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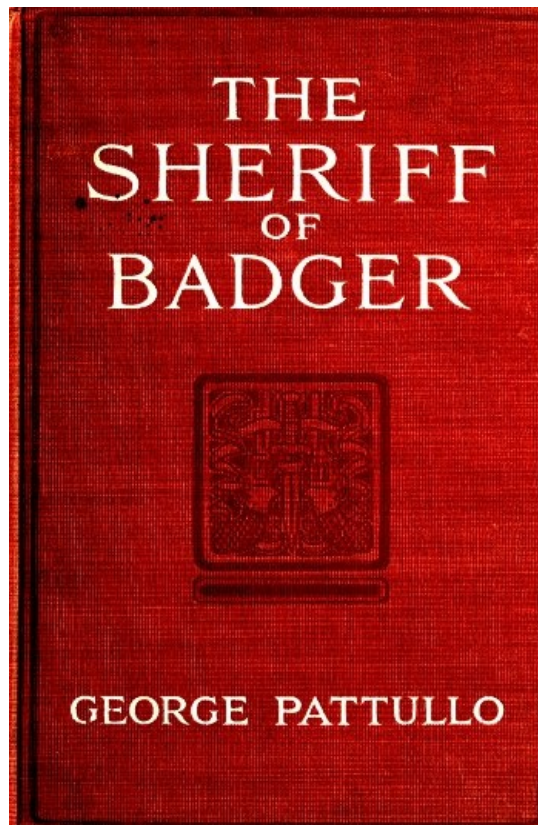
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SOUTHWEST BORDERLAND ***



The SHERIFF OF BADGER

A TALE OF THE SOUTHWEST BORDERLAND

BY GEORGE PATTULLO

ILLUSTRATED

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TO
A. W. BALLANTYNE



The Sheriff of Badger

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THE SHERIFF OF BADGER

CHAPTER I

LAFE JOHNSON ARRIVES AT THE LAZY L RANCH

It may come as a shock to many to learn that we have in cowland a considerable number of full-blooded men who have never made it a practice to step outside the door of a morning and shoot a fellow-citizen before breakfast. This is true; vital statistics and fiction to the contrary, notwithstanding. They are well-grown, two-fisted men, also, and work very hard seven days in the week, and whenever they go to town they get drunk. But in the main they are law-abiding, and steal calves only for their employers.

There was Lafe Johnson. This story has him for its central figure.

"It's right queer about men," Lafe used to say, when in a reflective mood. "A feller will knock in a friend what he'd be like to do himself. And he'll act mean one day so he's sure ashamed of it the next. Yes, sir; the best of 'em will. It all depends on how a man feels, I reckon, and what shape his stomach's in. No man ain't always going to do the right thing, and I've never met a feller yet who was all bad. What's more, nobody thinks he's bad, or I expect he wouldn't be. Don't you reckon? Why, a man'll be plucky one day and the next morning he'd cry if a jackrabbit was to slap him in the face."

Lafe started man's estate as a cowboy. What his antecedents were I don't know and don't care,

nor did anybody else in our country. We have so many more important matters to engage us. Punching cattle happened to be his profession. In every other respect Lafe was a normal individual—no better than you or I, and assuredly no worse. Some thought he was worse, and among them a Mrs. Tracey—or she pretended to—who thought that and a few other things besides. That was why Mrs. Floyd, just before Johnson departed the ranch, insisted that he accompany her to the Tracey home in Rowdy Cañon.

"I'll tell her to her face what I think," she said.

Lafe tried to pacify her.

"I ain't much of a fighter, ma'am," he said. "You'd better go alone and have it out. Miz Tracey, she's got me scared off the map right now."

"You'll come, too!" Mrs. Floyd assured him, pulling on her gauntlets.

This is what Mrs. Floyd said, sitting her horse in front of the Tracey gate, her erstwhile friend being on the veranda: "I've heard the stories you've been spreading about me, Tracey!"

"Stories? Gracious, what's got into you, Sally? I never mentioned your name! Do you reckon I've got nothing better to talk about?"

"Don't lie," Mrs. Floyd continued, her voice rising. "You know what I mean. And I've got Mr. Johnson with me to hear it, too. You keep your mouth shut about me—do you hear? If you don't, I'll shut it for you. I'm right proud and glad to know Lafe Johnson—he's a friend of my husband, too—and—and—"

She had much more to impart, having rehearsed it mentally on the way over in order to be effective, but here rage and tears choked speech. Perhaps it was as well; finical people may even find something to deplore in what Mrs. Floyd did say. Mrs. Tracey answered, tucking her chin into her neck, that she was very, very glad to hear it, but, for herself, she must confess complete inability to discover any grounds for pride in Mr. Johnson's acquaintance. Upon which she slammed the door.

"Now, I wonder if that lady meant something?" Lafe murmured gently.

That was forever the way. People were never indifferent to Johnson. They either swore by him or execrated his name, which ought to be held to his credit. A man's virtues must be negative if he make no enemies.

Here is the story of Lafe's advent in our part of the world—merely the facts, and not the tale Mrs. Tracey spread. No man will blame him, and let those of her sex judge Mrs. Floyd who have never erred a hair's breadth. We will then consider the jury.

The Lazy L outfit was loading a train with cattle—ones and twos, graded stuff and some bulls—when Johnson first appeared. He arrived on a freight, presumably. It is my belief he was heading back for Texas on the bumpers of an eastbound that passed. It stopped for water and he dropped off when he perceived us shipping.

Forty yearlings had been manhandled and heaved into a car, and one old bull was added which would eventually visit eastern parts in tins. Perhaps the range monarch had some suspicion of this, for he turned round to walk out. They yelled, and prodded at his neck and ribs with poles, but the bull shook his head in settled determination and started down the chute. If he gained the crowding pen, where more yearlings and another bull waited, there would be a fight and a lot of mussing and long delay. The boss danced up and down, swearing like a moss-trooper.

"Bar the chute! Bar the chute!" he yelled from the top of the corral fence.

Ere the poles could be thrust in, a seedy individual stepped down directly in front of the giant Hereford and began to lash him furiously over the face with a rope.

"Come out of there! You'll get killed. Come out!" cried the boss.

The bull bellowed with rage, but the sting of the blows forced his head up. Blood trickled down his nose, and there were livid wales above the eyes. One lurch forward and this man would be crushed, but the rope cut fiercely and without pause, and the bull began to back. The stranger did not let up, but drove him into the car with savage recklessness.

"What the Sam Hill are you, anyhow?" said the boss, straddling the fence. "A circus or a town cowboy?"

Now, a "town cowboy" is a term of reproach among us, signifying a young man who never did range work, but wears the clothes and does trick roping for the delectation of visitors. Ultimately he joins a Wild West show and instructs the rising generation.

"I reckon you're cleverer than me," Johnson said, "but you ain't awake to me yet. Turn over. You're on your back."

Without concerning himself further about the boss, he clambered out on to the platform and threw the borrowed rope to Reb. We saw that he was tall and big of bone, and his shoulders had an indolent droop. Although he could not have been over twenty-five, his hair was plentifully flecked with gray.

Presently Buffalo Jim, who was keeping tally of the cattle going through the chute, lost count and admitted frankly that he could not say whether there were thirty-seven or forty in the car. He tried to appear grave in confessing this, but was unable to repress a snigger. Everything would have gone smoothly, he contended, had he not chanced to recall a story Uncle Hi Millet had told him the previous night.

"If that feller could count up to fifty," said Johnson, in an aside to the buyer, "he would be back in Texas still, a-teaching school."

"Hello, Lafe!" the other exclaimed. "Where did you drop from? Want a job? Seventy a month?"

"Eighty."

"No, sir; seventy."

"Eighty. I got a lot of unfinished business down the line unless."

"Have it your own way. Eighty it is. Fly at it."

Johnson replaced Buffalo Jim and sat on a board between two posts, dangling his legs, staring at everything but the plunging steers. Yet he never once failed to tally.

The boss's wife rode up to the corrals. With her was Mrs. Tracey.

"Who's them there ladies?" Lafe whispered to a cowboy who wielded a prodpole.

"That pretty one's Miz Floyd. I cain't rightly see the other. Oh, yes. Shore. She's a widow woman—owns a flock of mines way up in them mountains."

"The pretty one's the one I meant," said Lafe.

We sealed the door of the last car, and a brakeman waved to the engineer to pull forward. The buyer grabbed Lafe by the shoulder and jabbered instructions into his ear. Then he caught the caboose rail as it sped by, and Johnson informed the amazed Floyd that he had been commissioned to receive the other herds when gathered.

"And he don't even know your name? Oh, he does? All the same, that's sure rushing it. Glad to do business with you, anyhow. I want you to be acquainted with my wife. Shake hands with Mr. Johnson, Sally."

Mrs. Floyd came down the platform, striding like a man. She was wearing a divided skirt, very useful-looking spurs on her high-heeled boots, and a man's felt hat. All the cowboys stopped work to eye her. She was only twenty-two and had an amazingly trim figure. With that meaningless smile of polite welcome with which a woman greets her husband's friends, Mrs. Floyd drew off a glove to give Johnson her hand.

"Lafe Johnson! Lafe!" she squealed. And with that she was pumping the big fellow's arm up and down, her cheeks red with excitement.

"Why, it's li'l Sally!"

"I take it you two know each other," said her husband mildly.

"Do we? Why, we were raised together, Tom. Lafe was one of my best beaux. Weren't you, Lafe?"

"Ain't got over it yet," said Lafe.

The widow put in a reminder that she was on earth by a furtive pull at Mrs. Floyd's sleeve. Lafe said, "Pleased to meet you, ma'am," very correctly, and shook hands. After the hand shake he looked at Mrs. Tracey again, with a new interest. The boss shouted for his horse. He could never be idle a minute.

"Let's go home. Reb, give Johnson your horse and double up with one of the boys. I'm sure getting hungry."

Laughing and indulging in horse-play, the Lazy L men set out. Mrs. Tracey paired off with Floyd and took especial pains to lead him well in advance. There would have been nothing in this maneuver but for her manner of executing it.

"What does she mean by that?" said Sally hotly.

"Who? What?"

"The way she went off there. Didn't you see her? You'd think we—oh, I don't know how to say it."

"I reckon this lady knows her way about, ma'am?"

"She's awfully nice, Lafe. Really she is. When we're alone, I love her. But sometimes, when men are around—well, you saw how she acted."

"Sure," said Lafe, in his soft bass, and he grinned at her. "It ain't what she does, but it's what she don't do. That smile she smothers, now—"

"Have you noticed that, too? Tom did, very first thing. He doesn't like her."

Johnson asked her of her marriage and how it had come about. It was five years since he had

seen her, wasn't it? Mrs. Floyd said four, and he murmured that it seemed longer. She laughed, but was pleased, nevertheless. As they rode, she studied him without disguise, and remarked that the gray in his hair was an improvement. He was dressed very poorly, and his boots were down at the heel and worn through the soles, but she did not appear to notice their plight and he suffered no confusion therefrom. Twice she detected him looking from her to Tom, loping in the van.

"What're you thinking about?" she said.

"Nothing much. Ideas don't get much of a hold on me. There ain't nothing to grip."

"I know—I can see it in your face. It's mean of you, Lafe, just because he's forty and—and—well, he's the truest and best—"

"Hold on there. Pull up!" He was chuckling. Abruptly sober: "Sure, I'll bet he's got a kind heart."

She glared at him for an instant. Then they both exploded into laughter and she shook her horse into a gallop.

"You're just the same old Lafe. Nothing'll ever sober you," she called over her shoulder. "Remember—I'm a married woman, Lafe Johnson."

"I won't forget it if you don't, ma'am," he said amiably, upon which she gave him a fearfully stern look and giggled.

CHAPTER II

CERTAIN COMPLICATIONS RESULT

Many authorities assert that a man's looks count for nothing in the pursuit of women and the game of love. And they seem to have the rights of the matter. Citations can be had in plenty. Take the case of the Lazy L boss. Floyd was not unlike an amiable gorilla. Well over the two-score mark in years, he rambled somewhat in his shape. In the first place, his shoulders were too broad for his height, and his jaw and mouth were entirely too wide. Moreover, his legs had the liveliest scorn one for the other. The boss always compelled interest and respect, it is true; but so does a bulldog. Yet he owned the Lazy L and all its herds; he had the prettiest wife in the country, and there were those who said she adored him; and he had a son and heir, two years old. All of which set Lafe to marveling over the inscrutable contrivings of Providence.

It was seven miles from the shipping pens to the ranch, another seven to the Tracey home. Consequently the widow stayed to supper, though it meant enduring Floyd's cold scrutiny for an hour of chat. The boss was civil to her in a heavy, formal way, bestowing sidelong looks when he was persuaded she could not see him. However, there was a full moon and it would fall to Johnson to take her home. She was a persevering woman.

Floyd presented himself to his wife on the second day and said, in his usual blunt style: "Sally, better be decent to that fellow Johnson. Will you?"

"Why, sure, Tom. What's got into your head now?"

"Some of this last bunch of cattle are awful poor stuff. Where the tarnation Reb picked up these brindles and swaybacks and old, hipped long-horns beats me. Lafe will cut 'em all back. He'll just go through that herd like a prairie fire. So keep him in a good humor, Sally, will you? Is it a go?"

"Tom, you're dreadful. Do you think I'll help you cheat Mr. Horne by flirting with Lafe? You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Tom Floyd."

"Who asked you to flirt? I've seen you mighty handy with them eyes of yours on other fellows, without being asked," he said good-humoredly.

"Oh, what a lie, Tom! I won't. Remember, I won't."

But, being a good wife, she did.

Autumn was rattling the dry bones of summer, and she and Johnson rode together every day. A keen southwest wind swirled the dead grass and leaves about their horses' feet. He would listen to her chatter by the hour, watching the pink grow in her cheeks. Lafe was very good-humored, indeed. With the improvement in his circumstances had come a marked improvement in appearance. He had imported what is known as a "hand-me-down" suit at the cost of a week's pay, and he took a pardonable pride in it, for the reason that the tailors expressly stated in their advertising that they catered only to gentlemen of refined tastes. Also, he had done some trafficking with Buffalo Jim, thereby obtaining a pair of whole boots.



"She and Johnson rode together every day."

Often he spent hours with the baby Tommy, fashioning him ridiculous playthings, and tumbling on the ground for the child's delectation. And Sally gloated over Mrs. Tracey, who scarcely saw Lafe at all. Mrs. Floyd looked not an hour over eighteen.

Twice she brought Johnson up short.

"Now, Lafe, none of that. I won't listen."

Let us disregard the fruits of our experience and believe that Mrs. Floyd did not perceive what was growing in Johnson during those two weeks of companionship, although we may be convinced that even a stupid woman can sense it a mile off; and Mrs. Floyd was clever. But she would not give ear to her own doubts.

"That widow won't get him, anyhow," she said, standing in front of a mirror. She could not resist giving her hips an approving pat, and she smiled.

One evening, as they sat on the veranda, Lafe put up a forefinger languidly and touched a stray curl. She dashed his hand away.

"It's just as black and silky as ever," he said.

"Perhaps. But you keep your hands off! Do you hear?" Then she added: "There's no gray in it, anyhow."

Just for whom this shaft was meant will ever remain a profound mystery. Both Lafe and Mrs. Tracey had gray in their hair. That night Sally was demonstrative with Floyd, hanging over the back of his chair with her hands locked under his chin and her face snuggling against the top of his head. The boss blew clouds of smoke and seemed gently amused. These manifestations of devotion had become frequent of late, but it should not be hastily inferred that because Lafe was a spectator they were done for his benefit. That could not be, because he took them with such extraordinary fortitude. If he was harassed, Johnson stifled all expression of his condition grandly.

Floyd was much away from home. Sometimes he was in the south, buying stock cattle. Again, he went north and east to sell of his herds. Sally told Lafe that he left her alone too much. Lafe coughed and said something unintelligible, and lighted a cigarette.

"What did you say?" she asked sharply.

"When a feller is getting old and ain't got long to live—"

"You quit that kind of talk right now. I won't stand for it."

It was the first time she had been really angry at any of his frequent sallies concerning Floyd, and it put them at once on a different footing. The safe frankness of raillery was gone.

Alas, that Lafe could draw the line so sharply between business and the courtesies of leisure hours. A trail herd arrived. They plied Johnson with strong drink and worked in relays to get him drunk. He partook sociably, but without noticeable impairment of his faculties, and he cut the herd ruthlessly to a remnant. The boss grew dizzy figuring his losses and departed from the roundup, unable to endure the spectacle without interference, leaving instructions to be notified

when the fool was done.

"I'm working for Horne," said Lafe cheerfully. "Did you think I couldn't tell a two-year-old from a three, Floyd? Those boys tried to run a bunch by me."

Mrs. Tracey drove over to the Floyd headquarters twice, on matters relating to a recipe for a cake and certain patterns, and then asked her friend and Mr. Johnson to dinner. She invited Floyd, too, but it was done so perfunctorily that Sally felt the stab and was furious. However, she went. The widow was as sleek as a kitten and wore such a secretive air that Mrs. Floyd had much ado to keep her temper during the meal. Afterward, Mrs. Tracey excused herself for a few minutes on some pretext and left them alone in the sitting-room. When she had to pass through on her way upstairs, she hurried as though intruding, and said: "Oh, I beg your pardon!"

"The cat!" Mrs. Floyd cried, gritting her teeth.

"There wasn't no call for her to say that?"

"Of course there wasn't, booby. That doesn't make it any better. It makes it worse."

Two days later: "Now guess what?"

"I done quit guessing," Johnson answered.

"That Tracey woman tried to tell me this morning that my Tom was too friendly with one of those Baptismo girls."

"Pshaw!" said Lafe. "Pshaw! What does she want to go and tell them lies for? What good does it do?"

"You don't see?"

"I reckon I'm dull."

"Oh, you great baby!" Mrs. Floyd gurgled delightedly.

This display of malice disturbed Lafe greatly. Such weapons were beyond his knowledge and capacity, and he felt hotly uncomfortable when Sally intimated that they might expect Mrs. Tracey to be talking of them next—if, indeed, she had not done so already. She was for going to Rowdy Cañon without delay to bestow a tongue-lashing on the widow.

"What's the use?" the cowboy said. "Her talk can't hurt nobody. They all know you."

"Some people will believe her."

"Some people will do anything. Never bother with poor trash, Sally. It don't matter what that kind thinks. Leave her be. What can you expect from a pig but a grunt?"

That was no way to speak of a lady, but Mrs. Floyd jumped from her chair and cried "Goody!", greatly consoled. Just before the evening meal, she put on a pink dress for which Lafe had professed admiration, and parted her hair in the middle. Had there been a woman within seven miles, she would not have done this, but Lafe liked it that way. So also did her husband, for that matter.

"As if I'd get jealous of Tom!" she sniffed. "Huh! you won't get Lafe that way, my lady."

I have said that they rode together every day. Sometimes Floyd watched the two meditatively. His instructions were being carried out—no doubt of that—and Johnson was good-natured. But the boss was a silent man and opposed no objection. As for Sally, if she gave it a thought at all, she probably found justification in a dozen reasons a woman would appreciate, which are beyond male ken.

Lafe helped her down from her horse late one afternoon, though she needed no help. And he held her for just the fraction of a second. She stiffened with an injured air, but she did not reprove him. On another occasion—they were on the veranda and it was growing to dusk—after staring helplessly at her for a full quarter of an hour, while she purposely said as little as possible and toyed with the lace of her handkerchief, her head on one side that he might get the benefit of her profile—suddenly he seized her in his arms and tried to kiss her. He did, in fact, obtain the merest peck at the tip of her ear.

"You darn fool!" she said, tearing loose.

Then she saw his face, and went hastily indoors and huddled in a chair in a dark corner. She sat there until called to supper, striving to fix recent happenings in proper sequence.

After putting the baby to bed, she beckoned Lafe on to the veranda. Her manner was hurried.

"Lafe, you've got to go away. You've got to go to-morrow."

"Why? I can't, Sally. There's three thousand more—"

"You must! You must! Can't you see? You've got to go. We're—"

"Sure, I see," he said. It was very dark and he came closer. "You care! That's what it is. You used to, Sally, and you do now."

"Lafe, let me go! Please—please!"

She broke away and gained the door. She was panting. In the lighted entrance, she looked back.

"You've got to go to-morrow, remember," she said faintly.

But he did not go on the morrow. Floyd was astir before dawn—he usually fell asleep on a sofa immediately after his supper, thereby gaining a few hours on everyone else—and rode away with ten men to bring up the last herd of the sixteen thousand head he would ship.

Sally was distraught and restless all day. She punished the baby for upsetting a pitcher, and then ordered the Mexican nurse to take him and keep him out of her sight. Johnson stayed away from the house and busied himself at the corrals, where some newly purchased mules were being broken to harness for his employer. He never gave an order, yet the boys obeyed his slow-voiced suggestions with the same promptitude they gave to the boss's crisp commands. Lafe could always get obedience without visible exercise of authority. He knew his business and followed it without fluster.

At sunset, a cloud of dust whirled madly across country, with the rain close behind it. Sally ate alone—Lafe had evidently stayed at the bunkhouse—and she felt vaguely resentful. About nine she tucked the child into his bed and went out on to the veranda. The wind was dying, and the rain fell in a soft, steady murmur.

Johnson came running along the pathway and took the steps at a jump. He was wet, but jeered at her suggestion that he change.

"Only got this one suit," he said. "If it gets to shrinking much more on me, I'll have for to steal a blanket to-morrow, Sally."

He took a chair beside her and they watched the lightning play above the black jumble of hills to the east. Sally uttered hardly a syllable. When she spoke at all, the words came jerkily. Lafe leaned over once to brush some sparks of his cigarette from his coat. A delicate perfume reached him.

"The river," he said, clearing his throat, "the river'll be way up. Bridge is like to go out."

"I'm afraid so. Oh, dear! Tom promised he'd come home to-night, too."

"Come home to-night? Why, it's thirty miles."

"I know it. But he's never failed to keep his word yet," she said.

"He won't come home to-night."

A writhing fork of lightning leaped from east to north. There was no thunder. They sat tensely quiet and the rain dripped sadly from the roof.

"No, he won't come home to-night," he said in a hoarse voice. "He can't."

"Sally!" he breathed, bending toward her. "Sally!"

CHAPTER III

CONCERNING A BABY'S WAIL

He was gripping both her hands and she had not moved. Her lips were open, but she seemed powerless to speak. A loud thump startled the pair. A shrill wail from the bedroom and Mrs. Floyd sprang up.

The baby had fallen from the bed and was now engaged in howling himself purple in the face. Mrs. Floyd swooped down on him in a tremor, and gathering him in her arms, went all over his sturdy body with speed and precision, to ascertain in just how many places bones were broken.

"Lafe," she cried, "he's bumped his head. Oh, just look at this lump! My own precious darling! Lafe, get the witch-hazel! Quick! No, no! In the bathroom, on the window sill. Oh, he's holding his breath! Baby! Baby!"

She shook Tommy until he was forced to release the air in his lungs, which he let go with a tearing yell. Johnson brought the bottle and stood awkwardly holding it, while she applied some of the contents to a red spot on the baby's forehead. Sally sat in a chair, rocking back and forward, with her lips against her child's neck and her arms holding him close. Little Tom clutched her tightly and gradually his cries and sobs ceased. Lafe tiptoed to the door. He remained there a few minutes to watch, leaning against the jamb. But Sally did not appear to notice him as she crooned to the baby, who was sinking to sleep.

Johnson was standing at the edge of the steps, staring into the blackness, when she came out. He threw away his cigarette on hearing her call his name.

"Just look at that dark, Sally, will you?" he said. "It beats all."

At the tone of his voice, she cried: "Oh, Lafe, Lafe! I'm so glad!"

Mrs. Floyd did not specify why she was glad, nor did Johnson ask her. She gave him both hands without hesitation, and they stood smiling at each other in comradely fashion in the half-light from the hall. When he spoke, it was to his childhood's playmate.

"Huh-huh!" she agreed. "Let's sit down and talk over old times. Do you remember, Lafe, the grass fights we used to have? You were an awful cheat."

"That's a lie, ma'am! Leastways, it ain't true. You done put a lizard down my back with a bunch of grass."

They were in high glee when a clatter of hoofs broke in on them. It startled Mrs. Floyd.

"What's that? Who's that?"

Two riders pulled up in front of the house, and Floyd stepped stiffly out of the saddle. He gave the reins to Miguel, who disappeared toward the corrals at a gallop. The boss was spattered with mud, and wringing wet and dog-weary. As he came into the light, he dragged his feet, and water ran in streams from his overalls and seeped from his boots.

"Tom!" His wife ran to him.

"Don't," he said. "I'm soaking."

"How did you get here? Mercy! You're a sight. Don't let the rain drip on the rug! Stand over here."

"How's the bridge, Floyd?" Johnson asked.

"The bridge is down," the boss answered. "We done swum the river." Then he chuckled grimly. "Miguel, he was plumb scared, but I pulled a gun on him and made him go ahead."

He threw himself into a chair and removed his muddied spurs.

"I never dreamed you'd get back to-night," said Sally.

"I said I would, didn't I?"

Johnson, resting his shoulders against the sitting-room mantel, suddenly bethought himself and went to his room, whence he returned briskly with a bottle of whisky.

"This'll keep the cold out."

"Why, you must be half dead, you poor, dear old Boy Blue!" Sally cried; the name fitted the boss as happily as Fido would a rhinoceros. "Wait, and I'll cook you something."

Something in her manner or her words caused Floyd to lift his head sharply. A slow smile twisted his features. He got up and went into the dining-room to pour some water into his drink. Before he drained it, he looked at his reflection in the glass above the sideboard. His eyes showed tired but well content.

"Come on, Lafe," he said brusquely. "Let's eat."

"You're on," said the cheery Mr. Johnson.

Sally hovered about them, constantly running to the kitchen for hot coffee and toast. Lafe sat back—it being his custom to bring his mouth down to his fork, instead of his fork up to his mouth—and surveyed the scene with much approval. Mrs. Floyd was at that moment pressing her husband to a second plate of scrambled eggs.

"There's nothing like a home, after all," said the boss, with a sigh of satisfaction. "You ought for to get married, Lafe."

"Hell!—yes!" said Lafe, who was sometimes careless in his speech.

CHAPTER IV

OUT OF A JOB

Three days later Johnson left us to go north with his last load of cattle. Floyd and his wife were at the pens to say good-by, and waved at him until the caboose followed the rest of the train around a curve. Even Tommy flapped his chubby fist. And in the course of time Horne paid him off.

That was in Kansas City. Johnson spent his earnings in something under thirty hours and made the return in a day coach, having no money for a berth. Indeed, his last meal, which he procured at a wayside lunch counter in New Mexico, he was compelled to charge. It was made easier for him to do this inasmuch as he had already eaten the meal. The landlord, after slowly thinking it over, said he would trust Lafe.

Now he was back in the cow country, hopeful that Horne might find further employment for him,

for that was the only work in which Lafe was content. And he went to Badger, his credit being good there until they should discover he had no money. It behooved him to get a job, with winter almost on them, yet the prospect did not distress Lafe in the least. He loitered around the Fashion, waiting for something to turn up.

On a November morn, Buffalo Jim rode into Badger from the Lazy L, leading a pack-horse that carried all his worldly possessions on its back. Buffalo was lifted up in heart and scornful of roundups, having just sold a mine. It does not concern us what sort of mine he sold, although a gentleman from Illinois grew very nasty over this point subsequently. Suffice that Jim had four hundred dollars.

He told Lafe that he was through with the Lazy L and sick cows, and would devote his future to prospecting. Nobody would ever order him around again; he wouldn't stand to be roused out of bed at four in the morning by Floyd, or any man alive. A week's work in the hills, a vein of copper—and here he was with money in his pocket, able to glean life's pleasures. He banged his silver down on the bar and looked all around, like a landed proprietor. Johnson agreed that it was a tempting career, although a man had once hunted him for a month with a sawed-off .25-35 because of a similar transaction. Buffalo scoffed at the suggestion of the Illinois party ever finding him, and he proceeded to do nothing. Lafe helped him.

It is to be feared that you will regard these two as a godless pair, which I deplore. Remember that customs create standards of behavior, and in Johnson's world they are suspicious of a man who permits himself no indulgences. Besides, in your circle or in mine, what earthly honor is accorded the man so palely good that he never takes a jaunt into the pleasant by-ways?

So then, Lafe Johnson and Buffalo Jim proceeded to enjoy life in Badger in the only way they knew. There was really no adequate physical reason for Shortredge's name of Buffalo Jim. If one scrutinized him closely, the difference could be discerned with comparative ease. Yet Shortredge possessed traits that made the appellation peculiarly fitting. When storms brew, a buffalo will drift into them head on, being so constructed by the Creator. It is yet to be learned that Jim ever permitted trouble to overtake him with his back turned.

They were lying under a pool table in the Fashion one gusty November dawn, lost in vague conjecture as to how they had arrived there, when Mr. Shortredge was seized of an inspiration. He told Lafe that he would give a dance, and Lafe readily consenting to this expenditure of his friend's money, they sallied forth to acquaint the citizens of the impending function, and to bid them come.

"I want everybody to come a-runnin'," was Jim's formal invitation. "No style, mind; but it's best to be clean."

The ball was held in Haverty's empty feed barn and the guests presented themselves with the commendable expedition their host had urged on them. At an early hour in the festivities, three male persons from Nogales sought admittance, and Lafe Johnson, not taking kindly to their looks, a slight awkwardness resulted. This was satisfactorily adjusted between the barn and the town limits, and Lafe and his companion returned to their hospitable duties in that peace of mind obtainable from work well done.

"What do you think of that there girl with the yallow hair?" said Johnson, in a cautious whisper that could not be heard beyond fifty feet.

"I don't think much of her," Jim answered. "Too loose in the j'int's for me."

"I reckon she looks good enough to tie to," said Lafe.

In pursuance of this opinion, he began to haunt the vicinity of Grace Hawes. He danced two Paul Joneses with her; followed them with a two-step and a waltz; and by that time Miss Hawes was giggling in half-hysterical mirth over her partner's unusual sallies. She slapped playfully at Lafe when he leaned close to her ear to whisper.

"Say, you've got your nerve," she said, covering her face with her hands in an ecstasy of laughter.

"No, I ain't. Honest I ain't. I'm sure shy as a teeny li'l rabbit with other girls."

"What makes you go to say them things then?"

"You do. You make me brighten up a heap. And I'd kind of like to learn to talk easy like the other boys."

"You've got 'em backed into the cactus right now," said Grace, once more overcome.

The two were occupying one of the wooden benches ranged against the walls. Johnson was obliged to give her up at this point to a man from New Mexico. His visage was expressionless as he watched her depart and then he crossed to the door to institute inquiries as to how this interloper had contrived to get in.

"Let's run him off," said Jim. "That big Hick ought to be in a cotton-patch, anyhow."

"No-oo. She'd think I was jealous. And I'm not caring; not me. She can blister her feet for all of me, and he's a sure a-helping her. Watch him tromp on her toes. Say, Buf'lo, that's the third time she's danced with that there feller."

"What're you getting all swelled up about, Lafe?" Haverty asked, overhearing. "Quit your roaring. You mad just because Steve done took your girl?"

"Mad, hell!" said Johnson. "Who is this here Steve, Haverty?"

"He done drifted in about a month ago. Works for the Tumbling K. You've heard of him, Lafe? Shore you have. Goes by the name of Moffatt. He done killed Hi Waggoner and Balaam Halsell and—"

"Now I've got you. Sure. He's the gunfighter. So that's Steve Moffatt?"

Lafe's eyes brightened and one would have thought that this discovery was the only thing needed to complete his satisfaction. He grinned genially at Moffatt when they chanced to meet at Miss Hawes's side, and exchanged polite surmises on the outlook for more rain. Said Mr. Johnson, knowing well to the contrary: "Running sheep?"

"Cattle," said Moffatt shortly.

He studied Lafe with an oblique glance, not at all sure that no insult lurked in the query. Presently he whisked Miss Hawes away. The majority of the gentlemen at the ball held their partners with both hands around the shoulders, and this method afforded excellent opportunity for Grace to gaze up into Moffatt's eyes. Her own were deep blue and singularly enticing. Steve's were brown and very, very alert and steady, and Miss Hawes rapidly discovered that they refused to waver and grow uncertain, as was the habit of most masculine orbs. To Johnson, this exhibition seemed crude, even raw. He went outside where the refreshments were cached in order to find Buffalo.

"Say, Jim, I swan that don't seem the right way to dance," he said. "It don't look proper, hugging a girl that away."

"Huh! It don't, hey? You took to it smart enough. You weren't hollering. Why, you didn't know whether you was on the floor or on the roof, when she had you going. It sort of made me tired, Lafe, the way you done. Better leave her be."

An uproar broke out in the dance hall, and Johnson sped away to ascertain the cause and to quell it. Quiet descended as his foot touched the doorstep—a swift, ominous quiet. He discovered Moffatt standing in the corner occupied by the Mexican orchestra. One of the three players sprawled on the floor, rubbing his head and sobbing, and in front of the gunfighter was an abashed puncher from the Tumbling K range.

"What did you hit him with that there stool for?" Moffatt asked, as Lafe approached.

"He weren't keeping good time," said the cowboy. "I done told him so twice."

"Go on and dance," Moffatt ordered. "Here, you. Here's your guitar. Take to it. And when a gen'l'man asks you to slow up again, you slow up. Savez?"

Miss Hawes took his arm, with a soft, prideful sigh, and they moved off. It was glorious to be the center of all eyes, and she was very proud of him just then. He dominated the assembly with such disdainful unconcern. She had seen the Tumbling K boy actually shrink. Realizing quickly the need of smoothing out the situation, Lafe created a diversion. Advancing to the center of the floor, he shouted: "The next'll be a quadrille. Get your partners for a quadrille. Hi, everybody! Step to it."

Thus harmlessly did the incident pass over. Lafe was famous at calling off a dance and soon Grace found herself wavering in her allegiance. It is true that Moffatt was extremely handsome, but Lafe had a way. He might be too stooped and indolent for grace of movement, but—Johnson's voice came to her over the heads of the whirling crowd, and she forgot to reply to a question from her partner.

"First lady to the right, the right hand gent the right hand round. Partner by the left as you come round. Lady in the center, all hands round," he yelled, and there was a swirl of skirts and lifting of dust to stamping feet.

"Head lady and opposite gent forward and back," he chanted again.

Give right hand half way round;
Back with left, left hand round.
Promenade the corner as you come around.

When the dance ended, it was the conventional thing for a gentleman to abandon the lady where they chanced to find themselves at the moment and go on about his business. Taking advantage of this custom, Lafe descended upon Miss Hawes and bore her off; nor did he once give her up until the stars paled in the sky. Then he asserted his right to take her home.

On the way he fell silent. All his glibness of tongue deserted him abruptly, and Grace was mightily pleased over the symptom.

"What's the matter, Mr. Lafe?" she asked. "Why don't you say a word?"

"I'm studying over something," said Johnson.

After a moment he inquired, without looking at her: "You done give me two Paul Joneses, didn't you?"

"Sure I did. Why? Weren't they enough?"

"Yes. And four waltzes and four two-steps. Ain't that the tally?"

"You've got it right. But what's the matter, Mr. Lafe?"

"And you done let me have the Home Sweet Home waltz, too?"

"Look a-here, Mr. Lafe, what're you driving at?"

Johnson pondered darkly for a full minute. "What'd you give that feller Steve?" he said finally.

"You'd like to know, wouldn't you? Say, you've got your nerve." She tilted her chin upwards and flashed a look at him.

"What did you let that feller have?" he said again.

"I won't tell you: so there. Not near so much as you got, Lafe Johnson. Now, are you satisfied?"

"Pretty near. Leastways, for a while."

She gave Lafe her hand at parting, and he tried to draw her to him. It was a half-hearted impulse, wholly lacking his customary dash. Grace hesitated, flushed warmly; then, with a tremulous laugh, pushed him back.

"You certainly don't lose no time, do you, Lafe Johnson?"

"I don't aim to." His voice was shaky.

All that passed at the ball was perceived by Buffalo, who became greatly exercised the next day over Lafe's extraordinary behavior. Instead of establishing himself at pitch in the Fashion's back room, Johnson mooned about town, or stared absently at the dust of the street whilst he leaned against a post and whittled a stick. It was not as though he had no money, for Jim had staked him. The cowboy took counsel of friends. Buffalo Jim was disposed to hold Miss Hawes lightly.

"I ain't no prude," he explained. "You boys know that right well. You-all know me. I like a girl what's got ginger. But I don't figure on marrying a whole can of it, nor I don't calculate to see ol' Lafe get it smeared over him that way, neither."

"Well, what're you aiming to do?"

"Leave it to me. I'll fix it," said Jim.

CHAPTER V

AN INCIPIENT LOVE AFFAIR

In the afternoon Johnson called on Miss Hawes at the Cowboys' Rest, where she bathed dishes and did other useful tasks. She was wearing a pink dress with the neck cut low, and looked very neat and wholesome. Nobody but a woman would have guessed that she had expected him.

The sight of her put the finishing touches to Lafe. Within half an hour, he was lost in speculation as to whether he could command sixty dollars a month if he went to work for the Lazy L. And perhaps he might be given the Ajos camp, with its comfortable adobe house and rosebushes in the yard? He pictured her there. Lafe could almost hear the wild doves cooing in the scrub-oak cañon.

Grace made him sing.

Come, all you wild rovers, pay 'tention to me
While I tell to you my sad historee.
I'm a man of experience, no favors to gain;
Love's been the ruin of many a man.

He droned it through his nose, with sharp yelps at the end of each line, like a coyote in the full swing of his nightly paroxysm.

"I don't like that song," she said decidedly. "Cut it out. It's fierce."

"I reckon it ain't true," Lafe admitted lamely, and tried another, a plaintive ditty of Little Joe, the horse wrangler.

Hardly had he finished than Moffatt knocked and was admitted. Steve had on a new, yellow silk neckerchief, and Johnson cursed his want of foresight in not purchasing some finery. To-morrow that would be rectified: he recalled a green one he had seen in the store window.

The gunfighter let two six-shooters slip from his waist when he entered, depositing them

carefully on a chair. Local ordinances do not permit the carrying of firearms in Badger, and Johnson was interested.

"You travel well heeled?" he remarked.

"Yes," said Moffatt, "but I don't talk about it."

"Do you know, I'm always scared to pack a gun," Lafe went on pleasantly. "You'll never see me with one, Miss Hawes."

"Why not? I like them. They look so cute."

"I'm always scared somebody'll twist the sights off'n it, or take the doggone thing away and slap me."

"Some fellers do get hurt trying for to pack a gun," Steve said. He added critically: "You look stout enough."

"I'm feeling pretty tol'able fair, thanks."

When Lafe got home that night, Jim was sitting up for him, thumping his heels against the edge of the bed. He was so much concerned for his friend that he did not feel like sleep. After a tentative puff or two on a cigarette, and some coughing, he got it out. Did Lafe know that Grace Hawes—Johnson silenced him curtly, and they lay down, back to back. But Buffalo was undaunted by a sleepless night. His was a staunch soul, and early next morning he repaired to the Cowboys' Rest to interview Miss Hawes.

"You say he's been married before?" Grace cried. "Lafe Johnson is married now, you say?"

"Shore," said Jim, with a friendly smile. "That's a way ol' Lafe has. He don't mean no harm, Miss Grace. He's just naturally playful. It's sort of a habit he's got, getting married—sort of a hobby like."

"Hobby? I'll hobby him—hobby him good. How often has he had the habit? How many wives has he got now, Mr. Buf'lo?"

"Oh, not a great many. I don't rightly know, but—"

"And these—these wives and fam'lies? Where are they?"

"There ain't many fam'lies," Jim corrected, beginning to regret his interference. "Not a great many fam'lies, Miss Hawes. Just a few, scattered here and there."

"Get out!" said Miss Hawes. "Get out, and don't you never show your face round here again. Married? Huh, you can't go to fool me! You quit trying to crowd into my affairs or it'll be the worse for you, Mr. Buf'lo."

"Certainly, ma'am. Certainly, Miss Grace," Jim said, seizing his hat. "Excuse me, ma'am, will you, please?"

He decided to say nothing of the visit to Lafe.

When Johnson reached the Cowboys' Rest that evening, Moffatt was already ensconced in the wicker rocking-chair. Lafe was momentarily cast down. A conference had revealed that he and Buffalo had no more money. They must go in search of work without delay.

"Oh, Mr. Lafe," was Grace's greeting, "guess what! I've been asking Steve about shooting, and he done promised to keep a can in the air for five shots to-morrow."

"That's good shooting," said Johnson, accepting a chair.

