," Angus returned impatiently. "And I could beat you to a froth, and you know it. I don't want to start—the way I'm feeling. That's all."

"Then I'm sorry I hit you," Turkey conceded. "But all the same, I didn't fire the stack."

"We won't talk about it."

"Yes, we will. If you think I did, I'm pulling out."

"You'll do as you please," Angus said coldly. "You'll come back mighty soon."

"Don't fool yourself," Turkey retorted. "I'm sick of this dam' place, and working day in and day out."

"I've told you what I think of your work. If you're sick of it I'm just as sick of coddling you along. Can't you get it through your head that you're almost a man?"

"Yes," Turkey returned, "and I'm going where I'll be treated like one."

"Then you'll have to change a lot," Angus informed him. "When you behave like one you'll be treated like one, here or anywhere else. Till you do that, you won't. And here it is cold for you, Turkey, with no trimmings: You may go to the devil if you like; but you can't stay on this ranch and do it, because I won't stand for it."

And so, at last, the issue between the brothers, so long pending, lay clear and sharply defined. There was no middle course. For a long minute they looked each other in the face. Then said Turkey:

"You and the ranch can go to hell!"

He turned on his heel and went to the house whence, a few minutes later, he emerged wearing wool chaps and a heavy mackinaw. In one hand he carried his pet rifle; in the other a canvas warbag. He went into the stable and presently led out his mare, saddled. Then he jogged away without a glance in Angus' direction.

CHAPTER XVIII

CHRISTMAS AT THE FRENCHES

On Christmas Day, Angus and Rennie found themselves alone on the ranch. Gus had gone to town, which meant that he would be drunk for some days. Turkey had not returned since he rode

away, nor had Angus seen him, though he had learned that he was helping Garland to round up a drive or two of cattle and would probably feed a bunch through the winter for a grubstake.

The weather had turned mild. The day was warm as October, and the frost was coming out of the ground, for still there was no snow. Rennie was busy with preparations for an elaborate night dinner, but Angus was restless.

"I think I'll go out and look for that old buckskin cayuse," he said.

"He ain't worth lookin' for," Rennie returned; "but if you go, you better pack that old buffler coat."

But Angus did not take the old buffalo riding coat which had been his father's. He got into a pair of leather chaps and tied a mackinaw on the saddle.

The big horse wanted to go, and Angus let him. When he left the road it was to follow cattle trails, on which Chief sailed smoothly. Now and then he pulled up to listen for bells, but the buckskin was merely an excuse. He was an old sinner, with a habit of staying out as long as he could rustle feed. When Angus ran across him at last, late in the afternoon, he was with a band of half-wild, disreputable friends, from whom he had no intention of being separated. They knew every foot of every trail in a badly broken country, and Chief, though sure-footed, was not a stock horse. The continued twists and turns and brush worried him. He could not use his speed, and not knowing exactly what was expected of him, began to fret. After an hour of fruitless chase Angus gave it up and looked around to get his bearings.

He found himself up under a mountain in a rough country some fifteen miles from home. The sun was gone; and all over the north and west and overhead the sky was blue-black, trimmed with dirty gray. As he sat breathing Chief he could hear a far-off straining and sighing. A gust of cold wind drove past, and borne with it were white flakes.

Angus needed nobody to interpret these signs, and he cursed the buckskin and his own carelessness in neglecting to watch sun and sky. Real winter was opening with a blizzard, and from all indications it was going to be the real thing.

In five minutes the snowflakes had become a white blur. He could not see fifty yards ahead. Trails vanished. Landmarks were invisible. The air was full of drifting white. It was as if one had suddenly gone nearly blind, unable to see beyond a short radius. No man could hold a course with certainty. Constantly it grew colder, and the light began to fail.

Riding fast in the growing darkness was impossible. The cold began to nip his fingers through his light buckskin gloves, and his toes, for he was wearing leather boots and but a single pair of socks. He steered a general downhill course which he knew in time must intersect a wagon trail which led past the French ranch and thence home. The trouble was that in the darkness he might cross it. In that event it would be a case of spending the night out.

It grew utterly dark, save for a certain dim light which the snow seemed to hold. Warned by a growing numbness in his feet Angus dismounted and stamped the blood back into them. He decided that it must be below zero. On the brows of the benches the wind was bitter.

Just as he decided that he must have passed it, he came on the wagon trail. He mounted and gave Chief his head. But once more his feet began to numb. Again he got down and stamped the circulation going, but as soon as he began to ride again they numbed. To take off boots and rub was out of the question, so he sent Chief sailing into the blinding storm, trusting to luck to keep on the road.

After several miles of blind riding he saw the far flicker of a light which he knew must come from the French ranch. He had no wish to intrude on Christmas night, but he knew that unless he was to have badly frozen feet he must get to shelter at once. He struck the fence, followed it to the gate, and turned in.

The house, when he got close enough to see through the driving snow, was brightly lighted behind drawn blinds. The chords of a piano came to him, accompanying a strong, ringing baritone, and as he passed beneath the window the old, rousing, hunting chorus of "John Peel" crashed out.

A devil of a time to butt in, Angus reflected grimly, as he led Chief under the partial shelter of the house. No doubt there was a Christmas party on. However, it was no night to indulge in pride or shyness.

He could not leave Chief out in the storm, and an attempt to stable him himself would probably mean a battle with the dogs which slept in the stables. He banged on the door, and as no one answered stepped into the hall. After the temperature outside it seemed tropical, friendly with the smell of warmth and good tobacco. Being in a hurry, he did not stand on ceremony, but opened the door to his left just as the last notes of "John Peel" died. For a moment he blinked in the light like a storm-driven night bird.

There were nearly a dozen men besides the Frenches, and among them he recognized Chetwood. Kathleen was swinging around from the piano, laughing up at the singers. Tobacco smoke eddied blue around the hanging lamps. A couple of card tables were going. After the hours of cold and darkness and the sting of the wind-driven snow, it seemed to Angus extraordinarily warm and

cosy and comforting.

Kathleen was the first to catch sight of the snow-plastered apparition in the doorway.

"Why, Angus!" she exclaimed, springing to her feet.

"I'm sorry to bother you," Angus said, "but I got caught back on the range, and my feet are touched a little. If I can put up my horse—"

But Gavin French rose from his card game.

"Larry will look after your horse. You come along with me out of this heat."

Angus stumped after the blond giant down the hall and into a back kitchen, where he unlaced his boots while Gavin brought in a dishpan of snow.

"Toes and heels," the big man observed as he rubbed briskly. "It's no night for leather boots. It's close to fifteen below now, and a wind with it. Feel the blood starting yet?"

Angus felt the welcome tingle of returning circulation and continued the rubbing himself, while Gavin brought him his own moccasins and a pair of heavy woolen socks. As he was putting them on Kathleen entered.

"If you were caught on the range you haven't had anything to eat. I've got something ready in the dining room. You can go back to your game, Gan. I'll look after him."

"Don't bother about me," Angus said.

"I'm not. Come along and eat."

He followed her into the dining room where the table was spread with a substantial cold meal. She sat down with him.

"Now, see here," he said, "this is not right. I'm taking you away from your guests—"

"You're one of them," she laughed.

"An unbidden one."

"But a very welcome one. Don't be silly."

Angus ate and drank, and the food and hot coffee warmed him through.

"And now," said Kathleen, "we'll join the festive throng."

But Angus balked. He was not dressed for such things. He preferred to stay out in the kitchen.

"Angus Mackay, you make me tired!" Kathleen told him. "What do I care about your clothes? You're still thinking of yourself as an unbidden guest, after I've told you you're more than welcome. I'm not going to let you sit out in the kitchen like an Indian. Come along, now, like a good boy."

As there was no way out of it, Angus followed her, feeling very conscious of his worn riding-clothes. But as everybody was playing cards nobody cast more than a casual glance in his direction, save Faith Winton, who rose and came toward them.

"Kathleen, I've driven my unfortunate partner nearly crazy. He's too polite to tell me what he thinks of my play, but see how wistfully he's looking at you."

Kathleen laughed.

"Well, take care of Angus, then. And keep his mind off his clothes. He's worrying because he isn't dressed like a head waiter." With a nod she left them and seated herself at the vacant table.

"They were relieved to get rid of me," Faith Winton laughed. "Shall we sit down and talk? I haven't seen you for weeks. Why didn't you come to see me once in awhile?"

"I wanted to, but somehow—"

"Never mind excuses. When I get a place of my own perhaps you will be more neighborly. I've made up my mind to build a house on my ranch in the spring."

She told him her plans. She would have a cottage built, buy a few head of stock and some chickens, break a few acres as a start and set out fruit trees. Between the rows she would grow small fruits, feed, vegetables. When the trees came into bearing she would have an assured, definite income.

Angus listened in grim silence. He had heard it all before from the hopeful lips of new settlers. Theoretically, so many bushels may be grown to the acre, a tree so many years old will bear so many boxes of fruit. This is quite unassailable, proven by actual experience, by incontestable data, set out in reports which are the gospel of the new and especially the inexperienced settler. He seizes these facts avidly, but overlooks or refuses to consider a number of other things, such as drought, hail, frosts early or late, winter-killed trees, pests, poor years, low prices, and a hundred other factors which taken together make those actually used entirely misleading. But the one big factor which the inexperienced invariably refuse to consider at all, is that

inexperience itself.

"I don't want to discourage you," he said, "but you know, don't you, that you can't do this work yourself. Hiring will eat up your profit."

"But there must be a margin. You hire men yourself."

"I hire two men to about three hundred acres. You are thinking of hiring about one man for ten. At that rate I should have thirty men, and the land wouldn't pay for them."

"But I could hire a man as I needed him, and what improvements I make will increase the value of the place. And when I get more cleared—"

Metaphorically, Angus threw up his hands. It was no use. Also it was impossible to tell her the truth about the property under the circumstances. With actual experience she might give up the idea. All he could do was to make the experiment as cheap as possible for her.

"Well," he said, "when the winter breaks up, if you're of the same mind, I'll do your breaking and disking for you, if you like, and seed it down to something. I can clean out the spring and run a ditch and fix it for irrigating. You needn't bother with water from the creek for a few acres. While I'm about it I might as well do the fencing and fork out the sods for a garden patch. When the sleighing is good I'll haul over a few loads of well-rotted manure."

"Thank you," she said, "but—"

"Oh, that's all right," Angus continued. "I guess you don't know much about planting trees and garden truck. I'll attend to that. I may as well order your seeds while I'm getting my own. I can run a cultivator through the garden now and then in the evenings. I can fix you up with all the tools you'll need. Then I can give you a milk cow, a nice quiet—"

"Wait, wait!" she interrupted as Angus began to think of other items. "What are all these things and all this work going to cost?"

"Cost?" Angus echoed blankly. "Why, nothing, of course. They don't amount to anything."

"Don't they? It seems to me you're calmly arranging to do all my work yourself—the work you said I'd have to hire done."

"These are just a few little chores for a neighbor. Nobody would think of charging for them. We sort of swap work about here."

"But what work could I do for you?"

"Huh!" Angus hesitated, at a loss for an answer. "Oh, lots of things. You could—er—um—yes, of course you could."

"You can't think of one single thing I could do!"

"You could pick berries," said Angus struck by a brilliant thought. "Yes, you could do that better than any man. I always have a lot more than I can use, and you could put up all you needed for the winter."

"And you think giving me fruit would pay for—p-pay for—"

She broke off, and Angus saw to his utter amazement that her eyes were full of tears, as she bent her head.

"Whatever is the matter?" he whispered. "Is it anything I've said?"

"It's—it's everything you've said," she murmured. "Don't say anything for a minute, please."

So Angus kept silence, sorely puzzled, and in a few moments she looked him in the face with eyes still misty and a little, tremulous smile.

"Yes, it's everything. I couldn't stand it. Nobody else has really offered to help me. The boys think it's a joke, and Kathleen thinks I'm mildly crazy. And then you, a stranger—"

"I'm not. And I might as well put in my spare time helping you."

"You have no spare time, and I know it. I must pay for what you do."

"All right. I'll send you a bill."

"For a fraction of what the work is worth!" she scoffed. "Not that way, Angus Mackay!"

"Any way you like," Angus said, knowing that he could make it up to her.

"Very well—and thank you. I'll be an independent ranch lady—unless I sell the place."

"Has any one made you an offer?"

"No. I would rather not sell, anyway."

"You have your title deeds all in order, in case you should want to sell?"

"I suppose so. Uncle Godfrey would attend to that."

"He has the title papers?"

"Yes. I never saw them. I don't know much about such things. Father told me Uncle Godfrey had them all."

Angus dropped the subject. He could not very well suggest that she take a look at these papers. Faith Winton on her part appeared satisfied. Presently she suggested music and went to the piano. Lying back in a chair Angus watched the soft curve of her cheek, her clean-cut profile, the certain touch of her fingers on the keys. Absently his gaze wandered to the card players. He had no idea of the stakes, but the players were tense, absorbed. Faith Winton, glancing at him, marked his expression.

"What are you thinking of?" she asked without interrupting the play of her fingers.

"I was wondering how on earth these people can sit playing cards all night."

"I hate this," she said. He looked at her in surprise. "All of it. It's not like Christmas night. It's not even sociability. It's gambling, pure and simple. Uncle Godfrey and Kathleen will stop presently, but the boys will play till morning."

Shortly, the first half of her prediction was verified. The games broke up. Godfrey French apologized perfunctorily. Time was when he would have spent the night in such good company, but now he was no longer young. With him went Faith and Kathleen.

With their going the business of the evening began in earnest. A quartet stuck to bridge, but the rest embarked on a poker game. Scotch circulated briskly.

Angus, very much out of it, sat and smoked, regarding the players idly. He noted that the French boys—Blake was absent—drank very little. On the other hand, some of the players drank a good deal. But finally he lost interest. He became sleepy and dozed in his chair.

He was awakened by loud voices. The poker game had broken up; the players were on their feet.

"I tell you, Willoughby," Gerald French was saying, "you are quite mistaken. Nothing of the sort happened.

"I saw it," Willoughby maintained doggedly.

"You are a guest," said Gerald, "but don't abuse your privileges."

"I am aware of my obligations as a guest," Willoughby retorted, "but they do not include allowing myself to be rooked at cards."

Instantly Gerald struck him hard across the mouth and Willoughby lashed back. Another guest sought to interfere. Young Larry pushed him back.

"Keep out!" he said. "Mind your own business."

"Keep your hands off me!" the other returned, and caught at his arm.

Larry pinned him, and somebody else tried to pull him loose. Larry came loose with remarkable alacrity, and did so hitting with both hands. Gavin, pushing forward, was caught by two men. Instantly a rough-house started.

Angus sat where he was, taking no part. He saw Chetwood plunge into the fray and go back from a straight punch. Gavin shook off three men as a bear shakes clear of a worrying pack, and as he did so another man who had caught up a chair, swung it at his head. The big man partially dodged the blow, wrenched the chair away and brandished it high. As he did so he emitted a short, deep roar of anger.

Fearing that somebody might be seriously hurt, Angus decided to interfere. He leaped forward and caught the chair as it poised for a moment aloft.

"Don't do that," he said. Gavin's ordinarily cold eyes were blazing.

"Keep out of this," he said. "It's nothing to you." As he spoke he tried to wrench the chair free; but Angus' grip held. Letting go himself, the big man clinched him.

Angus felt himself caught in a tremendous grip; but the wrench and heave that followed did not pluck him from his footing. He locked his long arms around Gavin, and the arch of his back and the sinews of his braced legs held against him.

Suddenly Gavin gave ground, swung and tripped with the heel. Angus felt himself going, but he took his man with him. They rolled over and over. By this time Angus had lost all his indifference. For the first time since his full strength came upon him, he was putting it all forth against a man as strong or stronger than himself. And then he became aware that nobody else was fighting. Gavin's grip loosened.

"Let go, Mackay," he said. "Cut it out now."

Then Angus saw Kathleen. She had slipped on some clinging thing of blue and lace, and her hair in its night braids hung to her waist. Her face was pale and her eyes stormy with anger.

"Well," she said, "*gentlemen!*"

She accented the word with bitter irony. Her eyes swept over them disdainfully, resting for a moment on Angus.

"All right, Kit," Gavin said. "You can go back to roost."

"If you're quite through!" she said. "Otherwise I'll stay."

"Oh, we're through," Gavin assured her.

Without another word Kathleen left the room. Behind her there was utter silence for a moment. Then with one accord the guests moved toward the door. Gavin halted them.

"No," he said, "you can't go till this blizzard blows out. Don't be damned fools just because we've had a row. Mackay will tell you what it's like outside. Now we'll leave you alone, because you probably want it that way." He turned to Angus who stood apart from the rest, and lowered his voice. "You're a good, skookum man, Mackay. I half wish Kathleen hadn't butted in."

"So do I," Angus returned. The big man smiled.

"No hard feelings on my part," he said. "I'd just like to see which of us was the better man. I never hooked up with anybody as husky as you. You're not like these blighters." His eyes rested on his guests with utter contempt. "You were right in catching that chair. I might have hurt somebody. Thanks. Good night."

Left alone, Angus after telling the others that in his opinion it would be folly to venture out before daylight, established himself in his corner, where Chetwood presently joined him.

"Pleasant evening, what?" he observed. He grinned.

"I didn't know you were back."

"Just got in the other night, and intended to look you up to-morrow."

"Do it, anyway."

"I wanted to ask you if you could do with another man on your ranch?"

"Not till spring."

"Wages secondary object. Primary one a Christian home for an honest but inexperienced young man whose funds are not what they should be."

"Who is he?"

"His full name is Eustace William Fitzroy Chetwood. But he would answer to 'Bill.'"

"You?" Angus exclaimed. "You're joking."

"Not a bit of it. I have the best of reasons for asking. Tell you about them some time. To-night is my last night of the gay life. Thought I might win a little money, but instead of that I lost. I am an applicant for work."

"You're welcome. I can't pay much, but the meals come regularly."

"That's very good of you," Chetwood acknowledged. "I'll move my traps out to-morrow."

CHAPTER XIX

INTRODUCING MRS. FOLEY

That spring, as soon as the frost was out of the ground, Angus did his promised work for Faith Winton, while a couple of carpenters ran up a cottage, stable and outbuilding. With this extra work, Angus was more than busy. The Frenches did nothing to help. They seemed to regard the girl's actions as folly of which the sooner she was cured the better.

"I am getting a companion, an old friend of mine," Faith told Angus one day as the cottage neared completion. "It may be cowardly, but I don't want to live here alone."

"Of course it would be lonesome," he agreed. "It will be nice for you to have a girl friend."

She stared at him for a moment and laughed. "Oh, very nice. We'll move in some time next week."

A week passed and another, and Angus, though he had heard that the new ranch was occupied, had had no opportunity to visit it. Then one evening he saddled Chief and rode over.

He saw smoke rising from the chimney, and when he dismounted and ascended the steps he heard a strange swishing and thumping, accompanied by a melancholy moaning which put him in mind of a dog scratching a sore ear. Wondering what on earth the racket was about, he knocked.

The noise ceased, heavy footsteps utterly unlike Faith Winton's crossed the floor, the door opened and a strange lady confronted him. She was short, but extremely broad of beam. Her

hair, streaked with gray, had once been a fiery red. She had keen, aggressive blue eyes, a short, turned-up nose, and a wide mouth with perfect white teeth. Her sleeves were rolled above her elbows, showing a pair of solid, red, freckled forearms, and in one hand she carried a mop. Amazed at this apparition, Angus gaped at her.

"Well," said the lady in accents which left no doubt of her nationality, "well, misther man, an' phwat will yez be wantin'?"

"Is Miss Winton at home?" Angus asked.

"She is *nat*."

"She's living here now, isn't she?"

"She is."

"Which way has she gone?"

"I dunno."

"Then I'll wait," Angus decided.

"Outside!" the lady also decided.

Bang! The door shut in Angus' face. Immediately the thump and swish began again, though the moaning obligato did not. Angus sat down on the steps and filled his pipe, but found he had no matches. For some moments he sat there, sucking the cold stem and wondering where the deuce Faith Winton had picked up this woman. No doubt she and her girl friend had gone for a walk. Well, he might as well be doing something.

He went around to the back of the house where he had hauled a pile of wood, picked up an old ax and began to split. Once the lady of the mop came to the back door and took a long look at him. By and by, tiring of splitting and wanting a smoke very badly, he put on his coat and went to the door to request a match. The lady of the mop met him on the threshold.

"Could you give me—" he began, but she cut him short.

"I could *nat*," she said grimly. "Who asked ye to do ut? On yer way!"

"But—"

"They's nawthin' comin' to ye," the lady asserted. "Ut's no handout yez'll get here."

"But I don't want—"

"Yez want coin, do yez? Divil th' cint will yez get!"

"No, no," Angus protested, "you're all wrong. I want—"

"An' do I care phwat yez want, ye black-avised bo?" the lady shouted in a tops'l-yard-ahoy bellow. "Beggars on harrseback I've heerd iv, but ye're the first I've seen. On yer way; or th' flat iv me hand and th' toe iv me boot is phwat ye'll dhraw, for all the bigness iv ye, ye long, lazy, herrin'—bel—"

"Give me a match!" Angus roared through this wealth of personal description, despairing of making his want known otherwise. "I want a match, that's all."

"A match?" the lady exclaimed.

"Sure, to light my pipe with," Angus told her. "I'm not a hobo. I'm working the place for Miss Winton."

"And why couldn't ye say so before?" she demanded, frowning at him.

"Because you wouldn't give me a chance. You wouldn't let me get in a word edgeways."

"God save us all, an' maybe I wouldn't then," she admitted. "Is Mackay th' name iv ye? Come in an' sit down. A match, is ut? Here ye are, then."

Angus sat down and lit his pipe, while she stared at him.

"Faix, then, I wouldn't have knowed ye at all, at all," she said.

"Well, you never saw me before."

"Be description, I mane. She said—"

"Miss Winton?"

"Who else? Yez do be big enough, but homelier than she said."

"Did she say I was homely?"

"Did I say so?" the lady returned, and her blue eyes twinkled.

"Not exactly. But—"

"Then don't be puttin' words into a woman's mouth, for God knows they's no need iv ut," she told him. "An' so ye do be th' Mackay lad I've been hearin' iv, that found her whin she was a little, lost wan, an' shooted that murtherin' divil iv a grizzly bear!"

Angus acknowledged his identity and diffidently inquired the lady's name.

"Me name, is ut? They's times whin I have to stop an' think. Mary Kelly I was born, an' me first was Tim Phelan. A slip iv a gyurl I was then, an' little more when they waked him. Dhrowned he was, but sure wather was always fatal to his fam'ly, an' maybe it was all for the best, as Father Paul said whin he married me to Dan Shaughnessy after a dacint year. But he died himself, the holy man, before Dan fell off the roof, an' it was Father Kerrigan said the words over me an' Pether Finucane. It was Dinney Foley brought me th' news iv th' premachure blast that tuk Pether, an' I married him. Dinny was me last. So me name's Mrs. Foley."

"And is Mr. Foley here on the ranch?" Angus asked.

"I hope not," Mrs. Foley returned with apprehension. "Givin' him th' best iv ut, he's wid th' blessid saints. A voylent man was poor Dinney, as broad as ye, but not so high, an' a lion wid a muckstick. But phwat's a muckstick to knives? Sure thim dirty dagoes is born wid thim in their hands. Though he stretched thim right an' left wid th' shovel, he could not gyard his back. So whin I buried him I quit. No, I've had no luck at all keepin' men." And Mrs. Foley sighed, pursed up her lips and shook her head at Angus.

"You do seem to have been out of luck," Angus sympathized gravely. "Have you known Miss Winton long?"

"As long as she is. I nursed her wid me own b'y that died."

"And have you known this girl friend of hers, long, too?"

"Phwat gyurl friend?"

"The one who is here with her—her companion."

"I'm her," Mrs. Foley returned. "Where do ye get this gyurl friend thing, anyway?"

But Angus could not tell. He had put his own construction on Faith Winton's words. At any rate Mrs. Foley seemed a capable companion.

"Well, I hope you'll like it here," he said. "It may be a little lonely, but there's nothing to be afraid of. Bears seldom come down on the benchlands now, and there are no hoboos worse than I am."

"Afraid, is ut?" Mrs. Foley snorted. "An' wud I that has lived wid four men be afraid iv a bear? I am not even afeard iv a mouse. Anyways, for bears an' bos they's a dog."

"I thought I heard him whining when I came to the front door."

"Whining?" Mrs. Foley ejaculated.

"Well, sort of moaning as if he was scratching a sore ear. And then he howled."

"Howled!" Mrs. Foley cried. "Th' nerve iv ye!"

"What's the matter?" Angus asked. "It sounded like a lonesome pup to me."

"Did ut, indade!" snorted Mrs. Foley. "Ye big, on-mannerly blackgyard, that was me, singin'!"

"Singing?" Angus gasped.

"Singin'," Mrs. Foley repeated firmly. "An' a sweet song, too, a rale Irish song. Color blind in th' ears, ye are, ye long lummix! May th' divil—But phwat's the use? Th' ign'rance iv ye is curse enough!"

"What's the matter, Mary?" Faith Winton's voice asked from the door. "You're not quarrelling with Angus Mackay, I hope."

"I wud not lower mesilf!" Mrs. Foley replied loftily, "though he said me singin' was like the howlin's iv a purp."

"No, no," Angus protested, "I didn't mean that. I heard your singing, too, and it was fine."

"Yez may be a willin' liar, but yer work is coorse," Mrs. Foley informed him. "Well, I do not set up fr to be wan iv thim divas. I can raise th' keen fine over a corpse, but me singin' is privut an' so intended. So I forgive ye, young man, more be token I can see it's herself thinks it's a joke on the old gyurl. For shame, Miss Faith! An' me that's crooned ye in yer cradle many's the long night!"

But there was a twinkle in Mrs. Foley's blue eyes, and Angus began to suspect that her bark was much worse than her bite.

"Mary was my nurse," Faith told him when they were seated in the living room. "She really thinks the world of me, spoils me—and bullies me. But what do you think of my humble home? You haven't seen it since it was finished."

Angus approved the room and its furnishings. There was space to move, and a fireplace. The chairs were comfortable and strong; there was a spacious couch, a well-filled bookcase, a piano

and a banjo case.

"I like it," he said. "It's not cluttered up with a lot of junk. Everything looks as if it could be used. That's what I like. Is that a banjo and do you play it?"

"Yes, I play it."

"I like a banjo better than a piano."

"You Philistine! Why?"

"Perhaps because I'm a Philistine. I don't know just why. All I know is that I *do* like it better. A piano is sort of machine-made music to me; but with a banjo the player seems to be making the music himself, as if he was singing."

"You mean there is more personal expression."

"Maybe. I don't know anything about music. But a banjo seems to *talk*. It's the thing for the tunes that everybody knows."

"You and Kipling agree, then. You know his 'Song of the Banjo':

"And the tunes that mean so much to you alone—
Common tunes that make you choke and blow your nose,
Vulgar tunes that bring the laugh that hides the groan—
I can rip your very heartstrings out with those."

"Yes, that's the idea. He's right enough there."

"And how about:

""But the word, the word is mine
When the order moves the line,
And the lean, locked ranks go roaring down to die,?"

she asked curiously.

"The only music to fight with and to die to is the pipes," Angus said.

"The pipes? You mean the bagpipes."

"Of course."

"Some people," Faith laughed, "would say that death would be a blessed relief from the sound of them."

Angus smiled grimly. "I know. There are plenty of jokes about the pipes. But they are no joke to the men who meet the men played into battle to the skirl of them."

"I believe you are right in that," Faith admitted. "I haven't a drop of Scotch blood, so far as I know. But I have heard a pipe band playing 'Lochaber No More' behind a gun carriage which bore a dead soldier; and I have seen the Highland regiments march past the colors at a review, to 'Glendarual' and 'Cock o' the North,' and heaven knows what gatherings and pibrochs, and I have stood up on my toes and my back hair has felt crinkly. I own up to it. But I love the banjo. It's a little sister of the lonesome."

She took the instrument, a beautiful concert model, from its case, keyed it for a moment and spoke through low, rippling chords.

"Sometimes at night I pick it by the hour—oh, very softly, so as not to disturb anybody—not any particular tune—just odds and ends, anything—and my thoughts go away off wool gathering and I am quite happy. Can you understand such foolishness?"

"Yes," Angus replied seriously. "I can't play anything, or sing, but there are times when I want to—if you can understand that."

She nodded, her fingers brushing the strings. "Yes, I know. Often the person who knows least about music loves it best—down in his soul."

"Play something," Angus urged.

And so Faith Winton played. At first she played consciously; but as the daylight faded and the twilight came she let the strings talk. Bits of old half-forgotten melodies rippled from her fingers, changing, shifting, mingling and merging, now familiar or half familiar and then quite strange; but always tugging, tugging at the heartstrings, as if in the gut and parchment there dwelt a wayward, whimsical soul, half-sad and half-merry, whimpering and chuckling in the growing darkness. Suddenly the music swept into a rolling, thunderous march, shifted to a rollicking Irish jig, and stopped abruptly with a crash of chords and a ringing of gut and iron.

"Don't stop," Angus said.

"But I've played myself out—for this time. It's dark—quite dark—and I didn't notice. I must get a light."

"I must go. I have never heard playing like that—never. I'll take much of it home with me."

"Come and get more any time," she laughed. "When shall I see you again?"

"To-morrow or next day. There are several things to be done here. If I can't come myself, I'll send Gus."

"Try to come yourself," said Faith Winton.

Angus, as he rode homeward, found himself dwelling on these words.

CHAPTER XX

AN ENEMY AT WORK

Spring merged into early summer, and Jean came home. Angus met her, and before they were clear of town he was undergoing a feminine cross-examination as to Faith Winton.

"Is she pretty, Angus?"

"You girls are all alike," he grinned. "That's what she asked about you."

"What did you say?"

"I said I hadn't noticed."

"You're a nice brother!"

"That's exactly what she said."

"Well, I like her for that. But is *she* pretty?"

"Well, I don't know that a girl would call her pretty. She doesn't dress herself up like a French wedding and frizzle her hair and all that, but she's—she's—oh, darned if I know! She looks *clean*."

"Clean!" Miss Jean cried. "Well, I should hope so!"

"I mean clean-run, clean-strain, clean-built, like a good horse."

"My heavens, Angus, don't tell me she's built like a horse!"

"Don't be a little fool!" her brother growled. "She's better built than you are, young lady, and prettier, too."

"Oh, indeed!" Miss Jean sniffed. "Well, beauty doesn't run in our family. Now tell me about Turkey."

But Angus could not give her much information. Turkey was working around, here and there, but he never came to the ranch.

"Can't we get him to come back, Angus?"

"He can come when he likes."

"Yes, I know. But won't you ask him?"

Angus did not reply at once.

"No" he said at last, deliberately, "I won't. It's not the fire; I don't care for that. But we haven't got along well for a long time. It had to come to a show-down."

Out of her knowledge of her brother, Jean dropped the subject temporarily. She asked casually about Chetwood.

"Did he ever tell you why his remittances had stopped?"

"No. Of course I never asked. I got the idea that something had gone bust—that there was no more money coming in. He wasn't actually a remittance man, you know. He had some money of his own."

"It comes to the same thing—if he hasn't any now," said Miss Jean. "It will be a good thing for him to do some work."

She exhibited no special enthusiasm when she met the young man. Chetwood in overalls, with nailed boots, hard and brown, differed materially from the young idler of the summer before, but his cheery good nature was unchanged. Apparently the loss of his income or capital, or both, did not worry him.

The next day Jean rode over with Angus to make Faith Winton's acquaintance. Angus left them alone to be friends or otherwise. Returning a couple of hours later, he found that there was no doubt about their mutual attitude.

"Why, she's a dear!" Jean declared enthusiastically as they rode homeward. "Why didn't you tell me what she was like?"

"I tried to."

"You said she was clean-built, like a good horse. I told her—"

"What!" Angus cried in horror.

"Not that, of course. I told her you were a clam. She said from your description she thought I was a skinny, little girl in braids and short dresses."

"I never said anything about braids and dresses."

"Did you say I was skinny?" Miss Jean demanded.

"Well—"

"Then you did say it. Ye great, long, lummix—"

"Hello!" said Angus. "That sounds like Mrs. Foley."

"'And so yez do be th' sister iv that great, long, lummix iv an Angus Mackay,'" said his sister in startling imitation of that lady. "'Yez do not favor him, bein' a good-lookin' slip iv a colleen.' What do you think of that, Angus?"

"That you're making the last part up," her brother grinned.

"Not a word, not a syllable. I told her I thought you were a big, fine-looking young man, and what do you think she said?"

"I'll bet she didn't agree with you."

"'Tis yer duty as a sither to stand up f'r yer brother,' she told me, 'an' I am not mixin' it wid yez on th' question iv his shape. 'Tis true he's that big they was a good pair iv twins spoilt in him, and he has th' legs an' arrums an' back iv a rale man; but his face is that hard it wud make a foine map f'r a haythen god.'"

"Huh!" Angus snorted. "She ought to look at her own."

"Heavens, Angus! I believe you're vain."

"Vain—blazes!" Angus growled. "I suppose I ought to be tickled when an old she-mick says I look like a totem pole."

"Like a god!" his sister chuckled. "Don't get sore, old boy. Miss Winton says she's never complimentary to the people she likes best. She thinks you've made a hit with the lady."

"Then I wonder what she'd have said about my figurehead if I hadn't?" Angus grinned. "I like the old girl, myself, but she sure does hand it to me. Well, I guess I can take my medicine."

But Angus had more important things to think about. One which began to worry him was exceptionally dry weather. High, drying winds sucked all the moisture from the soil, and with the loss of it the surface earth shifted and blew away from the roots of the grain. Deprived of this support, they twisted in the winds, their arteries of life hardened and withered. The grass crops were poor, short and wiry when they should have been lush and long. Pallid green instead of dark dominated the hue of the fields, the worst possible sign to the eye of the rancher. And this was in spite of the best that could be done by way of irrigation.

Now Angus obtained the water for his ditch system from a mountain creek fed by innumerable springs as well as by melting snows back in the hills. But for the first time in his experience he found himself without sufficient water. For he had been clearing land steadily, year after year, without enlarging his main ditch. So far the seasons had favored him. But now, in the first, old-time dry season for years, he found that his ditch was insufficient to irrigate his enlarged acreage.

It was out of the question to deepen or broaden the ditch just then. To do so would be a task of some magnitude, for from intake to ranch was nearly two miles. Time had packed and cemented the gravel of its banks, and further bound them with roots of grasses and willows. Again, to avoid expensive fluming the ditch wound sinuously around the flanks of several steep sidehills, and to disturb existing sidehill ditches is to invite slides, which necessitate flumes. He made up his mind to enlarge the ditch before another season, but meanwhile he had to depend on it. So he took every drop of water it would carry. The creek was high, a muddy torrent, and he set the water gate of his intake so that the ditch should run rap full, but no spill, and thus cause washouts along its banks.

One morning in the gray of dawn Angus awoke. The wind which had blown all night seemed to have lulled. He heard Gus pass his door on the way to the stables, but as he was dressing the big Swede returned. He pounded on Angus' door.

"Hey, gat oop!" he cried. He stuck his head inside, his eyes round and goggling. "We ent gat no watter!" he announced.

"The devil we haven't!" Angus exclaimed. "What's wrong?"

"Ay be goldarn if Ay know. She's yoost oft. Mebbe dae ditch ban plug."

"Glom a shovel for me and get an ax and pick and I'll be right with you," Angus told him.

Dressing hastily, he struck the main ditch behind the house. It was dry, save for little pools in which water lingered. They crossed the rear fence, finding no obstruction, and followed the ditch until it struck the sidehill section. Then Gus who was in the lead, stopped with an oath.

"By Yudas Priest!" he ejaculated, "dae whole dam' sidehill ban vash to hal!"

Pushing past him, Angus surveyed the damage. Where the ditch had run was a raw, gaping wound in the hillside. Hundreds of tons of gravel, earth and small bowlders had slid down on it. The far end of the ditch vomited water upon the mass. Even as they looked a few yards of hillside undermined by its rush came down upon the broken end, blocking the water. This, backed up, began to pour over the banks of the ditch.

Left to itself the whole ditch would wash away. Circling the break, both men took the trail to the intake. The water gate was wide open. The high water of the creek was hurrying through in a swift flood, far more than the ditch could carry. They threw their weight on the lever and shut it off.

"Who opened it this far on that water?" Angus demanded.

"Ay ent been near him," Gus replied. "Mebbe dae Engelschman monkey med him."

It was most unfortunate. In other years the ditch had carried a full head without accident. This time, however, it had failed just at the time when water was absolutely necessary to the crops. The only way to get water now was to build a flume; and so, immediately after breakfast, Rennie started for a load of planks, while the others began to get out timbers to support them, and to clear away the mass of dirt. Chetwood, it appeared, had not been near the water gate. Somebody, however, had changed it.

They dug into the mess, and sank holes for timbers to support the flume. Now and then a small bowlder or a little dirt came down from above, where the hill rose sheer above the slip. Gus, looking up at it, shook his head.

"Mebbe she come anoder slide an' take dae flume, hey! Mebbe I better put in leetle shot up dere an' fetch him now?"

"You might fetch half the hill."

"Yoost vat you say."

"Well, make it a darn small one."

So Gus put in a very small shot which brought down a small patch of dirt and gravel, but did not budge the mass.

"I guess she ban O.K.," he admitted.

It took four days to put in the flume. When water was running once more and the long, silver ribbons of it were trickling down the length of the fields giving fresh life to the grain which, even in that short time was yellowing with the drouth, Angus heaved a sigh of relief.

"Thank the Lord that's done," he observed.

"If we couldn't have put her in we'd have had a hundred years of dry weather," Rennie grumbled. "But now, of course, she'll rain."

That night, as if to make his prediction good, thunder-heads rose above the ranges and lightning was splitting the back of the southwest sky. But all that came of it was a heavy wind, though some time in the night Angus was awakened by what he thought was a heavy roll of thunder. But as he emerged from the house in the early morning the sky was clear and the day seemed to promise more heat than ever.

Thankful that he had water anyway, he stood for a moment cleaning his lungs with big draughts of mountain air; but as he stood he seemed to miss something which was or should have been a part of that early-morning stretch and breath. Puzzled for an instant he would not tell what was missing. And then he knew. He could not hear the gurgle of water in the ditch which ran beside the house.

He reached it in two jumps. It was dry. For a moment he stood contemplating it, and then started on a run for the flume. There his worst fears were verified. There was no flume. The hanging section of sidehill above it which Gus' shot had failed to shake, had fetched away and swept the structure out of existence. The only evidence of it was a few ends of planks and timbers sticking up at crazy angles. All the work and a great deal more was to do over again.

Angus stood scowling at the wreck. His crops needed water very, very badly, and this time, to judge from appearances, it would take a week to make repairs. If the dry weather continued that would mean practical ruin to his crop.

But standing there would not help matters and time was precious. As soon as he had shut off the water he returned to the house, and after breakfast all hands tackled the job.

It was harder than before. Much earth and loose rock had to be moved. The morning was hot, breathless. As the sun gained power the sidehill absorbed its rays and threw off a baking heat. Chetwood, unused to such work, puffed and gasped, but stuck to it. Angus and Gus labored steadily, without respite. But Rennie after a while leaned on his shovel and stared up at the raw earth above.

"Where'd you put in that shot, Gus, when you was tryin' to shake her?" he asked.

Gus told him, and soon after he abandoned his shovel and climbing around the track of the slide he got above it. There he poked around for some time. Coming down he beckoned to Angus.

"How long do you s'pose it'll take to put in this flume?" he queried.

"Maybe a week."

"Uh-huh! And then s'pose she goes out again?"

"What's the use of supposing that?" Angus demanded irritably, for his hard luck was getting on his nerves. "What the devil are you croaking for? I've got troubles enough."

"I'm goin' to give you more," Rennie told him. "Look a-here!" He exhibited four or five small stones with fresh, yellow earth still clinging to them, and a piece of broken root. "What do you think of this lay-out?" he asked.

Angus frowned at the junk impatiently. The stones came from the layer of like stuff which lay beneath most of the land in the district. The root was fir, old, resinous, so that it had not rotted with the tree it had once helped to anchor, and apparently it was freshly broken off and twisted.

"I've been shoveling stuff like that for hours," he said. "What about it?"

"Quite a bit. You seen me nanitchin' round up there, and I s'pose you damned me for a lazy cuss. Well, up there's where I find them things."

"You could have found plenty of them without climbing."

"But I'm tellin' you I found these here *above* the slide."

Angus stared at him, slowly taking in his meaning.

"Above it!" he exclaimed.

