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Jean of the Lazy A

By

B. M. BOWER

CONTENTS

JEAN OF THE LAZY A

CHAPTER I

HOW TROUBLE CAME TO THE LAZY A

Without going into a deep, psychological discussion of the elements in men's souls that breed events, we may say with truth that the Lazy A ranch was as other ranches in the smooth tenor of its life until one day in June, when the finger of fate wrote bold and black across the face of it the word that blotted out prosperity, content, warm family ties,—all those things that go to make life worth while.

Jean, sixteen and a range girl to the last fiber of her being, had gotten up early that morning and had washed the dishes and swept, and had shaken the rugs of the little living-room most vigorously. On her knees, with stiff brush and much soapy water, she had scrubbed the kitchen floor until the boards dried white as kitchen floors may be. She had baked a loaf of gingerbread, that came from the oven with a most delectable odor, and had wrapped it in a clean cloth to cool on the kitchen table. Her dad and Lite Avery would show cause for the baking of it when they sat down, fresh washed and ravenous, to their supper that evening. I mention Jean and her scrubbed kitchen and the gingerbread by way of proving how the Lazy A went unwarned and unsuspecting to the very brink of its disaster.

Lite Avery, long and lean and silently content with life, had ridden away with a package of sandwiches, after a full breakfast and a smile from the slim girl who cooked it, upon the business of the day; which happened to be a long ride with one of the Bar Nothing riders, down in the breaks along the river. Jean's father, big Aleck Douglas, had saddled and ridden away alone upon business of his own. And presently, in mid-forenoon, Jean closed the kitchen door upon an immaculately clean house filled with the warm, fragrant odor of her baking, and in fresh shirt waist and her best riding-skirt and Stetson, went whistling away down the path to the stable, and saddled Pard, the brown colt that Lite had broken to the saddle for her that spring. In ten minutes or so she went galloping down the coulee and out upon the trail to town, which was fifteen miles away and held a chum of hers.

So Lazy A coulee was left at peace, with scratching hens busy with the feeding of half-feathered chicks, and a rooster that crowed from the corral fence seven times without stopping to take breath. In the big corral a sorrel mare nosed her colt and nibbled abstractedly at the pile of hay in one corner, while the colt wabbled aimlessly up and sniffed curiously and then turned to inspect the rails that felt so queer and hard when he rubbed his nose against them. The sun was warm, and cloud-shadows drifted lazily across the coulee with the breeze that blew from the west. You never would dream that this was the last day,—the last few hours even,—when the Lazy A would be the untroubled home of three persons of whose lives it formed so great a part.

At noon the hens were hovering their chickens in the shade of the mower which Lite was overhauling during his spare time, getting it ready for the hay that was growing apace out there in the broad mouth of the coulee. The rooster was wallowing luxuriously in a dusty spot in the corral. The young colt lay stretched out on the fat of its side in the sun, sound asleep. The sorrel mare lay beside it, asleep also, with her head thrown up against her shoulder. Somewhere in a shed a calf was bawling in bored lonesomeness away from its mother feeding down the pasture. And over all the coulee and the buildings nestled against the bluff at its upper end was spread that atmosphere of homey comfort and sheltered calm which surrounds always a home that is happy.

Lite Avery, riding toward home just when the shadows were beginning to grow long behind him, wondered if Jean would be back by the time he reached the ranch. He hoped so, with a vague distaste at finding the place empty of her cheerful presence. Be looked at his watch; it was nearly four o'clock. She ought to be home by half-past four or five, anyway. He glanced sidelong at Jim and quietly slackened his pace a little. Jim was telling one of those long, rambling tales of the little happenings of a narrow life, and Lite was supposed to be listening instead of thinking about when Jean would return home. Jim believed he was listening, and drove home the point of his story.

"Yes, sir, them's his very words. Art Osgood heard him. He'll do it, too, take it from me, Crofty

is shore riled up this time."

"Always is," Lite observed, without paying much attention. "I'll turn off here, Jim, and cut across. Got some work I want to get done yet to-night. So long."

He swung away from his companion, whose trail to the Bar Nothing led him straight west, passing the Lazy A coulee well out from its mouth, toward the river. Lite could save a half mile by bearing off to the north and entering the coulee at the eastern side and riding up through the pasture. He wanted to see how the grass was coming on, anyway. The last rain should have given it a fresh start.

He was in no great hurry, after all; he had merely been bored with Jim's company and wanted to go on alone. And then he could get the fire started for Jean. Lite's life was running very smoothly indeed; so smoothly that his thoughts occupied themselves largely with little things, save when they concerned themselves with Jean, who had been away to school for a year and had graduated from "high," as she called it, just a couple of weeks ago, and had come home to keep house for dad and Lite. The novelty of her presence on the ranch was still fresh enough to fill his thoughts with her slim attractiveness. Town hadn't spoiled her, he thought glowingly. She was the same good little pal,—only she was growing up pretty fast, now. She was a young lady already.

So, thinking of her with the brightening of spirits which is the first symptom of the world-old emotion called love, Lite rounded the eastern arm of the bluff and came within sight of the coulee spread before him, shaped like the half of a huge platter with a high rim of bluff on three sides.

His first involuntary glance was towards the house, and there was unacknowledged expectancy in his eyes. But he did not see Jean, nor any sign that she had returned. Instead, he saw her father just mounting in haste at the corral. He saw him swing his quirt down along the side of his horse and go tearing down the trail, leaving the wire gate flat upon the ground behind him,—which was against all precedent.

Lite quickened his own pace. He did not know why big Aleck Douglas should be hitting that pace out of the coulee, but since Aleck's pace was habitually unhurried, the inference was plain enough that there was some urgent need for haste. Lite let down the rails of the barred gate from the meadow into the pasture, mounted, and went galloping across the uneven sod. His first anxious thought was for the girl. Had something happened to her?

At the stable he looked and saw that Jean's saddle did not hang on its accustomed peg inside the door, and he breathed freer. She could not have returned, then. He turned his own horse inside without taking off the saddle, and looked around him puzzled. Nothing seemed wrong about the place. The sorrel mare stood placidly switching at the flies and suckling her gangling colt in the shady corner of the corral, and the chickens were pecking desultorily about their feeding-ground in expectation of the wheat that Jean or Lite would fling to them later on. Not a thing seemed unusual.

Yet Lite stood just outside the stable, and the sensation that something was wrong grew keener. He was not a nervous person,—you would have laughed at the idea of nerves in connection with Lite Avery. He felt that something was wrong, just the same. It was not altogether the hurried departure of Aleck Douglas, either, that made him feel so. He looked at the house setting back there close to the bluff just where it began to curve rudely out from the narrowest part of the coulee. It was still and quiet, with closed windows and doors to tell there was no one at home. And yet, to Lite its very silence seemed sinister.

Wolves were many, down in the breaks along the river that spring; and the coyotes were an ever-present evil among the calves, so that Lite never rode abroad without his six-shooter. He reached back and loosened it in the holster before he started up the sandy path to the house; and if you knew the Lazy A ranch as well as Lite knew it, from six years of calling it home, you would wonder at that action of his, which was instinctive and wholly unconscious.

So he went up through the sunshine of late afternoon that sent his shadow a full rod before him, and he stepped upon the narrow platform before the kitchen door, and stood there a minute listening. He heard the mantel clock in the living-room ticking with the resonance given by a room empty of all other sound. Because his ears were keen, he heard also the little alarm clock in the kitchen tick-tick-tick on the shelf behind the stove where Jean kept it daytimes.

Peaceful enough, for all the silence; yet Lite reached back and laid his fingers upon the smooth butt of his six-shooter and opened the door with his left hand, which was more or less awkward. He pushed the door open and stepped inside. Then for a full minute he did not move.

On the floor that Jean had scrubbed till it was so white, a man lay dead, stretched upon his back. His eyes stared vacantly straight up at the ceiling, where a single cobweb which Jean had not noticed swayed in the air-current Lite set in motion with the opening of the door. On the floor, where it had dropped from his hand perhaps when he fell, a small square piece of gingerbread lay, crumbled around the edges. Tragic halo around his head, a pool of blood was turning brown and clotted. Lite shivered a little while he stared down at him.

In a minute he lifted his eyes from the figure and looked around the small room. The stove

shone black in the sunlight which the open door let in. On the table, covered with white oilcloth, the loaf of gingerbread lay uncovered, and beside it lay a knife used to cut off the piece which the man on the floor had not eaten before he died. Nothing else was disturbed. Nothing else seemed in the least to bear any evidence of what had taken place.

Lite's thoughts turned in spite of him to the man who had ridden from the coulee as though fiends had pursued. The conclusion was obvious, yet Lite loyally rejected it in the face of reason. Reason told him that there went the slayer. For this dead man was what was left of Johnny Croft, the Crofty of whom Jim had gossiped not more than half an hour before. And the gossip had been of threats which Johnny Croft had made against the two Douglas brothers,—big Aleck, of the Lazy A, and Carl, of the Bar Nothing ranch adjoining.

Suicide it could scarcely be, for Crofty was the type of man who would cling to life; besides, his gun was in its holster, and a man would hardly have the strength or the desire to put away his gun after he has shot himself under one eye. Death had undoubtedly been immediate. Lite thought of these things while he stood there just inside the door. Then he turned slowly and went outside, and stood hesitating upon the porch. He did not quite know what he ought to do about it, and so he did not mean to be in too great a hurry to do anything; that was Lite's habit, and he had always found that it served him well.

If the rider had been fleeing from his crime, as was likely, Lite had no mind to raise at once the hue and cry. An hour or two could make no difference to the dead man,—and you must remember that Lite had for six years called this place his home, and big Aleck Douglas his friend as well as the man who paid him wages for the work he did. He was half tempted to ride away and say nothing for a while. He could let it appear that he had not been at the house at all and so had not discovered the crime when he did. That would give Aleck Douglas more time to get away. But there was Jean, due at any moment now. He could not go away and let Jean discover that gruesome thing on the kitchen floor. He could not take it up and hide it away somewhere; he could not do anything, it seemed to him, but just wait.

He went slowly down the path to the stable, his chin on his chest, his mind grappling with the tragedy and with the problem of how best he might lighten the blow that had fallen upon the ranch. It was unreal,—it was unthinkable,—that Aleck Douglas, the man who met but friendly glances, ride where he might, had done this thing. And yet there was nothing else to believe. Johnny Croft had worked here on the ranch for a couple of months, off and on. He had not been steadily employed, and he had been paid by the day instead of by the month as was the custom. He had worked also for Carl Douglas at the Bar Nothing; back and forth, for one or the other as work pressed. He was too erratic to be depended upon except from day to day; too prone to saddle his horse and ride to town and forget to return for a day or two days or a week, as the mood seized him or his money held out.