"Ain't it wonderful? I do love a man who can shoot. When I marry, I want a man who knows how to keep other men scared. I used to tell my sister back in Abilene—she ain't like me. No, indeed. She's a society lady, my sister is. I done said to her, 'Mary Lou, when—'"

"Yes, it takes nerve to be a gunfighter," Lafe interrupted.

"Oh, it's grand, I think." Miss Hawes clasped her hands and rolled her eyes.

"Yes, sir; yes, ma'am, it sure takes nerve. A gunfighter always gives the other feller an even break. And he don't care how even it is, does he, Moffatt?"

"I don't take you," Moffatt said doubtfully.

"Why, there's all kinds of nerve in this world, Miss Hawes," said Lafe. "When a man knows he's better at a thing than the next man, he's liable to be awful nervy. Take a bronc buster, now. He knows he can clean a horse, and he ain't scared so you could notice it. And a gunman. If the other feller was a mite quicker, I wonder if he'd—What do you think?"

Said Moffatt: "I don't know what you're driving at."

"Well, look a-here. Supposing I was to put it up to a gunfighter—to Mr. Moffatt here, say—'Let's go into that back room with just our bare hands and lock the door and lay the key on the table.'"

"What for?" Miss Hawes asked breathlessly.

"The best man to open it—I wonder now what a gunman—what Mr. Moffatt here—would say to that?"

"I ain't a fool," was what Moffatt had to say to that.

"Or," Lafe resumed, "what if I put it up this way to some of them terrible fighters? What if I said, 'Let's put two guns on a table, draw off to opposite sides of the room, let another feller count three, and the man who gets to 'em first, lives?'"

None of the three moved when Johnson had finished. The alarm clock on the flimsy, draped mantel-shelf ticked loudly. Miss Hawes's breathing sounded strained.

"Ol' man Haverty wanted to see you down at the Fashion, Moffatt," Lafe said at last.

"You coming, too?"

"I reckon so."

"You're on," said Moffatt.

CHAPTER VI

DISCOMFITURE OF A GUNFIGHTER

Grace accompanied them to the door.

"Everybody'll know you're fighting about me," she whispered, twittering with excitement. "Everybody is sure to know the row is over me?"

"Yes. I'm afraid so," said Lafe, staring at her.

"Oh. All the girls will be wild."

There was not an instant's hesitation in Haverty's acceptance of the mastership of ceremonies. He took Moffatt's two guns, examined them thoroughly and removed the cartridges. The weapons were exactly alike. Then he reloaded them and stationed the men.

"Both your hosses is ready saddled," he announced. "So one of you kin get over the Border."

"That suits me," said Steve.

They were stationed in opposite corners of the rear room in the Fashion, a table placed accurately half-way between. On the table were two six-shooters, the butts outward. Johnson had the ball of one foot braced against the wall.

"All ready?" Haverty said crisply. "One—two—three!"

Johnson gained the middle of the room at a bound, seizing his gun and overturning the table with one movement. It crashed against Moffatt's chest and his hands failed to grasp the weapon. Lafe jammed the .45 close to his ribs and pulled twice.

"Help, boys!" Moffatt shrieked, sinking to the floor. "Help! He's murdering me!"

He threw an arm upward, as though to ward off the death he had meted out to others. Johnson remained over him, the smoking gun in his hand.

"Get up," he said. "Get up and run."

"I can't. You got me twice. I'm done for, I reckon."

"Pshaw!" said Haverty. "You ain't even hit. Just scorched, Moffatt. Them was blank kattridges."

From the floor, the gunfighter gazed stupidly at the two. He arose slowly and dusted himself.

Outside in the crowded bar, nobody ventured to gibe at him, for Moffatt was always a dangerous man, and most dangerous when beaten or humiliated. He went quickly in search of his horse.

"You'd better go back to Grace," Johnson said, following to see him safely out of town.

"Not me. I'm overdue at the ranch already. She's yours. I wish you joy of her, Lafe."

He rode out of town at a purposely slow dogtrot. Some time afterward he killed a Mexican vaquero in a dispute over a bridle, and fled south.

Johnson was saddling next day, when Grace Hawes swept into the yard of the stable and confronted him.

"What's this I hear?" she shrilled. "What's the meaning of it, Lafe Johnson? Where're you going?"

"I've got to go to the ranch to-day, Grace."

"You mean you're through with me, Lafe Johnson?"

"I wouldn't go to put it that way, Grace. Don't take on so."

"I will—I will! I don't care who hears. You're a villain—that's what you are. You promised last night—you said—"

"A man had ought to be sociable with ladies," said Lafe, busy with the cinch.

"You done run off a man who was worth two of you any day, Lafe Johnson. And then you go to leave me. You leave me here to be laughed at. You ... here, wait. Don't go, Lafe. Lafe, I didn't mean ... please, Lafe ... oh, please ..."

Johnson and Buffalo ambled side by side along a mesa covered with mesquite. Jim had promise of a job from Floyd and assured Johnson of one, also. Both planned to eschew the frivolities of city life henceforth. Buffalo asked suddenly: "What made you draw off so sudden that way, Lafe?"

Johnson grinned at him.

"It's right queer, Jim," he said. "But when she saw us off to go to fighting, some way I begun to think of my li'l' sister. You knew my sister Kitty, back in Texas, didn't you, Buf'lo? She's got yallow hair."

"I shore did," said Jim, in some confusion.

"Well, I sort of begun to wonder what I'd think of Kitty if she served a man like that. It was all off then. If Kitty tried a game like that, Buf'lo, I'd sure take to her right smart with a rope end."

"Me and you both," Jim said heartily.

They rode onward toward the Lazy L headquarters, one whistling, the other smiling over memories.

CHAPTER VII

JOHNSON IS ELECTED SHERIFF OF BADGER

For you or for me a certain embarrassment would attach to a return to work at a place we had sworn to avoid forever. Nothing of the sort appeared to trouble Buffalo Jim. A month previous he had left the Lazy L, scornful of cow work, vowing that he would live like a gentleman all his days. Now, penniless and unrepentant, he came back as a matter of course.

Indeed, Shortredge put his horses into the corral at headquarters as a man might who had reached home from a long trip. And there was not a vestige of surprise on Floyd's face when he greeted Jim. He did it casually, and shook hands with Lafe and said that he was glad to see him. Then he gave Buffalo certain orders for the morrow, touching the matter of salt for the cattle, just as though Jim had never been off the ranch. The cowboy merely said: "You stayed a week longer'n we figured on, Buf'lo."

So Buffalo Jim went to work at daybreak and Johnson loitered at headquarters. Mrs. Floyd was unaffectedly glad to see him and was not too inquisitive as to why he happened to be there. Indeed, she appeared to take his arrival as quite natural, which spared Lafe much confusion. He played with Tommy most of the time, and on the third day of his stay he sounded Floyd on the subject of a job. The boss had expected it, and surmising that Lafe was hard up, attempted to drive a hard bargain. A prudent man, such was his practice. It may be, too, that the boss did not especially relish the notion of Johnson being permanently on the place.

"Oh, no," said Lafe, "I couldn't take that."

He was never one to accept anything handed him merely because his situation looked desperate. That policy of compromise might befit the weak, but Johnson was made of sterner stuff. No matter in what straits his mistakes landed him, he forever kept his own valuation at a certain figure. And usually other men accepted his estimate.

"That's the best I can do," Floyd ended. "I've got a range boss already, and a top hand ain't worth over fifty a month, Lafe."

"All right. I'll be drifting."

"Stick around a bit, anyhow. We might strike a trade later. Say, come up to the house. The missus wants you to stay with us instead of down here at the bunkhouse."

"Thanks," said Lafe, "but your cook's been sick since that weddin'. No, I reckon I'd best hang round with the boys down here."

He remained at the Lazy L a week, half expecting that Horne would send a message to bespeak his services again. In paying him off, the cowman had intimated that he would shortly have other deals to be put through. A message arrived, but not from the cattle buyer. The bearer came, he said, from Turner, the storekeeper and justice of the peace of Badger. After listening for a moment, Lafe led him behind the barn for further converse.

"They want me to run for Sheriff of Badger," he told Buffalo Jim that night.

"Go to it," said Jim. "It'll make the town a heap pleasanter for us. We'll feel safer. The boys'll sure be pleased."

It would appear that Johnson's bloodless defeat of Moffatt had made a deep appeal to the citizens of Badger. They reasoned that a man who dared make a fool of a notorious character should be able to make short work of lesser fry. Accordingly, their message was that the law-abiding residents of the town were desirous of securing Mr. Johnson's services; and would he come forthwith? To this Lafe answered that he would return to Badger in a day or two, and the messenger departed. And for two solid days Johnson dawdled about headquarters, absolutely idle. He had an idea that to show eagerness would be to weaken his position. This surmise proved correct.

Badger leaped at once to the conclusion that they could not get him. Yes, he had seemed reluctant, said the messenger. Now, the average man does not want a thing badly until he is persuaded he can obtain it only by strenuous effort. And masses are like individuals, in this respect. That was why, as Lafe approached the town, he met a small party of horsemen headed for the Lazy L. It was a deputation of citizens, set out to cajole him into accepting the office. Briefly and earnestly they explained how things stood in Badger.

"All right," said Lafe, "I'll run. But remember this—when I'm elected, you-all look alike to me. I won't play favorites. There'll be law and order in Badger."

"Sure," the committee agreed. "That's the ticket, Lafe. Well, let's have a li'l' touch, just for luck."

Johnson's opponent in the election was simply nowhere. The tale of Lafe's prowess grew with every telling. Tim Haverty asserted on his hopes of heaven that Lafe could take a six-shooter and drive the nails into the shoes of a running horse. Personally, I suspect Mr. Haverty to have been guilty of some slight exaggeration. Still, there was ample evidence that Johnson could handle a gun, and nobody on the Border doubted his courage. Led by Turner, the respectable element voted for him as a unit. The others—the hard drinkers, and the gamblers, and men of no steady means of support—ranged with Lafe, too. They had known him as a "good fellow," a man liberal with his money and equally liberal in his views. Therefore they anticipated no trouble to themselves from his election.

In this manner was Lafe Johnson elected sheriff of Badger. When made acquainted with the result, he took a long breath and grew very solemn.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I thank you for your support. And I'll sure do my duty."

The opportunity was afforded him that same night. Some of them who had worked most ardently for Lafe were gathered in the Cowboys' Rest, and there was considerable drinking. A dispute arose, and in the course of it the landlord laid out one of the disputants with a chair. A panicky person fired a gun. That brought Lafe into the Rest at a quick run.

"Stop it," he shouted. "The very first man who pulls a gun goes against me. Tommy, give me that six-shooter. Now, you get out and wait for me."

He broke Tommy's gun and motioned him outside. Then Johnson examined the injured man on the floor. He was badly hurt.

"You'll have to come along with me," he told the landlord.

"Go along with you? Go along—why, Lafe, I just had to hit him." The landlord could hardly believe his ears. Had he not repeated three times for Lafe in the election?

"You can explain that to the judge. Come on, now. Get moving."

The landlord gaped a moment and then announced that he hoped to be damned if he went. If Lafe thought he could double-cross him in that manner, he had a few things to learn. The sheriff made a step forward and the landlord reached under the bar for his .45. Before he could raise it, Johnson gripped his wrist and with his free hand struck him over the head with the butt of Tommy's gun. The landlord gave a grunt and dropped into the sheriff's arms like a sack of meal. Five minutes later he went before the justice of the peace very quietly, along with Tommy.

"Understand me"—the new sheriff faced the crowd that followed, some of them murmuring—"I'd arrest my best friend if he broke the law. Remember that."

"Hell, Lafe," they protested, "this is running it over us."

"We're going to have order here in Badger. Come on, you two," said Johnson.

Then he went bail for his prisoners.

CHAPTER VIII

A FEUD AND WHAT CAME OF IT

They had hanged a man in the Willows. He was swinging from a lower limb of a tree sixteen feet in diameter—the natives call it the Mother of Cottonwoods. The sheriff of Badger and I cut him down, and because the time was summer and the flies were bad, we buried him with all haste in the sand, beside a chiming stream. Then, that no prowler might despoil, we piled rocks above, and got to horse without delay.

"He don't look like nothing now," said Lafe, "but it's Tom Rooker. You remember ol' Rooker? He always bummed his drinks, Tom did."

We rode through a pleasant grove, where it was eternally twilight by day. A squirrel chattered above us and the stream whispered here in a sandy bed. At a bend, we came upon three cows wading belly-deep in the current and eating of watercress. Some birds cheeped in a leafy thicket beside the trail. The Willows was a paradise. Then a black shadow flitted in front, as we emerged into a glade where the light was stronger, and a bleary buzzard settled leisurely on the topmost branch of a tree. He gazed at us with calm insolence. I looked hastily away, remembering what we had laid out.

After a while, the sheriff said: "I shouldn't have left town, Dan. I shouldn't have gone."

"You had to go."

"They wouldn't have got away with it, if I'd been home. Poor ol' Tom—he was awful good-natured when he was sober."

We left the Willows behind and traversed open country, heading up the San Pedro Valley. As we went, the sheriff talked of the hanging. He spoke in a hushed tone, as though there were ears to hear; or, it may be, he could not get the dead man out of his thoughts.

"This is some of Bud Walton's work," he said.

It did not appear probable to me. Walton could have shot Tom with much less bother and unpleasantness.

"Bud might not have done it himself. No, he wouldn't. But some of his friends done it for him." Lafe slapped his thigh in passionate determination. "I tell you, Dan, I'm a-going to put a stop to this trouble. Fellers like them are keeping this country back. Either Bud or Jeff have got to come to a showdown, or get out of Badger."

"Go to it. That's what they put you in for."

"I know," he said, with a return to gloom, "but you can't do everything in six months. I've got to move according to law, being how I am situated. And they've been awful careful, them two have."

He fell to communing with himself, and we went steadily forward, the ponies shuffling the dust in a dejected chop-trot. It was almost noon, and the heat waves were lifting from the ground like the smoke of an oil flame. We passed a dead tree, and the sheriff roused from reverie.

"They done hung Dave Pearsall from there six years back," he said, with a jerk of his head.

I glanced around for the grave, it being the custom to inter close to the scene of the taking-off.

"It's over beyond. No, you can't see it, 'count of that rise. But you get your eye on that tree. Notice? And now the Mother of Cottonwoods'll die, too."

"Pshaw!" said I, laughing. "You don't believe that old woman's tale, do you?"

"Of course, now," he said patiently, "you know better."

Many cowmen had voiced the superstition, but the sheriff had not struck me as of a credulous type.

"I've knowed eight men to be strung up on eight big, sound trees," he went on, "and I've seen eight trees that looked as if the devil had smashed 'em. Blasted. Yes, sir; dead as a rat and deader. You wait and see."

Presently he began to speak of the feud which had been the bane of his office during four of the six months of his tenure. When I proffered the suggestion, in a spirit of hope, that there must have been a beautiful fight before the Walton faction secured Rooker, he dismissed that possibility with an impatient snort. It was like that Jeff Thomas had been away, he said; probably south of the Border, on some meanness or other. As for Tom, he had not mixed much in the trouble in town. Perhaps they had picked on him because he was Jeff's closest friend.

"We'll know right soon now. Gee, ain't the heat a fright? Say, Dan, if you take my advice, you'll hit the grit out of Badger just as hard as you can make it."

I resolutely declined to hit the grit as proposed. Soon we came in sight of the town. It showed uncertainly on the horizon like a lake of mist, with a few wavering windmills swaying therein; it might have been an impressionistic painting of a Dutch canal. A mile from the first house, the sheriff pulled up and bade me remain where I was, whilst he entered Badger. His instructions were that I should hold back for ten minutes precisely, then proceed casually into town, leaving my horse at the cattle company's corral, and meet him at dinner in the Fashion.

"No, you can't come with me," he said. "So let that soak into your hide. It's like some fool will

start something and I don't want you on my mind. You'd only be in the way."

This was not flattering, but every man to his business. The sheriff made preparations for his by looking carefully to his six-shooter. Then he nodded and rode ahead into Badger. Ten minutes and ten seconds later, I followed.

Badger suggests in its exterior a woman of the street, made up carefully as to the face and run-down at the heel. To left and to right as you enter from the west, are the Fashion and the Cowboys' Rest, both of frame, and pretentious structures for that region. Then there is the Wells-Fargo express office, with a tin roof which catches all the heat of the ages and sends it sizzling over Badger. There are a general store and a butcher shop; two Eating Houses, one at the Fashion, the other conducted by a Chinaman; and a broken line of one-story, two-roomed dwellings of rough boards. Beyond that again, a few adobe huts straggle for a full half-mile. They are the abodes of natives. The cattle company's corral is at the extreme edge of town, and there is a stable attached. From there one can see the habitation of Dutch Annie and her handmaidens. Usually the tinkle of a piano greets the wayfarer, and sometimes bursts of laughter which have no tinkle in them, nor any musical quality whatever.

The sheriff's horse slouched in front of the Fashion as I proceeded down the street. Not a human being moved in sight. The express agent waved a friendly hand at me from the interior of his darkened office, and bestowed a sardonic grin. Then he made a fanciful gesture, as of drawing a loop around his neck. Next, he was fighting violently for breath, and he was still engaged in this agreeable pantomime when I passed beyond his ken. A mongrel collie, stretched in the hot dust, retreated sluggishly to give me right of way, and, sitting on his rump, began to scratch for fleas.

"Say, Dan, hell's a-poppin'," said Tim Haverty cheerfully.

Mr. Haverty takes care of the company's corral and counts that day lost when no fracas promises. He told me all about it now, with a most unholy glee, although he is an old, old man, who ought to be giving thought to heavenly things.

His tale ran thus—the town of Badger was divided against itself. Jeff Thomas had come up from the south, weary of Mexican chuck and sullen from failure. He had said nothing when informed of Tom Rooker's demise and the manner thereof, but, amply refreshed, had started a hunt for Walton in order to fasten a row on him. It happened that Bud was away in the mountains when his enemy made the round of his usual haunts, and Jeff's slowly enunciated insults to Bud's adherents had not been taken up. So, fearing an outbreak that would stain Badger's fair name, the express agent and the general-store man, the butcher, and five other reputable citizens had proposed a compromise, in order to preserve peace—to wit, a division of the city of Badger. All north of the street was to be Thomas' hunting ground; the section to the south was free to Bud to wander in at his pleasure. Both men had been prevailed upon to accept this arbitration—Thomas, with a show of reluctance, but real willingness; the other, grudgingly, after persuasion.

"If you ast me," said Old Man Haverty judicially, "if you ast me, Dan, I'd say Bud has got it on Thomas in some ways. Yes, sir; Jeff, he's scared of that feller, except when he's good and mad."

Such apportionment of a town has not been uncommon in the southwest in times past. I know of two communities similarly divided, at present writing. The armistice makes for temporary peace, but has a decided tendency to be irksome to citizens who would be nonpartisan, and it usually ends by a casual trespass, or one of intent, prompted by bravado or rye. After which the deceased gentleman's record is thoroughly threshed out and it is agreed on all sides that he was a pretty good fellow, "but—"

The sheriff and I sat later at a table in the Fashion, toying with a pile of dominoes. And we discussed these things. It is etiquette for a visitor, on entering the city, to hand over his gun to the bartender of the first place of call. This signifies that his designs are peaceful, and perhaps honest, and it also keeps him out of a heap of mischief. Besides, if he does not do that, the sheriff is apt to seek him out and take the weapon, anyway. Therefore, the gentleman who was swabbing the bar with a damp towel had possession of my .45 Colt.

Night fell. Daniel Boone—fat and fifty, who claimed descent from the great pioneer—was at a table in a corner by himself, practicing sleight-of-hand with a pack of cards, faro being his profession. If luck favored Daniel, some plump lamb would be delivered to his fleecing before another dawn broke.

Jeff Thomas came in, walked to the bar and ordered a drink. The Fashion being on his domain, this occasioned no surprise. Then he espied the sheriff and clanked across to our table.

"Hello, Johnson. Say, Walton's been making threats against my life," he said.

"Huh-huh?" said the sheriff carelessly. "Seems to me, Jeff, him and you both've been doing a pile of talking."

"But he done told some fellers he'd get me inside forty-eight hours."

"I reckon you'd better keep out of his way, then, Jeff."

"But look here, Johnson—oh, pshaw, let's talk sense. He's made threats, I tell you. I done got a permit from the justice of the peace to pack a gun. Turner, he give it to me for my own protection."

"Well?"

"Well? WELL? What're you going to do about it? That's what I want to know. You're sheriff, ain't you?"

My friend lighted a cigarette from the stub of another. Afterwards he studied the nails of his fingers with elaborate interest. A protracted pause, and he addressed a casual remark to me as though Thomas were not present.

"Cut that, Johnson. I'm a-talking to you. What're you going to do about it?"

On this, the sheriff whirled sharply in his chair. He clipped his words, so that each seemed to snap.

"I'll show you what I'll do. You two yellow pups start something, and I'll show you what I'll do."

Daniel Boone folded his cards and stole softly out of the room. I looked furtively for a sheltering nook. Only the shiny top of the bartender's bald head was now visible above a beer keg. But either Thomas did not want a row, or he could not afford one.

"Well," he said finally, with an uncertain laugh, "that's different again, ain't it? There's no use getting all swelled up about this thing, Lafe. Let's have a snort."

When the ceremony had been fitly observed, Thomas seated himself at the third table in the saloon, in no very good humor, and removed his hat. Shortly Daniel Boone returned, padding in like a wary cat, and resumed his interrupted studies of faro and its uses. We settled once more to our talk and piled the dominoes in unreckoned combinations.

The main door opens directly from the saloon on to the street. At the far end of the bar is another door, which leads into a dining-room that is run as an annex to the Fashion. Jeff occupied the table nearest the bar, sitting sideways to it so as to face the entrance. Back of him was a doorless exit, which gave on to a dark passage. This led somewhere into the outer back-regions and was in frequent demand when a patron found himself overcome by the fumes of rejoicing and desired air, without publicity.

In the corner remote from the street Mr. Boone was established, his legs embracing the legs of a chair, and he placidly dealt cards to an imaginary player. The sheriff and I were in the left foreground, close enough to the window to see through it, had a curtain not been discreetly drawn to the height of a grown man's head.

Tilly entered from the dining-room, patting her hair with both hands, and tarried for an instant at the bar, talking to the man behind it. She waited on table in the Fashion annex, and was not without charm, both of person and mind. Indeed, her repartee would set a room to laughing, being forceful as a clout on the head; which may have been why she was sought after by sundry residents of those parts for wife. Whence she came or why, nobody knew. Badger held her for an honest girl, in spite of what Tilly's unchampioned contact with the world had done to rub off the first blush. Leaving the bartender choking with delight, Tilly sauntered over to Jeff's table, where she pretended to examine the snake-skin band of his hat. We saw her speak to him, but could not catch the words. He glanced up alertly and gave an emphatic nod.

"Well, well," murmured the sheriff, and smiled. When she had gone back to the dining-room—pausing to exchange a last cheerful sally with her friend of the bottles—the sheriff said: "Dan, there's a mighty fine girl. Or I reckon I ought to say 'woman.' If she'd only got a different start—"

"What about it?"

"You can see for yourself. She's getting tougher in her talk every day. If Tilly don't hitch up soon—why, look at the way these fellers are running after her—"

"But," I said, for I had faith in Tilly, "they're all crazy about her. Don't you fret. That girl's the gamest girl I ever saw, Lafe. She can take care of herself. Sure they run after her. They all want to marry her."

"Some of 'em do—yes—but—" he broke off and considered for a moment. "Did I ever tell you how Bud Walton run it over that big Slim Terry? He done run him out of town. Slim was awful stuck on Tilly, too."

"What did Tilly do?"

"What could she do? She wouldn't believe it first when Bud told her. Then she swore most dreadful. She slapped Bud's face, too—a little later, this was."

A boy shoved his head inside the saloon and peered all about. It was Turner's youngest son, an urchin of about twelve years.

"Say, Mr. Johnson," he piped, "Sam wants you over to the express office right away. He says he cain't leave, so for you to come."

"All right, Tommy, boy. You run home quick and draw some water for your ma. Drag it, now." The head withdrew. "This ain't no place for a boy to be round. Sam ought to have more sense. Wait here, Dan. I'll be back in a shake."

The sheriff rose and stretched himself, with a yawn. Then he went out and crossed the street.

Daniel Boone was blowing through his loose, thick lips, as he sorted the cards. The bartender read a much-thumbed letter, and I builded a fort of my pile of dominoes. We heard a firm, swift chink of spur rowels, and Bud Walton strode into the Fashion.

"So," he said. "Now, I've got you."

CHAPTER IX

AN INQUEST AND A SURPRISE

I was looking toward Thomas at the moment. His face blanched, but his hand sped to his breast, where a gun was secreted in a holster sewed to the inside of his shirt bosom. Before he could draw, Walton pulled on him once. This much I saw and then dived under the table. There came another shot. Bud stood a second or two, with a sort of wondering, puzzled look in his eyes. He swayed and sank gently to the floor, almost within touch of his enemy.

Jeff lurched to his feet and leaned over the fallen man. He fired twice in quick succession, but his hand shook so that the bullets tore splinters in the boarding at either side of Walton. Then he desisted and stood waiting, the six-shooter hanging limply from his fingers.

"There," he said, as the sheriff ran in. "You see, I've done it. I've killed the bastard."

The sheriff knelt beside Bud and turned him over. Walton was shot through the forehead and must have been dead before he hit the floor.

"Hem," said the sheriff. He got up and requested the surrender of Jeff's gun, which was given up without question. Johnson inspected it with care.

"You fired three, hey, Jeff?"

"Three," answered the other, his gaze fixed on the body.

The sheriff was scrutinizing the six-shooter and its empty chambers. He scratched his head. Thomas turned to the bar. His nostrils were straining and there was an unnatural distension of the eye-balls.

"Gimme a drink," he said.

Daniel Boone emerged from the corner where he had thrown himself flat, and the Fashion filled with men. They grouped in a semi-circle about the corpse and regarded it soberly.

"You're under arrest, Jeff," said the sheriff.

"Sure."

"Gentlemen, I'll have to ask you-all to leave. Clear the bar, gentlemen, please. The inquest'll be to-morrow morning over in Bob Turner's place. Step lively, gentlemen. I've got a pile of things to do."

I was shoved from the saloon with the others and went only too willingly. Shortly afterwards three men bore the remains of Walton out of the Fashion and laid them in an empty room above Turner's store. The proprietor was justice of the peace and would sit as coroner.

Badger filled the court-room on the morrow. The crowd overflowed into the street, and there was much jostling and frantic efforts at peering over the heads of neighbors; also, requests to witnesses to speak louder, that all might hear. Follows a rough transcript of the evidence presented.

Bartender.—It was ten o'clock. There was nobody in the bar except Dan Boone—he was playing solitaire in the far corner—and Jeff Thomas, and a fat party unknown to him. The fat party had come in with the sheriff and sat over against the window. Jeff was alone and was monkeying with his fingers on the table—sort of playing tunes. He, the bartender, was reading a letter from a lady who lived in Silver City—a right nice, respectable lady—when Bud came in on the jump. He yelled something at Jeff and they took to shooting. That's all he saw, because he hid behind the beer-keg immediately. Yes, he had heard shots. Four, he thought, but he could not be sure. The bartender rubbed his bald spot and added that there seemed to be five, but he would not swear to that—they came so fast.

Daniel Boone.—He had seen nothing at all, but had heard shots. No, he could not say how many. Then, when the sheriff came back, he saw Bud Walton lying dead and Jeff standing over him, a little to one side.

Myself.—A boy had summoned the sheriff to the express office while he and I were seated in the Fashion, playing dominoes. Soon afterwards a man entered quickly—yes, it was the man whose body lay upstairs—and yelled at Thomas that he had got him now. Thomas was alone at a table in the center of the room. He was strumming with his fingers on the table. The visitor fired first; then there was another shot, and he dropped to the floor. After he fell, Thomas shot twice. He missed him both times.

Tommy Turner.—Bud Walton had sent him with a message to the sheriff in the Fashion. The message was that Lafe was wanted at the express office right away.

Thereupon the coroner requested the survivor for his version of the fight.

Jeff Thomas.—He was waiting in the Fashion for one of the Lazy L boys to come along. They had a horse trade on. Bud Walton appeared at the door. He pulled a gun on him. Bud got the first shot in—he was positive of that. He fired once and Walton went down. Not being certain Bud was really done for, he pulled a couple of times more, but thought he had missed.

Yes, they had long been enemies. Walton was always abusing him behind his back. He had made threats. Some of his friends had strung up Tom Rooker, too. Tom wouldn't never harm a fly in his life. Only the day before, Bud had told some men Jeff knew, that he would get Thomas within forty-eight hours. So witness had asked for a permit to carry a gun. Mr. Turner knew about this. He had given the permit.

The coroner.—"Did you expect him last night?"

Thomas hesitated perceptibly. "Yes, I did," he said.

"What made you?"

"Somebody tipped me off he might be coming. I'd rather not say who it was."

Coroner.—"Where did Walton's shot go?"

"Here," said the prisoner.

He fished in his pocket and drew out a Bible. The crowd craned their necks and swayed toward it eagerly.

"Why, that's mine," the coroner said.

It was, in truth, one that Bob had carried off as a Sunday School prize, when a boy, in Ohio. It was so stiff that the cover cracked when it was opened; but the leather binding was ripped and torn, and the leaves were plowed into pulp for three-fourths of its thickness. At this point the sheriff explained that the bullet had been deflected into the solid wood of the table. He had dug it out.

Coroner.—"Where did you get this here book?"

The gunfighter looked rather sheepish.

"I'm sort of superstitious," he confessed, "and when I seen that in your office the other day, Bob, I stuck it inside my shirt."

A murmur swept over the court-room and beat against the walls.

Coroner.—"You've killed six men, ain't you?"

"No, sir; you're wrong. Only four," Thomas corrected, licking his dry lips.

"Gen'l'men," said the coroner, not without sternness toward Thomas, "this hits me like so plain a case of shooting in self-defense, that I reckon we don't need to bother no more about the evidence."

"Hold on," the sheriff said. "Hold on, there; I'd like for to say something."

Being duly sworn, he started off like this: "Gentlemen, this wasn't a killing. It was a murder."

Everybody waited open-mouthed to hear more. Thomas turned on him a quick, startled glance. Then someone said: "What's the matter with you, Lafe?"

"It's just what I done said. Murder."

There was a stir, and a ripple of unbelieving laughter. "Order!" the coroner cried. He was looking to Johnson for explanation.

"I was kind of wondering," the prisoner muttered, half aloud, as though not altogether surprised at the turn of events.

"Yes, sir, Bud Walton was murdered. This man here didn't kill him at all. Here's Jeff's gun. Take a look at it. It's a .45. Bud, he was killed with a 30-30 rifle. Here's the bullet. Jeff's first shot went way above his head into the ceiling, and the next two are in the boards."

CHAPTER X

A JOURNEY TO SATAN'S KINGDOM

"What're you giving us?" "Go on, Lafe." "Hush, let's hear him." "Quit crowding there, will you?" "Say, are you looking for trouble?" "Well, quit it." It was long before quiet could be obtained.

The sheriff waited for absolute silence before taking up the thread of his explanation again. Then he said, slowly scanning the faces around him—"Mr. Coroner, if you'll adjourn this here court for two days, I'll bring the murderer here."

The inquest adjourned in confusion. Thomas was released, only to be rearrested.

"I'll learn fellers like you a lesson," the sheriff told him. "Bob, give him thirty days for stealing that there Bible of yours."

The justice of the peace imposed the sentence with alacrity. It had the appearance of spite, but Jeff exhibited no resentment and left for the county town in charge of a deputy, without a word of protest. To me, he appeared a broken man.

Not a word of enlightenment would the sheriff give, although all Badger was agog with excitement and babbled questions wherever he moved. They would cling to his arm in their eagerness, but he shook them off. At dinner, he ordered me to fetch my horse, for he planned a hard ride.

It was early afternoon when we set out for Satan's Kingdom. Our way took us through the Willows, which we threaded at dusk. We were passing a certain pile of rocks, when the sheriff pointed with his forefinger.

"Look," he said.

The Mother of Cottonwoods towered above the lesser trees, plain to the sight. She was black and stark, bare as though blasted by lightning. We jogged along mutely.

"Look a-here," the sheriff said, as we neared the mountain village, "you done heard that shooting. What did you hear? Tell me as near as you can."

I strove to focus all my faculties on the task.

"There was a first shot—that must have been Bud's."

"Never mind whose it was," said Johnson.

"Then there seemed to be two very close together. I'm not sure about that, Lafe, because it might have been one, sort of drawn out. But I was watching Jeff's hand and it looked only half-way out of his shirt when that second shot started."

"Good. How did it sound?"

"Well, she began with more of a ring to her—sharper than a six-shooter—and she ended heavily, just like a .45."

"Sure," he said, with great satisfaction. "That was the 30-30. It just beat Jeff to the mark. Why didn't you tell that at the inquest?"

"I wasn't sure," I answered lamely. "Nobody would have believed me, anyway."

"So you think a feller ought to tell only what he figures folks will believe? Well, it don't matter. Don't get hot. Listen. We'll bring back the feller who shot Bud, to-night or to-morrow. He was hiding in that dark hall back of Thomas, just waiting for a chance. As quick as I saw the hole in Bud's head, I said to myself, 'A .45 never made that, son.' No, sir; I sure knew that 30-30 mark."

"How did you know where it came from?"

"That's easy. Bud was shot in front, wasn't he? Well, Jeff didn't do it, so I hunted in that passage to find out who did. Sure enough, a feller had braced himself with his hand on the wall. He was a powerful big brute, too—more'n six feet high, easy."

The sheriff chuckled, pleased as a boy with his own astuteness.

"Say, Dan, it's almost funny the way things turn out. Ol' Miguel, the lazy rascal, he done left a tin of axle grease on a shelf beside the back door, and when this feller come in and went sneaking along the hall, a-feeling his way so as not to make a noise, he stuck his hand into it. Then he leaned with that hand bracing him, while he waited for Bud. Do you get that? That was the hand he leaned on. Wouldn't that most scare you? That gives his size away. Why couldn't his luck have made him lean with the other hand? I tell you, it makes a man think."

He would not talk more on the subject and evinced impatience when pressed. We put up at Kelley's place in the Kingdom, and the sheriff had a few words with Kelley himself before we ate a meal specially prepared for us.

"No, he ain't here just now," Kelley said. "He done rode off just after supper. But he'll be here in the morning for breakfast. I hope there ain't nothing wrong, Lafe?"

"No-oo. We just want a talk, that's all. Don't tell him, Kelley."

There were half a dozen persons at the table when we took our places not long after daylight. Three were prospectors, one was a cowboy, and a miner sat next him. Opposite me was a long, lank, youthful-appearing man, who consumed his food with his nose very close to his plate. He had little to say, except when he desired something.

Now, if a man be a lusty trencherman, or if he wolf his food, either by tearing or the process of inhalation, we never pass direct criticism. That might hurt his feelings and the sensibilities of the other diners. No; instead, one glances good-naturedly about the board to pick up the eyes, and remarks in a slow, modulated tone—"Say, ol' Bill here don't eat enough to fatten a hog, does he?"

The sheriff watched this individual intently for a space. His scrutiny made me uneasy, although it is true that the gentleman's table manners were offensive. Then he leaned toward him and remarked, smilingly: "Say, you don't eat enough to fatten a steer, do you?"

I expected an outbreak. The long person raised his eyes and a sickly smile overspread his face. And then I knew what manner of man we had to deal with. Because, when a man of pluck receives a blow that hurts, he first looks serious and perhaps thoughtful; that is followed by a determined squaring of the jaw. At last he said, essaying a sneer:

"I reckon you've got the world by the tail with a down-hill pull, ain't you?"

"Perhaps," said Johnson. "I've got you, anyhow, Slim. You're under arrest. Finish that coffee and come on."

"Who're you?" the other asked slowly.

"The sheriff of Badger."

"Well, I ain't sorry. I'll go along," was the reply.

On the morning of the second day, another coroner's inquest sat in Badger. Slim Terry faced it. A greenish pallor showed near his eyes and around the corners of his mouth, but he talked composedly.

Coroner.—"Did you shoot Bud Walton?"

"Yes."

"Tell us about it."

The prisoner passed a hand over his forehead and down to his chin, as though to clear his thoughts.

"This feller Walton, judge, he done run me out of Badger. First, though, he run me out of the Fashion. I ain't been in this town for six months till the day of the shooting. Yes, I was scared of him. I ain't a fighter, gen'l'men. I come in that day, because somebody done sent for me."

Coroner.—"Who sent for you?"

Slim pondered this question. "I ain't a-going to tell that," he said. "Well, I laid quiet at ol' Raphael's place on the aidge of town until dark, and then I sneaked up back of the Fashion. Nobody seen me. Somebody'd told me Bud Walton would likely do for Thomas there that night, and I figured to get him from that back hall in the mixup. One of us was sure to nail him."

"Who told you this?"

"I ain't a-going to tell. I've said that twice already, Mr. Turner, so you needn't ask me. Well, I waited in the hall there, standing mighty quiet. I seen Thomas at the table and a fat gen'l'man over near the window with the sheriff here. I didn't know he was the sheriff then. By and by a boy come in and the sheriff went out. Then all at once Bud Walton run in at the door and pulled a gun. And then I let him have it. I plugged him square. Couldn't miss at that distance. What'd you say, judge? No; nobody seen me. I run out into the lot back of the Fashion and got on my horse. I've been at the Kingdom most of the time since, but I wasn't trying to hide out. How did you find out, Mr. Johnson?"

The audience in the court-room listened to this recital with scant sympathy. Their disapproval was obvious. Even the sheriff appeared a trifle ashamed of his prisoner.

"Did you have any other reason, Terry, for shooting this man?" asked the coroner.

"No, sir. He done run me off, and I was afraid he would kill me some day, the same as he'd done to a lot of others. So I plugged him—there in the Fashion."

"It's a lie. He's lying, judge," cried a treble voice at the door.

The crowd wavered and split apart, and a woman broke through and confronted the coroner. It was Tilly, the waitress at the annex. Her hair was disordered and hung in lank wisps about her face, but she gave no thought to that. With her red arms bare to the elbow, and her cheeks flabby and pale from fright, she took position squarely in front of Turner. She tried to speak, but gasped for breath.

CHAPTER XI

A WAITRESS TO THE RESCUE

"Order in the court!" shouted the coroner.

"That man there—him, Slim Terry—he's lying to you, judge. Yes. He is. He's lying. He didn't kill Bud. He's lying, judge. He is; honest."

"Who killed him then?" said the coroner. The sheriff walked over and stood beside the girl.

"I did. I shot him. I—"

"Tilly, you're crazy. Stop her, sheriff. She ain't telling the truth. She's—" The prisoner made to shove her back.

"Order in the court!" Turner roared.

"Listen to me. I'm going to tell you. Yes, I am. I'm going to tell."

"Silence, gentlemen. Let's hear what she's got to say," the sheriff ordered.

"I knew Bud Walton was coming to the Fashion that night to look for Jeff Thomas." Tilly told her story gustfully, her voice shrill. "Yes, I knew it. I told Jeff so. Why shouldn't I? Bud told me. He'd been drinking the night before. That man sitting there was my fellow. He came to see me that afternoon, and I had to hide him in ol' Raphael's house like any dog. All because of Bud Walton. Yes."

"Go on. Quiet, please."

"Slim, he wanted to shoot Bud himself. So would you, judge, if you knew. But I said no. Do you know why he wanted to shoot? I'll tell you. Bud Walton was bad. Yes. He was. He was a bad man. He asked me to marry him, and when I laughed, he said he'd take me anyhow. Yes. That is what he said. He was bad. And I got afraid. He done run Slim out of town last year and there was nobody—oh, don't let 'em all stare at me that way, judge. I'm telling the truth. Before God, I am."

"Go on," said Turner huskily.

"I was in the hall with Slim. I let him in at the door. Yes, I did. It was locked. We had a rifle and we stood there. I had often shot at prairie-dogs with the rifle when me and Slim would go riding together. Slim, he couldn't never hit a barn door. No wonder he was scared of Bud. It's true—true as gospel, judge. He couldn't have killed him. No. I made him put both hands against the wall and then I rested the gun on his shoulder. Yes. I did. Bud Walton was bad. He was a bad man. When I saw him, I pulled quick. And then I shut my eyes. And then—I don't rightly remember after that. That's the truth. It's all true, every word. Yes. It is. Slim, he went away—and now—oh, oh, oh."

She rocked on her feet, her hands over her eyes.

"Order in the court! Order in the court!" the coroner bawled, though you could have heard a man gulp.

The sheriff took Tilly by the arm and led her away. He permitted Slim to come with them.

"Gen'l'men," said Turner, clearing his throat as he rose from his chair, "this court stands adjourned. Bud, he just died. That's good enough for him."

The next morning the sheriff called on Tilly at the Fashion and told her to don her best bib and tucker with all speed.