"That's what I said. Up hill from the slide. Slide stuff never runs up hill. This stuff was *blown* there."

"Gus put in a little shot—"

"Near a week ago. The dirt on these rocks ain't dry yet. Same with the wood. They ain't been lyin' out in the sun no time at all. All Gus did was to put in a little coyote hole, and she blew straight out. This shot was above, and when she blew she ripped the whole sidehill loose. Mebbe there was more than one shot. I'll bet I heard it, and thought it was thunder. Anyway, all this stuff was above where the slide started. And that's what made the first slide, too. It wasn't water. Some son of a gun shot the ditch."

Angus turned the bits of evidence over in his hands, frowning.

"Who would do a trick like that?"

"You can come as near guessin' as I can."

Angus shook his head. Nobody, so far as he knew, would deliberately cut off his water. And yet, according to this silent but conclusive evidence, somebody had done so. The repairs had been wrecked as soon as completed. They might be wrecked again. It gave him a strange, uncomfortable feeling, akin to that of a mysterious presence in the dark. Also it moved him to deep, silent anger.

"I would give a good deal to know," he said quietly.

"Nobody hangin' round lately that I've noticed. But somebody was keepin' case all right, 'cause we only got water a few hours. And I'll tell you somethin' else: When we get the flume pretty near in again I'm keepin' case myself."

CHAPTER XXI

WATCHING

It took nine days to complete the flume a second time, and all hands were dog-tired. All the time the heat had continued and the hot winds were constant. The ranch had suffered badly. Irreparable damage had been done. The grain was stunted, yellow. There would not be half a crop.

These things bit into the soul of Angus Mackay as he labored fiercely, pitting his strength and endurance against relentless time. He could get no clew, no inkling of the person responsible for the trouble.

On the afternoon of the day when the flume was completed, Rennie was absent. After supper he sought Angus.

"I went across the creek this afternoon," he said, "and I clumb up onto that hill across where we was workin'. There was somebody there across the gulch from me. Course I went down and over, but he'd gone. Found where his horse had been standin' on top of the hill."

"You couldn't tell who it was?"

"No. I don't think he seen me. But whoever it was, was sizin' up the flume. I'm goin' to take my blankets and camp alongside it for some nights."

"So will I," Angus said. "If I can find out who is doing this, Dave, I will handle them myself. I will not bother about the law."

A little spark lit in Dave Rennie's mild, blue eyes.

"Sure; best way," he agreed. "Things was a darn sight better and safer and less skunks and sharks when every gent packed his own law below his belt. Law don't give you no action when you want it. Well, let's get organized."

Angus had told Jean nothing of his suspicions as to the destruction of the flume. But now it was necessary. She listened, wide-eyed.

"But who would do it, Angus?"

"If I knew," he replied, "I would be hunting him now."

Jean looked at her big, swarthy brother, noting the grim line of his mouth, the smouldering anger in his eyes.

"Don't get into any trouble, Angus."

"It will be somebody else that will get into trouble if I find him."

"But if you can avoid—"

"I will avoid nothing," he told her sharply. "Let others do that. I have never injured a man in my life, of my own will, and nobody shall injure me and get away with it."

Going into Rennie's room he saw his blankets on the floor ready for rolling. On them reposed a worn gun-belt with two holsters, from each of which protruded an ivory butt. Angus stared at this artillery, which he had never seen before.

"Sure, take a look at 'em," Dave said, interpreting his gaze. "I ain't wore 'em for so long they feel funny now. Time was, though, when they felt natural as front teeth."

Angus drew the guns. They were ivory-handled, forty-one calibre, heavy, long-barreled, single-action weapons of an old frontier model. Though they had evidently seen much service, they were spotless. The pull, when Angus tried it, was astonishingly quick and smooth, and in his hands they fitted and balanced perfectly.

"Them guns," said Dave, "pretty near shoot themselves if a feller savvies a gun at all. A feller give 'em to me a long time ago."

"Some present," Angus commented.

"Well, he hadn't no more use for 'em," Dave explained. "Tell you about it some time. What gun you takin'?"

"I don't know."

"Take a shotgun with buck. That's the best thing at night."

Angus stared at him. In all the years he had known Rennie the little man had been meek and mild, apparently the last being on earth to exhibit bloodthirsty tendencies.

"I don't want to blow anybody to pieces," he said.

"Well, you won't—unless you get to shootin' at mighty close range," Rennie pointed out; "and then you won't care. Take a double bar'l and a box of goose loads, anyway."

An hour later they picked a level spot near the new flume, wrapped up in their blankets and lit pipes. But soon Angus dozed.

"Go to sleep," said Rennie. "I'll wake you after a while."

Angus went to sleep instantly and gratefully. He woke some hours later with Rennie's hand on his shoulder.

"It'll be light in two hours, and I'm pinchin' myself to keep awake. You're awake for sure, are you? All right."

He settled himself in his blankets, sighed and slept like a tired dog. Angus sat up. The night which had been bright with stars was now overcast and a wind was blowing. He could hear it straining through the tree tops and booming back in the hills. The creek roared and brawled noisily. A couple of horned owls hooted at their hunting in the timber. There were noises close at hand; the faint, intermittent gurgle of water, little rustlings of grasses and leaves, the occasional scurry of tiny feet, the buzz and click of insects. He had a hard job to fight off sleep. But suddenly a sound which did not blend with the natural voices of the night drove every bit of drowsiness out of him.

It was faint, like the clink of metal on stone. While Angus listened it was repeated. He touched Rennie. Instantly the latter's breathing stopped and changed.

"Somethin' doing'?"

"Listen!"

Clink, clink, clang! Down the wind came the sound.

"It's on the next sidehill," said Rennie. "Rippin' the ditch out, or makin' a hole for a shot. She's a worse hill than this, too." He rose, shook himself, and buckled on his belt. "We'll hold 'em up. Sneak up as close as we can, and tell 'em to h'ist their paws."

"Suppose they don't," said Angus, slipping a couple of shells into the breech of his gun.

"When you tell a feller to put 'em up and he don't, there's only one thing to do; 'cause there's only one thing he's goin' to do, and you got to beat him to it."

The ditch, leaving the sidehill with the new flume, crossed the end of a flat and struck another sidehill. This was brushy halfway to the top, marking the track of an old slide of many years before. But above it, where the ancient slide had started, the bank rose sheer, overhanging. As they struck the flat they heard more plainly the clink of tools.

"Right under where that old slip hangs," Rennie deducted. "That's the place 'd make most trouble to fix. It's a darn sight worse than what we did fix. Now—"

His words were interrupted by the shrill blast of a whistle from somewhere above. It was repeated, and from where the sounds of work had been came the crash of brush. Rennie swore, and a gun seemed to leap into his hand.

"Their lookout seen us on this blasted flat!" he cried. "They're climbin' the hill. If we had any sense—Come on! Maybe we can head 'em off!"

They rushed at the steep, brush-covered hill. To their right, but invisible, others seemed to be climbing also. Suddenly from above a gun barked, and a bullet drilled above Angus' head and spatted on a rock below. Again a spurt of fire lanced the night, and another bullet buzzed, this time to the left.

Angus had never been shot at before. He had supposed that he would be nervous if ever called on to stand fire. But actually his main feeling was indignation that any one could shoot at him. And just as automatically and unthinkingly as he was accustomed to swing on a bird, he sent a charge of shot at the second flash of the gun. But a third shot answered and he fired again, and broke the twelve gauge and shoved in fresh shells, and started forward, only to be pulled back by Rennie.

"There ain't no cover ahead. You'll get plugged."

"But they'll get away!"

"Well, so'll you," Dave told him; "but if you go crowdin' up without cover somebody'll have to pack you home. Have sense! And lay down. You're so darn big you'll stop something if you keep standin' up!"

Angus dropped beside him in a little hollow, and a bullet droned through the space his body had just occupied.

"Told you so," Rennie grunted. "There's one man up there savvies downhill shootin'. If I could—" The gun in his hand leaped twice so quickly that the reports almost blended. "Don't believe I touched him. Outa practice with a belt gun. Dark besides. Scatter some shot around near the top."

Angus used half a dozen shells, guessing as best he could. A shot or two came back. Rennie suddenly turned loose both his guns in a fusillade, and for an instant Angus saw or thought he saw moving figures silhouetted against the sky on the hill's rim. At these, he let go both barrels. Dave, swinging out the empty cylinders of his guns, swore.

"Darn 'f I b'lieve we've touched hide nor hair. They got horses up there. What darn fools we was to camp down in this bottom. There they go now."

Angus could hear the faint drumming of hoofs over the hill. There was nothing to be done about it. Disgusted they went back to their blankets, but not to sleep, and with dawn they returned to investigate.

An endeavor had been made to tear out the wall of the ditch, and above it a hole had been

started, apparently with intent to use powder. A shot there would have split off a section of the precipitous bank, and brought it down, trees and all, into the ditch. Angus, surveying these things with lowering brow, saw Rennie stoop and pick up something.

"What have you got there?" the latter asked.

Without a word Rennie handed him an old, stag-handled jack-knife. Angus knew it very well. He himself had given it to his brother, Turkey.

Angus stared at the knife, at first blankly and then with swiftly blackening brow. He heard Dave's voice as from a distance.

"Now don't go off at half-cock, Angus. Maybe—"

"You know the knife," he said, his own voice sounding strange in his ears.

"Well, that don't say Turkey was in this. Maybe he lost it, and somebody—"

"Quit lying to yourself!"

"By gosh, Angus, I'll bet Turkey don't know a darn thing—"

But Angus was not listening. Out of the glory of the sun rising over the ranges, one of the black moods of the Black Mackays descended on him. All his life he had struggled against the hardness and bitterness of heart inherited from his ancestors, men dour and vengeful, whose creed had been eye for eye and tooth for tooth through the clan feuds of the dim centuries. Hard and bitter men, these bygone Mackays whose blood ran in his veins, carrying the black hate in the heart, even brother against brother. There was even that Mackay of a dark memory—and his name, too, was Torquil—who after a quarrel with his brothers had slain them, all four. Old tales, these, handed down through the years, losing or gaining in the telling, perhaps, but all stormy and full of violence and hate and revenge. And in all of them there was never one of a Mackay who forgave an injury. One and all they brooded over wrong and struck in their own time. With them it was not the quick word and blow—though if other tales were true they were quick enough with both—but the deep, sullen, undying resentment under injury.

As he thought of these things with the black mood upon him, Angus' heart hardened against his brother. He did not doubt that this was Turkey's revenge. There was his knife, and he should account for it. Since he had not been alone he should tell the names of his confederates. And then, like the bitter, dour Mackay he was, Angus put the knife in his pocket and turned a grim but composed face to Rennie.

"Maybe you are right," he admitted, though he had not heard a word the other had been saying. "Let's go home and get breakfast. And say nothing at all to Jean."

CHAPTER XXII

BROTHER TO BROTHER

Jean was left in ignorance as to the occurrences of the night. No further attempts were made to interfere with the ditch; but the flume itself sagged in the middle by natural subsidence of the loose soil, and much of it had to be set up again. Angus was sick at heart, for the damage done by the combination of hot winds and lack of water was irreparable. Much of his crop would not be worth cutting.

And this, of all times, was the one chosen by Jean to re-open the question of Turkey's return to the ranch. She urged Angus to ask him. Angus flatly refused.

"He is our brother—our younger brother," Jean urged.

"If he were fifty times my brother, I would not. I tell you he has worn out my patience, and I am glad he went. He made trouble enough when he was on the ranch, and now—"

But suddenly recollecting himself he broke off. Jean's face was grave.

"Angus," she said, "what has Turkey done?"

"Nothing," he replied sullenly.

"That is not the truth, Angus."

"Then whatever he has done it is more than enough. Let it go at that. I will not talk about it to you or any one."

"The black dog is on you," Jean told him. "I have seen it for days."

"And if it is, your talk doesn't call it off," Angus retorted, and left the house. And that night, being in a worse mood than ever, he threw a saddle on Chief and rode away to have it out with his brother.

Turkey dwelt alone in a log shack on the outskirts of the town. Angus had never visited him, but he knew the place well enough. There was a light in the shack, and after listening a moment to make sure there was nobody else there, he knocked. Turkey's voice bade him enter.

Turkey was lying on a bunk reading by the light of a lamp drawn up beside him, and his eyebrows lifted as he recognized his visitor.

"It's you, is it?" he said.

"I have come to talk to you," said Angus.

"Then you'd better sit down while you're doing it," said Turkey, as he got out of his bunk.

Angus sat down. There was but one room, in which Turkey ate and slept. The walls were decorated with pictures cut from magazines. A rifle and shotgun leaned in a corner with a saddle beside them. At the head of Turkey's bunk hung a holstered six-shooter. The place was tidy enough, save for burnt matches and cigarette butts which Turkey had carelessly thrown down.

"To save time," Angus began, "I'll tell you that this is a show-down." Turkey's eyes narrowed at his tone, and the old, latent hostility sprang to life in them.

"Then spread your hand," he said. Angus took the knife from his pocket and tossed it on the table.

"That's yours, isn't it?"

Turkey picked up the knife, surprise in his face.

"You ought to know it."

"I do know it."

Turkey shrugged his shoulders. "All right. Thanks. Say whatever you have to say, and don't stall."

"I can say that in a few words," Angus returned. "It is not because you are my brother, but only for Jean's sake that I keep my hands off you. Do you get that?"

"I can tell you another reason," Turkey retorted, his young face hardening, "which is that I won't let you put your hands on me. You'll get hurt if you try it. Now go on."

"I want the names of the men who were with you."

"What men? With me when?"

"You know mighty well," Angus accused him.

"All right, have it your own way."

"I want their names."

"Then keep on wanting them," Turkey returned. "If you think I know what you mean, keep on thinking it. Keep on having your own way, same as you've always had. Same as you had when you got me to quit the ranch. Now you can go plumb, understand?"

"Before I leave here," Angus said, "you will tell me what I want to know, or—"

"Or what?" Turkey demanded.

"Or you will lie in that bunk for a week and be glad to do it," Angus finished grimly. His young brother's eyes closed down to mere slits.

"Get one thing straight," he said. "I'll take no more from you now than I would from a stranger. Remember what I told you about keeping your hands off me. I mean it!"

"And so do I," said Angus rising. "No more nonsense, Turkey. Will you answer my question?"

Turkey was on his feet instantly. He took a step backward. "No," he said; "I won't tell you one damned thing. Keep away from me, Angus. Keep away, or by—"

Unheeding the warning, Angus sprang forward. Turkey dodged, leaped back, and his hand shot for the gun hanging by his bunk. It came out of its holster. Angus swung his arm against it, and it roared in his ear. He grasped it as the hammer fell a second time, and the firing pin pierced the web of his hand between thumb and finger. He ripped the weapon from Turkey's weaker hands and threw it away. Then he lost control of himself and let his anger have full sway.



Angus swung his arm against it, and it roared in his ear.

Turkey was a strong, active young fellow, but against his brother's thews and bulk he was helpless. Angus did not strike him; he poured his strength in a flood upon the body in his grasp, shaking and worrying it as a great dog might worry a fox. But as the tremendous handling shook away the last of Turkey's power of resistance, the door opened, there were voices, a rush of feet, a hard fist came against Angus' ear, and an arm shot around his neck.

With this assault sanity came to him. He caught the wrist of the arm and twisted it, and he heard a yell of pain. He thrashed himself free, leaping back against the wall.

The newcomers were Garland, Blake French, Gerald, Larry and two young men strangers to Angus. Blake French, nursing a twisted wrist, cursed him.

"By —, he was trying to murder Turkey!" he declared.

The younger Mackay swayed forward, his face white in the lamplight.

"Shut up!" he said. "Don't talk damned foolishness!"

"He was choking you," Garland cried. "Somebody used a gun. The room's full of powder smoke."

"If you don't like smoke the air's good outside," Turkey told him.

Angus stared at his young brother in amazement. He had expected denunciation.

"This isn't your put in—any of you," Turkey declared.

"But—"

"But—nothing!" Turkey snapped. "Mind your own business, can't you! Who asked you to horn in?"

Gerald grinned, a certain admiration in his lazy eyes.

"All right, Turkey, I get you completely. See you later. Come on, boys."

When the door closed behind them Turkey dropped into a chair, shoved his hands into his pockets and stared at his brother.

"You're a husky devil!" he said after an interval of silence. "What were you trying to do—kill me?"

"I don't know," Angus admitted.

"If you had been just a shade slower," said Turkey, "I would have blown your head off. So I can't blame you much. Well—what happens now?"

"Nothing," Angus replied. "I'll be going." Getting up he walked to the door, his anger replaced by shame and disgust. At the door he turned. "I am sorry," he said, "and ashamed of myself. To prove it I will say what I never thought to say, meaning it: Will you come back to the ranch? Jean wants you. Maybe we can make a fresh start."

Turkey stared at him in amazement for a moment.

"You didn't come here to say that, did you?"

"No," Angus admitted. "But Jean wanted me to."

"Oh, Jean!" said the younger man. "I get on with Jean all right. But you're doing it not because Jean wants you to, but to square yourself with yourself. You always were a sour, proud devil, so I know what it costs you. I won't crowd you, though. I'm getting along all right this way, and so are you. No, I won't go back."

"Suit yourself," said Angus. Turkey nodded.

"I wouldn't go back on a bet. Some day you can buy out my share of the ranch cheap—that is if I have any share. That's up to you."

"When I can afford it, I will pay you what your share is worth," Angus told him. "Father left me all he had, because I was the eldest and he knew I would deal fairly. I think it would be fair if we took a third each. That is what I have always intended."

"More than fair," Turkey admitted. "You have done most of the work. I'll hand you that much. So when the time comes, split my third two ways. I'll take one, and you and Jean can take the other."

"You can do what you like with your share," Angus told him, "but of course I will not touch one cent of it. Meanwhile the ranch is increasing in value."

"I know all that," Turkey replied. "Don't tell me you're working for me."

"I will tell you this," said Angus, "anything that injures the ranch injures you."

Turkey eyed him for a moment.

"Well?"

"Well—remember it."

"I'll try," said Turkey. "We don't get along well together. Best way is not to be together. So after this you keep plumb away from me, and I'll keep away from you. Does that go?"

"Yes," said Angus. "And mind you keep to that, you and your friends. Let me alone, and let the ranch alone!"

Turkey stared at him, frowning, and half opened his mouth in question, but let it go unuttered. Without another word Angus left him and rode home through an overcast night. As he turned in at the ranch gate a drop struck his hand. As he stabled Chief it began to rain softly and steadily. Angus Mackay turned his face to the sky, and out of the bitterness of his heart cursed it and the rain that had come too late.

CHAPTER XXIII

FAITH'S FARM

Angus was riding fast for Faith Winton's ranch. Rain had fallen steadily for two days, and was still falling. The hills were veiled to their bases in low clouds. Mists hung everywhere, rising from little lakes, hanging low over the bottoms, clinging to the tree-tops of the benchlands. The rain would do good, undoubtedly, but it could not repair the damage of the drouth.

Angus had not seen Faith for a fortnight. As he rode, head down against the rain, half unconsciously he began to picture unimportant details. Of course, on such a beastly day, she would be at home. There would be an open fire, and perhaps music. Music and an open fire! The combination suited him. Perhaps—

A live bomb landed beneath Chief's feet with an explosion of barking. The big horse, taken by surprise, bounded and kicked. And as Angus caught him hard with the rein and a word picked at random from a vocabulary suited to the comprehension of western horses, he saw Faith Winton.

She was cased against the rain in a long slicker, and a tarpaulin hat protected her fair head. Beneath the broad brim of it her face, rosy and clear-skinned, laughed up at him as he brought Chief up with a suddenness which made his hoofs cut slithering grooves in the slop.

"Jehu, the son of Nimshi, rideth furiously. Also he useth vain words to his steed."

Angus reddened, for a man's remarks to his horse are in the nature of confidential communications.

"I didn't see you," he said, dismounting beside her.

"Melord of many acres honors the poor ranch maiden. Methought he had forgotten her existence."

"You know better than that."

"Well, perhaps I do. I hope your flume is all right now. But of course this rain—"

He did not undeceive her.

"I never expected to see you out on a day like this."

"Like this? Why, I never could stay in, on a rainy day. I must get out. Good for the complexion."

"I can see the complexion part of it. I wonder if you know how becoming that slicker hat is?"

She laughed up at him. "Of course I know. Do you think I'd wear it if I didn't?"

"I never saw one on a girl before."

"No? They're supposed to be purely masculine, I know." She cocked the hat on one side and sang:

"If it be a girl she shall wear a golden ring,
And if it be a boy he shall fight for his king,
With his tarpaulin hat, and his coat of navy blue
He shall pace the quarter-deck as his daddy used to do."

Her rich contralto rang down the misty aisles beneath the dripping firs.

"Fine!" Angus applauded. "That's a great old song." She nodded and swung into the old, original refrain, her voice taking on the North Country burr:

"O-ho! it's hame, lads, hame, an' it's hame we yet wull be—
Back thegither scatheless in the North Countree;
Hame wi' wives an' bairns an' sweethearts in our ain countree—
Whaur the ash, an' the oak, an' the bonnie hazel tree,
They be all a-growin' green in our ain countree."

"I like those old songs," Angus approved.

"So do I. Modern songs seem to me cheap things, written just to sell. But the old ones—the real, old songs that were the songs of generations before us—weren't really written at all. Somehow, when I sing them I feel that I am almost touching the spirits of those who sang them many years ago." She stopped abruptly. "And now you'll think I'm silly!"

"Not a bit. Spirits! Old Murdoch McGillivray—"

"Who was he?"

"A friend of my father's. He had the gift."

"The gift?"

"I mean the second sight."

"You believe in that?"

"Well, he foretold his own death."

"Not really?"

"It comes to the same thing. The last night he was at our house he was playing the pipes, and suddenly he stopped and would play no more. Before he left he told my father he had seen himself lying dead beside running water. A week after that they found him dead beside the creek. What would you think?"

"I don't know," Faith admitted. "It's a thin veil, and some may see beyond." She shivered. "I wish you had the second sight yourself. Then you might tell me what to do."

"About what?" he asked.

"Uncle Godfrey has made me an offer for my land, and I don't know whether to accept it or not."

"Will he give you a fair price?"

"He offers the price paid for the land and the cost of the improvements I have made."

It seemed to Angus that Godfrey French had some conscience left. But it might be less conscience than fear that the girl would find out how he had cheated her father. Restitution was practically forced on him if he had the money to make good, and apparently, in spite of what Judge Riley had said, he had.

"I would take his offer," Angus advised reluctantly, for it meant that he would lose his neighbor.

"Why?"

"Why? Why, I've always told you you can't make a success of ranching."

"And I've never admitted it. I'm gaining experience. And land is going up."

"Some land."

"Then why not this? What is the matter with my land?"

Angus evaded the direct challenge. "The place is too big for you. There's a lot of it, like that little, round mountain, that's no good at all."

"Which is directly against your contention that the place is too big for me. But if this land is worth what was paid for it, it should be worth more to-day."

Suddenly Angus began to wonder what had spurred French's conscience.

"Why does he want to buy?"

"Partly, he says, to take a white elephant off my hands; and partly for Blake."

"For Blake?" Angus exclaimed in amazement.

"Blake wants a ranch of his own. You don't believe it?"

"Not a word of it."

"Perhaps Uncle Godfrey is merely inventing that reason. He may have no other than a desire to take the property off my hands, if he thinks I can't work it profitably."

"It seems funny," Angus said, thoughtfully. "If he wants to buy for Blake he may offer more. I don't think, after all, I'd be in a hurry to decide."

"I'll take that advice, and wait. But here we are at the house. Put Chief in the stable. You'll stay for supper, of course."

Angus stayed. But all evening he was preoccupied. Again and again he went over the puzzle. Why did Godfrey French want to buy that dry ranch? Why had he given a reason which was not a reason? Why had he lied about Blake? He could find no satisfactory answers to these questions.

His reflections were interrupted by the unexpected appearance of Blake himself, and Blake was obviously half-drunk. He acknowledged Angus' presence with a nod and a growl, and thereafter ignored him, devoting himself to Faith. His attitude toward her was familiar, and when at his request she went to the piano glad to escape his conversation, he leaned over her, placing a hand on her shoulder, an action which made Angus long to break his neck. But she rose from the piano.

"No, I won't play any more. You must have some refreshments. Tea, coffee or cocoa?"

"Not strong on any of 'em," said Blake. "But all right if *you* make 'em. Drink anything *you* make, li'l girl!"

Without reply Faith left the room, and without invitation Angus followed her. In the hall she turned fury blazing in her eyes.

"He's disgusting!"

"Shall I send him home?"

"He wouldn't go. I wish he would."

"I can make him go," Angus said hopefully. "I'd like to."

"No, no, that wouldn't do. I'll just have to put up with him. Perhaps he'll be better. Why, there's somebody in the kitchen. I didn't know Mrs. Foley had a visitor. Why, it's your man, Gus!"

Gus was established in a chair which he had balanced on its hind legs against the wall. Around its front legs his huge feet were hooked. A pipe was clenched in his teeth, and on his face was placid content.

"Yaas," he announced, "Ay ban purty gude man on a rench. Ay roon dat rench for Engus, yoost like Ay roon him for hes fader."

"Ye run th' ranch f'r th' ould man, did ye?" Mrs. Foley commented.

"Sure," Gus affirmed. "Me and him we roon him. Engus, he don't know much about a rench. If it ent for me, Ay tank he mek dam' fule out of the whole t'ing."

"Gawd, but ye hate yerself!" said his auditor. "If ye know so much, why ain't ye got a half section or bether of yer own, instid of dhrillin' along a hired man?"

"Vell, Ay don't see yoost vat Ay like," Gus explained. "Ay mek gude money."

"Who gets it?" asked Mrs. Foley. "Th' barkeep?"

Big Gus grinned. "Mebbe he gat some. But Ay got a stake saved up. Ven Ay see a gude rench mebbe Ay buy him. But a faller alone on a rench haf purty hard time. He needs a woman to cook and vash by him."

"Is that so?" snorted Mrs. Foley. "But, be me sowl, I b'lieve ye're tellin' the stark, naked trut' as ye see ut. That's all the loikes iv yez sees in a woman."

"Soome time," said Gus reflectively, "mebbe Ay gat me a voman."

"Hiven help her!" said Mrs. Foley piously. Gus surveyed her calmly.

"If Ay gat a voman," he announced, "Ay skall gat one dat ent no fule."

"Any woman ye get will be," Mrs. Foley retorted with a meaning which got past Gus entirely.

"Vell, Ay don't know," he returned. "Some voman is gat soome sense ven dey gat old enough. Ay don't vant no good-lookin' young dancin' girl dat don't know how to cook. Ay gat me soome day a rench, and a gude strong voman like you, and settle down."

Faith smothered her mirth with difficulty. "There's a pointer for you, Angus!" she whispered.

"Mrs. Foley will murder him now," he returned.

"Ye have ut down fine," Mrs. Foley snorted, "an' all I hope is that ye get a woman that'll lay ye out wid a rowlin' pin in life, an' wid a cleaner shirt nor ye have on now, when yer time comes. An' ut's me that's lit candles, head an' feet, for four men already. Though belike ut's no candles ye'll have to light yer way up or down. Phwat belief are ye, ye big Swede?"

Gus scratched his head and pondered.

"Ay vote democrat in Meennesota," he replied, "but Ay tank Ay ban socialist now."

"Agh-r-r!" snarled Mrs. Foley. "I mean phwat religion are ye, or ain't ye?"

Gus scratched his head again.

"Ay tank mebbe Ay ban Christian," he said doubtfully.

"Ay tank mebbe ye're a Scandahoovian haythen," Mrs. Foley mimicked.

But the entrance of Faith and Angus cut short her further theological research. Faith explained her wants.

"It's for Blake French, Mary," she said. "He's—well, we thought he might feel better if—"

"Is he dhrunk, bad scran till him?"

"Half," Angus nodded.

"Then, instid of feedin' him why don't ye t'run him out?"

"I'd be glad to, but—"

"No, no," Faith broke in, "he may be better—"

"A bad actor an' a raw wan is that same lad," Mrs. Foley announced with conviction, "an' comin' around here too much. I am not yer mother, but if I was—"

"Please, Mary!" Faith cried, her cheeks scarlet.

"Well, well," Mrs. Foley observed, "coffee an' pickles is th' best thing f'r him, barrin' p'ison. Go yer ways, an' I'll bring ut in whin ready."

They returned to the living room and the society of Blake. He met them with a scowl. He chose to interpret the fact that he had been left alone in the light of an insult. He was surly, glaring at Angus. The coffee, cold meat and pickles which presently appeared did not change his mood. The liquor dying in him left a full-sized grouch as a legacy.

Angus ignored his attitude. Faith tried to make conversation, but it was a failure. Time passed and it grew late. Apparently Blake was waiting out Angus. The latter did not know what to do, but he had no intention of leaving Blake behind him. Finally, however, he was forced to make a move. He bade Faith good night. She turned to Blake.

"Good night, Blake."

"Oh, I'm not going yet," he announced.

"It's late, Blake, and I'm tired."

"I want to talk to you."

"Not to-night, please. Come to-morrow."

"No, I'll talk to you to-night."

"Not to-night, Blake."

"Well, you will," Blake declared with an oath. "Trying to get rid of me, are you? And I suppose this Mackay—"

"That will do now," Angus interrupted. "Be careful what you say."

"Say!" Blake roared, his temper getting the better of his prudence, "I'll say what I like. What business have you hanging around here? It's time—"

"It's time you went," Angus told him, "and you're going, do you savvy? Come along, or I'll take you."

"You—" Blake began, but got no further, for Angus slapped the words back against his teeth and caught him by wrist and collar.

The struggle was short and sharp. A couple of chairs went over. And then Angus got his grip.

"Give him th' bummer's run!" shrieked Mrs. Foley from the door.

"Open the front door!" Angus commanded Gus.

When it was open he shot Blake through with a rush and outside released him.

"Now, Blake French, I want to tell you something," he said. "You have a dirty tongue in your head. See that you keep it between your teeth, and mind that never again do you come here drunk. For as sure as you do and I hear of it, I will break half the bones in your body. Is that plain enough for you?"

Blake swore deeply. "I'll get you for this," he threatened.

"Then get me right," said Angus, "for the next time I lay my hands on you I will break you. Remember that."

Riding homeward beside Gus he thought over the events of the evening. It seemed fated that he should lock horns with Blake. He regretted that he had not thrown him out sooner. For the latter's threat he did not care at all. As he looked at it Blake had not enough sand to make his words good.

"Ay tank," said Gus, "dat faller, Blake, he'd do purty dirty trick."

"Maybe."

Gus was silent for a mile.

"Dat's purty fine voman," he announced.

"Yes," Angus agreed absently, "Miss Winton is a fine girl."

"Ay ent mean her," said Gus; "Ay mean dae Irish voman."

Angus grinned in the darkness. "Sure," he said, "she's a fine, strong woman."

Gus sighed.

CHAPTER XXIV

A DEMAND AND AN ANSWER

A few days after the episode with Blake, Angus busy in his workshop ironing a set of whiffletrees, had a visit from Godfrey French. French made the reason of it plain at once.

"You know," he said, "that I have offered to buy my niece's land. She doesn't want to sell, and in that I am under the impression that she is acting on your advice? Is that so?"

"At first I advised her to sell," Angus told him, "but when I thought it over it seemed to me she shouldn't be in a hurry."

French studied him for a moment. "What made you alter your advice?"

"It doesn't pay to be in too much of a hurry to sell."

"And sometimes it doesn't pay to refuse a fair offer. Now I was always opposed to this foolish idea of hers that she could ranch, but I couldn't prevent her doing it. I made up my mind, however, that she should not lose by her play; that is that I would take the place off her hands at cost, plus whatever she had spent on improvements, providing these were not too expensive. I can do that now, but I can't pay for more improvements, because I am not a rich man, and I can't keep the offer open indefinitely. She must make her choice now. And so, as she seems to rely on your opinion, I come to you. I hope you will persuade her to take my offer and give up the absurd idea of ranching."

Angus thought as rapidly as he could.

"She told me you wanted to buy the place for Blake."

French gave him a swift, keen glance of scrutiny.

"And you didn't believe it?"

"No," Angus admitted, "I didn't."

French laughed. "And not believing it you drew the natural conclusion that I had some other motive. Well, I will be quite frank with you: If I had said I wanted to buy merely to take the property off her hands she would not have allowed me to do it. But what I said about Blake is partly true. I don't know that he himself wants to ranch—but I want him to settle down. So that is the situation."

Once more Angus did some swift thinking.

"I don't know what to say about it," he admitted frankly.

French's eyes narrowed a trifle in suspicion.

"Do you think she can succeed—make the ranch pay eventually?"

"No."

"Do you think the land is worth more than I have offered?"

"I don't know why it should be."

"Then why not advise her to get rid of it?"

"Because," Angus told him, "there are some things I don't understand at all."

"For instance?"

"Well, in the first place the price her father paid was much more than the land was worth at the time."

"Doesn't that make my offer all the fairer?"

"I don't understand how it was paid at all. The land wasn't worth half of it then."

"That is a matter of opinion."

"There is no opinion about it. It's a matter of fact. Just as good land could have been bought for two or three dollars an acre. And yet you invested Winton's money in this at ten dollars."

"Excuse me, but I did nothing of the sort. Winton had seen the land, wanted it, and was looking for something to hold for years. As a matter of fact, I advised him not to buy, because I considered the land too far back to be readily salable if he ever wished to dispose of it. But he instructed me to buy at the price at which it was held. I can show you his letter to that effect."

As this was entirely different from Faith's version, Angus was taken aback. "But," he said, "last fall Braden tried to sell part of it to Chetwood. How could he do that when it wasn't his?"

"I told Braden to try to sell it, because the sale, if it had gone through, would have given her in cash a large part of her father's investment, and no doubt she would have ratified it. I thought and still think it was the best thing that could be done. I understand that you were responsible for that sale falling through."

"It's a dry ranch, except for the spring."

"Nonsense! There's a water record."

"That record is more nonsense. You ought to know that if you are thinking of buying the place for Blake."

"I take that risk when I offer to purchase."

"Yes," Angus admitted, "and that's another thing I don't understand."

French's gray brows drew together for an instant.

"If it is in my interest not to buy isn't it in my niece's interest to sell?"

"It looks like it," Angus admitted, "but still I don't understand—"

"What?" Godfrey French demanded as Angus paused. "I have explained as well as I can. Do you mean that my explanations are not satisfactory?"

"Perhaps."

"In what particular?"

"They don't seem to explain."

"What do you mean by that?" Godfrey French rasped. "Do you mean that you question the truth of my words?" He frowned at Angus angrily.

"You are putting words into my mouth," Angus replied. "But I mean just this: The land was worth only about a quarter of what was paid for it. You and Braden both knew it. If you had told Winton that, he wouldn't have paid what he did unless he was crazy. I wonder why you let him pay it. Now you want to buy back worthless land, and I wonder why."

Their eyes met and held each other. In those of each was suspicion, hostility. French moistened dry lips.

"I admire your frankness," he said. "Have you told my niece that in your opinion the land is worthless?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I would rather not say."

"I insist on an answer."

"Very well," Angus returned. "I did not tell her, because she would have wondered what sort of a man you were to let her father load himself up with stuff like that, and I was not trying to make trouble."

Godfrey French's fists clenched. "Thirty years ago," he said, "for that you should have proved to me what sort of a man *you* were."

"Well, I can't help your age," Angus retorted. "I would not have told you, but you would have it."

"There are some things," said Godfrey French, "which it seems you do not understand. But understand this very clearly. Hereafter you will keep your nose out of things that don't concern you. You will keep away from me and mine, which includes my niece. Do you understand that?"

"I hear what you say," Angus returned. "But nobody but herself is going to forbid me to go to your niece's ranch."

"I forbid you," said Godfrey French. "I won't have you hanging around there. I won't have her name coupled with yours."

"I did not know it was being coupled," Angus said, "and I do not think it is. But if it is—what then?"

"What then!" Godfrey French exclaimed. "Have you the consummate impudence to imagine that my niece would think twice of an ignorant young hawbuck without birth or education? Bah! You're a young fool!"

At the words, entirely insolent, vibrant with contempt, a hot fire of anger began to blow within Angus. With all his heart he wished that Godfrey French had been minus the thirty years he had regretted.

"Those are hard words," he said, and it was characteristic of him that as his anger rose his voice was very quiet.

"True words," Godfrey French returned.

"At any rate," Angus told him, "I make a clean living by hard work."

"And I suppose you think 'A man's a man for a' that,'" Godfrey French sneered. "Don't give me any rotten nonsense about democracy and equality."

"I am not going to," Angus replied. "I think myself that every tub should stand on its own bottom. But if, as you seem to think, there is something in a man's blood, then perhaps mine is as good as your own."

"Fine blood!" Godfrey French commented with bitter irony. "Wild, hairy Highlanders, caterans and reivers for five hundred years!"

"Ay," Angus Mackay agreed with a grim smile, "and maybe for five hundred years back of that. But always pretty men of their hands, good friends and bad enemies, and ill to frighten or drive." Then, following the custom of his blood, he returned insult for insult. He launched it deliberately, coldly. "And it is not claiming much for the blood of a Mackay to say it is as good as that which comes from any shockheaded kernes spawned by a Galway bog."

White to his twitching lips, Godfrey French struck him in the face. Angus caught his hand, but made no attempt to return the blow.

"I think you had better go," he said. "You have too many years on your head for me."

Godfrey French stepped back.

"That is my misfortune," he said. "Well—I have sons. Remember what I told you, young man."

"I will remember," Angus said, "and I will do as I please. If your sons try to make your words good they will find a rough piece of road."

He watched Godfrey French drive away, and turned back to his work. But presently he gave it up, sat down and stared at vacancy. For an hour he sat, and was aroused from his brown study by Jean.

"I've called and called you," she told him.

"For what?"

"For supper, of course. Heavens, Angus, what's wrong that you forget your meals?"

He did not answer for a moment.

"I have been making up my mind about something."

"About what?"

"Just something I am going to do. I will tell you later."

He ate supper, and immediately saddled Chief and rode away in the direction of Faith Winton's ranch.

Faith listened in amazement as he told her of the high price her father had paid; of the abortive sale and his discovery that the land was non-irrigable; and finally of French's request that he should advise her to sell.

"But why didn't you tell me these things before?"

"I could not very well tell you while you were under his roof."

"No, I suppose not. You are sure of what you say—that the land could have been bought for so much less then, and that I can't get water on it now?"

"Absolutely."

"Then why does he want to buy the ranch now?"

"I wish I knew."

"I am going to find out before I sell it. He lied about Blake, and I don't believe he just wants to take it off my hands. There is some other reason."

"I think so myself, but I don't know what it is. There is something else though. We had a few hard words, and the upshot of the whole thing was that he forbade me to have anything to do with him or his. I suppose he has that right. But also he forbade me to come here."

The girl stared at him, amazed.

"Is he crazy? He has no right—"

"So I told him."

"And you will always be welcome, while the ranch is mine, or beneath any roof that is mine."

"Thank you," he said simply.

"But this is beyond everything!" she flamed indignantly. "I am not a child. I make my own friends. I will tell him—"

"He is an old man. Pay no attention to it. I am sorry, now, that I said to him what I did."

"What did you quarrel about? Tell me!"

"About the whole thing, I think."

"Then it was all on my account. From first to last, I've made trouble for you. I am sorry."

"You needn't be. All the trouble you have made me is a joy."

"Why—Angus!" The color rose in the girl's cheeks.

"Didn't you know it?"

"I know you have been very—good—to me."

"You have known more than that," he said.

"No, good heavens, no! Angus—"

"I have only known it myself since that day in the rain," he interrupted. "Before that, I thought I was only helping you, as I would have helped any woman—or man, either. But then I knew it was something else. And to-day when Godfrey French said he would not have our names coupled together—"

"Oh!" the girl cried sharply.

"And that you would not think twice of a rough, uneducated man like myself," he pursued. "I decided to find out to-night whether he was right or wrong."

"He was wrong!" she cried. "That is—I mean—that you are not rough and uneducated, and—"

"I am both," Angus admitted gravely. "I have worked hard since I was a boy, and what education I have I have got for myself. In that he was right. And so I find it very hard to tell you what I want to, as a woman should be told, because words do not come to my tongue easily, and never did. The thoughts I have had I have always kept to myself, for that, and because there was no one who would understand even if I could have put them into words. And this is all I can say, that I love you as a man loves one woman in his lifetime, and I want you for my wife. Is it yes or no, Faith?"

"But—Angus—I never thought of such a thing—not really, I mean. You were always kind, helpful, but never like—like—"

"Never like a lover?"