Lite knew that there had been some dispute when he had left; he had claimed payment for more days than he had worked. Aleck was a just man who paid honestly what he owed; he was also known to be "close-fisted." He would pay what he owed and not a nickel more,—hence the dispute. Johnny had gone away seeming satisfied that his own figures were wrong, but later on he had quarreled with Carl over wages and other things. Carl had a bad temper that sometimes got beyond his control, and he had ordered Johnny off the ranch. This was part of the long, full-detailed story Jim had been telling. Johnny had left, and he had talked about the Douglas brothers to any one who would listen. He had said they were crooked, both of them, and would cheat a working-man out of his pay. He had come back, evidently, to renew the argument with Aleck. With the easy ways of ranch people, he had gone inside when he found no one at home,—hungry, probably, and not at all backward about helping himself to whatever appealed to his appetite. That was Johnny's way,—a way that went unquestioned, since he had lived there long enough to feel at home. Lite remembered with an odd feeling of pity how Johnny had praised the first gingerbread which Jean had baked, the day after her arrival; and how he had eaten three pieces and had made Jean's cheeks burn with confusion at his bold flattery.

He had come back, and he had helped himself to the gingerbread. And then he had been shot down. He was lying in there now, just as he had fallen, and his blood was staining deep the fresh-scrubbed floor. And Jean would be coming home soon. Lite thought it would be better if he rode out to meet her, and told her what had happened, so that she need not come upon it unprepared. There was nothing else that he could bring himself to do, and his mood demanded action of some sort; one could not sit down at peace with a fresh tragedy like that hanging over the place.

He had reached the stable when a horse walked out from behind the hay corral and stopped, eyeing him curiously. It was Johnny's horse. Even as improvident a cowpuncher as Johnny Croft had been likes to own a "private" horse,—one that is his own and can be ridden when and where the owner chooses. Lite turned and went over to it, caught it by the dragging bridle-reins, and led it into an empty stall. He did not know whether he ought to unsaddle it or leave it as it was; but on second thought, he loosened the cinch in kindness to the animal, and took off its bridle, so that it could eat without being hampered by the bit. Lite was too thorough a horseman not to be thoughtful of an animal's comfort.

He led his own horse out, and then he stopped abruptly. For Pard stood in front of the kitchen door, and Jean was untying a package or two from the saddle. He opened his mouth to call to her; he started forward; but he was too late to prevent what happened. Before his throat

had made a sound, Jean turned with the packages in the hollow of her arm and stepped upon the platform with that springy haste of movement which belongs to health and youth and happiness; and before he had taken more than the first step away from his horse, she had opened the kitchen door.

Lite ran, then. He did not call to her. What was the use? She had seen. She had dropped her packages, and turned and ran to meet him, and caught him by the arm in a panic of horror. Lite patted her hand awkwardly, not knowing what he ought to say.

"What made you go in there?" came of its own accord from his lips. "That's no place for a girl."

"It's Johnny Croft!" she gasped just above her breath. "How—did it happen, Lite?"

"I don't know," said Lite slowly, looking down and still patting her hand. "Your father and I have both been gone all day. I just got back a few minutes ago and found out about it." His tone, his manner and his words impressed upon Jean the point he wanted her to get,—that her father had not yet returned, and so knew nothing of the crime.

He led her back to where Pard stood, and told her to get on. Without asking him why, Jean obeyed him, with a shudder when her wide eyes strayed fascinated to the open door and to what lay just within. Lite went up and pulled the door shut, and then, walking beside her with an arm over Pard's neck, he led the way down to the stable, and mounted Ranger.

"You can't stay here," he explained, when she looked at him inquiringly. "Do you want to go over and stay at Carl's, or would you rather go back to town?" He rode down toward the gate, and Jean kept beside him.

"I'm going to stay with dad," she told him shakily. "If he stays, I'll—I'll stay."

"You'll not stay," he contradicted her bluntly. "You can't. It wouldn't be right." And he added self-reproachfully: "I never thought of your cutting across the bench and riding down the trail back of the house. I meant to head you off—"

"It's shorter," said Jean briefly. "I—if I can't stay, I'd rather go to town, Lite. I don't like to stay over at Uncle Carl's."

Therefore, when they reached the mouth of the coulee, Lite turned into the trail that led to town. All down the coulee the trail had been dug deep with the hoofprints of a galloping horse; and now, on the town trail, they were as plain as a primer to one schooled in the open. But Jean was too upset to notice them, and for that Lite was thankful. They did not talk much, beyond the commonplace speculations which tragedy always brings to the lips of the bystanders. Comments that were perfectly obvious they made, it is true. Jean said it was perfectly awful, and Lite agreed with her. Jean wondered how it could have happened, and Lite said he didn't know. Neither of them said anything about the effect it would have upon their future; I don't suppose that Jean, at least, could remotely guess at the effect. It is certain that Lite preferred not to do so.

They were no more than half way to town when they met a group of galloping horsemen, their coming heralded for a mile by the dust they kicked out of the trail.

In the midst rode Jean's father. Alongside him rode the coroner, and behind him rode the sheriff. The rest of the company was made up of men who had heard the news and were coming to look upon the tragedy. Lite drew a long breath of relief. Aleck Douglas, then, had not been running away.

CHAPTER II

CONCERNING LITE AND A FEW FOOTPRINTS

"Lucky you was with me all day, up to four o'clock, Lite," Jim said. "That lets you out slick and clean, seeing the doctor claims he'd been dead six hours when he seen him last night. Crofty—why, Crofty was laying in there dead when I was talking about him to you! Kinda gives a man the creeps to think of it. Who do you reckon done it, Lite?"

"How'n hell do *I* know?" Lite retorted irritably. "I didn't see it done."

Jim studied awhile, an ear cocked for the signal that the coroner was ready to begin the inquest. "Say," he leaned over and whispered in Lite's ear, "where was Aleck at, all day yesterday?"

"Riding over in the bend, looking for black-leg signs," said Lite promptly. "Packed a lunch,

same as I did."

The answer seemed to satisfy Jim and to eliminate from his mind any slight suspicion he may have held, but Lite had a sudden impulse to improve upon his statement.

"I saw Aleck ride into the ranch as I was coming home," he said. As he spoke, his face lightened as with a weight lifted from his mind.

Later, when the coroner questioned him about his movements and the movements of Aleck, Lite repeated the lie as casually as possible. It might have carried more weight with the jury if Aleck Douglas himself had not testified, just before then, that he had returned about three o'clock to the ranch and pottered around the corral with the mare and colt, and unsaddled his horse before going into the house at all. It was only when he had discovered Johnny Croft's horse at the haystack, he said, that he began to wonder where the rider could be. He had gone to the house—and found him on the kitchen floor.

Lite had not heard this statement, for the simple reason that, being a closely interested person, he had been invited to remain outside while Aleck Douglas testified. He wondered why the jury,—men whom he knew and had known for years, most of them,—looked at one another so queerly when he declared that he had seen Aleck ride home. The coroner also had given him a queer look, but he had not made any comment. Aleck, too, had turned his head and stared at Lite in a way which Lite preferred to think he had not understood.

Beyond that one statement which had produced such a curious effect, Lite did not have anything to say that shed the faintest light upon the matter. He told where he had been, and that he had discovered the body just before Jean arrived, and that he had immediately started with her to town. The coroner did not cross-question him. Counting from four o'clock, which Jim had already named as the time of their separation, Lite would have had just about time to do the things he testified to doing. The only thing he claimed to have done and could not possibly have done, was to see Aleck Douglas riding into the coulee. Aleck himself had branded that a lie before Lite had ever uttered it.

The result was just what was to be expected. Aleck Douglas was placed under arrest, and as a prisoner he rode back to town alongside the sheriff,—an old friend of his, by the way,—to where Jean waited impatiently for news.

It was Lite who told her. "It'll come out all right," he said, in his calm way that might hide a good deal of emotion beneath it. "It's just to have something to work from,—don't mean anything in particular. It's a funny way the law has got," he explained, "of arresting the last man that saw a fellow alive, or the first one that sees him dead."

Jean studied this explanation dolefully. "They ought to find out the last one that saw him alive," she said resentfully, "and arrest him, then,—and leave dad out of it. There's no sense in the law, if that's the way it works."

"Well, I didn't make the law," Lite observed, in a tone that made Jean look up curiously into his face.

"Why don't they find out who saw him last?" she repeated. "Somebody did. Somebody must have gone there with him. Lite, do you know that Art Osgood came into town with his horse all in a lather of sweat, and took the afternoon train yesterday? I saw him. I met him square in the middle of the street, and he didn't even look at me. He was in a frightful hurry, and he looked all upset. If I was the law, I'd leave dad alone and get after Art Osgood. He acted to me," she added viciously, "exactly as if he were running away!"

"He wasn't, though. Jim told me Art was going to leave yesterday; that was in the forenoon. He's going to Alaska,—been planning it all spring. And Carl said he was with Art till Art left to catch the train. Somebody else from town here had seen him take the train, and asked about him. No, it wasn't Art."

"Well, who was it, then?"

Never before had Lite failed to tell Jean just what she wanted to know. He failed now, and he went away as though he was glad to put distance between them. He did not know what to think. He did not want to think. Certainly he did not want to talk, to Jean especially. For lies never came easily to the tongue of Lite Avery. It was all very well to tell Jean that he didn't know who it was; he did tell her so, and made his escape before she could read in his face the fear that he did know. It was not so easy to guard his fear from the keen eyes of his fellows, with whom he must mingle and discuss the murder, or else pay the penalty of having them suspect that he knew a great deal more about it than he admitted.

Several men tried to stop him and talk about it, but he put them off. He was due at the ranch, he said, to look after the stock. He didn't know a thing about it, anyway.

Lazy A coulee, when he rode into it, seemed to wear already an air of depression, foretaste of what was to come. The trail was filled with hoofprints, and cut deep with the wagon that had borne the dead man to town and to an unwept burial. At the gate he met Carl Douglas, riding

with his head sunk deep on his chest. Lite would have avoided that meeting if he could have done so unobtrusively, but as it was, he pulled up and waited while Carl opened the wire gate and dragged it to one side. From the look of his face, Carl also would have avoided the meeting, if he could have done so. He glanced up as Lite passed through.

"Hell of a verdict," Lite made brief comment when he met Carl's eyes.

Carl stopped, leaning against his horse with one hand thrown up to the saddle-horn. He was a small man, not at all like Aleck in size or in features. He looked haggard now and white.

"What do you make of it?" he asked Lite. "Do you believe—?"

"Of course I don't! Great question for a brother to ask," Lite retorted sharply. "It's not in Aleck to do a thing like that."

"What made you say you saw him ride home? You didn't, did you?"

"You heard what I said; take it or leave it." Lite scowled down at Carl. "What was there queer about it? Why—"

"If you'd been inside ten minutes before then," Carl told him bluntly, "you'd have heard Aleck say he came home a full hour or more before you say you saw him ride in. That's what's queer. What made you do that? It won't help Aleck none."

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" Lite slouched miserably in the saddle, and eyed the other without really seeing him at all. "They can't prove anything on Aleck," he added with faint hope.

"I don't see myself how they can." Carl brightened perceptibly. "His being alone all day is bad; he can't furnish the alibi you can furnish. But they can't prove anything. They'll turn him loose, the grand jury will; they'll have to. They can't indict him on the evidence. They haven't got any evidence,—not any more than just the fact that he rode in with the news. No need to worry; he'll be turned loose in a few days." He picked up the gate, dragged it after him as he went through, and fumbled the wire loop into place over the post. "I wish," he said when he had mounted with the gate between them, "you hadn't been so particular to say you saw him ride home about the same time you did. That looks bad, Lite."