"I'd a heap rather go to this here Slim party's funeral, Tilly," he said, "but I suppose you've got to have him. So get a move on. I reckon Badger can stake you to a wedding."

Naught cared Tilly for this genial slight on her lover. She had him—that was sufficient for her. A woman does not need to respect a man in order to love him devotedly. Moist of face, but radiant, she presented herself before Lafe within an hour.

And to what a wedding did Badger stake the waitress! The entire town seemed to regard it as a public event in which every citizen had a personal interest and a duty to perform; and they did it nobly. Tilly was deluged with gifts, ranging from a Book of Common Prayer to a heifer calf, which the donor assured her would one day develop into a fine milch cow and feed all the little Terrys.

Lafe took upon himself the conduct of the proceedings. And in the course of them he became so wrought up that he made a speech, a faculty for which had hitherto been unsuspected in the sheriff. He started off by saying it would not be much of a speech, and he was correct. Yet such was his fervor that Tilly cried for the fifth time that day, and her husband gulped until his Adam's apple threatened to jump out of his throat, as he gripped Johnson's hand.

A strict adherence to facts compels the admission that there was a very considerable consumption of liquor on this day. You see, nothing is ever consummated in Badger, from a sale of steers or a horse trade, to a wedding in the season, without a certain indulgence of this nature.

For, in the course of human events and in pursuit of that liberty and happiness which constitute the inalienable right of every citizen, a man is apt, from time to time, to get drunk. Nobody in Badger ever held it against him—far from it. Let that then be the excuse for sundry estimable gentlemen who felt badly the morning after Tilly's marriage. Let that explain the presence of the justice of the peace and the sheriff of Badger and Dr. Armstrong, when they foregathered in the Fashion before breakfast, to compare symptoms and to contrive means by which they might last

through another sun. Indeed, convivial relaxation was regarded in Badger as incidental to male existence, however rarely these "benders," as they were termed in local parlance, might be tempered by discretion.

Yet there have always been certain unwritten rules governing bouts with Care, and if a man broke them in Badger, he became either a social outcast or an inmate of the calaboose, which was worse. The calaboose was once a livery stable and has never entirely got over it.

This qualifying statement is by way of leading up to happenings that wrought a regeneration in Lafe Johnson and changed the whole course of his life.

CHAPTER XII

THE SHERIFF SETTLES A CONJUGAL DISPUTE

About a year after the killing of Bud Walton, the sheriff was engaged one day in a game of pitch in the Fashion. Order in Badger had been excellent of late. This had not been accomplished by moral suasion, although that had been a factor, but by stern and often fearless performance of duty in quelling disorders. Johnson's reputation had grown apace. He always knew the precise moment to strike, which effectually nipped many threatening feuds.

On this day, Sellers Hardin stopped his stage in front of the Fashion and inquired for the sheriff.

"Say, Lafe," he said, "there's a guy over to the Cowboys' Rest bawling his wife out powerful strong. I'd sure have smeared the road with that gen'l'man, only it weren't my business. Hey? Yes, I left 'em over there. They come off that El Paso train, the two of 'em."

"I'll step across," said the sheriff.

He threw down his cards and walked over to the rival saloon. The landlord, who had long forgiven the blow on the head and was now a staunch Johnson man, nodded at him and paused in his work of polishing glasses to point to the door of a rear room with the towel. Inside, a loud voice was raised in maudlin harangue.

"You come along now. I'll show you. You bet we'll stay here. What? I'll learn you who's boss right now. Didn't I send you your fare? Huh? And you done come ahead on the jump. But you're too good for me now all of a sudden, ain't you? I'll—"

Lafe found a man denouncing a young woman. She sat near the window, and showed no fear as she watched him storm up and down the floor, pouring out reproaches and abuse. She was pale, but perfectly collected, and she rested her chin in her palm, regarding her companion with a species of impersonal speculation. He was a florid, youthful person of very baggy clothes and with his hair parted in the middle. The shoulders of his coat projected beyond his real shoulders to an astonishing width, and he wore peg-top trousers; also, his shoes had beautiful sloping heels and flowing bows. An intense, nervous irritability kept his arms jerking about. She listened placidly.

"If you don't quit your fooling and come along with me—" he was saying, when she cautioned: "There's somebody behind you." He wheeled and beheld the sheriff.

"What's the trouble here?" Lafe asked.

"None of your business. That's what. When we want any help in a fam'ly dispute, we'll send for you."

The sheriff, by way of answer, selected a chair and placed his hat carefully on the floor.

"You're drunk," he said, with the utmost good-nature. "Let's be friendly, now, and get this thing settled."

Beyond a faint curiosity, the girl exhibited no interest in his arrival, but her companion planted himself in front of Johnson, with his feet wide apart, and made a strong effort to look threatening.

"Well, I'll be doggoned," he said. "Who're you, anyway? What do you think you're doing, butting into my private affairs this way? Ain't a man boss of his own wife? Ain't I got any rights? You get out now, before I throw you out."

"This here party," Lafe said to her in a confidential aside, "is fixing to throw me into the road. He sure will, too. You can see that sticking out all over him. What do you want that I should do?"

"You don't look very scared."

"No, ma'am. I always try to hide my feelings. Do you reckon you can handle him yourself, or will I take him along?"

"Say, you! You pay attention to—"

"Where'll you take him?" she asked.

"Look a-here, you two—"

"We've got a nice, peaceful lockup, where the rats is friendly," answered the sheriff. "He won't be lonely. There's a Mexican there right now, drunker'n he is."

She shrugged her shoulders and looked out of the window. "Suit yourself," she said.

"Say," cried the gentleman of the peg-tops, "ain't I got anything to say in this? You're getting too gay, you two. Do you hear? Ain't a man got any rights in this country? I can run my wife alone, can't I?"

"Does this here party belong to you, ma'am? Are you his wife?"

"No."

"What? You ain't? You sit there and say you ain't my wife? Why—"

"I married him, but I'm not his wife."

"Sure," said the sheriff, "I see. I don't blame you, ma'am." He put on his hat. The other was watching him doubtfully.

"You come along with me," said Lafe.

"Come along, my foot. What do you think you are, anyway?"

"That's all right. I'm sheriff here. And if I wasn't, I'd take you along. It's one of the rules of this here town that a man can't talk to his wife like you done. Understand? Get a-going, now. I'm liable to get peevish directly."

Still he hesitated. Lafe was growing angry. His rage always seemed sudden, but this was by design. In reality it was the release of long-pent and controlled passion.

Said the sheriff: "Hurry up, Harris."

"My name ain't Harris. It's Jackson."

"Jackson or Harris, it's all the same to me. You were Harris when me and Buf'lo Jim done run you out of Cananea. I reckon you ain't forgot that, have you?"

A quick glimmer of recognition showed that Mr. Harris had not. He sobered with amazing celerity.

"Where're we going?" he asked.

"You get moving first," said the sheriff, "and then we'll figure on that."

"I won't go," was the emphatic rejoinder. "No, sir; not me. Tell him to leave us alone, Hetty. I'm within my rights. And you're framing up something. I can tell."

"Say, Harris, you're fixing to get hurt awful bad." The sheriff's air was regretful. He stepped to the door and held it open, nodding at Jackson. That young man gave him a swift look and banged his hat down over his curling bang. Without even a word to the girl, who was regarding the tableau much as a spectator from a seat in the stalls, he walked out. The sheriff followed. Within a minute he stuck his head inside again to say: "I'll be back right away." She made no response.

The two walked out to the residence of Dutch Annie, Johnson a yard in advance.

Dutch Annie said: "Don't you bring that rat in here, Mr. Johnson."

She was a forceful woman, of startling precision of speech. Annie would not open the door, but surveyed the abject Harris through a crack about two inches wide. The sheriff kept the toe of his boot inside, to prevent Dutch Annie slamming it against them.

"I'm not here to make trouble for you, Annie," he hastened to say, "but just take a look at this feller. Ain't you seen him before?"

"Huh! I reckon so. He done married Sarah last year and run off and left her on my hands. Hush—best to get away quiet. If she hears he's here, there'll be no holding of Sarah."

"That's all," said Lafe, and the door banged in their faces.

"Now," he said to Harris, "you hit for foreign shores. I start shooting at forty. Quick."

This does not pretend to be an exact reproduction of the sheriff's speech, because he had an honest man's loathing and contempt for this kind of male. But it is the gist of his words. The procurer made the first hundred yards in fifteen seconds flat, so the sheriff speeded his count, lest he get out of range. The satisfaction was accorded him of dusting Jackson's heels as he ran, and Lafe repaired to the Cowboys' Rest in a better frame of mind.

"She ain't here," the landlord told him. "She's done gone."

The sheriff found her at the Fashion. "You reckon you're a married woman, I take it, ma'am?" he inquired cheerily.

"I married him in El Paso. Yes, I had to. He'd paid my fare. Yes, I do."

"Well, you ain't," said Lafe. "He's got one wife already that I know of, that fine gen'l'man, and probably bunches more, besides."

She thought this over for a minute. There was no surprise; neither was there any of the joy he had anticipated; and no sign of reaction or tears.

CHAPTER XIII

AND HETTY COMES TO BADGER TO LIVE

"Where is she?" she asked.

"Who? This wife? Oh, over beyond. Not so very far from here. You won't never see her," was the careless reply.

Again she appeared to ponder what he said. A slight shiver was quickly repressed. At last: "So that's what he is? You reckon—"

"Where's your outfit, ma'am?" the sheriff interrupted.

"My trunk? It's here. I've taken a room."

They were in the parlor of the Fashion, one flight above the street. It was sumptuously furnished, the proprietor taking pride in his establishment—a red plush sofa, a table, three chairs, and a cottage-organ. On the wall was a chromo lithograph of a girl clinging to a wave-swept pillar of stone. This was entitled "Rock of Ages."

Thereupon she told him her story. Of course Lafe did not believe half of what she said, although he gave ear gravely to her direct manner of replying to his questions. The girl's self-possession and cool disregard of the extremity to which she was reduced, suggested only one explanation to his mind—ripe experience. He had never encountered these traits among ladies of domestic virtues.

Her name was Hetty Ferrier, and Miss Ferrier had exactly eleven dollars and seventy cents. She had lived in Eau Claire, but went to Chicago to make a fortune and to marry a rich, handsome youth, as girls starting out in the world invariably do. There she got a job in a department store, where they paid her four dollars and a half a week to keep soul and body together, though subsequently little consideration was shown for her soul. When she parried the assistant manager's attentions she was removed from the lace counter to the hardware department, but she did not care. Then she fell ill; for breakfast foods, wetted with watery milk and eaten in a room opening on hot, slate roofs, are not a sustaining diet when one stands all day on one's feet. So she was sent back home from the hospital. And her parents were miserably poor. Her father had borrowed the money to bring her home. She began reading advertisements again, and finally answered one of the matrimonial variety.

That was all. This man Jackson replied to her, and his letters were very nice—those of a perfect gentleman, Miss Ferrier assured the sheriff. Then he sent the money, and she journeyed to El Paso. He was not what she had expected, but he treated her decently when he met her at the train. Furthermore, he could be very amusing and "splendid company," she said; so she went through a ceremony with him. After that he went away to get tickets, and when he came back, he was drunk. She was frightened and sat up all night in a day coach, and he went to sleep in a Pullman, waking up sometimes to order the porter to tell her to go to sleep at once. When they got out, he said they would take the stage to Badger, where he had some business to transact, and then go on to Nogales.

The sheriff pressed for fuller information. Had she no friends while working in the city? Yes, she knew some of the girls, but they were always scheming for a good time, and she never had any money. The nicest ones lived at home, but not all of them. Several young men had been kind to her and had taken her to theaters. But they usually tried to get fresh, said Miss Ferrier. Some appeared to have heaps of money, but others worked for it as she did, only they spent it with princely recklessness on pay night.

There was one—she came to a full stop. Yes, she would tell him about that one, too. He was very poor. Indeed, he dressed so shabbily that the girls tittered when he called to meet her at the employés' entrance. No; he treated her all right and was always respectful. She liked him because he was very good, and different. He was a student and was working his way through college by waiting in a dining-hall. They had hoped to marry some day. Then she got sick and went home. It would have taken years, anyway. She seemed never to have regarded the prospect with much hope.

"Uh-huh!" said the sheriff, when she had finished. "And what do you aim to do now?"

"I don't know. What can I do? Get a job as waitress, I guess."

She appeared undistressed by the prospect, but it was the apathy of countless failures and physical exhaustion.

"No," he said with decision. "You're a heap too pretty for that."

"You think so?" she asked indifferently.

"You bet I do." It was Lafe Johnson who was talking now, and not the sheriff of Badger. They were alone in the parlor. He watched her for a moment. Her profile was turned to him and her attitude was one of tired acquiescence with the stress of her situation. He hitched his chair forward close to hers.

"Say," he said, lowering his voice, "you forget this here Harris and all that, and throw in with me. I'll treat you good."

"How—throw in with you?"

"Why, you know. I'll take you over to a li'l' place I've got beyond the Willows. It's right pretty. We'll—"

"I wonder," said Miss Ferrier, without a trace of resentment, "I wonder if there's more than one man on earth who isn't a brute?"

"I don't take you, ma'am."

"What difference is there between you and the others? How're you better than this fellow you ran off—this Jackson?" she demanded, with her first display of animation. "You've got nothing on him."

"Say, you quit that. Quit that right now. I don't make my living—"

"And neither do I, Mr. Johnson. So put that in your pipe and smoke it."

She jumped to her feet and went out before he could prevent her. Johnson heard the bolt of her room jerked into place, and then he went downstairs, whistling a casual air. The barkeeper brought a tried judgment to bear on these symptoms and furtively closed one eye at the proprietor.

"Humph," said Lafe, when he was outside and walking toward the cattle company's corral. "She can give any woman I ever done met up with, cards and spades at a bluff."

Yet he was seized of qualms. It was the first time in his tenure of office that the man had triumphed over the official in any respect whatsoever. He had done his work with a single eye to duty, and without prejudice; and he had done it well. Nor was he given to pursuit of this nature. The girl made a tremendous physical appeal to him, and of course all that about the assistant manager and those other fellows was pure fiction. Lafe knew women of her stamp better than that.

He was low in spirits all afternoon, and about sunset invaded the bar of the Cowboys' Rest.

"I'm going to get pickled," he announced, "not real drunk, you understand. Nothing vulgar, but just nice and quiet. Here's my gun. I reckon Badger'll run itself for a day or two."

"It's sure a-coming to you, Lafe," said the landlord. "You've been sober for a right smart spell."

In the morning he felt very rocky, for the refreshment they provide in Badger would stagger the oldest man in the world; and he could hear bands playing in unlooked-for places. So he gave over in disgust all thought of further carnival and went to the Fashion for breakfast, knowing of old that a hearty meal would set him right.

Miss Ferrier waited on him. So she had secured the job! The barkeeper told Lafe that she got it so quick it made his hair curl, and she was sure a waitress.

"She's got the rollers under the ol' man," he said. "He'll eat out of her hand. Say, business ought to pick up. Don't you reckon?"

Assuredly it did. All the unattached men of Badger developed a taste for the corncakes served at the Fashion. One of the Anvil boys happened to ride into town for a new pair of boots, and took dinner there. What he narrated on his return kept an entire outfit sleepless far into the night, planning methods of getting a day off, and it is on record that twenty-seven extra meals were served in as many days to gentlemen who smelled healthily of horse and walked to a merry jingle of spurs. Hetty treated all alike and was a paragon of waitresses. All aspired to be admirers. The majority were shy and ill at ease, given to staring at the menu with glassy, uncomprehending eyes; but there did not lack doughty ones. They lost their courage completely, however, when it came to finishing what they began, in face of her calmly amused smile.

Yet she did not come off scatheless. They were lavish in their invitations, and horses were thrust at her as gifts, like so many boxes of chocolates. She was anxious to learn to bestride a horse, and when she had acquired the knack, Hetty readily accepted several proposals for rides up the valley. Then she abruptly discontinued them; for, fired by what they had heard, her escorts grew bold. Two she repulsed successfully, and followed that up with lashings of a quirt, but the third achieved her waist and lips. He got small satisfaction for his trouble. Her chilling surrender to his kiss when she felt herself helpless, took all the eagerness of the conqueror out of him. The cowboy was miserably penitent on the way home and later announced that he would bet everything he had, inclusive of socks, that Miss Ferrier was the finest girl in town and could lay it

over any lady of his acquaintance.

CHAPTER XIV

THE SHERIFF ENSNARED

Evidently the feminine portion of the population did not agree with him. One was openly hostile—a Mrs. Garland. But she may not have been unprejudiced, for her maiden name had been Grace Hawes. For some reason—not unconnected with her manner of arrival in Badger—the married women fought shy of Hetty and kept their daughters rigidly aloof. She perceived this quickly enough—long before the men remarked it—and accepted it as she did everything else, with a species of passive disdain.

"What for do you let these here fellers get off them bum jokes?" said Lafe suddenly, one day at dinner. He was in high dudgeon. The sheriff was a regular boarder at the Fashion now, but seldom did he offer a word to the waitress, or she one to him.

"If it amuses them, let 'em do it. It don't hurt me," she said, unruffled.

"Yes it does, too, hurt you. Say, you'd ought to wear a high collar."

"You mind your own business," Hetty cried hotly and flushed to the tips of her ears.

The white, white column of her neck was always bare, for she knew its beauty full as well as did anybody else and wore her dress cut low accordingly; and Mr. Johnson had noted with consuming rage that it held the rapt gaze of the diners. Indeed, she was a strapping, fine woman. Black hair, heavy black eye-brows, blue eyes and a dazzling skin—they made an unusual combination. Hetty carried herself fearlessly erect. Her figure was full but supple, and she walked as if her body held inexhaustible reserves of strength.

He said no more then, but later broke out with the stunning declaration that waiting on table was no fit job for a lady—not with a lot of lazy loafers round, especially. His proposition was that she get out of the Fashion and go to live with the Widow Brown, who was a nice, respectable woman, and would be company for her. And the sheriff would see that she got a job of some sort. Or perhaps she would like to go on a visit to Mrs. Floyd, whose husband owned the Lazy L range. He would secure her an invitation.

"You're awful kind, aren't you?" she said. "You make me think of Bessie and her fellow, you do."

Lafe intimated that these individuals were unknown to him, but he fain would hear more.

"Why, this fellow of Bessie's—Bess worked next to me at the store—he wanted to reform her, he said—Bess was really too fly."

"Well? Why shouldn't he?"

"Huh! Reform her!" said Miss Ferrier. "He only wanted to keep everybody else away."

"She's tough." Lafe assured himself of this again and again as he went home. "She's mighty tough; yes, sir. Else she couldn't talk that away. And them friends of hers. A city's a rotten place."

Of course, he, too, asked her to go riding. She thanked him, but refused.

"I'll treat you proper," he said.

"You can bank on it you will. But I won't go. No, thanks."

A silver heart he purchased for her, together with an enormously long chain, was returned without a syllable of explanation, although the gift was dispatched anonymously. The sheriff was much chagrined. Hetty did her task above criticism when he was at table, but all efforts to establish a friendlier footing met with rebuffs.

"I'll be doggoned if you ain't nicer to these here other fellers than you are to me," said Lafe, after a fortnight of this.

"Why shouldn't I be?"

"Why shouldn't—? I swan I don't know."

The admission was wrung from him slowly, and he appeared to be deep in thought during the remainder of the meal. His manner thenceforward took on a grave, distant politeness that Hetty found peculiarly galling. Meanwhile, the world wagged on about as usual.

One day he listened with a very bad grace to certain compliments paid by a puncher to Hetty. He considered them to be in execrable taste, probably because her badinage in reply lacked its usual sting. He frowned sullenly, and Mr. Johnson's reputation was such that this surly demeanor greatly disconcerted her admirer, much to Hetty's annoyance. The sheriff lingered after the others had risen from the table.

"I'll find out right now," he said determinedly.

Hetty happened to lean over his shoulder to remove some dishes. With a dexterous twist, he pinioned her arms and kissed her full on the mouth. She was quite passive under it, gazing steadily into his eyes when he paused.

"Well, I hope you enjoyed yourself," was all she said.

"I ain't complaining," he answered thickly. Yet he released her.

A bad week followed for Lafe. He was irascible, quick to snap up a word, which was foreign to him. So insulting was his behavior that the landlord of the Fashion feared he would have to shoot Lafe some day when he caught him without a gun.

The sheriff occupied a two-roomed frame shack on the edge of town. It was a cheerless hole of a place. His barn, where he kept his three horses, was inviting by comparison. Often of nights he paced the bare floor of the bedroom, and more than once the faint dawn was whitening the windows, and the cocks of all Badger were lustily heralding the sun, before he threw himself down to sleep. One evening he deposited his lantern on a chair and sat down in another beside it, and in that half-light tried to reason out the whole problem. About midnight he threw away his cigarette and prepared for bed.

"Well," he said, ruffling the sheet with his toes, "I give in. She may be worse'n ol' Dutch Annie, but I've got to have her. That's all there is to that."

He sought Hetty next evening after her work was done at the Fashion. She was standing in the rear doorway of the annex.

"I want you to marry me," he began.

"You do, do you? I suppose you think you're doing something mighty fine to ask me, don't you?" A slight color rose in her cheeks.

"Never mind what I think. I can't do without you. It must be love, I reckon, though it ain't what I thought that was. But I want you to marry me, anyhow. Will you?"

"No, I won't," she said.

"Yes, you will, too."

"I wouldn't marry you, Lafe Johnson, if you were the last man on top of earth." She turned indoors.

The sheriff went home, very quiet indeed.

CHAPTER XV

HOW HE WON A WIFE

Three days passed, and they were much the same as before. Then, on a sunshiny morning, the sheriff strolled back from the bar of the Fashion to glance into the dining-room, minded to seek another interview. Hetty was sitting by a window. Her face was red and streaked with tears. She was wiping her eyes with a handkerchief. He tiptoed out of the place.

At dinner Lafe was very brusque and stated his wants with sharpness. After the diners had departed: "It's a wonder"—pausing to strike a match—"it's a wonder that there fine young feller of yours don't come after you. Why don't you write to him?"

"What fine fellow of mine?"

"That stoddent feller. If he thought such a heap about you, he ought for to show it. Ain't you written to him?"

"Shut up," said Hetty.

"No, but honest—"

"Do you think I could write to him after going away without a word to—to marry a man I'd never set eyes on? You make me sick."

"I don't think much of him, anyhow," he said stubbornly.

"I guess he'll be able to live that down," said Hetty.

"Where does this here party live? A stoddent, you said he was?"

"Sure"—using her handkerchief again. "He's studying at a dental school in Chicago. Here's his address."

The sheriff did not question her further, but eyed the card she produced, for a long time. That afternoon he spent three sweating hours over some sheets of blue, ruled paper, with very meager

results. Here they are:

Mr. Abner Fish, Chicago, Ill.

DEAR SIR: I write to say there's a young lady here as seems to be in need of friends from home leastways she's powerful lonely now this here town ain't never had its teeth tended to right chief reason they never wash them I guess. Ha ha.

Say if you ain't laid out any plans better come ahead and start right in here to fix them good. You can come all the way by train except sixty miles by stage the going is good unless Sellers happens to get drunk and runs his mules over the rocks and I'll be pleased to meet you at the terminus, being as I am sheriff I enclose eighty dollars for expenses which is sort of coming to you from the town and you can pay it back when you make it. Well I'll cut this out now it is very hot here.

Yours respectfully,

LAFE JOHNSON.

P. S. The lady's name it is Miss Hetty Ferrier.

The letter mailed, Johnson took horse and crossed the Border into Sonora. He did not return for ten days and then went straight to his house. The Fashion saw him not. He ate at the Cowboys' Rest, but Hetty knew of his coming an hour after he rode down the street.

When three meals had been served and eaten without Lafe appearing, she put on her hat and went boldly to his house. It was afternoon, and Badger lay in a still, dead torpor under a cruel sky.

"Well?" said Lafe, standing abashed on the threshold.

"Abner Fish is coming," she announced, and that was all she could say.

"Well, I swan. That's a right good thing. He can fix teeth pretty good, can't he?"

"Yes—no—that is—he says you sent for him. Oh, Lafe."

This was a vastly different woman from the one he had known. Hetty would not look at him, but kept her gaze timidly on a knot in the door and twiddled a ribbon flaring garishly from her waist.

"Pshaw!" said the sheriff, "it's most time Badger done woke up. The doggone rascals, they never take no care of their teeth. I've been reading some about them things, Miss Ferrier, and it's most scandalous how sick people'll get if they don't watch out for their teeth. This book says—"

"Oh, Lafe."

"Do you mean to say you don't want him to come?" he asked. His hand, resting against the doorjamb, began to quiver and jerk.

"No-oo."

"God!"

Hetty was beginning to weep, which was a ridiculous thing to do under the circumstances. The proceedings subsequent to this wholly reverent ejaculation of Lafe's were too utterly idiotic for sober recital. When she had calmed, they stood behind the door, safely out of sight, and the bosom and shoulder of the sheriff's shirt were moist.

"No, I can't," Miss Ferrier was saying, in the weakest voice imaginable. "Everybody knows what a fool I was to come out here to Jackson, and they'll laugh at you. I couldn't bear that, Lafe."

"Now, that'd be horrible, wouldn't it?" he said. Then, very quietly: "I reckon I can take care of my wife, Hetty."

CHAPTER XVI

THE GUNFIGHTER RETURNS AND DELAYS WEDDING

They were to be married in a fortnight. Hetty's preparations were of the simplest sort.

"I'll fix my hair the way you like it," she said, laughing. "That's about all I can do."

On his part, Lafe wrote to the Floyds and obtained their promise to come. Mrs. Floyd did not seem to resent this usurpation of the sheriff's affection, which establishes her rarity beyond question. Then he ordered some furniture. It was of an inexpensive kind, because he had saved nothing and had only a month's pay owing to him. The sheriff would not run into debt, having had a surfeit of its effects when a cowboy.

Of course he went to call on Hetty every night at the Widow Brown's. Occasionally he found opportunity to drop around during the day, too. Hetty had resigned as waitress, and her admirers

faded away, for it is foolish to meddle with another man's girl, when that other is such an one as Lafe Johnson. And ten or eleven days sped by.

Then, about eight o'clock on an evening when the sheriff was talking to Hetty on the Widow Brown's porch, Steve Moffatt ambled into town. He dismounted quietly in front of the Fashion, walked across to the express office and stuck a six-shooter under the agent's nose. That official reasoned swiftly and decided to let him take what he could find. He was not without pluck, but he was also a very sensible man. There was only ninety dollars in the safe, and having soundly berated the agent on this account, Moffatt put it in his pocket and rode out of Badger. He left the agent bound to a chair and securely gagged.

"Tell Lafe Johnson good-by for me," Moffatt said at departure. "Give him and his girl my regards."

"Thanks," said Lafe politely, when he received them.

He saddled his horse and put a rifle in the holster. His .45 was always at his hip, concealed in a leather-lined pocket.

"I reckon we'll have to put the wedding off a few days, Hetty," he said, as he bade her good-by. "I've got to leave on the jump. There's no saying when I'll get back, either."

It was nearly midnight and very dark. Hetty toyed with his horse's mane. She swallowed the lump that rose in her throat.

"All right," she said. "Take care of yourself, Lafe."

The sheriff kissed her and set out. He entered Mexico and struck southwest. No United States officer had a right to invade Mexican territory for a criminal, nor to arrest him on Mexican soil, but Johnson was determined to catch his man first and argue this legal phase of it afterwards, with Steve safe in the calaboose at Badger. So he opened a line gate unobserved and galloped through the soft night in pursuit of Moffatt.

The days sped by and Hetty received a wire from Lafe, who was now in Cananea.

"No luck," it ran. "He's doubled back on me. Hope to pick up trail here."

But what transpired in Cananea deserves a place to itself. Even now Hetty does not like to hear any reference to the subject, and Lafe will eye her uneasily if it be mentioned.

CHAPTER XVII

JOHNSON MEETS A FRIEND OF HETTY'S

Should a man clutch at an imaginary wire that eludes him up the wall beside his bed, and take to raving and prayer, it raises a doubt as to recent conduct and habits. Hughie MacFarlane, rancher, age thirty-seven years, did all this and many other disagreeable things, and then died.

A considerable number of his acquaintances wagged their heads and remarked that the world would survive the loss—it was noticeable that those who had partaken most freely of Hughie's bounty were foremost in this line of epitaph. Others declaimed the platitude of the mealy-mouthed, that MacFarlane had been a big-hearted fellow, his own worst enemy. Within a week after the funeral, nobody in Cananea thought much about him one way or the other, and certain lapses in his notions of enjoyment were forgotten, for where there is no jury of public opinion, men grow tolerant of human frailty, and then lax. That is our way on the Border.

So everybody promptly forgot Hughie—all except a flame-headed girl at the Hotel Carmen, who sniffed a great deal when she leaned over your shoulder to put the steak and vegetables on the table, and whose voice was wet when she inquired whether you preferred your eggs straight up or over. She was not one to tempt a man to boldness, and none had ever found her desirable; but once, on his way from the bar to the dining-room, Hughie had given her a rough, laughing embrace. That was all, on my honor; but Molly remembered and worshiped the unregenerate creature, according to her nature. Finally she became such a nuisance, with her red eyes and general dampness of face, that the proprietor discharged Molly.

"Hughie was a fine feller when he first came here," Lafe Johnson remarked, in reference to this episode, "but he got to talking Mexican too good."

With which dark assertion he reared his feet to the rail of the Hotel Carmen veranda and lazily watched the hacks careen past down the hill. Three weeks had elapsed since he started on the bandit's trail and he was apparently farther behind him than on the night Moffatt fled. After two days of close pursuit, during which Moffatt had twice doubled back, the sheriff had been able to obtain nothing better than rumors. These he followed up obstinately, and at last they led him to Cananea, where he rested, awaiting developments.

It was Sunday, and the cabs were doing a rushing business. Gentlemen of white skin, gentlemen of olive and brown, crowded into them and departed with an air of elation. Presently two cabs moved by at a parade pace. Both were loaded to the axles with bull-fighters in tawdry velvet

trappings. The matador, a person who perspired like a pat of butter on a warm day, doffed his hat unceasingly to admiring friends on the sidewalk. It was very hot and the time was noon.

"I hope that fat one gets horned," said Johnson, comfortably, to his neighbor. "What? You going to the fight? I can't stand to see them ol' hosses ripped. Say, it beats me how white women can go there and sit through it. They chew gum all over the grand stand, too, them women do. If my girl—if I had a woman—"

Incoming guests cut Mr. Johnson off. They arrived off the 10.10 train—two drummers, and a lank individual, very tanned, and stiff in his clothes, who proved to be a mining engineer about to start on a prospecting trip, and a woman. She was plump and had brown hair, and her dress was of deepest mourning. That much Lafe noted as she stepped from the cab, and he took his feet down and removed the cigar from his mouth. She rustled up the steps and hurried inside without bestowing more than a flurried glance on the loungers.

Johnson was still resting there an hour later, meditating, when the landlord came out and held the screen open with a fine show of courtesy.

"Say, Lafe, I want you to shake hands with Mrs. MacFarlane," said the Hotel Carmen man. "This here lady's Hughie's wife. She wants to go out to the ranch. Mr. Johnson's sheriff of Badger, ma'am. It's like you've heard of him."

"I'll be right glad to look after you, ma'am," Johnson said soberly, shoving his chair forward.

Mrs. MacFarlane smiled in a manner curiously shy for a widow of thirty, and murmured something to the effect that she knew Mr. Johnson had been a friend of her Hugh's. This was not strictly true, but Lafe would not have denied it to her for a herd of graded stuff. He leaned against the railing and waited patiently to learn her wishes. She had come to claim Hughie's estate and to make certain that his—grave—here she started to cry soundlessly into a handkerchief—received proper care. All this was very painful and Johnson stirred restlessly. Whenever Mrs. MacFarlane made reference to her late husband, it was always as her "boy," and the tone was one of such restrained adoration that Lafe experienced a sinking feeling beneath his vest. Listening to her—she was decently reserved and her talk escaped in snatches—he gathered that Hughie had been a great and noble man, which was an estimate of Hughie that never would have occurred to any of his acquaintances.

"The feller must have had a heap of good in him somewhere, Buf'lo," he told Shortredge that night. Jim was now engaged in the slaughtering business in Cananea. "A man can't make a woman like her care that a-way else."

"I don't know about that, Lafe. I don't know about that. I ain't so shore," said his friend. "It's most amazing how they kin forget everything when he's gone. They only remember li'l things he done for 'em; things what a feller might do for a yallow dawg."

The trip across the mountains was a full day's drive, and Johnson was to call for Mrs. MacFarlane at dawn with a buckboard and a mule team. She kept him waiting forty minutes, but he passed the time patiently, recalling that a certain female in Badger was wont to do the same thing. This recollection brought a grin to his countenance, and may have been responsible for the solicitous manner with which he seated Mrs. MacFarlane in the vehicle. They set out at the sober gait suited to a wearing drive. The landlord, after watching them for a while, remarked thoughtfully to the barkeeper that he hoped they would find everything all right.

"Hughie ought for to have told us he was married," he said slowly. "Yes. He ought. I sure hope they'll find everything all right. She's an almighty fine woman."

The almighty fine woman settled back against the stiff leather seat and looked at the bleak wastes they were threading. Johnson eased his mules down the slopes, taking rare heed of the going. Ordinarily she would have been in terror of the perils of this climb-and-drop road, but the driver appeared to entertain no doubts and merely clucked at the hybrids or abused them in emotionless harangues. It must have begotten confidence, for she gave no more than the tiniest squeak when they shot abruptly from a shelf of rock and sped downward at a gallop, the buckboard leaping off rocks and ruts and banging at the mules' legs. There was a sharp curve at the bottom of the descent, and for a wild moment Mrs. MacFarlane wondered if it were possible he perceived this.

"The brake's done bust," said Lafe, as though the matter were scarcely worth mention.

They took the curve on two wheels, sending sand and pebbles in all directions, and he pulled the team to a halt. Then he got out, handing the reins to her, for which she beamed on him. Johnson repaired the brakes with a bit of wood and some rope, and they went forward again.

"I done told ol' Biggerstaff that this brake was no good," he said.

"I'd mention it to him again," Mrs. MacFarlane suggested mildly.

He was very grateful, too, because she forbore to grab at the reins more than once in dangerous spots. The sparkling air and the stern beauty of the mountain country they entered seemed to soothe her. Soon she was chatting vivaciously, but when the sun climbed to his strength, her lids drooped. The talk became broken and lazily intimate. Suddenly Mrs. MacFarlane sat up with a gasp.

"Why, I've just remembered. How on earth did I ever forget it? Hetty Ferrier!"

The widow pronounced Hetty's name as a magician would a talisman. Lafe went very red in the face and asked in a constrained voice whether she knew that lady.

"Know her? I guess I do. Why, Hetty and my young sister were playmates. She used to live where I come from. We heard from her and she told us—"

Mrs. MacFarlane did not state what Hetty had told them, but settled herself to study Lafe, with the privileged frankness conferred by her information. He bore the scrutiny well, giving all his attention to the mules, but he was thankful for the bumps that distracted the widow and made her clutch his elbow to avoid being thrown out.

"Isn't it funny I shouldn't have thought about you and her before? It's a small world, isn't it? Of course she told me you were sheriff of Badger. You're a very lucky man, Mr. Johnson," she said.

Lafe could find no words for the moment. At last: "You see, ma'am, her and me are fixing to get married."

"Huh!" said the widow. "Did you think I didn't know that? How is Hetty?"

"She's fine, thanks."

"I don't need to ask if she's happy?"

"Happy as the dealer in a big jackpot," said the sheriff, much pleased. The widow appeared to comprehend.

They drew near the ranch in late afternoon. The light is of a peculiar, velvety yellow then, and the mountains grow purple along their bases; farther up there are deep blue blurs; and the ragged rims show black against a glow. The widow exclaimed in rapture; then, apparently remembering her bereavement, assumed a look of sadness; and she made the last few miles of the journey in a gentle melancholy.

Nobody appeared to welcome them. A tipsy Mexican lolled in a chair on the veranda, and another was making music for him on a guitar. From time to time the man in the rocker would nod approval and command a fresh tune. Near the corrals, about twenty natives were hi-yi-ing at the breaking of a horse.

When the majordomo perceived the buckboard, he put down his cup reluctantly, placed the bottle beside the leg of the chair and came to meet them. Lafe saw at once that a fortnight of authority and freedom from restraint had played havoc with the man. Nevertheless, he greeted them suavely, and when he learned who the passenger was, cried an order over his shoulder. Three or four men ran to take the mules.

"Aren't there any whites on the place?" asked Mrs. MacFarlane uneasily.

"Hughie, he done fired them all. Pete Harris used to be boss here, but him and Hughie had words over something, and Pete got his time."

Johnson did not consider it necessary to add that the veteran Pete's antipathy to all-native labor had been responsible for this rupture with MacFarlane, and that the vaquero playing the guitar still held his job, although Pete had incontinently discharged him months before. Nor did he mention that the man with the guitar had a sister. As to that, he had heard nothing but rumors, and he was never inclined to believe half of what he heard.

Hughie's old servant, Salazar, waited on the two at supper. He had a shrewd notion that Lafe was the lady's admirer, with an eye to the property; but what booted it? All through the meal he watched Mrs. MacFarlane stolidly and addressed her as "Señorita," which was a brainy proceeding. However, he told Paula in the kitchen that she was Hughie's wife and a ravishingly beautiful woman. The girl received the intelligence with somber calm.

Twice she came out on to the veranda where they sat afterwards—once to fill the water bag; again, to draw from it. Mrs. MacFarlane asked who she was, her age, and where her mother was. She obtained evasive answers, but was too abstracted to give thought to what might have troubled her at any other time.

"She's so pretty—so awfully pretty. Are they all as beautiful as that?"

"No-oo. I should say not. Paula, she's got most of 'em hiding out in the long grass," said Lafe, without enthusiasm.

There is a quality about a southwest night that saddens, or elevates above all petty trouble, according to temperament and conditions of health. Moreover, it can make everyday worries seem trivial, which surely is a God-given thing. As the languid dust thickened, Mrs. MacFarlane grew depressed. The silence became longer and her replies punctilious. Soon she bade him good-night. The drive had made her very sleepy, she said. Johnson started down to the Mexican quarters. A dance was in progress there, and it was impossible to say to what lengths the revelers might go unless convinced that authority slept under headquarters' roof.

As he stepped down, he became aware that someone leaned against a shade-tree in the yard. It was Paula, and she was watching Mrs. MacFarlane's lighted window.

CHAPTER XVIII

A SACRIFICE AND ITS PUNISHMENT

Salazar was not on hand at breakfast, having contracted a sickness in the head during a dispute at the ball. Paula brought in the dishes. She fixed her solemn, round eyes on Mrs. MacFarlane and Johnson could read a questioning in their limpid steadiness. Once she spoke sharply. He gave a curt answer and appeared perturbed.

"What does she want?" asked Hughie's widow.

"Nothing, ma'am. It ain't anything."

"She looks angry," Mrs. MacFarlane persisted.

"No-oo. She says the toast is burned. That's all."

"Nonsense. The toast's delicious," said the widow.

They went on with the meal. Hanging above the sideboard was a portrait of Hughie. It was a wretched thing in crayon, framed in wide gilt of sumptuous design, but the drawing had been a gift to MacFarlane from a friend in the cow business, and accordingly he had allotted it a place of honor. The widow saw this at breakfast for the first time. Hughie's face wore a simper, but the likeness must have recalled him in tender moods, for two large tears gathered on her cheeks and slid slowly downward.

Paula, entering with fried eggs, noted the direction of her gaze and saw, also, the tears splash on the widow's plate. Mrs. MacFarlane was extracting a handkerchief from her sleeve and she smiled wanly at the girl to intimate that the matter of the toast really did not weigh in the least. It was kindly meant, but Paula failed altogether to understand. She dropped the platter and began to jabber. It is of no importance what she said. At her first words Johnson jumped up, but she pushed him back into his seat and cried names at Hughie's widow it was lucky that good lady knew not the meaning of. She crooked her fingers under Mrs. MacFarlane's nose, and when the widow tried, in her astonishment and indignation, to rise from the table, Paula seized a plate. Lafe pinned her arms. There was a tremendous to-do for a few minutes, with Paula shrilling and tugging.

After the first shock, the widow regarded the girl's struggles without apprehension. Lafe contrived to drag Paula from the room. In the kitchen, her access of rage evaporated swiftly, and she sobbed, her face buried in her arms against the wall. Johnson returned, panting.

"Now," Mrs. MacFarlane said steadily, "I want to know what this means."