"Well—no."

Angus laid his great hands on her shoulders. The ordinary grimness of his face was lacking. It was replaced by something ineffably tender. Slowly he drew her to him until they stood breast to breast.

"I can be like a lover, Faith," he said, "if you will have it so."

For a long moment Faith Winton's clear eyes looked into his, and then went blank as she searched her own heart for an answer and found it.

"I will have it so—dear!" she said.

CHAPTER XXV

CROSS CURRENTS

Jean Mackay, rustling through the house with broom and duster after breakfast, came on her brother reading what at first glance she took to be a magazine. This gave her what was destined to be the first of a string of surprises, for Angus never loafed around the house.

"Shoo! Get out of here!" she said. "You'll get all choked with dust. I declare I don't know where all the dirt comes from."

In proof of her words she raised a cloud which made him cough. "Told you so," she said. "Do go somewhere else, Angus. You're only in my way."

"In a minute," he replied, frowning at his reading.

"Where did you go last night—to Faith's?"

"Uh-huh!"

"You might have asked me to go along."

"Huh!"

"You're extra polite this morning!" his sister observed with irony. "Whatever are you reading? Well, of all things! A jeweler's catalogue! What on earth—"

Angus held it out to her.

"Here," he said, "I know nothing about such things. Pick out a ring."

"A ring!" Miss Jean exclaimed, astounded. "I don't want a ring, I mean I can get along without one."

"That's lucky," said her brother, "because the ring I want you to pick out is for Faith."

"Good Lord!" cried Miss Jean, and fell limply upon a couch. Recovering herself she rushed upon him, threw her arms around his neck, and punctuated her words with emphatic hugs. "You big, old fraud. But I'm glad, really I am. When—where—"

"Last night," Angus told her. "That was what I was making up my mind about. I didn't know whether I should ask her just now."

"Why shouldn't you? If she cares—"

"It wasn't that. You see I owe a good deal of money."

"How much?" asked Jean, who knew little about the finances of the ranch.

"Nearly ten thousand dollars."

"What?" gasped Jean. "Impossible."

"Nothing impossible about it. That includes the principal of the mortgage father gave Braden when he bought that timber that was burnt out afterwards. When I had to run the ranch I couldn't pay much interest, and Braden carried it along. Then of course there was the hail last year, and the drouth this. And I had to borrow money from him on my note, to pay something that wasn't my fault, but couldn't be helped. Now I have just had a letter from Braden saying that the mortgage and note are past due. I suppose that's a matter of form, and I can make arrangements with him."

"And with all that you sent me off to get an education," said Jean bitterly. "Oh, I wish—"

"That was a mere drop in the bucket. Nobody can take that away from you, no matter what happens. Now about this ring—"

"Do you think you should buy one—now?"

"I would buy a ring and a good one now if it took my share of the ranch," Angus declared

frowning. "You will pick out one that she can wear in any company at all. Find out what she prefers, and get one like it but a good deal better, and never mind the cost. And to save trouble, you had better order a wedding ring at the same time."

"Quick work!" beamed Miss Jean. "When *is* the wedding?"

"Wedding? I don't know," Angus admitted. "We didn't talk about that."

"You're going to buy a wedding ring and you don't know when you'll be married?" Miss Jean cried scandalized.

"Well, we'll be married some time. I always order more repair parts of machinery than I want, and they always come in handy. So will the ring."

"Repairs! Machinery! Oh, my grief!" ejaculated Miss Jean. "I suppose you *have* a soul, but—Oh, well never mind!" She threw her broom recklessly at a corner, and her dust cap after it. "Go and saddle Pincher for me, will you? And you men will have to get your own dinner. I'm going over to spend the day with my *sister*!"

When she had gone, burning up the trail toward Faith's ranch, Angus saddled Chief and rode to town, taking with him the notice he had received from Mr. Braden. He looked upon it as a matter of form, and attached little importance to it. With the undoubted security of the ranch he anticipated no difficulty in securing an extension.

"Of course," he said to his creditor, "I don't suppose this means just what it says."

"It means exactly what it says," Mr. Braden informed him. "The loan is very badly in arrears, and I have made up my mind to call it in."

"But the security is good for double the money."

"Security isn't money. You are away behind. Then there is that note, past due. I can't let these things run on indefinitely."

"You always told me not to worry about interest payments."

"It doesn't look as if you did worry about them. I carried you along because you were a mere boy, and under the circumstances I couldn't press for money. But you have increased your debt instead of decreasing it. I have been easy, that's what I've been—too easy. I can look back at my dealings with you," Mr. Braden continued with virtuous satisfaction, "and I can truly say that I have dealt tenderly with the—er—fatherless. But of course there's a limit."

"Well, if you feel that way about it, the only way I can pay up is to get a loan elsewhere."

"There's another way," Mr. Braden told him. "I make the suggestion to help you out, principally. If you will sell the place I will take it over at a fair price, and pay you the difference in cash."

"I don't want to sell."

"Think it over. The ranch is saddled with a heavy debt. *You* are saddled with more than a young man should be called on to carry. *You* are the one who will have to pay, if you keep the ranch, by your own hard work. You will be handicapped for years, deprived of many things you would otherwise have. On the other hand," Mr. Braden continued, warming to his subject, "if you sold this place all debt would be wiped out, you would have a nice lump sum in cash, and you would be as free as—er—birds. You could take a year's holiday, travel, or," he added, seeing no signs of enthusiasm in Angus' face, "you could go into one of the new districts just opening up, buy virgin land, full of—of—er—"

"Full of alkali?" Angus suggested gravely.

"Alkali! Not at all," said Mr. Braden frowning. "'Potentialities' was the word I had in mind. Yes, full of potentialities. In a new district you would become prosperous, free from the ball and chain of debt. That is the sensible course. Now what do you think of it?"

"Not much," said Angus.

"Huh! Why not?" Mr. Braden inquired, plainly disappointed at this reception of his disinterested advice.

"Because I have a good ranching proposition here. And you wouldn't pay what the land will be worth some day if I hang on."

"What will it be worth?"

"About a hundred dollars an acre."

"You're right, I wouldn't pay it," Mr. Braden concurred. "Ridiculous. I would give you say twenty dollars, all around, and that's more than it's worth."

"Just as it stands—stock, implements and all?"

Mr. Braden looked at Angus, but failed to read his face.

"That's what I had in mind. But if you were making a start elsewhere and needed some of the implements and stock—why I wouldn't insist. Say for the land alone."

Angus laughed.

"All right, laugh!" said Mr. Braden frowning. "Go and get a new loan, then. And don't lose any time about it, either."

"You seem to be in a hurry."

"I never delay business matters," Mr. Braden replied. "Get your loan, and get it at once. Otherwise I shall exercise the rights which the mortgage gives me."

"That is plain enough," said Angus.

"It's intended to be," said Mr. Braden.

Thence Angus went to Judge Riley's office and told him the situation. The Judge jotted figures on a pad.

"To clean up you will want nearly eleven thousand dollars," he said. "That's a large sum for this country."

"The property is worth three or four times that."

"Yes, on a basis of land at so much per acre. But uncultivated land isn't productive. You have to pay interest out of what you grow. Few concerns will lend money on raw land. Then you are borrowing to pay off accumulated debts, and not to improve property, buy stock or the like. These things have an important bearing. You may have trouble in getting money. And I think Braden will try to see that you have."

"What will he have to do with it?"

"Bless your innocence, he knows the loan companies operating here, and their appraisers. They'll ask him what sort of a borrower you have been and are apt to be, and why he is calling his loan in, and he'll knock you as hard as he can. He doesn't want the loan paid off. He wants to sell you out, and buy the place in. He is still at the old game. He'll try to work it now by a mortgage sale."

"But that would be a public sale. He'd have to bid against others."

"Nobody in this country has money enough to pay a fair price for the ranch as a whole. That would practically knock out competition. That's what he is counting on."

"He hasn't got me yet," said Angus. "It's funny, but old French is trying to buy out Miss Winton, too." He told the lawyer of French's offer.

"Then Braden is putting up the money for French," the lawyer deduced. "I don't understand it any more than you do, but I do know that neither of these men would knowingly buy anything valueless. So far as your place is concerned, the value is there. As to the other it doesn't seem to be. But I think you did right in advising her not to sell."

Angus rode homeward thoughtfully. His thoughts affected his pace, and so when under ordinary circumstances he would have been home, he was little more than halfway. Chief suddenly pricked his ears, and Angus became aware of Kathleen French upon her favorite horse, Finn. She seemed to have been riding hard, for his coat was wet and his flanks drawn and working.

"What's the hurry?" he asked. She brushed her loosened hair away from her forehead.

"He wanted to run and I let him. I'll ride along with you now."

"I suppose you know that your father wouldn't like it?"

"This isn't the Middle Ages," she replied scornfully. "These family feuds make me tired. I have no quarrel with you."

"I don't want to make trouble for you."

"You won't," she told him. "I can look after myself."

They descended a steep grade, which at the bottom made a sharp turn opening upon a flat through which ran a little creek. As they made the turn they came face to face with Blake French, Gerald and Larry. At sight of Kathleen their faces expressed astonishment. Blake uttered an oath.

"What the devil are you doing with him?" he demanded.

"Riding with Angus Mackay!" said his sister. "I'll ride with any one I like, when I like. Do you get that, Blake? Pull out. You're blocking the trail."

Gerald French laughed. "I thought you were up to something, Kit."

"That's what I thought about you," she retorted.

As Angus rode past the French boys, who had not addressed him at all, he met their eyes. Their stares were level, hard, insolent. He rode on, half angry and much puzzled. Kathleen lifted her horse into a lope and he followed. Then she pulled to a walk.

"The boys didn't like you being with me," he said.

"Never mind what they like. I'm glad I was in time—" She broke off, but a sudden light dawned on Angus.

"What!" he exclaimed. "Is that what you were running your horse for? You mean they were waiting for me?"

He wheeled Chief abruptly, but more quickly she spun Finn on his heels, blocking the back trail.

"I won't let you go back!" she cried.

"That was a nice trick to play on a man!" he told her indignantly.

"And that's a man gratitude!" she retorted bitterly.

"Gratitude! I know you meant well, and I thank you. But it looks as if I had hidden behind your skirts, and I am not that kind of a man. I am going back."

"You are not. I won't have any trouble between you and the boys to-day. You said you didn't want to make trouble. Well, then, don't."

"I don't want to make trouble, but I am not going to run away from it. If your brothers want to take up their father's quarrel—and I am not saying they haven't the right to, mind you—I will meet them half way. I am not going to be hunted by them in a pack. I don't have to be rounded up. If there is going to be trouble I am going to have some say about the time of it."

"And so am I," Kathleen declared. "I will put a stop to this."

"Men's affairs must be settled by men," he told her.

"I believe you are all savages at heart," she said. "This will blow over if you will let it. Whether you like it or not, I am going to interfere. I blame Blake for this."

"You may be right. I had to put him out of Faith's house the other night. He was drunk."

"Pah!" said Blake's sister in disgust. "I'm glad you told me. He has been going there lately, I knew. Well, I'll see that he stops *that*."

"You need not bother. I will look after that myself. Faith won't be there long."

"Is she going to sell? I'm glad of it."

"I don't know about selling. But she is coming to my ranch."

"On a visit to Jean?"

"No, she is going to marry me."

The girl stared at him. He saw a flood of color rush to her cheeks and recede, leaving her face white. Her strong hand gripped the saddle horn hard.

"She is—going—to marry you!" she said in a voice little more than a whisper.

"Yes," Angus replied, "why shouldn't she? She is too good for me, I know, but I hope you don't think, like your father, that I am not fit to marry her."

Kathleen French smiled with stiff lips.

"What rot!" she said. "I didn't know my father thought anything of the kind, and certainly I don't. I hope you will be very happy. When did it happen?"

Angus told her, but it was a subject on which he did not care to enlarge. Where the trail forked to the French ranch they parted and he rode on. But if he had turned back and ridden half a mile on the other trail, and two hundred yards to the right behind a thick growth of cottonwoods, he would have seen a girl lying on the ground, her face buried in her arms, while a big, bay horse with a sweat-dried coat stood by flicking the flies and regarding his mistress wonderingly.

CHAPTER XXVI

CONSPIRACY

On the chance that, after all, water might be got on Faith's ranch, Angus had his own levels checked by a surveyor. The result was to confirm them. Thus most of the level land was undoubtedly worthless for agricultural purposes. As for the rest of the property, it was hill and coulee and included the round mountain. Angus had ridden over it and hunted through it and he thought he had nothing to learn about it. He dismissed it with contempt. The only reasonable explanation of French's desire to purchase seemed to be that he was acting for Braden and that Braden had some purchaser in view. That being so, it would pay to hold out for a better offer.

So far as his own affairs were concerned, the outlook was not promising. His loan applications were turned down cold by various loan companies, as Judge Riley had feared. And one day he received a formal demand for payment of mortgage and note, coupled with an intimation that,

failing immediate payment, legal proceedings would follow.

"Yes, I thought this was about due," Judge Riley said when Angus showed him the letter of Mr. Braden's lawyers. "There are no grounds for defending the actions, that I know of."

"The money is owing, no doubt about it. And I can't pay it."

"Then it will have to be realized upon the security. I'm sorry, my boy. I don't know where you can raise a loan. If I had the money I'd lend it to you myself, but I haven't. Braden will get his judgments and sell."

Angus himself saw nothing else for it. This, then, was the end of his years of work, of struggle, of self-denial. The land he had promised his father to hold would be sold and bid in by Braden for a fraction of its value. For himself, so far as the financial loss went, he did not care especially. But with it Jean's share would be swallowed up. Without any fault of his own, so far as he could see, he had failed in his duty to her. And the thought was bitter.

As he walked down the street his thoughts went back over the years. He could not attribute his failure to lack of hard work, to lack of planning, to lack of care. All these he had given, without stint. The seasons had been against him, but they had been against others. He had lost cattle mysteriously, but that was merely an incident. There was the fire which had destroyed his hay, but his own brother was responsible for that. Finally there was the ruin of his present crop by the destruction of the ditch. That was the only definite act of hostility on which he could lay his finger. But apart from that he could not have paid Braden.

If he was to lose the ranch it did not matter who had wrecked his ditch. Turkey would be hoist by his own petard. Angus smiled grimly at the thought that his brother had contributed to his own loss. And just then he saw Turkey going through the door of Braden's office. To Angus it was as if a searchlight had been turned upon a dark corner, as if a switch had been closed establishing a connection.

Up to that moment he had seen no object, other than spite, in the wrecking of the ditch. But now, as things were turning out anything which injured him financially would further Braden's carefully laid plans to obtain the ranch. Might he not be responsible? There, at last, was motive, the thing he had sought vainly.

The idea was new and amazing. But once formed it grew in probability. Would Turkey deliberately lend himself to a plan to deprive not only Angus but Jean and himself of the ranch? Likely he had not thought of that. The boy had been a catspaw without knowing Braden's ultimate purpose. There were others besides Braden in the game. Braden himself did not do the work of destruction; but no doubt he had instigated and paid for it. As to these others, Angus made up his mind to settle the score with them if he ever found out their identity. Never again would he lay a hand on Turkey. As for Braden—his mouth twisted scornfully at the thought of the latter's fat body in his grip.

But Turkey's visit to Mr. Braden's office was with quite a different object than Angus' interpretation of it. Between Turkey and Mr. Braden there was little more cordiality than on the day when the latter had patted the boy on the head. When he had left the ranch Mr. Braden had extended sympathy, condemned Angus for harshness; but Turkey had been unresponsive. He looked on family quarrels as the exclusive property of the family.

Turkey knew of the mortgage which Mr. Braden held but nothing of its condition. The burden of financing the ranch had been upon Angus, and he had not shared it. Nor did Turkey know anything of the further sum Angus had borrowed. And so Turkey, if he thought of the mortgage at all, assumed that it was all right. It was Angus' business.

He heard of the action which Mr. Braden was taking quite by accident. On the occasion when Angus had seen him entering the office he had gone there merely with reference to a transaction in cattle in which Garland was interested. But on hearing that Braden had launched a mortgage action, he went there to get first-hand information.

"Do you mean," he queried with a scowl when Mr. Braden had stated the case succinctly, "that the ranch will be sold?"

"I am afraid there is nothing else for it," Mr. Braden replied in regretful tones. "I offered to buy it at a fair price, but your brother wouldn't sell."

"He wouldn't, hey!"

Mr. Braden shook his head sadly. "I am sorry to say that the present condition of affairs is due to his recklessness and mismanagement."

"Huh!" said Turkey.

"It would have been much better," said Mr. Braden, "if I had insisted upon my original view after your father cash—er—was called hence. I felt that your brother was incompetent, and results have proved it. I was weak; yes, I admit that I was weak."

"Then the size of it is, that we lose the ranch?"

"If my claim is satisfied otherwise I shall be very glad. But of course I have to protect myself."

"Who gets it? You?"

"It will be sold publicly to the highest bidder."

"Is that you?"

"I may have to bid it in to protect myself," Mr. Braden explained. "It is forced on me, and I fear others—you and your sister—must suffer for your brother's incompetence."

Turkey, scowling said nothing for a moment.

"I remember the day you came to the ranch after father died," he said at last irrelevantly.

"Um," Mr. Braden returned. "I felt very deeply for you in your bereavement. You were quite a small boy then. I—er—patted you on the head."

"I didn't know you then," said Turkey, "but do you know what I thought?"

"No," smiled Mr. Braden. "I suppose you stood somewhat in awe of me, my boy."

"I thought you were a fat, old crook," Turkey announced.

"Hey!" Mr. Braden ejaculated.

"Of course, I know you better now," Turkey added.

"Yes, yes, just so," said Mr. Braden with comprehension. "Childish impressions. Most amusing. Ha-ha! Huh!"

Turkey looked him in the eye.

"And now you're fatter and older," he said deliberately, "and I believe you're a damned sight crookeder than I thought you were then. You pork-faced old mortgage shark, I'll like to burn your ears off with a gun!"

Mr. Braden gasped. Turkey's voice was as venomous as his words. His hard, young mouth twisted bitterly as he spoke. "You're damned anxious to sell the ranch, aren't you?" he went on. "Angus had the right steer about you. He thought you were trying to put something over. I was a kid, and he wasn't much more, but we both had you sized for a crook. Well, we're not kids now. Since I left the ranch I've been hearing about you. I'll tell you what I've heard."

Mr. Braden expressed no undue anxiety to hear. "I don't know what you have heard and I don't care. If you can't talk decently, get out of here."

"In a minute," said Turkey, "when I've told you what I think of you."

His spoken opinion caused Mr. Braden to change color from time to time, but the prevailing hue was red.

"Get out of my office!" he roared, rearing his impressive bulk against Turkey's slimness. "Get out or I'll throw you out!"

"Shucks!" said Turkey with contempt, and dug a hard, young thumb into Mr. Braden's forward over-hang. "That's the only thing you can throw out, you old tub of lard. You'll drop dead some day with a rotten heart. And now I'm telling you something: I guess I can't stop you from selling the ranch, but if you do, I'll get you somehow, if you live long enough."

Turkey, as he went down the street from this interview, was in a poisonous temper. His was the impotent rage of youth, which failing expression in physical violence, finds itself at a complete loss. Though he had said a number of highly insulting things, he was not satisfied. He told himself that he did not care a hoot about Angus, nor about his own prospective share in the ranch, which would be wiped out by a forced sale. But he thought it hard luck for Jean. In spite of their quarrel, he recognized that his brother had done most of the work for years. The thought that a pork-faced old mortgage shark should get the ranch that had been his father's was bitter.

However, he did not know what could be done about it. No doubt Angus had consulted old Riley. The law was against him. The darn law, Turkey reflected, was always against the ordinary man, which was not to be wondered at since it was made by darn crooks. Coming such, Turkey unconsciously sighed for the good, old days of stock which had no special respect for the law, as days when dispossession was attended by difficulties other than legal.

Under the circumstances, it seemed to Turkey that he should have a drink. To get it he went around the block to a hostelry immediately behind Mr. Braden's office. There he had a drink with the proprietor, one Tom Hall. Then Tom had one with him. Five minutes later both had two more with two strangers. Hall took his drinks from a private bottle which contained cold tea. But four drinks of the kind he dispensed to customers furnished a very fair foundation. Turkey had nothing particular to do. Thus the end of a decidedly imperfect day found him gently slumbering in an upstairs room of Tom's place.

When he awoke it was dark. He did not know where he was, and did not care. Being young and in perfect health he had not the traditional "splitting head." He was very dry, but that was all. He lay still, and remembered that Tom had helped him to that room, taken off his boots and told him to sleep it off. Apparently he had.

The window was open and the night air blew softly upon his face, bringing with it the sound of voices from the next room. He heard the scraping of chairs, the pop of a safety match, the clink of glass. Then the voices became more audible, as if the occupants of the room had drawn closer to the window. Listening idly, Turkey caught his own surname. In a moment it was repeated.

In spite of the adage concerning what listeners are apt to hear of themselves, and all honorable theories against eavesdropping, the average person hearing his own name will prick up his ears. Turkey rolled softly out of the bed, and in his stockinged feet went to the window.

It was a rear window, looking out upon the roofs of sheds and the backs of other buildings. The night was dark and, save for a soft breeze, quiet. The first words Turkey heard were calculated to destroy any scruples.

"I thought the boys were going to beat Mackay up," said a voice which at first he could not identify. Another voice which he knew for Garland's replied:

"They will, later. Blake has it in for him good and plenty."

"Over that girl on the dry ranch, I s'pose," the other speculated.

"There's a lot of things."

"Blake's a darn fool," said the other, and now Turkey knew the voice. It was Poole's. "He's too fond of women and booze. He's in a mess right now. That klootch wants him to marry her."

"She's got another guess coming."

"Well," said Poole judicially, "if he ain't going to marry her, if I was him I'd pull out for a while. Some of her folks might lay for him."

"She hasn't got any folks but her grandfather."

"At that, some of these old bucks is bad medicine. Well, it's none of our funeral. When will the Mackay ranch be sold?"

"Soon as the old man can work it. I wish we could touch him up for some coin. I'm broke."

"Me, too," said Poole. "Trouble is we ain't got nothing on him. We couldn't give him away without giving ourselves away, and he knows it. We couldn't prove a darn thing, anyway. *He* didn't rustle them cattle either time, nor he didn't blow out Mackay's ditch in the dry spell. We couldn't prove that he even knew of them things, let alone framed 'em up and paid for 'em. He'd give us the laugh if we tried to hold him up."

Turkey, leaning out into the night, listened in amazement. So the stock had been rustled. The speaker could not refer to anything else. But what was this about the ditch? Turkey made a swift deduction which was fairly accurate. That was what Angus meant when he had demanded the names of men responsible for something unknown to Turkey. Somehow, Angus had connected him with it. It must have been through his knife. That must have been found on the ground, and Angus had naturally assumed that he had been there. At this point obstinacy had prevented an understanding, set him and Angus at cross-purposes, and led to a fresh quarrel.

Turkey ground his teeth softly and cursed beneath his breath. So that was the stuff that was being put over on Angus. The "old man" must be Braden. For the first time, Turkey began to see clearly through the mists of hurt, boyish pride, to perceive realities undistorted by youthful grievances. Angus might not have been tactful—but he had been right. And he, Turkey, instead of helping his own had deserted them.

In Turkey's inner being sounded the rallying call of the blood. It was no time for family feuds. If he had been a young fool, he would make up for it. He would play a lone hand, taking his time, and he would play more than even. But now he must not lose a word.

"The old man's pretty darn smooth," Poole went on. "Take that time he lent Mackay money to make good them bets he was holdin'. That put Mackay further in the hole to him. It's lucky Mackay don't know who rapped him on the head and rolled him that night. You get a feller like him on the prod, and I'd rather take chances on a mad grizzly. You take that kid brother of his, too. There's a bad actor. You can see it in his eye."

"He's just a young fool," Garland said contemptuously. "He hates his brother like poison. I wish he'd blown his head off. There was some sort of a gun play, I know."

"And that's what I'm tellin' you. The big man would kill a man with his hands, but the kid would go for a gun fast and quiet. If he knew he'd been trailed home that night he was full and the stack fired, there'd be trouble."

"If the stable had gone with the hay it would have thrown a crimp into Mackay. I don't savvy why it didn't go. The wind was right."

Suddenly the blackness of the back wall of the building opposite was split by a slot of light, revealing a railed landing on a level with the second story. A bulky figure stepped out and the light disappeared. Came the creak of wooden steps beneath a heavy body. Garland swore softly.

"There he is now!"

"The old man?"

"Sure. There's an outside flight of steps from the back up to his room. I wonder what he's up to. Douse our light for a minute."

The light in the next room went out and Turkey drew back. His neighbors evidently occupied the window. From the darkness beneath came the sound of a badly-hung door rasping on its hinges.

"There's a shed down there he keeps a lot of old plunder in," Garland observed.

A silence of minutes and the door rasped again. Following that came a series of metallic sounds and once more the creak of steps. The slot of light of an open doorway appeared again. The bulky figure showed in it, carrying some heavy object hung in its right hand. Then the door closed, all but a crack through which a light filtered.

"He was carrying something," said Garland. "Could you see what it was?"

"No. Sounded like a milk can or a tin trunk."

The light went on again in the next room, but the men moved away from the window, and Turkey heard no more than odd snatches of conversation which were not relevant to his affairs. Listening proving unprofitable, Turkey softly opened his door and carrying his boots went downstairs. Nobody seemed to be about. He went down a hall to a rear door and slid out into the night. Thence he picked his way through the litter of a back yard to the foot of the flight of steps which led to Mr. Braden's apartments, and leaving his boots at the bottom ascended with great care.

Turkey had identified the object which Mr. Braden had brought back with him as a typewriter in its carrying case. To Turkey it seemed mysterious. Why should Braden who had two perfectly good machines in his office below, go out the back way and bring in a machine from an old shed? It was funny. But he had made up his mind to find out all he could about Braden and his doings, and to start at once. Braden had been playing a crooked game right along. If Turkey could catch him in anything—get something on him—it might help to save the ranch. If not that, it would help him to play even. He put his eye to the crack of the door.

He saw Braden and Godfrey French. They were at a table on which stood a typewriter, and Braden appeared to be signing some legal documents. They were talking, but Turkey could not distinguish words. Presently French rose, folded up some papers and put them in an inner pocket. Braden went with him to the door which was the ordinary entrance to the apartment, and gave upon a hall and flight of stairs leading down to the office.

Turkey went down the outside stairs and put on his boots. He was disappointed in not being able to over-hear their conversation, but he had heard a good deal that night.

What would he do?

CHAPTER XXVII

WHILE SHELLING PEAS

Miss Jean, spick and span in a cool dress of wash fabric, took a critical survey of herself in the mirror, and adjusted a wide shade hat at exactly the right angle. Then, taking a bright tin pan she sallied forth into the afternoon sun. Her course led her back of the house, through the orchard, and finally to a garden patch a couple of acres in extent. There, by a strange coincidence, Chetwood was working among the plants. At sight of her he paused, straightened his back and leaned upon his hoe.

"Oh, are *you* here?" said Miss Jean in tones of extreme surprise. Chetwood looked down at his feet, tapped his head and finally pinched himself.

"Rather," he announced gravely. "At least my mortal body seems to be."

"Don't let me interrupt you," said Miss Jean. "I came to pick peas."

"I'll help you."

"I don't require help, thanks."

"You might get thorns in your fingers."

"Peas haven't thorns!" said Miss Jean scathingly. "You ought to know that by this time."

"Observation has taught me that in this world one finds thorns in the most unexpected places. Even roses—fragrant, blushing roses—"

"Don't be absurd!"

"Then let me help you pick peas."

"But the garden needs hoeing."

"The bally thing always needs hoeing," Chetwood commented with deep resentment. "It has an insatiable desire to be tickled with a hoe. What a world it would be if weeds would die as easily as plants, and plants thrive as carelessly as weeds. Bright thought, what?"

"Nonsense!" said Miss Jean.

"Oh, I say! It's really profound."

"It's profoundly silly. You had better stick to the hoe."

"My back is broken."

"Well," Miss Jean relented, "you may help me if you like."

On either side of tall vines trained on brush they began to pick the big, fat Telephones. Now and then, in the tangle of the vines, their fingers touched, as both reached for the same pod.

"This beats hoeing," Chetwood announced.

"I'm afraid you're lazy."

"I am. I always was. But to help a girl, especially a pret—"

"If you are going to be silly I shall go to the other end of the row."

"'O stay,' the young man said, 'and rest thy weary head up—'"

Miss Jean promptly picked up the pan and marched to the other end of the row. Chetwood followed her.

"They *are* better here," he said. "It's a genuine pleasure to pick such peas together." Miss Jean did not reply. "Don't you like to pick peas with me?"

"When you talk sensibly I don't object. There, the pan's full. Thanks very much."

"And now we'll shell them."

"I'll take them to the house to shell."

"Please don't. Here is shade, running water, the company of an industrious young man. You can't overlook a combination like that—if you have a heart."

"It *is* nice shade," Miss Jean admitted.

They sat in it, the pan piled with peas between them, and began to shell. Miss Jean's hand diving for a pea, encountered Chetwood's and was held fast.

"Mr. Chetwood!"

Without relinquishing his prize that gentleman set the pan aside and with considerable agility seated himself beside Miss Jean.

"My full name is Eustace William Fitzroy Chetwood. I prefer the second. William is a respectable name. Do you know what it means?"

"I didn't know it meant anything."

"Oh, yes; it means 'Bill.' I answer beautifully to 'Bill.'"

"Will—"

"'Bill!'"

"Will you please let go my hand?"

"'What we have we hold' is a good motto. It seems a sound system to hold what I have."

Miss Jean sighed. "Then of course I can't shell peas, and you won't have any for supper."

"Hang supper! Jean, darling, how long are you going to keep me in suspense?"

"I'm not keeping you at all; and you mustn't call me 'darling.'"

"Are you going to keep me waiting seven years, as Rebecca kept Joseph?"

"It wasn't Rebecca or Joseph."

"Well, it doesn't matter; I had the waiting part of it right. I can feel the strain telling on me, and when I look into your eyes—like this—"

Here Miss Jean shut her eyes. Chetwood being human did the natural thing. Miss Jean wrenched her hand away and rubbed her cheek.

"How dare you!" she demanded with really first-class indignation.

"I don't know; but like Warren Hastings, I am astonished at my own moderation. I should have kissed you before. And I am going to kiss you again."

Though the prospect did not seem to dismay Miss Jean, she removed herself swiftly to a distance

of several feet, and further consolidated her position by placing the pan of peas between them.

"Shell peas—Eustace!" she said. Chetwood ground a set of perfect teeth.

"You want to drive me crazy, I see that," he said. "You're too dangerous to be running around loose. You need a firm hand—like mine. Now—"

What followed was very bad for the peas. Some minutes later Miss Jean, raising hands to a flushed face and sadly tilted hat, regarded them in dismay.

"Now see what you've done!"

Chetwood grinned. "Will you carry sweet peas?" he asked. "If we are married early in September —"

"September!" Miss Jean gasped. "I couldn't think of such a thing, Bil—ly!"

"You can when you get used to it," Chetwood assured her. "Like getting into hot water, you know."

"It may be a good deal like it," Miss Jean observed reflectively.

"Eh! Oh, I didn't mean that."

"I know you didn't, but it might be true, all the same. We can't be married for a long time."

"Why can't we?" the lover demanded.

"For a number of perfectly good reasons," Jean replied, a grave little pucker coming upon her forehead.

"Wrinkles!" cried Chetwood. "But I'll love you just as much when—"

"Well, goodness knows, I've enough worries without getting married."

"Cynic!"

"Maybe, but I hope I have some horse sense. Now to start with, Billy—and please don't be offended—I'd like you to make good, more or less, before I marry you."

"In what way?"

"Well, I'd like you to have a ranch of your own."

"Any special one?"

"Don't joke about it," Jean reproved him. "You'll find it serious enough. As you haven't any money now you can't buy a ranch. And so you'll have to homestead."

Chetwood stared at her for a moment and gulped. "I keep forgetting I'm a hired man. Go on."

"It's doing you good. You're getting a knowledge of ranching. I think you know almost enough now to take up a homestead."

"But," Chetwood objected, "I'd have to live on the blinking thing in a beastly, lonely shack."

"Plenty of good men have lived in lonely shacks."

"I didn't mean that. I meant that I shouldn't see you more than perhaps four or five times a week. Now—"

"You may not see me at all. I'll tell you why, presently. Anyway, I wouldn't let you waste your time. I'm serious. You see, Billy—" here Miss Jean blushed—"you'd be working on your homestead for—for us."

"Oh, Lord!" said Chetwood. "That is—I mean—yes, of course. Inspiring thought and all that sort of thing, what? But how much nicer it would be if I were able to look forward to seeing you in our humble door as I came home weary from my daily toil, with—er—roses and honeysuckle and all that sort of thing clambering about don't you know, and the sweet odor of—of—"

"Of what, Billy?" Miss Jean prompted softly, in her eyes the expression of one who gazes upon a fair mental picture. "Of what, Billy?"

"Of pies," Chetwood replied raptly. "Ah! Um!"

"Of wha—a—t!" Miss Jean cried, coming out of her reverie with a start.

"Of pies cooking," Chetwood repeated. "Nice, juicy pies."

"Pies—bah!" Miss Jean ejaculated.

"Say not so," Chetwood responded. "I admire pie. The land of my birth, I sadly admit, is deficient in pie. But here I adopt the customs of the country. I am what might be called a pie—oneer—"

"Ugh! Awful!" Miss Jean shuddered.

"Now I thought that quite bright."

"That's the saddest part of it."

"My word, what a—er—slam! Strange that you should feel such a sincere affection for—"

"I don't know whether I do or not!"

"Then, Miss Mackay," Chetwood demanded, "what is the meaning of your conduct?"

Miss Jean bit her lip, blushed, and finally decided to laugh. "I was getting sentimental for a moment," she confessed. "Your little word picture had me going. And all the time you were fooling. That's dangerous, young man."

"No, on my word I wasn't," Chetwood protested. "I meant it. Only I got stuck for a word, and I just happened to think of—pie."

"I'm glad you did," Jean admitted. "What I like about you is that you're cheerful all the time. Angus sulks like a—mule. So does Turkey. Oh, I do, too. We all do. But you always have a smile and a joke, though sometimes they're awful."

"Both of 'em?"

"The smiles are all right," Jean admitted. "But do you know, I've never seen you serious about anything. And it seems to me that a man who has a—well, a real purpose in life should be—now and then."

"Perhaps I never had one."

"Well, now you've got me."

"Eh! By Jove, so I have. I'll live in a shack if you say so, but I'd rather stay on here a bit. I'm learning all the time."

"That brings me to another reason. There may be no 'here' to stay on at—so far as we are concerned."

She told him the situation briefly. "And so, you see, we may not have a ranch at all. Then Angus would go away and take up land, and I might go with him."

"So would I if he'd have me. It would be rather jolly."

"Nonsense!" said Jean. "Making a new ranch isn't fun; it's hard work. And then, on top of it all, what do you think Angus is going to do?"

"Wring old Braden's neck, I hope."

"He's going to get married!"

"Hooray!" cried Chetwood. "Nail the flag to the mast! Derry walls and no surrender! Give hostages—er—I mean that's the spirit. Also an example. Let's follow it. What's sauce for the Mackay gander ought to be sauce for—er—"

"I'm not a goose," she pouted prettily.

"Duck!" Chetwood suggested.

"Don't be silly. It's a different proposition entirely."

"Why?" Jean did not reply. "Why, Jean?"

"Because Angus can look after himself—and a wife."

Chetwood's perennially cheerful expression sobered. "That's rather a hard one. I'm not quite helpless, really."

"I'm sorry," Jean said simply. "But I meant just what I said. The country is new to you and you're new to the country, and we can't be married till you find yourself. It wouldn't be fair to either of us. I'm putting it up to you to make good, Billy."

Chetwood nodded soberly, but his eyes smiled.

"I'll make good," he said. "I'll go and see this Judge Riley—about a homestead. And now, Jean darling, will you oblige me by the size of that pretty little third finger."

"You are not to spend any money on rings. Keep it for the homestead."

"Oh da—er—I mean high heaven hates a piker. Can't allow you to go ringless. It's not done, really. I'm going to have my own way. Nothing elaborate. Just a simple, little ring, costing, say, fifty pounds—"

"Fifty pounds!" Jean gasped. "Two hundred and fifty dollars! Why, I couldn't—"

"Does sound more in dollars. Tell you what I'll do. I have a ring at home. It belonged to my mother. I'll send for it if you don't mind."

"I should be proud of your mother's ring," said Jean.

"I think," said Chetwood, "that she would be proud to have you wear it."

"Billy," said Jean, "that's just the nicest thing you ever said—or ever will say."

CHAPTER XXVIII

MRS. FOLEY ON MARRIAGE

Faith and Angus were to be married at Faith's ranch. There was small preparation, to the scandal of Mrs. Foley.

"Sure I niver thought to see ye go off this way, wid no style about ye!" she mourned. "Foour min have I tuk, hopin' th' bether an' gettin' th' worse, but annyways ivery time they was lashin's to ate an' dhrink, an' all the folks there we knowed an' plenty we didn't. But here ye're fixin' for nobody at all."

"Well, there won't be anybody," Faith replied. "It's to be a very quiet wedding."

"Ye may say that," Mrs. Foley agreed. "All th' differ' bechune it an' a death-bed will be a dochter an' a nurse."

"Oh it's not as bad as that, Mary," Faith laughed. "I really prefer it that way."

"Bein' a woman mesilf, I know ye're lyin'," Mrs. Foley returned uncompromisingly. "'Tis not the nacher iv us to dispinse wid frills in annything."

Faith laughed, stifling a sigh. She had had her dreams. But she was quite content. Mrs. Foley ran on:

"Sure, thin, iver since ye was a little tot I've been thinkin' that some day I'd see ye comin' up th' aisle in a big church on yer blessed father's arrum, all in white wid a big bookay an' veil an' orange blossoms an' all; an' th' organist tearin' th' bowils out iv th' organ whiles, an' th' choir rippin' loose; an' a foine fat bishop or th' loikes, wid a grand voice rowlin' th' solemn words out in his chist. An' atherwards atin' an' dhrinkin' an' speechifyin', an' showers iv rice an' shoes an' white ribbon be th' yarrd. Thim's th' things I t'ought f'r to see. An' instid iv that, ye will stand up in privut in a shack in a neck iv woods, an' have th' words said over ye by a dom', wryneck, Gospel George iv a heretic pulpit-poundher, that's dhruv out in a buckboord dhraved be a foundhered harrse, to do th' job loike a plumber comes. Well, God's will be done. An' mebbe yer second weddin' will be diff'rent. Though they's never th' peachbloom on th' second they is on th' first, worse luck."

"Mary! what a thing to say!" Faith cried. "There will never be a second wedding for me."

"Ye say so—knowin' nawthin'," Mrs. Foley responded. "All wimmin say so before they're first married, knowin' nawthin' iv marriage; an' half iv thim swear it to thimselves before they've been married a year, knowin' too much. But sure 'tis th' nacher iv us to take chances, or we'd niver marry at all. An' f'r why should a young widdy woman like yerself go lonely all yer days?"

"Heavens, Mary, stop it!" Faith shuddered. "Talking like that before I'm married at all. I'm not a widow; I won't be a widow."

"I'm wan foour times," Mrs. Foley observed. "An' I've knowed thim that wud have give their sowls to be wan just wanst. Ye niver can tell."

"To judge by Angus' looks I won't be a widow for a long time," Faith laughed.

Mrs. Foley shook her head sagely. "Nor ye can't tell about that. Sthrong th' lad is, but he's voylent, an' voylent min come to quick ends."

"Violent? Nonsense! He never loses his temper."

"All min lose their timpers," Mrs. Foley asserted; "an' th' quoiter th' man th' bigger divil he is whin he starts. Thim kind is th' worst. It's not f'r nawthin' he carries that harrd face."

"His face isn't hard," Faith contradicted indignantly.

Mrs. Foley waved her hand. "I was speakin' in parables, loike. I'm not meanin' it's bad-lookin' he is, but he's harrd. He's th' kind that niver forgives wrong or slight, an' it wud shtrain him awful to forgive th' same. They's a divil lives deep down in him, I'm tellin' ye, that's best left asleep."

"Bosh!" said Faith.

"Ye say that, bein' ign'rant iv min," Mrs. Foley told her gravely. "I believe he loves ye thrue, an' ut's little th' life iv a man wud be worth who should speak a light word iv ye, or lay a hand on ye in other than respect, if he knew it. But take ye heed, my gyurl, niver to rouse that sleepin' divil an' have him peep at ye through the eyes of yer man. Niver, as ye value yer station as a wife, give him annything to forgive in ye as a wife. Forgive it he might, but forget it he niver would."