"Bad for who?" Lite turned in the saddle aggressively.

"Looks bad all around. I don't see what made you do that;—not when you knew Jim and Aleck had both testified before you did."

Lite rode slowly down the road to the stable, and cursed the impulse that had made him blunder so. He had no compunctions for the lie, if only it had done any good. It had done harm; he could see now that it had. But he could not believe that it would make any material difference in Aleck's case. As the story had been repeated to Lite by half a dozen men, who had heard him tell it, Aleck's own testimony had been responsible for the verdict.

Men had told Lite plainly that Aleck was a fool not to plead self-defense, even in face of the fact that Johnny Croft had not drawn any weapon. Jim had declared that Aleck could have sworn that Johnny reached for his gun. Others admitted voluntarily that while it would be a pretty weak defense, it would beat the story Aleck had told.

Lite turned the mare and colt into a shed for the night. He milked the two cows without giving any thought to what he was doing, and carried the milk to the kitchen door before he realized that it would be wasted, sitting in pans when the house would be empty. Still, it occurred to him that he might as well go on with the routine of the place until they knew to a certainty what the grand jury would do. So he went in and put away the milk.

After that, Lite let other work wait while he cleaned the kitchen and tried to wash out that brown stain on the floor. His face was moody, his eyes dull with trouble. Like a treadmill, his mind went over and over the meager knowledge he had of the tragedy. He could not bring himself to believe Aleck Douglas guilty of the murder; yet he could not believe anything else.

Johnny Croft, it had been proven at the inquest, rode out from town alone, bent on mischief, if vague, half-drunken threats meant anything. He had told more than one that he was going to the Lazy A, but it was certain that no one had followed him from town. His threats had been for the most part directed against Carl, it is true; but if he had meant to quarrel with Carl, he would have gone to the Bar Nothing instead of the Lazy A. Probably he had meant to see both Carl and Aleck, and had come here first, since it was the nearest to town.

As to enemies, no one had particularly liked Johnny. He was not a likeable sort; he was too "mouthy" according to his associates. He had quarreled with a good many for slight cause, but since he was so notoriously blatant and argumentative, no one had taken him seriously enough to nurse any grudge that would be likely to breed assassination. It was inconceivable to Lite that any man had trailed Johnny Croft to the Lazy A and shot him down in the kitchen while he was calmly helping himself to Jean's gingerbread. Still, he must take that for granted or else believe

what he steadfastly refused to confess even to himself that he believed.

It was nearly dark when he threw out the last pail of water and stood looking down dissatisfied at the result of his labor, while he dried his hands. The stain was still there, in spite of him, just as the memory of the murder would cling always to the place. He went out and watered Jean's poppies and sweet peas and pansies, still going over and over the evidence and trying to fill in the gaps.

He had blundered with his lie that had meant to help. The lie had proven to every man who heard him utter it that his faith in Aleck's innocence was not strong; it had proven that he did not trust the facts. That hurt Lite, and made it seem more than ever his task to clear up the matter, if he could. If he could not, then he would make amends in whatever way he might.

Almost as if he were guarding that gruesome room which was empty now and silent,—since the clock had not been wound and had run down,—he sat long upon the narrow platform before the kitchen door and smoked and stared straight before him. Once he thought he saw a man move cautiously from the corner of the shed where the youngest calf slept beside its mother, He had been thinking so deeply of other things that he was not sure, but he went down there, his cigarette glowing in the gloom, and stood looking and listening.

He neither saw nor heard anything, and presently he went back to the house; but his abstraction was broken by the fancy, so that he did not sit down again to smoke and think. He had thought until his brain felt heavy and stupid; and the last cigarette he lighted; he threw away, for he had smoked until his tongue was sore. He went in and went to bed.

For a long time he lay awake. Finally he dropped into a sleep so heavy that it was nearer to a torpor, and it was the sunlight that awoke him; sunlight that was warm in the room and proved how late the morning was. He swore in his astonishment and got up hastily, a great deal more optimistic than when he had lain down, and hurried out to feed the stock before he boiled coffee and fried eggs for himself.

It was when he went in to cook his belated breakfast that Lite noticed something which had no logical explanation. There were footprints on the kitchen floor that he had scrubbed so diligently. He stood looking at them, much as he had looked at the stain that would not come out, no matter how hard he scrubbed. He had not gone in the room after he had pulled the door shut and gone off to water Jean's dowers. He was positive upon that point; and even if he had gone in, his tracks would scarcely have led straight across the room to the cupboard where the table dishes were kept.

The tracks led to the cupboard, and were muddled confusedly there, as though the maker had stood there for some minutes. Lite could not see any sense in that. They were very distinct, just as footprints always show plainly on clean boards. The floor had evidently been moist still,—Lite had scrubbed man-fashion, with a broom, and had not been very particular about drying the floor afterwards. Also he had thrown the water straight out from the door, and the fellow must have stepped on the moist sand that clung to his boots. In the dark he could not notice that, or see that he had left tracks on the floor.

Lite went to the cupboard and looked inside it, wondering what the man could have wanted there. It was one of those old-fashioned "safes" such as our grandmothers considered indispensable in the furnishing of a kitchen. It held the table dishes neatly piled: dinner plates at the end of the middle shelf, smaller plates next, then a stack of saucers,—the arrangement stereotyped, unvarying since first Lite Avery had taken dishtowel in hand to dry the dishes for Jean when she was ten and stood upon a footstool so that her elbows would be higher than the rim of the dishpan. The cherry-blossom dinner set that had come from the mail-order house long ago was chipped now and incomplete, but the familiar rows gave Lite an odd sense of the unreality of the tragedy that had so lately taken place in that room.

Clearly there was nothing there to tempt a thief, and there was nothing disturbed. Lite straightened up and looked down thoughtfully upon the top of the cupboard, where Jean had stacked out-of-date newspapers and magazines, and where Aleck had laid a pair of extra gloves. He pulled out the two small drawers just under the cupboard top and looked within them. The first held pipes and sacks of tobacco and books of cigarette papers; Lite knew well enough the contents of that drawer. He appraised the supply of tobacco, remembered how much had been there on the morning of the murder, and decided that none had been taken. He helped himself to a fresh ten-cent sack of tobacco and inspected the other drawer.

Here were merchants' bills, a few letters of no consequence, a couple of writing tablets, two lead pencils, and a steel pen and a squat bottle of ink. This was called the writing-drawer, and had been since Lite first came to the ranch. Here Lite believed the confusion was recent. Jean had been very domestic since her return from school, and all disorder had been frowned upon. Lately the letters had been stacked in a corner, whereas now they were scattered. But they were of no consequence, once they had been read, and there was nothing else to merit attention from any one.

Lite looked down at the tracks and saw that they led into another room, which was Aleck's bedroom. He went in there, but he could not find any reason for a night-prowler's visit. Aleck's

desk was always open. There was never anything there which he wanted to hide away. His account books and his business correspondence, such as it was, lay accessible to the curious. There was nothing intricate or secret about the running of the Lazy A ranch; nothing that should interest any one save the owner.

It occurred to Lite that incriminating evidence is sometimes placed surreptitiously in a suspected man's desk. He had heard of such things being done. He could not imagine what evidence might be placed here by any one, but he made a thorough search. He did not find anything that remotely concerned the murder.

He looked through the living-room, and even opened the door which led from the kitchen into Jean's room, which had been built on to the rest of the house a few years before. He could not find any excuse for those footprints.

He cooked and ate his breakfast absent-mindedly, glancing often down at the footprints on the floor, and occasionally at the brown stain in the center. He decided that he would not say anything about those tracks. He would keep his eyes open and his mouth shut, and see what came of it.

CHAPTER III

WHAT A MAN'S GOOD NAME IS WORTH

You would think that the bare word of a man who has lived uprightly in a community for fifteen years or so would be believed under oath, even if his whole future did depend upon it. You would think that Aleck Douglas could not be convicted of murder just because he had reported that a man was shot down in Aleck's house.

The report of Aleck Douglas' trial is not the main feature of this story; it is merely the commencement, one might say. Therefore, I am going to be brief as I can and still give you a clear idea of the situation, and then I am going to skip the next three years and begin where the real story begins.

Aleck's position was dishearteningly simple, and there was nothing much that one could do to soften the facts or throw a new light on the murder. Lite watched, wide awake and eager, many a night for the return of that prowler, but he never saw or heard a thing that gave him any clue whatever. So the footprints seemed likely to remain the mystery they had seemed on the morning when he discovered them. He laid traps, pretending to ride away from the ranch to town before dark, and returning cautiously by way of the trail down the bluff behind the house. But nothing came of it. Lazy A ranch was keeping its secret well, and by the time the trial was begun, Lite had given up hope. Once he believed the house had been visited in the daytime, during his absence in town, but he could not be sure of that.

Jean went to Chinook and stayed there, so that Lite saw her seldom. Carl also was away much of the time, trying by every means he could think of to swing public opinion and the evidence in Aleck's favor. He prevailed upon Rossman, who was Montana's best-known lawyer, to defend the case, for one thing. He seemed to pin his faith almost wholly upon Rossman, and declared to every one that Aleck would never be convicted. It would be, he maintained, impossible to convict him, with Rossman handling the case; and he always added the statement that you can't send an innocent man to jail, if things are handled right.

Perhaps he did not, after all, handle things right. For in spite of Rossman, and Aleck's splendid reputation, and the meager evidence against him, he was found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to eight years in Deer Lodge penitentiary.

Rossman had made a great speech, and had made men in the jury blink back unshed tears. But he could not shake from them the belief that Aleck Douglas had ridden home and met Johnny Croft, calmly making himself at home in the Lazy A kitchen. He could not convince them that there had not been a quarrel, and that Aleck had not fired the shot in the grip of a sudden, overwhelming rage against Croft. By Aleck's own statement he had been at the ranch some time before he had started for town to report the murder. By the word of several witnesses, it had been proven that Croft had left town meaning to collect wages which he claimed were due him or else he would "get even." His last words to a group out by the hitching pole in front of the saloon which was Johnny's hangout, were: "I'm going to get what's coming to me, or there'll be one fine, large bunch of trouble!" He had not mentioned Aleck Douglas by name, it is true; but the fact that he had been found at the Lazy A was proof enough that he had referred to Aleck when he spoke.

There is no means of knowing just how far-reaching was the effect of that impulsive lie which Lite had told at the inquest. He did not repeat the blunder at the trial. When the district attorney reminded Lite of the statement he had made, Lite had calmly explained that he had made a

mistake; he should have said that he had seen Aleck ride away from the ranch instead of to it. Beyond that he would not go, question him as they might.

The judge sentenced Aleck to eight years, and publicly regretted the fact that Aleck had persisted in asserting his innocence; had he pleaded guilty instead, the judge more than hinted, the sentence would have been made as light as the law would permit. It was the stubborn denial of the deed in the face of all reason, he said, that went far toward weaning from the prisoner what sympathy he would otherwise have commanded from the public and the court of justice.