This was natural enough, and Lafe had been thinking faster than he had ever thought in his life. He began an elaborate dissertation on standards along the Border—how different they were to those back east. It was in his mind to persuade the widow that men were apt to depart from the charted paths when removed from the compelling force of an established moral sentiment. That would give him a chance to lead up to Hughie's backsliding by easy stages.

Such was his plan. It might have worked smoothly with any other woman, or done by a man of readier wit. But as he looked into Mrs. MacFarlane's face, the affair assumed a different aspect to Lafe. He could not tear down the image of Hughie she had builded and kneeled to during eleven years. There came a tremor in his voice and his speech trailed off into weak incoherencies. He paused, braced himself and started again.

"That's better," said Mrs. MacFarlane, very white, and deadly quiet. "That sounds more manly."

Once squared away to his task, Johnson did it well. He showed an amazing aptitude for lying. Looking the outraged widow straight in the eye, he lied—lied gloriously—so that, as she heard him, Mrs. MacFarlane gradually shrank back. She appeared to expand and grow taller in her contempt—to Lafe she seemed to fill the room—but when he deftly added a picturesque touch about Paula deluding herself with the suspicion that Mrs. MacFarlane and himself were much too friendly—he told her this with a savage zest—the widow exclaimed, "The very idea! Oh, the creature!"

"And you were Hughie's friend?" she remarked when he had ended. Of course, that was the monstrous side of this affair.

"Well, you see, ma'am, him and me—"

"And Hetty Ferrier!"

Now, Lafe had forgotten Hetty in all this. Had Mrs. MacFarlane been a wiser woman, she might have read a different story from his eyes in that instant.

"It's my duty to tell her, Mr. Johnson," Mrs. MacFarlane went on, sustained by that sense of moral obligation which overtakes us all in dealing with our friends' private affairs.

"It ain't right, ma'am," said Lafe. "It ain't proper that a girl should hear such things."

"Ho, indeed!" the widow sniffed. "It isn't, hey? We'll see about that. I suppose Hetty's a baby? And let a sweet girl like her marry a man like you?"

"You aim to tell her, Miz MacFarlane?"

"I certainly shall."

"Wait. Hold on a minute," he begged.

"There's nothing you can say, Mr. Johnson. I won't listen. Good-by. It won't be necessary for you to drive me back. I will get Salazar. No, I don't want to hear anything more. I won't listen. I've heard too much already. That will do, please. Let me by."

She swept past him as though marching on a citadel, and Johnson withdrew, limp and wretched. Indeed, he looked and felt, at the moment, the thing Mrs. MacFarlane thought he was. There obtains a notion that an innocent man's innocence will shine from his face like the sun breaking through clouds. It is a comfortable thought. The facts, however, are that he is very likely to show much bewilderment under sudden accusation, whereas the hardy scoundrel will summon up the most blighting wrath when brought face to face with his misdoings.

Hughie's widow retired to her room, where, with a photograph of Hughie on the table in front of her, she had a long cry. Then she sat down and wrote to Hetty Ferrier, lest she be swerved from her high purpose by subsequent happenings, or neglect it through bad memory. Salazar received orders to hitch the team to take her back to town, and the majordomo promised that Paula would be sent back to her mother, who lived on the far side of Tepitate. Her conscience serene, Mrs. MacFarlane gave the majordomo some money for the girl, which the majordomo pocketed against a holiday in the city. As he intended to marry Paula some day, it may be that he regarded this as dowry and consequently his own. Then the widow drove back to the Hotel Carmen, and a week later boarded the train for the homeward journey.

CHAPTER XIX

BUFFALO JIM GIVES WISE COUNSEL

Johnson departed the ranch like a sneak-thief, keeping well off the trail for fear he should be overtaken by Mrs. MacFarlane and further humiliated by a blank stare. He wanted to take counsel of Buffalo Jim, who now lived in Cananea, as I have said, among drying hides and the fresh carcasses of steers. If you follow a road out of this city—the wood haulers use it, for the most part, with their laden burros—you will descend a mesa by wide sweeps and run slap against a slaughter house. There are corrals and stables also, and a thousand carrion crows will acknowledge your coming by a reluctant lifting of wings. Here Lafe's friend resided and slew thirty head daily for beef. Perhaps his occupation contributed to the study of human problems—killing things is a serious business—at any rate, Buffalo really knew all that a man may know in this life.

He took an extremely pessimistic view of Johnson's prospects. Of course, the girl would believe Mrs. MacFarlane. That was only natural. A woman might stick to a man through every crime in the calendar against his fellow men, and still hold faith in him; but when another woman entered into the plot, it was time for a new deal; he was as good as done for, then. Thus spake Buffalo Jim. He advised Lafe, however, to write Hetty without delay. By so doing, he might forestall the widow and prepare the young lady.

"It'll sort of give the widow woman your dust," he explained, "and then she's liable to make a bad throw."

Accordingly, Johnson went to the Hotel Carmen and sat himself down at a desk in a corner. He chose some neatly ruled paper and dipped the pen; everything in due order. After that he coughed and consumed some minutes in staring fixedly at the blank sheets. He had no heart for this task. Resolute in all the crises of his man's life, this was beyond him.

Then he began to write, the pen scratching and sputtering over the page. The sentences opened with firmness and precision, but gradually slanted towards the lower corner. First his spurs bothered him, and he took them off. Next, his neckerchief became sticky and he untied it and left his shirt collar open.

"If you keep a-writing much more, Lafe, you'll be naked," said the landlord critically.

Some cowboys passed through and invited Johnson to join them, but he shook them off. At last it was finished.

Dear Friend:

How are you?

I am sitting in a room it is a big room and a lot of loafers keep coming and going but genrally coming.

This is to say I am well and doing fine I hope you are well and doing fine. Say a lady met up with me here a few days ago who said she knew you ain't that a hot one to spring on me sudden. She is a right nice lady though she don't care a heap what I think I reckon she as good as toald me I was a bad egg. Perhaps I am a bad egg how about it.

She said she was going to write to you. I done the best that I could and it don't seem fair it ain't right that you should hear what she said she was going to write to you and besides it was all a stall and wasn't true but you musn't tell that to Mrs. MacFarlane because it would make her feel bad. Hughie he was a friend of mine but Hughie wasn't of no account in some ways for he spoke Mex too good now when a man gets that twist on his r's and begins to hang around with the natives its time to take a new hand all round because he ain't satisfied with his color no more. No sirree it don't do to talk the lingo to good and I make them speak my language which will improve their morals if they only had some to improve that was what ailed Hughie but she must not know and so you be careful. I hope I have made it all clear.

The heat is fierce to-day I am going to take a little drink when this is finished I don't take them often only a few with Buffalo Jim and some of the boys. Do you remember the call down you done give me about that. Ha ha that was sure a dandy.

How is it back there in Badger Old Lee is there likely ain't he. Give him my regards the Widow Brown must be there too give her my regards. Fred Hall and I used to be thicker than thieves give him my regards. Say tell him to smoke up and let out a roar of some kind.

There is not much round here to tell you about Cal and Tim tangled and Tim is under doc's care he's pretty sore. I done told you about them before. Jerry's wife done run off and Jerry is scared to death she'll come back but perhaps she wont. I told him to hope for the best because he cant do nothing more than that.

Say you'll think I'm trying for to write you a book but I wanted to get this thing about Mrs. Mac straight so you'd understand. There's a lot a feller would like to say that he don't like to say you know how that is and a lot of loafers hanging round trying to guy you. But a feller thinks a lot sometimes.

Cattle in good shape and prices right but we need rain bad. I got to go south to find Steve Moffatt right soon perhaps he ain't where I think he is but will take a chance.

Well you must have laid down for a sleep by this time and wonder when I'm going to cut this out I have written so much. Don't you pay no attention to what Mrs. MacFarlane says though she is a right nice lady and I ain't got no hard feelings one way or the other. Well its about time I quit this well good-bye. I'd like mighty well to hear how you are. I'll bet you're looking fine.

Yours truly,

LAFE JOHNSON.

Lafe was master of a loose and flowing hand, which had served him faithfully on cattle tallies—he was not called upon to make written reports as sheriff—but made a bulky letter. He dropped this missive, with many misgivings, into a box, and then took horse for the south. We will not follow him, because ten days of fourteen hours in the saddle and a steady diet of beans and tortillas and coffee will grow monotonous to a refined taste. Moreover, tracking down a thief cannot be of any interest to us of larger effort.

In good time the sheriff returned, but of Moffatt he had found no trace. Immediately upon arrival, he inquired at the telegraph office for messages, expecting that Haverty would have wired him further information from Badger. The man behind the counter listened with a far-away expression and then assured him sadly that there was nothing. Lafe went away in doubt and returned next morning, insisting that the telegrapher had made a mistake; a letter received from Haverty spoke of a wire sent the day of his departure. The official shrugged his shoulders at this display of bull-headed persistence, so typically American, and asked him once again for his name. Then, still pensive, he thumbed over a pile of flimsy.

"Johnsing, you said?"

"Sure. Johnson. That's me. I done told you that a thousand times."

"Ah, yes. Here are two," said the telegrapher, and very deliberately he smoothed out the messages and delivered them.

The first dealt with dates of Moffatt's appearances on the Border, so far as Haverty had been able to learn them. They were nothing but unconfirmed rumors, and Lafe skimmed over it. The other was unsigned and he read it several times, the copper hue of his face deepening.

"Don't worry. Nobody can lie to me about you."

He thrust this message into his shirt pocket and forgot all about the reproof he had rehearsed for the telegrapher's benefit. Very jauntily he exhibited the slip to Buffalo Jim at the slaughter house. That worthy butcher eyed it gravely, and grunted.

"She's a daisy," he said, after mature consideration, vaguely aware that Lafe expected him to say something appropriate.

"You're damn whistlin'," said Lafe. "What'd I tell you, Buf'lo? She'd never believe nothing against me."

"Yes, sir, she's a daisy," Buffalo repeated. "It's like she just tore up that widow woman's letter and was as sarcastic as hell."

As Jim said this, he winked at one of the wagon horses. Then he went leisurely to work again on a piece of harness he was patching.

"All the same, Lafe," he admonished, "you'd better figure on her throwing that up to you again. The woman never breathed that wouldn't. Hey? You mark my words—the first row you have, Hetty'll hand you one about Paula, first crack out of the box."

"You don't know her."

"No, I don't," said Buffalo Jim, "but I've knowed a heap of others."

CHAPTER XX

THE SHERIFF PURGES TOWN OF BADGER

The sheriff, rather crestfallen, was obliged to return to Badger without Moffatt. Having lost all trace of him, he was suspicious that the gunfighter would strike unexpectedly from another direction; perhaps in Badger itself, relying on Johnson's absence. His acquaintance with Moffatt had been short, but sufficient to persuade Lafe that he was most to be feared when nobody knew his whereabouts.

Arrived in town and refreshed, Lafe went straight to Dutch Annie. Nobody in the community was especially predisposed toward Moffatt except a few hangers-on at the Fashion who had enjoyed his largess, and a lady known as Picnic Kate. Picnic Kate lived with Dutch Annie. Her name suffices to describe her, and as persons who have no nice friends are unworthy our consideration, I will let her case rest there. However, the sheriff had a shrewd notion that if anybody knew, or was apt to learn, anything concerning Moffatt, Picnic was the individual.

"I ain't saw him since him and you had that run-in up at the Fashion," said Kate.

The sheriff was convinced she was lying, but merely nodded.

Hetty welcomed him back with some shyness. It puzzled Johnson until he recalled the date, and then he looked troubled.

"Hetty," said he, "we've got to put off the wedding again. We can't be married yet."

"Why not?"

The sheriff gave a short laugh. "I don't want you a widow as soon as you're a wife."

"What's the matter, Lafe? What do you talk that way for? A widow?"

"Moffatt's somewhere around here, I'll swear," said the sheriff. "Jeff Thomas sent me a letter today—here, look. He says Steve swears he'll get me."

"Well?"

They were standing in the front room of the Widow Brown's. Lafe sat down and tried to talk naturally, preferring not to take cognizance of the probing of Hetty's eyes.

"You see, hon, Steve is the last of the ol' tough bunch. I'll get him. It'll only take a few days—something's sure to break right away—don't look so scared, hon—we'll be married in a month, I bet you."

Hetty looked down at him like a queen of tragedy in a ten-twenty-thirty tent show performance. She said slowly: "No, we won't. I've got a feeling we won't ever be married."

"Pshaw!" said Johnson. "Don't talk like that."

"But I feel like that."

"Women always get ideas like that of yours in their heads. If somebody looks cross at a feller, they can see a funeral with all his friends sending Gates Ajar wreaths. No, ma'am. I ain't ready for mine yet awhile."

"Why don't you throw it all up?" she asked abruptly.

"You mean my job? Resign? Quit being sheriff?"

"Yes, I do. Oh, you're bound to get killed some day. And for heaven's sake, what is there in it? If things go right—well, that's what they're supposed to do, anyhow. But if things go wrong, you get

blamed." Hetty spun around to the window when she saw Lafe's expression of amazement. She gazed out at the ugly, huddled nakedness of Badger, and there was loathing in her eyes.

"The place ain't fit for a human to live in."

"You won't have to stay here long, hon," the sheriff reminded her.

"But anything's apt to happen before that. We've put it off twice already."

"Once," Lafe corrected.

He rose and stood before her. She kept her face averted, but did not withdraw her hand when he took it. At last he said: "You'd have me quit? You'd have me back down when they—all these here people—done put me in just because they thought I was the best man to clean up this here place? I don't believe it. Not for a minute, Hetty. It ain't like you."

"Gunmen aren't the only toughs in this town," she said darkly.

"I don't take you, ma'am. Oh, you mean—them?" He pointed to the outskirts of Badger, to the red, tinned roof of Dutch Annie's abode.

"Yes, I do," said Hetty, flushing.

The subject was dropped for the time and they fell to discussing furniture for the house in Hope Cañon. Then, as he bade her good-night, Lafe remarked in a casual voice, as though the step were routine: "I'll do that, too."

"Do what?"

"Clear out that crowd. There'll be an awful howl all around town, but I'll do it."

He had gone a hundred yards when she called him back.

"Oh, Lafe."

"What is it?" he asked, returning.

"That poor creature—Sarah—you remember Jackson?"

"I thought we agreed not to say nothing about that feller."

"Yes, but—well, I might—you'll look after her, won't you, Lafe?"

"Sure. They'll be all right. Don't you worry. Good-night."

He was very serious as he took his way homeward. What he planned to do amounted to a moral revolution in Badger, and there would assuredly be an outcry and a tremendous to-do. True, the town had been purged before. Once, in the hottest of the hot weather, driven to frenzy by Brother Ducey's exhortations—he was a genius in choosing the purgatorial months for his vivid pictures of a living hell—a crowd of citizens had rushed from the meeting, and, surging across the sand-flats to the establishment of Dutch Annie's predecessor, had ousted the merry sisters in the dark of the night. But, as is usual in such cases, reaction from their zeal was swift and far-reaching. Dutch Annie came and flourished; and when the citizens of Badger elected Johnson sheriff, no mention of this cancer in the body social was made in the program of reform.

Lafe now reflected on these things from a new view-point. His conclusion was: "It ain't decent. Hetty's got the rights of this, I reckon."

To many aspects of their Border life, he had given scant thought. Where much that ought to be viewed with horror is tolerated as an established factor in communal life by law-abiding people, a man tends to become complaisant of laxity. Many evils existing in Badger had never struck the sheriff as such, simply because they had always been; but he was learning. Little glimpses of Hetty's healthy outlook on things shook his own code of conduct to its spine and filled him with a species of awe.

"Let 'em roar," he said firmly. "It'll be a mighty fine wedding present for her. Besides, it'll make Steve wild."

The sheriff was an execrable politician, else he would have proceeded differently. Had he possessed the sagacity of a ward leader, how he would have corralled the reform vote by going at his task with beating of drums and a fanfare of announcements. Lafe took quite another method. He paid a call, in a spirit approaching friendliness, and after some vehement protests, he departed with a promise extracted.

Dutch Annie was as good as her word. Next day a little company of pilgrims boarded the stage, bound for the railway. They looked sadly worn in the glare of sunlight, in spite of extravagant efforts with the rouge pot and the powder rag, but they put a brave face on the situation and exchanged badinage with a few choice spirits gathered to witness the departure.

"Well, so long, Lafe," said Dutch Annie, who was a just woman, according to her lights. "It was right mean, but I reckon you had to do it. And you've acted the gen'l'man, which is more'n I can say for a lot of loafers in this here town."

Sellers cracked his long whip, the mules lurched against their collars and the stage rattled away.

This was the last that Badger ever saw of Dutch Annie.

So quietly had the feat been accomplished that the town really did not awake to the fact until they had gone. Then criticism broke out.

"I suppose you'd call it the right thing, looked at in a large way, Lafe," ventured the landlord of the Cowboys' Rest in mild protest. "It's more religious, in course. But you'd ought to have thunk of some of the boys."

Others assumed a violent tone, but these excoriations were delivered where the sheriff did not hear them. Consequently they hurt neither him nor those who made them. They held that he had exceeded his duties and powers; his job was to do what was bidden in the by-laws to preserve order, not to regulate the private morals of everybody in the town. Man alive, first thing one knew, Johnson would be breaking up card play, and it wouldn't be safe for a man to shake dice with a barkeep for the drinks. Jake Taylor, who had once been a miner, and who had now joined the leisure classes through inclination rather than fortune, talked freely of the referendum and recall.

The sheriff was fully aware of what was being said. Yet it gave him a new sense of power to feel, also, back of his act, the support of the better element. They arrayed themselves with him unostentatiously, for fear of ruptures that might work harm to business. Nevertheless, he knew their support could be counted on. Indeed, Turner and other substantial men of the place hastened to assure the sheriff that he had done a brave thing. Not a word of it did he breathe to Hetty, but when he called for her to go walking the following night, she was waiting for him at the gate, and when Johnson saw her smile of understanding and confidence, he knew he would not repent, whatever might befall.

"No news of Steve yet," he told her.

"Oh, Lafe, do be careful. They tell such dreadful things about him. Mrs. Brown says he could hit a two-bit piece at a hundred yards."

"Don't. Let's be cheerful," said the sheriff, and laughed. "It'll only be a few days, hon. I'll get him all right."

"Well," said Hetty, with a sigh of content, clinging to his arm, "there's one comfort. If anything ever did happen to you, I'd know it, if you were in Jericho."

"How?" he asked, much diverted.

"Why, you booby, I could feel it. Isn't it strange, Lafe? I feel as if we'd known each other all our lives. We must have been made for each other."

"That's right queer," said the sheriff solemnly. "I often get that feeling myself."

As I have a suspicion that other loving young people have talked like this before, enough of it.

CHAPTER XXI

A FIGHT IN THE DARK

As Lafe was coming from dinner at the Fashion annex next noon, a Mexican handed him a letter. It was undated and without beginning.



"As Lafe was coming from dinner ... a Mexican handed him a letter."

Steve's sore. Look out for him.

ANNIE.

The sheriff had received so many warnings in his time that he had grown callous and seldom attached any significance to them, but he knew that Dutch Annie was not given to foolish alarm. So he tore her note into minute particles and saw to the oiling of his six-shooter. That was the only preparation against trouble that Johnson was wont to make.

The sheriff's two-roomed frame shack was somewhat removed from its neighbors. It was a full half mile from the Widow's house, where Hetty lodged. His housekeeping had a fine touch of simplicity. If all things were favorable, and he had nothing else to do, Lafe would make the bed once in a while. To do him justice, he had been known to sweep the place, also. That was not a particularly arduous task, because the furniture consisted of the bed aforesaid, one chair, one table with three legs, which stood propped against the wall, and a packing case for a washstand.

About seven o'clock that evening he led a spare horse to the Widow's house and took Hetty for a ride. They talked of the future—soberly, almost as a staid married couple. She never indulged in coquetry, and their courtship had not been of the kind to make jealousy of others expedient or a desirable weapon for her use. After she had dismounted at the gate:

"I wish you weren't going. I'm sort of nervous to-night."

The sheriff smiled down at her. "I reckon you'd best get a glass case to keep me in, hon."

"I know it's silly—but you'll be awful careful, won't you, Lafe?"

"Sure," he said. "There ain't a native in ten counties that likes getting hurt less'n I do."

He put the horses up and repaired to the Fashion, for he had it in mind to ascertain the latest gossip of Moffatt. It was not to be supposed that a man of the outlaw's temper would take the expulsion of Picnic Kate from Badger in a spirit of decorous humility.

The proprietor had it on excellent authority that Steve was far down on the Baccanochi range, endeavoring to cheat the natives out of a herd of stock cattle. The sheriff stood at the bar and conversed for a space.

"You got a new gun, Lafe?" asked the Fashion man, pointing to his belt.

"No-oo. Just been cleaning this up some."

The other held out a languid hand and Johnson passed him the gun. It was a workmanlike .45 Colt, single action, and the hammer rested on an empty chamber for safety. The Fashion proprietor turned it over with the ease and appreciation of an expert. He pulled back the hammer and twirled the chambers.

"She's a beaut," said he.

"Yes, that's a right good gun," Lafe agreed. He received it back carelessly, and slipped it into the holster. They chatted indifferently for a moment, and Lafe drank a nightcap and started home.

The night was thick and sticky. Back of the mountains thunder was muttering. The air clung about him like a soft blanket. Some bull-bats wheeled above his head. Lafe glanced at the dirty sky and wondered whether those hurrying wracks of clouds would shed rain. They had a pitiless habit of holding out hope, only to blow over, leaving the country gasping.

His door was shut. It struck him as odd, because he never locked his house, having nothing of value to safeguard. Inside, it was so black that the darkness seemed to rise up and buffet him in the face. He crossed the empty outer room and felt his way to the table against the far wall. On it stood always an empty bottle, a candle crammed into the neck. This was the sheriff's light system.

His hands groped over the rough surface, but he could not find the candle, nor the matches usually piled close beside. He fumbled in his pocket—nothing there but some keys and loose silver.

"Pshaw!" he muttered. "Well, it don't matter. I can undress in the dark."

He moved towards the bed. Then he halted and his stomach muscles contracted. Slowly his head turned to see what was behind. There was somebody in the room. He stared until his eyes smarted, but could see nothing. He listened, but could catch no sound. Yet, somewhere close to him, a living thing moved; he was positive of that. Nobody had ever questioned Johnson's courage, but now he experienced a peculiar gripping of the throat and a pringling over all his skin.

"Who's there?" he asked, and waited.

"Who's there, I say?"

Surely there was a faint stirring in the corner, the merest pinpoint of a sound. The sheriff whipped out his gun. He could descry nothing, but pointing his forefinger along the barrel to where he thought an object crouched, he thumbed the hammer. It fell with a click on an empty chamber. Before he could pull again, a body hurled itself through the dark on Johnson.

Instantly he grappled it. A knife thrust was the danger now, and he locked his arms about his assailant and heaved sideways, driving his hip against the opposing hip to give momentum to the throw. The other lost his feet and Lafe swung with all his weight, but they crashed against the wall, which brought them upstanding. While one could count ten, the two stood breast to breast, panting.

The sheriff suddenly brought his right knee upward with force, desirous of driving it into his opponent's stomach, but the blow was caught on the thigh, and again they went lurching about the room, gasping for breath, but voiceless. As he strove to pin the jerking arms, Johnson's mind ran automatically on the empty chamber. How had the hammer happened on that? Sure—the Fashion man had done it.

The discovery gave him new strength. In swift rage he tried for a lower hold, feeling his enemy weaken. The momentary release of his grip was enough. The other wrenched one arm free and swung it. Lafe was dimly conscious of a crash and the tinkle of broken glass. He felt no pain. It seemed to him that trains were rushing by at high speed, and he was beset with the idea that he had something to do that he was powerless to perform. He crumpled up and slid to the floor, his fingers scratching the boards for the handle of his six-shooter, but all the strength seemed gone from them. And now, mingling with the roar of the train and the harsh screaming of brakes, was the rattle of a horse's hoofs. The sheriff stretched out on his back and sighed.

The patter of rain on the roof was the first sound that aroused Johnson. Assuredly the house leaked, for there were warm drops falling on his face, too. Next, he heard somebody strike a match, and he began to speculate in a sort of languid wonder as to what a woman was doing there and what made her cry. Then a shooting pain above the right ear wrung an exclamation from him and he tried to sit up.

"Don't. Don't. You must lie still."

"Hetty," he said.

She knelt beside him and held a wet handkerchief to the wound.

"You're hurt bad, Lafe. Don't talk," she whispered.

"Steve Moffatt—"

"Yes, I know, dear. Lie still."

Splinters of a bottle strewed the floor around him. So Moffatt had got away. The sheriff looked weakly at Hetty.

"How did you get here?"

"Hush. You mustn't talk. Keep still and I'll go for Dr. Armstrong."

"How—?"

"I heard you calling me," she said.

"Calling you?" the sheriff repeated. "Why, hon, I never said a word."

CHAPTER XXII

CAPTURE OF MOFFATT, THE GUNMAN

For more than a month, the sheriff lay sick. Armstrong feared concussion of the brain, but his diagnosis proved incorrect. And Hetty nursed him as never a man was nursed before, in that country of rough methods. Indeed, her devotion was so pronounced that the entire sentiment of Badger underwent a change. The married ladies came to the tardy conclusion that Miss Ferrier belonged to the sisterhood of good women; none of the males had ever doubted it; the whole town paid tribute to her conduct, and their indignation against the sheriff's assailant waxed correspondingly.

At the beginning of the first week of convalescence, the Floyds arrived in Badger from the Lazy L. Mrs. Floyd was hampered by no scruples on the score of false modesty; if her husband did not object—if her Tom understood—what mattered it about the rest of the world? So, straight to Lafe's bedside she went.

"Lafe! Dear old Lafe," she exclaimed, when she saw the unnatural pallor of his face.

Hetty was standing at the other side of the bed. She tried bravely not to stiffen towards their visitor when she saw her kneel and take Lafe's hand, but some subtle sense of divination—or perhaps it was that Mrs. Floyd was so pretty—made her reception frigid. Mrs. Floyd glanced quickly into her face, then seized her impetuously, crying: "Don't. Oh, please don't. Lafe and I were babies together."

Whereupon the amazed patient beheld Hetty clasp the smaller woman in her arms, and the two took to weeping.

This must have been excellent for his complaint, because the sheriff mended rapidly from that date. It was not long before he went about as usual, although a long strip of plaster adorned one ear. His first care was to talk with the proprietor of the Fashion, who said: "The hammer was on the wrong chamber? Why, Lafe, surely you don't think—"

That was exactly what the sheriff thought. It ended in the saloonkeeper leaving town in haste. Then the sheriff set quietly to work to ascertain whither Moffatt had flown for refuge. It would be so warm for him along the Border now, that a haven would be difficult.

"We'd best to wait a mite yet, Hetty," he told his fiancée again. "Supposing he was to get me? No, no. It's either me or him. So let's just keep the wedding off a while, hon, and then this'll all be straightened out."

"Oh—all right."

"You see, hon, I want to have a clean slate," he went on rather lamely. "Don't you understand? Before we get married, I aim to throw up this job of sheriff and take to running cattle with ol' Horne."

"Huh-huh."

"Don't look that way, hon. Steve, he's the last. I'll go get him and then I'll have done what they put me in for."

"Oh, of course, if you think more of the people who elected you than you do of me," said Hetty.

For a moment he seemed taken aback. Then his face cleared and he swept Hetty into his arms.

He did not have long to wait for news of the outlaw. A telegram came from Floyd of the Lazy L.

Steve Moffatt in Lost Springs mountains. Heading for the Jug. Killed Pablo Jiminez to-day while running off bunch of horses. Horne and I offer five hundred reward for him.

It was because of this wire that the sheriff rode up a cañon in Lost Springs on a cool October afternoon. The wind played through the live-oaks and scrub-cedar and went whistling upward to be lost among the solemn peaks. Some cattle were watering at a shallow hole. A ground squirrel scurried across his front. From all about came the soft, mournful cooing of wild doves.

All morning he had been climbing. Sometimes he traveled three miles to gain a mile of distance; winding upward to high mesas, skirting them and descending into another cañon nearer the summits toward which Moffatt was heading.

Presently he was confronted by a wall of rock. It was a sheer thirty feet in height and water oozed down its face into a small pool. There seemed no way out and Lafe scanned the cliffs in

search of the trail. While he lolled thus in the saddle, there came a shot from above his head and his horse winced. Without hesitation he fell to the ground and scrambled on hands and knees to the shelter of a tree.

"I near got you that time, Johnson," a clear voice called to him.

It came from behind the crags above the pool. Then he thought he heard the ring of a horse's shoe on stone, but he was too cautious to expose himself at once. For fully an hour he waited, listening for evidence of his enemy and occasionally sighting along the barrel of his 30-30. Then, persuaded Moffatt had seized the chance to increase his lead, he remounted and continued the pursuit. A wale along his mount's shoulder was the only injury.

"He's scared, or he could have got me then," said Lafe, examining this with much satisfaction.

In late afternoon he threaded a broad cañon and entered on a stretch of brakes, perhaps six miles in length and one in width. The top of its numberless bald hills overlooked the cañon's sides. The track he followed ran along a narrow plateau. At intervals, chalky cliffs dropped sheer away on his right hand to a depth of two hundred feet, and there were gaping cavities into which a mountain could have been dumped, resembling in their formation the craters of extinct volcanoes. Giant fissures showed in the mounds of salmon-colored clay, and, close beside him, a yawning void threatened, whence a hundred thousand tons of shale had slid. Of vegetation there was none here, save a tangle of prickly-pear at the mouth of a gulch.

"There he goes now," said the sheriff, pricking his horse.

Moffatt was nearly a mile ahead and moving leisurely, as though he had no fear. He topped a rise and waved his hand at Johnson before dipping out of sight.

This confidence was partially explained when the sheriff eased his horse down the declivity that had shut him from view and discovered a break in the trail. At this point it ended at a huge rock, and split. One part ran along the base of the rock and then turned back in the direction he had come. At least it so looked, but he could not see its ultimate destination because of the broken nature of the country. The other path made a slight detour and went on, past the rock.

"Huh-huh," said Johnson, pulling up. "Sure. He's back of me again, the rascal."

In spite of an effort by Moffatt to disguise his imprint at the junction, the trail lay plain to Lafe. It was too old a game for him to be deceived; had he not once, on a previous hunt, detected Moffatt's ruse in changing his horse's shoes so that the corks were in front? Suddenly he uttered an exclamation and got down in the dust on his hands and knees. There was a second trail, and it was following Moffatt's.

It came from beyond the rock, and then changed direction and now overlapped the outlaw's. Had the two met? It was probable that Moffatt had come upon a confederate, for this was the region of the Jug, the rendezvous for fugitives. But why, then, had the two not come to meet him?

"That ain't Steve's way," Johnson reflected. "It's like they're laying for me up the trail a piece."

Neither did this solution satisfy him. One thing alone about the look of the two tracks seemed to make the notion of two confederates riding peacefully in single file untenable. The last rider was going faster than the other. Then he must be in pursuit.

Debating these possibilities, the sheriff advanced with caution. Limestone cliffs soon hemmed him in. He came upon a steer as he crossed a tiny mountain stream. The animal dashed away, wild as an antelope. Just before he made the next turn, Johnson glanced back. The steer had stopped to gaze after him. It would not willingly leave the vicinity of the water it had come six miles to get.

The going became so rough that his horse faltered and the sheriff feared that he might maim himself any moment on the rocks. The way was nothing but a succession of narrow gorges, leading one into the other and cluttered with boulders; ever ascending, the light became more subdued as the cañon's walls grew steeper and higher. He calculated that he must be nearing the summits of Lost Springs.

A shot reverberated among the cliffs in front of him; then another. The echoes rolled and multiplied. The abrupt detonations startled his mount, which sprang under the quick, nervous grasp of the knee. A stone gave under foot, and down came horse and rider with a jolt like a trunk being dumped from a baggage car.

The sheriff instantly cheeked his horse, holding his head down by main strength lest the beast rise and trample him. His foot hung in the stirrup and the spur was caught in the blanket. There was no need for this precaution. The poor brute lay where he fell, nostrils quivering and his breath coming in tearing gasps. Instantly realizing that he was seriously hurt, Lafe began to extricate himself. He slowly drew his leg from the boot; free, leaped upward and pinned the horse's head with his knee. One look at the right foreleg was sufficient. Johnson stuck his gun to the white star on its forehead and pulled the trigger.

He was now thoroughly angry.

"Doggone that scoundrel. I'll go get him if I have to walk barefoot from here to the Jug," he declared wrathfully.

A good horse gone, and Moffatt still ahead! Yet he had much to be thankful for. He was unhurt except for a severe shaking, and a bruise to his ankle. The sheriff wasted no time on his predicament, but removed saddle, bridle and blanket from the body and hid them in a hole high up among rocks.

The boot came with the saddle, and having tied his handkerchief about the injured ankle, he went forward again, carrying the rifle in one hand, the boot in the other.

He entered a wider gorge, well wooded with post-oak. The ground rose steeply and the cañon narrowed half a mile ahead to an oval opening between cliffs. Beyond this towered a solid peak. This was the Jug, the fastness to which the Border bandits retreated in times of stress. Lafe peered hard up the cañon and halted to spy out surroundings. From behind that opening, one determined man could hold off a regiment.

"I swan," he ejaculated.

A dead horse, saddled, lay near a fallen tree not twenty yards distant. It was still bleeding from a wound in the neck. The trappings were old and patched and repaired with rope, after the fashion of the natives. This, then, accounted for one of the shots. The sheriff gazed, and stepped hastily behind a post-oak.

Something had risen from the ground about a hundred yards beyond. Peeping round his shelter, he saw that it was another horse, whose forequarters flopped helplessly as it strove to rise. Instantly he recognized the markings of the "paint" on which Moffatt had fled.

"Somebody has beaten me to him," he muttered; then sprang from behind his tree with ready gun and yelled: "Hi!"

Close to the far horse two men were struggling on the ground. As he looked, one rolled uppermost and, wrenching a hand loose, struck with a knife. A stifled cry came from the man underneath, and the sheriff ran forward at top speed.

A Mexican was straddling Moffatt, one hand about his throat. The outlaw was vainly endeavoring to break the grip with his fingers. The knife was raised for a second blow, when the native heard the crunch of the sheriff's boot and turned his head. His expression of raging hate changed to a look of such absolute amazement that it was almost ludicrous. Next instant he released Moffatt and scurried away like a cottontail, zigzagging among the trees as he headed for the Jug. It would have been an easy matter to bring him down, and for the fraction of a second Johnson was so inclined. Then: "Pshaw, I ain't looking for him," he said, and hurried to Moffatt's side.

"Hello," said Steve weakly, opening his eyes.

"Are you hurt, Moffatt? Hurt bad?"

"Pretty bad, I reckon," said the injured man. "He done got me here."

He placed a hand over his right breast. There was a knife wound high up, which was bleeding generously, but not enough to cause alarm. Johnson unfastened the shirt and inspected the cut. It was deep, but the Mexican's thrust had been diverted and had gone high, toward the shoulder. Lafe did not think that the lung had been pierced or that there was internal hemorrhage. He removed the bandage from his ankle, found some water dripping from crevices in the cliff, bathed and bound the wound.

Said Moffatt: "Gee, I wish I had a drink."

Johnson caught some in his hat, and cooled his face when he had drunk. The outlaw seemed grateful.

"You ain't got anything to eat, have you?" he inquired.

"I reckon you're feeling better? What'd you like? A steak with onions?"

Moffatt grinned, made a wry face and sat up painfully.

"Where did that fool Mexican go to?" he asked.

Lafe pointed to the Jug and opined that they would have to leave him there. The Jug was too formidable for assault, unless they had urgent need of him.

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Moffatt. "He ain't there now. I'll bet he's sneaked out the back way and is drifting right now. His gun went wrong, or it's like he'd have got me. No, sir, ol' Jiminez has beat it while the going was good, you can bet."

"Jiminez?" the sheriff repeated. "Pablo Jiminez?"

"His brother," answered Moffatt, and became sullen.

Johnson said nothing more just then. All was now explained. The Mexican had cut across country over unfrequented trails to intercept Moffatt at the Jug, as soon as he had learned of the killing of his brother. They had been companions on more than one ranch raid for horses, and he had guessed where Moffatt would seek refuge.

"Whose horse was shot first?" Lafe demanded, after an interval of silence, during which he

gathered wood for a fire.

"Mine. Then I got his before he could shoot again. And when he done fell, he smashed his ol' gun. That was sure some luck."

"But why," Johnson said, much amazed, "why didn't you get him then? It ought to have been easy."

"No kattridges," said Moffatt briefly.

Shortly afterwards, night coming on, he proposed that Lafe go ahead into the Jug and make certain Jiminez was not there. If the place were empty, they could find shelter therein for the night; likewise flour and bacon and beans, and pots to cook them in. Save for weakness, part of which was the result of hunger, the outlaw did not appear greatly distressed from his wound, which had stopped bleeding.

Accordingly the sheriff approached the oval opening, exercising nice circumspection. It looked sufficiently peaceful. An acute, carefully developed instinct for danger told Johnson that none lurked there.

"Go on," Moffatt called after him. "He can't shoot, anyhow. No gun. We'll take a chance."

"We will? This is me. Not you," answered Johnson.

Then he cried in Mexican a friendly greeting, to be on the safe side in the event of Jiminez being in hiding, and strode into the Jug. The opening led into a high and deep cave. It was deserted. In front was a shallow open space, and here were the ashes of fires and some empty bottles and old cans. In a remote corner of the cave, under some dirty sacks, were flour and bacon.

"Come on," he said, returning. "Let's go. It'll be dark in a minute."

Propping Moffatt with his shoulder, and an arm about his waist, Lafe reëntered the Jug. There they spent the night.

Before the early coyotes had got into full swing in their morning songs, they were astir and made what breakfast they could. The sheriff was eager to be gone. Who could say at what moment a pair of desperadoes, with prior claims on the Jug, might not ride up the trail? In that event, he knew that Moffatt might be relied upon to act against him, and Johnson was feeling in no humor for further combat. His prisoner's shoulder was very stiff and caused him exquisite pain when he moved; also, he had a slight fever; but these things are borne as visitations of their profession by such men, and Moffatt never questioned the sheriff's demand that they start at once. He pursed his lips and whistled when the darting pains in his shoulder began, but went readily enough.

There was a slender ribbon of trail leading from the mouth of the Jug around the mountain peak and down the other side into a wide draw. By following it, said Moffatt, they could hit a road which ran south.

"It's eleven miles to it, though, and—wow—what a country. Say, Lafe, what're you going to do with me?"

"You're coming to Badger," replied the sheriff.

The outlaw gave him a sidelong look. "Oh, well," he said, "if you're set on it, all right."

When they had entered the draw after a terrible, sliding descent of the back trail—during which Lafe often bore his prisoner's entire weight—Moffatt spoke up again.

"Got any bread?" said he.

"You bet. Why?"

"Well, there's a big ol' mule we turned out here. I done found him last year down in Zacaton Bottom. He was like to of died, that mule. But I fixed him up good and packed some bedding and chuck on him way up here. He's sure been useful, too. You keep your eye skinned and if you see him, just give him bread. Ridin's cheaper'n walkin'."

"It sure is. Let's go—easy—that's it."

The two had covered another mile of the draw, when, behind a tangle of mesquite, sounded a snort of suspicion.

"Good boy. Good ol' boy," said Johnson soothingly, advancing with the bread extended.

The mule jumped sidewise, hampered by a hobble. He sniffed and the sheriff followed, with endearing words and blandishments. Would he never stand still? It was a gaunt animal, with an especially large head. Probably it smelled the delicacy so rarely enjoyed, because it came blowing at Lafe's hand. Whilst it munched on the crust, Johnson removed the hobble and tied the rope around its neck. Then, with a fervent prayer that the evil latent in every mule might be appeased, he hoisted Moffatt to his back and clambered up behind him. They headed out of the draw.

The sun was three hours high when they struck the road and paused at a wallow to give their mount a sip of water. Outside the draw he had obstinately refused to proceed faster than a walk and Lafe's sense of security was not sufficient to dispute the pace with him. As he lifted his

massive head from drinking, a pair of mules shoved their noses above a rise and a wagon came into view. A white man was driving. Johnson waved his hat and shouted a frantic greeting.

The stage was already descending and the driver could not stop it, although he laid himself back on the reins in the attempt. The sheriff regarded him in amazement. Was he gone crazy? When almost opposite, he let out a whoop and, running out on the pole, cut at the team with his whip. They went by at a gallop in a cloud of sand. Lafe caught a fleeting glimpse of the driver's white face and wavering eyes. Then their mount was seized of the devil; down went his head and he pitched as only a mule can. Moffatt went off at the first jump; at the third, Lafe scattered the waters of the wallow.