Faith, her smooth cheeks aflame, drew herself up haughtily. "You have no right to speak to me like that."

"I am takin' th' right," Mrs. Foley replied steadily. "Do I not know ye for what ye are—a little lady born an' bred, pure-minded an' high-minded? Ye blush whin an old woman that's seen th' rough iv ut calls a spade a spade. I wud tear th' eyes out iv man or woman that spoke ill of ye. But ye are a woman, an' women will be women, and min min, foriver an' a day."

"You have never spoken to me so before. Why do you do it now?"

"Bekase ye are about to take a man," Mrs. Foley replied. "A colleen is her own woman, wid none but herself to gyard an' care for; but a wife is her man's woman, an' besides herself she must gyard an' care for her man an' his love for her. The wise wife will gyard herself closer nor whin she was a maid, an' she will gyard her man closer nor his mother."

"Angus may trust me," Faith said proudly, "as I trust him."

"An' well f'r both iv ye," said Mrs. Foley, "if as ye say now in yer youth ye do till ye have grandchilder." She wound a great arm around Faith and drew her to her ample bosom. "There, there, gyurl iv me heart! Forgive th' rough tongue iv an owld woman wid a long, harrd road behind her. Th' lad is a rale man, if iver I saw wan. An' as f'r th' divil in him, I wouldn' give a snap iv me thumb for a man widout wan."

Whereat Faith, being motherless and in spite of her independence lonely as well, cried a little and so did Mrs. Foley, and both enjoyed it very much.

The wedding took place a few days later. Kathleen French was the only one of her family present. Turkey would not come, sending Jean an excuse. Faith had never even seen him.

There was no wedding trip. But after a few days at the Mackay ranch Angus began to arrange excursions. So far as he could see, it was now merely a matter of weeks till the place had another owner, probably Braden. He had done his best, and he was more or less resigned to the inevitable. With the resignation a load of worry dropped from his shoulders. Later he must make a fresh start, but now he would enjoy the present.

With Faith he took long rides into the foothills, along faint, old trails first beaten by the feet of the long-vanished elk, through deep timber where towering, seal-brown trunks shot fifty feet in the air without a limb and met in dense, needle-foilage above, and the horses' feet fell without sound; beside creeks fed by the hoary, old glaciers which far away glinted gray, and ridged, and fissured, relics of the ancient ice-cap which once overlay and over-rode the land. To Faith these trips were a novelty, opening a fresh world new and wonderful. Incidentally they showed her husband to advantage, in a new light and her trust in him strengthened.



To Faith these trips were a novelty, opening a world new and wonderful.

In such surroundings Angus was at home, adequate, competent. His knowledge of them amazed Faith, though there was nothing at all wonderful about it, since he had lived in the open all his life and consorted with men who had done likewise. His camps were always comfortable and sheltered. He constructed deep beds in which one sank luxuriously. Rain or shine he was a wizard with a fire and a frying pan, building browned and feathery bannocks in a minimum of

time, the doughgods he mixed were marvels, his mulligan a thing to dream of. All was accomplished without hurry and without fuss. She saw the results without quite appreciating the method.

Another thing which impressed her was his apparent ability to make the horses comprehend his wishes. When he spoke to them he seldom raised his voice. When trouble developed he was infinitely patient; when punishment was necessary he inflicted it without temper. Faith saw no signs of the "divil" of which Mrs. Foley had spoken. If he existed at all he dwelt deep, in the dungeons of the man's being, securely chained.

It was natural that she should take pride in her husband's physique. His body was hard, lean, in the condition of an athlete's in training. Her fingers pressing his forearm made scarcely an impression. Once, as he bent to heave out of the way fallen timber which blocked the trail, she placed her hands upon his back. He turned his head.

"Lift!" she said, and beneath her hands she felt the long, pliant muscles spring and tauten and harden. On another occasion a bowlder had fallen upon the trail, partially embedding itself. It was possible to go around, but he would not. Finally he worried out the rock and rolled it down the hillside.

"Heavy?" she queried.

"Pretty heavy. The trouble was I couldn't get hold of it."

"Do you know how strong you are?" she questioned.

"Why, no," he admitted. "That is, I don't know just what I can lift, if that is what you mean, nor what I could pack for say a mile if I had to. There's a good deal of knack in that sort of thing—balance and distribution of weight, and the development of a certain set of muscles by keeping at it. There are men who can pack five hundred on a short portage. I've heard of eight hundred—but I don't know."

Faith thought she had known Angus before marriage. But in the companionship of the trail and beside the evening fires beneath the stars she learned that her knowledge of him had been superficial. She found that the country rock of his reserve hid unsuspected veins of tenderness, of poesy and of melancholy. But though he possessed these softer veins—and she reflected that it should be her task to develop them—the man himself was essentially hard and grim. His outlook, when she came to know it, proved primitive, the code which governed him simple and ancient—the old, old code of loyalty to friends, and in the matter of reprisals eye for eye and tooth for tooth.

"But that is not right," she urged when he had set forth this latter belief. "We are told to return good for evil."

Angus smiled grimly. "We may be told to do so," he said, "and we are told to turn the other cheek to the smiter. That is all very well when the evil or the blow is unintentional, sort of by accident. But when a man does you harm on purpose, out of meanness, the best way to show him he has made a mistake is to get back at him hard."

"Which makes him hate you all the more."

"Maybe. But it makes him mighty careful what he does."

"But don't you see," she argued, "that if there were no such thing as forgiveness—if everybody paid back everybody for injuries in the same coin—the whole world would be at feud and at war. We should go back to savagery."

"And don't you see," he responded, "that if men knew they could get away with anything without a comeback the world wouldn't be much better. There are men and nations who are decent, and there are both who are not. These have to be kept down. If they ruled, it would be terrorism."

"There would be the law; there must be the law, of course. That would protect people."

"The law has too much red tape about it. In the old days things were better. Then a man packed his own law."

"The gun? A horrible state of affairs! Barbarism!"

"Well, it made men careful. Now you take Braden. With the help of the law he is going to get our ranch for a fraction of its value. I am not kicking about that. But he blew up my ditch. I don't mean he did it himself, but he framed it, though I can't prove it. If it wasn't for the law I would go and twist the truth out of him, and then I would settle with the men who did it. And then there's your ranch. I know it must be Braden who wants to buy that. I'd find out about that, too. There's something wrong. He's trying to put something over." His fist clenched suddenly. "The rotten crooks!" he growled. "They've got me. But let them try any dirty work on *you*!"

Secretly, Faith worried a little about the future, the more because Angus seemed utterly careless of it. He had utterly refused to allow her to sell her ranch and apply the proceeds to satisfy Braden's claim. If he had any definite plans for the future he would not talk of them. With what money he would have from the sale of stock and various chattels there would be enough for a start elsewhere. But when and where and how that start should be made was up to Angus.

"Shouldn't we be making some definite plans?" she asked.

"I suppose we should," he admitted. "But I've always planned and worried, and the best I've made out of it all is to land in this mess. Now and then I've asked myself what was the use of it."

"But that's no state of mind for a man," she protested. "That's lie down and quit. You're not that sort, surely?"

"I didn't think I was," he said slowly. "I thought I had sand and staying power. But I'm tired. Lord, you don't know how tired I am—and sore! Every thought I've had for years has been for the old place. And now to lose it! It sort of upsets me—temporarily. I'm deliberately not thinking, nor planning. When the place is sold it will be different. Till then I'm going to loaf, body and mind, for all I'm worth."

Though she thoroughly disapproved of this state of mind, Faith said no more. Time drew on. And one night Angus announced that loafing was done.

"Now I'll get into the collar for another stretch of years," he said. "To-morrow we'll start back. I want to be at the sale, to see who will bid the place in."

"It will be like turning the knife, won't it?"

"Yes, but I can take my medicine. Then I'll sell off the stock, turn everything I can into cash, fix up you and Jean somewhere and go cruising."

"Cruising?"

"Prospecting for new ground somewhere. The farther away the better. I want a lot of land—cheap. I'm out to make a stake—to found a fortune for the Mackay family."

"You'll take me with you."

"No."

"Please!"

"Better not, old girl. I may have to cover a lot of ground before I find what I'm looking for, and the traveling will be rough. It's better for me to go alone."

Faith did not press. She recognized the truth of what he said. But she realized as they rode down out of the hills what a difference already his absence would make in her life.

CHAPTER XXIX

SUDDEN DEATH

Though Godfrey French's habits could not be called studious his private room was known as his "study," which possibly was as good as any other name. The furnishings of the room were of comfortable solidity. Since the room served as an office in which he transacted such business as he had, there was a desk with many pigeon holes, and backed against the wall stood a small safe.

Outside it was dark, and the rising wind was beginning to sigh with a promise of breeding weather. But in the study, lit by a shade lamp, its owner and Mr. Braden were comfortably seated. Beside them stood a small table bearing a decanter, a siphon and a box of cigars.

Mr. Braden helped himself to the whiskey. His drinking was strictly private, but he indulged rather more frequently than of old, and in larger doses. Somehow he seemed to require them. As for Godfrey French, he took his Scotch as he took his tea, as he had been taking it all his life, and with no more visible effect.

But as Mr. Braden looked at French he seemed to have aged in the last few weeks. The features seemed more prominent, the keen face leaner and more deeply lined, the cold, blue eyes more weary and more cynical.

"You look a little pulled down," Mr. Braden commented. "Perhaps a change would do you good."

"If I could change the last thirty years for the next thirty, it might," French agreed grimly.

"None of us get younger," said Mr. Braden. "I myself begin to feel the—er—burden of the years."

"You're not old. It's the burden of your fat."

"Ha-ha!" Mr. Braden laughed without much mirth. "But what seems to be the matter with you?"

"The life that is behind me," French replied. "You can't eat your cake and have it. But what the devil is the use of cake if you don't eat it? I've eaten my cake and enjoyed it, and I'm quite willing to pay when the times comes. All flesh is as grass, Braden—even such a quantity as yours."

Mr. Braden shifted uneasily. Like many men he found any reference to his ultimate extinction unpleasant.

"Oh, yes, yes, of course we must all pay our debt to nature. No hurry about it, though. We have a number of things to do first."

"We merely think we have," French returned. "It wouldn't matter in the least if we both snuffed out to-night."

"It would matter to me," Mr. Braden declared with evident sincerity.

"But to nobody else. Who would care a curse if *you* died?"

Offhand, Mr. Braden could not answer this blunt question. French grinned at the expression of his face. "You don't like to face the inevitable, Braden. Well, since it is the inevitable it doesn't matter whether you like it or not." He tossed three fingers of straight liquor down his throat. A shade of color came into his lean cheeks and his eyes brightened. "Have you heard anything fresh lately?"

Mr. Braden shook his head. "Nothing authoritative. I know the Airline people are running trial lines east of here. I had a reply to my letter from the head of their real estate department—McKinley, as near as I could make out the signature—and he says just about half a page of nothing."

"He doesn't want to tip their hand."

"That's what I think, I know they are coming through here, and when they do it will kill this town, because they won't come within fifteen miles of it. Well, in a week or so I'll own the Mackay ranch, and be in shape to make them a definite townsite proposition whenever they do come. There isn't a better natural townsite anywhere."

"No hold-up," French warned. "They won't stand for it. Give them a good slice if they want it."

"I'll do that because I can't help myself. It's lucky I've been able to bring on the sale so soon. You were wrong in thinking it would stop the girl from marrying Mackay, though."

"I thought she would have more sense than to marry him under the circumstances."

"You've heard nothing about the—er—deeds since you gave them to her?" Mr. Braden asked.

"Nothing at all."

"Then I guess it's all right. When I sell out Mackay he'll get out of the district likely. Just as well. He might find out something if he stayed around here."

"He might," French agreed. "He suspects that we split up the biggest part of the price that Winton was supposed to pay for the land."

"He can't prove it."

"And possibly he suspects that you are responsible for his failure to get a new loan. He may even suspect that you had something to do with what happened to his water supply."

"No; but when a man begins to suspect he interprets things which otherwise would carry no meaning. So far he connects us only through the original transaction with Winton. If he knew the truth he'd probably twist your neck like a chicken's."

Mr. Braden moved that threatened part of his anatomy uneasily. "He wouldn't dare to attempt physical violence."

French laughed. "You don't know that young man, Braden, because you're a different breed. I know him, because I've seen his kind before. I made a mistake in quarreling with him."

"I'd like to see him beaten to a pulp," said Mr. Braden viciously, "but after all, it's the money we want. I'm having a devil of a time to keep my head above water, and you're broke."

"Yes, I'm broke," French admitted. "These things are the only chance I see of getting money. When a man reaches my age and faces poverty to which he is unaccustomed, he will do almost anything for money. I want to see the cities and some of the men I knew thirty years ago, before I die. For money to do that I'd give—give—I would—give—"

Something seemed to have gone wrong with Godfrey French's enunciation. It resembled nothing so much as a phonographic record with a running-down motor. He did not stammer, but the words came slowly and then blurred, as if his tongue had lost power. His face, on which a look of blank wonder had come, suddenly contorted, his hand caught at his breast, he threw his head back, chin up, mouth open, gasping.

"What's the matter?" Mr. Braden cried, startled at this sudden transformation. "Are you ill? What—"

"Get—" Godfrey French muttered indistinctly, "get—" He fell back in his chair, inert, sagging arms loose, his face gray, unconscious.

For an instant Mr. Braden stared at his associate horrified. It was as if he had been seized, struck down and throttled by an invisible hand which might claim another victim. Recovering, he poured a glass of liquor with a shaking hand, and shivered as the rim clinked against the unconscious man's teeth. He ran to the door.

"Help!" he shouted wildly to the echoing darkness of the hall. "Come, somebody! Help!"

His call was answered by Kathleen and young Larry.

"Your father!" Mr. Braden quavered. But Kathleen, pushing past him, ran to her father's side.

"He has a hypodermic somewhere," she said. "Look in his room, Larry, quick!" Young Larry bounded for the stairs. "He has had these attacks before, but this is the worst."

"I'll go for the doctor," Mr. Braden offered.

"Larry will go. Your horse isn't fast enough. I wish you'd stay here, if you don't mind. The other boys are out and I'm alone."

But in a moment Larry returned with a hypodermic syringe in its case and a vial of tablets. Kathleen dissolved one of the latter, and baring her father's arm administered the injection with a swiftness and steadiness which commanded Mr. Braden's admiration. "We'd better get him up to his room," she said.

Larry picked up his father's inert body and mounted the stairs. He laid him on his bed.

"I'll look after him now," Kathleen said. "You won't mind waiting till Larry comes back, Mr. Braden? And—*ride*, Larry!"

Mr. Braden returned to the study. In a few moments he heard the dancing rataplan of the hoofs of an eager, nervous horse, a curse from Larry, the hoof-beats clamored past, steadied to a drumming roar, and died in the distance. Evidently Larry was riding at a pace which probably meant a foundered horse.

Mr. Braden helped himself to a drink. Inadvertently he sat down in the chair which had held Godfrey French, and suddenly realizing that fact vacated it hastily. Outside the wind had increased to a gale, and with it was rain. The window was open and the drawn blind slatted to and fro. Mr. Braden selected another chair and sat down.

But in a moment he arose, went to the door and listened. Leaving it ajar he went to the desk and proceeded to pull out drawer after drawer, rooting among their contents. Not finding what he sought he turned to the safe. He stared at the impassive face of the dial, shook his head, half turned away, and then caught the handle and twisted it. To his amazement the bolts snicked back. Apparently whoever had closed the safe had neglected to turn the knob of the combination.

Mr. Braden burrowed in the safe's contents, and with an exclamation of satisfaction seized a packet of legal-looking documents bound by a rubber band. He stripped off the band and riffled the papers. Apparently he found what he sought, for he selected two documents, replacing the rest. Then, crossing the room to the light he opened the documents and proceeded to verify them by glancing at their signatures.

As he stood he fronted the window; and as he raised his eyes from the perusal the down blind bellied and lifted with a gust of wind. In the enlarged opening thus made Mr. Braden saw or thought he saw, a face. It was but the merest glimpse he had of it, white with the reflected light of the lamp. For an instant it stood out against the darkness, and then the blind dropped back into place, hiding it.

Hastily Mr. Braden shoved the papers in his pocket, while a gentle but clammy perspiration broke out upon his forehead. But had he actually seen a face, or was it some freak of vision? He went to the window, raised the blind and peeped out. It was pitch dark and raining hard, but across from him there was a glint of white, and in a moment he identified it as merely a painted post of a fence glistening in the rain. So that was the "face." Mr. Braden's heart resumed its normal action. He closed the safe, spun the combination, sat down and picking up a paper began to read.

It was more than an hour later when Dr. Wilkes arrived. He came alone, Larry having gone in search of his brothers. Mr. Braden listened to the sound of low voices, of footsteps coming and going on the floor above. Finally Wilkes came down.

"And how is the patient?" Mr. Braden asked.

"Gone out."

"Gone out? You don't mean—"

Dr. Wilkes nodded. Between him and Mr. Braden there was little cordiality.

"What was the—er—cause of death?"

"Valvular cardiac disease of long standing."

"Poor fellow, poor fellow!" Mr. Braden sorrowed, his hand involuntarily caressing the papers in his inside pocket. "You never can—or—that is in the midst of life we are in death. Why, only an hour or so ago he was planning for a trip abroad."

"He's on a longer trip," Wilkes said grimly.

But the pounding of hoofs outside indicated that Larry had found his brothers. In a moment he

entered with Gavin and Gerald. Dr. Wilkes did not soften his reply to Gerald's quick question. They stared at him, stupefied. It seemed to Mr. Braden that he should express his sympathy.

"My dear boys," he said, "I assure you that I feel for you in this dark hour. Providence in its inscrutable wisdom has seen fit—"

But Gavin interrupted him.

"Cut it out!" he growled. "We don't want any stuff like that from *you!*"

Shortly afterward Mr. Braden found himself driving homeward. The rain had turned the road into mud, and was still coming down. It drove through the lap-robe, wetted his knees and trickled down the back of his neck. He was thoroughly uncomfortable. Nevertheless he reflected that Providence in its inscrutable wisdom sometimes arranged things well. Once more his hands pressed the papers in his pocket. Arriving at his apartments he placed them in an old-fashioned iron safe which was operated by a key instead of a combination. There were two keys. One Mr. Braden carried with others on a ring. The other hung upon a single nail driven into the wall immediately behind and concealed by the safe itself. As it was dark there and as the safe was very close to the wall, it seemed a very secure hiding place. On this occasion Mr. Braden used the latter key, because he had changed his wet garments and left his key-ring with them.

But Mr. Braden's trust in Providence might have lessened—or increased—had he known that outside, chinning himself against the window-sill which he had just managed to reach from the rickety steps, hung Turkey Mackay; and that, further, the said Turkey had been a witness to the manner in which the papers had come into the possession of Mr. Braden.

CHAPTER XXX

STRANGERS ASK QUESTIONS

When Faith and Angus got back to the ranch Godfrey French's funeral was over. Faith did not pretend to be specially grieved.

"But of course I must go and see Kathleen," she said.

She went alone, for Angus would not go. He held no particular ill-feeling toward Godfrey French, but as French had held it toward him he thought it best to stay away. When Faith had gone he pottered about the house, stables and sheds, taking an inventory, estimating the value of the things he could sell, deciding where they could be sold to the best advantage. There were the tools, implements, rigs, cut crops, horses and stock on the range. He jotted down a rough estimate and frowned at the result. Still it was the best he could do.

Chetwood appeared. "Busy?" he queried.

"I've just been figuring up what I can sell and what I can get for it."

"You haven't sold anything yet?"

"No, I'll hold off till the place itself is sold."

"Somebody might bid it up to a good figure."

"Nobody is apt to bid. Nobody here with enough loose money. No, Braden'll get the place, I guess."

"Old blighter!" Chetwood grunted. "But you never can tell. 'The best-laid schemes of mice and men' and all that sort of thing. Let's talk of something else—something I want to talk about."

"Fire away," said Angus.

"Jean and I are thinking of getting married," Chetwood told him bluntly.

"The devil you are!" Angus exclaimed. He was not exactly surprised at the news, but at the time of its announcement.

"I like you," Angus admitted, "but I don't know a great deal about you. You're working for wages which aren't very large. They won't keep two."

"No more they will," Chetwood replied. "Jean suggests that I take up a homestead." Angus shook his head. "You don't like the idea? No more do I. I shan't do it."

"Have you any idea what you will do? I gathered that you lost what money you had in some fool investment. You never told me what it was."

"I don't look on it as totally lost," Chetwood responded. "It may be all right some day. One thing I'll promise you, old man, I won't marry Jean till I have something definite to go on."

"Good boy!" Angus approved. "That's sense. I'm going to look up a bunch of land in one of the new districts. When I find what I want Jean will come and live with us, of course. Then we might

make some arrangement—if you want to buck the ranching game."

When Chetwood had gone, presumably to find Jean, Angus was restless. He liked Chetwood, but the Lord alone knew when the latter would be in shape to support a wife unless somebody helped him. He would have to do that. The fancy took him to walk around the ranch for a last look as owner. As he walked a hundred recollections crowded upon him. Here there had been a good crop in one year; there a failure in another. Here was the place where he had first held the handles of a plow. This was where a team had run away with a mower. He arrived at the gate and looked back over the fields. To-day they were his; to-morrow in all likelihood they would belong to Braden.

Looking up the road he saw a light rig with two men. One of them was standing up in it, apparently surveying his surroundings through a pair of field glasses. Presently he sat down and the team came on. By the gate the driver pulled up and nodded.

"Afternoon!" he said. He was a thickset, deeply tanned man of middle age, with a shrewd, blue eye. He wore a suit which, though old, was of excellently cut tweed, and his trousers were shoved into nailed cruisers. His companion was younger, stout, round-faced and more carefully dressed, but he, too, possessed a shrewd eye. Neither looked like a rancher, and both were strangers to Angus. Between them rested an instrument of some sort, hooded, which looked like a level.

"Nice ranch, this," said the driver, "Yours?"

"Yes."

"For sale?"

"Yes," Angus told him grimly.

"How much have you got here?" the second stranger asked. Angus told him. "En bloc?"

"Yes."

"What do you hold it at?"

"I don't hold it at anything. It will be sold to-morrow by public sale under a mortgage."

The two men exchanged glances and eyed Angus with curiosity.

"Who holds the mortgage?" the younger man asked.

"Isaac J. Braden."

"Braden, hey! Isn't that the fellow—" He spoke swiftly in an undertone to his companion, who nodded. "We've heard of him. Local big bug, isn't he? What's the amount against the property?" He whistled when Angus told him. "Why didn't you get a loan somewhere and pay him off?"

"Because I couldn't. Nobody would lend. The loan companies' appraisers—well, they shied off."

"Braden fixed them, did he?" the other deduced. "Knocked the loan, hey? Knocked you as a borrower! Shoved you to the wall. Thinks he'll bid the place in. Anybody else want it? No—or you'd have made some deal."

"That's about the size of it," Angus admitted, surprised at the swift accuracy of these deductions.

"Will it leave you stranded?"

"Nearly. Not quite."

"Folks depending on you?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you tell me to mind my own darn business?"

"I came near it," Angus admitted; "but you look as if you know enough to do that without being told."

The stout man chuckled. "I think I do, myself. If I had known of this place before I'd have made you some sort of an offer for it. As it is, I'll go to that sale to-morrow. Good day. Drive on, Floyd."

Angus watched them drive away and turned back to the house. It seemed that Braden might have opposition, and apart from financial reasons he was glad of it. The strangers did not look like ranchers. Speculators, likely. Anyway, it had not taken the stout fellow long to size Braden up. But if he could have overheard the conversation between the two strangers as they drove away he would have been more surprised at the accuracy of their mental workings.

"Things like that," the man called Floyd observed jerking his head backward, "always get my goat. I'll bet that young fellow's got the raw end of some dirty deal. He's taking a bitter dose of medicine. You can see it in his face."

"And I can make a pretty fair guess what it is," the other responded. "This fellow Braden has been trying to get information about our construction plans. He hinted that he had some sort of a townsite proposition to make to us, and if that place back there is it I give him credit for a good eye. He doesn't seem to have been very particular about how he went to work to get hold of it

himself."

"What are you going to do about it, Mac?"

"What I should do," the other replied, frowning thoughtfully, "is to make a dicker with Braden to take over the land at a reasonable profit, after he had bid it in for the amount of his dinky mortgage. That's my plain duty to my employers, the Northern Airline, Mountain Section, for which they pay me a salary, large it is true, but small in comparison with my talents."

Floyd grinned. "Yes, I know you *should* do that. But what *are* you going to do?"

"Well," the man called Mac admitted, "I do hate to see a shark get away with anything but the hook. Besides, it looks to me as if Braden, if he got hold of the property would try to double-cross us. I'll bet he'd hold us up for some fancy price. So it's my duty to see he doesn't get a chance. The property is just about what we want. There's room for a good, little town. With that creek, a natural gravity water system could be put in. No trouble about drainage. You can get power, too. A subsidiary company formed to handle that end would pay well in a few years when the place got going. Ah, it's a bird of a proposition—too good to take any chances on."

"That's your end," Floyd nodded. "We go ahead and find the grades and put 'em in, and you fat office guys come along and clean up. Well, Healey's notes are all right so far. Easy construction through here. I'll send young Davis in right away and let him run a trial line east, for Broderick to tie into."

"Don't be in a hurry," the other responded. "Trouble with you roughneck engineers, you think all there is to a railroad is building it. You wait till I pick up what I want. I could fix it with Braden, but he'd get the profit, and that young fellow back there would go broke, as he said. I think I'll try to fix it so *he* gets the profit. I'll just bid the place in over Braden, and the young fellow will get any surplus over the mortgage claim. It will be just as cheap for us."

"And the trouble with you," said the chief of Northern Airline construction to its chief right-of-way and natural resources man, "is that you're mushy about men in hard luck. I know some corporations you wouldn't last with as long as a pint of red-eye in a Swede rock gang."

"You're such a hard-hearted guy yourself!" sneered Mac, his round face reddening perceptibly. "No bowels of compassion. Practical man! Dam' hypocrite! Yah! you make me sick!"

Mr. Floyd also reddened perceptibly. "Oh, well, I've been in hard luck myself," he said.

"So've I," his friend admitted. "I know what the gaff feels like. Well—stir up those horses. We've got a long way to go."

CHAPTER XXXI

THE AUCTION

The sale was to take place at noon in the sheriff's office. After breakfast Angus went down to the corrals. Faith followed him.

"I'd like to go with you to the sale."

"Why?" he asked.

"I'd just like to be with you."

He stared at her for a moment. In his life this solicitude, almost maternal, was a new thing.

"Why, old girl, I believe you think I can't stand the gaff. But if you like, we'll take our medicine together."

Toward noon they entered the sheriff's office. Braden was already there with his lawyer, Parks, talking with the sheriff. Presently entered the two strangers with whom Angus had talked the day before. The stout man smiled and nodded, with a quick appraising glance at Faith. Then came Judge Riley, and with him, to Angus' surprise, was Chetwood.

"Under and by virtue of the power of sale contained in a certain mortgage bearing date—and made between—"

The sheriff's voice droned on. Angus paid scanty attention. Now that he was there "to stand the gaff" his feelings were almost impersonal.

"What am I offered for this property?" the sheriff having stated the conditions of sale was getting down to business.

"Ten thousand dollars." This from Mr. Braden. The amount was slightly more than his mortgage claim.

"Ten thousand dollars I am offered. Ten thousand. Are there any other offers? If not—" The sheriff paused, sweeping the room with his eye. Braden, looking at Angus, permitted himself a

grin. "If not, then—"

"Twelve thousand." It was the stout man, Mac. Having uttered the two words he resumed a conversation with his friend.

"Twelve thousand?" the sheriff repeated. "Was that right sir? You bid twelve thousand, Mr.—er—"

"McGinity," the stout man supplied.

"Twelve thousand I am offered. Any other offers?"

"Thirteen," said Mr. Braden.

"Fourteen," said McGinity on the heels of Braden's voice.

Faith whispered, "Who is he?"

"I don't know. He was out at the ranch yesterday. I think he'll run Braden up."

Braden whispered to his lawyer, who shook his head.

"Fifteen thousand."

"Sixteen."

Mr. Braden frowned, hesitated and went over to Mr. McGinity.

"We seem to be opposing each other," he observed.

"Does seem like it."

"Perhaps we could reach an understanding—privately. As it stands, we are running the price up."

"I can stand it so far," said Mr. McGinity.

"But we are cutting into each other. If you have reached your top figure I will give you five hundred on it."

"I haven't any top figure—except the value of the property to me."

"You have bid all the property is worth."

Mr. McGinity grinned. "Then naturally you won't bid any more," said he.

"I have—er—sentimental reasons for desiring this property. You won't enter into any arrangement?"

"Not just now."

"Very well," said Mr. Braden. "Sixteen thousand, five hundred, Mr. Sheriff."

"Seventeen," said Mr. McGinity, idly creasing his hat.

Again Mr. Braden conferred with Parks. He raised the bid five hundred, and again the stranger tilted it. The latter did so nonchalantly. Between bids he conversed with his friend. But when Mr. Braden had bid nineteen thousand, five hundred, he shot it to twenty-one thousand.

Though the perspiration stood upon Mr. Braden's brow, his pedal extremities began to suffer from cold. He had not expected any opposition. The conditions of sale were stringent, as he had intended them to be, with a view of choking off others; but just then, though few knew it, certain unfortunate speculations had strained his credit very badly. Twenty-one thousand was a large sum, more than he could count on with certainty unless he had time to raise more on the security of the property itself, even though part of it was his mortgage claim. But he wanted the property very badly—needed it, in fact. Who the deuce was this McGinity?

And then, suddenly, he saw light. "McGinity" was the translation of certain hieroglyphics appended to letters he had received from the Northern Airline. He had translated them into "McKinley," but with considerable doubt. So his competitor for possession of the Mackay ranch was the Airline itself!

So that was what he was up against! Mackay, somehow, must have gotten wind of his intentions, and himself entered into negotiations with the railway; and these must have reached a definite point.

It was a difficult situation for Mr. Braden. He saw his dream of carving up a choice townsite—of seeing it grow in value by leaps and bounds—go glimmering. He hated to drop out. But what was the use of going on? McGinity would bid up to whatever he thought the proposition worth, and not a dollar more. More than that, if he, Braden, overtopped that figure, they would let him keep the land, and they would make a townsite elsewhere. Mr. Braden was under no delusions. He had known landowners who had held the mistaken belief that a strong corporation could be forced to adopt a certain location for a townsite merely because it was the best. The said landowners still owned the land, but it was not a town.

"Twenty-one thousand!" the sheriff repeated. "Any advance? A very valuable property, gentlemen." He looked at Mr. Braden. That gentleman sadly shook his head. No, he was out of it. "Then," said the sheriff, "if there is no higher bid, I—"

"Twenty-two thousand!"

It was Chetwood, and the effect was explosive. Mr. Braden stared, open-mouthed. McGinity and Floyd turned and eyed him. Faith gasped, clutching Angus' arm.

"Why—why," she whispered, "how can he—you told me he had lost all his money!"

"So he told me. He must be running some sort of a blazer. Only, of course, it won't go. It's foolish of him to try."

The sheriff seemed to share Angus' view. Mr. Braden whispered to him. He frowned.

"You know the conditions of sale, young man?"

"I heard you state them."

"You are able to meet them?"

"May I point out," said Chetwood, "that you have not asked that question of any previous bidder. Why favor me?"

"Well—er—you see—" the sheriff was slightly embarrassed—"I understand that you are working for Mr. Mackay."

"Quite so. And what of it?"

"A man who can pay twenty-two thousand for a ranch doesn't often work on it as a hired man," the sheriff pointed out.

"It is absolutely none of your business, official or private, for whom, or for what, or at what I work," Chetwood retorted. "I make that bid, and I demand that you receive it."

Faith laughed softly. Angus stared at his hired man.

"I may tell you, Mr. Sheriff," the court voice of Judge Riley filled the room, "that this gentleman is quite able to meet the conditions of sale in any offer he may make."

"Twenty-three thousand," said Mr. McGinity experimentally.

"Twenty-four," Chetwood returned.

Mr. McGinity turned to his friend. "Now what the devil is up? I've raised Braden out. Who's this young fellow? And what's this about his working for Mackay?"

"I'm an engineer and an honest man," Floyd returned. "This is your end, Mac. But if I were doing it, I'd get together with those boys, now that the old cuss is out of it."

"I always said you had too much brains for an engineer," Mr. McGinity retorted. He crossed the room to Angus and bowed to Faith.

"Suppose you tell me what the idea is?" he said. "Is this young fellow bidding for you?"

"You know as much about it as I do," Angus confessed, and beckoned to Chetwood. "What are you up to, anyway?" he demanded of the latter. "I thought you were broke. You told me so."

"I told you my income had stopped—temporarily," Chetwood replied. "So it had. If you had ever said a word about money troubles I would have fixed them like a shot, but you never even mentioned 'em. So now I'm going to buy the ranch in."

"How high will you go?" Mr. McGinity asked. "Hold on, now—wait a minute. I represent the Northern Airline, which is going to build through here, and this property is valuable to us. I'm prepared to go fairly high myself to get it. That means that we are prepared to pay the owner a good price. Now, instead of crazy bidding, can't we come to an arrangement?"

"Have you any connection with Braden?" Chetwood asked.

"Hell, no!" Mr. McGinity replied. "Didn't you just see me raise him out? And I can raise *you* out, young man, if you won't act sensibly, unless you have a mighty big roll back of you."

"Oh, no, you can't," Chetwood replied cheerfully. He drew McGinity to one side. "Because, you see," he explained, "I'm really bidding the property in for Mackay, though he doesn't know it. So, you see, I never have to put up real money at all, except enough to satisfy old Braden's claim, and technically satisfy the conditions of sale. I buy the property, hand stage money to Mackay, he hands it back to me—and there you are! The only real money is what Braden gets."

"And suppose Mackay doesn't come through," Mr. McGinity speculated wisely. "Suppose I forced you up—away up—and Mackay found that as a result his ranch had brought a top-notch price which he was entitled to most of; and suppose he stood pat and insisted on receiving it. Where would you get off at then?"

Chetwood laughed. "Braden might do that. Mackay isn't that kind. We're friends, and I'm going to marry his sister. Raise away, if you feel like it."

Mr. McGinity's eyes twinkled. "Not on your life," he said. "The combination is too many for me." The sheriff impatiently claimed recognition. "I'm through, Mr. Sheriff. The last bid is good as far

as I'm concerned."

The sheriff looked at Mr. Braden, who shook his head. And thus the Mackay ranch came into the nominal possession of Chetwood.

Angus, throttling his pride, held out his hand.

"You've got a good ranch," he said. "I'm glad it's you. If you marry Jean it will be staying in the family, anyway. I'll be moving out as soon—"

"You'll be doing nothing of the kind," Chetwood told him. "Do you think I'm such a dashed cad as that? I'm buying the ranch for you, of course. You can pay me what I'll pay Braden, when you like, and if you never feel like it nobody will worry."

Angus stared at him dazedly. For the first time in years his eyes were misty; but his innate pride still held.

"It's good of you," he said. "Oh, it's *damned* good of you, but—I can't stand for it."

"Afraid you'll jolly well have to, my boy," Chetwood grinned cheerfully. "You can't help yourself, you know."

"But I can't allow—"

"Don't I tell you, you'll have to. Don't be such a bally ass, or strike me pink if I don't punch your beastly head here and now! Can't you take a little help from a friend who would take it from you? Mrs. Angus, for heaven's sake make this lunatic listen to reason!"

Faith laughed happily. "He wouldn't let *me* help him," she said. "Give him time, Mr. Chetwood."

As Chetwood waited to comply with the necessary formalities Mr. McGinity touched him on the arm.

"I want to make a proposition to whoever owns that land—you or Mackay," he said. "I'd rather make it to you, because I can see you know more about business than he does. The Airline isn't any philanthropic institution, of course, but we'll play fair with you and Mackay."

"Thanks very much," said Chetwood, a twinkle in his eye.

"Oh, I mean it," Mr. McGinity assured him. "You seem a pretty bright young fellow. If you haven't got too much money to take a good job, I can place you in my department."

"But you see," Chetwood returned, "I've already got a job with your company."

"What?" cried Mr. McGinity. "What kind of a con game is this? What department are you in?"

"I'm a director. Did you ever hear of Sir Eustace Chetwood?"

Mr. McGinity gasped. "Are you trying to kid me? Sir Eustace Chetwood was one of our English directors, but he's dead. And he was about eighty years old."

"Quite right," Chetwood nodded. "He died a few months ago, and by virtue of the shares in your corporation which he left to me, I was elected to fill his place. I'm his nephew, you see. As to the title, it's hereditary, and I can't help it."

"Sir Eustace Chetwood!" gasped Mr. McGinity. "Good Lord!"

"Well, I'm not using either title at present," Chetwood grinned. "Just keep it dark, like a good fellow. I don't want to be plagued by a lot of blighters who can't see me at all as a thirty-dollar ranch hand. My real friends are just beginning to call me 'Bill'—and I like it. I say, Mr. McGinity, if you should ever call me 'Bill,' I'd call you 'Mac'."

"Is that so, Bill?" said Mr. McGinity, who was a gentlemen of easy adjustments.

"It are so, Mac!" Chetwood laughed. "See you later about that proposition. Remember, you are to play fair."

CHAPTER XXXII

CHETWOOD UNMASKED

As Angus drove homeward he was at first unable to adjust himself to actuality. He had given up all hope of retaining the ranch. The wrench of loss had been over. But now the ranch was his again, subject to the debt already existing, to keep if he chose.

But he realized that it would be folly to retain it as a ranch, to refuse a proposition which McGinity had just made amounting to a fifty-fifty partnership with the Airline in the project of a townsite. Again, no matter what his individual preference, he must think of others. In reality, his own individual interest in the ranch amounted to but one-third. Sooner or later there must be a division—an adjustment of shares between Jean, Turkey and himself. In justice to them he could

not refuse an offer which promised more than he could ever hope to make or receive for the ranch as a ranch.

And so the ranch, as a ranch, was done. Its broad fields and pastures and broad stretches of timbered levels would be broken up, surveyed into building lots, pegged out with stakes, gridironed with embryonic streets. For a while it would lie raw, unsightly, ruined as a ranch, unmade as a town. And then people would come in. Shacks would spring up, stores with false fronts, all sorts of makeshifts which accompany construction days. Later would come permanence, better buildings, churches, schools, gardens, sidewalks. Where the Ranch had been would stand the Town. It was Progress, the history of the West since the first steel road adventured among the ancient buffalo trails. The old order was changing, but he, though young, was more of the old order than the new, because he had been bred in the former.

Faith touched his arm lightly.

"Tell me I'm awake. It seems like a dream."

He put his arm around her and she snuggled in the crook of it, leaning comfortably against his shoulder. He pulled the team to a walk.

"Now say it yourself."

"Say what? How *did* you know I wanted to say something? But it's nothing particular. It's just—everything!"

"It's sure a surprise to me. Why, only yesterday I hinted to Chetwood that it was doubtful if he could support a wife—and to-day he bids in my whole ranch." He laughed, but with little mirth, for the sense of obligation lay heavy on him.

"I wonder if Jean knew?"

"I don't think so. Why, she wanted him to homestead—said he'd have to make good before she'd marry him."

"Jean is so practical!" sighed his wife. "Now I'd never have said anything like that to *you*. I'm glad that Braden didn't get the ranch. Odious beast!" Angus chuckled. "Well, he *is*!"

"Easily! I never happened to think of that particular descriptive phrase, though."

"I don't want to hear *your* descriptive phrases. He's a horrible man. I shudder when he looks at me. He—he seems to be thinking evil things about me—plotting—Oh, I don't know. Did you see his face when he saw that he would be overbidden? It turned white, and then *green*. Oh, you may laugh! I *saw* it."

"It was a jolt for him. He had it working like an oiled lock up to then. Some day I will play even with him."

"He didn't accomplish his end. He's beneath your notice."

"No man who tried to hand me what he did is beneath my notice," he said grimly. "Yes, I'll settle with him some day."

"I thought I might see your brother at the sale."

"No, he wouldn't go near it. I'll be glad when I can hand him over his share to do what he likes with."

"It's odd that I've never seen him. Why don't you make it up with him, Angus?"

Angus' mouth tightened grimly. "Make it up! Now, I'll tell you something, Faith, which you must never repeat, even to Jean: I believe he is in cahoots with Braden."