You know how those things go. There was nothing particularly out of the ordinary in the case; we read of such things in the paper, and a paragraph or two is considered sufficient space to give so commonplace a happening.

But there was Lite, loyal to his last breath in the face of his secret belief that Aleck was probably guilty; loyal and blaming himself bitterly for hurting Aleck's cause when he had meant only to help. There was Jean, dazed by the magnitude of the catastrophe that had overtaken them all; clinging to Lite as to the only part of her home that was left to her, steadfastly refusing to believe that they would actually take her dad away to prison, until the very last minute when she stood on the crowded depot platform and watched in dry-eyed misery while the train slid away and bore him out of her life. These things are not put in the papers.

"Come on, Jean." Lite took her by the arm and swung her away from the curious crowd which she did not see. "You're my girl now, and I'm going to start right in using my authority. I've got Pard here in the stable. You go climb into your riding-clothes, and we'll hit it outa this darned burg where every man and his dog has all gone to eyes and tongues. They make me sick. Come on."

"Where?" Jean held back a little with vague stubbornness against the thought of taking up life again without her dad. "This—this is the jumping-off place, Lite. There's nothing beyond."

Lite gripped her arm a little tighter if anything, and led her across the street and down the high sidewalk that bridged a swampy tract at the edge of town beyond the depot.

"We're taking the long way round," he observed "because I'm going to talk to you like a Dutch uncle for saying things like that. I—had a talk with your dad last night, Jean. He's turned you over to me to look after till he gets back. I wish he coulda turned the ranch over, along with you, but he couldn't. That's been signed over to Carl, somehow; I didn't go into that with your dad; we didn't have much time. Seems Carl put up the money to pay Rossman,—and other things,—and took over the ranch to square it. Anyway, I haven't got anything to say about the business end of the deal. I've got permission to boss you, though, and I'm sure going to do it to a fare-you-well." He cast a sidelong glance down at her. He could not see anything of her face except the droop of her mouth, a bit of her cheek, and her chin that promised firmness. Her mouth did not change expression in the slightest degree until she moved her lips in speech.

"I don't care. What is there to boss me about? The world has stopped." Her voice was steady, and it was also sullen.

"Right there is where the need of bossing begins. You can't stay in town any longer. There's nothing here to keep you from going crazy; and the Allens are altogether too sympathetic; nice folks, and they mean well,—but you don't want a bunch like that slopping around, crying all over you and keeping you in mind of things. I'm going to work for Carl, from now on. You're going out there to the Bar Nothing—" He felt a stiffening of the muscles under his fingers, and answered calmly the signal of rebellion.

"Sure, that's the place for you. Your dad and Carl fixed that up between them, anyway. That's to be your home; so my saying so is just an extra rope to bring you along peaceable. You're going to stay at the Bar Nothing. And I'm going to make a top hand outa you, Jean. I'm going to teach you to shoot and rope and punch cows and ride, till there won't be a girl in the United States to equal you."

"What for?" Jean still had an air of sullen apathy. "That won't help dad any."

"It'll start the world moving again." Lite forced himself to cheerfulness in the face of his own despondency. "You say it's stopped. It's us that have stopped. We've come to a blind pocket, you might say, in the trail we've been taking through life. We've got to start in a new place, that's all. Now, I know you're dead game, Jean; at least I know you used to be, and I'm gambling on school not taking that outa you. You're maybe thinking about going away off somewhere among strangers; but that wouldn't do at all. Your dad always counted on keeping you away from town life. I'm just going to ride herd on you, Jean, and see to it that you go on the way your dad wanted you to go. He can't be on the job, and so I'm what you might call his foreman. I know how he wants you to grow up; I'm going to make it my business to grow you according to directions."

He saw a little quirk of her lips, at that, and was vastly encouraged thereby.

"Has it struck you that you're liable to have your hands full?" she asked him with a certain drawl that Jean had possessed since she first learned to express herself in words.

"Sure! I'll likely have both hand and my hat full of trouble. But she's going to be done according to contract. I reckon I'll wish you was a bronk before I'm through—"

"What maddens me so that I could run amuck down this street, shooting everybody I saw," Jean flared out suddenly, "is the sickening injustice of it. Dad never did that; you know he never did it." She turned upon him fiercely. "Do you think he did?" she demanded, her eyes boring into his.

"Now, that's a bright question to be asking me, ain't it?" Lite rebuked. "That's a real bright, sensible question, I must say! I reckon you ought to be stood in the corner for that,—but I'll let it go this time. Only don't never spring anything like that again."

Jean looked ashamed. "I could doubt God Himself, right now," she gritted through her teeth.

"Well, don't doubt me, unless you want a scrap on your hands," Lite warned. "I'm sure ashamed of you. We'll stop here at the stable and get the horses. You can ride sideways as far as the Allens', and get your riding-skirt and come on. The sooner you are on top of a horse, the quicker you're going to come outa that state of mind."

It was pitifully amusing to see Lite Avery attempt to bully any one,—especially Jean,—who might almost be called Lite's religion. The idea of that long, lank cowpuncher whose shyness was so ingrained that it had every outward appearance of being a phlegmatic coldness, assuming the duties of Jean's dad and undertaking to see that she grew up according to directions, would have been funny, if he had not been so absolutely in earnest.

His method of comforting her and easing her through the first stage of black despair was unorthodox, but it was effective. Because she was too absorbed in her own misery to combat him openly, he got her started toward the Bar Nothing and away from the friends whose enervating pity was at that time the worst influence possible. He set the pace, and he set it for speed. The first mile they went at a sharp gallop that was not far from a run, and the horses were breathing heavily when he pulled up, well out of sight of the town, and turned to the girl.

There was color in her cheeks, and the dullness was gone from her eyes when she returned his glance inquiringly. The droop of her lips was no longer the droop of a weak yielding to sorrow, but rather the beginning of a brave facing of the future. Lite managed a grin that did not look forced.

"I'll make a real range hand outa you yet," he announced confidently. "You remember the roping and shooting science I taught you before you went off to school? You're going to start right in where you left off and learn all I know and some besides. I'll make a lady of you yet,—darned if I don't."

At that Jean laughed unexpectedly. Lite drew a long breath of relief.

CHAPTER IV.

JEAN

The still loneliness of desertion held fast the clutter of sheds and old stables roofed with dirt and rotting hay. The melancholy of emptiness hung like an invisible curtain before the sprawling house with warped, weather-blackened shingles, and sagging window-frames. You felt the silence when first you sighted the ranch buildings from the broad mouth of the Lazy A coulee,—the broad mouth that yawned always at the narrow valley and the undulations of the open range, and the purple line of mountains beyond. You felt it more strongly when you rode up to the gate of barbed-wire, spliced here and there, and having an unexpected stubbornness to harry the patience of men who would pass through it in haste. You grew unaccountably depressed if you rode on past the stables and corrals to the house, where the door was closed but never locked, and opened with a squeal of rusty hinges, if you turned the brown earthenware knob and at the same instant pressed sharply with your knee against the paintless panel.

You might notice the brown spot on the kitchen door where a man had died; you might notice the brown spot, but unless you had been told the grim story of the Lazy A, you would never guess the spot was a bloodstain. Even though you guessed and shuddered, you would forget it presently in the amazement with which you opened the door beyond and looked in upon a room where the chill atmosphere of the whole place could find no lodgment.

This was Jean's room, held sacred to her own needs and uses, in defiance of the dreariness that compassed it close. A square of old rag carpet covered the center of the floor, and beyond its border the warped boards were painted a dull, pale green. The walls were ugly with a cheap, flowered paper that had done its best to fade into inoffensive neutral tints. Jean had helped,

where she could, by covering the intricate rose pattern with old prints cut from magazines and with cheap, pretty souvenirs gleaned here and there and hoarded jealously. And there were books, which caught the eyes and held them even to forgetfulness of the paper.

You would laugh at Jean's room. Just at first you would laugh; after that you would want to cry, or pat Jean on her hard-muscled, capable shoulder; but if you knew Jean at all, you would not do either. First you would notice an old wooden cradle, painted blue, that stood in a corner. A button-eyed, blank-faced rag doll, the size of a baby at the fist-sucking age, was tucked neatly under the red-and-white patchwork quilt made to fit the cradle. Hanging directly over the cradle by a stirrup was Jean's first saddle,—a cheap pigskin affair with harsh straps and buckles, that her father had sent East for. Jean never had liked that saddle, even when it was new. She used to stand perfectly still while her father buckled it on the little buckskin pony she rode; and she would laugh when he picked her up and tossed her into the seat. She would throw her dad a kiss and go galloping off down the trail,—but when she was quite out of sight around the bend of the bench-land, she would stop and take the saddle off, and hide it in a certain clump of wild currant bushes, and continue her journey bareback. A kit-fox found it one day; that is how the edge of the cantle came to have that queer, chewed look.

There was an old, black wooden rocker with an oval picture of a ship under full sail, just where Jean's brown head rested when she leaned back and stared big-eyed down the coulee to the hills beyond. There was an old-fashioned work-basket always full of stockings that never were mended, and a crumpled dresser scarf which Jean had begun to hemstitch more than a year ago in a brief spasm of domesticity. There were magazines everywhere; and you may be sure that Jean had read them all, even to the soap advertisements and the sanitary kitchens and the vacuum cleaners. There was an old couch with a coarse, Navajo rug thrown over it, and three or four bright cushions that looked much used. And there were hair macartas and hackamores, and two pairs of her father's old spurs, and her father's stock saddle and chaps and slicker and hat; and a jelly glass half full of rattlesnake rattles, and her mother's old checked sunbonnet,—the kind with pasteboard "slats." Half the "slats" were broken. There was a guitar and an old, old sewing machine with a reloading shotgun outfit spread out upon it. There was a desk made of boxes, and on the desk lay a shot-loaded quirt that more than one rebellious cow-horse knew to its sorrow. There was a rawhide lariat that had parted its strands in a tussle with a stubborn cow. Jean meant to fix the broken end of the longest piece and use it for a tie-rope, some day when she had time, and thought of it.

Somewhere in the desk were verses which Jean had written,—dozens of them, and not nearly as bad as you might think. Jean laughed at them after they were written; but she never burned them, and she never spoke of them to any one but Lite, who listened with fixed attention and a solemn appreciation when she read them to him.

On the whole, the room was contradictory. But Jean herself was somewhat contradictory, and the place fitted her. Here was where she spent those hours when her absence from the Bar Nothing was left unexplained to any one save Lite. Here was where she drew into her shell, when her Uncle Carl made her feel more than usually an interloper; or when her Aunt Ella's burden of complaints and worry and headaches grew just a little too much for Jean.

She never opened the door into the kitchen. There was another just beyond the sewing-machine, that gave an intimate look into the face of the bluff which formed that side of the coulee wall. There were hollyhocks along the path that led to this door, and stunted rosebushes which were kept alive with much mysterious assistance in the way of water and cultivation. There was a little spring just under the foot of the bluff, where the trail began to climb; and some young alders made a shady nook there which Jean found pleasant on a hot day.