The opposite ascent was of soft sand, and before they reached the top, fatigue compelled the stage team to drop to a walk. The driver looked back, apprehension showing even in the bend of his neck. The gray mule had disappeared. Seeing Johnson on foot, helping Moffatt from the ground, the man threw on the brake and the stage came to a halt. The sheriff toiled painfully up the hill, holding the suffering outlaw around the waist.

"Here," said the driver in a dry voice. "Get in. Get in."

Together they lifted Steve in. The driver released the brakes and whipped his mules to a gallop.

"I swan. I swan," he kept repeating.

"Why the hell didn't you stop? Hey? What do you mean by running by that way?" said the sheriff angrily.

"Runnin' by? Runnin'—why, man alive," croaked the driver, "that doggone ol' mule you rode used to pull this stage. And he's been daid over a year."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE WEDDING

When in a discursive mood, Badger was wont to say, with the aggressive local pride common to new communities, that the world had produced three great men—Julius Caesar, Theodore Roosevelt and Lafe Johnson. They accorded this ranking to Julius rather reluctantly, he having been a "foreigner." Imagine, then, their feelings of helpless amazement when they learned that Lafe was about to leave them.

"You don't need no sheriff here now," said he. "Things have got so peaceful that what you want is a dog-catcher and a pound-man. I ain't a candidate for that job. Go ahead and elect a city marshal, and let him do the chores when he ain't busy on anything else."

He was obdurate in this resolution. To his intimates he confessed that the hazards and journeyings of the office made it unfit for occupancy by a married man. And, now that Moffatt was safely in jail and the country cleared of its worst element, he proposed to become a married man. It was Hetty who steeled him in this resolve, when the pleadings of his friends and fellow-townsmen appeared to have him wavering. She had her eyes fixed on Lafe's place beyond the Willows as on a haven of rest, and the Widow Brown gathered from her conversation that Hetty's notion of a respectable and happy citizen was a farmer with one hundred and sixty acres and a flock of children. She mentioned this to Hetty, who grew crimson and requested her to talk sense.

So Lafe resigned as sheriff of Badger, and they presented him with a large watch which ticked so loudly that he could not sleep with it under his pillow; and several staid, responsible property holders got very drunk indeed.

The wedding was fixed for the day following that on which he laid down the cares of office. He and Hetty were talking over final arrangements on the eve.

"I've got a surprise for you," said Lafe.

"What is it?"

"Ol' man Horne has bought the Anvil range. He's made me boss, too. A hundred a month."

Hetty exclaimed in delight as Johnson proudly exhibited a letter received quite three weeks before, which he had been holding back in order to cap his resignation. That made everything smooth and safe for them. They would have their home in Hope Cañon beyond the Willows, and good fresh beef and butter and milk. Assuredly Lafe would himself become a rich cowman some day. Hetty was sure of it.

Their wedding-morn broke, sullen and muttering like a man heavy with sleep. Badger kicked off the blankets, sat up to ascertain just what head it had contracted, and asked hoarsely for an eye-opener. An eye-opener is a drink of undiluted whisky, gulped down before breakfast. Then it stepped out into the road, cocked an eye aloft and opined that the weather looked bad for the sheriff's wedding. They will always call him "sheriff" in Badger.

Turner, the storekeeper, announced at a very early hour that it was mere folly trying to work, and

nobody need expect him to attend to business that day or for several to come, perhaps. Thereupon he shut up shop and carried a graphophone on to the front porch. It played "In the Shade of the Old Apple Tree" eleven times, while the express agent's dog squatted in the road, with its nose tilted back, and howled dismally.

About noon, nine of the Anvil boys rode into town to grace the occasion. They had on clean shirts, and their boots were greased and odorous. Following them came Mr. and Mrs. Horne in a buckboard. The couple had driven forty miles to do honor to the new range boss, and Mrs. Horne lost no time in repairing to the Widow Brown's to assist in attiring the bride. She found that young woman aggravatingly cool—almost placid. Next there arrived the Floyds, with their son Tommy, now grown to overalls and boastful talk.

All the male population of Badger was gathered in the Fashion and in the Cowboys' Rest across the street. Thither hastened Horne and Floyd to hearten the sheriff, but they discovered only their own men and a crowd of merry-makers. Escaping from them in good time, the two sought Turner, who, as justice of the peace, was to perform the ceremony. The storekeeper was found crouched behind some goods in the back portion of his place. He was perspiring profusely. Some fiend in human form had warned Bob not to mix the burial service with the marriage ceremony, as he had done on another occasion best forgotten, and the justice of the peace could not get the fearful idea out of his head. He was therefore trying to commit as much as possible of the service to memory.

"You're looking pretty slick, Bob. Where's Lafe?" asked Horne.

"He's upstairs. I hid him out in that empty room where we keep the stiffs," said Turner, hastily secreting the book. By "stiffs" he referred to the custom of holding the bodies of gentlemen who met violent deaths, until a coroner's jury pronounced on them.

"That's a good place for him," said Floyd.

They started upstairs. "Wait," cried Turner. "I'll take him his dinner."

The trio found Lafe sitting on a stool. He had on a new suit and his hair was plastered down over his forehead, but despite this brave show, he was wretched, gazing miserably out of the window into the street, where numbers of his friends were surging up and down and across. As they entered, a cowboy topped an outlaw mule and the frenzied shrieks of encouragement to the rider drew Horne and Floyd and Turner to look. Then his employer obtained a close view of the sheriff's face.

"You sick?" he demanded.

"No-oo. Why?"

"Then, man alive, brace up. You ain't going to be hung."

Lafe smiled in ghastly fashion and essayed to eat of the steak and vegetables which the justice had brought. It was a vain pretense. His throat was dry and he could not swallow without straining. After watching him a while, Horne suggested that they all take a drink.

"I find a touch of rye helps me a heap when I'm poorly," said he.

To this proposal nobody objected.

"Got the ring?" said Horne.

Again the sheriff gave a sickly grin and stuck his forefinger into a waistcoat pocket. Instantly his face turned a pea-green shade.

"Why," he exclaimed, "I done put it there not five—" He started going through every pocket with shaking hands.

"Jumpin' Jupiter!" said Turner. "You done give me that ring to keep for you an hour ago, Lafe. He kept taking it out so often to look at it, I was scared he'd wear it out, Horne."

In any report of a wedding, it is proper to itemize the plunder. We will therefore leave the bridegroom and his three tried friends to pass the remaining hours playing "cold hands" with cards, whilst we take a peep into the Widow Brown's abode. Hetty is dressing by the aid of Mrs. Horne and Mrs. Floyd, and no peeping is permissible there. Out upon the thought! Suffice that she wore that day certain fine linen and fluffy creations, the like of which the ladies of Badger had never seen and of whose existence in wardrobes the male residents had no suspicion. Mrs. Horne was vastly gratified.

The presents were laid out in the parlor—all but one. That one was given by the express agent, and was hidden deep in the barn, but rest assured that it will ultimately be taken to the house in Hope Cañon. Ever a facetious and far-sighted man, the express agent had sent a go-cart.

A piano lamp under a pink glass shade with green bead fringe centered the display. The fact that it was made for gas—and they would be lucky, indeed, always to have oil in the Cañon—did not diminish its value in Hetty's eyes at all. Moreover, there was not a piano in Badger. Somebody had sent Lafe a silver-plated six-shooter; another, a chromo lithograph of the prophet Elijah caught up in a chariot of fire. To Hetty had come shawls and cruetstands, coffee pots and tidies and chair scarfs; also, plated cake dishes, cutlery and rugs. An erstwhile admirer from the Lazy

L, who had partaken of many meals at the Fashion on her account, sent a milch cow, and for Lafe came a black saddler from Floyd. This was the horse that had carried the Lazy L boss across a swollen river on a certain occasion in which Johnson had figured, and he had often admired the beast. A very serviceable gift was that from Horne—a check for fifty dollars.

"Wilt thou have this woman to—"

They were standing side by side in the parlor of the Widow Brown's, under a wedding-bell made of cedar boughs, which was suspended from the ceiling by a wire. All Lafe's nervousness was gone. His face was stern, but there was a peaceful light in the eyes that was good to see. Evidently Mrs. Horne thought so, for she and the Widow Brown cried softly and without ceasing. The bride was rather pale, but entirely composed. Only Turner and Horne fidgeted, the latter because his collar chafed him. Turner skimmed over the words and paused twice to whisper in an aside that he hoped to the Lord Lafe hadn't forgotten the ring.

"Wilt thou have this woman to—"

There was an inward surge, then a break in the ranks of the guests grouped behind the pair and at the door, and Turner paused with his hand raised.

"Hold on there! Hold on," cried a falsetto voice.

An enormously fat woman lurched through the company and confronted the groom. A felt hat with a red plume wagged rakishly on top of her head. She had on a blue calico skirt, and her feet were large and bulbous. They could not discern her features because of a veil.

"What's this?" said she in a high-pitched voice. "What's this, Lafe Johnson?"

"Ma'am?" said the sheriff.

"What does this mean? Who is this lady?"

"I don't take you, ma'am. This lady and me, we're just fixing to get married. What's the matter?"

"Matter? Matter?" shrieked the intruder. "You do fine to ask, don't you, Lafe Johnson? What about me that you left in Abilene, back in Texas? Hey? How about li'l' Charlie and James, that's the dead image of you? He's been a-cryin' for you, Lafe. Just after he got over the measles—oh, you wretch!"

"Abilene?" repeated the sheriff dully. "Abilene? Charlie and James? Why, I was never in Abilene longer than half an hour in my life, ma'am. You can see for yourself—"

Hetty, who had shrunk back with a startled air at the entrance of the fat woman, now moved suddenly and pulled up the veil, disclosing the round, shining visage of the Anvil cook.

"Why!" said Horne. "If it ain't old Dave!"

Instead of throwing him into the street or into jail, as he deserved, the company permitted Dave to retire with honor to the outer circle, where he divested himself of skirt, waist and plumed hat, and was heard to entreat one of the boys to help loosen the belt with which he had painfully compressed his figure for the event. They could hear him squeal, pretending to be tickled. All agreed that his portrayal of feminine behavior was a marvel of similitude.

Neither Lafe nor the bride took the interruption in ill part. The justice of the peace only appeared chagrined—Turner was in an agony of fear lest he lose his place—but even he managed to join in the laugh. The two faced him again. Three minutes later they were man and wife.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE BRIDE IS LOST

For reasons of economy there was to be no wedding trip, except the drive to their home in the Cañon. Later, perhaps, they would journey to some railroad town to shop, and—come a good year—Lafe would take her to a Middle West city—"to the East," they called it in Badger.

A buckboard was in waiting, a pair of spirited young bays straining against the men who held them. Sheltering Hetty with his body from a shower of rice and old shoes, the sheriff and his bride sped down the path from the Widow Brown's. He lifted her into the buckboard and picked up the reins. Then a cloud of dust swept down on them, and out of the cloud came a rattle of hoofs. A rope sped, and the sheriff was jerked off the seat.

"Help, Horne!" he cried. "They've got me."

The treacherous Horne gave succor by grinning while the cowboys bound the groom. Hetty had disappeared, whisked away in the turmoil. A man was driving the buckboard toward the company's corrals, but of the bride there was not a trace. Stealing her from her lord's arms is one of the merriest jests we have.

"Well," said Lafe good-naturedly, "I reckon it's one on me. Turn me loose. I buy."

An hour went by, and he endeavored to escape from his friends that he might rejoin his wife. They would not hear of it. When Lafe insisted and left despite them, he was unable to find Hetty. For another hour he kept patient, dawdling in Turner's place and giving as good as he got in the way of badinage. Everybody in town seized the opportunity to rally him while he waited. The sheriff sat on the counter, kicking his heels against the boards, and never once lost countenance.

About five o'clock Mrs. Horne ran in hot haste to her husband.

"Hetty," she panted, "where is she?"

"How should I know?" said Horne. "You had her last. Didn't you and Mrs. Brown hide her out?"

"We locked her in Mrs. Turner's house. She's gone. She isn't there. Oh, what shall I do? She's gone."

"Pshaw!" the cowman said. "She's all right. She's just given you the slip to go find Lafe."

Still wringing her hands, Mrs. Horne returned to her ally, the Widow, and they hunted the house and Mrs. Turner's house all over again. Hetty was not to be found.

"Boys, a joke's a joke and I can take mine with the rest," said Lafe—in proof whereof he gave vent to a hollow "ha, ha"—"but this has gone further. I want my wife. I want Hetty. Where is she?"

It was the supper hour and they were collected at the Fashion, and still no sign of the bride. Even Horne began to look anxious. His wife and the Widow melted into tears, bitterly bewailing their share in this unfortunate practical joking. Lafe indulged in no reproaches when the situation was explained to him, but started on a systematic raking of Badger. Search parties were instantly formed and not a corner of the town was overlooked.

One of the Lazy L outfit—he who had given the milch cow—became a trifle too acrimonious in his denunciation of the manner in which the Anvil men had behaved. They had stepped beyond the bounds of gentlemanly comportment, he contended. There were high words, but the men separated. Later they met again in the Cowboys' Rest and a shooting was imminent. A boy summoned the sheriff.

"Don't, boys," said Lafe, entering hastily. "Put up the gun, Dave. No shooting now. Be good boys. If anything happened—if anybody got hurt—Hetty, it'd break her all up."

The combatants reluctantly surrendered their weapons and as reluctantly shook hands. Each was hurriedly impressed into a search party and they were led in opposite directions.

Night found the citizens of Badger beating the bushes and peering into fence corners and yelling Hetty's name. Despairing of finding her in town, the sheriff and Horne made a circuit of the place. It had to be done slowly, as the ground was rough and one was apt to fall over mounds of tin cans and other débris.

They were about a quarter of a mile beyond Badger's limits, when Lafe halted suddenly.

"She's somewhere near," said he.

"Why, how do you figure it? I can't see my hand in front of my face."

"Figure it?" said the sheriff, who was trembling. "Man, I can feel it."

He cupped his hands and shouted—"Hetty! Oh—Hetty!"

"Here I am," said a drowsy voice. "Is that you, Lafe? Gracious, what's happened? It's dark."

There was the bride, sitting beside a mesquite bush and rubbing her eyes. They ran to her. She got up and limped a few steps.

"My foot's gone to sleep," she exclaimed.

With Lafe holding her on one side and Horne pacing austerely on the other, she walked into town. Why had she run away? She had run away from Mrs. Horne and the Widow because she perceived what they planned to do. For an hour or two she waited for Lafe outside the town and then grew very sleepy. So she lay down beside the bush.

"I knew you would find me," said she.

Horne began to whistle, not caring to hear the sheriff's assurance that he would find her at the ends of the world—wherever those be.

"What time is it? Lafe, dear, I'm so hungry. I feel like a steak," said Hetty.

While she was partaking of this with a very unbridelike appetite, and Lafe was doing his best opposite her, a messenger brought the sheriff an envelope. It was unaddressed, but there was a note inside—

Here's wishing you'll be happy. Adios. I won't bother you till after the honeymoon.

STEVE.

While he was puzzling over it, Hetty asked what was the matter. He passed her the paper.

"Wrote it in jail, I reckon," he said.

"Oh, Lafe," said Turner, sticking his head inside the door, "here's a telegram for you."

It was from the county seat.

Steve Moffatt broke jail here yesterday. Gone over the Border.

This, also, Lafe handed to his wife.

"Doggone his fat head," he said. "Why couldn't he wait? Let somebody else catch him. My successor can do that."

"Of course," she answered, sighing happily. "You'll never be bothered with him again."

"Never no more," said the sheriff, not knowing what the years would bring.

Although it was ten o'clock when they finished their meal, both insisted on setting out for their new home in Hope Cañon.

"Don't go to-night. You can stay with me," said the Widow Brown. "There's lots of room. Or wait—I'll move out. You'll be more comfortable all alone."

"No, thank you, ma'am," answered the sheriff. "I know the trail like I do the path from your front gate. We'll be there in two hours."

So they set out through the languorous dark. Lafe drove easily with one hand.

CHAPTER XXV

JOHNSON BECOMES BOSS OF THE ANVIL

The Johnsons went to live at Lafe's place beyond the Willows, in Hope Cañon. And there they occupied a frame house on the crest of a knoll. It was an ideal locality for a bridal couple, privacy being its most pronounced feature. For nobody else lived in the Cañon and their nearest neighbors were the citizens of Badger, fourteen miles distant, beyond a swelling valley and a fringe of hills.

Hetty was so busy making habitable the three bare rooms of the home, that the days were as minutes to her and the weeks took wings. It was absolutely amazing what she achieved with two tables, a packing case, six chairs, a bureau and some mats and window curtains—all these freighted from Badger in a wagon. No room of the three gave the appearance of having been slighted. In lieu of pictures, she contrived to bestow brightness to the walls by tacking up covers from magazines, and solid comfort was afforded by bunks built in corners of two of the rooms. They were draped with Navajo blankets and Hetty had constructed them herself of substantial oak, Lafe being an indifferent carpenter and immensely impatient of it. After the manner of his kind he hated any task that could not be done on horseback. That Hetty had a taste for show cannot be denied, because the bed in her room was hung with mosquito netting in the shape of a canopy, and there was a wondrous blue coverlet. Indeed, it was fit for a royal couch.

To a bachelor of long standing, adjustment to married life brings with it certain brain shocks and sudden vistas. It is constantly unfolding surprises that burst on his vision as wonders. So many shifts of their household arrangements struck Lafe as unique that he could not forbear mention of them to his friends in Badger—with the air of a discoverer, confident that nothing like this had ever been done or attempted before in history. Whereupon they would emit merry jeers and the older men would assure him that he would soon be harness-broken.

But the greatest change was in his outlook on life, in the new perspective and the new responsibilities that the married state opened to him. A year before, the sheriff would have chafed at any restraint which prohibited enjoyment with his friends after the fashion of the country. Now, he willingly abandoned all his former boon companions whom he chanced to meet, and did not do it with a sense of righteousness for having lived up to his duty, but cheerfully, gladly, because their companionship seemed now stale and flat and purposeless. And he was always anxious to get home.

"Don't you lose none of them parcels, sheriff," they would chaff, standing on the sidewalk to watch Johnson tie his purchases to the saddle.

"Has she done begun to cut your hair yet, Lafe?" another inquired.

Johnson would grin comfortably, and with an "Adios, you fellers," ride off towards Hope Cañon. Invariably he brought a present for Hetty. Everything pretty that he saw struck him as a possible gift for her, so that their home waxed in comfort.

In his blighted days of singleness, Lafe had often taken hearty amusement out of the simple fact that some among his married friends were obliged to rise at unearthly hours in order to light fires and do household chores which he considered to be within the feminine province. On the first mornings of their residence in the new home, he performed these tasks as a loving attention.

Of course, ever after he had to do them as a duty. Once a man does a thing, he establishes a precedent which a conscientious individual finds it hard to break—but, bless you, Lafe would never have permitted Hetty to do jobs of this sort, that were within his own powers of performance. So he helped cheerily as dishwasher and assistant housemaid, this gunfighting sheriff of Badger.

Yet Lafe did not emerge wholly scatheless from the ill customs of a lifetime. On a day, old man Horne sent him to Badger in company of a cattle buyer, with whom Horne was making a deal that ran into hundreds of thousands of dollars. And his orders were that Johnson was to get the buyer drunk and keep him in that enviable condition as long as he could. This is considered legitimate in the cow country and "good business."

Lafe did so. And in the course of his enthusiastic labors, he took on a cargo which he found some difficulty in storing. The night of his return, Johnson, as he rode up Hope Cañon, sang a ditty which were best forgotten by a respectable married man.

The house was in darkness, and when he would have entered their bedroom, he found the door locked.

"This ain't no time to get mad," Lafe said warily, winking into the dark, and went to sleep on one of the bunks.

Next morning his appetite for breakfast was far below normal, but he kept Hetty busy boiling coffee.

"What was the trouble last night?" he had the brazenness to ask.

"I knew there was something the matter when I saw that note you sent from town by the boy," said Hetty, "and I didn't want to see you. What I don't know won't hurt me much, I reckon."

Lafe was feeling very shaky, and looked up at her from his plate with marked shamefacedness.

"It won't never happen again," he promised, and Hetty came around behind his chair and put her arms about his neck.

"You've been a pretty good boy," she whispered, "but, oh, Lafe, I just couldn't bear to see you. That's why I locked the door."

Johnson took to his cow work with much zest. The Anvil range was a huge domain, a kingdom in itself. The bawling of Horne's calves sounded from the 108th to the 111th meridian of longitude and the Anvil steers grazed a thousand hills. Much of this land was free range, the property of the American people; but Horne controlled it by owning all the water-holes, and defended his rights by the iron hand. In addition to the free grass, he had some hundreds of thousands of acres under fence, which was his by purchase of Spanish grants—a portion of it on the other side of the Border.

To be boss of the Anvil, then, meant something. Directly and indirectly, Lafe had two hundred men under him. Fifty of these were cowboys; the others were employed as windmill hands, as farmers to grow feed for the cattle in winter, and as laborers to put up new fences, corrals and division camps, for Horne was laying out the range on his own lines.

Johnson chose his outfit with considerable shrewdness. He was a keen judge of men and knew cattle from horn to hoof and beyond to the stock yards. Therefore the Anvil riders were famed in the land as expert cowmen. Ability to ride or dexterity with the rope did not win a cowboy a place with the Anvil. He took those who best understood the science of the range. Most of them were Texans, and men of mature years.

"The northern boys make better busters," he told Horne. "Take 'em all in all and they can beat our boys riding. But they don't know cattle like these longhorn Texans do. No, sir; it takes our southern boys to know how to handle cattle."

Thus did Lafe make a propitious start and win respect. And the months went by, and the two in Hope Cañon were ridiculously happy.

Unruffled happiness cannot endure for long. Perhaps it would pall if it did. A thing, to be deemed precious, must have contrasts to establish its value. So there entered into the wedded life of the Johnsons its first severe jar.

CHAPTER XXVI

ENTERS TROUBLE

"You'll know her because she has yellow hair and gray, gray eyes and her clothes fit," said Mrs. Horne. "Besides, nobody else will get off."

"How'll we know they fit her?" Lafe asked. "Suppose they shouldn't happen to fit her right snug, ma'am, we'll leave her at The Tanks?"

"She'll be on the last car," said Mrs. Horn "Remember—yellow hair and gray eyes. Judith walks like this."

With these directions, Mrs. Horn sent Johnson to The Tanks to meet the Burro express. It was called that by the sparse population of the region in a spirit of levity: a burro will pause to graze on the least excuse and takes joy in lying down with his pack.

It was twenty-seven miles from the ranch to The Tanks, and Manuel would follow with a buckboard and mule team, since it was manifestly absurd to expect Mrs. Vining to make the journey horseback. Lafe was much elated to be chosen for this mission and invited me to accompany him.

"Miz Horne," said he, "wouldn't send a greenhorn. No, sir; she wants somebody who'll look like something in decent company. Say, if I get any stronger with ol' Horne, he'd ought to raise me. Don't you reckon?"

Cheered by the prospect, he began a monologue to his horse, a habit Mr. Johnson had acquired in lonely places. "Doggone your fat head, why can't you lift your feet? Hey? Hold still, can't you, till I light this cigarette? Oh, you needn't look back. You know I'm here all right."

In early afternoon we crossed a cañon on the far side of The Hatter and turned to the left along a mesa. Lafe puckered his eyes, squinted carefully and said: "Well, I swan. Do you see that?"

A man was sitting on the skull of a horse and he was counting the tops of the hills. It struck me as a profitless form of endeavor. As we neared him: "No," he remarked, "that's not right. I made it two thousand and three before."

"Off in your tally, pardner?" Lafe inquired civilly.

He proceeded, unheeding, with his simple addition. "One thousand and seventy-six, and those five little fellows make—what do they make, now?" He broke off to scratch his head in vexation. He looked at Johnson briefly and then stared at me.

"That fellow there," he said, with a nod at Lafe, "that fellow's crazy. Everybody's crazy out here—all but me."

He was not an old man, but his hair was grizzled and fell in dirty disorder to his shoulders. We could see portions of him through his clothes, and a sleeve of his shirt was not. Yet I began to marvel, for he spoke with the accent of culture.

"There used to be three thousand four hundred and eight scrub-cedars on that big mountain yonder," he confided to me. "I've lost count a bit lately, though. What do you make 'em?"

"You're short six. Four hundred and fourteen—not four hundred and eight."

He thanked me and considered this for some minutes. "Perhaps you're right," he said. "Sometimes when these old rocks take to hopping up and down, it keeps a man on the move not to lose track of 'em."

"It must be right hard doing that 'rithmetic all day long?" Johnson ventured.

"Oh, yes. I get hungry frequently. Have you boys got anything to eat? Well, if you haven't, you'd best be on your way."

Complying with the suggestion, Lafe turned his horse. "It's that ol' prospector who lives up on the shoulder of The Hatter," he told me.

It did not seem right to leave him thus. The man was deranged and unfit to be at large. But when I proposed that he accompany us to The Tanks, our acquaintance returned a vehement refusal. We could not fool him, he said. The last man who gave him a ride had tried to put him on board a train, and he had been compelled to knock the fellow on the head with a stick of wood. So we left him sitting on the skull, counting the tops of the hills. He mentioned carelessly that he would probably see us again.

There was no mistaking the lady we had come to escort.

"There she is. Wouldn't she knock you cold?" Lafe whispered.

Her hair was yellow, and she gave the impression of having been melted and poured into her pink muslin. Assuredly she was not of our world, and most certainly her clothes fitted. The conductor, a large individual of red hair and an aloof expression, closed his left eye slowly at Lafe and stepped aboard. The Burro express crawled away up the valley and we set out for the ranch, Johnson riding close to the buckboard, the better to converse with Mrs. Vining.

She began to question about the country and cow work. Everything was "astonishing" or "delightful, really," of course; and no matter what she said, there was injected into her speech an indefinable note that seemed to place the listener on a confidential footing, to the exclusion of all others. Some women have this faculty. The two ignored me utterly. I coughed once or twice as a faint reminder to Lafe that he was a newly married man and that I was prepared to do the civil thing myself, but he took no notice.

We had forgotten all about our friend of the mathematical propensities, when he appeared suddenly beside the trail.

"Hello," he cried, "back already?"

Mrs. Vining regarded the unkempt figure with composure.

"Why don't we drive on?" she said. "Drive on, please."

"Who's that? Who's that, I say?" The prospector advanced on the buckboard at a shambling trot.

"Please, please drive on," Mrs. Vining entreated faintly.

Instead of obeying, the Mexican waited. The prospector came to the wheel of the buckboard and peered hard at Mrs. Vining. She met his gaze in a sort of horrified fascination for a moment and then turned completely about in her seat, so that her shoulders were to him. Before we could intervene, he seized her by the arm and commenced to drag her out. He was mumbling as he did so.

"No, I won't go," she screamed. "It wasn't my fault. I won't go. Help! Help me!"

Lafe spurred almost on top of the fellow and cut at him with a quirt. He released his hold and dodged, and Mrs. Vining sank back into the buckboard.

"Hi, you—drive on," Johnson commanded.

He made no attempt to chastise the prospector. A demented man is not responsible and is protected of God. Such is the creed of primitive peoples and to it Lafe held strongly. Manuel whipped the mules and we went by the mountain prowler amid a shower of sand and pebbles. He remained in the trail, staring after us. He shouted something and whirled his arms at a great rate, but when Lafe cantered back, he scurried off among the mesquite like a scared rabbit.

"What an extraordinary person," said Mrs. Vining, when Johnson overtook us. Her lips were open in a fixed smile and her skin faded yellow under its powder.

"He's harmless, ma'am," Lafe assured her. "Don't you be scared. He's just a bit locoed. We'll go fetch him to-morrow or next day, if you say so."

"No, no," she begged. "Leave the poor creature alone."

I could see her hands tremble in her lap. She seemed distraught all the way home and as soon as Mrs. Horne had done embracing her, she retired. Next morning, however, she was sitting on the porch and called Lafe to her side. They talked there for an hour or two and we could hear Johnson's soft bass laugh. When he joined me in the corrals to catch the horses, he was looking very pleased with himself.

Mrs. Vining spent the next three days in minute probing of range life. At least, that is what Lafe told me she found to talk to him about. Apparently Mrs. Horne had little sympathy for this seeking after knowledge, for she laughed a trifle impatiently and remarked to me that men were idiots the world over and it was none of her business.

She made it her business on the third day.

"Why don't you leave Lafe alone?" she demanded.

"Why, my dear Martha, I'm not running after Mr. Johnson."

"Well, then, what do you find to talk about all the time? It's shameful, Judy."

"There you go again. One can't be civil to any sort of a man, but that Puritanical conscience of yours—"

"Oh, darn," said Mrs. Horne.

We were treated on succeeding days to the spectacle of Lafe hovering about Mrs. Vining like a fly above molasses paper—he knows he ought not to be there at all, but cannot keep away. I am persuaded that a third party could have heard all they said without embarrassment; but still, there was Hetty. And it interfered with his work, just when he was new to it and should have applied himself whole-heartedly. The entire superintendence of the Anvil range fell to him, but Lafe now gave up long trips. When he did go out, Mrs. Vining went with him on the pretext of familiarizing herself with the country. Lafe began to assume a hint of bravado in his bearing and was evidently flattered that he could attract a woman of Mrs. Vining's world.

"Judith," said Mrs. Horne, "if you don't let up on Lafe Johnson, I'll tell his wife, or get Bob to give him his time."

"His time? What's that?" she asked in amaze. She had just got out of bed and was brushing her yellow hair. They could hear Johnson whistling "Turkey in the Straw" as he went past the house.

"Fire him." Her friend faced Mrs. Vining squarely. She was intensely angry. "What do you mean by taking him out on the porch as you did last night?"

"Martha, how dare you say such a thing? You're horribly rude and—and unkind. Why, I never thought—"

"Of course you didn't," Mrs. Horne went on in a level voice. "You never do. And you're going to tell me all that nonsense? Remember, I'm a woman, Judy, and the woman was never born who

wouldn't lie about some things."

"We're nothing but the most casual friends," said Mrs. Vining warmly.

Mrs. Horne stopped her with a gesture of passionate impatience. "Who said you were anything else? Will nothing sober you? I would have thought that Harry—"

"You're cruel, Martha. Yes, you are. Will you leave me alone to dress?"

"Oh, darn!" Mrs. Horne exclaimed.

From that interview she came straight to me. A party of friends was coming from the mining town for a few days, she said, and I was to meet them at The Tanks. Among them would be Mr. Mortimer Peck, a bachelor who managed a large copper mine. Also, on my way over, I could go around by Hope Cañon and leave a letter for Mrs. Johnson. Perhaps I grinned. At any rate, Mrs. Horne said: "Now, don't try to be clever, but keep your thoughts to yourself."

To my everlasting credit, be it said, I did not read that letter, although it was unsealed. Whatever was in it, Hetty seemed dumbfounded. For a moment I feared she would faint. She was not that sort, however. Before I left she was bristling with energy and told me that she would be at the ranch on my return. There was a red spot in each cheek and the light of battle in her eyes.

CHAPTER XXVII

A CLEVER WOMAN AND A MISUNDERSTANDING

I met the train at The Tanks and drove the party to the ranch. There were Mr. and Mrs. Prouty, a colorless pair, and the young man Peck aforementioned. I think Prouty had once been Horne's financial backer. When we arrived at headquarters, everybody was on the steps to welcome them, with the big hospitality of cowland. Hetty was there, too, more radiant than I had ever seen her.

It is true that her dress suffered considerably by comparison with Mrs. Vining's, but she had advantages which that expert lady would have given all her aids to possess. Young Peck looked in Hetty's direction just once, and gravitated there as by natural laws. He had met many women like Mrs. Vining. She tried all her wiles on him and he responded gaily, with a poise equal to her own, and then went on about his business. This business appeared to concern Hetty.

Shame on the graceless woman!—she had not been married five months and here she was giving open encouragement to a man who had seen too many sides of life for anybody's good. Yet Mrs. Horne did not chide her. Indeed, she watched the progress of events with undisguised pleasure.

The same cannot be said for Lafe. First he seemed at a loss, then dazed. After that he sulked. It was noticeable that he was absentminded now when Mrs. Vining cooed to him, and appeared to give ear more to what Hetty was saying to the mining man at the other side of the room. Peck's manner was joyous and eager. There was much merriment in their corner.

The boss was very gloomy as he helped me at the stables that night. It would appear that Mrs. Horne planned a ride to the Wolf place on the morrow and he grumbled that he supposed it would be just his luck to draw Mrs. Vining for the entire day. It was not for me to remind him he had seemed sufficiently satisfied with this arrangement on other occasions.

By dint of maneuvering her horse next morning, Mrs. Vining enticed Peck to her assistance. However, on perceiving that Hetty was riding off with me, Mr. Peck utilized his privileges of guest to call out to Lafe: "I say, Johnson, you know more about these things than I do? Will you fix this girth for Mrs. Vining?" Upon which he loped away after Hetty.

Throughout that ride I kept far ahead of the procession, driving a pack-mule that carried our provisions. The brute was stubborn and gave trouble, persisting in efforts to scrape off its burden under every tree; but they were troubles more easily handled than those I suspected Mr. Johnson to have laid up for himself.

The Wolf place is a heavenly retreat in a brown, stern land. The day was warm, and old man Horne, who thought a good deal of his comfort, proposed that we wait until sundown before starting for home. Everybody was agreeable except, perhaps, Lafe, and he said nothing. He spent the entire afternoon in wake of Mrs. Vining—such a very evident victim, though, that she gave up in disgust and went to sit beside Mrs. Horne and the Proutys. Lafe affected not to watch Hetty and Peck, who were gathering wild flowers and behaving like two children released from school.

It was dark when we went home. As before, I was assigned to the mule. Next came old man Horne and Mrs. Prouty, his wife and Mr. Prouty; then Mrs. Vining and Lafe; and last—very far behind—rode the mining engineer and Hetty. We had gone about five miles when Lafe mumbled some excuse to Mrs. Vining and went back.

It happened that Peck had just reached out to take a flower from Hetty's hand. They had been tossing them about all evening. I grant you there was no occasion for this move, but these are the facts. Let us assume that Hetty never divined his purpose. He seized her wrist and was drawing

her towards him when Lafe arrived. Hetty jerked free. Peck laughed.

"Go ahead with Miz Horne," Lafe ordered. It was the primal man speaking to the woman who belonged to him. "You wait here, Peck. We'll settle this thing right now."

"Don't be an ass—"

"Lafe!" Hetty protested. She was flurried and much frightened, for never before had she seen him really angry. She brought her horse against his, so that they could see each other plainly. There must have been signs of weakening in him, for she suddenly flicked her reins upon his riding boot and said: "Perhaps this'll teach you."

"Teach me what?" asked Lafe uncertainly.

"Never mind. You ask Mrs. Horne. She'll tell you all about it."

Peck had drawn near. He entertained fears for Mrs. Johnson, but none for himself. When he heard this, he laughed. He was disappointed, but he had seen a lot of the world.

"So that's it," said Peck. "You little rascal."

He pinched Hetty lightly on the cheek, but Lafe did not object. Instead, he looked rather sheepish and drew alongside his wife in proper humility. At a word from her they galloped to the front, passed the others of the party, and took charge of the pack-animal. Peck lighted a cigar and joined Prouty. He was smiling and seemed not at all put out.

I fell back to ride with old man Horne. Hetty and Lafe were far in the lead, going at a long lope and beating the mule joyously with a rope-end when it lagged in its pace. She threw a flower at him and he caught it and stuck it inside the bosom of his shirt.

Old man Horne departed at dawn on some cow business, and when his wife went to bed that night, she left injunctions that she was on no account to be disturbed before eleven in the morning. Yet at midnight she was wakened by a knock at her door.

"Wha-what—who's there?" she cried.

Mrs. Vining padded into the room in her bare feet and crawled into bed beside her friend, snuggling against her shoulder. It was black in the room and the older woman winked solemnly at the wall. She waited with patience for the other to speak her mind.

"I couldn't sleep," said Mrs. Vining.

"I could."

"Martha, I've been so catty."

"Yes, you have," said Mrs. Horne stoutly.

"Well, you needn't tell me like that. I'm sure there was nothing to make all this—"

"Don't let's go over all that again, Judy. Why did you do it? That's what I want to know. The whole thing was ridiculous."

"Because I did—that's why. And one has to have *some* amusement out here."

"Well! that *is* nice."

"You know I didn't mean it that way, Martha."

There was silence, so long that Mrs. Horne thought her friend must be sleeping. Gradually she became aware that she was crying.

"Judy, what's the matter, dear?" She drew the younger woman closer and patted her in motherly fashion.

"No-nothing. She's—she's so pretty and I'm getting—getting old. Martha, it's lonely. I can't stand it. I'm only thirty-four and all alone. I'm afraid to look ahead. Think of all the dreadful years. You can't blame me for—sometimes I think I'll—"

Mrs. Horne comforted her as she would have comforted a daughter. She was thinking intently as she soothed. Presently she asked: "Judy, have you ever heard from Harry?"

"Never."

"Don't you know where he is?"

She felt Mrs. Vining's body stiffen.

"No—that is—no, I'm not sure. I don't know."

Mrs. Horne cleared her throat and offered the sort of consolation we are apt to accord our friends.

"You know, Judy, dear, what everybody said when Harry left. Of course, I knew it was all his own fault and his drinking. I never did believe what people said—"

"No, of course you didn't," said Mrs. Vining, with a trace of bitterness.

They fell silent again. At last Mrs. Vining moved.

"She's so sweet," she murmured. Shortly afterwards she kissed Mrs. Horne and rose to go to her own room.

"Stay here, Judy. You won't bother me."

"No, but you'll bother me. You snore dreadfully."

"Judy, that's a lie," Mrs. Horne cried after her.

By Hetty's orders, Lafe accompanied us to The Tanks when Mrs. Vining departed. A truly womanly stab, this, in victory. And the Burro express bore Mrs. Vining away, the conductor winking at Lafe from the platform of the last car, his countenance sad and composed. We watched him take his cap off in order to mop his brow and Mrs. Vining waved her glove at us. Then we turned our horses about. Mrs. Horne shed a few tears and instructed Manuel to whip the team, lest she be late home for supper.

The Burro express crawled away up the valley. At a point six miles from The Tanks, an unkempt man with matted hair flung a stone through the window of the last car. Later I came on him on a mesa and he was counting the tops of the hills.

CHAPTER XXVIII

RECONCILIATION—MRS. VINING EXPERIENCES A CHANGE OF HEART

We were to see more of our mathematician who haunted The Hatter.

On a day, the rider who brought our mail twice weekly, delivered a fat letter to Mrs. Horne. She read it with open mouth and called her husband into consultation behind closed doors. Shortly afterwards they summoned Lafe, and in about an hour, he sent for me.

"I've got to go fetch that locoed prospector," he confided. "Will you help?"

"Why not get some of the boys to round him up?" I objected, for the mail had brought some personal business that required thought.

"They might be rough with him. No, sir; we've got to bring him in gentle, Dan. It's the queerest story I ever done heard. Say, don't women do queer things? I swan, I can't figure 'em."

All of the afternoon and next morning we rode the slopes of The Hatter. Then suddenly we saw him. The prospector was catching grasshoppers. He made to run as we approached, but Lafe spurred his horse and headed him off. Seeing escape barred, he stood still and waited, not without dignity—if a man who is clutching a fist-full of grasshoppers can possess dignity.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"Say, you speak French, don't you?"

"I can speak five languages, sir," said the prospector pompously. And he began to patter German.

"Well," Lafe resumed—and I could see he was impressed—"well, sir, there's a guy at the ranch who can't speak English very good. We want somebody to tell him what the ol' man wants—ol' Horne of the Anvil. If you'll come down—"

"I shall be very pleased."

"Good," Johnson said in surprise. "We've got some right good liquor there and I thought—"

The prospector laughed and looked at him cunningly. He would not mount behind either of us, being suspicious even of the offer, but trudged between, occasionally breaking into rambling discourses on natural history and associated topics—such as the edible qualities of grasshoppers, if properly stewed. It took us five hours to reach the ranch, and our guest was then so tired that he readily acceded to the suggestion that we eat and sleep before meeting the gentleman who spoke only French.

Next morning, by dint of impressing on him the importance of the transaction and the high social status of the man he was to converse with, Lafe persuaded the prospector to bathe and don new clothes. They belonged to Horne and sagged all over his emaciated body, but he seemed rather proud of his appearance. Also, once started, he consented to let Dave, the cook, cut his hair and beard.

At noon I was on the porch when a buckboard drove up, and a man and a woman got out. The woman was heavily veiled. Both were hurried inside by Mrs. Horne and I was sent down to the bunkhouse to carry word to Lafe and his captive.

"That feller who just come in is a specialist," Lafe whispered on the way to the house. "They come

off the Burro express this morning."

The prospector was ushered into Horne's office, a bare room facing the corrals. There a well-groomed man of affable manners met us and courteously addressed him in French. They talked for a moment. The prospector never let his gaze wander from the other's face.