"Oh, surely not!" she cried, and when he told her the grounds of his belief she was unconvinced. "There's some mistake, Angus."

"It's not on my part. I'm through with him—except to give him his share. He shall have that, to the last cent. He shall not say I did not play fair with him."

"You would play fair with every one," she told him. "I know that."

His arm tightened for an instant by way of acknowledgment. But he found her words only just. To the best of his ability he had tried to play fair all his life. On that score he could not reproach himself at all.

They drove up to the ranch, and at the sound of wheels Jean ran out. She had been waiting, regretting that she had not accompanied them, anxious to know the worst and have it over.

"Well, dear!" said Faith tantalizingly.

"You know what. Who bought the ranch? Was it Braden?"

"No," Faith replied, "it was a young man named Chetwood."

"Wha-a-t!" cried Jean in tones which left no doubt of her utter amazement. "Oh, stop joking! This is serious."

"He bought it," Angus assured her.

"But—but he *couldn't!*" Jean exclaimed incredulously. "Angus, you know he couldn't. Why he's *broke!* He's working for you for *wages.*"

"Just what the old sheriff said," Angus laughed. "But it's straight, Jean. He bid the ranch in for twenty-four thousand."

"But where did he get the money?"

"I don't know. But he had it."

"Then," Jean flashed, "I'll never speak to him again—never! To buy the ranch, your ranch, our ranch—at a sale! Oh, the miserable, contemptible—"

"Hi, hold on!" Angus interrupted. "You don't understand. He didn't buy it for himself; he bought it in for us—to save it. He's a white man, all right, Jean."

"I don't care what he bought the ranch for!" Jean cried. "And he's *not* a white man. He's a sneak. He deceived me. He said his remittance had stopped. He let me make a fool of myself advising him to homestead and get a place of his own, and work hard, so that—so that—"

"So that you could be married!" Angus chuckled.

"Ye—yes," Jean confessed, and her brother roared. "Oh, you think it funny, do you? Well, *he* won't. I never want to see him. I *won't* see him."

"But, Jean dear, listen," Faith put in, for she saw that to Jean there was nothing humorous in the situation. The girl was deeply offended, bitterly angry.

"I don't want to listen," Jean snapped. "I don't want to be rude, Faith, but he—he *lied* to me. He led me to believe that he was poor, that he hadn't a dollar. He was playing with me, amusing himself, laughing at me when I was—oh, I can't talk about it!"

"Oh, shucks, old girl!" said Angus. "You're going into the air about nothing. You ought to be glad he isn't broke."

"Ought I?" Jean retorted. "Well, I'm not. He wasn't straight with me, he wasn't fair. He talked about a little cottage, and wanted me to marry him right away, and—and—"

"And share his poverty," Angus grinned. "Weren't you game, sis?"

"Angus!" Faith warned. But Jean's cheeks flamed.

"No, I wasn't," she replied bitterly. "I told him he would have to make good first, if you want to know, not because I didn't love him, poor as I thought he was, but because I thought it would make him work in earnest. Can you understand that, Angus Mackay? Do you think, after telling him that, I'd marry him now that he has money? I'd rather *die!* And—and I half believe I want to."

With which tragic ultimatum Miss Jean turned and fled. Angus gaped after her and at his wife.

"Well, of all darn fool girls—" he exclaimed.

"You don't understand. You made it worse."

"Why, what did I—"

"Never mind now. I'll talk to her after a while, but in her place I'd feel much the same. I only hope she will get over it."

"Of course she will. Rot! She fooled herself about Chetwood, same as I did. Go and make her behave sensibly."

"You don't know a blessed thing about girls," his wife told him.

"Well, I'll bet if you let the two of them get together they'll make it up. She'll go for him red-headed for five minutes, then it'll be over."

But Faith vetoed this simple plan. She saw that Jean's pride had been deeply hurt. When Chetwood appeared, later, he met the surprise of his young life. He did not see Jean. Faith took the matter into her own hands.

"But—but, hang it," he exclaimed when the situation was made clear to him, "it's all a beastly, rotten misunderstanding. I mean to say it's all wrong. Jean—why, bless the girl, I never dreamed of offending her."

"But you've done it. Do you mind answering one or two questions?"

"I'll tell you anything," Chetwood replied with fervor.

"Well—they may be impertinent. Have you much money? And is it yours, or—remittances?"

"'Much money' is rather a relative term. But I have enough to live on, and it is mine."

"Then what on earth made you work as a ranch hand?"

"Jean did. She had a strong prejudice against remittance men, and she classed me as one of them. I was an idler, and she rather despised me. Of course she didn't tell me so, but I could see how the land lay. So I made up my mind to remove that objection, anyway. The best place to do it seemed to be where she could see me working, and I really wanted to know something about ranching. Struck me as a good joke, being paid for what I was perfectly willing to pay for myself. Then I thought I might as well live up to the part and really throw myself on my own resources, which I did. I've been living on my wages. But of course I had to have some adequate explanation. I couldn't tell Angus I wanted to live on the ranch to make love to his sister. Now, could I? So I merely let it be understood that my remittances had stopped. May not have been exactly cricket, but I can't see that I'm very much to blame. If I could see Jean—"

"Not now. She refused to marry you till you were in a position to support a wife. That's the bitter part of it."

"But I *am* able to support one."

"Yes, but don't you see having refused to marry you until you had made a little money she won't put herself in the position of doing so now for fear you or somebody might think the money had something to do with it."

Chetwood took his bewildered head in his hands.

"O, my sainted Aunt Jemima!" he murmured. "In the picturesque language of the country this sure beats—er—I mean it's a bit too thick for me. She didn't approve of me because I was an idler and presumably a remittance man. Very well. I cut off my income and became a hired man. Then she wouldn't marry me because I was. Now she won't see me or speak to me because I'm not. Kind lady, having been a girl yourself, will you please tell me what I am to do about it?"

Faith laughed at his woebegone countenance. "The whole trouble is that you weren't frank with her. What was play to you—a good joke—was the most serious thing in life to her. While she was considering and planning in earnest for the future you were laughing at her. Perhaps a man can't appreciate it; but a woman finds such things hard to forgive."

"I'll apologize," Chetwood said. "I'll eat crow. Mrs. Angus, like an angel, do help me with the future Lady Chet—er—I mean—"

"What!" Faith cried.

"Oh, Lord!" Chetwood ejaculated, "there go the beans. Nothing, nothing! I don't know what I'm saying, really!"

"Don't you dare to deceive me!" Faith admonished sternly. "Lady Chetwood! What do you mean?"

"But it's not my fault," the luckless young man protested. "I can't help it. It's hereditary. When the old boy died—"

"What old boy?"

"My uncle, Sir Eustace. I was named after him. And I couldn't help *that*."

"Do you mean to tell me," Faith accused him severely, "that on top of all your deceptions you have a title? Oh, Jean will never forgive this!"

"But it's not much of a title," its owner palliated. "It's just a little old one. Nothing gaudy about it, like these new brewers'. It's considered quite respectable, really, at home, and nobody objects. It—it runs in the family, like red hair or—er—insanity."

"Insanity!" Faith gasped. "Good heavens, is there *that*? Oh, poor Jean! That explains—"

"No, no!" Chetwood protested desperately. "I didn't mean that. Quite the contrary. Not a trace. Why, dash it all, there isn't even genius!"

Whereat, with a wild shriek, Faith collapsed weakly in her chair and laughed until she wept. "Oh, oh, oh!" she gasped feebly, wiping her eyes, "this is lovely—I mean it's awful. Mr. Chetwood—I mean Sir Eustace—"

"Bill!" the object of her mirth amended. "Poor Bill. Poor old Bill! Dear, kind, pretty lady, have a heart!"

"A heart! If it gets any more shocks like this—But what am I to tell Jean? Here's a poor country girl and a noble knight—"

"Don't rub it in. You see Sir Eustace was alive when I came over here. When I heard of his death I said nothing to anybody, because there are a lot of silly asses who seem to think a title makes some difference in a man. And then I was afraid some beastly newspaper would print some rot about my working as a ranch hand."

"Well, I don't know what's to be done about it," Faith admitted; "but I do know that now isn't the time for you to see Jean. Really, I think the best thing you can do is to go away for a week or two."

CHAPTER XXXIII

ANOTHER SURPRISE

Outwardly, life on the Mackay ranch settled back to its old groove. Work went on as usual. Angus entered into an agreement with McGinity which relieved him from present money worries. But the actual railway construction would take time, and meanwhile, next season, he could take off another crop.

Already the summer was done, the days shortening, the evenings growing cool. Birds were full-grown and strong of wing. Fogs hung in the mornings, to be dispelled by the sun slanting a little to southward. The days were clear, warm, windless. In the lake, trees and mountain ranges were reflected with the accuracy of a mirror. On these shadows, as perfect upside down as right side up, Faith expended photographic film prodigally.

Chetwood had returned to the ranch, but Jean had refused to restore the status quo. She treated him with formal politeness, avoiding him skilfully, taking care that he should not see her alone. Mrs. Foley, now in complete charge of the ranch kitchen, commented thereon.

"What's th' racket bechune yez?" she asked bluntly. "Ye act like ye was feared to be wid th' lad alone. An' a while ago I felt it me duty as a fellow-woman to cough, or dhrop a broom—"

"Nonsense!" Jean interrupted tartly.

"Well, a dacint lad he is—f'r a sassenach—fair-spoken, wid a smile, an' a pleasant word f'r th' likes iv me, an' always a josh on th' tip iv his tongue."

Jean sniffed.

"Havin' buried four min, I know their ways," Mrs. Foley continued. "Whin a man's eyes rest on a woman wishful, like a hungry dog's on a green bone, that's thruve love."

"I'm not a bone!" Jean snapped.

"I am not makin' no cracks at th' build iv yez," Mrs. Foley assured her. "A foine, well-growed shlip iv a gyurl ye are; an' a swate arrumful—"

"Mrs. Foley!" Jean cried, cheeks afire.

"Well, glory be, an' what else is a gyurl's waist an' a man's arrum for?" Mrs. Foley demanded practically. "Sure, I am no quince-mouthed owld maid, talkin' wide iv phwat ivery woman—maid, wife, an' widdy—knows. I misdoubt, f'r all yer high head, ye're in love wid th' lad. Then why don't ye let love take its coorse?"

"I'm not in love with him," Jean declared. "I don't want to see him. I wish he'd go away."

"An' if he did ye'd be afther cryin' thim purty brown eyes out."

"I would *not!*" Jean asseverated. "He's nothing to me—less than nothing."

"Well, well, God knows our hearts," Mrs. Foley commented piously. "Ffour min I've buried, an' I know their ways."

"You might have another husband if you liked," Jean told her by way of counter-attack.

"Ye mane th' big Swede," Mrs. Foley responded calmly, "Maybe I could. But I've had no luck keepin' min, an' he might not last either, though him bein' phwat he is it might not matther. Still an' all, buryin' husbands is onsettlin' to a woman."

"But Gus is so healthy!" Jean giggled.

"So was me poor b'ys that's gone," Mrs. Foley sighed. "They was that healthy it hurt 'em. Health makes f'r divilmint, an' divilmint shortens a man's days. I'm tellin' ye, ut's th' scrawny little divils that ain't healthy enough to enj'y life that nawthin' shakes loose from ut. But rip-roarin', full-blooded b'ys, like thim I had, they leaves a woman lorn."

"Were your husbands *all* Irish?" Jean asked.

"They wor," Mrs. Foley replied, "if Galway, Wicklow, Clare an' Down breed Irishmin, God rest thim!"

"Well, Gus is a good worker. He's been with us for years."

"But ye could fire him when ye liked," Mrs. Foley pointed out. "A husband an' a hired man is cats of diff'rent stripes. But they tell me this lad of yours has money. Then why is he workin' as a hired man onless f'r love of ye, tell me that?"

"I can't help his feelings," Jean returned.

"No, but ye might soothe thim, instid iv playin' cat-an'-mouse—"

"I'm not!" Jean cried. "And I wish you wouldn't talk about him any more."

The net result was that, feeling herself under Mrs. Foley's skeptical eye, she treated the

unfortunate Chetwood more distantly than ever. Faith observed, but said nothing, waiting for an opportune moment which was slow in coming.

Since her wedding Faith's ranch had been abandoned. She had removed some of her personal belongings, but the furniture remained. She was aware, now, of the worthlessness of the place. The reasons which had impelled Godfrey French to purchase, whatever they were, were not operative with his children. If Braden had been behind that offer it was improbable that it would be renewed by him. The place was dead horse.

Nevertheless, Faith held a fondness for it, principally sentimental. Occasionally she rode over to see that all was in order. She had an idea that, if the Mackay ranch was cut up, they might live there, and she had a wish, of which she had not yet spoken to her husband, to spend a week or two there alone with him before the winter. And so one day she paid a visit to her property.

Though the day was warm the interior struck chill. She threw the doors open and raised the blinds, letting in the air and sun. Then, taking a book, she moved a rocker to the front veranda, and basked in the sun. For a time she admired the mountains sharply defined, gulch, shoulder and summit, in the clear air, but speedily she became lost in her own thoughts.

A sudden, thudding detonation broke her reverie and brought her upright in her chair. It rumbled into the hills, caught by the rocks, flung across gorges and back in a maze of echoes, diminishing and dying in the far ranges. For a startled instant she wondered what it could be, and then she knew that it was powder—a blast.

The shot seemed near, not more than a mile distant. It was either on her land or very near it, in the vicinity of the foot of the round mountain which projected from the foot of the range. While she puzzled, another shot came. Yes, undoubtedly that was where it was. But who could be using powder on her property?

She made up her mind to find out what was going on. She locked the doors, and mounting her pony took as straight a line as she could in the direction of the blasts.

There were no more shots, but she rode on, and presently came to what seemed to be a new trail leading upward beside the shoulder of the round hill aforesaid. Her pony scrambled up the rough going, walled on either side by brush. Then she emerged upon a bench a few acres in extent, above which the hill rose steeply. There stood a couple of tents. The brush had been cut away, and earth and stones stripped from the mountain side, leaving a new, raw wound. Fragments of gray country rock, split and driven by the force which had ripped them loose, lay around. By the face thus exposed half a dozen men were at work. Closer at hand two men conversed. As she pulled up her pony they saw her.

For a moment they stared at her. She rode forward.

"I—I hope I'm not in the way," she began, feeling the words inadequate. "I was down at the ranch and heard the blasts. I am Miss—I mean I am Mrs. Mackay." She was not yet accustomed to the latter designation.

"My name is Garland," said the younger of the two. "This is Mr. Poole."

Mr. Poole murmured unintelligibly. Then both waited. A hammer man began to strike. The measured clang punctuated the stillness.

"I thought I would ride up and see what was going on," Faith explained.

"We're doing a little development work."

"Oh," Faith said, and hesitated for an instant. "But—but this is my land."

"Your land!" Garland and Poole were plainly surprised. They exchanged glances. In them was quick suspicion, unspoken question, speculation.

"Where would your line run?" Garland asked.

But Faith could not tell him. Godfrey French had indicated in general terms where her boundaries lay, but she had never followed them. She could only repeat her conviction. Again the men exchanged glances.

"I'm afraid you'll have to see Braden about that," Garland told her. "This is his property—or he thinks it is. We're working for him."

"But what are you working at? What are you doing?"

"We're opening up a prospect—what's going to be a mine."

"A mine! What kind of a mine?"

"A coal mine," Garland replied, "and a good one, too. I guess this little mountain is mostly coal. We're just clearing off the face, but you can see the seam if you like."

Coal! Faith stared at the wound in the hillside. She could see a dark belt, the "seam" of which Garland had spoken, partially exposed. There, overlain by soil and worthless rock, screened by tree and brush, was the stored fertility of some bygone age, the compression of the growth of a young world, potential heat, light, power.

"This isn't much more than outcrop," Garland was saying, "but it's good coal. Braden will make a clean-up on this when the railway comes through—that is if it is his." His eyes met Poole's, and again there was the unspoken query, the speculation.

"But I'm sure it isn't," said Faith. "That is, I'm almost sure."

"It would be a good thing to be sure about," Garland told her.

"I think my husband will be able to tell you," said Faith.

"No use telling us," Garland replied. "Braden's the man for him to see. And—well, our instructions are not to allow anybody on the ground."

"No trespassing," Poole corroborated.

"But if this is my property—"

"That's the point—*if* it is."

"I think it is. And until I know it isn't I have a right to come here, and so has my husband."

Garland shrugged his shoulders. "I'm only telling you our instructions. I may as well tell you Braden wouldn't want your husband coming here. They're not friends, I guess. You'd better tell him to keep away."

"My husband will go where he likes without asking Mr. Braden's permission."

"We're working for Braden," said Garland, "and what he says goes. We don't want any trouble with anybody, but we're going to carry out our instructions."

"I'll tell my husband," Faith returned. "Good-bye."

Garland and Poole watched her out of sight and stared at each other.

"Now what do you think of that?" the former asked.

"Darned if I know. She seemed sure. But Braden ought to know what he's about."

"He *ought* to," Garland admitted. "He sold her father whatever land she has. He owns a whole bunch of it around here." He was silent for a moment. "I wonder if he's putting something over; I wonder if she *does* own this, and Braden has framed something on her?"

"Her deed would show what she owns."

"That's so. But if Braden is putting something over and we can get onto it, we could make him come through. This thing is going to be worth having a share in."

"How are we going to get onto it?"

"I don't know," Garland admitted, "but you never can tell what will turn up."

"Suppose young Mackay comes horning in here. He'd come on the prod."

"This bunch can handle him," Garland said with confidence. "That big Swede that's using the hammer is a bad actor. I'll give him a pointer about Mackay."

CHAPTER XXXIV

A NEW COMPLICATION

Faith rode homeward at an unwonted pace. She had always regarded that mountain, supposed to be worthless, as part of her property. Godfrey French, she now remembered more clearly, had once indicated it as within her boundaries. Now that it was valuable, it appeared that Braden claimed it. It might be true, but it was strange.

Her husband met her as she clattered up to the corrals. It was his habit to lift her from the saddle. For a moment he held her above his head as if she had been a child, kissed her and set her on her feet gently. His eyes went to the pony's sweating coat.

"Just finding out that old Doughnuts can travel when he has to?" The pony owed his name to that far-off episode of their first meeting.

"I was in a hurry. Did I ride him too hard?"

"No, did him good." He loosened the cinches, stripped off saddle and bridle and dismissed Doughnuts with a friendly slap for a luxurious roll. "What was the hurry, old girl? Has somebody been breaking into Dry Lodge?"

"No, no; all right there. But Angus, such a strange thing has happened. They've found coal in that round mountain!"

"Coal!" he exclaimed.

Swiftly, words tumbling over one another so that much had to be repeated, she related her experiences. As she spoke, mentioning the names of Garland, of Poole, and finally of Braden, she saw his face cloud and darken. The frank, genial lights of love and laughter left his eyes; they became hard, brooding, watchful.

"Well," she asked, "what do you think? Isn't that my property—*our* property?"

"I supposed so from what you told me, but I never knew where your lines ran. How did you know your boundaries?"

"I didn't really know them, I'm afraid. Uncle Godfrey just generally indicated where they were, from the house. But I know he said that hill was inside them."

"Your deeds would show; but Judge Riley has sent them away to be registered. I don't remember the description in them."

"But couldn't we find the corner-posts if the land was surveyed?"

"Perhaps it wasn't surveyed. Surveys are usually up to the purchaser. Your land is part of a larger block owned by Braden. I think he owns land on both sides of it. He got it for about fifty cents an acre, and he got the Tetreau place for next to nothing. The description in the deed would give a starting point, then so many chains that way and so many another, and it would work out to the acreage, but no actual survey may have been made."

In fact the only means of determining the actual boundaries were the deeds themselves, which were temporarily inaccessible.

"I'll go over the ground to-morrow anyway," Angus said, "and look for a line. And I'll see what these fellows are doing."

"Oh, I forgot! This Garland told me nobody was to be allowed on the ground. Those were his instructions."

"They were, were they. It's easy to give instructions. I believe Garland and Poole had something to do with my ditch. They're just the sort Braden could hire to do a thing like that. And now they're in charge of this coal prospect! There's something queer about it. I wonder if that was why your uncle was trying to buy you out?"

"Why," she exclaimed, startled, "surely you don't think he knew of this coal! Oh, he couldn't!"

"It looks to me like a reasonable explanation."

"But if it is my land, how can Mr. Braden say it's his?"

"I don't know," Angus replied, "but I do know that Braden will do anything he thinks he can get away with."

Early the following morning Angus and Rennie rode away. The latter, to Angus' surprise, was wearing a gun.

"What do you want that for?" Angus asked.

"I don't know," Rennie replied, "but I know if I need her she's going to be there. This claim-jumpin' is as risky as foolin' with another man's wife. You never can tell."

"But we're not going to jump them."

"All right. But maybe they'll take a notion to jump us. I don't aim to be crowded by no dam' rock-gang like Braden 'd hire for a job he thought there might be trouble about."

They found the boundaries of the old Tetreau holding without difficulty, and with these for a base began to prospect for others. After a long search they found what appeared to be an old line which had been cut through brush, but new growth had almost choked it.

"She was run a long time ago," Rennie decided. "Longer 'n when your wife's pa bought all this scenery. It looks to me like she might be the line of the block Braden owns."

"We can take a sight and see where the line hits the mountain," Angus suggested.

They took a rough sight, with stakes set as nearly as possible in the center of the old line, and they found that the line, produced, would strike to the northwest of the round mountain. Therefore if this line was the northwestern boundary of Faith's land, it would include the coal deposit claimed by Braden.

"Braden skins his hand mighty close before he puts down a bet," said Rennie. "If he's openin' up a prospect, he's likely organized to back her. My tumtum is to wait till you get them deeds back and then have a survey made, or, anyway, see Riley."

"We can go and have a look at what they're doing, and hear what they have to say. I like Braden's nerve, giving orders to keep people off. What the devil does he think this country is? If there wasn't something crooked about the thing he wouldn't mind who took a look at it. I'm going to have a look, anyway."

They rode toward the mountain, eventually striking into the trail which Faith had followed on the

preceding day. As they approached they could hear the sounds of work in progress, and suddenly they came upon a man planting posts. A roll of wire lay on the ground. The man stepped into the trail.

"Hold on," he said. "You can't go any further."

"Is that so?" said Rennie. "The trail looks like it went some farther."

"Well, *you* don't," the other retorted. "Them's orders."

"Whose orders?" Angus asked, crowding forward.

"The boss'—Braden."

"Braden be damned!" said Angus. "Get out of the way. Give me the trail, you, or I'll ride plum' over you!" As he spoke he touched his horse with the heel, and the guardian of the trail gave ground, cursing, but followed them as they rode out on the bench and into the presence of a group of three—Braden, Garland and Poole.

Angus halted, and without paying the least attention to them, took in his surroundings. Then he shifted his gaze to the trio, eying them in a silence which was broken by Mr. Braden.

"What do you want here?" he demanded, in a voice which he endeavored to make stern.

"To see what you're doing on what I think is my wife's property."

Mr. Braden laughed.

"Your wife's property! Not much. Her land—if you mean what I sold to her father—lies east of here. This is mine. I bought it from the government fifteen years ago."

Mr. Braden's tone was loud, assertive. But his eyes, after a moment, shifted away from Angus' steady stare.

"You're lying!" the latter said.

"Lying, am I?" Braden snarled. "You'd better be careful what you say, young man. This is my land, and I have the grant. Your wife has her deeds, hasn't she? Take a look at them before you come here shooting off your mouth."

Obviously, that was the thing to do.

"Why were you and French trying to buy my wife's property?" Angus bluffed.

"I don't know anything about French," Mr. Braden asserted, "but I never tried to buy your wife's property. It has nothing to do with this. I gave the deeds of what I sold her father, to French, as his agent. I don't know whether he tried to buy it from her or not, and I don't care."

Angus felt that he was up against a blank wall. The deeds alone would settle the question conclusively. But possibly Braden held the erroneous idea that the deeds had been lost or destroyed. He knew that French had held them unregistered. He might think that Faith could not produce evidence of ownership.

"In case you have any doubt about it," Angus said, "I may tell you that French gave the deeds to my wife before he died."

But Mr. Braden merely grinned. "Well, read them," he said. "And keep off my property after this."

"You seem fairly anxious about that," Angus retorted. "You're trying to put something over, Braden, and I give you notice to be careful. I've had my satisfy of your dirty work."

"And I give you notice to keep off my property," Mr. Braden snarled. "You get off now, or I'll have my men throw you off!"

Angus laughed, his temper beginning to stir.

"Tell 'em to go to it!" he challenged. "You old crook, you've been trying to get me ever since I was a kid. You thought you'd get my ranch, and you came mighty near it. I'll play even with you some day, and with the bunch you hired last summer to blow my ditch. Do you get that, Garland, and you, Poole?"

"I don't know what you mean?" Garland returned.

"I never done nothing to you," Mr. Poole declared nervously.

Angus eyed them grimly. "It's lucky for both of you I'm not sure," he said.

But the dispute had attracted the attention of the workmen. They rested on their tools, watching, listening curiously. The presence of these reserves gave Mr. Braden heart.

"Get out of here!" he shouted, his voice shrill with nervous rage. "Get off my property, and stay off! Talk about your ranch! Yours? Bah! Bought in by a remittance man that's chasing your sister! Hi, boys! run these fellows out!"

The men started forward, and Angus recognized the leader as the big Swede who had once been handled so roughly by Gavin French. But Mr. Braden's taunt, his reference to Chetwood and

Jean, had cut deep. Suddenly his temper, already smouldering hotly, burst into flame. He left his saddle with a vaulting spring, and as he touched the ground leaped for Mr. Braden. His hand shot out and fastened upon his shoulder.

Mr. Braden uttered a cry like the squeal of a rat beneath an owl's claws. Angus jerked him forward, and drew back his right fist. But something, perhaps the age or lack of condition of the man, restrained him. "You old skunk!" he gritted; and releasing the shoulder opened his right hand and swung it wide, stiff-armed. His palm cracked against Mr. Braden's cheek and ear with a report like a pistol, knocking him flat.

But the man who had followed them from the trail sprang upon Angus from behind, trying for the small of the back with his knees. The shock drove Angus into Garland. The three became a locked mass. Suddenly it disintegrated. Garland staggered back, his hands to his face. The guardian of the trail, torn from his hold, was lifted and hurled upon the earth. Poole, stooping as Angus freed himself, caught up a rock. Garland, his face covered with blood, was reaching beneath his coat.

"Drop that rock!" Rennie roared. "Nick Garland, h'ist your hands!" Gun in hand he menaced the oncoming rush of men. "Keep back there!" he rasped. "Drop them mucksticks! You big Swede with that hammer, I got my eye on you. Hands up, the bunch! Sky 'em. Now—*freeze!*"

The commotion was suddenly stilled. The little man on the horse dominated the situation. His gun menaced, controlled.

Mr. Braden quavered shrill denunciation.

"I'll have you arrested!" he threatened, his hand to his injured cheek. "Assault! Trespass! Threatening with deadly weapons! We'll see what the law has to say about this!"

"Well, don't overlook this here little statute I got in my hand," Rennie warned him. "This is one law you can't make work crooked for you."

Garland cursed, shaking his fist. "If you want gun law you'll get it!" he threatened.

"I will, hey!" Rennie retorted. "I been wise some time to that shoulder gun you pack under your coat, and I'll tell you what I'll do: I'll get down off'n this cayuse and put up both hands empty and let you get your hands on your gun butt. And then I'll bust your arm while you're drawin'! How'd that suit you, you dam' four-flush?"

But Garland did not see fit to accept the challenge. Rennie eyed him with contempt. "I guess bushwhackin' 's about your limit," he said; "and I dunno' 's you pack the nerve for *that*. Come on, Angus, let's go!"

When they were down the trail and riding side by side Rennie shook his head.

"Now maybe you see how handy a gun can come in. But all that didn't do no good. Your wife either owns the property or she don't, and the way Braden talked, he seemed to be mighty sure about it. If I was you I'd go and see Judge Riley."

Angus did so the next day.

"If you had come in yesterday instead of going off half-cocked," the judge told him severely, "I could have shown you the deeds. They came back some days ago. The only thing to do is to get Barnes or somebody to make a survey and see what its boundaries are."

Angus hunted up Barnes, the local surveyor, and drove him out to Faith's ranch. The place of beginning named in the deed was with reference to the eastern corner of the large block owned by Braden. Thence Barnes ran his line west until according to the wording of the deed he reached the spot which should be the easterly corner of Faith's property. Planting a post there he continued to work west. Reaching the spot which according to the description was the southwest corner, he turned off his angle to work north. Angus peered through the instrument, noting where the cross-hairs notched upon the landscape.

"Are you sure this is right?" he asked.

"Of course I'm sure," Barnes replied somewhat tartly. "If you think I don't know my business you can get somebody else."

"Then," said Angus, "this survey won't take in that round mountain at all?"

"Not a foot of it," Barnes replied. "The line will run just by its east base."

And when the survey was completed it was evident that Faith's deeds gave her no title whatever to the land claimed by Mr. Braden. The deeds were conclusive; Barnes' survey accurate. Suspicions amounted to nothing.

CHAPTER XXXV

BRADEN MISSES SOME PAPERS

The discovery of coal coming on top of sudden activity in railway survey filled the hills with prospectors, amateur and otherwise. But no further discoveries were made. Indeed, Mr. Braden's discovery had been made by accident, according to his own account of it, which was more or less along historic lines. He proceeded serenely with development. He spoke largely of potential output, refusing to consider tentative proposals. Later he might organize a company and offer shares to the public, but just then he preferred to keep the entire ownership himself. He became a personage of more local importance than ever, deferred to, his opinions quoted. In this notoriety he basked as in the sun. Almost daily he visited his prospect.

He was driving back to town one evening when he met Gerald French. Mr. Braden, who for reasons of his own had rather avoided these young men since their father's death, nodded pleasantly and would have passed on, but Gerald stopped and held up his hand.

"I'd like to have a little talk with you," he said.

"Can you come in to-morrow? I'm rather in a hurry. To-night I have to preside at a meeting."

"What I have to say won't take long," young French told him. "I want to come to a definite understanding with you about this coal property."

Mr. Braden, for reasons of his own, experienced a decidedly nervous feeling. "Huh!" he said. "An understanding! What do you mean?"

"You know damned well what I mean," Gerald replied. "You and my father were in this thing together. He had an interest—or was to have one. We expect to have the same interest. Is that clear enough for you?"

It could not be much clearer, but nevertheless Mr. Braden if not bewildered gave an excellent imitation of that state of mind.

"Your father's interest in my coal property!" he exclaimed. "There is some mistake. Your father had no interest."

"Oh, yes, he had," Gerald maintained.

"But I tell you you are mistaken," Mr. Braden protested. "I give you my absolute assurance that he had no interest whatever."

"Your assurance—hell!" Gerald sneered. "What do you take me for, anyway? Do you think I'm not wise to you?"

"If you have any evidence of your father's interest, produce it," Mr. Braden returned.

"So that's the ground you take, is it?" said Gerald. "Well, I guess you know I haven't any evidence that would hold. But all the same the two of you were partners in this deal. I know it, whether I can prove it or not. And what we want is to be let in on this on a fifty-fifty basis with you."

"You do, hey?" Mr. Braden replied sharply. "Well, you won't be. Your father had no interest at all. As it is, he owes me money, which—"

"Forget it!" Gerald interrupted. "He steered a lot of business your way, and I'll bet you broke better than even. As for the coal, I saw a sample of it on his desk months ago. *You* weren't giving out samples. Then he was trying to buy the Winton property. Buy it? He couldn't have bought anything the way he was fixed at the time, and you know it. You were going to put up for it, and you know that, too."

"What has that to do with the coal?"

"It had something to do with it. I'm telling you that we want a slice, and we're going to have it—somehow."

"If you think I'm going to give away property to people who have no right to it, you're much mistaken," Mr. Braden stated emphatically. "If you can bring any evidence—"

"I told you I couldn't, because I think you know that already. And you probably know we are broke. Being broke, we're not going to be particular about how we get money."

"Are you threatening me?" Mr. Braden asked somewhat nervously.

"Call it what you like. You're pretty smooth, Braden, but you're also a hog; and you're a fool to hold out on us. You'll lose by it. Do you think I don't know where the money came from for a lot of things—for blowing Mackay's ditch for instance? Do you suppose I thought Garland was putting up himself?"

"Are you trying to blackmail me?" Mr. Braden demanded.

"No," Gerald replied. "I'm giving you a chance now to come through."

"You won't get any money from me," Mr. Braden declared. "I financed your father from time to time for reasons of—er—friendship, but I'm not going to do the like for you young men. If you want money, earn it like other people."

"That's your last word, is it?"

"Absolutely my last."

"All right," said Gerald. "Now go ahead, Braden, and be careful you don't bump into something hard."

Mr. Braden drove on. At first Gerald's words gave him considerable uneasiness, but as he thought them over he came to the comfortable conclusion that they were principally bluff. Gerald had admitted that he had no evidence of his father's interest. Also they were broke, as Mr. Braden knew very well. All they had was the ranch, which was mortgaged to the hilt, and the mortgage was far in arrears. Likely they would get out of the country, scatter and go to the devil individually.

He had seen no more of Angus Mackay, though he knew that the latter had had a survey made. There could be no collusion between Mackay and the French boys, to embarrass him. The latter were all more or less hostile to Mackay, and especially Blake.

So Mr. Braden drove home, had supper, presided at his meeting and sought his own apartments. There, having lighted his lamp, he opened his little safe and, taking out a bundle of papers, returned with them to the light. By rights, the papers which he had abstracted from the safe of Godfrey French should have been on top of the bundle; but they were not. He stripped off the rubber band which bound the bundle, and ran through it rapidly. He could not find what he sought.

Mr. Braden sat up straight, his eyes widening in an expression which bore a strong family resemblance to fear. Once more, with fingers which shook a little, he went through the papers. Nothing! And yet he had a distinct recollection of snapping that rubber band around them.

Catching up the lamp he set it beside the safe and went through its contents. His movements became more hurried, more nervous as his search progressed. But at the end of it, when he had gone through the contents of the safe half a dozen times, it was absolutely certain that his search was in vain. He rose to his feet, but sat down because something seemed to have happened to the stiffening of his knees.

"My God!" he said aloud, "they're gone!"

It appeared to be a shocking discovery. He had found the safe locked, but somebody must have had access thereto. He felt for the key which hung behind the safe, and found it. Nobody, to his knowledge, knew of that hiding place; but somebody must have known of it. Naturally, he thought of Gerald French. But if French had gone through his safe, he would have dropped some hint of it during their interview.

A new thought struck him. Was anything else missing? Engrossed in the search for those particular papers he had not thought of that. He had no schedule of the safe's contents, but he had an excellent memory. Once more he went through the papers on the floor, and at last he straightened up from his task with a full-sized oath.

"Nick Garland!" he muttered. "That envelope is gone, too!"

Now, some years before, Garland had secured money from Mr. Braden on a promissory note, apparently endorsed by a well-to-do but somewhat illiterate rancher. When the note matured Garland was unable to meet it, and Mr. Braden intimated that he would have recourse to the liability of the endorser. Whereupon Garland, in a panic, had admitted that he himself had reproduced the rancher's painful scrawl. Mr. Braden secured his signature to a statement to that effect, and filed it away with the note. Eventually Garland paid or worked out the face of the note, but Mr. Braden kept it and the confession as well; Garland for obvious reasons being unable to insist upon their delivery. Now the envelope containing that old note and the signed statement had disappeared. The inference, to Mr. Braden, required no elaborate reasoning.

CHAPTER XXXVI

TURKEY PLAYS A HAND

Mr. Braden's reasoning which fixed the responsibility on Garland, was perfectly logical; but his conclusion was entirely wrong. The missing documents were in the possession, not of Garland, but of Turkey Mackay. Turkey, on the night when he had seen Mr. Braden take certain papers from French's safe, had gone to that ranch to see young Larry about a horse. What he had seen, which included the fatal seizure of Godfrey French, had put his errand entirely out of his head. The papers which Braden had taken, he reasoned, must be important. The French boys would sure raise blazes if they knew of it. Hence, he had followed Braden home, debating the feasibility of holding him up and taking the papers by force, but had decided against it. Reaching town he had scurried around to the rear of Mr. Braden's apartments, and when the light went on had chinned himself up to the window and seen him place papers, which must be those in question, in the little safe; and he had also observed where Mr. Braden had secured the key.

Thereafter he merely awaited a favorable opportunity to investigate the safe. There must be private papers in it which Braden would be sorry to lose. A skunk like that would have a lot of

stuff he wouldn't want people to know about. Therefore, Turkey constructed a short ladder which, under cover of night, he concealed beneath a pile of old lumber in the rear of Mr. Braden's office. He found his opportunity in the night of the meeting at which Mr. Braden presided. It was a public meeting, and Turkey, looking in at the door of the hall, noted Mr. Braden on the platform. It was exactly what he had been looking for. The night was cloudy, dark, with a spatter of rain. Turkey made tracks for his shack, and securing a short bit of steel which bore a strong family resemblance to a jimmy, and a flashlight, hastened to the rear of Mr. Braden's building, erected his ladder, forced the window, found the key without difficulty and opened the safe.

At first he found the safe's contents disappointing. The old accounts and letters which he scanned hastily, seemed innocent, and what books there were contained no record of crime. The first item of interest was an envelope endorsed with Garland's name. This Turkey opened and read the contents. Grinning to himself he put them in his pocket. Anyway, he now had something on Garland. Searching further, he found what seemed to be a conveyance in duplicate from Braden to Sewell Winton. Turkey frowned, puzzled. Sewell Winton? That was the name of Angus' wife's father. Then those deeds should be in her possession. What was Braden doing with them?

Suddenly Turkey thought of the night he had seen Braden and French together in that very room, poring over documents which French had taken away. French was Angus' wife's uncle, and had bought the property she had lived on for her father, Turkey had heard. Now French had taken documents away; and Braden had stolen two documents from French's safe. Here were two documents which, though he could not identify them, were connected more or less with both men. Unless he could find others bearing directly on French, these must be the ones.

Having reached this conclusion with the simple logic of a savage working out a trail, Turkey placed the deeds in his pocket and continued his search; but he found nothing more connected with French, nor were there any other papers which looked suspicious. And so Turkey reluctantly closed the safe, replaced the key where he had found it, reflecting that it might come in handy again, and departed as he had come.

When he reached his shack he got into his bunk as being a position favorable to profound thought, but went to sleep before he thought of anything. In the morning breakfast absorbed his mental faculties until it was consumed. Then he lit a smoke and read all the papers through.

Those connected with Garland were obvious enough, self-explanatory, but he did not know just what to do with them. If he made them public he would have to account for his possession of them. That would not do. He would keep them for a while and see what turned up.

But the deeds were a different matter. They represented ownership, and so should be in the hands of his sister-in-law whom he had never seen. Why hadn't Braden or French given her these deeds? Why had Braden swiped them from French? The girl had been living on the land, so that she knew it belonged to her. Maybe, now that French was dead, that old skunk Braden was going to pretend that he never sold her father the place at all. But from what he, Turkey, knew of the old Tetreau lay-out, it wasn't worth going to much trouble about.

Suddenly Turkey whistled softly and swore to himself. He must be a bonehead! Braden wanted to get hold of that land because it was near his coal. Sure! That was it. The darn, old crook, trying to hold out on a girl after he'd made a strike like that on his own land! Why, the blanked, double-dashed old hog! Angus' wife must have the deeds at once, or Braden might put something over on her. It wouldn't do to trust the mail or any one else. He hated to go to the ranch, but he must give them to her himself.

Turkey thereupon saddled his blue mare and clattered away. The mare was in high spirits, the morning cool, and youth and good health surged in Turkey's veins. As he rode he sang classics of the old frontier which for excellent reasons have never been embalmed in type. Within a couple of miles of his destination the road dipped down to a wooden flat, crossed a creek and mounted a steep grade. Turkey, walking the blue mare, was half way up when a horse and rider appeared at the top. To his amazement they bore down on him at a run, and to his greater amazement the rider was a girl. For anybody to run a horse down that grade was to tempt Providence. But in a moment he realized that the horse was running away.

The girl had given up trying to hold him, and was letting him run. The animal, a powerful bay, had the bit, and his eyes showed white. His rider was sitting still, holding the horn with one hand, trying to adjust her body to the thumping jar of the downhill run. She was staying with it gamely, and though her face was white her mouth was set. She was a complete stranger to Turkey.

The latter was not foolish enough to endeavor to stop a runaway head on, on a grade. He wheeled his mare in to the bank, giving right-of-way.