The rest of the house might be rat-ridden and desolate. The coulee might wear always the look of emptiness; but here, under the bluff by the spring, and in the room Jean called hers, one felt the air of occupancy that gave the lie to all around it.

When she rode around the bold, out-thrust shoulder of the hill which formed the western rim of the coulee, and went loping up the trail to where the barbed-wire gate stopped her, you would have said that Jean had not a trouble to call her own. She wore her old gray Stetson pretty well over one eye because of the sun-glare, and she was riding on one stirrup and letting the other foot swing free, and she was whirling her quirt round and round, cartwheel fashion, and whistling an air that every one knows,—and putting in certain complicated variations of her own.

At the gate she dismounted without ever missing a note, gave the warped stake a certain twist and jerk which loosened the wire loop so that she could slip it easily over the post, passed through and dragged the gate with her, dropping it flat upon the ground beside the trail. There was no stock anywhere in the coulee, and she would save a little trouble by leaving the gate open until she came out on her way home. She stepped aside to inspect the meadow lark's nest cunningly hidden under a wild rosebush, and then mounted and went on to the stable, still whistling carelessly.

She turned Pard into the shed where she invariably left him when she came to the Lazy A, and went on up the grass-grown path to the house. She had the preoccupied air of one who meditates deeply upon things apart; as a matter of fact, she had glanced down the coulee to its wide-open mouth, and had thrilled briefly at the wordless beauty of the green spread of the plain

and the hazy blue sweep of the mountains, and had come suddenly into the poetic mood. She had even caught a phrase,—"The lazy line of the watchful hills," it was,—and she was trying to fit it into a verse, and to find something beside "rills" that would rhyme with "hills."

She followed the path absent-mindedly to where she would have to turn at the corner of the kitchen and go around to the door of her own room; and until she came to the turn she did not realize what was jarring vaguely and yet insistently upon her mood. Then she knew; and she stopped full and stared down at the loose sand just before the warped kitchen steps. There were footprints in the path,—alien footprints; and they pointed toward that forbidden door into the kitchen of gruesome memory. Jean looked up frowning, and saw that the door had been opened and closed again carelessly. And upon the top step, strange feet had pressed a little caked earth carried from the trail where she stood. There were the small-heeled, pointed prints of a woman's foot, and there were the larger tracks of a man,—a man of the town.

Jean stood with her quirt dangling loosely from her wrist and glanced back toward the stables and down the coulee. She completely forgot that she wanted a rhyme for "hills." What were towns people doing here? And how did they get here? They had not ridden up the coulee; there were no tracks through the gate; and besides, these were not the prints of riding-boots.

She twitched her shoulders and went around to the door leading into her own room. The door stood wide open when it should have been closed. Inside there were evidences of curious inspection. She went hot with an unreasoning anger when she saw the wide-open door into the kitchen; first of all she went over and closed that door, her lips pressed tightly together. To her it was as though some wanton hand had forced up the lid of a coffin where slept her dead. She stood with her back against the door and looked around the room, breathing quickly. She felt the woman's foolish amusement at the old cradle with the rag doll tucked under the patchwork quilt, and at her pitiful attempts at adorning the tawdry walls. Without having seen more than the prints of her shoes in the path, Jean hated the woman who had blundered in here and had looked and laughed. She hated the man who had come with the woman.

She went over to her desk and stood staring at the litter. A couple of sheets of cheap tablet paper, whereon Jean had scribbled some verses of the range, lay across the quirt she had forgotten on her last trip. They had prowled among the papers, even! They had respected nothing of hers, had considered nothing sacred from their inquisitiveness. Jean picked up the paper and read the verses through, and her cheeks reddened slowly.

Then she discovered something else that turned them white with fresh anger. Jean had an old ledger wherein she kept a sporadic kind of a diary which she had entitled "More or Less the Record of my Sins." She did not write anything in it unless she felt like doing so; when she did, she wrote just exactly what she happened to think and feel at the time, and she had never gone back and read what was written there. Some one else had read, however; at least the book had been pulled out of its place and inspected, along with her other personal belongings. Jean had pressed the first wind-flowers of the season between the pages where she had done her last scribbling, and these were crumpled and two petals broken, so she knew that the book had been opened carelessly and perhaps read with that same brainless laughter.

She did not say anything. She straightened the wind-flowers as best she could, put the book back where it belonged, and went outside, and down to a lop-sided shack which might pass anywhere as a junk-shop. She found some nails and a hammer, and after a good deal of rummaging and some sneezing because of the dust she raised whenever she moved a pile of rubbish, she found a padlock with a key in it. More dusty search produced a hasp and some staples, and then she went back and nailed two planks across the door which opened into the kitchen. After that she fastened the windows shut with nails driven into the casing just above the lower sashes, and cracked the outer door with twelve-penny nails which she clinched on the inside with vicious blows of the hammer, so that the hasp could not be taken off without a good deal of trouble. She had pulled a great staple off the door of a useless box-stall, and when she had driven it in so deep that she could scarcely force the padlock into place over the hasp, and had put the key in her pocket, she felt in a measure protected from future prowlers. As a final hint, however, she went back to the shop and mixed some paint with lampblack and oil, and lettered a thin board which she afterwards carried up and nailed firmly across the outside kitchen door. Hammer in hand she backed away and read the words judicially, her head tilted sidewise:

ONLY SNEAKS GO WHERE THEY ARE NOT WANTED.
ARE YOU A SNEAK?

The hint was plain enough. She took the hammer back to the shop and led Pard out of the stable and down to the gate, her eyes watching suspiciously the trail for tracks of trespassers. She closed the gate so thoroughly with baling wire twisted about a stake that the next comer would have troubles of his own in getting it open again. She mounted and went away down the trail, sitting straight in the saddle, both feet in the stirrups, head up, and hat pulled firmly down to her very eyebrows, glances going here and there, alert, antagonistic. No whistling this time of rag-time tunes with queer little variations of her own; no twirling of the quirt; instead Pard got

the feel of it in a tender part of the flank, and went clean over a narrow washout that could have been avoided quite easily. No groping for rhythmic phrasings to fit the beauty of the land she lived in; Jean was in the mood to combat anything that came in her way.

CHAPTER V

JEAN RIDES INTO A SMALL ADVENTURE

At the mouth of the coulee, she turned to the left instead of to the right, and so galloped directly away from the Bar Nothing ranch, down the narrow valley known locally as the Flat, and on to the hills that invited her with their untroubled lights and shadows and the deep scars she knew for canyons.

There were no ranches out this way. The land was too broken and too barren for anything but grazing, so that she felt fairly sure of having her solitude unspoiled by anything human. Solitude was what she wanted. Solitude was what she had counted upon having in that little room at the Lazy A; robbed of it there, she rode straight to the hills, where she was most certain of finding it.

And then she came up out of a hollow upon a little ridge and saw three horsemen down in the next coulee. They were not close enough so that she could distinguish their features, but by the horses they rode, by the swing of their bodies in the saddles, by all those little, indefinable marks by which we recognize acquaintances at a distance, Jean knew them for strangers. She pulled up and watched them, puzzled for a minute at their presence and behavior.

When first she discovered them, they were driving a small bunch of cattle, mostly cows and calves, down out of a little "draw" to the level bottom of the narrow coulee. While she watched, herself screened effectually by a clump of bushes, she saw one rider leave the cattle and gallop out into the open, stand there looking toward the mouth of the coulee, and wave his hand in a signal for the others to advance. This looked queer to Jean, accustomed all her life to seeing men go calmly about their business upon the range, careless of observation because they had nothing to conceal. She urged Pard a little nearer, keeping well behind the bushes still, and leaned forward over the saddle horn, watching the men closely.

Their next performance was enlightening, but incredibly bold for the business they were engaged in. One of the three got off his horse and started a little fire of dry sticks under a convenient ledge. Another untied the rope from his saddle, widened the loop, swung it twice over his head and flipped it neatly over the head of a calf.

Jean did not wait to see any more than that; she did not need to see any more to know them for "rustlers." Brazen rustlers, indeed, to go about their work in broad daylight like that. She was not sure as to the ownership of the calf, but down here was where the Bar Nothing cattle, and what few were left of the Lazy A, ranged while the feed was good in the spring, so that the probabilities were that this theft would strike rather close home. Whether it did or not, Jean was not one to ride away and leave range thieves calmly at work.

She turned back behind the bushy screen, rode hastily along the ridge to the head of the little coulee and dismounted, leading Pard down a steep bank that was treacherous with loose shale. The coulee was more or less open, but it had convenient twists and windings; and if you think that Jean failed to go down it quietly and unseen, that merely proves how little you know Jean.

She hurried as much as she dared. She knew that the rustlers would be in something of a hurry themselves, and she very much desired to ride on them unawares and catch them at that branding, so that there would be no shadow of a doubt of their guilt. What she would do after she had ridden upon them, she did not quite know.

So she came presently around the turn that revealed them to her. They were still fussing with the calf,—or it may have been another one,—and did not see her until she was close upon them. When they did see her, she had them covered with her 38-caliber six-shooter, that she usually carried with her on the chance of getting a shot at a coyote or a fox or something like that.

The three stood up and stared at her, their jaws sagging a little at the suddenness of her appearance, and their eyes upon the gun. Jean held it steady, and she had all the look of a person who knew exactly what she meant, and who meant business. She eyed them curiously, noting the fact that they were strangers, and cowboys,—though of a type that she had never seen on the range. She glanced sharply at the beaded, buckskin jacket of one of them, and the high, wide-brimmed sombrero of another.

"Well," she said at length, "turn your backs, you've had a good look at me. Turn—your—backs, I said. Now, drop those guns on the ground. Walk straight ahead of you till you come to that bank. You needn't look around; I'm still here."

She leaned a little, sending Pard slowly forward until he was close to the six-shooters lying on the ground. She glanced down at them quickly, and again at the men who stood, an uneasy trio, with their faces toward the wall, except when they ventured a glance sidewise or back at her over one shoulder. She glanced at the cattle huddled in the narrow mouth of the "draw" behind them, and saw that they were indeed Bar Nothing and Lazy A stock. The horses the three had been riding she did not remember to have seen before.

Jean hesitated, not quite knowing what she ought to do next. So far she had acted merely upon instincts born of her range life and training; the rest would not be so easy. She knew she ought to have those guns, at any rate, so she dismounted, still keeping the three in line with her own weapon, and went to where the revolvers lay on the ground. With her boot toe she kicked them close together, and stooped and picked one up. The last man in the line turned toward her protestingly, and Jean fired so close to his head that he ducked.

"Believe me, I could kill the three of you if I wanted to, before you could turn around," she informed them calmly, "so you had better stand still till I tell you to move." She frowned down at the rustler's gun in her hand. There was something queer about that gun.

"Hey, Burns," called the man in the middle, without venturing to turn his head, "come out of there and explain to the lady. This ain't in the scene!"

"Oh, yes, it is!" a voice retorted chucklingly. "You bet your life this is in the scene! Lowry's been pamming it all in; don't you worry about that!" Jean was startled, but she did not lower her gun from its steady aiming at the three of them. It was just some trick, very likely, meant to throw her off her guard. There were more than the three, and the fourth man probably had her covered with a gun. But she would not turn her head toward his voice, for all that.