"I say," he broke out abruptly in English, "isn't your name Toole?"

"It is."

"Harvard '87?"

"Yes, sir."

"That was my class."

The other affected to search his memory. He wrinkled his brow and pursed up his mouth.

"I remember you now perfectly. You're Vining."

They shook hands. Then Vining drew back as though assailed by a suspicion, and his glance flickered from one to the other of us like that of an animal at bay.

"They said you couldn't speak—what does this mean, anyway? You're trying—"

"Steady, old man," said the doctor.

The door to the sitting-room off the office opened, and Mrs. Vining came in. She went straight to the prospector, with her hands out pleadingly. Had she wavered, heaven knows what might not have happened.

"Harry!" she said.

What transpired after that I cannot say. Lafe and I found ourselves outside, and there the doctor joined us.

Not long after sunrise, Johnson himself drove a light, covered wagon in front of the porch steps, with me on the seat beside him. Our orders were to catch the Burro express with our guests.

Mrs. Vining came first, the prospector holding fast to her arm. His eyes were steady and he appeared perfectly rational, but uneasy and nervous, and he still shambled in his walk. Just behind them was the specialist, brisk and confident. He smiled on us triumphantly.

Before Mrs. Vining got into the vehicle, Mrs. Horne surged down the steps impulsively and threw her arms about her neck and kissed her.

"Judy, I'm so—you've made me feel so—you're such a good—"

"Hush," whispered the woman of the yellow hair, and all the gay affectation was gone from her. "Let us be thankful he's all right. If he'll only stay—good-by, dear—we can only hope and pray God."

CHAPTER XXIX

LAFE HELPS A DESERTER

After this experience, Johnson settled to hard work for Horne, and hard work on a range means unremitting toil. When everything moved smoothly, he would act as Horne's trail boss. At this time the cowman was buying large herds in Mexico, principally yearling steers and cows and calves. He would throw these cattle across the line and pasture them until a rising market offered the profits he had set his mind on. Success had so puffed up Horne that nothing less than sixty per cent would tempt his investment.

At the setting-in of winter again, Lafe took his outfit far down below Arizpe and purchased a herd of nine hundred head. Then the American authorities declared a quarantine and the cattle could not be brought up until it was lifted. Johnson started back. His party camped on the San Pedro, and just before they crawled under the blankets, they were joined by a native outfit. Of course the Mexicans had no beef or anything to eat. The boss gave them a quarter from the yearling they had killed that evening.

Five of them began to shoot dice on a saddle blanket in a decent, gentlemanly manner—two of the cowboys, the Chinese cook, a Yaqui vaquero and a Mexican horse thief from the Cuitaca valley. The boss smoked and watched the game. Another man lay under the wagon with his collar bone broken and at times his complaints became a nuisance.

"Come a eight," the Celestial invoked. "Heap bum thlow. Me ketchum soon. You wait."

Presently they became aware that somebody was ministering to their injured companion. His moans ceased. "Feel any better, now?" a voice asked. There followed murmurings and a movement as if the newcomer were easing the sufferer's position.

"Well," he said, "if you can swear that way, you shouldn't ought to be dying. Keep it up. You're doing fine."

A tall man walked into the group around the lantern. He surveyed each face in turn. The Yaqui was blowing on the dice to bring luck and was fearfully disgusted at the interruption. Addressing himself to Johnson, as though somebody had told him that he was the leader, the stranger said: "Hello! Got anything to eat?"

"Sure," Lafe answered readily. "Here, you, Charlie—go get this gentleman some cold beef and bread. Drag it now; ketchum quick. Fly at it, pardner."

The visitor was ravenous and bolted the beef in hunks. Lafe judged that he had walked into camp, but refrained from asking why, although the man is poor indeed who cannot obtain a horse to ride in that country. Bedding was scarce, for they were traveling light, and the best that Johnson could offer was that he should double up with the Chinaman. Their guest appeared no whit abashed by the prospect.

"Well, me for the hay," he said at once. "I'm all in. Lordy, hark to my joints creak. I bet I've footed it a million miles through the sand, Mr. Johnson. Your name's Johnson, ain't it? Mine's Wilkins. Say, if this here Chink snores, you'll be burying a cook in the morning, sure as you're alive."

They headed for the Border at daybreak. It was a long thirty miles, and Lafe impressed a horse and the injured man's saddle for Wilkins' use. He noted that Wilkins' overalls and shirt were trying to forsake him and that his toes were taking the air, so when he perceived Charlie measuring him with a comparative eye, in which lurked a gleam of satisfaction, he sent the cook sharply about his business. Lafe held that superiority of race should ever be maintained.

For the most part they rode in silence, as men do at the beginning of day. Their eyes were heavy with sleep. Wilkins seemed sullen and gave no explanation of his presence in that region. He sat stiffly erect in the saddle with his right arm hanging straight at his side. A cowboy or a native westerner crooks his elbows and lets them jog.

"He's a soldier," Lafe concluded, and because he entertained an undefined contempt for soldiers, he trotted ten yards ahead of his guest throughout the morning.

The sun was high when they sighted a white stone monument on a ridge below the Huachucas. A wire fence ran past it. They could see it stretch for miles and miles in a straight line. On their side of the fence was Mexico. Beyond lay the United States.

They reached a gate. Johnson got down and held it open for his men to pass through. Wilkins stopped and remained a dozen yards within the Mexican Border.

"I don't reckon I'll go on with you," said he; "I'll just stick around here for a spell. Here's your horse, Mr. Johnson. Much obliged. He's sure some horse."

"All right," Lafe answered, and ordered one of his men to throw the horse in with the saddle bunch, which they were driving loosely ahead of them. It struck him as curious that a man should voluntarily go afoot in that unsettled mountain country, but he never abandoned the tenet that a man's business is his own. Consequently he showed no surprise, nor did his men, but they moved off northward, leaving Wilkins gazing after them from the far side of the fence.

"Look!" said a cowboy. "What's that girl doing here?"

A young woman was fording the river some distance to their left, just below the Palomino. Johnson recognized her mount and made as if to hail her. Then a sudden remembrance of Wilkins waiting beyond the gate caused him to pull up. He grinned and grew solemn abruptly, because she was a friend of his wife's, and her brother worked for Horne.

Of course he told Hetty all about it on his return home and of course she refused to see the matter from his standpoint at all and exhibited the liveliest sympathy and understanding of the case. Lafe need not try to tell her that she was indiscreet; Mary Lou Hardin could afford to be indiscreet. Hetty had never known a sweeter, nicer girl. To this Lafe grunted. He had not much faith in women's estimates of their own sex and he considered that any girl who would go to meet a soldier who dare not enter his own country were better off under careful surveillance.

"Nonsense!" cried Hetty. "I tell you it's all right. Anything Mary Lou does must be all right. I'll ride over to-morrow and see her. I bet she tells me all about it."

When Johnson returned to the Cañon next night from a day of horse-breaking, he found Hetty simply bursting with news. Yes, Mary Lou had told her all about it. Wilkins had been a trooper—a corporal or a colonel or something—and he and Mary Lou had been sweethearts for over a year. But Mr. Hardin would not hear of her marrying a soldier, so Mr. Wilkins had done the only thing possible under the circumstances—he had gone over into Mexico to make a fortune in the mines. It would appear, however, that something ailed the price of copper. The company closed down one of its shafts and Mr. Wilkins was released. He had grown lonely for Mary Lou and homesick for his own country. Wasn't it noble of him? The whole tangle was perfectly clear to Hetty.

"Noble, my foot!" said Lafe. "The feller's a deserter. And here I done lent him a horse!"

That was not all Hetty had to say. She had a clever scheme, concocted by herself and Mary Lou while they mingled their tears over this recital of self-sacrifice. It was this—Wilkins wanted to

come back. If he did so without preliminary negotiation, they would be apt to lock him in a cell and then he would not be able to see Mary Lou at all. Wasn't it inhuman? There were some silly rules or regulations Mr. Wilkins had overlooked when he departed, and Mary Lou said that the commandant would probably not see the thing in the right light and would give no consideration whatever to their feelings. Mary Lou was sure that the commandant had a pick on Mr. Wilkins.

"I reckon he'd ought to give this here Wilkins a better job and present him with a purse, hey?" Lafe sneered. "I reckon they'd ought to make him boss of all them soldiers. Then him and Mary Lou could get married and everything would be lovely. Yes, I reckon that's the nicest way to treat a deserter."

"Why, Lafe," Hetty remonstrated, "don't you see? He just left to make enough money to marry Mary Lou. He did it all for her. Wasn't it grand of him?"

The boss threw up his hands and walked off to the spring, where he could smoke and clear his brain of the cobwebs of sentiment. He was not to be allowed to dismiss the matter so lightly. When she had him in the house, Hetty pounced upon him again. Hardly had he taken a chair, than she came to sit on his knee and began stroking his hair. Lafe would not have had a citizen of Badger see this ridiculous performance for all the wealth stored in the depths of the mountains, but he nevertheless submitted to it with a sort of reluctant enjoyment.

"Mary Lou and I," said Hetty, "we thought that if you would speak to Mr. Horne, he would speak to that soldier man."

"Would he, now? And what has ol' Horne got to say to that general, or whatever he is?"

"Why, you baby, don't you see? Mr. Horne and that man who runs the fort are friends. Now, Mary Lou and I thought that if Mr. Horne would only say something nice about Wilkins, he'd let him go. Don't you think he would?"

"Oh, sure. He'd pin a medal on that feller. It's like he'd put it on with a sword, though, to make it stick."

"Oh, Lafe," Hetty said, almost in tears.

Lafe groaned and gave up the fight. It would be utterly useless, he told her—who ever heard of such a proposition made to serious men? But, of course, if Hetty wanted her husband to make an idiot of himself, he supposed he would have to do so.

"It won't be much trouble," Hetty coaxed. She added: "There, I knew my boy would help me."

Her boy approached the task with much misgiving and very shamefacedly. He was not a skillful pleader at any time, being accustomed to take what he wanted, instead of asking for it. As a result, old Horne bellowed: "Haw, haw," and slapped his leg and rolled about in his chair, gurgling that Lafe would be the death of him yet. Then Mrs. Horne came into the room.

"What's this all about?" she inquired.

Johnson told her and withdrew. The cowman was still chortling.

CHAPTER XXX

AND DISCOVERS HETTY'S BROTHER

However, when he joined Lafe at the stables that afternoon, he looked a very chastened individual. Had Lafe seen the gradual transition in mood, from huge merriment to exasperation and then protest and resentful surrender, he would have understood better. Horne volunteered nothing of what had passed, so he went to Mrs. Horne. That lady informed him that her husband would use his best endeavor with the commandant. There appeared to be no question in her mind that this was the only course open to him, and Johnson, who had come prepared for a few timely jokes on the matter, muttered: "Yes, ma'am, I sure am obliged," and walked away like a chidden child.

Two weeks later he moved his outfit south again. And at their old camp on the San Pedro, Wilkins walked in on them. His advent was not unexpected, but Lafe found it impossible to give him more than frigid civility. The man had been recreant to his trust and he was going to get out of it through the intercession of women; that was enough to damn him in the eyes of Lafe and his kind.

"Howdy," said Wilkins unconcernedly. "I'm going back."

"So I done heard."

"I got the letter here," Wilkins continued, fumbling in his shirt bosom. "He says if I go back, they'll let me off easy on account of previous good conduct."

"Huh-huh. Sure," said the boss grimly, "I'll let you have a horse and you can ride with us in the morning. We start at four o'clock, remember."

A sergeant of cavalry and two troopers sat their horses beside the big corrals where the custom men inspect the cattle, when the cavalcade arrived. They led a spare mount. At sight of them, Wilkins left the party and loped ahead. The soldiers waited for him on the other side. He went unhesitatingly through the gate—jubilant, alert and smiling, like a girl going to her first dance. The sergeant advanced and Wilkins extended his hand. The soldier ignored it.

"Here's your horse, Johnson," said Wilkins. "You've been mighty decent. Muchas gracias. All right, Osborne. I'm ready."

"Hold on," Lafe cut in; "say, wait a minute. What's the matter, anyhow? What's it all about? I want to get the rights of this."

"A deserter, Mr. Johnson," said the sergeant. "He used to be in Troop F. Ran off, he did. Some post exchange funds went, too."

"That's a lie," Wilkins shouted; "I never touched a cent. And you know it better'n anybody else, Osborne."

"We've been chasing him a year, Mr. Johnson."

Wilkins was watching Lafe much as a dog would watch his master to see whether he was angry. "I'd like to talk to you a minute, if you're agreeable, Mr. Johnson." The sergeant nodded acquiescence, and he led Lafe aside. "It's a wonder you'll speak to me after that. Osborne, there—he wouldn't shake hands."

"I'm not a soldier," the boss said guardedly.

"And I'm not a thief. You believe that, don't you? It was the rotten sameness of the life. Oh, you know how it is—and Mary Lou waiting—well, I hated the post, and it wasn't long before I grew to hate the boys. What'd you say? Sure, they're all right. But when you're cooped up with the same crowd day in and day out, the best men on earth will soon hate one another. You ain't never done it, so you don't know. Nothing to see but those ol' mountains, solemn as death all the time." He broke off, striving to compose himself. "See that high one yonder? I swear I've seen it nodding at me. Yes, sir, just like this. And Mary Lou and her father—oh, I got afraid of those hills—honest to God, I did. And the boys—why even your cowboys look down on us. And Mary Lou—so I beat it and swore I'd never come back."

"But you did."

"That's the queer part of it"—he laughed without mirth—"I can't rightly explain that myself. Mary Lou—no, I'd have come back anyhow. I was going dippy down there among the yellow-bellies. And Mary Lou, she—"

He told Lafe that he had wandered four times to the line, merely to get a glimpse of the country. The air this side of the border fence was different to the other; he was positive of that, although the boundary consisted of some strands of barbed wire. Once a corporal, returning from Naco to the post, had come upon him a mile within American territory. What was he doing there? Oh, just looking round. He had taken back with him a prickly-pear plant. The corporal had almost caught Wilkins that time, but he managed to put the fence between them. On the other side he could twiddle his fingers at the corporal, who dared not pursue.

Johnson was puzzled and said so. "What were you hanging round here for? With a good job at the mines, you had a chance to start all over again."

"That's what I'm a-telling you, consarn it. With the whole wide world to wander in, I kept sneaking back to this fence like a sick pup. Ain't it hell?" The aching sadness of a very homesick man had him fast. He stared up the San Pedro valley and drew in a slow, deep breath. His voice was unsteady when he tried to resume.

"And Mary Lou—I sent her messages, and she kept saying—"

"Oh, well," said Lafe, "if you're going to cry over it, I'm off. Adios."

"Don't be a bloody fool. Hey, wait a minute, Johnson."

The escort could not be kept waiting all night, the sergeant shouted.

"Keep your shirt on, Osborne. I'll have to be quiet long enough from to-day."

"About three years, I'm thinking," the sergeant said gloatingly.

Wilkins let the remark pass. He was gazing at two riders who were advancing down the lane towards the corrals. "Why—no, it can't be. Yes, it is. It's Mary Lou."

It was, indeed, Mary Lou; and Lafe's wife was with her. Johnson was not especially pleased to see her there, but he wisely refrained from comment. The two women approached the group. Mary Lou shook hands gravely with Wilkins and Lafe was glad that he did not try to kiss her, or betray any sentimental weakness. The pair accepted the situation soberly and Mary Lou called to her friend to come forward.

"This," she said shyly, "is Bill. Shake hands with Mrs. Johnson, Bill."

"How do you—Bob, Bob! It's you," Hetty squealed.

The manner of Mrs. Johnson's introduction was this—she jumped her horse close to the deserter and clasped him in her arms. He was equally fervent on his part. He held her tight and cried: "Hetty! Little Hetty."

Lafe experienced a not unnatural curiosity. He thrust between them and wanted to know who the gentleman might be who seemed so fond of his wife, and, glaring at that unabashed young woman, inquired what she meant by it. The troopers were grinning. The sergeant looked annoyed.

"Why, Lafe dear, this is Bob."

"So I done heard you say," said Lafe. "Bob who? What're you hugging him for?"

"He's my brother."

The boss's tongue clove to the roof of his mouth and he sat dumbly, looking at his wife. Mary Lou and Hetty were patting Wilkins' hand and making much of him. They did not seem to appreciate the fact that he was an outcast and a prisoner, but treated him as if they had every reason to be proud of this reunion.

"So your name ain't Wilkins? It's Ferrier?" Lafe said slowly.

"Yes," said the other.

"Oh, Lafe, we must get him off sure."

Johnson silenced her and turned his back on the deserter. Curtly he told Hetty that the escort was waiting. He ordered her to come with him and to bring Mary Lou.

"Tell Bob good-by," she insisted.

"So long," said the boss grudgingly.

"No, that won't do. You've got to shake hands with him."

Lafe glanced at her radiant face and what he was about to say never came out. He stuck out his long arm towards Wilkins, who grasped his hand eagerly.

The misery of indecision had dropped from the deserter like a cloak that is shed. He laughed encouragingly over his shoulder at Hetty, as he turned to leave.

"Did you expect me to holler, Johnson?" he asked. "Not much! Why, this is going home, to me."

"Ready?" Osborne cried.

"And when I get out, I'll be able to look you boys in the face, too. Not you, Osborne. You can't look me in the eye right now. Pshaw! What is a year in a lifetime?"

"Quit your preaching. Come on."

"Adios, Mary Lou. Adios, Hetty. So long, Johnson. I'll see you soon."

"Guard and prisoner—'tention! Fours—left about—march!"

They swung around and made northwest, Wilkins in their midst. He was making his horse prance and was humming "Dixie." Once he looked back and waved his arm in a wide gesture towards the Huachucas, towering on the left; to the right, the straggling Mules range; and the San Pedro valley between, stretching away for eighty miles.

"What about this little ol' country now, hey?" he shouted. "What do you think of her, hey? How about this air? Lord!"

Hetty waved at him, but Mary Lou, who had drawn out a handkerchief to do the same, wept into it instead. They started slowly homeward, Lafe ambling along in gloomy quiet. Hetty did not perceive his mood, being too uplifted over her brother's recovery to be cognizant of lesser things. She ranged beside her husband. There were tears on her cheeks, but she was smiling and humming "Dixie."

"Isn't it just like heaven? Here I haven't seen him in six years. Just think of finding him like this. Oh, I never thought I could be so happy."

"You bet," the boss said scathingly. "This is simply great, this is. He's gone to jail, I suppose you know? And I've got to get him out, I reckon."

"You can do that all right," Hetty declared—she had a vague idea that Lafe administered the entire law of the land, the High justice and the Low—"What does the jail matter, anyhow? We've got him back."

"Yes, it's all right now," Mary Lou agreed and dried her eyes.

"Oh, pshaw," said Lafe, settling to the ride. "What's the use?"

CHAPTER XXXI

GREAT EXPECTATIONS IN JOHNSON FAMILY

"Say, Dan."

"Huh-huh?"

"Did you ever feel kind of sudden like you'd done something before?" Lafe inquired.

It was a month later and we were riding through the dusk up the Cañon towards his home. This was too abstruse.

"I mean," he explained, "sometimes when you're at some place or looking at something, haven't you had a quick idea that you'd done the same thing in the same place a long time ago? Haven't you ever felt that way, Dan?"

"Often."

"I wonder," said he, "what's the reason?"

"It's probably a recurring impression—a remembrance of an act performed years ago."

He shook his head. "No-oo. It ain't that. I ain't never rode up here with you before. This is the first time me and you have been here together, ain't it? Yet I swear it struck me just now that, so long ago I can't call to mind when, me and you were trotting along just like this."

"Perhaps we were chums in a previous existence. There is the transmigration of souls, you know."

Lafe answered impatiently that the phenomenon could not be explained on any such grounds and expressed surprise that a man of my seeming sense would credit such theories. It seemed to rankle in him strangely. He grumbled to himself for a considerable distance, and was so visibly put out that I switched the talk.

"How's Bob getting along?" I ventured.

It proved an unfortunate choice of topics. Ferrier had been given a year in the cells by the commandant of the post, and then Horne had gone to his succor. And although the major had vowed to high heaven that no deserter would ever be dealt with leniently by him, he had yielded finally to the point of cutting down his punishment. It is true that there were many extenuating circumstances, and Ferrier seemed so sincere in his desire to atone that his commander was favorably inclined. So it ended by Hetty's brother escaping with thirty days' confinement. Then, anxious to get him away from old associations, and comrades who knew the mistakes of his past, Johnson arranged through Horne to pay for his discharge.

All this had he done. Indeed, Lafe had labored unceasingly for his brother-in-law. Yet he railed against him, even while he aided. Like many men who never shirk from helping when it is most needed, Johnson could never hear the object of his benefactions mentioned without falling a victim to spleen. I should have avoided all reference to Ferrier.

"There's a brother-in-law for you," he snorted. "Yes, sir, he's sure a treasure. I no sooner get him out of the cells for deserting, than off he goes and—guess what he wants to do now?"

"Borrow some money?"

"You've hit it. Yes, sir, you've nailed it dead to rights. Here, after all the trouble me and ol' Horne took with that general at the Fort, that there feller Ferrier asks me to stake him, just as cool as you'd ask for a match. Say, have you got one? I'm plumb out."

"Oh, well," said I, "a man has to stand by his family."

"He ain't my family."

"He's Hetty's brother."

"Sure. He's Hetty's brother and I ain't allowed to forget it, either. I tell you what, Dan—when a man marries a woman, he marries all her kin, too."

With which bitter reflection Johnson borrowed some tobacco and rolled a cigarette. After a space he remarked that Ferrier planned to settle on a quarter-section within the Horne range, and that he required three hundred dollars to make a start. Mary Lou Hardin was included in this scheme of settlement, said Lafe, the idea being that two could live as cheaply as one and that Bob would never amount to a row of beans unless anchored and domesticated. He had nothing but scorn for such adolescent reasoning.

"When I think of the way a young feller cares for a girl, I want to laugh," he said. "Pshaw, it's all mush. Nothing but talk, and those kids make the talk do instead of work. And if it ain't mush, it's wind. I tell you what—a man and a woman don't rightly care for each other, Dan, until they're married."

I stared at him. "Is that so? Well, well. Suppose they only wake up then and find they don't care at all. That would be fierce."

"Sure," he answered gravely. "It's a gamble. Why don't you take a chance?"

"That's my business."

"Well, you needn't get all swelled up about it. Hetty was saying to me only the other day—say, what're you so red in the face about?"

"You and Hetty stick to housekeeping and let me run my own affairs," I retorted hotly. Their presumption passed all bounds. "Whenever a man's friends get married, they begin picking out a girl for him right off. I suppose misery likes company."

Johnson chuckled and said: "All right, let's forget it." It was very apparent in what channel his thoughts moved, however, for he would keep turning on me a broad smile.

"What good are bachelors, anyhow?" he demanded. "They'd ought for to tax 'em heavy."

"You talk like a mothers' meeting, Lafe."

"Well, I've got the rights of this thing, anyhow. Bachelors make me think of what Frank Hastings said once about a mule—up on the Plains, this was—'without pride of ancestry or hope of posterity,' Frank said."

"Huh! Frank read that somewhere."

For an hour we were silent. Night closed down over the Cañon. The mountains seemed to take a long breath and settle to rest. It was warm, and so we were hopeful of rain within a week, or perhaps two. Our ponies swashed the dust lazily side by side, and we said no word, for the coming of dark in our country will still speech in anyone but a clod or a fool.

A Jack-o'-Lantern rose in front of us, twinkling like a diamond against black velvet. It held steady for a moment, then flitted eerily in darting curves, soaring high until it appeared a tiny star. Our folk say that little Jack is a lost soul, doomed to haunt the place of his earthly woes; but I have a pleasanter theory.

"Look at him," said Johnson in a tone almost reverent. "That there shiny feller's been following of me at nights now something ridiculous. If I ain't out on the range, I swan he comes loafing round the house. Honest."

"I like 'em."

"You do? I wonder what they are?"

"Why, you mean to say you don't know? I'm surprised at you, Lafe. They're human souls seeking a lodging."

He exploded into laughter. "Is that so?" said he. Facing to the front again, he fell to musing. "Is that so?" he repeated. "You're sure a wolf on souls, Dan."

Hetty was on the porch to receive us. With her was Ferrier, big and straight and indolent. She bade me welcome with frank heartiness as an old friend, but there was distinct coldness in her greeting of Lafe. I could not but observe it. When he would have kissed her, she turned her cheek to him; she submitted even to this with evident reluctance. A tiff—a dotting couple's tiff—I concluded, and engaged Ferrier in conversation. He had scarcely a word to say, and walked beside me so lazily when we went to put the horses in the pasture, that my patience was sorely taxed. That was the way with soldiers, I reflected—once a soldier, never any good for anything else. Yet what little he uttered contradicted this notion, for he seemed in earnest. Apparently Bob had been doing some hard thinking and he was determined to get a foothold on the broad, straight highway.

As we were entering the house: "Oh, do be quiet. Let me alone. You worry me half to death. A lot you care what becomes of me. Here, you're off all day and sometimes long after dark, and I've got _"

"Why, hon," Lafe was pleading, "I've got my work to do. You know I stay home every minute I can. Ol' Horne says I'm tied to your apron strings. What's got into you, Hetty?"

"Nothing's the matter with me. For heaven's sake, shut up and let me have a little peace. I say you don't care what becomes of me. No, you don't. Here, I've had a splitting headache and when I tell you about it, all you do is grin. Now, don't go and try to tell me you feel for me."

"What do you want me to do? Cry on your shoulder? A man can't make a fuss over them things, Hetty."

"There you go again—making fun of me. If I was to die to-night, nobody'd care—not even Bob. I wish I could die. You could go back to Paula then."

"Hon," said Lafe, in a choked voice.

Bob wiped his feet noisily on the steps and I coughed. When we entered, there was no trace of a dispute or of anger on Hetty's countenance. Supper was ready and we sat down to it with grand appetites.

In the morning the repair of a windmill at a water tank compelled our setting out to Badger to

purchase pipe and joints. Lafe explained the purpose of the trip at unusual length to his wife. She listened stonily and told him to go by all means—told him with that high air of resignation we put on when we acquiesce in anything we are powerless to prevent. Just as we started, Johnson tried to put his arm about her. On being repulsed, he slowly mounted his horse.

CHAPTER XXXII

BIRTH OF LAFE JOHNSON, JR.

We were going down the Cañon when Hetty called after us: "Well, don't take any bad money, you two."

She stood in the doorway, wiping flour from her hands. Bob was grinning over her shoulder. The caution must have reminded Lafe. He slapped his hip pocket and extracted a wallet, from which he drew two soiled bills.

"Here," he said, riding back, "you keep this, Hetty. I've got three dollars in silver. That'll do me."

"You're learning," was her composed comment, and she slipped the money inside the bosom of her waist. After this agreeable exhibition of domestic foresight, we rode down the Cañon and started across the valley. It may be that I showed amusement.

"What's hurting you?" Lafe asked; "what I done then? That's the only way I can save money. It's right queer, Dan, but whenever I have any and get to town, it goes like a bat out of hell."

This information was wholly superfluous. "I usually have to charge my horse's keep and my meals," I confessed.

"Sure. It's in the blood, I reckon. But if me and you and all the others don't learn to sweat a dollar, all these here new people a-coming in from the States will take everything off'n us. Yes, sir, they'll have us bare to the hides. Some of 'em have got the first two-bits they ever earned."

The only previous occasion on which I had seen Johnson hoard his money was once when he hid it in the band of his hat as a safeguard against new-found friends, and, during subsequent operations, forgot its hiding place. Lafe had been bitterly chagrined on discovering it later, holding himself cheated of entertainment. Assuredly his new responsibilities were working a change of heart.

"Lafe, I never knew Hetty was so pretty."

"You're whistlin'," he said. An accompanying sniff signified surprise and contempt that my recognition was so tardy. We jogged along and he became thoughtful. Finally he asked: "Did you notice it, too?"

"Notice what?"

"Well, I kind of got the idea that Hetty was prettier now than she used to was. When you said that just now, it made me think you seen it, too."

I nodded earnestly. There had come a look into Hetty's eyes which caused one to wait expectantly for a halo to appear.

"But she's sort of poorly," he went on; "seems like everything I do makes her mad. I expect everybody gets that way some time or other, more especially if they live off by themselves where they never see no one. Don't you reckon?"

"Perhaps it's Bob."

"No-oo, I don't think so. But she does get mad about him sometimes—not at Bob, though. Anything that lazy scamp does is all right. No, sir; at me. She got mad because I said I wouldn't let him have that money. I can't spare it, Dan. Honest, I can't. And she says I leave her alone too much."

"She'll soon get over that."

"Sometimes she's worse'n others. Yeow, how she gives it to me some days."

We reached town in good time and put up at the Fashion, where were three of the Anvil boys. Johnson hailed their presence with proper ceremonies, and then drew me to one side.

"Say," said he, "I've got to see the new sheriff for a minute. I'll pull out right after dinner. What're you going to do? Stick around?"

"Oh, I suppose so. Nothing else to do."

"Well, if you should happen for to play pitch," he advised, "don't bid more'n your hand's worth. Remember your weakness. Adios."

Two months later we two again rode together up Hope Cañon. Bob Ferrier was behind us and

was soberly elated, for that afternoon Johnson had loaned him three hundred dollars and I had gone security. He would wed Mary Lou on the morrow.

The sun was setting behind The Hatter as we neared the house. It was a blissful twilight, and Lafe sang in gladness of heart.

But he chanced one day to run agin
A bullet made o' lead,
Which was harder than he bargained for,
And now poor Bill is dead;
And when they brung his body home
A barrel of tears was shed.

He ended with a halloo as we topped the last rise. There was no response or sign from the house. A puzzled look came over his face and he was down before his horse came to a stop. He sprang through the door.

"Hetty!" he shouted. "Hetty!" Then in a voice hoarse from fear: "She ain't here. She ain't here. Hetty, where are you?"

He was rushing frantically from one room to another. Ferrier was more methodical. He found a piece of paper under a cup on the kitchen table, which he read and handed to his brother-in-law.

I can't stand it any longer. I am going away. You'll soon get over it. Be sure to feed the dog. Good-by.

Johnson held the penciled lines at arm's length, while I waited for him to say something. It is my belief that he did not distinguish the words after the first perusal. Then he began to laugh.

"Why, it can't be—Hetty, she wouldn't—say, it must be a joke—what does it mean?"

Bob lifted his shoulders in a shrug he had picked up from the Mexicans. It stung Lafe.

"Where has she gone? Do you know anything about this?"

"Not me. She's been mighty queer lately, Lafe. Where could she go?"

We could only look at one another while we mentally debated possibilities. Hetty had no kith or kin in this region, and the nearest point was Badger. She could not have gone there, else we should have passed her on the road.

"Mary Lou's!" Bob exclaimed. "I'll swear that's where she's hit for."

Johnson remained beside the table a moment, deep in thought. Then he smote his hands together and an expression of relief lighted his face.

"I'll go get her," he told us.

We were for accompanying him to the Hardins' place, but had not gone more than a few hundred yards when he pulled up and requested that we go back. This matter was between him and Hetty—he said it with some hesitation—and it were better that he go alone. So we turned back, only to halt again.

"He might need some help," was Bob's excuse. "Supposing she's sick. What do you say if we trail him?"

"Come on."

It was now after nine o'clock and there was small probability of Johnson perceiving us. Yet we kept far in rear lest he hear our horses. We had proceeded perhaps a mile when he amazed us by riding back. Lafe was going at a lope and he did not pause. To our utter consternation he took no notice of our presence, but went by at a clatter and swerved to the right up a narrow ravine.

"He's crazy," said Ferrier. "He must have gone out of his head. Let's drift."

"Wait, Lafe. Wait!" I bellowed.

We jabbed with the spurs and went in pursuit. Presently we saw Lafe's horse standing riderless amid the post-oak, nibbling at the grass, and some distance in front we heard the stroke of his spur. He must have stubbed his toe, for he fell, and swore with freedom. That permitted us to gain on him, but he picked himself up and went forward at an ungainly run.

"What's got into him?" said Bob. He was puffing. We had abandoned our horses and were legging it after him as best we could.

"Search me!" I said breathlessly.

Far ahead I could see a spark burning. It was going steadily up the ravine. Surely Lafe could not be smoking; I dismissed this idea at once, for we could see him dimly and he was much nearer than the spark. It seemed to expand and cavort with glee as we came on.

The ravine had always been a favorite spot with Hetty. There were shady places in it during the day, however merciless the aching void of sky, and often had she brought her sewing to sit there,

listening to the acorns drop in the hushed stillness.

"Gee, I can't run another step," said Ferrier. "You go on. Lafe! Stop!"

We both ceased running. I was compelled to clutch the limb of a tree to hold myself upright. The spark ahead of us was now grown to a ball of fire, giving off a vaporous sheen. Still it kept on, and the runner in front slowed to a walk: Lafe was as little accustomed to this exercise as we were. Then I perceived that Jack-o'-Lantern had come to a stop. He flashed above a tree, dipped downward, poised in midair.

"Hal-loo," came a cry from Johnson. "Here I am. Hurry! Hurry!"

"Let's try again," Bob gasped, and we forced our cramped limbs into a run.

Lafe was bending over a white object that lay huddled at the base of a tree.

"It's her," said he, as we arrived.

Hetty was unconscious, and had her head pillowed in the crook of one arm. Often so had Lafe seen her lying asleep, on tiptoeing into the room when returned from distant parts of the range.

"Here," Bob grunted. "Give me her legs. Help with the shoulders, Dan."

"I'll take 'em myself," Lafe said fiercely.

We lifted her very slowly and tenderly, and started back. Twice were we obliged to set our burden down and rest, but we managed to carry her back to the house. As we were placing her on the bed, Hetty revived and opened her eyes.

"Get away," she said fretfully to her husband. "You're always smelling of that tobacco. Get away. You make me tired."

"Hetty," Lafe whispered, groping for her hand.

"What're you looking so scared about?" his wife asked. "Leave me be, now. I hate you."

"Better get out," I cautioned. "Go and fetch Armstrong."

A few minutes later we heard the rattle of his horse's hoofs, going at full speed towards Badger. He had saddled a fresh mount. And we composed ourselves there in chairs beside the bed, to wait—listening to Hetty's moans when she would rouse from the semi-trance which held her. Never had I felt so helpless and so wholly wretched.

"Tut-tut," said Dr. Armstrong, when knocked up from bed. "Keep your shirt on, man. It isn't the first time in the history of the world, nor the last, I take it. She's a strong woman. Brace up."

Nevertheless, he made all speed, and although three score years had beaten over his rugged head, he never once complained during the long ride. Johnson went at a gallop, with brief, impatient periods of dogtrotting to breathe their horses. They covered the fourteen miles in fifty-seven minutes, and it was not much after one o'clock when they clattered up to the door.

Lafe would have pushed into the room had not the doctor thrust him back. At the same time Hetty turned in the bed and cried petulantly that she would not have him near.

"Out you go," he ordered, "do you hear me? Don't go whining round here. That's nothing unusual."

The husband demurred, but Armstrong shoved him outside. As he was passing from the room, the doctor said to him over his shoulder in a tone of intense joy—the joy of the born physician in a fair fight against the Enemy: "She's liable to swear at you in a minute. Does she know how to swear? I've heard some of 'em cuss me everything they could lay their tongues to." It was almost a chortle he emitted, but he was solemn enough before Lafe had closed the door.

There is a flat rock on the slope in front of the Johnson house, and Lafe and Bob and I sat thereon and tried to smoke. It was of no use. Lafe simply could not remain still. He suddenly remembered the horses, which we had entirely forgotten, and led them to the spring to be watered. That done, he unsaddled and turned them into the pasture. The beasts gave a long sigh of relief, shook themselves, lay down to roll, and began to graze. We joined him at the fence. Johnson spread his elbows on the top rail and kept his gaze on a brilliant spark that was rocketing among the cottonwoods. He turned away at last and took to wandering round and round the house, staring at the light in their bedroom window. Ferrier and I followed dumbly, finding no words to comfort. Lafe left us and rapped timidly on the door.

"I told you to get out and stay out!" Armstrong hissed. The doctor was not a nervous person, but he was strung to high tension. We caught Hetty's voice, raised in querulous supplication. It was very weak and seemed to carry reproach of Lafe, and he shrank back.

"Get out, I tell you. Go 'tend the horses," said Armstrong, giving him a push.

"I done 'tended 'em."

"Well, take a run up and kill that wildcat that's screeching up there. Don't shoot it. Smash him with a rock, or something; but drag it out of here. Move, now. Send that brother-in-law of yours to me. I need him."

Johnson faded from the door, and we paced the ground in front of the porch. Something moist touched his hand and Lafe whipped it away, but it was only his mongrel dog come for a caress. For the first time since manhood Lafe knew real fear—not the nervous tension of an emergency, but sick, craven fear. A peculiar nausea where his stomach ought to be took all his courage away, and he rolled another cigarette in the hope of steadying his nerves. As he struck a match, he recalled what his wife had said about the brand of tobacco he favored and he threw the stub away.

"Why, she ain't much more'n a girl"—he was fondling the dog's ears—"just a kid."

I guessed what was passing in his mind. Thoughts of trifling things he might have done for Hetty, to the easement of her lot, rose up to reproach. When a man has gone through that, he has known anguish of soul. But they were instantly submerged in a new tenderness. In that hour of trial, Lafe learned many things.

The creak of a cautious step on the boards of the porch brought him standing and when Armstrong emerged, Lafe was there to meet him, pallid of face, but entirely calm.

"It's all right. Don't look that way, Lafe. No, you can't come in. I came out for a drink. Where's the bucket? Whew, it's hot."

Johnson poured him a cup of water and carried the canteen to the spring to be refilled. On his return he stepped into the kitchen. Growing uneasy over his long absence, I went in search of him, strolling carelessly to the door. The room was in darkness, so I struck a match. There was Lafe behind the door, with an old apron of Hetty's clutched in both hands. He was simply looking at it, and looking.

"Lafe," I said. He dropped the apron hurriedly and came out. We did not face each other. "Tell me something."

"Let's have it. What do you want to know?"

I hesitated, doubtful how he might take the question.

"Well?"

"How did you know where to hunt? What made you think Hetty was up there?"

"I didn't think," he replied. "Didn't you see that li'l firefly? The minute I set eyes on him, he sort of seemed to waver at me. Yes, sir. I remembered what you'd said, too, Dan. Jim-in-ee, there he is again. Look!"

Jack-o'-Lantern had abandoned his game of hide-and-seek among the trees and was now circling the house. He twinkled from door to window, as though to peep in. Perhaps something discouraged him; at any rate, he continued to flit in long, soaring glides. Lafe noted these, marveling, and we squatted on the rock again, determined to stay there. Then, looking upward to a star which shone in line with the chimney, he perceived the eerie light quivering above the roof. The location evidently suited Jack-o'-Lantern, for there he hung.

At last there were sounds within, and Johnson clutched the dog where it crouched between his knees. The brute whined under the grip of his fingers. We got to our feet and the dog looked up at us in doubt, much mystified as to what all this could mean.

The merry spark above the roof gave a final twinkle and went out. At the same moment an inner door opened, releasing a flood of light into the hall-way, and a high-pitched, treble yell that lifted the hair at the nape of my neck and set Johnson to shaking, rent the night air with the suddenness of a popping cork.

The doctor stuck his head out of the door. He called in suppressed glee: "Come on in, Lafe. She wants you. Say, he's a dandy."

Jack-o'-Lantern had found a habitation.

CHAPTER XXXIII

JOHNSON ONCE MORE IN ROLE OF SHERIFF

Horne of the Anvil approached his sixtieth year full of vigor. His birthday would also mark the thirtieth anniversary of his marriage. It had been a fat season. His steers were rollicking, the calves romped high-tailed, the valley pastures held clear-eyed cows and his horses were a comfort between one's knees. Therefore Horne saw that all was good and waxed content of heart, and he bade his boss, Lafe Johnson, to make all ready for a dance, for it was in his mind to do honor to his neighbors, humble and high.

"Tell everybody to come a-running," said he, "and kill the fattest yearlings we've got. Better pick brindles, though, Lafe. Those red ones bring too much money."

Thus happily did Horne temper his generous impulses with shrewdness. These directions

provoked a grin from Johnson, and he despatched his riders east and west and north and south to summon the guests. From east and west and north and south they came—a good seventy miles, some of them. In couples, singly, in boisterous parties, they came riding up to the Anvil headquarters. And the dance began.

It had lasted two days and two nights and was running comfortably into the third day when a killing occurred which made the function memorable in cowland annals. Everything was going smoothly. There were more than a hundred guests, and the orchestra was still vigorous and resourceful in invention. He occupied a seat on a stool atop a table at one end of the dining-room, and as he sawed with the bow he kept time to the cadences with his left foot. Occasionally a volunteer would come to his assistance and beat on the strings at the neck of the violin with small sticks. This produced the effect of a guitar and was very popular with those ladies who were a bit hazy as to the time of a measure.