"Stay with it!" he yelled. "I'll get you at the bottom!" And as the big bay thundered past he regained the road and sent the mare down after the runaway at a pace which even he considered risky.

He reached the bottom some fifty yards behind the bay, and for the first time called on the real speed of the mare. She overhauled rapidly, but as he drew nearly level and reached for the rein, the bay swerved, abandoned the road and took to the brush. But the blue mare was accustomed to hard riding after wild, long-legged steers up and down brush-covered coulees. She stuck to the bay, through an undergrowth that slashed and whipped, and once more brought Turkey level. This time he got a hold, and dragged the bay to a halt.

"Th—thank you!" the girl murmured, and swayed a little, catching the horn with both hands. "I—I think I'll get down, for a minute."

"Sure!" Turkey agreed, but as he saw how she slid from the saddle he leaped down and caught her.

"I'll be all right in a minute. I must have been frightened. It's so silly of me."

She sat down on the grass, and Turkey tied the bay to a sapling. This done he regarded the girl furtively, deciding that though not exactly pretty, she was mighty easy to look at. Blue eyes, fair hair, nice skin, tall and well-built. He hoped she wouldn't faint. That would be—well, it would be embarrassing. He wouldn't know what the—that is he would be helpless.

"I'm not going to faint," she said as if in answer to his thought. "I'm just shaken up."

Turkey nodded. A run down hill jolts even a hardened puncher at times. Girls were complicated machines—soft, too. Shaking up wasn't good for 'em. But in a moment the color began to come back to her cheeks.

"There," she said, "I feel better. I want to thank you really, now."

"That's all right," said Turkey. "I couldn't stop him on the grade; he'd have gone over, likely. What started him?"

"A piece of newspaper blew off the sides of the road under his feet. I couldn't hold him at all."

Turkey feebly expressed his opinion of people who dropped paper beside a road, the feebleness being due to the sex of his unknown companion.

The girl regarded him closely.

"You remind me of somebody," she said, "but I don't think I've ever seen you before."

"My name is Mackay," Turkey vouchsafed, and waited for a similar confidence which did not come.

"Mackay!" the girl exclaimed. Her eyes were veiled for a moment. When she again looked him in the face their expression had altered.

"Are you the Mr. Mackay who has a ranch somewhere near here?"

"That's my brother, Angus," Turkey replied.

"What a really Scotch name! Yours should be Donald, or Duncan, or Murdoch?"

"Worse than that," Turkey grinned. "Torquil. But most people call me 'Turkey.'"

"May I call you 'Turkey'?"

"If—if you like," Turkey stammered.

"Well, I do like. And I like *you*, Turkey."

"Huh!" said Turkey.

"Really and truly I do. Don't you like me?"

"I don't know you," the startled Turkey responded defensively.

"Oh, Turkey! what a speech! But wouldn't you like to know me better?"

Gosh! was this darn girl trying to be fresh, to flirt with him.

"I—I hadn't thought about it," he stammered.

"Oh, worse and worse! I want you to like me, and I want you to come and see me. I'm going to live here—in this district—for a while."

Turkey cast a longing eye at the blue mare. He would feel much safer in the saddle.

"Will you pay me a visit, Turkey—a nice, long visit. I'll make you comfy, really I will. I'd love to."

This was a holy fright.

"I'm mighty busy just now," he replied.

"You mean you won't. That's not nice."

"Well, maybe I'll drop around some time," Turkey relented.

"I'll look forward to it. And you know, Turkey dear"—Turkey jumped—"in the brave days of old when brave knights rescued ladies they were sometimes rewarded. Would you mind very much if I kissed you?"

Turkey backed hastily toward the faithful blue mare. This girl was crazy, and that was all there was to it. She shouldn't be out alone. A crazy girl, plum' bugs on men! A devil of a note! And it was his luck to get into a jackpot like that!

"You—you'd better not," he said desperately. "It wouldn't be right, anyway. I—I got consumption."

This amazing female laughed.

"Please let me kiss you, Turkey!"

"Not by a—I mean, no chance!" Turkey replied emphatically. "If you feel able to ride I'll go along with you to wherever you're going."

The girl rose obediently. But as Turkey turned to the horses two strong, rounded arms clasped him and warm lips pressed a kiss upon his cheek. Disengaged, he staggered back.

"It wasn't so bad, was it?" the girl laughed. "You won't be so shy next time." She drew a fringed buckskin glove from her left hand, and to Turkey's utter horror he beheld the dull gleam of gold upon the third finger.

A wedding ring! Oh Lord! Somebody's crazy wife. Suppose the husband showed up and found a kissing match going on!

"Turkey dear," said the crazy wife, "you haven't asked me who I am."

"Well, who are you?" said Turkey. Likely she would claim to be Joan of Arc or Pocahontas, and she would be calling him old Cap. Smith next.

"I am Faith Mackay, Angus' wife!"

"What!" Turkey gasped.

Faith laughed, her eyes dancing.

"I know you'll forgive me, Turkey. But you were so funny, and so be-yewtifully shy! You wouldn't come to our wedding, and I never saw you, and so I couldn't resist having a little fun with you."

Turkey grinned shamefacedly. "I thought you were crazy," he admitted.

"Yes, I thought you did. But I'm not—even if I did want to kiss you."

"You can do it again if you like," Turkey suggested with sudden enthusiasm.

"Perhaps I shall when you come to pay me that long visit."

Turkey frowned. "I guess you don't know how things are. Angus—"

"Now, Turkey, listen to me: The whole trouble with you Mackays is that you are too stiff-necked to get together and talk over your differences frankly. Angus has his faults, but his good qualities outweigh them. He's a *man*, Turkey, and I'm proud of him."

"Oh, he's a man, all right," Turkey admitted frankly. "I never said he wasn't. He's a darn good man; but all the same he's a darn hard man for me to get along with. But it's funny. I was going to the ranch to-day to see *you*."

"That was nice of you."

"I didn't mean it that way. I wanted to give you the deeds to your land."

"My deeds? But I have them."

"Are you sure?" Turkey exclaimed.

"Of course I'm sure. My uncle gave them to me before he died."

Turkey was crestfallen. She ought to know. Then what the dickens was the junk he had in his pocket? He produced the deeds and handed them to her.

"Well, all I know is that these look like deeds to your father. I thought you ought to have 'em, so I brought 'em along."

She regarded the papers with a puzzled frown.

"Why they seem just the same as the others. Why should there be two sets of deeds?"

"Search me," Turkey admitted. "They're the same, are they?"

"I think so. I mean they *look* the same, signatures and all." She read the description of the property. "A thousand acres. Yes, that's the same. Oh, wait! 'Beginning at a point ... and thence westerly—'" Her forehead wrinkled in an effort of recollection. "Why, Turkey, they *aren't*! I mean it's the same number of acres, but this puts my east corner further west. I'm almost sure—Oh!"

"What's the matter?" Turkey asked, for she was staring wide-eyed.

"Oh, don't you see—but of course you wouldn't because you don't know—but if these deeds are real—I mean if they are the real deeds—I own the land which Mr. Braden claims—the coal land!"

The comment which burst from the lips of the startled Turkey went unreprieved.

"Where did you get these?" Faith demanded.

Turkey told her the truth. When he had concluded Faith sat silent, thinking.

"Well," she said at last, "there are several things I don't understand. But one thing is clear enough: You must come back to the ranch, and you and Angus must be friends again. I'm going to insist on that. No more misunderstandings. We all owe you a great deal, Turkey. And I'm going to kiss you again."

CHAPTER XXXVII

DUPLICATE DEEDS

Angus entering the ranch house from the rear, was amazed to see Turkey with his wife and Jean. But when he learned of the runaway he took his brother's hand in a hard grip.

"Go easy!" Turkey objected, rescuing his crushed digits. "You've got no business letting her ride that cayuse. He's a new one on me."

"It wasn't Doughnuts," Faith exclaimed. "It was that new bay, but I won't do it again. But it was worth it to meet Turkey and bring him home. Now you boys have got to make up. Turkey, tell him what you told me."

Turkey told that and more. He told of the conversation he had overheard between Garland and Poole.

"Why, I blamed you for that ditch business," Angus said.

"I know you did—now; but I didn't know it that night when you came to my shack."

Turkey proceeded. He told of seeing Braden take the documents from French's safe, and of how he had obtained them.

Angus scanned the deeds which Faith handed him, and going to a desk in the corner found those which French had given Faith. He spread them on the table and the four bent above them. Faith caught her breath sharply.

"The description of the land *is* different!" she cried.

"Yes, it throws your land further west—all of it. According to this your west line would be about where we thought it was—where French originally told you it ran."

"Then—?"

"Then if these are the original deeds, you own the coal prospect that Braden is developing."

"If they are the originals the others must be forgeries."

"Yes. It's plain enough. The originals were made by Braden and witnessed by French. Somehow they found this coal and then they tried to buy you out. When you wouldn't sell but demanded your deeds, they prepared new ones, moving your block east and leaving out the coal lands. That was easy, because Braden owned land on either side of yours. All they had to do was to sign the new deeds themselves. Where they slipped up was in not destroying the originals. I don't understand that, unless French thought their possession would give him a hold on Braden if he didn't play fair with the coal. Braden should have destroyed them when he stole them from French."

"But what are we going to do about it?"

"I had better see Judge Riley."

"What's the matter with you and me and maybe Dave going up there and standing up the bunch and running them off?" Turkey suggested. "I'd like to hold a gun on Garland. I'm going to get him. That was a dirty trick—"

"We'll get him. But Braden's the man I'm after. I'll give him a taste of the law he's so fond of."

"I'm thinking of Kathleen," Faith interposed. "If Braden was a forger, so was her father."

"But you can't let that deprive you of a hill full of coal."

"No, I didn't mean that. But if there is any way in which it can be kept quiet please take it."

"That will depend on Braden," Angus replied. "Anyway, I'll see Judge Riley the first thing to-morrow."

In the morning they entered Judge Riley's office before the judge had lighted his first pipe. He listened to Turkey's story, puffing hard, occasionally rumpling his gray mane.

"I knew it," he said. "I knew that some time Braden would put his foot outside the law. Your potential law-breaker merely waits for an opportunity which he thinks is safe. Braden thought he was safe enough, and he is a pretty cautious individual. It is one thing to be morally sure that he

committed forgery and another to prove it. Now, let's see what evidence we have to go on."

He spread out both sets of documents on his desk and studied them intently.

"Both," he observed after an interval, "are in my opinion actually signed by Braden and French—one as grantor and the other as witness. I know their signatures very well. The notarial certificate of execution is not material, because it is separate, and could easily have been detached from the originals and attached to the others."

"Your theory is that the deeds delivered by French to your wife were prepared recently. Let us see if we can find anything in the deeds themselves to corroborate that. They are on identical legal forms, and seem to have been written on the same machine, for the same letters show poor alignment, and the face of one, the small 'c' appears to have been injured. Let me see: I have some old letters of Braden's."

Rising he took down an old letter file and searched through it, finally removing a letter.

"This, like these deeds, is dated some seven years ago, and was written in Braden's office. It exhibits the same peculiarities of type."

"Well, wouldn't that show that both deeds were drawn seven years ago?" Angus deduced in disappointment, for so far the judge's words were not encouraging.

"Not as bad as that. It would show merely that both were prepared on a machine owned by Braden seven years ago. Here are other letters from him, written on another and presumably more modern machine. He may have the old one yet. It merely points to careful preparation—painstaking forgery. But Turkey, here, cannot testify positively that Braden was carrying a machine in the case that night, nor did he see him write anything on a machine. He cannot identify the machine that he did see."

"No," Turkey admitted.

"So that even if we found the old machine in Braden's possession, it would prove nothing," the judge went on. "Nor can you positively identify the documents you saw Braden abstract from French's safe?"

"No."

The judge rumbled his mane and reflected.

"The writing is slightly fainter in the deeds which we are trying to prove are the more recent. That might go to show either that they were written long ago, or recently with a dry or worn ribbon such as might well be in an old, discarded machine. But there is not enough difference to get us anywhere on that line. We can't depend on the testimony of Braden's stenographer, for it is too long ago. She would probably identify both as having been written on or about the dates which they bear, merely by the peculiarities of type of the machine she used then. Her evidence would probably be against us."

"But take the whole thing," Angus urged. "Take French's attempt to buy my wife out."

"Unfortunately, you have no evidence to connect Braden with that. He would deny all connection under oath, as he did to you. When you set out to prove a case out of the mouth of a hostile witness, you are embarking on a very doubtful enterprise. The fact is, Braden himself is the only witness, and there is nothing so far to contradict the evidence he will undoubtedly give if called."

"But how can he account for the existence of two sets of deeds?"

"I don't know," the judge replied, "but he will account for them. Don't underestimate him. He's a cunning fox. Suppose I put myself in his place. Assume that the documents delivered to your wife by French are forgeries. The originals I should have destroyed, but did not. They are stolen from my safe. I do not know who has them. I may suspect Garland, because of the disappearance of the other paper, but I am not sure. In any event I must provide against the possibility that they may be used against me. Now what story will hold water? What would be plausible?"

He drummed his spatulate fingers on his desk, his eyes half closed.

"My effort," he resumed after a moment's silence, "has been to duplicate the originals in every detail, to make it appear that the second were prepared some seven years ago. Then my explanation must be one which will naturally account for the preparation of two sets of deeds on or about the same date. And that can only be because there was some mistake in the first which rendered the preparation of the second necessary. Now, what is the most natural mistake, the most everyday, common mistake?"

He paused again.

"Misdescription!" he announced, "a misdescription of the property, a clerical error in that. And it's so profoundly simple! The instrument signed and witnessed carelessly, without comparison; then the discovery that the land was wrongly described, followed by the preparation of a second conveyance, and neglect to destroy the first, which of course is void both by error and lack of delivery. There you are! That's Braden's defense. And the devil of it is, that without evidence to contradict it it's perfectly good."

"Do you mean he gets away with it?" Turkey exclaimed.

"On the face of it he does," the judge replied, "but sometimes faces alter. No man can construct evidence without a weak spot somewhere. Leave these papers with me. I'll think the whole thing over again."

When his clients had gone he refilled his pipe and put his feet on his desk. He sat for an hour, motionless, his cold pipe between his teeth. Then once more he scrutinized the deeds carefully, looking at the faulty type. At last he held them to the light and peered at them. Then he brought his gnarled old fist down.

"By George!" he muttered, "it's a slim chance, and unprofessional as the devil, but it's about the only one I see. As matters stand, it would be folly to launch an action. 'Conscience makes cowards.' That's truer than most proverbs, and Braden's a rank coward at heart. I'll give him a few days to get really nervous, and then I'll try it. It may work—yes, it *may* work."

CHAPTER XXXVIII

GARLAND PLAYS A HAND

As Mr. Braden was quite sure that Garland had abstracted the deeds he expected to receive a proposition from him. When this did not come he was puzzled. What was Garland waiting for? Was it possible that he was dickering with Mackay?

The result of this uncomfortable suspicion was that he began to sound Garland, speaking carelessly of Faith's claim to the property, ridiculing it. Garland, being by no means a fool, began to wonder why Braden recurred to the subject, and began to lead him on.

"What made her think she owned the thing?" he asked. "If her deeds are all right they ought to show her what's hers."

This confirmed Braden's suspicions.

"You heard Mackay say French gave them to her before he died."

"Yes, I heard that," said Garland. But if Braden kept insisting on those deeds there must be something crooked about them. If they had been made years ago, why hadn't they been handed over? And why was Braden talking to him? The only answer was that he must be supposed to know something which he did not. However, being a fair poker player he remembered that the bluff of a pat hand has been known to win. He shot at a big venture: "As long as she doesn't know any more than those deeds tell her, I guess she won't make you any trouble," he said.

There was no doubt at all in Mr. Braden's mind now about Garland.

"Look here," he said, "are you going to make trouble for me—I mean are you going to try to?"

Garland was amazed at the result of his random shot, but had no objection to picking up the birds thus fallen at his feet.

"Not if you do the fair thing," he replied.

"What do you call fair?" Mr. Braden demanded.

Garland was in deep water. Braden wanted him to put a price on silence. Well, he had no idea of the price Braden would be prepared to pay.

"Fifty-fifty," he replied at a venture.

"Fifty-fifty!" Mr. Braden echoed. "Why, you hold-up, you sneaking safe-robber, I'll see you damned first. Those deeds you stole aren't worth the paper they're written on."

Here was real news for Garland. Deeds had been stolen from Braden's safe. If they were the real deeds of the property and French and Braden had delivered bogus ones to that girl, then Braden was in a devil of a mess. And Braden thought *he* had them.

"I'll take a chance on that," he replied.

But Mr. Braden, since the loss of the deeds, had been busy mentally constructing a bomb-proof defense, and this had taken very nearly the form anticipated by Judge Riley.

"Then you won't get a nickel out of it," he told Garland. "They might make a certain amount of trouble, but that's all. I'm not going to be held up. You think because you stole that old note and statement of yours when you took the deeds that I've no strings on you? Well, you try anything and see."

Garland in his surprise nearly exposed his hand. Here was a rotten complication, which gave him a very live interest in the affair. While evidence of his old transgression was in Braden's hands he had been sure it would not be used. But now somebody else had it. Who would have an interest in taking it, as well as deeds affecting the coal lands? Obviously Mackay, who would like nothing

better than to get something on him.

The position, then, in Garland's mind was that Angus Mackay had evidence which proved his wife's title to the coal lands. But Braden thought that he, Garland, had it. Mackay, also, had evidence of his, Garland's old forgery. He must get that back. As to Braden's misapprehension he must turn that to his own advantage. Braden, in his opinion, was simply bluffing as to the nonimportance of the deeds. If he could get hold of them he could hold Braden up. Also he would knock Mackay out of a very promising property. But he must lose no time. It was a wonder Mackay had not taken some action already.

"Keep your shirt on," he advised Braden. "Don't try to bluff me. You know if Mackay got hold of those papers it would raise the devil with you. They show who really owns the property."

"They are a mistake," Mr. Braden returned. "I mean they were drawn by mistake. French gave the girl her deeds."

Garland grinned. "Suppose he had given her the others, where would you be?"

"Suppose nothing of the sort!" Mr. Braden snapped. "I tell you they're no good. You might as well give them back to me."

"What do you want them for—if they're no good?" Garland grinned.

"I'll give you a hundred dollars for them."

Garland merely laughed, and though Mr. Braden increased his offer to five hundred it was not accepted. He was reluctant to go higher, first, because it would show Garland that he considered the deeds worth real money; and second, because Garland did not seem anxious to press his blackmail. The latter circumstance puzzled Mr. Braden. What was Garland up to, anyway? He did not threaten to deal with Mackay, after that single reference to him. Mr. Braden knew that he hated Angus, and preferably would not deal with him. And so it was his own play to wait and let the next suggestion come from Garland. There, temporarily, the matter rested, because neither was in a position to press it to a finish.

But Mr. Braden, though he had what so far as he could see was a perfectly good legal defense, experienced certain inward qualms. There was always the possibility that something might go wrong with a defense, if it came to that. That old Riley, for instance, who looked like a scarred Airedale, would enjoy baiting him. He might find some flaw, some kink of law, which might be embarrassing. Mr. Braden knew that his nerve was not of the sort to stand a grueling by skilled counsel, especially if he slipped once or twice. His would be almost the sole evidence. There was comfort in that, but there was also responsibility.

Looking into the future Mr. Braden foresaw the possibility of a situation in which the possession of actual cash would be very convenient if not necessary. He might have to pay Garland a lump sum. Or, if he refused to do so and Garland made a deal with Mackay, he might have to stand a trial. It might be a mere civil action to establish the validity of the missing deeds; of it might be a charge of forgery. In any event it would give him most undesirable publicity. His affairs were very badly involved, and it would then be very hard to raise money. If all went well, the coal would pull him out of the financial hole he was in, and put him on his feet again. But meantime it would be prudent to get together as much cash as he could. And so, very quietly, he set about accumulating as much currency as possible, and as he obtained it he placed it in his office safe, having now no confidence in his private one. He regarded it as accident insurance.

Meanwhile, Garland was making arrangements of his own. The job of obtaining anything from Angus Mackay was not going to be easy, and reluctantly he made up his mind that it was too big to be tackled single-handed. Assistance meant sharing the profits, but unfortunately it seemed to be a case. He thought of Poole, and would have preferred him, but Mr. Poole packed no sand whatever. Finally he decided on Blake French. Not that Blake had any too much courage, but he hated Mackay, and having rapped him on the head once, he might be counted on to do it again if necessary. Poole might be used for a scout, without telling him a great deal.

Blake French fell in with Garland's proposals with alacrity. He had had trouble with his brothers since his father's death, culminating in a short but vicious battle with Larry, in which the latter had got the best of it. He suspected his brothers of having funds which they refused to share with him. He himself was flat broke, without money to pay for his numerous drinks. His brothers treated him as an outsider. He was sure they were holding out on him. If he could get a share in that coal proposition he would have the laugh on them; also it would be a chance to get square with Mackay. And so he and Garland began to lay plans looking to the acquisition of the missing deeds. The matter seemed simplified for them by the circumstance that Angus Mackay and his bride were now living, temporarily at least, in her cottage on the dry ranch. This strengthened the hypothesis that Mackay had the deeds and was living close to the coal prospect in order to keep an eye on it.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE TURNING OF THE SCREW

If Mr. Braden had been puzzled by Garland's conduct in the first instance, he became more so. Garland made him no proposition. The thought that the latter might be dickering with the French boys crossed Mr. Braden's mind, but was open to the objection that he would have to share blackmail with them. On the whole, Mr. Braden concluded that he had bluffed Garland. After a while the latter would part with the document cheaply.

Hence, when he received a visit from Judge Riley one day about the close of business hours, he was very little perturbed. Mackay perhaps had taken legal advice on his supposed right, or the judge might have come on other business. But the lawyer's first words cleared up that point.

"I am here," he said, "on behalf of my client, Mrs. Mackay. You are aware that she claims ownership of the land on which coal has been found?"

"Her claim is nonsense," Mr. Braden asserted stoutly.

"That's just what I am trying to clear up. As a result of what French told her she always supposed she owned the land."

"I'm not responsible for what French told her. I'm getting tired of this absurd claim of hers. Her land is described in her deeds. That's her evidence of title. You ought to know that."

"Yes, I know that," the judge admitted mildly. "As it happens, she is now able to produce a deed from you to her father conveying the land in question."

It was so entirely unexpected that Mr. Braden's heart decidedly misbehaved. How in the name of all bad luck had this happened? Had Garland, after all, made a dicker with Mackay? Had Mackay got those infernal deeds? Or had he merely a suspicion, which Riley was trying to confirm by a fishing trip for a damaging admission?

"Nonsense!" he said.

"Oh, no," the judge replied cheerfully. "To be quite frank with you, our position is this: French, shortly before his death, delivered to his niece a conveyance in duplicate from you to her father purporting to convey certain lands therein described. This land lies immediately east of the coal lands, but does not include them. We claim that this latter conveyance is the true and original one."

"Where did you get it?" Mr. Braden demanded.

"Suppose French, feeling his end approaching, gave it to his niece?"

"He—" Mr. Braden began and checked himself suddenly. Riley was laying verbal traps for him. He must be careful. "If you have this conveyance, let me see it."

"You will see it at the proper time."

"You mean that you haven't got it," Mr. Braden charged.

The judge smiled. "You think I am trying to trap you into an admission. Nothing of the sort. I said we could produce the documents. The only difference between them and the others is the description of the property. Same date, same witness. It's useless to deny the existence of documents which I myself have seen."

There was no doubt that the judge was telling the truth. So Garland had sold out to Mackay. Mr. Braden's front trenches were carried, but he believed his second line to be impregnable.

"I'm not denying its existence. I know all about the thing, including the fact that it was stolen from me."

"The main thing is that it exists."

"It exists, but it is worthless."

"My clients consider it rather valuable."

"I suppose they paid for it, but they've been stung. When I sold that land to Winton, a clerk in my office prepared the deeds and got the description wrong. When I discovered the error I had new deeds prepared and executed, and they are what I suppose French gave to Winton's daughter. I supposed he had given them to Winton long ago. So there you are! You've found a mare's nest, and that's all there is to it."

Judge Riley chuckled internally, though his face was grave. Braden was doing the obvious.

"Don't you compare conveyances before execution in your office?"

"Of course I do. But in this case the error was in the description which the clerk prepared and gave to the stenographer to copy. She copied it, and it was compared with what had been given her."

"Then who discovered the error?"

"I did. It struck me that the description was not correct."

"After you had signed it and French had witnessed it?"

"Y—yes." There was hesitation in his voice.

"Don't you read things over before you sign and have your signature witnessed? Why didn't it strike you then?"

"You aren't cross-examining me!" Mr. Braden asserted.

"Not at all. I am just trying to understand a situation which is rather extraordinary. Then, as I understand it, you had a new conveyance prepared, and delivered it to French, and that's all you know about it?"

"That's all," Mr. Braden confirmed.

"Why didn't you destroy the other one?"

"I suppose I overlooked it. The papers got among others."

"And into your private safe."

"Yes. And they were stolen from it."

"But then you say they're worthless. You say that the two sets of papers were drawn on the same day? The second wasn't prepared subsequently and dated back?"

Mr. Braden hesitated, trying to read the purpose behind the question. He was again beginning to distrust Riley, who undoubtedly resembled an Airedale.

"I'm almost sure it was the same day. It may have been the next."

"But at all events within, say, forty-eight hours?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps your stenographer might remember? Or your clerk?"

"That clerk is dead," said Mr. Braden without noticeable regret. "My stenographer might or might not remember. But she could identify the papers as being written about the same time on the same machine."

"How?"

"Because I had only one machine in my office at that time, and that had certain peculiarities of type. I scrapped it soon after that, and got a new one. If you'll compare the deeds, you'll see they must have been written on the same machine."

"A very fair point," the judge admitted blandly. "You have an excellent memory for details. But even if you establish that they were written on the same machine, it would not prove that they were written on the same day. For that you would have to depend on your evidence and that of your stenographer."

"I don't have to prove when they were written," Mr. Braden stated. "The date of an instrument is *prima facie* evidence. I know a little law myself, Riley."

"A little law is a very dangerous thing to know," the judge commented.

"And I'm not going to be cross-examined by you," Mr. Braden declared. "If you contend that those deeds were made at different times it's up to you to prove it. Can you do that, hey?"

"Yes," the judge replied. "Absolutely!"

Mr. Braden almost jumped, and his heart again misbehaved.

"H—how?" he asked in a voice which shook slightly.

"In this way," the judge replied: "The conveyance delivered by French to his niece and dated some seven years ago, is on paper bearing the watermark of a firm which did not exist, much less manufacture a single sheet of paper, until two years ago!"

It was a terrible blow, direct, unexpected, smashing through Mr. Braden's elaborate system of defense. It produced the shattering, shocking effect of high explosive. For a moment he was speechless. He rallied feebly.

"It's—it's a lie!" he stammered. "They were written on the same legal forms, printed by the same firm."

"On the same legal forms," the judge conceded. "But law stationers as a rule don't manufacture their own paper." His face became grim, his voice rose, and he drove his accusation home as in the old days of his greater prosperity he had broken other carefully prepared testimony.

"That one detail, Braden, overlooked by you and French, destroys entirely the plausible story you have invented. I am prepared to prove, and prove to the hilt, that the deeds delivered by French to my client are forgeries, prepared by you both to defraud a young woman of land which, instead of being worthless as you supposed it to be when you sold it to her father in fraudulent collusion with French, you suddenly discovered to have a high potential value. I say I am prepared to prove this, including the writing of the forged instruments on the same machine. I am prepared to

prove, too, how the original deeds passed from French's possession to yours. You are in danger of standing in the dock facing a charge which carries a very heavy penalty. You must decide here and now, whether or not you will face that charge, and the damning evidence which I am prepared to bring against you."

Mr. Braden quailed before the stern voice and menacing finger of the old lawyer. He was not of the stuff to fight up hill, to play out a losing game to the last chip. What was the use? The judge had the goods on him. He sagged in his chair, all fight gone, his face white, his heart choking him.

"Don'—don't prosecute me, Riley!" he pleaded in a shaking voice. "I'll do anything you say. What do you want?"

CHAPTER XL

SIGNS AND OMENS

The reason of the temporary residence of Angus and his wife at her cottage lay principally in her whim. Angus laughed at it, but yielded, and found it rather pleasant to be alone with his wife. From force of habit he found a number of jobs which needed doing, things which should be put in order before the winter; but Faith insisted that it was to be a holiday. And so by day they rode leisurely along the base of the hills, rested at noon beside clear springs, ate with healthy appetites, and in the evenings returned to the cottage. Then there would be the cheery open fire against the chill of the fall night, and by its flickering light the banjo would talk and whimper, and chuckle, until Faith, laying it aside, would snuggle against her husband, watching the red heart of the fire, giving free rein to fancy.

So, she thought and said, men and women had sat in the dim, forgotten nights of the world, when the Red Flower first bloomed on the rude hearts of cave and forest and beside the lone beaches of dead seas. Angus laughed at her fancies, but in his own heart the spell of gut and string and fire stirred something, too; and when the winds souged around the cottage and strained through the tree-tops he found himself listening subconsciously for he knew not what.

"You are a dreamer, too," Faith accused him.

"I will be in about ten minutes."

"You might as well 'fess up. I wonder if you and I ever sat before a fire in a cave, together?"

"I don't remember it, myself."

"Oh, you may laugh, but it seems real to me—to-night. The wind in the trees is like the hiss and roar of squall-swept seas. I can hear other things, too—the soft padding of feet, and heavy, grunting, snuffling breaths. That is the tiger or the great cave bear. But they can't get in, because you have rolled the stone against the mouth of our cave."

"Suppose I forgot it?"

"Then to pay for your carelessness, you would have to fight old Sabre Tooth. You would fight to the death for me, wouldn't you?"

"And for myself."

"Be gallant, please."

"Cave men weren't gallant. They walloped ladies with clubs and abducted them."

"Happy thought. You have abducted me. No, not that, either, because I was never anybody's but yours. But there is a very great warrior who is trying to take me from you."

"The old warrior sure has some nerve. What am I doing about that time?"

"You fight," she told him, her eyes on the heart of the fire, "while I stand by praying to the unknown God that you may kill him. And you do kill him. And then you set your foot on his body and shake your war club on high and shout a great wild song to the stars. Oh, I can see you now! There is blood on your face, and the club is dripping with it, and I can hear the fierce song!"

"I'll bet the singing is fierce, too," Angus commented. But to his surprise she was trembling in his arms, every nerve aquiver. "What the dickens! Old girl, you're shaking! There now, that's plenty of that nonsense. It isn't good for sleeping."

For a moment she clung to him. "I'm awfully silly. But somehow it seemed real—to-night. I wonder if it ever did happen?"

"Of course not."

"Well, it's funny. I was just making it up. And then suddenly I felt that instead of making it up I was *recollecting*."

As she paused, Angus' ear caught a faint sound from without. To him it resembled the faint creak of a board beneath a stealthy footstep. For an instant his body tensed.

"What's the matter?" Faith asked. "Have you nerves, too?"

"Not that I know of. Turn in now and get a good rest, and don't dream of things."

But when she had gone to her room he yawned, stretched himself, wound the clock and passed into the hall leading to the kitchen. There hung his belt with holster and gun. He took the gun, went swiftly through the kitchen and outside. He circled the house, but neither saw nor heard anything, and so he went in again. But when he turned in, having extinguished the light, he laid the gun on the floor beside the bed, and in the morning smuggled it out without Faith's knowledge. Before she had risen he examined the ground around the house, but found no footprints other than their own. And so he came to the conclusion that whatever he had heard had not been a footstep.

He pottered around all morning, and in the afternoon decided to ride in to town and see Judge Riley. The latter might have some news.

"Well, I won't go," Faith decided. "I have bread to bake, and it's too far, anyway. I'll have supper ready when you get back."

But when Angus reached the judge's office it was closed. In the post office he found a note from him, consisting of four words: "Want to see you," and upon inquiry he learned that the lawyer had driven out with Dr. Wilkes to see a rancher named McLatchie who being taken suddenly ill had sent for legal as well as medical assistance. Angus decided to wait. As he strolled down the street he met Rennie emerging from Dr. Wilkes' office.

"Hello," he said. "What's the matter with *you*?"

"Nothing with me," Rennie returned. "I was just doin' an errand. But they tell me the doc's out."

"What is it?" Angus asked, for Rennie's face was troubled.

"You ain't heard? Well, Mary, that granddaughter of old Paul Sam, has been missin' some days, and to-day they find her—drowned."

"Good Lord!" Angus exclaimed. "How did it happen?" Rennie's face darkened.

"I dunno. They say she drowned herself. They say some white man is mixed up in it. She was a notch or two above the ordinary klootch, and so—oh, well, it's just the same old rotten mess!"

"Poor girl!" Angus said after a moment of silence. "This will be hard on old Paul Sam. Do the Indians know this white man?"

"I dunno. I heard—mind you I dunno what there is in it—that Blake French is the man. He's dirty enough. But I dunno's the Injuns know it. I seen old Paul Sam. He wasn't talkin'. Just sittin' starin' straight ahead. And the klootch lyin' on her bed alongside him where they'd put her down. Ugh! Some of 'em wanted to send the doc out. He makes reports of deaths and such to the government, and then he's coroner. So I come."

The event touched Angus deeply. He had known the dead girl all his life. She was, as Rennie said, a notch or two above the ordinary klootch. Paul Sam, too, was a good Indian, a friend of his and of his father's, so far as the white man who knows the Indian admits him to friendship. It would be a heavy blow for the old man. But unless some of the young bucks took the law into their own hands it was unlikely that the man responsible for the tragedy—Blake French or another—would suffer at all.

It was long after dark when the judge drove in, and Angus waiting at the livery stable, greeted him.

"How's McLatchie?" he asked. The judge, with emphasis, consigned McLatchie to torment.

"A bellyache!" he exclaimed, "and he thought he was going to die. I wanted Wilkes to cut him open, just as a lesson. And will you believe me, the damned Scotch—I beg your pardon, Angus, I mean the damned lowlander—when the fear of God produced by the fear of death left his rotten heart with the pain from his equally rotten stomach, refused to make his will. I made him do it, though—and pay for it. Well, you got my note. Come up to the office, where we can talk."

But when he had lit a couple of lamps which illuminated his office and turned to his desk he stopped short.

"Somebody's been in here," he said. "Things are not as I left them." He drew out the drawers of his desk. "Aha!" he exclaimed, for the papers they held had evidently been taken out and jammed back in disorder. "Now what misguided idiot thought a law office worth robbing? I wonder, now—By the Lord! but I believe that's it!"

"What?"

"Why somebody's been after *your* documents," the judge replied. "O-ho, Braden, me buck! You must think I'm a fool!"

"You mean you think Braden was trying to get back the original deeds?"

"And something else. It's a poor tribute he pays to my intelligence, thinking I'd leave such papers lying at the mercy of a flimsy door lock. People think I am careless, old-fashioned, because they can't see a safe in my office. Well, anybody can blow a safe—if the safe can be found. I had one blown once, and it was nearly the ruin of me. But look here!" A section of wainscoting swung out under his hand, revealing the face of a steel safe. "No local man had anything to do with installing this," the judge said; "and back of it is a false wall to my inner room." He spun the combination and threw the door open. Taking out a thick envelope he drew from it a single sheet of paper which he handed to Angus.

Angus read in amazement. It was a brief statement signed by Braden acknowledging forgery by French and himself, and an acknowledgment of the authenticity of the original deeds.

"How on earth did you get this?" he asked.

The judge told him.

"Well, that was mighty clever of you," Angus said in admiration. "I'd never have thought of that."

"Braden didn't either," the judge said drily. "And what's more he never thought that my statement about the watermark might be worth verifying."

"Do you mean you bluffed him?" Angus exclaimed.

"It was the only way," the judge nodded. "His story, stuck to through thick and thin, would have prevailed because we had no evidence to contradict it. But being guilty, it never occurred to him to demand an inspection of the papers. It may have occurred to him now. He may have searched my office in my absence, hoping to get back his confession as well as the deeds. But most of us realize our mistakes too late."

"Judge" Angus said solemnly, "you are a wonder."

"When I was your age I would have agreed with that," the judge grinned. "But I am merely an old dog with some experience of foxes. This settles Braden's hash. He will leave town—and possibly leave some creditors."

"I thought he had plenty of money."

"He has lost a good deal lately in speculation—lost it or tied it up. I imagine he will get together what cash he can and leave. His debts are none of my business. I will now have these deeds registered, and you will have no more trouble about title."

"When you send me your bill, put in the watermark."

"My bill will have a sufficiently high watermark to suit you," the judge chuckled. "And now, young man, I'm too old to be modest. Naturally you will incorporate, sooner or later, to work this property to advantage. I want to incorporate you, and I want such of the company's legal work as I am competent to handle."

"That's all of it."

"I meant that," the judge admitted. "And if I were permitted to buy a block of stock on as good terms as anybody I would take it."

"That goes, of course," Angus agreed, "and it doesn't by any means cancel our obligation to you. And now I must be drifting. My wife is alone, and I was to have been back by supper."

"You'll have a dark ride."

"My horse has good feet. Good night, judge, and thank you again."

The wind struck Angus hard as he left the office. It was blowing great gusts, and as the judge had said, it was very dark. When he left the lights behind it was better as his eyes became accustomed to the darkness. But ragged clouds hung low, and the mountains usually visible against even the sky of night could not be seen. The wind was roaring through the tops of the firs with a sound of running waves. But the road was good, and when Chief of his own notion struck into a long, trail-devouring lope, he did not check him.

He was suddenly anxious to get back to Faith. He wished to tell her the good news, but that did not account for the uneasy feeling that possessed him, tugging at his ordinarily steady nerves. There seemed to be no reason for it; yet it persisted and even increased. He realized with disgust that he was nervous. Something seemed to impend. The roar of the wind was sinister, minatory. The darkness seemed to hover above like a bird of prey, ready to strike. He swore angrily at himself for such fancies.

"I've got the nerves of a squirrel to-night," he muttered. "I'll be seeing things next. Go on, Chief, old boy! Leak out of here!"

With the touch of his feel the big chestnut settled to the business of covering ground. The wind increased, and with it came rain, huge drops driving like buckshot, stinging as they hit. Somewhere off the road a tree snapped and crashed down.

"Timber!" Angus shouted to the darkness, for the storm and the pace were getting into his blood, and with their entry his nervousness was replaced by a feeling of exhilaration. Then the chestnut

rose in a clean sailing jump, and Angus realized that he had cleared a fallen tree. But he did not slacken speed.

They were off the main road now, on the less used trail, and the ranch was little over a mile distant. Angus could picture Faith waiting, wondering what had detained him, perhaps a little anxious because of the storm. She would laugh when he told her that he had suffered from nerves. She—

Chief snorted, leaped, and something caught Angus across the chest. For a moment it yielded, tautened and snapped back, tearing his tight grip loose. At the pace he was riding it plucked him from the saddle as a hawk lifts a chick from the brood, flinging him backward to the earth. He struck it heavily on his shoulders and the back of his head. He had a dim impression of somebody or something leaping on him, of a blow, and then darkness shut down absolutely.

CHAPTER XLI

TERROR

Toward five o'clock, her bread being baked, Faith put in the oven a pan containing two young mallards and a blue grouse, all overlaid with strips of bacon. She made her vegetables ready and set the table. Now and then she glanced from the window expectantly, but saw nothing of Angus. When dusk came she lighted the lamps.

Finally she ate her own supper alone, slightly annoyed. Angus had promised to be back in time. Something must have detained him. She put his meal in the warming oven, sat down and tried to read. But somehow the book failed to interest. She had recourse to the banjo, but that little sister of the lonesome failed of charm. The wind rose until it was blowing a gale. Once she went to the door and looked out. The darkness seemed intense.

Ten o'clock came. What on earth was keeping Angus? She began to worry, which she told herself was absurd. Resolutely she sat down and picked up a book. She would not allow herself to be stampeded by nerves. She made up her mind to sit on that couch before the fire until her husband returned.

She found it hard to keep this resolution. She craved movement. She wanted a drink, an apple, a different book—anything, to get up and move around. But she resisted these assaults on her will.

Her thoughts reverted to the foolery of the preceding night. She had pretended to be a cave woman with her man. Now she was alone. What happened to those ancient women whose men went out never to return? How long did they feed the fire o' nights, and listen alone to the noises of the dark? The fancy proved more attractive than the book. She leaned back comfortably, enjoying the play of her imagination, constructing the life story of an unknown sister in the dawn of the world and presently, in proof that there was nothing seriously wrong with her nerves, she fell asleep before the fire.