"The gentleman called Burns may walk out into the open and explain, if he can," she announced sharply, her eyes upon the three whom she had captured so easily.

She heard the throaty chuckle again, from somewhere to the left of her. She saw the three men in front of her look at each other with sickly grins. She felt that the whole situation was swinging against her,—that she had somehow blundered and made herself ridiculous. It never occurred to her that she was in any particular danger; men did not shoot down women in that country, unless they were drunk or crazy, and the man called Burns had sounded extremely sane, humorous even. She heard a rattle of bushes and the soft crunching of footsteps coming toward her. Still she would not turn her head, nor would she lower the gun; if it was a trick, they should not say that it had been successful.

"It's all right, sister," said the chuckling voice presently, almost at her elbow. "This isn't any real, honest-to-John bandit party. We're just movie people, and we're making pictures. That's all." He stopped, but Jean did not move or make any reply whatever, so he went on. "I must say I appreciate the compliment you paid us in taking it for the real dope, sister—"

"Don't call me sister again." Jean flashed him a sidelong glance of resentment. "You've already done it twice too often. Come around in front where I can see you, if you're what you claim to be."

"Well, don't shoot, and I will," soothed the chuckling voice. "My, my, it certainly is a treat to see a real, live Prairie Queen once. Beats making them to order—"

"We'll omit the superfluous chatter, please." Jean looked him over and tagged him mentally with one glance. He did not look like a rustler,—with his fat good-nature and his town-bred personality, and his gray tweed suit and pigskin puttees, and the big cameo ring on his manicured little finger, and his fresh-shaven face as round as the sun above his head and almost as cheerful. Perfectly harmless, but Jean would not yield to the extent of softening her glance or her manner one hundredth of a degree. The more harmless these people, the more ridiculous she had made herself appear.

The chuckly one grinned and removed his soft gray hat, held it against his generous equator, and bowed so low as to set him puffing a little afterward. His eyes, however, appraised her shrewdly.

"Omitting all superfluous chatter, as you suggest, I am Robert Grant Burns, of the Great Western Film Company. These men are also members of that company. We are here for the purpose of making Western pictures, and this little bit of unlawful branding of stock which you were flattering enough to mistake for the real thing, is merely a scene which we were making." He was about to indulge in what he would have termed a little "kidding" of the girl, but wisely refrained after another shrewd reading of her face.

Jean looked at the three men, who had taken it for granted that they might leave their intimate study of the clay bank and were coming toward her. She looked at the gun she had picked up from the ground,—being loaded with blank cartridges was what had made it look so queer!—and at Robert Grant Burns of the Great Western Film Company, who had put on his hat again and was studying her the way he was wont to study applicants for a position in his company.

"Did you get permission to haze our cattle around like this?" she asked abruptly, to hide how humiliated she really felt.

"Why—no. Just for a few scenes, I did not consider it necessary." Plainly, the chuckly Mr. Burns was taken at a disadvantage.

"But it is necessary. Don't make the mistake, Mr. Burns, of thinking this country and all it contains is at the disposal of any chance stranger, just because we do not keep it under lock and key. You are making rather free with another man's personal property, when you use my uncle's cattle for your rustling scenes."

"Your uncle? Well, I shall be very glad to make some arrangement with your uncle, if that is customary."

"Why the doubt? Are you in the habit of walking into a man's house, for instance, and using his kitchen to make pictures without permission? Has it been your custom to lead a man's horses out of his stable whenever you chose, and use them for race pictures?"

"No, no—nothing like that. Sorry to have infringed upon your property-rights, I am sure." Mr. Burns did not sound so chuckly now; but that may have been because the three picture-rustlers were quite openly pleased at the predicament of their director. "It never occurred to me that—"

"That the cattle were not as free as the hills?" The quiet voice of Jean searched out the tenderest places in the self-esteem of Robert Grant Burns. She tossed the blank-loaded gun back upon the ground and turned to her horse. "It does seem hard to impress it upon city people that we savages do have a few rights in this country. We should have policemen stationed on every hilltop, I suppose, and 'No Trespassing' signs planted along every cow-trail. Even then I doubt whether we could convince some people that we are perfectly human and that we actually do own property here."

While she drawled the last biting sentences, she stuck her toe in the stirrup and went up into the saddle as easily as any cowpuncher in the country could have done. Robert Grant Burns stood with his hands at his hips and watched her with the critical eye of the expert who sees in every gesture a picture, effective or ineffective, good, bad, or merely so—so. Robert Grant Burns had never, in all his experience in directing Western pictures, seen a girl mount a horse with such unconscious ease of every movement.

Jean twitched the reins and turned towards him, looking down at the little group with unfriendly eyes. "I don't want to seem inhospitable or unaccommodating, Mr. Burns," she told him, "but I fear that I must take these cattle back home with me. You probably will not want to use them any longer."

Mr. Burns did not say whether she was right or wrong in her conjecture. As a matter of fact, he did want to use them for several more scenes; but he stood silent while Jean, with a chilly bow to the four of them, sent Pard up the rough bank of the little gulley. Rather, he made no reply to Jean, but he waved his three rustlers back, retreating himself to where the bank stopped them. And he turned toward the bushes that had at first hidden him from Jean, waved his hand in an imperative gesture, and called guardedly through cupped palms. "Take that! All you can get of it!" Which goes far to show why he was considered one of the best directors the Great Western Film Company had in its employ.

So Jean unconsciously made a picture which caused the eyes of Robert Grant Burns to glisten while he watched. She ignored the men who had so fooled her, and took down her rope that she might swing the loop of it toward the cattle and drive them back across the gulley and up the coulee toward home. Cattle are stubborn things at best, and this little bunch seemed determined to seek the higher slopes. Put upon her mettle because of that little audience down below,—a mildly jeering audience at that, she imagined,—Jean had need of her skill and her fifteen years or so of experience in handling stock.

She swung her rope and shouted, weaving back and forth across the gulley, with little lunging rushes now and then to head off an animal that tried to bolt past her up the hill. She would not have glanced toward Robert Grant Burns to save her life, and she did not hear him saying:

"Great! Great stuff! Get it all, Pete. By George, you can't beat the real thing, can you? 'J get that up-hill dash? Good! Now panoram the drive up the gulley—get it ALL, Pete—turn as long as you can see the top of her hat. My Lord! You wouldn't get stuff like that in ten years. I wish Gay could handle herself like that in the saddle, but there ain't a leading woman in the business to-day that could put that over the way she's doing it. By George! Say, Gil, you get on your horse and ride after her, and find out where she lives. We can't work any more now, anyway; she's gone off with the cattle. And, say! You don't want to let her get a sight of you, or she might take a shot at you. And if she can shoot the way she rides—good night!"

CHAPTER VI

AND THE VILLAIN PURSUED HER

The young man called Gil,—to avoid wasting time in saying Gilbert James Huntley,—mounted in haste and rode warily up the coulee some distance behind Jean. At that time and in that locality he was quite anxious that she should not discover him. Gil was not such a bad fellow, even though he did play "heavies" in all the pictures which Robert Grant Burns directed. A villain he was on the screen, and a bad one. Many's the man he had killed as cold-bloodedly as the Board of Censorship would permit. Many's the girlish, Western heart he had broken, and many's the time he had paid the penalty to brother, father, or sweetheart as the scenario of the play might decree. Many's the time he had followed girls and men warily through brush-fringed gullies and over picturesque ridges, for the entertainment of shop girls and their escorts sitting in darkened theaters and watching breathlessly the wicked deeds of Gilbert James Huntley.

But in his everyday life, Gil Huntley was very good-looking, very good-natured, and very harmless. His position and his salary as "heavy" in the Great Western Company he owed chiefly to his good acting and his thick eyebrows and his facility for making himself look treacherous and mean. He followed Jean because the boss told him to do so, in the first place. In the second place, he followed her because he was even more interested in her than his director had been, and he hoped to have a chance to talk with her. In his workaday life, Gil Huntley was quite accustomed to being discovered in some villainy, and to having some man or woman point a gun at him with more or less antagonism in voice and manner. But he had never in his life had a girl ride up and "throw down on him" with a gun, actually believing him to be a thief and a scoundrel whom she would shoot if she thought it necessary. There was a difference. Gil did not take the time or trouble to analyze the difference, but he knew that he was glad the boss had not sent Johnny or Bill in his place. He did not believe that either of them would have enough sense to see the difference, and they might offend her in some way,—though Gil Huntley need not have worried in the least over any man's treatment of Jean, who was eminently qualified to attend to that for herself.

He grinned when he saw her turn the cattle loose down the very next coulee and with a final flip of her rope loop toward the hindermost cow, ride on without them. He should have ridden in haste then to tell Robert Grant Burns that the cattle could be brought back in twenty minutes or so and the picture-making go on as planned. It was not likely that the girl would come back; they could go on with their work and get permission from the girl's uncle afterward. But he did not turn and hurry back. Instead, he waited behind a rock-huddle until Jean was well out of sight,—and while he waited, he took his handkerchief and rubbed hard at the make-up on his face, which had made him look sinister and boldly bad. Without mirror or cold cream, he was not very successful, so that he rode on somewhat spotted in appearance and looking even more sinister than before. But he was much more comfortable in his mind, which meant a good deal in the interview which he hoped by some means to bring about.

With Jean a couple of hundred yards in advance, they crossed a little flat so bare of concealment that Gil Huntley was worried for fear she might look back and discover him. But she did not turn her head, and he rode on more confidently. At the mouth of Lazy A coulee, just where stood the cluster of huge rocks that had at one time come hurtling down from the higher slopes, and the clump of currant bushes beneath which Jean used to hide her much-despised saddle when she was a child, she disappeared from view. Gil, knowing very little of the ways of the range folk, and less of the country, kicked his horse into a swifter pace and galloped after her.

Fifty yards beyond the currant bushes he heard a sound and looked back; and there was Jean, riding out from her hiding-place, and coming after him almost at a run. While he was trying to decide what to do about it, she overtook him; rather, the wide loop of her rope overtook him. He ducked, but the loop settled over his head and shoulders and pulled tight about the chest. Jean took two turns of the rope around the saddle horn and then looked him over critically. In spite of herself, she smiled a little at his face, streaked still with grease paint, and at his eyes staring at her from between heavily penciled lids.

"That's what you get for following," she said, after a minute of staring at each other. "Did you think I didn't know you were trailing along behind me? I saw you before I turned the cattle loose, but I just let you think you were being real sly and cunning about it. You did it in real moving-picture style; did your fat Mr. Robert Grant Burns teach you how? What is the idea, anyway? Were you going to abduct me and lead me to the swarthy chief of your gang, or band, or whatever you call it?"

Having scored a point against him and so put herself into a good humor again, Jean laughed at him and twitched the rope, just to remind him that he was at her mercy. To be haughtily indignant with this honest-eyed, embarrassed young fellow with the streaky face and heavily-penciled eyelids was out of the question. The wind caught his high, peaked-crowned sombrero and sent it sailing like a great, flapping bird to the ground, and he could not catch it because Jean had his arms pinioned with the loop.