Oh-oo-oo, ladies to the left and gents to the right.
All hands round; now hold 'em tight.

Lafe had been designated master of ceremonies and he stood near the orchestra to call off the square dances. Never more than twenty couples were on the floor at one time, but the rhythmical beat of their feet and the welling dust were sufficient to make an onlooker dizzy. Whenever a gentleman swung a lady, he really swung her—no mincing or faint-hearted gyration. With their hands behind each other's shoulders, they spun madly about, and the lady's skirt billowed to the movement. Both would sway dizzily when they stopped. The other guests were sleeping, or crowded into the kitchen, where were put out for refreshment huge platters of barbecued beef, calves' heads roasted whole under live coals in the ground for a whole night, and bread and pickles and cheese. Pots of coffee steamed on the stove, and one had only to give the nod to Jerry Sellers to be honorably escorted to the saddle-shed wherein on a stool rested a full-bellied keg. Jerry had constituted himself Lafe's right-hand man and never relaxed in his vigilant attention to duty. Had it not been for this first aid to the weary, the orchestra would long since have knocked under, but Harry vowed that he would hold out as long as the keg did, and everybody had confidence in him.

"The next piece," he announced, "is a li'l piece I done composed myself. It is called 'The Bull in the Corn Brakes.' Get your partners. Polka it is. Step to it."

Aside from a slight grayness about the eyes, Lafe gave no evidence of fatigue. His wife and young son were asleep in Mrs. Horne's bed. On the floor in the same bedchamber were seven other women, resting from their exertions. No special hours for repose had been set aside. All day and all night the dance went on, never ceasing, and there were always couples ready. Each guest lay down for a nap when he felt his system required it, and he lay where his notion of comfort dictated. It was not surprising then that one tripped over men stretched out under blankets on the veranda; the yard was cumbered with them, too.

The lady guests were provided for in the five bedrooms of the house. As for the children, of whom there were a dozen or more, now grown fretful from overexcitement, they played in the yard, or down in the corrals with some Shetland ponies Horne had imported. Only at meal times did they give their mothers any concern. And the orchestra still held out, having been thrice relieved that he might take naps.

Mrs. Paint Davis fed beer out of a bottle to her yearling son. The child's eyes grew heavy from it. A prudish person ventured to protest to the father.

"Pshaw, no," said Paint. "You can't make that boy drunk. It'll learn him to leave it alone when he's growed."

Jerry Sellers took Mordecai Bass to the saddle-shed to give him a drink. Mordecai said something that Sellers did not like. A reluctant rebuke was followed up by a sharp word. Ensued a furious outburst from Jerry, a pacific remonstrance from Bass, then blows. Lafe Johnson happened to emerge from the house to clear the dust from his lungs, and heard the altercation. He arrived in time to separate the two, and so successful were his labors as a peacemaker that they shook hands before parting.

"It's all along of Florence Steel," Jerry explained to his chief. "Mordecai, he thinks I'm trying to set to her. Just because I had four dances—yes, and a li'l something I done remarked, pleasant like."

On Lafe's return to the ballroom, he saw Florence waltzing with the half-breed Baptismo. Baptismo was showing his white teeth, and he whispered when he perceived Johnson. He was a strikingly handsome man and possessed a peculiar fascination for women. Men disliked him and Lafe's pride of blood was such that he usually ignored Baptismo. Had it been his dance, the half-breed would not have been there, but Horne had bidden him from policy.

An hour afterwards Lafe chanced to descry Jerry going to the spring for a bucket of fresh water to hang beside the keg. Sellers sang as he walked, swinging the bucket.

Oh, bury me not on the lone prairie,
Where the wild ki-yotes will howl o'er me—

Lafe could hear him clearly where he leaned against the jamb of the door. He smiled over the

doleful song of the night guard, which never occurred to Jerry unless he were feeling cheerful.

Where the rattlesnakes hiss and the wind blows free—

There was an abrupt breaking-off after "free." Then a dreadful cry.

"Lafe!" came Jerry's shout.

Johnson ran towards the spring. Close to it Sellers was hunched on the ground, doubled up over the bucket which stood between his legs. He was quite dead. There was a deep wound in his back, just below the shoulder blade.

They carried him to the barn in order not to stampede the guests, and roused Horne, who was sleeping. When they led him to view the body, the cowman was not wholly awake.

"Who did it?" he asked stupidly.

That was what everybody asked his neighbor by silent questioning of eyes.

"I think I know," said Lafe.

He left them and went in search of Bass. He could not find him at the house. Upon that he sped to the corrals, but Mordecai's horse was gone. The half-breed Baptismo informed him that Bass had ridden off only a few minutes before. Johnson did not hesitate. He was no longer a sheriff, but he was boss of the Anvil range, and Anvil hospitality had been outraged and dishonored. He would track down the slayer. Arriving at this decision while Horne plied question on question without obtaining a reply, he went to inform Hetty.

"All right," said that young woman sleepily. "Take care of yourself."

It is probable that in her drowsy state she did not appreciate his mission, else she would not have let him go so readily.

CHAPTER XXXIV

HE ARRESTS A SUSPECT

Johnson caught his most dependable horse and rode out from the Anvil headquarters. Strapped to his hip was a .45 Colt and he had a 30-30 Winchester in his saddle holster. Florence Steel, on foot, overtook him at the gate of the home pasture.

"What's this I hear? Where're you going, Mr. Johnson?"

Lafe told her glibly that he had been sent by Mr. Horne to recover certain cattle which had been run off by hostile nesters during the festivities. It was true that some cattle had been stolen.

"Sure," said Florence, gazing intently into his face. "If you meet up with him, better watch out. A man who'll stab in the back will do most anything."

"What do you know about this?"

"When you catch him," the girl added, "just give him this. Ask if this doesn't belong to him." She thrust into Johnson's hand a large clasp knife. There were blood stains on the blades and handle. Lafe nodded and put it in his pocket. He did not even inquire how the girl had come by it.

About dusk, on the following day, Johnson sighted Bass moving quietly up a ravine on the west side of The Hatter. Some cottonwoods intervened to spoil a shot. Lafe made a detour and quickened his pace, hoping to head him off. As he emerged from the ravine on to a mesa, Bass perceived him. Instead of fleeing, he turned his horse and threw up an arm as a caution to Lafe to halt.

"What do you want?" he cried.

"I want you. Better come along quiet. It'll save trouble."

"I wouldn't choose to, thanks. No. I reckon I won't."

Johnson was not one to take chances with an assassin. He began to pump his Winchester. At the second shot Bass's horse lurched forward on to his knees with a scream and stretched out, its legs stiff. His rider scrambled clear and shot Johnson through the fleshy part of his right forearm before he could pull again.

The boss had drawn his six-shooter and was coming on. He coolly changed the weapon to his left hand and threw down on him at twenty yards.

It had often been asserted in Badger that the sheriff could not miss at any distance under two hundred feet. This was scarcely an exaggeration. He had pulled only once when Bass held up empty hands in token of surrender. His gun lay on the ground and two fingers of his right hand were gone.

"I reckon I ought to have killed you, Mordecai," said Lafe, "but I couldn't forget that me and you had slept under the same blankets. Do you remember that roundup on the Lazy L? What'd you do this for?"

"I knew you'd think I did it," was all Bass said, and he began to make a ligature out of his handkerchief.

"Well, get up here in front and come along. We've got twenty-one miles ahead of us. Let's go."

"I know what you want me for," Bass said, "but you're wrong, Lafe. I didn't do it."

"How do you know it was done, then?" said Lafe. "Only three of us knew when I left the ranch. That was five minutes after we done found him."

His prisoner did not explain, but climbed obediently into the saddle in front of Johnson. Riding thus balanced, the horse could carry both, but it was punishing work, and not until eleven hours later did they make the county town. Lafe turned his prisoner over to the sheriff and saw him safely in jail under lock and key. As he was leaving, he said: "Here's your knife."

"Where did you find it?"

"Where you threw it."

"I done lost it at the dance," said Bass.

On this Johnson placed the knife in the sheriff's keeping, to be used as Exhibit A. When his arm had been dressed, he returned to the Anvil headquarters.

All the guests had departed and, though Mrs. Horne was prostrated and the cowman much perturbed, the cowboys of the outfit had started on their roundup. A trifle like a murder must not interfere with business. When he had driven Hetty and the boy home, Lafe joined the chuckwagon at the camp on Bull Creek and took charge of operations.

After supper on the first night Johnson took part in a game of pitch. It was not his habit to play with his men, as being subversive of discipline, but he was worried and needed distraction. Baptismo, the half-breed, was in the game. He was working through the roundup as strayman for the Gourd. Although Lafe lost, the play excited him to cheeriness and he began to drone, as he riffled the cards—

Oh, bury me not on the lone prairie,
Where the wild ki-yotes will howl o'er me—

"What's the matter, Baptismo?" he asked suddenly.

"Nothing's the matter. Go on and deal," said the strayman. He smiled at Lafe, but his hands were unsteady. The boss played wretchedly and lost more than he could afford.

"Whatever are you thinking about, Lafe?" exclaimed his partner, in exasperation. "I swear I never done saw a raw beginner overbid his hand worse'n you done."

"I'm right sorry. I was studying over something."

On the round next morning the boss made it a point to ride with Baptismo. The outfit was dispersed in a wide semi-circle covering an area five miles in diameter, and moved slowly forward within sight of one another, converging upon a cuplike valley. In this manner they drove ahead of them all the cattle within the limits of their sweep. Usually the half-breed was sent with the first bunch dispersed, for he was a capable hand, but instead of posting Baptismo this morning as he did the others, Lafe kept him at his side. Side by side they trotted slowly through the sage-brush, with the cattle careering in front, pausing often to look back at them. Several times Lafe raised his voice merrily.

"Oh, bury me not on the lone prairie," he sang.

The half-breed glanced at him obliquely and remarked: "You seem right fond of that song, Mr. Johnson."

"Yes? Did I sing that before? I hadn't noticed it," the boss answered, and went on with the verse.

All through the day Johnson kept close to Baptismo. It was quite evident that the half-breed had difficulty holding himself in check under this close espionage, but the only emotion he betrayed was a quickened alertness. And all through the day Lafe sang or hummed the ballad of "The Dying Cowboy."

On the next afternoon, as they were picking their way through a tangle of ocatilla among the foothills, Johnson burst into full-throated song—

Oh, bury me not on the lone prairie,
Where the wild ki-yotes will howl o'er me—
Where the rattlesnakes hiss and the wind blows free—

"For the love of God!" said Baptismo. "Stop that song!"

CHAPTER XXXV

THE DEATH DICE

He was shaking as with a chill, although the perspiration stood out on chin and forehead. On hearing this Lafe glanced in his direction and asked, good-naturedly enough, what was the matter.

"Nothing," said the half-breed quickly, "only you haven't sung anything else in two days but that song, and my nerves ain't good after the time we had at the ranch."

Several times in the course of the evening, as the outfit loafed in camp after supper, the boss had occasion to pass Baptismo where he lay by the fire. Each time he either hummed or whistled a line of "The Dying Cowboy."

Johnson had spread his tarp about thirty yards removed from his men. He was a very light sleeper, accustomed to wake at least once in the course of the night to look all around the camp and make sure that everything was well. Therefore he heard Baptismo when the latter stood over him, and he knew almost what each second of hesitation meant. Had the half-breed moved, the boss would have shot him dead. After an interval, Baptismo turned away and went softly to his own bed.

In the gray of dawn, as the Anvil men were roping their mounts from the remuda and the horses were plunging wildly into the press of their brethren, Lafe called his strawboss and told him to take charge of the work for the day. To Baptismo he said, placing a hand carelessly on the half-breed's six-shooter: "I reckon you'd better come along with me, Baptismo." With that he took possession of the gun.

The man's nostrils flared quickly and he grew pallid about the lips, but he neither inquired why Lafe wanted him nor offered any objection. Instead, he glanced in apprehension toward the group of riders now ready and waiting for the chief's orders to be off. The horses were restless to the tang in the air.

It was not until the two were a mile from camp and well on their way to the county town that Baptismo broke silence. Then it was to protest vehemently against suspicions which Johnson had not voiced. The boss made no answer, but kept a vigilant watch over his movements.

There was a crowd gathered in the town. They had a man in their midst and were dragging him at the end of a rope. As Johnson and his prisoner came down the single street, they encountered this mob. A cloud of dust enveloped the wretch they were dragging and Lafe had to check the rush before it cleared sufficiently for him to discover the victim's identity. It was Bass. He was unconscious and was bleeding from wounds inflicted by his captors' boots and ropes. A goodly portion of the crowd was composed of the Tilsons, relatives of Sellers, and the remainder were members of the outfit for which Jerry had worked. Johnson held up his hand, palm outward, and called for order.

"What the hell do you want?" they inquired.

"I used to be sheriff of Badger," cried Lafe, "and I'm boss now of the Anvil range. I arrested that man you've got there. This looks like a lynching. What's the idea?"

Gustfully they explained that the idea was to hang Mr. Bass to a tree adjacent. Lafe heard them in seeming patience, piecing together from the confusion of cries just how strong their passions ran. He inquired in a civil tone as to their reasons for hanging Mordecai.

"What for?" they echoed. "Why, damn it all, he done killed Jerry Sellers. Stabbed him in the back. Do you hear that? Stabbed him in the back!"

Lafe touched his horse with his heel and advanced on them a few steps.

"Men," said he, "Bass never killed Jerry Sellers. I done arrested him for it, but I made a mistake. The man who knifed him—"

The mob interrupted with hoots and a roar of abuse. Some of them pushed past Lafe and began to drag Bass forward once more. Others demanded to know what warrant the sheriff had for this extraordinary statement. They still called him "sheriff."

"Let's give him a trial," Lafe plead loudly; "let's try each of these men in turn. This man I've got here—"

He broke off, afraid to proceed further lest the swift rage of the mob include Baptismo also, and neither man secure justice. Once started, and two might swing as lightly as one.

"Why," bawled a man close to Johnson, "Bass, he done confessed. We done made him."

"You've made a mistake—" said Lafe, but they swept by him.

In the turmoil Baptismo edged off. Perceiving it, Johnson stuck a gun to his head and ordered him to ride in front or there would be no trial nor any chance for justice—simply a speedy arraignment before the Judgment Seat for Baptismo. Then he urged his horse into the thickest of the mob and, despite some rough handling, cut the rope by which the prisoner was being

dragged.

"Men," he cried, "if you hang him, you've got to put me out of the way first. This man never killed Jerry Sellers."

Not one man in a hundred but would have been taken at his word. They hesitated, but the sheriff sat his horse coolly in the midst of it all, and the half-breed clung at his knee. It was impossible to argue against the outcry, or to obtain anything coherent from the medley of shouts.

In his agony of suspense Baptismo drew a pair of dice from the pocket of his chaps and began to click them in his hand. It was characteristic of the half-breed that he should be able to smile brilliantly upon the crowd even when most fearful. The sheriff saw the dice. His face lighted and he thrust forward again, shouting for quiet.

"You say that Bass is guilty. You say he's confessed. I say that I've got the murderer here. You want to hang Mordecai without a trial. I want a trial—a trial for both—and that's all we'll need. Let's throw dice."

It is probable that not more than four or five of the mob caught Johnson's words, but they happened to be in the forefront, and when they halted, progress was immediately arrested.

"Throw dice?" one asked eagerly. "Thunderation, what for?"

"You think this man killed Jerry Sellers. I know that Baptismo killed him. I've got Baptismo here. Let the two of 'em throw dice to see which is innocent. If Baptismo didn't kill him—why, he just couldn't throw lowest."

The leaders looked at one another. It was just such a suggestion as appealed to their heated minds. They began to argue and Lafe breathed in relief. When men start argument, action need not be feared immediately. Gradually order was restored. Everybody waited on the man who held the rope, who was spokesman.

"I ain't so sure," said he, "that this'll prove anything. But we aim to hang this feller Bass. You aim to hang that yellow-belly. If it's agreeable to them, I reckon we can't raise any objections. We'll have a hanging anyhow, and Jerry'll rest easier."

Baptismo still clicked the dice automatically. He wetted his lips and assured them in a dry voice that this would be satisfactory to him and eminently fair. Perhaps Baptismo was not unbiased. The dice were his, and he knew that if held in a certain position in the palm of the hand, they could be thrown to suit the needs of the player.

Their minds diverted by the possibilities of this trial by luck, the crowd fell in quickly with the suggestion. It savored of the rough justice to which they were accustomed, and if the parties principally concerned were willing, why should they withhold sanction to the ordeal? Moreover, it gave an opportunity for divine intervention.

Johnson got down from his horse and removed the rope from Mordecai's neck.

"Here, you! Wake up!" cried several, shaking him by the shoulders. Somebody shoved a bottle to his lips and he groaned and speedily revived. Then they explained to him as clearly as several tongues talking at once could do, what the nature of the test was.

"I reckon you'll hang me anyhow, if I don't?" he asked.

They signified that such was their intent.

"Then, of course, I'll throw," said he. "It ain't fair, but it's my only chance."

Bass was still too weak to realize fully what was transpiring. The mob took no account of this, but surged forward to the spot originally selected for the hanging. It was a tree, which grew back of a flat rock. The advantage of this site was that the two could roll the dice on the rock, and then the one who was guilty could be hanged from the tree without further inconvenience.

Lafe went ahead, piloting the two principals by the arms, one on each side of him. He placed them side by side in front of the rock. The half-breed picked up the dice.

"One throw, or best out of three?" he inquired.

There was a pause, while the crowd looked to Bass.

"One will do as well as a hundred, I reckon," said he.

Baptismo gave a grunt of satisfaction and shook the dice in his hand. With a twist along his two first fingers he spun them on the rock. A double six! Twelve! A long sigh came from the crowd, and then they all began to talk. Somebody cheered. Assuredly this proved everything. A double six was the highest that could be thrown. Baptismo could not be beaten. True, his throw might be tied—so, too, an elephant might fly. The odds against Bass seemed utterly hopeless. He looked at the dice dully for a minute and then turned to Lafe.

"I reckon I'm done for," said he, "but God knows I didn't do it."

"If you did," Johnson said, his eyes troubled, "you fight mighty well for a feller who'd stab in the back."

And then, before them all, Bass fell on his knees beside the rock and sank his face in his arms. None but Lafe knew that he was praying. The crowd thought that he had fainted from weakness and sought to rouse him, urging him to go on with the test. At last he rose.

"It ain't fair," he said in a loud voice, "it isn't fair. And the dice are loaded. But—well, I'll try. I'm innocent, and I reckon He'll see me through, somehow."

Saying this, Bass rattled the dice in his hand and clapped them down with all his strength. So violent was his passion that they rolled off the rock upon the ground.

"The throw counts!" the crowd yelled—"the throw's got to count. He's trying to gain time."

Lafe bent to examine the dice. As he did so he began to shout frantically, and he waved the crowd back.

"Look there!" he yelled, and pointed to three pieces of ivory on the ground.

The force of Bass's throw had broken a dice. One of them registered a six. The half of the other showed a six. And the broken half showed one. The total was thirteen. He had done the impossible; he had beaten the half-breed by a point.

Baptismo gazed down at the fragments in stupefaction. His mouth was open, but for a minute at least no sound came from it. Then he whispered: "It's the judgment of God."

He collapsed and huddled in an abject heap, clasping Lafe's knees. And in that position he sobbed out his confession. Yes, he had killed Sellers—killed him there by the spring. They had long been enemies, and Sellers had insulted him in front of Florence Steel. He had followed when Jerry went to the spring. Sellers was singing. Sellers had angered the girl and she urged him to pick a quarrel. When he struck, Florence was coming down the path close behind. She saw it all, for she was quite close. He threw away the knife—he had found it—and ran to the barn. There he saw Bass coming from the bushes beside the spring. He knew of Mordecai's quarrel with Sellers, and when he perceived that Bass was about to ride off, he resolved to stay at the ranch.

"I reckon," said Lafe, as he and Bass moved along the homeward trail that night, "I reckon you'd best leave Florence be, Mordecai. What do you think? Seems to me she set more store by that feller swinging back there."

"Don't," Bass entreated. "Yes, I reckon she did, Lafe. She must have loved him a heap."

"Women are queer," said Lafe.

"Say," he said suddenly again, "if you were in the bushes there, you must have seen the killing. Why didn't you speak out?"

His companion flushed and looked uncomfortable. Luckily it was dark.

"No, I didn't see who stabbed him, at all. I didn't see Baptismo there. I only saw Florence coming along the path. And I'd lent her my knife, and—"

Both were silent a long time. Their ponies went steadily forward, their riders' legs occasionally touching. Finally Bass roused.

"What beats me," he said, "is how you happened to pick on Baptismo."

"Why," said Lafe, in a satisfied voice, "that was simple. I happened to sing that song. You know—'Oh, bury me not'—the one poor ol' Jerry was singing when Baptismo sneaked up behind. I was shuffling the cards and happened to look up sudden. And when I saw his face, I knew right away."

CHAPTER XXXVI

RESPONSIBILITY SITS HEAVILY ON LAFE

"It's a wonder," said Johnson to his wife one day, "it's a wonder we ain't never heard anything from Steve Moffatt."

She looked up from her sewing in curiosity. "Surely you don't want to hear from him, do you? I declare, one would think, to hear you talk, that you were sorry."

Lafe did not dispute this, but got down on his knees that his son might mount and ride him. Lafe, Jr., was pleased to consider his father a bucking bronco on these occasions and used to dig his heels gleefully into his ribs. Time—two months after Mordecai Bass and the half-breed shook dice against death, and they hanged Baptismo to a stout tree.

The boss of the Anvil freed himself from his rider by pitching him over his shoulder, and rose and dusted his knees.

"Well, anyhow," he said, "you remember what he done wrote to me when me and you were married. He said 'adios,' you mind. And he told me he wouldn't bother me until after the honeymoon."

"I remember well enough. What of it?"

"It's a mighty long time since the honeymoon," said her husband, shaking his head dubiously.

Hetty laughed, but the look she turned on Lafe was not wholly devoid of anxiety. For this was but one of a series of incidents. His behavior and recent trend of thought worried her. Since Jerry's tragic death, he seemed another individual. Lafe had grown subject to fits of depression and frequently gave utterance to the gloomiest forebodings. What had he on his mind? Nothing—not a thing in the world. Yet he continued to hint darkly that it would be just their luck if he fell ill, or were killed, leaving Hetty and the boy alone to starve.

"Nonsense!" cried Hetty, after she had listened patiently to several repetitions of this obsession. "We're doing fine. You've got this place and six hundred dollars saved. And Mr. Horne pays you a hundred and twenty-five a month, and Bob owes you three hundred—"

Lafe gave a hollow laugh. "Yes," said he, "Bob owes me three hundred. Ha-ha! That's a fine asset—what Bob owes—ain't it?"

"So you think he's going to rob you? Say it. Say it right out. What did you lend it to him for, then?" she exclaimed.

"Because you done worried me into it," he retorted, but perceiving that he had offended her, he began to weaken, and ended by apologizing. Although he scoffed at the prospect of his brother-in-law ever repaying the loan, it is my belief that Johnson had full confidence in Bob and would have resented with bodily injury any imputation from an outsider.

"If a man can't roast his friends, who can?" said he once, when I remonstrated with him concerning a criticism of Ferrier. "My friends knock me, I reckon. If they don't, then they can't think such a heap of me. No, sir. Bob's behaved like a no-account. Why, man alive, I had to let him have forty dollars more yesterday. What do you think of that—hey?"

Every one of his acquaintance had remarked the transformation in Johnson and all of us were at a loss. The change was revolutionary. It had never been my fortune to meet with an individual so reckless of the morrow as Lafe had been before marriage. Not only had he gambled daily with his life, but had held to it that money was to spend, and the prospect of poverty never appeared to enter into his calculations. Indeed, he had scorned those who showed reluctance to toss their hard-won earnings to the winds. Himself had always been penniless or in debt, but he had gone his way cheerily, indulging no worry over his plight.

Then he married, and now he talked like this: "I swan, Dan, when I think of what I married Hetty on, it sure makes me shake like a leaf. It's a wonder we didn't starve. A man's pluckier or he don't think of these things when he's younger—don't you reckon? I'd never dare do it over again now."

"Pluckier? No. Simply irresponsible—that's all. A lot of 'em hope for a miracle—these young people," said I.

"And damn my eyes if they don't usually get it," Lafe said. "It's most amazing how things will turn up to help people who can't help themselves—just when you think you're done for, too."

"Then why are you worrying so now?"

"Am I worrying?" he asked, looking sharply at me.

I could see he was displeased, and consequently dropped the subject. But Horne and others told me that Johnson was much concerned about his health merely because he had contracted a cold. This was to them a symptom of hopeless effeminacy.

On a night when Lafe and I were riding under myriads of stars, and a drink of mezcal had contributed to warm the confidential impulses begotten by a long day together in the saddle, the boss inquired abruptly whether I would look after Lafe, Jr., in the event of anything happening to him. I gaped at him.

"What on earth's going to happen to you? You're as healthy as a goat."

"Dan, it makes me ashamed, but, consarn it, I lie awake nights often, wondering what would become of Hetty and the kid if I was to be killed or got hurt or fell sick. We ain't got enough saved to—"

"Oh, pshaw!" I protested. "Forget it. This isn't like you, Lafe."

Really anxious, I took the opportunity to mention to Hetty that her husband was suffering from indigestion and that it behooved her to get him fit again.

"Do you know," said she, "I've been wondering if that wasn't what ailed him. A man is only half a man when his stomach is out of order. He's got to get his meals all proper or he won't amount to anything. Thank you, Dan, I'll attend to it."

Old man Horne put a different interpretation on Lafe's peculiar nervous dread. Very condescendingly he explained to me that, being a bachelor, I could not be expected to probe the mystery, but the fact was that every married man was seized some time with this species of anxiety.

"That is," said Horne, "if he's conscientious and worth his salt. Some of 'em, they never do get rid

of it. It isn't cowardice. He's just afraid for his family."

"But Johnson has no real cause for worry. Not like a lot of others. Look at him."

"Sure not. That's why he's worrying. He's got things too easy, the rascal. If he had some real troubles, probably he wouldn't fret at all."

Winter dragged along—a winter of blustering winds, of abrupt, dead calms and terrible cold. The cold did not last, however. Some snow fell in the hills, and under a bright sun ran down in rills to the river. Later, the rains held off and the grass shriveled. The country turned a pale brown.

We never look for the first rains to wash the land until July—for some unexplained reason everybody sets the date at July Fourth. But in early June numberless clouds massed in tumbled glory above the mountains and the rain drove down in sheets. Three days later the country showed green and pure, the trees put forth new leaves and the ocatilla flared turkey-red on the ridges.

"The cattle are looking fine," Lafe reported. "Their hides are loose. We've had a good calf crop. It'll run to seventy per cent, Horne. And there ain't no worms, or likely will be."

"Start the roundup next week," said Horne.

Accordingly, the Anvil outfit gathered its horses, packed its chuckwagon with food and bedding, and set out for Zacaton Bottom, there to pitch the first camp. They would not reach the mountain pastures, where the wild steers roamed, until late in the autumn.

The horses were on edge from their winter's freedom. One in every three were broncos just broken. What the Anvil buster facetiously called a broken horse was one that had had three saddles. After those, he was turned into the remuda—not bridle-wise, full of fight and vicious from memory of what the buster had imposed on him. As a result, we had five or six contests of endurance between riders and mounts each morning. One of the boys was thrown and had his collar bone broken.

As boss, Johnson had the privilege of topping the remuda for his string—that is to say, he had first choice of all horses. Yet it was generally a point of honor not to appropriate all the gentle ones; also, not to assign all the bad ones to one particular hand; and it is always a point of honor to retain those selected, and ride them, whatever characteristics they may develop afterwards.

In Lafe's mount was a big J A sorrel that had roved the fastnesses of Paloduro in Texas. The buster had christened him Casey Jones, after the celebrated engineer, because of the desperate quality of his courage. Now, by reason of Lafe's recently developed nervousness concerning himself, I could not repress my impatience for the day to arrive for Casey Jones' saddling—the horses are worked in rotation and, being entirely grass-fed, each can only be used about once in three days.

In a chill dawn the roper called to Johnson: "Want Casey Jones?"

"No-oo. Catch me Tommy," said the boss.

Nobody but the roper, the horse wrangler and myself marked this weakening. We did not even comment on it among ourselves, but I was much cast down. Of course no man after he has got beyond twenty-five years, or has otherwise arrived at some degree of sense, wants to ride a bucking horse; but when it is put up to him, when it becomes his duty, then the man who shirks is discredited. Yet none of us could think of Lafe as really shirking. Perhaps he had some excellent reason. Much more of this, though, and there would be a lessening of his authority.

CHAPTER XXXVII

BUT THE BOSS AGAIN PROVES HIS METTLE

He mounted Tommy, and we rounded up some foothills, where every patch of weed and mesquite gave up a bunch of cattle. While two of his men were working the herd on the roundup ground, Lafe sat Tommy on the outskirts, making one of the cordon of riders that surrounded the cattle and kept them in. He was talking to a strayman from the Lazy L, who worked with our wagon in order to gather the cattle of his brand which had wandered from their range.

Two bulls started a fight. They were Herefords of tremendous bulk, and when they crashed together in the center of the herd, the mass split apart. Fully a score of bulls had been wandering up and down picking fights, so Lafe and the strayman paid no especial attention.

However, it is the essence of folly to ignore bulls in combat if the combat be anywhere near you. None knew this better than Lafe. The bull that finds himself getting the worst of it will invariably break free, swerve aside and dash at the nearest object, as a diversion. Usually his foe goes in hot pursuit.

The two Herefords pawed and bawled and rumbled and butted. Johnson and the cowboy talked, lolling in the saddle. The bulls drew off from each other a few steps, bellowed and crashed head-

on. The impact was terrific. One of them rocketed out of the press of cattle straight at Lafe.

It happened that Tommy—finding that no work faced him—was taking it easy, with one hip down and his eyes half shut. The bull caught the horse under the belly and hurled him and his rider a good ten feet through the air. Lafe struck the ground partly under his mount, his right leg held by Tommy's shoulders. The horse did not rise. He was disemboweled.

The cowboys spurred to his aid and dragged Tommy off him. The bulls had trotted back to the herd and were now engaged in thundering challenges to other range monarchs. Lafe stood up painfully. He put his right foot to the ground, very carefully. A smile of intense satisfaction came over his face.

"Nothing broken," he said—"just shaken up. Jim-in-ee, but I'm sure lucky."

He turned to Tommy, wheezing on the ground and trying weakly to rise.

"Poor li'l devil. Poor ol' Tommy," he said pityingly. After a brief examination, he shot him between the eyes in order to spare him useless suffering.

The boss was very blue throughout the day, and I knew it was for the horse. Tommy had been a pet, and every one of us felt what it had cost Lafe. "Poor li'l devil"—that was all, but Johnson was of the kind who would hardly have said as much audibly for a human being.

Back of his grief I detected a great relief. It was almost a new sense of freedom, revealed in his eyes and his altered manner towards his men. The old quiet authority was his again. Just what he felt was shown when he said to me that night, "I reckon if a big ol' bull can't even hurt me, that I've got a few years to live yet awhile. Hey, Dan?"

"You're whistling. That was a close call, though, Lafe."

"If it had been Casey Jones now—" he began, but something in my face stopped him.

"Did you notice?" he asked, without embarrassment.

"Yes. Why did you do it?"

"I got to thinking about Hetty and the kid. And then I quit—quit cold—laid down. Just watch me ride ol' Casey Jones to-morrow, though. I'll sure clean that fine gentleman."

I watched him. We all did. It was a joy to behold. The sorrel was in high fettle and the ground was hard. So furiously did Casey Jones pitch—squalling through his gaping mouth at every jump—that one of his hoofs was split in two. Lafe sat him firmly, his poise yielding to every new move of the bronco, and he shouted in delight as he plied quirt and spur. Time and again Casey Jones leaped straight into the air and turned back under his rider. Johnson's head would snap back, but his seat was never shaken, and he raked the sorrel from shoulder to flank-cinch. At last Casey Jones stopped, his legs wide apart, his head drooped and his breath whistling. The Anvil men gazed in silence, but with deep approval.

"Crackee," said a cowboy to me, "the boss is sure some peeler."

"He certainly hasn't forgotten how."

"Me and some of the boys," he went on, "we'd been figuring as how Lafe had sort of lost his nerve. It seemed queer, too, but he's been mighty low-sperited. Did you notice? I reckon that was just a mistake, don't you? It must have been."

"A big mistake," I agreed. "He was just a bit worried. That was all. He'll never be that way again."

CHAPTER XXXVIII

HOW A MOFFATT HENCHMAN WAS OUSTED

Another episode during this roundup gave Lafe a lasting reputation among cowmen for cool judgment.

The outfit was working the foothills country. In nearly all the draws of this region nesters had settled, for one could grow corn and alfalfa in abundance, and some had laid out small peach orchards. They farmed in quarter-sections, and generally six or eight miles separated the farms. Some of them owned a few head of cattle, which grazed on the open range with the herds of the big companies.

Consequently, when the Anvil wagon went on its roundup and began gathering cows and calves from valley and hill and brakes, it was joined at various points by nesters. They came to see that the calves belonging to any of their cows that might be in a roundup got the proper brand; and they received free chuck, and worked as members of the outfit.

Late one afternoon a horseman ambled into camp and alighted leisurely close to the wagon. He left his mount standing almost on top of the pots whilst he secured a match from a drawer in the chuckbox. Now, it is contrary to camp tradition to bring one's horse within a certain radius. Fat

Dave stuck his arms akimbo and surveyed the visitor with ill-concealed rage.

"What for you don't hitch him to the coffee pot?" he sneered. "Perhaps you'd best put that ol' skate in my bed."

"Pshaw!" said the other, laughing. "I clean forgot, Dave."

He led the beast beyond the woodpile and returned to the fire. Dave was lifting some coals with a shovel, to put under a pot.

"Going to be with us, Ben?" he inquired, considerably mollified.

"I was sort of figuring on it."

A long silence, while the cook spread live coals on top of the Dutch oven wherein the bread was baking.

"Why, I didn't know you run any cattle, Ben."

"A few ol' cows. They're my nephew's," said the other.

He squatted on a pile of bedding and engaged the cook in conversation. A close observer might have remarked that Dave was wary in his replies—at least, wary for Dave, who was accustomed to call a spade a damned shovel.

"How're the boys off for beddin'?" asked the visitor.

"Right scarce. These nights get right cold now, I can tell you."

"Somebody'll find room for me, don't you reckon?"

Dave considered a moment.

"You can sleep with me, Ben," he said finally.

When the boys rode in to supper, tired and quiet from a punishing day, the cook seized an opportunity to speak to the boss. Lafe was adding up figures in a tally-book on the rim of a wagon wheel.

"Say, Lafe," began the cook, "this here nester, Ben Walsh, that just come in—"

"Well?" said Johnson.

"What's he doing here? What does he want? That's what I'd like to know. Hey?"

"He came to get his cattle, I reckon."

"Cattle?" Dave snorted. "Him? Why, he never had even a dogie calf. No, sir; no, Lafe, that Walsh is a bad hombre. He's mean. Meaner'n poison. None of the Moffatts ain't no meaner."

"The Moffatts?" Lafe repeated, pausing with his pencil in midair. "What's this nester got to do with Steve Moffatt or his kin?"

"Why," said the cook, "this Ben done married Moffatt's sister. He sure thinks he's some gunman, too, Ben does—most as good as Steve."

The boss was very thoughtful as they ate their meal. He spoke civilly to Walsh and discussed with him the condition of cattle and grass, and the water supply. He even offered Dave an extra blanket on learning that the cook had proffered the visitor a bed.

During the work next day, as Lafe was dispersing his riders, he stopped to ask of Walsh: "Where do you figure you're most like to find yours, Mr. Walsh?"

The nester mentioned a stretch of chaparral, and Johnson assigned him to that strip. He noted that Walsh performed his tasks indolently. Once, too, while they were working the herd, he caught a criticism of his methods that the nester was voicing to a cowboy. Lafe did not show any resentment, although the tone employed was raised purposely that he might hear, but bode his time.

A couple of days passed and the boss became aware that he was being made a butt by the nester. Malcontents can be found in every outfit. So there were some in the Anvil who listened to Walsh's low-voiced talk and joined readily in the laugh. After supper on the third evening, one of the old hands told Lafe that Walsh was "knocking" him.

"I know," said Johnson.

"But it hurts you with the boys," the other protested. "They don't work so good. Why, to-day, when you put Walsh on day herd and he went to the spring instead, a lot of 'em laughed and joked."

"Sure," said Lafe, evenly, "I know. I'm just waiting. Thanks, all the same, Mit."

Unvarying civility for another day on Johnson's part; on Walsh's, a cautious expansion of his policy of weakening discipline. The next night somebody inaugurated a game of pitch on a saddle-blanket by lantern light. Although the boss had not absolutely tabooed gambling, of late he had discountenanced it among the Anvil boys on the roundup. He was about to order the game

stopped, when he perceived that Walsh was one of the players. Upon that he walked over and asked to be allowed to take a hand.

The game ran with varying fortune. The players praised or cursed the cards with gusto, according to their luck, as is the way with cowboys—except Johnson, who won or lost with equal imperturbability. During a pause, someone told a story. Next deal, Walsh capped it with another. Just as he reached the point, he paused suddenly to examine his cards.

"And what," said Lafe, whose mind was on other things, "what did the girl do then?"

Walsh promptly sprang the point, a time-worn catch which under any other circumstances Lafe would have readily foreseen. The majority of the spectators around the blanket broke into crackling laughter. A few kept silent, for there was a venom, a calculated malice in Walsh's tone which did not escape the older men. The boss felt it, and for a moment his eyes held Walsh's steadily. Both wore guns, as did every man during roundup. Then Lafe threw back his head and laughed with such unaffected heartiness that the nester seemed puzzled. Throughout the remainder of the game he looked rather crestfallen.

Dave was cooking dinner about noon. The nester lolled in camp, having advanced a plea of sickness to avoid work that morning. When the sun was past its height, the outfit galloped in. Behind came Johnson, his horse moving at a sober walk. He was dragging a cow at the end of his rope. Arrived close to the fire, he ordered Mit to heel the animal, and when she was stretched out, borrowed a sharp knife from the cook. Then he went to the cow's head and took hold of her tongue.

"Land's sake, Lafe," cried Dave, "what do you aim to do now?"

"Split her tongue," said Johnson.

"Oh," said the cook. Everybody seemed satisfied.

"Split her tongue?" Walsh echoed, raising himself from a tarpaulin. "That's a new one on me. What're you going to do that for?"

"So she can lick both sides of her calf at once," Lafe drawled, and released the animal.

A perfect gale of laughter swept from the Anvil outfit.

"Damn my fat haid! Damn my ol' fat haid!" bellowed the cook.

A fig for Walsh and his prowess as a gunfighter! Dave feared no man. He went his way, grouchy and unreckoning, secure in the sanctity that hedges a cook. Besides, if that failed him, he had usually a pothook handy. Now, he threw himself flat on his back and kicked his heels in the air.

One must give Walsh his due. He had pluck to spare, but ridicule is the hardest thing to face in life. Besides, what earthly use was there in defying a whole outfit? He gave a sickly smile and returned to his tarpaulin.

To him came Lafe after dinner.

"How're you feeling?" he asked.

"Better."

"Well," said the boss, "we're moving to-day, Walsh. You don't seem to have found any of your stuff. It's certain you won't, where we're heading. So I reckon it'd save you trouble if you got moving."

Walsh eyed him expectantly.

"All right," he said at last. "You're the boss."

In this manner was discipline restored among the Anvil men.

CHAPTER XXXIX

NEWS FROM BUFFALO JIM

Rub-a-dub-dub,
Three men in a tub,
The butcher, the baker,
The candlestick maker;
They all jumped out of a holler pertater.
Rub-a-dub-dub.

"Do you call them your prayers?" asked Lafe sternly. "I done told you to get to bed more'n a hour ago, son. I swan I can't figure what your ma's thinking of. Now, drag it."

The boy turned a confident grin on his sire and continued his march through the house, rub-a-

dub-dubbing to the best that was in him. He was attired lightly in a chemise, and was accordingly able to give an unhampered illustration of how the candlestick maker and the other tradesmen emerged from the spud. Hetty had gone to prepare his bed; returning, she made a dive for the fugitive and bore him, struggling, to his unwelcome nest. There she was obliged to growl over him in imitation of a big old bear, before Lafe, Jr., became reconciled.

Johnson listened with scant patience to their further discourse inside the bedroom.