She woke with a start. There were footsteps in the house. Angus, then, had come back. She smiled, contented. She would scold him—in fun. But as she listened the footsteps seemed to differ from his firm, light tread. The handle of the door turned and a man who was not Angus stood framed in the opening—a man who wore a handkerchief across his face, whose eyes, invisible beneath the shadow of a broad hatbrim, peered at her through holes cut in the fabric.

Though a horrible, sinking feeling of nervousness assailed her, she did not cry out. She regarded the intruder in silence. As he came into the room she stared at him—at his leather chaps, at the gun in its holster, at his hands, taking in every little detail. He spoke.

"Don't be scared," he said in deep tones which she judged were unnatural. "You won't be hurt."

"I'm not afraid," she replied, and was surprised to find her voice quite steady. "What do you want?"

"I want those deeds."

He could mean only the deeds Turkey had given her. Then he must be an emissary of Braden. Obviously it was not Braden himself. But how could he know who had the deeds?

"Now, listen," the masked man added as she did not reply: "I know you have them. I know they are here in this house. You'll save trouble by handing them over."

"I'll do nothing of the sort," Faith told him; "and you had better go before my husband comes home."

The masked man laughed. "Your husband won't be home for a while. If you won't give them to me I'll find them myself."

"Very well," Faith replied. "But don't break anything, please."

"You've got nerve, all right," the man conceded. As he spoke another man similarly masked entered, standing by the door. The first turned to him and they held a whispered conversation.

"Well, we'll look for 'em," the first man announced. "If you're sensible you'll just sit quiet."

Faith sat quietly while they took a leisurely survey of the room. Her writing desk in the corner was their first objective point. Suddenly it came to her that their manner of procedure was too leisurely. They did not fear interruption. She remembered the first man's words when she had spoken of her husband. Was his continued absence in some way due to them? She felt a sickening apprehension, a feeling of desertion, of helplessness.

She began to study the intruders, to find if she could note something by which to identify them. There was nothing recognizable about the first. The second was a big man. His face was quite invisible. A riding slicker concealed most of his figure. She had not heard his voice. And yet she found something elusively familiar in his presence.

From her bedroom she heard the sounds of drawers pulled out and closed and the slam of a trunk lid. She would have been amused at the hopelessness of their search but for her growing anxiety for her husband. Even if he did come, they were armed and he was not. The search progressed from one room to another, and as it did so it became more impatient. At last they gave it up, and the first man advanced to her.

"You have those papers pretty well cached," he admitted. "Where are they?"

"I thought you were going to find them."

"You can cut that out. Now you're going to tell us where they are."

"Am I?"

"That's what I said. Now see here; I'm going to give it to you straight: Your husband isn't going to come home till we turn him loose. He told us you had those deeds. When you give 'em up you'll see him, and not before."

"My husband never told you anything of the sort," Faith said. "You're merely bluffing."

"Bluffing or not, we're going to get what we came for. You're alone. There isn't a living soul in miles. We don't want to hurt you or your husband, but if you've got any sense you'll give up, and save trouble for everybody."

"What you want isn't here," Faith told him.

"Where are those deeds? Who has them?"

"I won't tell you."

"We know they are here. Riley hasn't got them, because we've gone through his office. And your husband hasn't got them, because we've gone through *him*. So you have them. You can't bluff us. No more nonsense, now!" He caught her wrist with one hand, while with the other he thrust the muzzle of his gun in her face. "Hand them over," he snarled ferociously, "or say your prayers!"

But in spite of the fact that the ring of steel almost touched her forehead Faith was not convinced. It was melodrama, tawdry, poor. The man was a poor actor. She laughed in his face.

"Take care!" she said, "you are hurting my wrist."

For a moment the muzzle touched her forehead and the grip tightened. Then he flung her wrist aside.

"What the hell can you do with a woman, anyway?" he demanded in disgust. But his companion sprang forward. "You let her bluff you," he growled hoarsely, "but she won't bluff me!" He caught Faith by the throat. "Where are they?" he demanded. "Talk quick, or I'll choke you!" His fingers compressed her throat till she gasped. The strong taint of alcohol met her nostrils.

"No, damn it!" the first man cried, in protest; but his companion cursed him, swinging Faith between them.

"You keep out of this!" he cried savagely. "I'll make her talk inside a minute!" And his grip shut down.

This time there was no bluff. Faith realized the primitive savagery of the hands that were laid on her. With the knowledge she fought wildly, like a cornered animal. For a moment the other man was forgotten. Anger and fear lent her strength. She caught at the handkerchief which hid her assailant's face, and as he loosed one hand to catch her wrist, she broke away, tearing the cloth with her. She reeled back, gasping, disheveled, her dress torn at the throat, her hair bursting from confining pins falling on her shoulders.

"Blake!" she cried hoarsely. "Blake French!"

Stripped of his disguise, Blake French faced her, lowering, ferocious—but suddenly afraid.

"I wasn't going to hurt you," he said.

Her hands went to her throat.

"To hurt me? You liar! You utter brute! Is that what you will tell my husband?"

Blake's face contorted. He took a step forward.

"You'll tell him, will you?"

"Of course I will!" Faith cried.

Blake French knew that her recognition was disastrous. The whole plan, including the blackmail of Braden, had depended upon recovering the deeds without recognition. But now the matter of the deeds faded into nothingness. His innate brutality had swept him away, carried him too far. Apart from the law he knew the penalty that Angus Mackay would exact from the man who laid hands on his wife. But Angus was lying roped, helpless, a mile away. He was afraid, desperate. There must be silence; at all costs, silence.

He advanced. Faith sprang back, putting the table between them. But Garland suddenly interposed. Like Blake, he saw the collapse of their plans, but he accepted the failure.

"No more of that!" he said. "Let her alone!"

Blake turned on him in fury.

"You damned fool!" he snarled. "We've got to fix her, and Mackay, too, now!"

"You're crazy!" Garland cried. "Do you want to hang?"

"And do you want Mackay to kill you?" Blake retorted. He sprang forward, caught the table and thrust it aside. But Garland caught his arm.

"Let her alone, I tell you!" he repeated. "Come on; it's all off. Let's get out of here!"

Blake with a swift jerk ripped the concealing handkerchief from Garland's face. "Let her take a look at you, too!" he cried and flinging him aside drew his gun and turned on Faith.

Faith, facing him helpless, found herself looking into the eyes of Murder. It was useless to run. She stood and waited, white to the lips, but looking him in the face. The gun rose. Garland, recovering, sprang at Blake. But at that instant the door went wide with the crash of a shattered catch, and into the room bounded Angus Mackay.

He was hatless, wet, plastered with mud. His eyes blazed in his swarthy face. At a glance they took in the disorder, the overturned table; Faith standing at bay, Blake French with drawn gun, Garland suddenly arrested in his spring. Then in grim, deadly silence he launched himself at Blake.

Faith saw the gun shift and swing. Its report in the confines of the room was shattering. Garland struck Blake's arm as the weapon blazed a second time; but Angus staggered and pitched forward at Blake's feet.

Forgetful of all else Faith sprang forward and knelt beside him, lifting his head. Blood oozed horribly from his dark hair. She turned her face, white, anguished, to his slayer. Above her, Garland in panic cursed Blake.

"Now you've done it!" he said between oaths. "You've killed him."

"She—she'll tell!" Blake chattered with quivering lips. "We've got to—" He raised his gun with twitching hand. Garland caught it. He thrust his own weapon in Blake's face.

"If you try that I'll blow your head off!" he declared. With a quick wrench he twisted the weapon from Blake, and menacing him with his gun shoved him toward the door. "We've got to make a get-away. Get the horses, quick!" At the door he hesitated. Returning he knelt beside Faith.

"Let me see a minute," he said. Her senses were too dulled to shrink from him. Suddenly he drew a quick breath, almost a gasp of relief. "He isn't dead."

"Not dead?" Faith cried.

"Not by a long ways. Just creased along the scalp. I guess I hit the gun just in time, and I'm mighty near as glad as you are. He'll be all right. I just want to say, before I pull out, that I never meant to do more than scare you. Maybe you think I'm lying, and I don't blame you. But I'm not."

"I believe you," Faith said. In her sudden relief lesser things did not matter. "I don't know what to do. Stay and help me, please."

"I guess you don't understand," he returned, shaking his head. "This would mean about twenty years apiece for me and Blake if we're caught. And then"—he nodded at Angus—"when he comes around there won't be room enough in this country for him and us."

"But I'll tell him you helped me—how you struck Blake's arm—and afterward!"

"You're one white girl," Garland said with emphasis, "but I'm in too deep. You can tell him if you like, and you can tell him I'm pulling out. I never meant to do more than bluff you. Good-by."

He was gone. Faith got water, towels, and bathed Angus' head. Touching the wound with tender fingers she found that as Garland had said it was apparently in the scalp merely. Presently Angus sighed, stirred, muttered and opened his eyes.

"Hello!" he said, and as recollection came to him he sat up suddenly, staring around. "Where are they?" he demanded.

"They are gone, dear. It's all right. Don't try to get up."

But he shook his head impatiently and rose to his feet.

"What happened? Blake French and Garland! What were they doing? What's the matter with your hair? Your dress is torn." A tremendous expletive burst from him. "What are those marks on your throat?"

Her hand fluttered upward involuntarily. "Nothing. Never mind now. Please——"

"They laid hands on you!" he cried. "On *you*! And I wasn't here! Tell me. No, no, I'm all right. Tell me!"

She told him, seeing his face set and grow rigid. He groaned.

"They stretched a rope between two trees, and I rode into it. The fall almost knocked me out, and they finished the job. They roped me up. It took me a long time to get loose." He held out his wrists, stripped of skin to the raw flesh. "I was afraid of some devil's work, but——" He broke off, shaking his head, and put his hand to his left side. When he removed it his finger tips were stained.

"Oh, you are hurt—twice!" Faith cried.

"I don't think this is much." He stripped himself to the waist. The lamplight revealed a red furrow lying along his ribs, but though it bled freely the skin was little more than broken. To Faith's pleading to lie down he shook his head. On his instructions she brought an old sheet which he ripped into a long bandage. "That was Blake's first shot," he said as he replaced his garments. "He'll have to do better shooting than that—next time."

"Next time?" she exclaimed.

He did not reply, but going into the hall came back with a rifle in one hand and his gun belt in the other.

"Old girl, please rustle me some grub—cold meat and bread—and put it in an old sugar sack."

"But Angus, what are you going to do?"

"To do? I am going after Blake French and Garland, of course."

"But you are hurt. You are not fit—"

"I am not hurt at all—to speak of. I have a long account to settle with Blake French and Garland—yes, and with the whole bunch of those Frenches and Braden as well—and now I am going to clean it up."

"But if I forgive—"

"Forgive!" he interrupted bitterly. "It doesn't matter to me what you forgive. You are a woman. But I am a man and you are my wife, and I can see the marks of Blake French's fingers on your flesh. As surely as God lives I will kill him, or he will kill me. About Garland I don't know—yet."

His will was set, hardened; his mood black, deadly. Immediately he set about his simple preparations. He knew that Blake and Garland would not wait his coming. In all probability they would break for the hills, where he must be prepared to follow them. He had found Chief, who had come home of his own accord, waiting by the gate. A pack pony would hamper his movements. He shoved his food in a sack, rolled a single blanket in a tarp, got out a heavy sweater and changed his boots for shoe-packs. Then he held out his arms to Faith. She clung to him.

"Don't go!" she pleaded. "If anything should happen—now—"

"I must go," he said. "If I didn't I should be less than a man. Nothing will happen—to me. Tomorrow—or it's to-day now, I guess—go to the ranch and stay there till I get back."

He kissed her gently and put her from him. She followed him to the door and saw him mount. He waved his hand and vanished in the blackness of the night.

Faith returned to the living-room and sank into a chair. She was shaken, bone-tired, sick at heart. A lifetime seemed to have passed since she and Angus had sat there the night before, indulging in make-believe playing at tragedy. Now tragedy had invaded their lives. It was like an evil dream.

How long she sat there she never knew. Nor did she know how she became aware that she was not alone. She turned her head to see a figure standing behind her. Her shaken nerves forced a cry from her lips.

It was the old Indian, Paul Sam. There was a rifle under his arm, and around his middle was a belt from which in a beaded scabbard hung a long, broad-bladed knife. He was hatless, and his long, gray hair hung in two braids in front of his shoulders.

"All right," he said. "You not be scared. Where him Angus?"

"He isn't here."

The old Indian's eyes roved around the room, resting on the signs of disorder. "Iktah mamook?" he queried.

"I don't understand."

"What you mamook? What you do?" He threw up his head, his nostrils twitching like a dog's. "Smell um smoke," he said. "Somebody shoot. You see um Blake French?"

"He was here, but he has gone," Faith told him.

The old Indian's dark eyes peered at her, noting her agitation. "Me ol' man," he said. "Angus, him my tillikum. You him klootchman, him wife, all same my tillikum. Goo'-by."

Faith, left alone, knew she could not sleep. She dreaded the darkness, the lying waiting for slumber which would not come. She decided to stay before the fire till daylight. Then she would go to the Mackay ranch.

The wind had ceased, and in the comparative stillness she heard a low, distant drumming which she recognized as the sound of horses' hoofs. They approached, halted, and she started up in apprehension. What would happen next? Was everybody abroad that night? Footsteps tramped on the veranda; somebody knocked.

"Who is there?" she demanded.

"Me—Turkey."

She opened the door. There stood Turkey. Shadowy in the background was Rennie with the horses. She saw that Turkey was armed.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "You look sick. Where's Angus?"

She told him, finding relief in the confidence. Turkey might bring Angus back, or see that no harm befell him. As he listened a hard light came into Turkey's eyes.

"If Angus don't get Blake and Nick Garland, I will," he declared. "But I didn't know they were here. I thought they were with the bunch that did up Braden."

"Did up Braden?"

Turkey nodded. "The French boys—I thought sure Blake was in it, but I guess he couldn't have been—blew open Braden's safe and got away with the whole works. Braden was shot. Dave and I are part of a posse raised to round them up, and I wanted Angus. Braden, before he died, said that Gavin French is the man that shot father."

CHAPTER XLII

OUTLAWS!

Mr. Braden, some twenty-four hours after his interview with Judge Riley, made the shocking discovery that in all probability he had laid down a pat hand before a bluff. But though the discovery brought him to the verge of an apoplectic fit, it came too late. He had signed a statement covering the facts. Under the circumstances it did not matter who had the deeds. If Garland, then his scheme of blackmail would fall down. Mr. Braden found ample to occupy him in the crisis which the loss of the coal property made in his affairs.

The fact was that he was very hard up. The supposed ownership of a promising coal mine had bolstered up his shaky credit. But as soon as it was known that this was no longer his, one or two creditors would come down on him and start an avalanche. And then, though Riley had promised not to prosecute, it was inevitable that some suspicion of crookedness would attach to him. Under the circumstances he was forced to the conclusion that he had played out his string. He had been wise to secure cash. He could raise a few thousand more, and as soon as he did so he would pull out. At once he began to convert his few remaining assets, and as he turned them into cash he put it in his office safe, in a private compartment. The total formed a nice nest egg for the future. His creditors in the course of time might get judgment and be hanged to them, but the cash would be where it could not be tied up by injunctions.

Nevertheless, the strain told on his nerves. For some time he had slept badly, and now he slept scarcely at all. Whisky, which formerly had had a soporific effect, now failed, though he doubled the quantity.

And so, as Angus rode home through the darkness, Mr. Braden lay awake. His mind, after the habit of the insomniac, searched for, dug up and turned over the most unpleasant things within his recollection, driving sleep farther and farther away. It dwelt upon mistakes, failures, humiliations of years before. The wind roared and rain splashed upon the windows; and Mr. Braden, cursed by a thousand plaguing little devils of memory, cursed the night and the darkness and longed for day.

At last he dozed, but was awakened by a muffled, jarring reverberation which shook his bed slightly. It was much like localized thunder. He lay listening, and his ear caught a sound below.

Somebody was in his office. In an instant he was out of bed. He reflected that the boss of a local logging camp who had a payroll to meet the next day, had deposited a considerable amount of cash in his safe. No doubt that was what the robbers were after. But they would not overlook his own cash, too. He could not obtain help until too late. He must stop them single-handed, if at all.

His knees shaking slightly, Mr. Braden padded softly across the room to a wardrobe from which he took an old hammer ten-gauge shotgun, found a box of antique shells, and filled the chambers. Then he stole cautiously down stairs.

The door of his office was closed. He turned the knob and gently opened the door a crack. In the darkness the rays of a flashlight flickered on his open safe. Figures were vaguely outlined. He could not tell how many there were. Obviously, the thing to do was to cover them with the shotgun, but light was necessary, for otherwise they might attack him in the dark. His office was wired, and just beside the door was a switch. He put the gun to his shoulder, holding it with one hand while he felt for the switch. He found it, turned it, and the office sprang into light.

Three men were beside the safe. One held a flash light, another the mouth of a gunny sack to which the third was transferring the safe's contents.

"Hands up!" Mr. Braden commanded in a voice which shook badly.

The three men sprang erect. Mr. Braden recognized Gavin, Gerald and Larry French. They had made no attempt to conceal their faces. They blinked, frowning in the sudden light.

"You infernal scoundrels!" cried Mr. Braden. "Put up your hands! Put them up I tell you. If you make a move I'll shoot."

Mr. Braden's mistake was in reiteration. Etiquette and common sense alike demand that instant obedience to a gun be enforced by the gun itself. In this case the muzzle of the gun wavered and wobbled badly.

"Put that gas-pipe down!" Gavin said contemptuously.

"Put up your hands!" Mr. Braden repeated. "I'll shoot, I tell you. I will! I—"

Quite by accident, in response to unintentional pressure of an unsteady finger, the ten-gauge roared and the shot charge, almost solid at that short range, passing between Gavin and Gerald struck and splattered against the steel wall of the safe. Instantly, Gerald jerked a six-shooter from its holster and fired and fired twice.

Mr. Braden's face assumed an expression of dumb wonder. The shotgun sagged, exploded again, and the charge ripped the floor. He sank downward, pitched forward, and lay still.

"Hell's fire!" cried Gavin. "What did you do that for?"

"What for?" Gerald returned. "Because I don't want to be shot, myself."

"He didn't mean to shoot. He wouldn't have shot again."

"Then he was damned careless," Gerald replied. "One barrel of a shotgun is plenty for me. It was coming to him."

But in a rolling explosion of oaths Gavin cursed his brother for a fool. He had spilt the beans. There would be a devil of a row. They would have to make a get-away.

"What for—if he can't talk?" Gerald asked.

But at that moment Larry uttered an exclamation. He pointed to a window. Against the pane below the drawn blind was a face white in the reflected light. Almost instantly it vanished. Outside they heard running feet.

"How about a get-away now?" Gavin demanded. "He's gone to get help. I know him. He's a clerk in Park's law office."

"I guess that settles it," Gerald concurred coolly. Swiftly he scooped the remaining currency into the sack. "Well," he added, "we've got something to make a get-away on."

"Come on, come on," young Larry urged.

"Keep cool," said Gerald.

"If you'd kept cool," the younger man retorted, "we could have bluffed Braden."

But none of them voiced a regret for Braden himself. His death, if he was dead, was to be deplored merely as it might affect them. Gavin turned the huddled figure over and swore afresh.

"You're too smooth with a gun, Jerry. He isn't dead yet, but I guess he's got his. Now we have to beat it."

They emerged on the streets and ran for their horses, tethered on the outskirts of town, mounted and pounded off on the trail toward the ranch. They rode fast, but without forcing their horses, for later they would need all that was in the animals.

The ranch was dark as they rode up to it. They loosened cinches, removed bridles and gave the horses feed. Entering the house they began to throw an outfit together.

Gavin, mounting the stairs, knocked at his sister's door.

"I want to talk to you, Kit."

"In the morning."

"No, now."

"Come in, then."

She sat up in bed as he struck a match and lit the lamp. As he turned to her the big man's cold, blue eyes softened a shade in expression. He sat on the side of the bed and put his arm around her.

"Kittens, old girl, I've only got minutes. Jerry, Larry and I have got to pull out." He told her why, bluntly, feeling her body tense and stiffen. "So that was how it was," he concluded. "And now here's what we're going to do: We're going to break north through the hills and work up into the Cache River Valley. Then we'll go east or west, whichever looks best. We may split up, or not. Here's some money—no, no, this is all right. Braden never saw this. It's mine. Don't give any of it to Blake. And here's what you do: This place is sunk with a mortgage, so sell your own horses and quit it. Let the tail go with the hide. Get out of here, and wherever you go subscribe for the *Pacific Spokesman*. Read the 'lost' column every day, and when you see an ad. for a lost horse with our brand, answer it. I'll be doing that advertising. I guess that's all. I'm sorry, Kit, but it's the best I can do for you now."

"Yes, it's the best," she admitted. "Don't worry about me. I was going to leave here anyway. I'm going to do something, I don't know just what. But ever since father died I've known I couldn't go on as we've been going. You've made an awful mess of things—you boys. I've seen you going down hill—from bad to worse—losing your self-respect and that of others, falling lower and lower, till it has come to—this.

"And I've gone downhill myself. I've lived on money, knowing how it was obtained, and saying nothing. I'm not preaching. I'm not finding fault. But I'm through. And I'm through with you boys unless you change. Of the whole lot, you're the only one I care anything about. I don't know if you care anything about me, but if you do you're the only one who does. You've always been fair and decent to me, anyway, I—I'd loved you—if you'd let me."

"Damn it, Kit," her brother replied, "why didn't you say something like that before? I've been fond of you ever since you were a baby, but you never let me see you thought anything more of me than the other boys—and that was mighty little. Well—what you say is true. I'm a rotten bad lot, but all the same I'm just about as sick of the show as you are. And I'll tell you this much: If I can get clear now I'll make a fresh start—I've been thinking of the Argentine—and if you'll go with me, I'd like it."

"I'll go," she promised. "But suppose you don't get clear?"

The big man shrugged his shoulders. "Then I lose out. I'm not going to rot in the pen. You can say a little prayer if you feel like it."

She stared at him, somber-eyed. "I suppose that's the best way, after all."

"The only way. And now I must rustle an outfit."

"I'll be down in a minute," she said.

She came down to the apparent confusion of their preparations. Each had drawn on his personal outfit. Gerald and Larry nodded to her. She said little, made no reproaches, helping them silently, swiftly. Suddenly Larry paused, throwing up his head, lifting his hand. Upon the sudden silence burst the sound of swift hoofs. The brothers looked at each other.

"Go upstairs, Kit," said Gavin, "and stay there."

But in a moment it was evident that there was but one horse. The door was tried, shaken. A furious oath came from outside.

"It's just Blake," said Larry, and unfastened the door.

Blake stared at his brothers, at their weapons, at the outfit piled in the room.

"What's this?" he asked.

"You may as well know," said Gerald and told him. "And you keep your mouth shut," he concluded.

Blake laughed with a certain relief. "I've got to make a get-away myself. I'm going with you. I shot up Angus Mackay."

"You shot Angus!" Kathleen cried. Her face went white, and she clutched the back of a chair. "Do you mean that he is dead?"

"No," Blake replied. He had learned that much from Garland, who had decided that it would be safer for him to part company and had done so. "He'll get over it, I guess."

"What started it?" Larry asked.

"He came for me and I downed him," Blake replied sullenly. "Never mind what started it."

"You're lying!" Kathleen told him fiercely. "I know you, Blake. You'd never have faced him if he had had a gun. You shot him in the back, or unarmed."

But Gavin interposed.

"If you're coming with us, get a move on. Rustle your own outfit."

They gave Blake scant time. Immediately Larry began to pack two ponies. If necessary these could be abandoned, but meanwhile they would save the saddle horses. In a few minutes they were packed. All but Gavin mounted. In the hall he took Kathleen in his great arms and kissed her.

"Good-by, Kit. No telling how this will come out. Remember what I told you."

"I'll remember," she said. "Good-by, Gan—and good luck."

He released her and swung into the saddle. In a moment they had vanished in the darkness, heading north for the pass which led into the wilderness of the hills—outlaws.

CHAPTER XLIII

TAKING THE TRAIL

Kathleen returned to her room and dressed herself fully. It was only a matter of time until pursuit would be organized, would arrive, and she would be questioned. She would tell nothing. Her brothers should have their fighting chance.

Already her mind, recovering from the shock of the unexpected, was busy with the future. A sister of outlaws! Well, she would go away, adopt some other name, and wait till she heard from Gavin.

With a swift pang of pain she thought of Angus Mackay. How badly was he hurt? With daylight she would see, she would offer to do what she could. Of course Faith and Jean would shrink from Blake's sister. She could not help that. She would take her medicine. There would be much bitter medicine to take.

She went downstairs and began to put away things that her brothers had at first selected and then discarded. It would not be long, now, till something happened. She picked up a coat of Larry's, turned with it in her hand, and saw Angus Mackay.

She had heard no sound. Yet he stood in the doorway. His head was bandaged. A six-shooter in his hand advertised his purpose.

"Angus!" she cried. He raised his hand in a warning gesture.

"Don't make a noise! I didn't expect to see you. I'm sorry. I'll go away."

"You are looking for Blake!"

He nodded silently.

"He isn't here, Angus. He has gone. I want to know what happened."

"It will not be pleasant for you to hear."

"I must know."

As he told her, her face grew white with anger.

"I knew he was a brute—a cur!" she said. "But this is too much."

"Yes, it is too much," he agreed gravely. "I am sorry, because he is your brother, but it has come to a finish between Blake and me."

"I understand," she said with equal gravity. "I do not feel that he is my brother. But they have all gone together, and I may as well tell you why."

He listened, frowning. He did not care about Braden, to whom he attributed the attempt of Blake and Garland to recover Faith's deeds. But if Blake had gone with the other boys it meant that they would all stand together. It was feud, then, at last, unavoidable. But his purpose was unchanged.

"They don't know," Kathleen said, "that Blake laid hands on Faith. If they had known, they would not help him. They are bad enough but at least they are men."

He nodded silently. There was no doubt of that. Kathleen raised her head, listening. He became aware of a distant sound.

"That is—the law," she said. "Perhaps you would rather not be seen here—with me."

"I am glad to be here. I will see them. You shouldn't be alone. If you will go to Faith in the morning, and say that I asked you to stay with her—"

"No, no!" she cried. "It is kind of you. You are a good man, Angus. But I can't do that."

"You would be welcome."

"Still I cannot do it."

But the hoof-beats swelled in volume and clattered to a halt in front of the house. Angus went to the front door and opened it. He found himself confronted by a long, lean, grizzled gentleman who held a gun of orthodox proportions in readiness for action. But as he recognized Angus he lowered it with a grunt of surprise.

"Didn't expect to see *you*! Any of the French boys in the house?"

"They've pulled out. Their sister is alone."

The grizzled gentleman grunted again. His name was Bush, and he was the sheriff's deputy. As the sheriff was old and carried much weight for age, the rough jobs fell to Jake Bush, who did them well. He possessed much experience, a craw full of sand, and a thorough understanding of a gun. Behind him, with horses, Angus saw men he knew—Bustede, Drury, Fanning, McClintock—all men of the hills and of their hands.

"Yeh, I figgered them boys would pull out ahead of me," Bush admitted placidly. "And of course they'll p'int out north for the hills, where they ain't no wires. They know the country darn well, too. So I called in at your ranch and roused out Dave. He's a wise old ram in them hills. Your brother wanted to come, and he bein' a useful kid I swore him in, too. I wanted you, but when I found out where you was I sent Dave and the kid after you, and come right along here. But I had a hunch it'd be too late. Still, it's a s'prise to see you."

"And you want to know why I'm here?"

"Well—yes. It might have some bearin' on the case."

Angus told him why, and Bush's eyebrows drew together.

"Now I'm free to say that for a low-down skunk this here Blake French is some pumpkins. I sure thought he was with his brothers, but this gives him a alibi, I s'pose. And I s'pose, also, you're out to git him. Is that right?"

"That's right."

"I don't say he don't need killin'," said the deputy. "But the darn law—nowadays—sorter discourages these here private executions. And I'm an officer of the law."

"You and the law, Jake," Angus said deliberately, "can both go to hell!"

"Now don't be so darn hair-trigger!" the deputy protested. "Here's the proposition: You've give me information which justifies me in arrestin' him for murderous assault on your wife, and shootin' you with intent to kill. His brothers is wanted for robbery and murder, and they're all stringin' their chips together. I figger they'll resist arrest, and I don't believe in allowin' my officers to be shot up. So if you was sworn in, and was to kill Blake resistin' arrest, it would be all reg'lar. Savvy?"

"But suppose he doesn't resist arrest?"

"Never cross a bridge till you come to it," said Bush wisely. "You got to come along with us to find him, anyhow. So I'll swear you in and we'll hope for the best."

Bush's questioning of Kathleen was perfunctory. He grinned at her refusal to give information. "I wouldn't think much of you if you did," he admitted, and went on a tour of investigation, from which he drew some very accurate deductions.

Turkey and Rennie arrived, and for the first time Angus heard of Braden's dying declaration that Gavin French was responsible for the killing of Adam Mackay. But beyond the bare statement there were no details. Braden's end had come before he had been able to amplify it.

"Do you suppose it's so?" Turkey queried. "Or was he just trying to hang something on Gavin?"

Angus did not know. There were times, in the years, when he had been puzzled by Gavin's peculiar regard for him. There had always been something in the big man's eyes which he could not read, something veiled, inscrutable. He alone of the brothers had been reluctant to take up their father's quarrel with Angus. This might be the reason.

"If he killed father," said Turkey grimly, "he's got it coming to him. You take Blake, and I'll take him."

"There is nothing to go on but what Braden said," Angus pointed out. But he thought of his

father's dying words. His father had not wished to lay a feud upon him. It fitted.

At dawn, acting on Bush's theory, they headed north for the pass. When they struck it there were fresh footprints, many of them, heading into the hills.

"That's them," said Bush. "Hey, Dave?"

"Sure," said Rennie. "It ain't Injuns. These horses is shod."

A mountain pass is not a road. It merely represents the only practicable way of winning through the jumbled world of hills. Railway construction in the mountains follows the pass, but persons who admire scenery from vestibuled coaches know nothing of the old pass of the pack-trail, the binding brush, the fallen timber, the slides, the swift creeks, the gulches, the precipices to which the trail must cling.

The trail itself—the original trail—is invariably the line of least resistance. It proceeds on the theory that it is easier to go around than through or over. If traveling on the other side of a creek is easier it crosses. When conditions are reversed, it comes back. It wanders with apparent aimlessness, but eventually gets there, at the cost of time, but without much work. To natural obstacles the wild animals and the equally wild men who first trod the passes opposed patience and time, of which they had great store. Later the pioneer brought the ax. He slashed out the brush, so that he and his might get by without trouble; but he followed the windings of the trail.

The pass upon which the pursuit entered was a good trail. It led gradually and almost imperceptibly upward, following the general course of a creek. The hills sloped back on either hand. Into them led wide draws, timbered, little valleys in themselves. But this pass was merely a vestibule. It reached the summit of the first range of hills, and there was a way down the other side. The trail had been cut out. But beyond were hundreds of square miles of mountains in which what few trails there were had never known an ax.

In the afternoon they reached the summit of the first divide. It was comparatively low, and timbered. There was a lake, scarcely more than a pond. There the fugitives had halted.

Rennie and Bush nosed among the signs like old hounds, not looking for anything in particular, but because they could not help it.

"I sh'd say they got two pack ponies," Bush decided. "There's the four French boys, and maybe Garland."

"Garland ain't with 'em," Rennie returned with conviction. "He's too darn wise. He knows Angus would go after Blake, or if he didn't me or Turkey would. So he'd quit Blake right away and pull out by himself. I'd bet money on it."

"Not with me," Bush grinned. "I guess you're right."

They were standing by the little lake, and Rennie pointed to a moccasin track that lay in the soft ground. The foot that made it was shapely, rather small, and straight along the inner line. The toes were spread widely, naturally.

"That's funny," said Rennie.

"Why?" Bush asked. "It's some Injun. He jumped from there onto that log. I s'pose he wanted water without wettin' his feet."

"What's an Injun doin' here?"

"What's an Injun doin' any place?" Bush countered with the scorn of the old-timer. "S'pose you loosen up some. You know as much about Injuns as I do."

"Well, we ain't met this Injun," said Rennie, "so he's travelin' the same way we are. Maybe he's just one of a bunch that's in here huntin'. But I was tellin' you about how old Paul Sam come to Angus' wife's place last night. He was lookin' for Blake. 'Course you heard what was said about Blake and his granddaughter. I just wondered."

Bush removed his hat and scratched his head.

"By gosh, I wonder!" he observed. "He's mighty old, but it might be. He ain't no fish-eatin' flat-face Siwash. He's a horse Injun—one of the old stock. But he is darn old."

"He thought a heap of the girl," said Rennie. "He sent her to school. He was goin' to make her all same white girl."

"Uh-huh!" Bush growled. "A lot of darn fools think they can do tricks like that. But she's a job for the Almighty. Well, if this is the old buck, he couldn't go on a better last war-trail, and I wish him a heap of luck. Now let's get goin'."

Night found them at the foot of the range they had crossed. They were now in the valley of the Klimminchuck, a fast stream of the proportions of a river, fed by tributary creeks. Across it rose mountains, range on range, nameless, cut by valleys, pockets, basins and creeks. Their area resembled a tumbled sea. It was a mountain wilderness, little known, unmapped, much as it came from the hands of the Creator.

And yet in this wilderness there were trails. Up tributary creeks hunters had made them for short

distances, but they soon petered out. Beyond, into the heart of the hills, were other faintly marked routes, scarcely trails but ways of traverse, by which at various and widely separated times man had penetrated into these solitudes and even crossed them entirely.

All the men knew something of this mountain area, but Rennie's knowledge was the most extensive. His was the restlessness, the desire to see something of what lay beyond, of the pioneer. He had made long incursions, alone. Bush leaned on this knowledge. Around the fire that night, pipes alight, they held council.

"They've turned up river," said Bush. "If they keep on for the head waters they get into mighty bad country, hey, Dave?"

"Mighty bad," Rennie agreed. "They couldn't get no place."

"And they ain't outfitted to winter. Do they know she's bad up there?"

"Sure they know. Anyhow, Gavin does. My tumtum is they'll ford above here and try for a clean get-away, maybe up Copper Creek, right across the mountains."

"Can they make it?"

"They might. Depends on what they know of the country, and what luck they have."

"With horses?"

"Well, they might."

"How far have you ever gone yourself?"

"I been up to where the Copper heads and over the divide and on a piece."

"Good travelin'?"

"No, darn mean."

"Trail?"

"Only a liar would call it a trail. Still, you can get along if you're careful."

"Could they have gone farther?"

"Sure."

"Did you ever hear of anybody gettin' plum' through, say to Cache River, that way?"

"I've heard of it—yes. Old Pete Jodoin claimed he made her. And one time I run onto an old Stoney buck and he told me how, long ago, his people used to come down huntin' onto this here Klimmin, but they don't do it no more."

"Pete Jodoin was an old liar," said Bush, "and so's any Stoney, on gen'ral principles. But it's funny the places you can go if you know how. Think these French boys would know enough to make a trip like that?"

"Gavin knows a lot about these hills," Rennie replied. "He's hunted in 'em a lot by himself. He can pack near as much as a pony, and it's darn hard to say where he went and didn't go."

"Well," said Bush, "I only hope we don't lose their trail."

So far the trail had been plain, the hoof marks on it visible. But on bad ground this would not be the case. There would be no trail, in the sense of a path, and the trail in the sense of hoof-marks might disappear entirely. Therefore it was important to ascertain if they could the line of flight, so that if signs temporarily ceased there might be a possibility of finding them again further on.

But in the morning the trail of the fugitives led straight to the ford, crossed it and held up the farther side. They came to the mouth of Copper Creek, a delta with much gravel wash, but the trail of the fugitives, in place of turning the Copper, led straight on up the valley trail. A couple of miles on, just after crossing a patch of rocky ground, Turkey who was in the lead pulled up and dismounted.

"What's the matter, kid?" Bush asked.

"Matter!" Turkey exclaimed. "Why there isn't a shod horse in this bunch of tracks we're following."

Investigation showed that Turkey was right. They had been riding on the tracks of unshod horses, presumably of an Indian hunting party. And as they had trampled on these with their own shod horses it was going to be hard to ascertain just how far they had gone on this false trail. But Rennie had his own idea of a short cut.

"They made the side jump somewheres on these here rocks," he said. "They figgered we'd go hellin' along on the tracks of them barefoots. Now this bad ground is the end of that there shoulder you see, and she runs back and dips down on the other side to the Copper."

"Sounds reas'nable," Bush admitted, "Then we go back to the Copper."

The two were standing together apart from the others.

"Look over there," said Rennie, "and line up this rock with that lone cottonwood. What do you see?"

Bush looked along the line indicated. "By gosh," he ejaculated, "that cottonwood's *blazed!*"

"Blazed both sides," Rennie informed him. "I been there. And further on there's another tree blazed. Fresh."

"Lord—ee!" said Bush. "Them French boys wouldn't do that. You think it's the old buck?"

Rennie nodded. "He's wiser 'n we are; also closer to 'em. He's playin' a lone hand, so he has to wait his chance at Blake. He figgers Angus will be after Blake, and as he may run into bad luck himself he wants to make sure somebody lands him. He don't know why the other boys are there, but he knows there must be some good reason, because they're in a hurry and tryin' to hide their trail. So on gen'ral principles he blazes that cottonwood where he strikes their tracks where they've turned off, and keeps goin'."

"Uh-huh!" Bush agreed. "I guess we better not tell them Mackay boys about the Injun. They'd be for crowdin' things, and likely mess 'em up. They don't want nobody to get ahead of 'em. I wish I hadn't told 'em what old Braden said. But it seemed right they should know."

"So it is right," said Rennie. "Adam Mackay hadn't no gun. She was murder. Only thing, I don't savvy it bein' Gavin French. Givin' the devil his due, he's all *man*. And Braden was such a darn liar. Well, there's many a card lost in the shuffle turns up in the deal."

CHAPTER XLIV

THE RED AVENGER

Many miles beyond the head waters of Copper Creek four men rode along the crest of a sparsely timbered summit. Their horses were weary, gaunted with scant, frost-burnt feed. The riders were unkempt, unshaven, their eyes reddened by much staring into distances and the ceaseless pour of the mountain winds. The wind was now blowing strongly. It was very cold, and they bent against it, their hats pulled low, their collars high. Along the summit on which they rode and even along its flanks lay thin snow, the first of the coming winter. But above, on the higher ranges, it lay thickly white on the peaks and in the great gulches, promise of the twenty or thirty or forty feet of it which would fall before Spring, as it had fallen on that high roof of the world for ages.

On the second day on the Copper the fugitives had discovered that they had not shaken off pursuit. It clung to them doggedly, tenaciously. Once through binoculars they had seen their pursuers across the width of a mountain valley. Little figures, seven of them, had ridden across the field of the lens focused on a barren patch of hillside. They could make a very fair guess at the identity of some of the men. With the discovery they had made extra speed.

Then they had got off the trail, which was ancient, faint, overgrown. Left to himself Gavin, who was the pilot, would likely have steered a correct course, for he had much of that intuition which for lack of a better term may be called sense of direction, and an eye for the general configuration of country. But he was in a hurry and his brothers obtruded advice. And so Gavin went astray. Half a day's travel converted suspicion of this to certainty. The only thing to do was to angle forward in the general direction in which the old trail might be supposed to lie.

It is one thing to travel following the line of least resistance; but it is quite another to hold for any definite objective point. Immediately, obstacles interposed. All of a sudden, as it seemed, things went wrong. Their way was barred by swift creeks, rocks, tangled wind-falls piled high. These had to be circumnavigated. One pack pony was drowned in a sudden dip of what looked like a fordable stream. The other slipped, sprained his shoulder and could not travel. They shot him, and took his load between them. At last they regained what was presumably the old trail. The one redeeming feature was that in their wanderings, they might have shaken off pursuit. But the next morning, looking back, behind and below them but on their line of travel, they saw smoke. The pursuit had even gained.

Now the old trail grew better, clearer, so that they did not have to worry about that; but they did worry about the way their pursuers hung on. Of what profit was it to traverse this sea of mountains and emerge with these hunters at their heels? As they rode, bending against the keen wind that swept the great ridge, this problem lay in the mind of each.

But Blake viewed it from an angle of his own. He had thrown in his lot with his brothers in panic, relying on them, feeling the safety of numbers. But the pursuit that dogged was primarily of them and not of him. Then he had made a mistake in joining them. Garland was a wise bird in striking off by himself. That was what he should have done. He should have known it would be assumed that he had gone with his brothers. He had been a fool.