She laughed again and rode over to where the hat had lodged. Gil Huntley, to save himself from being dragged ignominiously from the saddle, kicked his horse and kept pace with her. Jean leaned far over and picked up the hat, and examined it with amusement.

"If you could just live up to your hat, my, wouldn't you be a villain, though!" she commented, in a soft, drawling voice. "You don't look so terribly blood-thirsty without it; I just guess I'd better keep it for a while. It would make a dandy waste-basket. Do you know, if your face were clean, I think you'd look almost human,—for an outlaw."

She started on up the trail, nonchalantly leading her captive by the rope. Gil Huntley could have wriggled an arm loose and freed himself, but he did not. He wanted to see what she was going to do with him. He grinned when she had her back turned toward him, but he did not say anything for fear of spoiling the joke or offending her in some way. So presently Jean began to feel silly, and the joke lost its point and seemed inane and weak.

She turned back, threw off the loop that bound his arms to his sides, and coiled the rope. "I wish you play-acting people would keep out of the country," she said impatiently. "Twice you've made me act ridiculous. I don't know what in the world you wanted to follow me for,—and I don't care. Whatever it was, it isn't going to do you one particle of good, so you needn't go on doing it."

She looked at him full, refused to meet half-way the friendliness of his eyes, tossed the hat toward him, and wheeled her horse away. "Good-by," she said shortly, and touched Pard with the spurs. She was out of hearing before Gil Huntley could think of the right thing to say, and she increased the distance between them so rapidly that before he had quite recovered from his surprise at her sudden change of mood, she was so far away that he could not have overtaken her if he had tried.

He watched her out of sight and rode back to where Burns mouthed a big, black cigar, and paced up and down the level space where he had set the interrupted scene, and waited his coming.

"Rode away from you, did she? Where'd she take the cattle to? Left 'em in the next gulch? Well, why didn't you say so? You boys can bring 'em back, and we'll get to work again. Where'd you say that spring was, Gil? We'll eat before we do anything else. One thing about this blamed country is we don't have to be afraid of the light. Got to hand it to 'em for having plenty of good, clear sunlight, anyway?"

He followed Gil to the feeble spring that seeped from under a huge boulder, and stooped uncomfortably to fill a tin cup. While he waited for the trickle to yield him a drink, he cocked his head sidewise and looked up quizzically at his "heavy."

"You must have come within speaking distance, Gil," he guessed shrewdly. "Got any make-up along? You look like a mild case of the measles, right now. What did she have to say, anyhow?"

"Nothing," said Gil shortly. "I didn't talk to her at all. I didn't want to run my horse to death trying to say hello when she didn't want it that way."

"Huh!" grunted Robert Grant Burns unbelievingly, and fished a bit of grass out of the cup with his little finger. He drank and said no more.

CHAPTER VII

ROBERT GRANT BURNS GETS HELP

"You know the brand, don't you?" the proprietor of the hotel which housed the Great Western Company asked, with the tolerant air which the sophisticated wear when confronted by ignorance. "Easy enough to locate the outfit, by the cattle brand. What was it?"

Whereupon Robert Grant Burns rolled his eyes helplessly toward Gil Huntley. "I noticed it at the time, but—what was that brand, Gil?"

And Gil, if you would believe me, did not remember, either. He had driven the cattle half a mile or more, had helped to "steal" two calves out of the little herd, and yet he could not recall the mark of their owner.

So the proprietor of the hotel, an old cowman who had sold out and gone into the hotel business when the barbed-wire came by carloads into the country, pulled a newspaper towards him, borrowed a pencil from Burns, and sketched all the cattle brands in that part of the country. While he drew one after the other, he did a little thinking.

"Must have been the Bar Nothing, or else the Lazy A cattle you got hold of," he concluded,

pointing to the pencil marks on the margin of the paper. "They range down in there, and Jean Douglas answers your description of the girl,—as far as looks go. She ain't all that wild and dangerous, though. Swing a loop with any man in the country and ride and all that,—been raised right out there on the Lazy A. Say! Why don't you go out and see Carl Douglas, and see if you can't get the use of the Lazy A for your pictures? Seems to me that's just the kinda place you want. Don't anybody live there now. It's been left alone ever since—the trouble out there. House and barns and corrals,—everything you want." He leaned closer with a confidential tone creeping into his voice, for Robert Grant Burns and his company were profitable guests and should be given every inducement to remain in the country.

"It ain't but fifteen miles out there; you could go back and forth in your machine, easy. You go out and see Carl Douglas, anyway; won't do no harm. You offer him a little something for the use of the Lazy A; he'll take anything that looks like money. Take it from me, that's the place you want to take your pictures in. And, say! You want a written agreement with Carl. Have the use of his stock included, or he'll tax you extra. Have everything included," advised the old cowman, with a sweep of his palm and his voice lowered discreetly. "Won't need to cost you much,—not if you don't give him any encouragement to expect much. Carl's that kind,—good fellow enough,—but he wants—the—big—end. I know him, you bet! And, say! Don't let on to Carl that I steered you out there. Just claim like you was scouting around, and seen the Lazy A ranch, and took a notion to it; not too much of a notion, though, or it's liable to come kinda high.

"And, say!" Real enthusiasm for the idea began to lighten his eyes. "If you want good range dope, right out there's where you can sure find it. You play up to them Bar Nothing boys—Lite Avery and Joe Morris and Red. You ought to get some great pictures out there, man. Them boys can sure ride and rope and handle stock, if that's what you want; and I reckon it is, or you wouldn't be out here with your bunch of actors looking for the real stuff."

They talked a long while after that. Gradually it dawned upon Burns that he had heard of the Lazy A ranch before, though not by that euphonious title. It seemed worth investigating, for he was going to need a good location for some exterior ranch scenes very soon, and the place he had half decided upon did not altogether please him. He inquired about roads and distances, and waddled off to the hotel parlor to ask Muriel Gay, his blond leading woman, if she would like to go out among the natives next morning. Also he wanted her to tell him more about that picturesque place she and Lee Milligan had stumbled upon the day before,—the place which he suspected was none other than the Lazy A.

That is how it came to pass that Jean, riding out with big Lite Avery the next morning on a little private scouting-trip of their own, to see if that fat moving-picture man was making free with the stock again, met the man unexpectedly half a mile from the Bar Nothing ranch-house.

Along every trail which owns certain obstacles to swift, easy passing, there are places commonly spoken of as "that" place. In his journey to the Bar Nothing, Robert Grant Burns had come unwarned upon that sandy hollow which experienced drivers approached with a mental bracing for the struggle ahead, and with tightened lines and whip held ready. Even then they stuck fast, as often as not, if the load were heavy, though Bar Nothing drivers gaged their loads with that hollow in mind. If they could pull through there without mishap, they might feel sure of having no trouble elsewhere.

Robert Grant Burns had come into the hollow unsuspectingly. He had been careening along the prairie road at a twenty-mile pace, his mind fixed upon hurrying through his interview with Carl Douglas, so that he would have time to stop at the Lazy A on the way back to town. He wanted to take a few exterior ranch-house scenes that day, for Robert Grant Burns was far more energetic than his bulk would lead one to suppose. He had Pete Lowry, his camera man, in the seat beside him. Back in the tonneau Muriel Gay and her mother, who played the character parts, clung to Lee Mulligan and a colorless individual who was Lowry's assistant, and gave little squeals whenever the machine struck a bigger bump than usual.

At the top of the hill which guarded the deceptive hollow, Robert Grant Burns grinned over his shoulder at his character-woman. "Wait till we start back; I'll know the road then, and we'll do some traveling!" he promised darkly, and laid his toe lightly on the brake. It pleased him to be considered a dare-devil driver; that is why he always drove whatever machine carried him. They went lurching down the curving grade into the hollow, and struck the patch of sand that had worn out the vocabularies of more eloquent men than he. Robert Grant Burns fed more gas, and the engine kicked and groaned, and sent the wheels burrowing like moles to where the sand was deepest. Axles under, they stuck fast.

When Jean and Lite came loping leisurely down the hill, the two women were fraying perfectly good gloves trying to pull "rabbit" brush up by the roots to make firmer foothold for the wheels. Robert Grant Burns was head-and-shoulders under the car, digging badger-like with his paws to clear the front axle, and coming up now and then to wipe the perspiration from his eyes and puff the purple out of his complexion. Pete Lowry always ducked his head lower over the jack when he saw the heaving of flesh which heralded these resting times, so that the boss could not catch him laughing. Lee Milligan was scooping sand upon the other side and mumbling to himself, with a glance now and then at the trail, in the hope of sighting a good samaritan with six or eight mules, perhaps. Lee thought that it would take about that many mules to pull them out.

The two riders pulled up, smiling pityingly, just as well-mounted riders invariably smile upon stalled automobilists. This was not the first machine that had come to grief in that hollow, though they could not remember ever to have seen one sunk deeper in the sand.

"I guess you wouldn't refuse a little help, about now," Lite observed casually to Lee, who was most in evidence.

"We wouldn't refuse a little, but a lot is what we need," Lee amended glumly. "Any ranch within forty miles of here? We need about twelve good horses, I should say." Lee's experience with sand had been unhappy, and his knowledge of what one good horse could do was slight.

"Shall we snake 'em out, Jean?" Lite asked her, as if he himself were absolutely indifferent to their plight.

"Oh, I suppose we might as well. We can't leave them blocking the trail; somebody might want to drive past," Jean told him in much the same tone, just to tease Lee Milligan, who was looking them over disparagingly.

"We'll be blocking the trail a good long while if we stay here till you move us," snapped Lee, who was rather sensitive to tones.

Then Robert Grant Burns gave a heave and a wriggle, and came up for air and a look around. He had been composing a monologue upon the subject of sand, and he had not noticed that strange voices were speaking on the other side of the machine.

"Hello, sis— How-de-do, Miss," he greeted Jean guardedly, with a hasty revision of the terms when he saw how her eyebrows pinched together. "I wonder if you could tell us where we can find teams to pull us out of this mess. I don't believe this old junk-wagon is ever going to do it herself."

"How do you do, Mr. Burns? Lite and I offered to take you out on solid ground, but your man seemed to think we couldn't do it."

"What man was that? Wasn't me, anyway. I think you can do just about anything you start out to do, if you ask me."

"Thank you," chilled Jean, and permitted Pard to back away from his approach.

"Say, you're some rider," he praised tactlessly, and got no reply whatever. Jean merely turned and rode around to where Lite eased his long legs in the stirrups and waited her pleasure.

"Shall we help them out, Lite?" she asked distinctly. "I think perhaps we ought to; it's a long walk to town."

"I guess we better; won't take but a minute to tie on," Lite agreed, his fingers dropping to his coiled rope. "Seems queer to me that folks should want to ride in them things when there's plenty of good horses in the country."

"No accounting for tastes, Lite," Jean replied cheerfully. "Listen. If that thin man will start the engine,—he doesn't weigh more than half as much as you do, Mr. Burns,—we'll pull you out on solid ground. And if you have occasion to cross this hollow again, I advise you to keep out there to the right. There's a little sod to give your tires a better grip. It's rough, but you could make it all right if you drive carefully, and the bunch of you get out and walk. Don't try to keep around on the ridge; there's a deep washout on each side, so you couldn't possibly make it. We can't with the horses, even." Jean did not know that there was a note of superiority in her voice when she spoke the last sentence, but her listeners winced at it. Only Pete Lowry grinned while he climbed obediently into the machine to advance his spark and see that the gears were in neutral.