"That ain't the way to learn the boy his prayers," he interrupted. "Bless *Mister* Shortredge. Mister! That's a fine way for a li'l feller to pray, ain't it? Call him Jim or Buf'lo, Hetty. Call him Jim or Buf'lo. I reckon the Almighty don't know Jim as Mister."

"I guess the Almighty ain't such a close friend of his, anyhow, seeing as he's a friend of yours," retorted Mrs. Johnson.

Lafe revolved this in his mind. By the time he had hit upon an apt rejoinder, opportunity for its use had fled; but he made a mental note thereof, resolved to steer the talk around some day to the same theme.

Early next morning Jeff Hardin came up the trail, with a letter for Johnson. Letters are rare arrivals in that region and a certain formality attaches to their receipt. This one Lafe accepted with seeming unconcern, and having looked long at the handwriting and turned it over and over, he called his wife. To her Lafe opined that Buffalo must have written to him. Meanwhile Jeff loitered near, flicking the reins on his horse's back, intent on catching anything of interest that might crop up.

"He wouldn't never take a prize, Buf'lo wouldn't," said Lafe critically, "but this looks a bit shaky, even for him."

"Well, let's open it," Hetty suggested.

It took her husband at least ten minutes to scan the brief page, although famous for the ease with which he read and spelled; but this was due to the fact that Shortredge despised punctuation and had broad theories of capitals, into which the sense of the subject-matter did not enter at all. So there existed always a confusion as to where his sentences began and where they left off. But Johnson finished at last, and then he turned to Hetty with a hopeless air.

"Well, if that wouldn't knock you deader'n a rat. Here he owes me fifty-seven dollars already, and he's been owing it for nigh on a million years," he said, "yet he wants—"

He broke off, perceiving that Jeff lingered. "Won't you get down and visit, Jeff?" he asked.

"No-oo, I wouldn't choose to, thanks, Lafe," said Jeff; "I got to drift. Did you say he owed you fifty-seven, Lafe? Well, adios, you two. Take care of yourself, Mrs. Johnson. Come on, boy, and I'll give you a ride as far as the spring."

Hardin continued his journey toward Badger, and told them there how Jim Shortredge had applied to Lafe Johnson for a loan of two hundred dollars, although he had been owing him close to a thousand for seven years.

"Well, what're you going to do about it?" said Hetty, when the courier had departed.

"Do about it? Forget it—that's what I'm going to do."

"We couldn't have him here with little Lafe round," Hetty went on reflectively. "It wouldn't be safe. No, we couldn't. Could we?"

"Well, I should reckon not. I should rather reckon not. Where'd we put him?"

Lafe was highly indignant for the remainder of the forenoon. What sort of an idiot did Buffalo take him to be, anyhow? It was all very well for a man to use his friend's money and time as his own so long as both were single, but when a man married, his family had first claim. If Jim could not get that through his head without having it pounded in, Lafe was sorry, but he would have to make it clear, notwithstanding. Send him fifty dollars—had Hetty ever in her life heard anything to equal that? Here was a feller who could easily earn seventy-five dollars a month—a thick, stout man—and just because he was a trifle sick, he had to send off to borrow and to ask if he could visit. It was weak-kneed, Lafe called it. He had really never suspected this propensity in Shortredge.

"Many's the time I've helped him out," he said, reverting to the subject after dinner, "and what do I get? A man owes it to a friend before he gets married, Hetty. Afterwards, he—"

"He what?"

"Well, he ain't got any friends," said her husband.

His irritation continued throughout the afternoon and he brusquely refused to take his son up in front when he rode away to Horne's headquarters. It was growing dark when he returned and the cattle were drifting up the Cañon to water. Johnson noticed each cow and calf with a shrewd eye, and determined to spread more salt in the morning. His son came galloping to meet him, and Lafe swung the boy to the fork of the saddle. He was still moody, however, and his wife observed that he did not eat with his customary appetite. Finally he pushed the plate from him.

"I declare that stew's no fit food for a man, Hetty. Can't we never have nothing else?"

"You've had stew twice in three weeks. That's what you've had," Hetty returned, bridling. "What's got into you, anyhow? You're worse than a big ol' bear."

"Ugh-ugh-ugh-ugh!" her son growled, making a persistent effort to worry his father's leg with his teeth. Lafe pried his offspring loose and set him on his knee. The boy wrestled and thumped him, and gradually Lafe softened under the play.

"I mind once, me and Buf'lo went for eleven days on jerky and tobacco; more tobacco than jerky," he said, considering his son with a smile. "Nothing ever seemed to hurt us in them days, me and Buf'lo. Down in the Baccanochi, it was, where we went for some cattle. And of all the sorry steers, you never seen the like, Hetty. Honest, they couldn't throw a shadow. But we got some beef there. I ain't never tasted beef like it since—no, ma'am."

"Ho, haven't you?" Hetty sniffed.

His usual even spirits seemed to return during the after-supper smoke. He sat on the porch and listened to the cows lowing contentedly around the tanks. Some animal went light-footed through the underbrush of the slope opposite, and Lafe, Jr., was morally certain it was a wildcat; but, then, he never failed to detect bears and wolves and mountain lions in the least stirring of a twig. The dark deepened and a coyote yelped against the Cañon's walls. The baby announced his intention of catching the prowler on the morrow with a pinch of salt, and by the exercise of cunning and stealth.

Hetty came out on the porch to fill the canteen and to warn little Lafe that bedtime was close upon him. The boy denied it vehemently.

"I mind once, when me and Buf'lo were sleeping at the ol' Palomino," her husband told her; "just a night like to this it was, and a couple of line riders come along with a deck of cards—"

"That's all you need to say," Hetty said. "You never did understand the game."

Shortly afterward she took the child from his father and put him to bed, Lafe, Jr., howling that he was wide awake and nothing under heaven would make him go. Yet he was asleep in a twinkling. His mother tiptoed out of the room. When she reached the porch, she gave vent to the long sigh a tired woman will give when the day's work is done and she can relax, and she began to rock in the wicker-chair. Her husband was walking meditatively near a tall cottonwood. He appeared to be pacing off the ground.

"What're you doing?" she called.

"Nothing. Nothing much." But when she joined him, he coughed and looked foolish.

"Now," said Hetty, locking both arms about one of his and leaning against him, "tell me."

"Why," Lafe said, "I was just sort of studying how a tent would fit here right snug. It's a slick place for a tent."

Hetty squeezed his arm and looked at him with eyes of perfect understanding.

"Do you want to see what I wrote to him?" she whispered.

"Who? Buf'lo? You wrote to Buf'lo? When did you write to Buf'lo? Well, I swan."

It is best at this juncture to stare for signs of the marauding coyote, or to gaze fixedly at the evening star blazing in line with the chimney, because those two often chose to forget that they had been married five years.

This is what Hetty showed Lafe, bending over his shoulder as he read it by the light of a lamp.

DEAR FRIEND:

My husband showed me your letter and I write to say we will be glad to have you come any time and stay with us as long as you like.

He has talked a whole lot about you and little Lafe always remembers you in his prayers. He don't like to say his prayers he's like his father. We have a nice home in the cannon and it will do you good it is so high up here.

Yours respectfully,
MRS. JOHNSON.

P.S. My husband is writing to you, too.

Lafe took this letter and enclosed one of his own composition, together with several very worn bills which he extracted from a can behind the kitchen clock. And just after daybreak he started for Badger to the end that the letter might be carried to a railway town by the stage driver. While he was making some purchases of flour and groceries that Hetty had itemized on a piece of wrapping paper as an aid to memory, one of the loungers remarked to Johnson that he heard Buffalo Jim had had the nerve to try to borrow some money. It puzzled him how some people would beat their way through the world.

"It does, does it?" Lafe answered, in a nutmeg-grater voice. "Well, it oughtn't to. Any time ol' Buf'lo wants anything, he knows where he can get it quick. Understand? Who done told you that? The man who told you that was a liar. And if there's anybody here got something to get off his mind about Buf'lo, now's the time. I'm a-listening."

Nobody had anything to get off his mind, it would seem. Having given ample opportunity, Johnson gathered up his parcels, tied them carefully to various parts of the saddle, and departed for home. He did not regard the incident in Badger of sufficient importance to communicate to his wife.

CHAPTER XL

HE ARRIVES TO VISIT THE JOHNSONS

Shortredge arrived in a buckboard, driven by Jeff Hardin, toward the close of a July day. They were visible a mile off, but Johnson did not step down from the porch until they pulled up. Then he went slowly to meet them. It took a long time for Buffalo to get clear of the conveyance, he was so shaky and uncertain on his legs.

"Hello, Lafe."

"Hello, Buf'lo."

They clasped hands and regarded each other uncomfortably. Then Shortredge paid the driver and the two friends walked to the porch, where Hetty was waiting to welcome the visitor. Such was the greeting between them after five years.

"Poor feller," said Johnson, when they had retired that night. "He's looking worse'n a ghost."

"Oh, Lafe, when I look at him I want to cry. To think we ever—"

"He was the stoutest man I ever set eyes on, once, ol' Buf'lo was. But he never would take no care of himself. That, and ridin' broncs, it sort of stove him all up, Hetty. I'm sure glad I done asked him here."

A tent was reared on the knoll under the cottonwood, and in it Jim slept. He scorned the cot which Johnson had procured and spread his blankets on the ground, as had been his wont in the days of his strength. There were several spare saddlers, and when he was feeling especially strong, Buffalo would accompany Lafe on some of his rides, but that happened very seldom. They never spoke much when together, which was as it had always been, but seemed quite satisfied to jog along side by side. At long intervals one would comment on the condition of the cattle they passed.

Within two weeks the invalid began to gain in weight. By that time he and Lafe, Jr., were staunch friends. For hours together he would build dirt forts under the boy's direction, never seeming to tire of the changes in ground plan that the child's whims demanded. And the toys he contrived to fashion, with no other tools than a jackknife, a stick and handkerchief! Yet his playmate imposed reservations on their companionship which sorely puzzled Lafe, Jr. For one thing, he would never dandle the boy on his knee, as his father did, and he laughingly dissuaded him from the rough-and-tumble tests of strength and skill in which the boy was accustomed to imitate a bull, or an outlaw steer, or some equally impulsive creature. Then, too, Hetty had become peculiarly insistent on the wording of her son's nightly supplications. Indeed, Shortredge's name became the feature of his prayer.

"You're looking a heap better, Buf'lo," Johnson told him. It was the first time he had referred directly to Shortredge's health.

"Shore. I feel a heap better too, Lafe. The cough don't bother me much at all now. But I done bust a valve or something—run away to your ma, Lafe, boy—I forget what the doc said now, for certain"—Jim was staring off to the horizon—"it's liable to hit me sudden."

"Hell, no! Doctors don't know nothing."

"Shore not," Buffalo agreed, with a short laugh. "Don't you say nothing to Hetty, Lafe. I'll face the music."

Of nights they would sit on the porch—Buffalo, Hetty and Lafe—the child scuffling with the dog at their feet, in the last spasmodic energy that foreruns infantile sleep. And they would watch the light fade in the Cañon. The cows came slowly to water, calling one to the other. There were soft creepings amid the leaves. A mocking-bird sang in a hackberry tree. It was all very peaceful.

"You can just make out the top of The Hatter from here, Lafe. Ever notice?" Jim asked.

"You can see him mighty plain sometimes, Buf'lo. Do you mind how we used to wonder what was on top of that ol' mountain, me and you? He looks so ragged up there. That was when you were punching on the Lazy L."

"I reckon I do. I've always sort of hankered to climb to the top of The Hatter," Buffalo went on

—"all my life I have. But I never did. You-all know how that is. They tell me you can see for ninety miles off'n the peak. It must be right pretty."

"We'll go some day," said Johnson.

Hetty caught her breath and glanced quickly at the visitor, but both men appeared perfectly matter-of-fact. She said: "Weren't you sick last night, Mr. Buf'lo? I thought I heard you."

"Yes, ma'am. Nothing to speak of. Just a li'l spell. Sometimes they hit me and then ag'in they don't."

It was dry the next six weeks. It was also scorching hot. The country began to look wan, then lifeless. On a night in early October a rider came to Johnson's door with word from Horne that the range was on fire. A blaze eight miles wide was sweeping the far shoulder of The Hatter. The messenger delivered this information in a subdued, expressionless voice, sitting his foaming horse in front of the porch, to Lafe inside the house.

CHAPTER XLI

A NIGHT RIDE AND DEATH OF BUFFALO JIM

"I'll go round up the pasture for you," he ended. "Will Nugget do? I kin catch him easiest."

As Johnson was saddling, he told Hetty through the window that perhaps he would not be back for a week.

"Say, Lafe"—Shortredge was at his elbow, plucking the sleeve of his shirt—"say, I want to go along."

"I don't reckon you'd ought, Buf'lo," Lafe answered. He spoke in a mild tone, as though the request were a very natural one. "It's all of thirty miles and you know what fighting fire means. There won't be nothing to eat but canned tomatoes and mighty li'l water and—"

"Man alive, I know that," said Shortredge, "but I want to go along."

Johnson coiled his rope and hung it carefully from the fork of the saddle. "No, I don't think you'd ought to go, Buf'lo."

"Why not? Listen to me, Lafe." He began to plead, his manner nervously insistent. "If it's going to come, it's going to come, and a lot of good dodging will do. Give me a chance, and not—say, I don't want to crawl off like a sick rat. Me and you never used to run away, did we? Well, I'd kind of like—I'd kind of like to be on top of a good horse."

"Me and you both."

"Come on, Lafe. Go get ol' Scrapper for me. I can stand it all right. Let's see The Hatter together, like we aimed to do. The sun'll be just busting himself when we get there."

"Well, you know what it means. Go get your saddle. Whatever you say, goes," said Johnson.

Ten horsemen met them where the path split, the one to the right sweeping upward and around the rim of the giant mountain. They were in ill-humor, for all had been roused from sleep and they knew what was ahead. Therefore, not a word was exchanged as they dog-trotted in single file. Sometimes only a pinpoint of light, when a cigarette glowed from a long intake, showed where they moved.

Rough and rocky was the trail. Shortredge came last, by Johnson's directions, and the cowboy in front turned in the saddle from time to time to ascertain that he followed in safety. He marveled much that Jim should attempt this ride, but advice is the last thing his class will obtrude. The night was black, but the western sky was a pale yellow, and a broken line of red wavered intermittently above the farther slope of The Hatter.

Once Shortredge became conscious of something beside him and faced toward it swiftly, but there was nothing there. He essayed a laugh. "Pshaw! I'm shore getting foolish," he muttered. "My eyes, I expect."

Twice after that he was moved to peer into the dark on his right hand. Surely something rode there, hovering very near. Lafe dropped back from his position at the head of the line, to satisfy himself about his friend.

"How goes it?"

"Stronger'n the oldest man in the world," said Buffalo cheerily.

Johnson ranged beside him for a short distance. The line wound ever upward, in silence. Several times a horse's hoof clacked on rocks with flare of sparks. At last: "Say, Lafe."

"Well?"

"I've been a-figuring that I must have given you and Hetty a right smart of trouble. There ain't no way of knowing it from you-all, but I kind of got the idea—"

"You make me tired," said Johnson angrily. "What's wrong with you, anyhow? You talk like an ol' woman."

"It's right queer," Shortredge continued, "ain't it?"

"What's queer?"

"Why, me and you both starting out the same way. We used to sleep under the same blankets, me and you did. And here you've got Hetty and li'l Lafe—say, Lafe, there's one kid for you. He says to me only yesterday—"

"Look out for this drop," Johnson cautioned.

"And I've got a bum heart and a bum lung. However, it's all in the game. Hey, Lafe? A feller's got to grin and face the music. That's all there is for him to do, I take it."

"What you need," his friend remarked sagely, "is a drink. But we ain't got any along. Now, take a brace and forget it, Buf'lo. Don't go talking like a quitter. Just as soon as you're a mite stouter, me and you'll go shares on that bunch of cattle we were looking over. I done had this in my mind for a long time. I need a partner—need him bad, what with ol' Horne's work coming on me more every day."

Buffalo started to say something to this, but Johnson touched Nugget with the spur and scrambled forward to the head of his men. They continued to climb. Often they would see the shooting flames; again, merely a dull glow revealed where the fire raged; and now they were mounting the sheer walls of a cañon, now dipping down the faces of cliffs. A horse rolled into a gulch and crushed his rider's leg. Johnson told off a man to look after the injured one. Another strayed from sight and sound, and bawled frantically for twenty minutes before he caught up with the party. Soon it was necessary to raise the cry of the night trail in broken country. Lafe began it.

"Here I go." He sent it weirdly behind him in a long yell.

"Here I go."

And, "Here I go" went down the line to the last man.

Shortredge kept a firm seat and allowed the reins to swing loose. Well he knew that Scrapper was more to be trusted in this work than the guidance he or anybody else could give.

"Here I go," came Johnson's halloo.

"Here I go."

"Here—I—go," Jim echoed.

The sting of early morning was in the air, and often he shivered. Stare at the rider in front as he might, he could not shake off the impression that something kept pace at his side. Vainly he sought the silhouettes of the advance horsemen, stark against the yellow sky, when they rounded a bend. Those were real men. He counted them—nine.

"There's ten in this bunch, all the same," he said to Scrapper. "Don't you see nobody besides us, boy?"

Apparently Scrapper did not. So Shortredge followed behind, encouraging Scrapper up the heights, leaning far back against the cantle when they went downward to thread another defile. Some of the chasms they crossed took his breath away.

"Well," he quavered, with an uneasy laugh. "We're giving him a run for his money. Hey, ol' feller? We're shore making him ride some."

At long last they climbed to the topmost ridge. Above was the peak of The Hatter, and the fire stood revealed a mile below. The air was cold, and a gray shiver ran along the eastern sky. Shortredge's hand flew suddenly to the breast of his shirt. He gasped for breath.

"How goes it?" yelled the man ahead.

"Fine as silk," he answered after a minute.

They skirted a crag and the devastation of the flames was hidden from them. No time was to be lost. With Lafe leading the way, they advanced at a quickened gait.

"Here I go."

"Here I go."

"Here—I—go," said the last man in a faint voice.

He settled gently in the saddle and Scrapper came to a halt. The reins trailed on the ground and the rider's hands were gripping the mane.

Thus did Buffalo Jim face the music, atop a good horse, as he had hoped—the music of the

spheres, swelling in the blood-red dawn that broke back of The Hatter.

CHAPTER XLII

MIDDLE LIFE

Ten years have passed. Lafe is a trifle heavier, his figure more set. The gray flecks in his hair are pronounced, and his manner has taken on an assured poise that marks him in the company of his fellows. I have seen Johnson in many companies, composed of men in all ranks of life. It must be admitted that sometimes he looked out of place, because he was so palpably not of their world; but never has he failed to win respect, frequently has he dominated the assembly, although usually silent.

If there be good stuff buried in a man, increased responsibility will bring it out. Larger responsibilities have contributed to develop Johnson's latent strength. He is now not only boss of the Anvil range, but has taken over the management of all its affairs from Horne, who has grown feeble in accumulating wealth and depends wholly on Lafe. In addition, he has started as a cowman in his own right and pays rental on pasture for eleven hundred cows. Fully a thousand calves wear his brand of the Spur—



A visitor to Hope Cañon is met by two tow-headed children, who greet him with their fingers in their mouths, staring round-eyed. These are Virginia and Eunice Johnson, daughters of the ex-sheriff, and they are aged respectively six and three years. Both of the parents are very dark, as you know, and Lafe's most reliable joke is to query Hetty very solemnly on the marked blondness of their offspring.

Hetty herself is plump and matronly. She is now in a position to afford domestics, and she has the calm bearing and complacency of a healthy, fruitful woman whose lot lies in pleasant places. In her face is the fulfillment of early promise. Selfishness and evil thinking may be slow to leave their marks, but devotion to a noble sense of duty will invariably light a woman's face. Although her household duties are greatly lessened, she takes such extraordinary pains in the bringing up of her children that her every hour is fully occupied. True, she occasionally snatches a half day to herself; but guess what the busybody does then? She drives over to the Ferriers', and lends her sister-in-law aid in straightening out her domestic difficulties. Bob Ferrier is working for Lafe, and works conscientiously, but he will never be anything but a salaried employé, for he lacks the faculty of thinking for himself. Perhaps he was too long under routine. Consequently their increasing family necessities provide the industrious Hetty with ample opportunity to exercise her desire of helping. So she is happy.

And when the Ferriers are provided for and everything is running evenly, of course she must interest herself in the plight of less fortunate neighbors. Many nesters have come to the country to take up farms, and to these Hetty appears as a saving angel, however hostile their arrival has been to her husband's interests. There are a few women in this world who must always be doing good or they are wretched, and Lafe had stumbled upon one of them for wife.

I have left until last any reference to a very important individual in the Johnson household—Lafe, Jr., the heir of the Spur. My reason for so doing has been a reluctance to take him up until something more to his credit than his father's comments, could be offered. The truth is that Lafe, Jr., has been a wild boy and a sore trial. He has shown tendencies which have greatly exercised his father. Hetty is more inclined to be lenient, which may be responsible for some of the trouble.

At the time this chapter opens, Lafe, Jr., was a tall, lank youth of about fifteen years, all knobby joints and hands and feet. When he spoke it gave one a scare, because his tones slid without warning from a high falsetto to a most sonorous bass. He was, indeed, at that awkward age when a well-grown boy is verging on manhood. Often Hetty worried over his abstraction and fits of sullenness; also, pimples marred his appearance, and a growth of down on chin and upper lip gave Lafe, Jr., food for thought.

"I swan that boy's getting worse every day," said Lafe to his wife one morning.

"What's he done now?" she asked.

"Oh, I done caught him out behind the barn again smoking cigarettes. Bill, he told me yesterday that he seen Lafe taking a drink out of a bottle with the horse wrangler. I'll can that feller if he don't leave Lafe alone."

"Oh, goodness, let the boy be, Lafe. You told me yourself you smoked when you were nine. All the boys out here learn to do that mighty young, and some of them know how to drink right well, too."

"That's all right," said Johnson stubbornly, "but I don't expect our son to be a no-account feller. We've got the money to educate him fine. But I'm scared to send him away until I'm sure he's worth it."

"Well, anyhow, don't be too hard on him. Don't go jumping on the boy all the time, Lafe. If you do

you'll make a sneak out of him."

"He's mighty nigh that now," said Lafe, and walked out of the room before Hetty could start an argument on the point.

He had not spoken to his wife of the worry that rankled deepest. This was nothing less than a doubt of his son's courage. To a man who had lived as Johnson had lived, who had calmly braved danger every month in his life, absence of pluck is the most despicable of human traits. Little incidents he had noted in the behavior of Lafe, Jr., filled the boss with a dread that his son might not only be lacking in aggressive courage, but might be the victim of positive cowardice. However, he reflected that happenings previous to his birth may have been responsible, which gave him a patience with the boy he might not otherwise have had. Yet Lafe, Jr.'s, shrinking fear of the ordinary risks of range life was wholly at variance with the reckless spirit he had shown as a child.

"He's even scared of his horse," said Lafe to me on a night. "Don't tell anybody, Dan. I'd be 'shamed. But I've seen that boy's knees near knock together before he crawled up on ol' Waspnest."

"He's at a bad age," I said, trying to console him. "In the first place, he has grown too fast, and in the second place, you haven't handled him properly. Lafe is a mighty sensitive boy and you ought to be more companionable with him. As long as you hold him off and never give him anything but a stern order, he's going to do things which you think are sneaky."

The boss looked astounded. It was a new experience for him to be told that he did not know how to manage a fellow creature, and the fact that that fellow creature was his son sharpened the sting. He stared at me a long time very thoughtfully.

"Maybe you're right," he said. "I'll give it a trial, anyhow."

Acting on this suggestion, he began to take Lafe, Jr., with him on his rounds of the range. At first the boy was suspicious of his father's motive in this move, and showed it by the reluctance and laziness with which he executed his orders; but, discovering in his sire's attitude nothing to confirm this view, he became more cheerful and took to the work with alacrity. Johnson was much pleased. He told me that the boy was shaping right to become a man yet.

CHAPTER XLIII

MOFFATT ONCE MORE

Towards nightfall on a day in June the boss of the Anvil rode in to headquarters from a tour of some water-holes that required patching. His son accompanied him, astride a mouse-colored bronco that, a month before, neither Lafe nor myself would have suspected him capable of handling. There was nobody near the stables, which was unusual, but Mrs. Horne met them at the corral gate. She was very collected, but so white that she frightened Lafe.

"Well," she said distinctly, "it's all over now. He's dead."

Johnson had just stepped out of the saddle. Still holding his horse by the cheek of the bridle, he said in amazement: "Ma'am?"

"Yes," she repeated, "he's dead."

Then she began to sway on her feet, and before Lafe could reach her, Mrs. Horne had fainted. With his son's help he bore her to the house. There he found everything in confusion. Two native women were padding about, wringing their hands and wailing for help, while Manuel knelt beside a sofa in the dining-room and bathed Horne's face and forehead with water. Lafe gave Mrs. Horne into the care of these females and bade them sternly to be silent. He then turned his attention to his employer.

In her distraction and first outbreak of grief, Mrs. Horne had been too hasty. The cowman was not dead. He had a bullet through his neck and another in the region of the stomach, but he was still alive and Johnson did not give up hope. Well he knew what a tough person this same Horne was, and he calculated that his indomitable spirit would help nature to pull him through. To Mrs. Horne, now revived and tearfully anxious to be of use, he said: "Pshaw, don't take on so, Miz Horne. It'll take more'n two bullets to kill the ol' man. How did it happen?"

In a gush of words she began to tell him, but Manuel rose from the floor and interrupted. The Mexican was almost hysterical, but from the two of them Lafe was able to piece together a fairly accurate picture of what had transpired.

Headquarters had been deserted except for the owner and Manuel, who was working in the stables at the time, and the three women. Old man Horne was dozing in a hammock, when a rider came to the corral and turned his horse inside. Horne woke in time to perceive the stranger throw his saddle on one of the Anvil horses. The cowman called out to him to know what he meant by it, and getting no reply, descended from the veranda and hurried to the corral.

Manuel was cleaning out the stallion's stall when he heard loud talking in the corral. Hardly had he laid down his fork in order to go to ascertain the cause of the disturbance, than there came two shots. He reached the door of the stable in time to see a man ride off at full speed. In the corral he had found Mr. Horne lying unconscious, and he heaved him on to his back and carried him to the house; all alone he did it.

In about half an hour the cowman opened his eyes.

"Hello, Lafe," he said.

The boss despatched his son to Badger to fetch Dr. Armstrong and himself set to work to ease the cowman's pain. The wound in his neck gave Lafe no concern, but that in the stomach caused Horne acute agony and Lafe feared internal hemorrhages.

"It was that skunk, Steve Moffatt," Horne told Lafe in a whisper. "He's come back after all these years."

"Don't talk," said Lafe.

"I will talk," said the cowman. "I'm not going to die for a long while yet."

"What was the trouble about?"

"I didn't know him at first, on account of he looks so much older. And he's grown a beard. He wanted a horse and I wouldn't give him one. Then he plugged me. Plugged me in cold blood, he did. Just as he did it he told me that would square us for me and Floyd offering that reward way back fifteen years ago."

In the course of nine hours Lafe, Jr., returned with the doctor. By that time Mrs. Horne had taken to her bed and was almost as much in need of Armstrong's services as was her husband. He made a brief examination and reported that the wounds were dangerous, but not necessarily fatal. The patient's advanced age was his greatest concern. Reassured on this point, Johnson and his son went to sleep.

The cowman sent for his manager in early afternoon.

"Lafe," he said, "I'm going to get all right. I've got enough nurses here, and I want you to go get Steve Moffatt. He's always tried to give me and you dirt, and I'm beginning to think that the Lord intended you to round him up. Take what money you need and go fetch him."

"I'll get him," said the boss.

"And, say," the cowman called after him, "when you catch him, bring him here to me. Whether he's living or dead, bring him here to me. I want to see Steve Moffatt for what he did yesterday."

Lafe promised and went out. He found his son near the corral, repairing a cinch with a bit of twine.

"Where're you going?" the boy asked.

The boss paused in his walk and surveyed him critically for some moments.

"I'm going after a man I've hunted for sixteen years," he said.

"Steve Moffatt?"

"Steve Moffatt," his father replied. "How did you know? Him and me have been shooting each other up since we were old enough to carry a gun."

Lafe, Jr., turned to his task of repairing the cinch again, and said nothing more for a few minutes. His father was inside the corral, roping a fresh mount.

"You might catch me ol' Beanbelly, Dad," Lafe, Jr., cried to him.

"What for?"

"Why, you're going to take me along, ain't you? You're going to give me a chance at him, too, ain't you?"

"You're damn whistlin' I am," said his father. "Come and get your horse."

CHAPTER XLIV

THE DUEL IN THE MALPAIS

For twelve days Lafe and his son followed the trail of the outlaw. Sometimes they lost trace of him, but Moffatt could never refrain from trifling displays of bravado which betrayed his identity everywhere he moved, so that Johnson was able to pick up his tracks without much loss of time. He was never more than three days behind Moffatt.

Evidently foreseeing that the telegraph of the entire continent would be put in service to capture

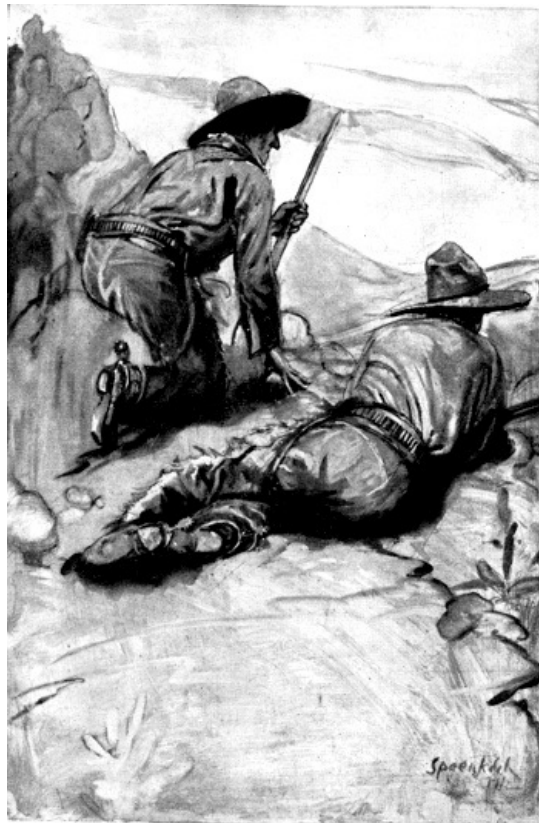
him, Moffatt did not attempt to get out of the country by train or by any of the frequented roads of travel. He kept to the by-trails and the wildest regions. Instead of stealing over the Border, he headed north. Lafe heard of him one day in a mountain hamlet; the next at the home of a nester, in a deep valley thirty miles distant. So with his son he followed him along the Border, up into New Mexico and across it, over the San Andres Mountains and onward towards the Capitan range.

At the Bar W headquarters near Carrizozo he learned that a man like the one he sought had taken dinner there and had later ridden onward into the Malpais. Accordingly Johnson and his son followed into these bad lands.

When they started, the sun was glaring ferociously from a pale blue sky and the dust of the flats rose like fine powder under their horses' feet. On their one side was an expanse of baked clay, loose and flaky like a crust of pastry, that stretched away to the base of some foothills where were areas of green, dotted with grazing cattle. Beyond the hills a mountain gloomed, mist-capped. In the right foreground was a grove of trees with a red house nestling in the midst. A windmill rose beside the house, and not far off, standing naked on the parched plain, was an adobe structure, square, flat-roofed and with a single stove-pipe chimney. These were the Bar W headquarters.

Ahead of the two the level country terminated abruptly at a dull red line, and beyond that was a fit abode for lost souls—twisted, gnarled heaps of metal and rock, a torn land where nothing of life stayed voluntarily.

They had set out from the Bar W on Wednesday evening. On Thursday afternoon Johnson and Moffatt were taking pot shots at each other from behind heaps of lava far out in the Malpais. Near the sheriff was his son. Lafe, Jr., lay in a fissure behind a mound of slag-iron and endeavored conscientiously to shoot off the top of Moffatt's head as it bobbed for the fraction of a second from behind another mound a hundred yards away. They had abandoned their horses when they entered the Malpais, because the footing was so treacherous that they could make as good progress by walking. Moreover, there was nothing of sustenance for the beasts in all the forty miles of waste. Coming upon Moffatt unexpectedly as he was examining his jaded horse's feet, the sheriff had not been able to carry into execution his plan of hiding Lafe, Jr., in a position where he would be safe and could yet render assistance. So now Lafe, Jr., flattened out in his fissure in equal danger with his father, and exulting vastly. Of course, what the pursuers should have done, according to the best military tactics, was to separate and come upon the outlaw from two sides, thus exposing him to a shot. About the only objection that could be urged to this strategy was that they couldn't do it. Moffatt could see their every movement and they dare not budge from their shelter. Whatever the quality of his courage, nobody could deny that Steve was terrible with a rifle.



"So now Lafe, Jr., flattened out in his fissure in equal danger with his father."

"How about that one, Lafe?" the outlaw yelled, as a bullet from his 25-35 skimmed along Johnson's shoulder and back.

"Two inches too high, Steve," said Lafe, without resentment.

Shortly after this the two pursuers ceased firing, though maintaining a watchful eye for any movement of the fugitive, and partook ravenously of bread and cold beef, canned tomatoes and tepid water.

Night was creeping over the Malpais. Away to their right yawned the crater whence this monstrous flow of lava had anciently spouted. From its base to its rim was about two hundred feet. On every side were the distorted, grotesque knolls of melted rocks, brick-red in color, stretching for leagues like a slag-heap from the fires of giants. Not a moving thing had they seen in their progress through this region. A tiny shrub clung here and there in a fissure, where an inch or two of soil had been gathered by the winds, and once Lafe, Jr., had narrowly escaped falling into a devil's pincushion. About three miles to the south towered the highest point in the Malpais, a precipitous hill of scorched rock, crowned with a blunt shaft. Atop this shaft was a dark object. Presently it soared into the heavens. It was an eagle.

Johnson scanned the western sky and the glory of the setting sun in its halo of gold and crimson and purple. Then he pointed to where the hosts of the storm kings were gathering above the pines just below El Capitan's peak. From the thickest of the mass a flash of lightning licked downward.

"The cook done told me yesterday," he said to his son, "that that ol' mountain yonder is always raising hell. If the lightning gets going strong, there're better places to be in than these here Malpais, son."

"I reckon you're right," said the boy, not without an anxious glance upward.

They exchanged shots twice with Moffatt before the dark came. With its coming they felt a warm splash of rain upon their faces, and in a leaping flash that illuminated the heavens, they beheld El Capitan swiftly despatching his cloud warriors over the country.

"It's getting blacker'n the wash basin at headquarters," said Lafe, Jr., with a nervous laugh. "Moffatt will give us the slip easy in the dark, Dad."

"He won't travel far in this storm, son."

Nor did he attempt it. The rain burst upon them in squalls that drove in regular procession like waves of the sea, and back of it, urging it forward, rode a hurricane of wind, shrieking and tearing among the mounds. From north to south the lightning flared; they could smell it. The detonations of the thunder rocked the earth. A great jagged spear was hurled upon the pile where the eagle had sat his vigil, and their starting eyes had a momentary vision of the awful impact. Lafe, Jr., crawled close to his father. He was shivering.

"Do you reckon we'll be killed, Dad? Look at the lightning."

To right, to left, behind them and in front, the forked flashes played upon the metal heaps, the splitting strokes blinding them with blue and green glares. It was a carnival of fire. Johnson stared fascinated, his whole being numbed. A loafer wolf, his tail between his legs, whining dolefully, slunk past them to his den. He did not see or, seeing, did not heed, his hereditary foes.

An especially brilliant flash, followed on the instant by a shock of thunder, brought the sheriff half-way to his feet, so close did it feel. In their ears sounded a wild, immeasurably plaintive scream, and he peered over the mound.

"That's a horse!" he shouted close to his son's ear. "They yell something awful when they're mortal scared. Yes, I swan there's Steve's horse laying on its side on a rock."

Lafe, Jr., was mumbling to himself, but his words were unintelligible, although Lafe afterward assured Hetty that he heard "Now I lay me," quite distinctly. However that may be, his son took heart and began to grope about in the dark behind him.

"What's the matter, Lafe?" asked his father anxiously. "Anything wrong, boy?"

"I'm looking for my slicker. I brought it along."

"What do you want your slicker for? You're soaked through now. You can't get any wetter."

"I'll feel sort of safer," said the boy obstinately. "Here it is. I'm going to put it on."

He got to his knees to don the sticky, clinging coat, and as he held it extended loosely in his hands to discover the armholes, a fierce gust of wind whipped it from his grasp and it flew high over their heads with a loud flapping, straight towards Moffatt's hiding-place. A shout, a shot and maniacal laughter came to them faintly against the tempest.

Peeping over their barrier, in a succession of flashes that lighted up the wastes for miles, they made out Moffatt standing on top of his mound with his hands raised to the sky. His hat was gone and his rifle he had thrown away. For a full minute he was blotted from their sight. Then, in another illumination, they saw him running towards them, laughing wildly.

"It's the angel of the Lord!" he shrilled to the contending skies. "It's the angel of the Lord. I seen him."

The renegade ran a dozen steps more, whirled dizzily and toppled to the earth. Shaking off his son's imploring hands, Johnson sprang into the dark. Three minutes later he was back, dragging Moffatt by the arms and shoulders.

"The lightning done hit him, I reckon," he panted. "Singed down both sides, he is. I reckon he got hit twice. He ain't dead—not him."

Moffatt regained consciousness in a few minutes, but the horror of it was still upon him, and his imagination peopled the night with avenging spirits. He cowered down between the two and endeavored to interpose the boy's body between him and the elements.

"You won't let the ol' man kill me, will you, son?" he whimpered.

"Shut up," said Lafe, Jr., coldly.

"You keep quiet, Steve," said Johnson irritably. "It's bad enough without having you blubber like that. We've got to stay here till daylight."

"All right. I'll be quiet, Lafe. But you-all won't kill me, now? Promise? Where's my gun?"

"I've got it," said Lafe, Jr. "I do believe this ol' storm is blowing itself out."

At daylight they sought their horses, Moffatt carrying his saddle over his shoulder and staggering weakly beside the boy. He was too frightened to remain near Lafe, and implored his son whiningly at every step to intercede for him with his father and the Anvil men. If he only would, he would treat him fair and teach him how to shoot.

Their mounts had drifted with the gale and were nowhere in sight, and there was nothing for them to do but toil the weary miles on foot. They arrived at the Bar W bunkhouse at nightfall, spent with hunger and want of sleep. They slept twelve hours, with Moffatt locked in the cook's own bedroom.

CHAPTER XLV

THE END

It was five days later that Mrs. Horne, emerging from the door on hearing a horse neigh, espied a pair of riders coming up the lane. Her mouth opened in amazement and she sped into the house, crying excitedly for Manuel. Lafe, Jr., pulled up at the yard gate and said; "No, you don't, Moffatt. You get down first and go in front."

"Sure, I'm ready, Lafe. Better not get too reckless with that li'l gun, boy. She's liable for to go off."

They passed into the house and entered Horne's bedroom, after Lafe, Jr., had whispered to the perturbed Manuel. Mrs. Horne was standing guard beside the bed, her face white and accusing, as Moffatt was thrust forward by young Johnson. The renegade would not look at the sick man, but mumbled, and fidgeted from one foot to the other. Horne surveyed him dully for a moment; then his eyes brightened and he turned his face towards Lafe, Jr., with a smile.

"Dad and I got him over in New Mexico," said Lafe, Jr., in answer to the look. "We caught up with him in the Malpais. Dad, he had to stay home this morning because mother's poorly, so he sent me with him."

The boy did not state that Lafe had purposely permitted him to come alone, for his greater triumph and the hardening of his nerve. In fact, Lafe, Jr., did not know it.

"Is he—what's wrong with him, Lafe?"

"Lightning. He got burned awful bad. He's awful scared, too, Mr. Horne. Here, you, stand up straight!"

"Moffatt," said the cowman weakly, "I ought to give you up to be hanged. You aren't worth shooting. But I reckon you're worse off alive than dead. Turn him loose, Lafe boy. I always knew his nerve wasn't real. He won't bother us any more."

"I can go then, Mr. Horne, sir?" the prisoner quavered.

"You heard what he said, didn't you?" said Lafe, Jr. "Out you go! No, you can't have that horse. You can walk. And say—get a move on you. I'm going to begin shooting when I've counted fifty."

"Say, Lafe, you'll give me a fair count, won't you, boy? Don't be mean and cut in on it, Lafe. Yes, yes, I'm a-going."

"One, two, three, four—"

THE END

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