And there was another consideration. He knew very well that the boys did not intend to be taken. If he stayed with them he would have to fight. Angus or Turkey, or even Rennie would shoot him on sight, and in all probability one or more of them was with the bunch behind. Obviously the thing to do was to quit his brothers and let them draw the pursuit. But the devil of it was he had

no money. They, however, had what they had taken from Braden. He did not know how much, but it must be a lot. They ought to share up with him. He considered that he had a grievance against them.

Toward evening they came to the end of the ridge and began a long descent into a high valley. They struck timber and shelter from the wind, and water. There they camped. But though feed was short and frost-burnt, they dared not let their horses range, keeping them on ropes.

Supper over they sat close to the fire, smoking, following their own thoughts. Gerald regarded the blaze through half-closed eyes; Gavin, motionless his chin in his hand stared straight ahead; but young Larry, on one elbow, frowning, impatient, jerked cones and bits of stick at the fire with vicious flips of the wrist. Finally he sat upright.

"Oh, what the *hell!*" he said, in tones of nervous irritation.

Gerald's half-veiled eyes shifted to him; Gavin turned his head.

"Well?" the latter asked.

"What's the use of this?" the young man demanded. "How long are we going to be chased all over these hills? I wouldn't kick if we were making a get-away—but we aren't. This bunch is right on our heels. What good does it do us to keep going? Not a damned bit! Wherever we come out they'll be right on top of us."

"The kid's right," Gerald observed.

"Well?" said Gavin again.

"Why not let it come to a show-down now?" Larry asked. "Let's make a stand. There's only seven of them, near as we can tell." He laughed recklessly. "Whoever loses out stays in these damned hills for keeps."

"Larry's right," said Gerald again.

"He may be," Gavin admitted. "Make a stand, hey?" He stretched his great arms slowly. "Four of us, seven of them. Well, I'm game, if you are. They're apt to have some pretty good men. Some of us are due to stay in these hills, as Larry says."

"Sure," Gerald agreed. "But the hills are better than the pen. We're all in the same boat."

"I don't know about that," Blake put in.

"Since you mention it," said Gerald, "maybe we're not. If young Turkey or Rennie is with that bunch they're out to get you." Blake shifted uneasily, and Gerald sneered. "I'll bet a hundred they *do* get you, too."

"You want the big end," said young Larry.

"You talk about being in the same boat," said Blake. "Well, I didn't shoot Braden, nor get any of his money. You held out on me. You thought you could get it yourselves. You wouldn't let me in on it."

"Well?"

"Well, why the devil should I help you stand off that bunch, then? They're after you, not me."

"Has anybody asked you to?" Gerald retorted. "And nobody asked you to come with us, if it comes to that."

"You had the fear of God in your heart and you begged to come," Larry told him. "You say you shot up Mackay, but you wouldn't tell why. And now, when things are getting hot, you want to quit and sneak off by yourself. I know what you're thinking. Quit and be damned, then! You never were any good. You never had the sand of a white rabbit."

Blake blustered, cursing his younger brother. The latter leaped to his feet. But Gavin interposed.

"Sit down, Larry. Blake, do you want to quit us? If you do, say so. There are no strings on you."

"If I did want to, I couldn't," Blake growled. "You know blame' well I haven't got any money."

Gavin eyed him in silence for a moment.

"I'll fix the money part," he said. Reaching into his warbag he drew forth a package of bills. He split it in half without counting, tossing one half to Blake as he would have tossed a bone to a dog. "There you are! Anything else?"

"Well, I don't want—" Blake began, but Gavin cut him short.

"You needn't lie. I've seen this in the back of your mind for days. You'll go now, whether you want to or not! Our trails fork in the morning, and you play your own hand. But if you try to save your hide by helping that bunch back there, I'll kill you. And that's cold!"

Blake could not meet the cold blue eyes that bored into his.

"You held out on me in the first place," he said. "This is your show, not mine."

"You—" Larry began.

"Shut up!" said Gavin. "Let him alone. Take what grub you want in the morning, Blake, and go your own way. And now I'm going to sleep."

He rolled his blanket around him and lay down. Gerald and Larry followed his example. Blake, to show his indifference, set by the fire for a time, smoking sullenly; but soon he too turned in.

It was dark when he awoke, but Gavin was already cooking breakfast, Larry and Gerald rolling blankets. He shared the meal, but nobody spoke to him. Larry brought in three horses, but Blake had to go for his own. Fresh snow, fallen in the night, lay on the ground, but it was merely a skiff which would go with the sun.

The east was rose and gold when they mounted. High to the westward the sun, as yet invisible, struck the eastern face of a great snow-wrapped peak, playing on it dazzlingly. The cold of the high altitudes nipped; the breath of the gaunt horses hung in steam.

At the head of the little cavalcade Gavin led the way down a sloping shoulder into the valley. Blake followed, uncertain what to do. When the valley opened Gavin pulled up.

"Here's where we break, Blake."

"All right," he replied sullenly. "Go ahead. I'm not stopping you."

"I said we broke here."

"I've got to get out of these mountains, haven't I? This is the only way."

"You wanted to quit us," said Gavin, "and now you have to."

"All right," Blake replied. "I'll quit you, if you want it that way."

Without a word of farewell his brothers rode on. Blake watched them go. Their wordless contempt had stung him, and he hated them. He hoped sincerely that they would be caught.

His own immediate plans were simple. He would ride a few miles off the trail till Bush and his posse went by. Then he would make up his mind just what to do. He might take the back trail when they had gone on. He would see.

He took care to leave the trail on rocky ground. The thin snow which still lay was unfortunate, but did not greatly matter once he was off the trail. In an hour or two it would be gone. He rode for a mile, which for his purpose was as good as five or ten, and dismounting let his horse feed. He found a place where the sun struck warmly, filled his pipe and lay down, his back against a rock.

He counted the money which Gavin had thrown him. It amounted to more than two thousand dollars. That would help some. He was better off than if he had stayed with his brothers. Lord, yes! He was safe as a church.

His eyes half-closed, he enjoyed his pipe, thinking things over. He made a mess of that Mackay business. When you came right down to it, he should not have laid hands on Faith. But he would have had the deeds out of her if Garland had not weakened. But for Garland there would have been no necessity for this get-away. Garland had got him into the thing. Damn Garland! And damn women! They were all fools. Take that klootch. How the devil could she expect a white man to marry her? She wasn't bad for a klootch, but as a wife—good night!

The pipe had lost its flavor. Blake tapped it out, rose, and started back with an involuntary cry. Just back of the rock against which he had been leaning stood Paul Sam.

The old Indian raised his rifle.

"S'pose you move," he said, "you go mimaloos." Blake froze into immobility. "You go mimaloos, anyway," the old man added; "but first me talk to you."

A great fear laid hold upon Blake. The old Indian's features were impassive, but his eyes were bleak and hard. He lowered the rifle to the level of his waist, but its muzzle still dominated. Blake's rifle leaned against the rock, out of reach. His six-shooter was in his belt, but he knew better than to try for it. He stood motionless, staring at the seamed features of the Indian.

"Me talk to you," Paul Sam repeated in soft, clucking gutturals. "Ole man, me; young man, you. You white man; me Injun. Very ole man, me. All the men that were young with me go mimaloos many years ago. My wife she go mimaloos. My son and his wife they go mimaloos. Only one of my blood is left, my son's daughter—Mary!"

He paused for a moment.

"There is no one else of my blood. Me raise hiyu kuitan, hiyu moos-moos, all for her when me die. One time this country all Injun. Pretty soon no more Injun. All white. Injun way no good now. All white man's way. So me send her to school to learn the white man's way.

"She come back to my house. When me look at her me think of many things, of many people who go mimaloos many years ago. It is good for an ole man to have the young of his blood in his house, for in them his youth lives.

"There comes a time when this girl who is the last of my blood, is sad. No more laugh; no more sing. Me not know why. Me ole man. Mebbe-so me blind ole fool. Me never think of—that! When she is dead—then me hear of *you*!"

The Indian paused. Blake spoke, moistening dry lips.

"I hadn't anything to do with Mary."

"You lie!" the old man returned. "You bring shame on her and on me. So me kill you."

There was no passion in his voice; but there was finality, judgment inexorable. It was the logical conclusion, worked out, demonstrated according to his rules.

Blake's face blanched. In fancy, as he stared at it, he could see the red stab of flame leap and feel the shock of lead. Was there no way of escape? He glanced around. There was nothing save the mountain wilderness, the serene heights of the peaks, the blue autumn sky, a soaring golden eagle. His eyes came back to the rifle muzzle. His mouth opened, but words would not come.

"Mebbe-so you like pray?" Paul Sam suggested calmly. Blake found his voice.

"I have money," he said. "Look! lots of money. Take it. For God's sake, don't kill me. I didn't mean—I didn't know—"

For the first time a glint of bitter anger leaped into the old man's eyes.

"Money!" he said. "You think I take money for a dead woman of my blood and for my shame. Now me kill you all same wolf!"

The rifle rose, steadied, pointed at Blake's heart. The old finger crooked on the trigger. The hammer fell with a click. For some reason—worn firing pin, weak spring, or defective cartridge—the weapon failed to explode.

Paul Sam's hand jerked down with the lever to throw another shell into place. But Blake in that instant of reprieve took his chance. With a leap he hurled himself forward and caught the barrel, throwing it aside, feeling the flame of the explosion heat the metal beneath his fingers. The report smashed out in the stillness of the valley, racketing and rolling against the hills.

Blake wrenched the rifle from the old man's hands and threw it far. His fear was gone, his face contorted with passion. He reached for his revolver. As he did so Paul Sam drew a nine-inch knife from its beaded scabbard and struck as a snake strikes.

With a screaming oath Blake shoved the muzzle of the six-shooter against him and pulled the trigger. The blunt report was muffled by the body. But again the knife, now red to the hilt, rose and fell, and again the gun barked like a kenneled dog. And then Blake reeled backward, his eyes wide, the gun escaping from his hand, and fell on his back horribly asprawl. With him fell Paul Sam. But the old Indian's fingers were locked around the haft of the knife, and the haft stood out of Blake's breast. And so they lay together as the rolling echoes died and the stillness of the great hills came again.

CHAPTER XLV

THE GREAT SHOW-DOWN

Down the slope from the wind-swept summit into the valley rode the posse of Jake Bush. Their horses, too, were gaunted with scant feed and hard work. Like the men who had preceded them these were unkempt, strained of eye. Rennie rode in the lead, his eyes on the trail. The eyes of the others prodded and tested the valley into which they were descending.

By various signs they knew they were closing the gap which separated them from their quarry. When they reached the abandoned camp they dismounted and Rennie and Bush tested the ashes.

"Warm where they ain't wet," said Bush. "This is the earliest we've ever struck their camp yet. They made slow time yesterday. Can't be many hours ahead."

"Looks to me like their horses is playin' out," Rennie agreed. "Well, let's get goin'."

They rode on down the valley. The trail was plain, and the tracks of horses in the vanishing light snow. They strung along at a steady jog.

From the left, clean and sharp came the vibrant crash of a rifle shot. Instantly the hills took it up, flinging it in echoes back and forth. But with the echoes came other shots, not clear but blunt, muffled, multiplying the riot of sound. They jerked their horses to a standstill.

"Not more 'n a mile away," said Rennie. "Them boys is further ahead. It can't be them."

"We'll darn soon see," said Bush.

They turned in the direction of the shots, spreading out riding slowly. And presently they came upon a pony standing with dropped reins.

"Why," Turkey exclaimed, "it's Paul Sam's! I'd know that cayuse anywhere."

There was no mistaking the calico pony. Angus, too recognized it. If Paul Sam were there it could be but for one purpose.

"Ride slow," Bush advised. "We don't want to overlook anything."

But in less than five hundred yards they came upon tragedy. Paul Sam and Blake lay as they had fallen. In the background a gaunt horse raised his head for a moment from his browsing.

They dismounted, ringing the prostrate figures around. Bush removed his hat, not out of respect for the dead, but to scratch his head.

"Gosh!" he observed inadequately. Rennie loosened the old fingers from the knife haft and made a swift examination. He picked up a rifle cartridge, unexploded, with the cap faintly dented.

"Missed fire!" he said. "Then Blake took the gun away from him and went for his six-shooter and the old man went for his knife. Lord!"

Angus said nothing. He felt he had been defrauded, hardly used. By day and by night one vision had haunted him—Faith's soft throat, bruised and discolored. Just so he had made up his mind to kill Blake, with his hands, repaying him measure for measure. His disappointment was bitter.

"The old man beat you to it," said Rennie, "but I guess he had the right to, if he could."

Angus nodded. It was true enough. But Turkey was picking up the scattered money which Blake had let fall. It opened a field for speculation. No doubt this was some of Braden's money, and the brothers had divided with Blake. But why had Blake quit them? Bush made a shrewd guess.

"Blake wasn't no game bird," he said. "He'd quit any time rather than go to a show-down. Mabbe that was what he was tryin' to do."

"And bumped into one," said Rennie. "But I wonder! We're gettin' close, and it ain't so far to the Cache now. It wouldn't do 'em no good to get there with us right behind. They might make a stand and take a chance."

"Or bushwhack us," the deputy suggested. "Us ridin' along single file in some bad place and them shootin' from cover—hell! we'd be down and kickin' before we could draw a gun."

"That's so," Rennie replied thoughtfully. "We'd better go careful. Well, I s'pose we better try to bury these dead folks while we're here."

"The Injun, anyway," said Bush. "Give him the best of it."

They did the best they could, and built above with stones. Then they went back and took up the pursuit, holding on till darkness hid the trail. By daylight they were away, and even earlier than before they came upon the deserted camp.

And now the old trail began to ascend. It led into a country wild and rugged, the jagged vertebrae of a mountain range seamed and scarred with gulch and canon. It was very bad for horses and very hard work for everybody. But signs showed that they were very near their quarry.

"We're darn near on top of 'em," said Rennie, and thereafter he rode with gun in hand.

But it was late in the afternoon when they got their first glimpse of the fugitives, who were rounding a bare shoulder ahead and above them. Two were riding and one was leading his horse. They themselves were not seen for a growth of brush at that point of the trail intervened. They looked to Bush for instructions.

"There ain't much sun left and they'll be goin' into camp soon," the deputy said. "We'll leave the horses here with one man, and the rest of us go ahead. While they're makin' camp we'll stand 'em up. What say, Dave?"

"Who stays with the horses?"

"Turkey," Bush decided. "He's the youngest."

"I'm damned if I do," Turkey rebelled. "Stay yourself. You're the oldest."

Bush grinned. "Can't, sonny, though I'd love to." He drew a dilapidated pack of cards from his pocket and spread them fanwise. "Draw one. Low stays. Deuce is low."

Drury drew low, cursed his luck. McClintock on one knee lacing a shoepack grinned at him.

"I wisht you'd sponge off my cayuse's back, Joe. He's gettin' sore. While you're about it, with nothin' else to do, you might go over the whole lot."

Drury's retort put his first outburst in the shade. Laughter stirred him to fresh efforts.

"Now, boys!" said Bush.

He took the lead, Rennie behind him, then Angus.

Angus was glad to be out of the saddle, and glad, too, that the end of the chase was at hand. With the death of Blake much of his interest in it had vanished. There was still Gavin, who if Braden's

dying declaration was to be believed had killed his father. But strangely enough he felt little or no enmity toward him. He thought he should feel more. Turkey, behind him, spoke.

"I guess this is the finish of that bunch. If they start anything, we want to get Gavin—if he killed father."

Angus was silent for a moment. There was the possibility that it would not be a one-sided affair. He was not troubled for himself, but Turkey was rash.

"Don't take any chances, kid, if there is trouble."

"Not a chance," Turkey replied cheerfully. "Anybody that beats me to the trigger will have to go some."

"That wasn't what I meant. Look after yourself. Don't get hurt."

"Are you trying to tell me to play it safe?" Turkey demanded with virtuous indignation. "Why I ought to report you to Bush. Look after yourself. You're married. Play it safe! Huh! You bet I will—with a fast gun."

But the sun was going down. Unless the fugitives suspected something they would soon be making camp. Now and then Bush stopped to listen. None now spoke above a whisper. It was like the last hundred yards of a long, hard stalk of big game. In this case the game was big enough, and dangerous. Mistakes could not be afforded.

Bush stopped suddenly. Distinct in the stillness came the quick "lick-lock" of an ax. The deputy nodded.

They came upon the camp. It was on a little flat at the mouth of a wild draw, a little glade fringed with brush, through which ran a trickle of a spring creek. At one side the horses, unsaddled, grazed. Gavin, at the other side, was dragging in a dry pole for firewood. Gerald knelt beside a freshly kindled fire. Larry was getting food from a sack.

It was Larry who saw them almost at the instant they saw him. He cried a warning. Gerald rose swiftly. Gavin dropped his pole. Bush stepped forward and held up his hand.

"I want you boys," he said.

"You can't have us," Gerald replied. "That's cold, Bush."

"Don't be foolish," Bush advised. "I want you, and I'm going to get you. And that's cold, too."

"Then fly at it!" Gerald cried, and with the words jerked his gun and fired.

Bush staggered, twisted and went down; but he drew his gun as he did so and began to shoot from the ground. The lonely mountain camp became an inferno of shattering, rolling sound.

Angus felt his hat lift as in a sudden squall. At the same moment Turkey spun half around and against him, destroying his aim.

"I'm all right!" the youngster gasped, and in proof of his assertion fired.

Bustede, his right arm hanging, had dropped his rifle and was struggling to draw his six-shooter with his left hand. McClintock, on one knee, was working the lever of his rifle like a saw. Rennie, a gun in either hand, unhooked them in a rattling roar.

Suddenly Gerald pitched forward on his face. Larry doubled up and went down. But Gavin was apparently unhurt. He saw his brothers fall. For an instant he stood looking at them. Then he turned and bounded for the sheltering brush. With the rush of a bull moose he crashed into it while a sleet of lead cut twigs around him, and disappeared.

"Git him!" Bush croaked from the ground. "Git him, somebody. Oh, sink my soul for all rotten shootin'! Six guns-and he makes the timber! Agh-r!"

Angus stooped for an instant over Turkey. The youngster, very white of face, was sitting on the ground; but he was outcursing Bush.

"Are you hurt much? Where?"

"Not much. My shoulder. Get him, damn him! Get him for father!"

Angus found Rennie running beside him. It was impossible to trail the fugitive. All they could do was to keep on up the draw and trust to luck. But the pace and the rough ground soon told on Rennie.

"I can't travel no more," he gasped. "Too old. You go ahead."

"Go back and help the boys," Angus said. "There's a moon to-night and I may not be back. If I don't find him I'll come in in the morning."

"Be darn sure you do come in. Don't take no chances."

Angus ran on up the draw. Now that he was alone he began to put forth his strength and speed while the light should last. He was sure that Gavin would make for the higher ground. He would cross the summit of that range, and go ahead for the Cache. Though he had neither food nor

outfit he had his six-shooter and presumably ammunition and matches. Angus knew that he himself would suffer little more than inconvenience if he were in Gavin's place.

The draw narrowed, and steep hills closed in on either hand. He turned to the right and began to climb. Darkness overtook him and he stopped. The cold chilled his sweating body with the cessation of motion, but Gavin was as badly off. When the moon rose he went on again, but it was slow work. Objects were distorted. Shadows lay where he would have had light. Once he slipped and fell, slithering twenty feet and barely saving himself from an almost perpendicular drop of a hundred. He crawled back with difficulty, but his rifle was gone. He had heard it clang far below him. However, he had his belt gun, and so was on a par with Gavin.

His objective was what seemed to be a notch in the summit. It was what he would make for were he in Gavin's place. He toiled upward methodically, without hurry now, for there might be a long trail ahead. If Gavin could go to the Cache so could he. The timber began to thin out, to stunt. Trees were dwarfed, twisted by the mountain winds, mere miniatures. Presently they ceased altogether. He was above timberline.

There the thin snow partially covered the ground, increasing the difficulty of travel. But its actinic qualities gave more light. It was past midnight, and the moon was well up. He had been traveling for more than seven hours.

For a moment he paused to rest, his lungs feeding greedily on the thin, cold air, and surveyed the scene below. It was a black fur of tree-tops, rolling, undulating, cleft with lines of greater darkness indicating greater depths. He could look over the tops of lesser mountains. Above were the peaks of the range, whitened spires against the sky.

In those far heights of the mountain wilderness one seemed to touch the rim of space itself. The moon, the night, the height produced an effect of unspeakable vastness. It seemed to press in, to enfold the tiny atom crawling upon and clinging to the surface of the earth. There finite and infinite made contact. It was like the world's end, the *Ultima Thule* of ancient man.

Some such thoughts, vague, scarcely formed, passed through his mind. The ranch, ploughed land, houses, seemed to belong to another world.

Once more he began to climb, and now that he was close to the summit the going was easier. Suddenly he stopped. There, clear in the moonlight, was the track of a moccasin-clad foot.

There was no doubt that it was Gavin's. Knowing his own pace Angus knew that the big man could not be far ahead. No doubt he would keep going, over the summit and down the other side, for timber. Once in the timber, with a fire, he would rest. His trail across would be covered by the first wind. He would not suspect that any one would or could follow him by night.

Angus followed the trail easily by the bright moonlight, noting grimly that the length of the stride was almost identical with his own. The prints were clean, showing that the feet had been cleanly lifted and set down, token of energy unimpaired.

When he reached the summit he took a careful survey. It was a desolate plateau, swept and scoured by the winds and rains and snow of unnumbered centuries. On it nothing grew. Here and there boulders loomed blackly. But nothing moved. Apparently, it was as bare of life as the dead mountains of the moon. The trail led straight on.

Satisfied of this, Angus followed the trail at speed. Now and then it turned out to avoid a boulder, but otherwise it went straight ahead, as though no doubt of direction existed in its maker's mind. Presently it swung around a huge rock and then turned north. Angus glanced casually at the boulder and passed by; but he had taken no more than three strides in the new direction when a voice behind him commanded:

"Stop! Put up your hands!"

CHAPTER XLVI

STRONG MEN

The tone forbade disobedience or delay. Angus turned to face a gun in the hands of Gavin French. The latter peered at him for a moment and laughed shortly.

"I thought it was you," he said. "Nobody else could have made as good time. You're a good guesser, too. Well—unbuckle your belt with your left hand and let it drop. Keep your right hand up. That's it. Now step away from it."

Having no option Angus obeyed, cursing himself internally for being fooled by the old trick of doubling back. Gavin lowered his gun.

"You can take 'em down," he said. "Now what's the next play?"

"That's up to you," Angus told him.

"Does look like it," the big man admitted. "But you know damned well I can't shoot you in cold

blood. If I roped you up here and left you, you might not be found. I can't take you with me. So it's partly up to you. This is hell's own rotten mess from start to finish. I knew it would be, from the time Jerry lost his head and plugged Braden. I suppose he's dead?"

"Yes."

"And Jerry and Larry, too?"

"I think so. I didn't wait to make sure."

"Sure to be," Gavin said calmly. "Jerry came ahead on his face and Larry wilted in a bunch. They got it, all right. I had a fool's luck. Any of your bunch get it hard?"

"I don't think so. We were lucky."

"You sure were. We were going to hold you up to-morrow, if we found a good place, but you got the jump on us. You were closer than we thought. So it seems I'm the only one left, bar Blake, and I don't count him. He quit us yesterday to save his skin. Maybe he was wise, at that."

"Blake is dead."

The big man exclaimed in astonishment. "Dead! How?"

Angus told him. Also he told why he himself had hunted Blake. Gavin French uttered a deep malediction.

"If I had known this," he said, "he would never have come with us. I think I would have handled him myself. But I don't suppose you believe that."

"Yes," Angus returned. "You are a man, and he never was."

Gavin French eyed him for a moment. "I guess you're right—about him, anyway," he said. "He got what was coming to him. Well, that leaves me—and Kathleen." He shook his head moodily. "I tell you straight, Mackay, that I'm not going to be taken. I've stood you up, but I don't know what I'm going to do with you. If you'll give me your word to go back to your bunch and give me that much start, you may pick up your gun and go."

"Will you answer me one question straight?" Angus asked.

"Anything you like," the big man promised. "It won't make much difference now."

"Gavin French, did you kill my father?"

The big man started violently. "Did I—What makes you ask that?"

"You promised me a straight answer. But Braden said so—before he died."

Gavin French did not reply immediately. "Braden was a rotten liar all his life," he said at last. "But I promised you a straight answer, and I keep my word. Yes, I killed your father—at least, I suppose that's what it comes to."

Angus drew a long breath. Its hissing intake was clear in the silence.

"You suppose!" he said. "My father was not armed. Do you think I will let you go, gun or no gun. One of us stays on this summit, Gavin French!"

"In your place I would say just that," Gavin admitted. "But I am going to tell you how it happened; and then I am going to let you take up your gun and do what you like. And just remember that if I wanted to lie I would have done it in the first place."

He paused a moment frowning at Angus.

"The day your father was shot," he began, "I was on the range looking for horses, and I had my rifle. In the afternoon I was riding up the long coulee by Cat Creek when I heard a shot ahead, and in a few minutes I came upon a steer staggering along. Then he rolled over and lay kicking. I got off my horse and saw your brand on him, and that he had been shot. Just then your father came tearing up the coulee. He saw me beside the dead steer, my rifle in my hand, and naturally he thought I had done the killing. He had no earthly use for me, and besides that he and I had some trouble a week before over a two-year-old. So when he rode up I knew there was going to be more trouble, and I was dead right."

"He didn't give me much chance to explain, and he didn't get off his horse. He damned me for a liar and a rustler, and suddenly he reached down and grabbed the barrel of my rifle with both hands. I've often wished I had let him take it, but by that time he was so damned mad that I wasn't going to let him have a gun, and I was pretty hot myself. So I hung onto it and tried to twist it out of his hands. Then his horse started to back. I was dragged along, holding to the gun, and my hold slipped. I swear I don't know how it happened, unless my slipping hand lifted the hammer, but anyway the rifle went off."

"He let go then, and his horse bolted. I didn't know he was badly hurt, because he was riding all right. In fact I wasn't sure he was hit at all. That was the last I saw of him. My own horse was frightened by the shot and it took me some time to catch him. I rode two or three miles looking for your father, but I was afraid that would lead to more trouble, because I thought the first thing he would do would be to organize himself with a gun. So I went home and kept my mouth shut."

The next day I heard he was dead. That's all. And there's your gun. If you feel like playing even, go to it."

But Angus as he listened knew that Gavin French was telling the exact truth. He could visualize the tragedy of that bygone day of his boyhood. His father's actions, as related by Gavin, were in exact keeping with his character. But in the end, though convinced that Gavin had fired with intent to kill, he had died in grim silence rather than leave to his son a heritage of hate and revenge.

"I believe it happened as you say it did," he said. "There is nothing to play even for."

The big man sighed deeply. "It's not every man who would believe it," he said; "but it's true. I know I should have come forward and told how it was, then, but I had only my own word. If your father had told anybody about the two-year-old and the words we had had, it would have been bad. So I just kept quiet."

"How did Braden know?"

"From Tenas Pete. I believe that Siwash shot the steer himself and saw what happened. Braden told me the Indian had told him the whole thing. That was a year after, and Pete had broken his neck with a bad cayuse. Braden tried to hold it over me till I put the fear of God in his heart one night when we were alone. I wouldn't do his dirty work, and I didn't know till too late what Blake and Jerry had done. I mean about your ditch. Larry wasn't in that. I couldn't give my brothers away, could I? Oh, it's a rotten mess from start to finish!"

He stared gloomily across the moonlit spaces, frowning heavily.

"So there's the whole thing," he said. "I've felt like telling you before, but what was the use? From first to last my family has done you dirt. Well, I'm the only man left, and I'll pay for the crowd. I'll be the goat. Short of surrendering, which I won't do, I'll give you any satisfaction you like. If you want it with a gun, all right. But we're two big, skookum men. I don't know which of us is the better, though I think I am. If you can best me to-night, in a fair fight without weapons, I'll go back with you; and if I best you you go back alone. What do you say?"

Angus knew that Gavin meant it. The proposal was primitive in conception and simplicity. Perhaps because of that it appealed to him strongly.

"There are not many men who would make that offer," he said.

"I would not make it to any other man," Gavin replied. "Does it go?"

"No."

The big man threw out his hands in a gesture of impatience.

"Then what the devil does?" he demanded. "Why not? You're no more afraid of me than I am of you. What do you want?"

"Nothing," Angus said. "Now that I know how my father died, I have nothing against you. Braden I care nothing about. So I am going back the way I came. But I am glad you do not think me a coward."

Gavin French drew a deep breath and his cold blue eyes for a moment held a curiously soft expression.

"Mackay," he said, "it probably sounds queer, but I have always liked you. And I liked you better after that little fuss we had on Christmas night, for then I knew you were strong as I am strong, and I hoped some day, for the pure fun of it, we might see which of us was the better man. A coward? Lord, no! I know why you are doing this. I'll bet you saw Kathleen."

"Yes," Angus admitted, "I saw her. She told me. But that's not—"

"You needn't lie about it," Gavin said gruffly. "That sort of thing is about all you would lie about. She's a good girl. I—I'm fond of her." He hesitated over the admission. "We were a queer bunch—our family. Stand-off. No slush. Afraid to show that we were fond of each other. That was the way with Kit and me. If I can make this, it will be different in the future. I'm not pulling any repentance stuff, you savvy. What's done is done, and it can't be helped. Well, it's time I was moving."

"How are you fixed for matches and smoking?"

"None too well—if you can spare either."

Angus handed over what he had in his pockets. "I wish you luck," he said. "I hope you make it—clean."

"I'll make it," Gavin replied calmly, "if it's my luck, and if it isn't I won't. It won't make any difference to anybody but Kit. If it wasn't for her I wouldn't care—either way."

"Don't worry about her. We will see that she wants for nothing. Her home will be with us if she will make it there, till you are ready for her."

"That's white of you," Gavin said with something very like emotion in his voice; "but she'd better

do as we had arranged. Tell her I'll make it sure. And tell Faith—if you don't mind—that I said her husband was a good man—oh, a damned good man!—every way." He was silent for a moment. "Shake?" he said and held out his hand.

Their grips met hard.

"Well, so long," said Gavin.

"So long," said Angus.

The big man nodded and turned north. Angus turned south. In a hundred paces he looked back. Gavin, already indistinct in the deceptive moonlight was standing at the top of a slight rise doing likewise. He waved his hand, turned, and the rise hid him from view. Though Angus watched for some moments he did not reappear. He had crossed the divide.

Then Angus, too, turned again, and realizing for the first time that the night cold of the height had chilled him to the bone struck a brisk pace down the southern slope; while behind him a rising wind broomed the dry snow of the desolate summit, effacing all trace of the trespassing feet of men.

CHAPTER XLVII

PEACE

Angus was riding up to the French ranch. He had just parted from his companions. Their homeward progress had been slow because of the wounded men. Turkey and Rennie had gone on toward the home ranch, and Bush and the other toward town. But he had turned off the trail to see Kathleen. He hated his errand, but it was better that he should tell her than leave it to a stranger. He would be glad to get it over and go home—to Faith.

As he approached the house he saw her. Apparently she had seen him coming, for she came down to greet him. He dismounted stiffly. He felt her eyes searching his face.

"Well?" she queried. He shook his head.

"I am sorry, Kathleen. It is bad news."

"I expected it," she said quietly. "Tell me about it—all!"

He told her the main facts, omitting details. When he had concluded she sat motionless, her eyes on the glory of the evening sky above the western ranges.

"I am sorry," he said again.

"I understand," she said. "You are sorry that it had to be. I knew what might happen if the boys were overtaken. It was inevitable. Well, they made their choice and took their chance, and it went against them. I think Gavin will tell me more than you have told me—some day. Well, this is the end of a good many things. I was merely waiting for word. To-morrow I am going away."

"There is no need. If you would stay with us—"

"I am just as grateful, but it is best not."

"It may be," he admitted. "Is there anything I can do?"

"If you would take Finn? He's too lively for Faith, but he's a good horse. I hate to sell him to a stranger."

"I will buy him."

"You will not buy him. Are you too proud to do me that kindness?"

"No. I will take him and give him a good home all his life."

"Thank you."

"For taking the gift of a good horse?"

"You know better. Finn and I were friends. He—he may miss me a little." For the first time her voice was not quite steady. "To feel that way about a horse!" she said scornfully. "Well, it's something to be missed—even by a horse."

"I shall miss you," Angus told her. Her eyes rested on him gravely for a long moment.

"I know what you mean," she said. "You liked me because I was a frank sort of individual. You may think of me now and then, when there is nothing else on your mind. But as for missing me—pshaw! Nobody will miss me. I had no friends."

It was brutally true. Kathleen French, highly organized, sensitive, proud, had repelled friendships. She had hidden real loneliness under a cloak of indifference. Apparently sufficient unto herself, others had taken her at her own apparent valuation. Her voice was tinged with

bitterness. Angus realized vaguely a part of the truth.

"I don't think anybody thought you wanted friends."

"Everybody wants friends," she returned. "Often the people who want them most have not the knack of making them. But I am not complaining. I have always been able to take my medicine without making a very bad face."

"You are a clean, straight, game girl," he said. "One of these days you will marry, and your husband will be a lucky man."

She smiled for the first time, but her mouth twitched slightly.

"I am game enough," she said. "I suppose that goes with the breed—like other things. Oh, yes, I am game enough to run true under punishment. But as for marrying—I don't think so. I was in love once—or thought I was."

"I didn't know about that," Angus said in surprise. "I'm sorry I said anything."

"No, of course you didn't know. Nobody did—not even the man in the case. He married another girl."

"He lost a mighty fine wife," Angus said.

"That's nice of you. But heaven knows what sort of wife I'd have made. The girl he married will suit him better. And now I mustn't keep you, Angus. Faith will be waiting. I won't see either of you again. She hasn't much cause to love me or mine, but she has never shown it by word or look. She is real, Angus, and I hope you will be very happy, both of you, all through life. Some day—oh, a long time hence, when the things that are so real and hard now have been dimmed and softened by the years—I may see you both again. Till then—good-by."

Angus took her strong, firm hand in his, and looked into her somber eyes.

"Good-by," he said, "and thank you for your good wishes. Good luck to you and to Gavin. Tell him that. And remember that anything I can do at any time for either you or him will be done cheerfully."

"I will remember," she said. "I wish you and Gavin had known each other better. You would have been friends. You are both real men."

She knew nothing of Gavin's connection with his father's death, for that was one of several things he had not told her. Another was that he had lied to Bush. He had said that he had found no trace of Gavin. Kathleen stood beside him as he mounted, and when, having ridden a few hundred yards, he turned in the saddle and glanced back she was still standing where he had left her, motionless.

But as the French ranch vanished from view Angus drew a long breath. It was more than the relief from the performance of an unpleasant duty. A chapter seemed to have closed, the old order of things ended, a new one begun.

Already the shadows were falling, the hills purple black against the west. Well, he would be home as fast as a good horse could carry him. Turkey would have told Faith, and she would be waiting for him. He shook the big, gaunted chestnut into a fast lope.

But at a sharp bend he met Faith, almost riding her down.

"Why, old girl!" he cried, while Chief's hoofs slid and grooved the trail and the reliable Doughnut side-stepped expertly. "This is fine!"

"I couldn't wait," she said. "I have been waiting too long already. So when Turkey came home I came to meet you."

"We had to travel slowly. And somebody had to tell Kathleen. I thought it was better that I should."

"I am very sorry for her."

"So am I. But tell me about yourself. How does it feel to be a grass widow?"

"I'm not going to tell you. I've been worried. I suppose I've been silly. But Jean will tell you all about that. She was always telling me not to worry, cheering me up."

"Has she made it up with Chetwood yet?"

"Well, my goodness!" Faith exclaimed.

"Why, they're not married, are they?"

"No. Why, it went clean out of my mind, but this afternoon when I saw Turkey coming, I ran down to meet him and came around the corner of the wagon shed, and there the two of them were. And they looked as if they had been—well, you know."

"Kissing each other?"

"Yes, it looked like that."

But the ranch came in sight, its broad, fertile acres dim in the fading light. The smell of the fresh earth of fall plowing struck the nostrils, and a tang of wood smoke from new clearing. From the corrals came the voices of cattle. A colt whinnied in youthful falsetto for his dam. All sounds carried far in the hush of evening.

"Seems odd to think this will be broken up," Angus said. "Houses and streets on the good land; maybe a church on that knoll, a school over yonder. I ought to be glad, because it means money. But I'm not."

"I know," his wife nodded wisely. "I've been a wanderer and a city dweller most of my life, but I can understand how the one spot on all the earth may claim a man. And you'll always want a ranch, and stock, and wide spaces, no matter how much money you have. Oh, yes, boy, I know."

"I guess you are right," he admitted. "I grew up that way. Well, there's plenty of time to think it over. I can take another crop off this." He lifted his head and sniffed the air. "Old girl," he said, "I believe I smell grub—real grub—cooking. And I haven't had a real meal for three days. We were sort of shy coming out, you know."

"My heavens!" Faith cried, "Turkey said the same thing. When I left he was telling Mrs. Foley he would marry her for a pie. Let's hurry."

Some hours later Angus, shaven and fed, sat with Faith enjoying rest and tobacco. It was good to lie back in a chair, to relax, to be in a house again protected from the wind and cold, to look forward to a comfortable bed in place of one blanket and such browse as could be scraped into a heap as a dog scrapes leaves and rubbish to lie on. Though he could sleep anywhere, by virtue of youth and a hard body, he appreciated comfort.

Earlier in the evening Jean, Chetwood and Turkey had borne them company. But the two former had gone, followed by caustic comment from the latter. And soon after that young gentleman had announced that Angus and Faith were a darn sight worse, and that he was going to bed.

Left alone, Faith spoke the thing which was in her mind.

"I am glad," she said, "that it was not you who killed Blake."

"I intended to kill him," he replied, "and I would if it had been my luck to come up with him. But I think I am glad, now, that I didn't, though he deserved it. Anyway Paul Sam had the better right."

"The poor old Indian!" Faith said softly.

"Oh, I don't know. If he could talk about it he would say that he couldn't die better. And then he was a very old man."

"But life may be sweet to the old."

"Yes. But when a man is alone, when all of his blood and the friends of his youth and manhood are gone, there can't be much to live for. I would wish to die before that time comes to me."

"Don't talk of dying." She shivered a little. But the chord of melancholy in his being had been struck and vibrated.

"Why not? Talking will not bring death nearer, nor stave it off. '*Crioch onarach!*' You have no Gaelic, but it means a good finish—an honorable end to life. And that is the main thing. What does it matter when you die, if you die well? I would not live my last years like a toothless, stiff, old dog, dragging his legs around the house with the sun. I would rather go out with the taste of life sweet in my mouth."

"We have many years before us, you and I," she said. "I think they will be happy years, boy."

"They will be largely what we make them. I remember my father's words when it was near the end with him; and *he* was a hard man. The things worth least in life, he said, were hate and revenge; and the things worth most in life and more in death were love, and work well done, and a heart clean of bitterness. I did not think so then. But now I am beginning to think he was right."

"Yes, he was right," she said.

Fell a long silence. At last Faith took the banjo on her knee, and smiling at her husband began to pick the strings gently. She played at random, snatches of melody, broken, indistinct; old airs, odd, half-forgotten. Now and then she sang very softly.

Angus listened in utter content. He seemed to have reached a harbor, a sheltered haven. Toil, struggle, stress seemed far off, faint memories. The spell of the home was upon him in full. Little things—familiar furnishings, the backs of books, pictures—seemed like the smiling faces of old friends. It was, he recognized, the force of contrast with his recent experiences; but it was very pleasant. Softly the banjo talked; and with the haunting murmur of gut and parchment came Faith's voice, low but clear, singing to herself rather than to him.

"Hame, laddie, hame, an' it's hame ye'll come to me,
Hame to yer hame in yer ain countree;
Whaur th' ash, an' th' oak an' th' bonnie hazel tree
They be all a-growin' green in yer ain countree."

For a moment the singing ceased, while the banjo whimpered uncertainly as if seeking a new tune. But it steadied to the same air.

"If the bairn be a girl she shall wear a gowden ring;
And if it be a boy he shall fight for his king—"

Something in her voice, a soft, crooning note, caused Angus to stare at the singer. Up from the throat to brow a great wave of color swept. But her voice did not falter:

"With his tarpaulin hat and his coat of navy blue
He shall pace the quarter-deck as his daddy used to do!"

THE END.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE LAND OF STRONG MEN ***

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