"Don't crank up till we're ready!" Lite expostulated. "These cayuses of ours are pretty sensible, and they'll stand for a whole lot; but there's a limit. Wait till I get the ropes fixed, before you start the engine. And the rest of you all be ready to give the wheels a lift. You're in pretty deep."

When Jean dismounted and hooked the stirrup over the horn so that she could tighten the cinch, the eyes of Robert Grant Burns glistened at the "picture-stuff" she made. He glanced eloquently at Pete, and Pete gave a twisted smile and a pantomime of turning the camera-crank; whereat Robert Grant Burns shook his head regretfully and groaned again.

"Say, if I had a leading woman—" he began discontentedly, and stopped short; for Muriel Gay was standing quite close, and even through her grease-paint make-up she betrayed the fact that she knew exactly what her director was thinking, had seen and understood the gesture of the camera man, and was close to tears because of it all.

Muriel Gay was a conscientious worker who tried hard to please her director. Sometimes it seemed to her that her director demanded impossibilities of her; that he was absolutely soulless where picture-effects were concerned. Her riding had all along been a subject of discord between them. She had learned to ride very well along the bridle-paths of Golden Gate Park, but Robert

Grant Burns seemed to expect her to ride—well, like this girl, for instance, which was unjust.

One could not blame her for glaring jealously while Jean tightened the cinch and remounted, tying her rope to the saddle horn, all ready to pull; with her muscles tensed for the coming struggle with the sand,—and perhaps with her horse as well,—and with every line of her figure showing how absolutely at home she was in the saddle, and how sure of herself.

"I've tied my rope, Lite," Jean drawled, with a little laugh at what might happen.

Lite turned his face toward her. "You better not," he warned. "Things are liable to start a-popping when that engine wakes up."

"Well, then I'll want both hands for Pard. I've taken a couple of half-hitches, anyway."

"You folks want to be ready at the wheels," Lite directed, waiving the argument. "When we start, you all want to heave-ho together. Good team-work will do it.

"All set?" he called to Jean, when Pete Lowry bent his back to start the engine. "Business'll be pickin' up, directly!"

"All set," replied Jean cheerfully.

It seemed then that everything began to start at once, and to start in different directions. The engine snorted and pounded so that the whole machine shook with ague. When Pete jumped in and threw in the clutch, there was a backfire that sounded like the crack of doom. The two horses went wild, as their riders had half expected them to do. They lunged away from the horror behind them, and the slack ropes tightened with a jerk. Both were good rope horses, and the strain of the ropes almost recalled them to sanity and their training; at least they held the ropes tight for a few seconds, so that the machine jumped ahead and veered toward the firmer soil beside the trail, in response to Pete's turn of the wheel.

Then Pard looked back and saw the thing coming after him, and tried to bolt. When he found that he could not, because of the rope, he bucked as he had not done since he was a half-broken broncho. That started Lite Avery's horse to pitching; and Pete, absorbed in watching what would have made a great picture, forgot to shut off the gas.

Robert Grant Burns picked himself out of the sand where he had sprawled at the first wild lunge of the machine, and saw Pete Lowry, humped over the wheel like any speed demon, go lurching off across the hollow in the wake of two fear-crazed animals, that threatened at any instant to bolt off at an angle that would overturn the car.

Then Lite let his rope slip from the saddle-horn and spurred his horse to one side, out of the danger zone of the other, while he felt frantically in his pockets for his knife.

"Don't you cut my rope," Jean warned, when she saw him come plunging toward her, knife in hand. "This is—fine training—for Pard!"

Pete came to himself, then, and killed the engine before he landed in the bottom of a yawning, water-washed hole, and Lite rode close and slashed Jean's rope, in spite of her protest; whereupon Pard went off up the slope as though witches were riding him hard.

At long rifle range, he circled and faced the thing that had scared him so, and after a little Jean persuaded him to go back as far as the trail. Nearer he would not stir, so she waited there for Lite.

"Never even thanked us," Lite grumbled when he came up, his mouth stretched in a wide smile. "That girl with the kalsomine on her face made remarks about folks butting in. And the fat man talked into his double chin; dunno what all he was saying. Here's what's left of your rope. I'll get you another one, Jean. I was afraid that gazabo was going to run over you, is why I cut it."

"What's the matter over there? Aren't they glad they're out of the sand?" Jean held her horse quiet while she studied the buzzing group.

"Something busted. I guess we done some damage." Lite grinned and watched them over his shoulder.

"You needn't go any further with me, Lite. That fat man's the one that had the cattle. I am going over to the ranch for awhile, but don't tell Aunt Ella." She turned to ride on up the hill toward the Lazy A, but stopped for another look at the perturbed motorists. "Well anyway, we snaked them out of the sand, didn't we, Lite?"

"We sure did," Lite chuckled. "They don't seem thankful, but I guess they ain't any worse off than they was before. Anyway, it serves them right. They've no business here acting fresh."

Lite said that because he was not given the power to peer into the future, and so could not know that Fate herself had sent Robert Grant Burns into their lives; and that, by a somewhat roundabout method, she was going to use the Great Western Film Company and Jean and himself for her servants in doing a work which Fate had set herself to do.

CHAPTER VIII

JEAN SPOILS SOMETHING

Jean found the padlock key where she had hidden it under a rock ten feet from the door, and let herself into her room. The peaceful familiarity of its four walls, and the cheerful patch of sunlight lying warm upon the faded rag carpet, gave her the feeling of security and of comfort which she seldom felt elsewhere.

She wandered aimlessly around the room, brushing the dust from her books and straightening a tiny fold in the cradle quilt. She ran an investigative forefinger along the seat of her father's saddle, brought the finger away dusty, pulled one of the stockings from the overflowing basket and used it for a dust cloth. She wiped and polished the stamped leather with a painstaking tenderness that had in it a good deal of yearning, and finally left it with a gesture of hopelessness.

She went next to her desk and fumbled the quirt that lay there still. Then she pulled out the old ledger, picked up a pencil, and began to write, sitting on the arm of an old, cane-seated chair while she did so. As I told you before, Jean never wrote anything in that book except when her moods demanded expression of some sort; when she did write, she said exactly what she thought and felt at the time. So if you are permitted to know what she wrote at this time, you will have had a peep into Jean's hidden, inner life that none of her world save Lite knew anything about. She wrote rapidly, and she did not always take the trouble to finish her sentences properly,—as if she never could quite keep pace with her thoughts. So this is what that page held when finally she slammed the book shut and slid it back into the desk:

> I don't know what's the matter with me lately. I feel as if I wanted to shoot somebody, or rob a bank or run away—I guess it's the old trouble nagging at me. I KNOW dad never did it. I don't know why, but I know it just the same—and I know Uncle Carl knows it too. I'd like to take out his brain and put it into some scientific machine that would squeeze out his thoughts—hope it wouldn't hurt him—I'd give him ether, maybe. What I want is money—enough to buy back this place and the stock. I don't believe Uncle Carl spent as much defending dad as he claims he did —not enough to take the whole ranch anyway. If I had money I'd find Art Osgood if I had to hunt from Alaska to Africa—don't believe he went to Alaska at all. Uncle Carl thinks so.... I'd like the price of that machine I helped drag out of the sand—some people can have anything they want but all I want is dad back, and this place the way it was before....
>
> If I had any brains I could write something wonderful and be rich and famous and do the things I want to do—but there's no profit in just feeling wonderful things; if I could make the world see and feel what I see and feel—when I'm here, or riding alone....
>
> If I could find Art Osgood I believe I could make him tell—I know he knows something, even if he didn't do it himself. I believe he did—But what can you do when you're a woman and haven't any money and must stay where you're put and can't even get out and do the little you might do, because somebody must have you around to lean on and tell their troubles to.... I don't blame Aunt Ella so much—but thank goodness, I can do without a shoulder to weep on, anyway. What's life for if you've got to spend your days hopping round and round in a cage. It wouldn't be a cage if I could have dad back—I'd be doing things for him all the time and that would make life worth while. Poor dad—four more years is—I can't think about it. I'll go crazy if I do—

It was there that she stopped and slammed the book shut, and pushed it back out of sight in the desk. She picked up her hat and gloves, and went out with blurred eyes, and began to climb the bluff above the little spring, where a faint, little-used trail led to the benchland above. By following a rock ledge to where it was broken, and climbing through the crevice to where the trail marked faintly the way to the top, one could in a few minutes leave the Lazy A coulee out of sight below, and stand on a high level where the winds blew free from the mountains in the west to the mountains in the east.

Some day, it was predicted, the benchland would be cut into squares and farmed,—some day when the government brought to reality a long-talked-of irrigation project. But in the meantime, the land lay unfenced and free. One could look far away to the north, and at certain times see the smoke of passing trains through the valley off there. One could look south to the distant river bluffs, and east and west to the mountains. Jean often climbed the bluff just for the wide outlook she gained. The cage did not seem so small when she could stand up there and tire her eyes with looking. Life did not seem quite so purposeless, and she could nearly always find little whispers of hope in the winds that blew there.

She walked aimlessly and yet with a subconscious purpose for ten minutes or so, and her face was turned directly toward the eastern hills. She stopped on the edge of the bluff that broke

abruptly there, and sat down and stared at the soft purple of the hills and the soft green of the nearer slopes, and at the peaceful blue of the sky arched over it all. Her eyes cleared of their troubled look and grew dreamy. Her mouth lost its tenseness and softened to a half smile. She was not looking now into the past that was so full of heartbreak, but into the future as hope pictured it for her.

She was seeing the Lazy A alive again and all astir with the business of life; and her father saddling Sioux and riding out to look after the stock. She was seeing herself riding with him,—or else cooking the things he liked best for his dinner when he came back hungry. She sat there for a long, long while and never moved.

A sparrow hawk swooped down quite close to Jean and then shot upward with a little brown bird in its claws, and startled her out of her castle building. She felt a hot anger against the hawk, which was like the sudden grasp of misfortune; and a quick sympathy with the bird, which was like herself and dad, caught unawares and held helpless. But she did not move, and the hawk circled and came back on his way to the nesting-place in the trees along the creek below. He came quite close, and Jean shot him as he lifted his wings for a higher flight. The hawk dropped head foremost to the grass and lay there crumpled and quiet.

Jean put back her gun in its holster and went over to where the hawk lay. The little brown bird fluttered terrifiedly and gave a piteous, small chirp when her hand closed over it, and then lay quite still in her cupped palms and blinked up at her.

Jean cuddled it up against her cheek, and talked to it and pitied it and promised it much in the way of fat little bugs and a warm nest and her tender regard. For the hawk she had no pity, nor a thought beyond the one investigative glance she gave its body to make sure that she had hit it where she meant to hit it. Lite had taught her to shoot like that,—straight and quick. Lite was a man who trimmed life down to the essentials, and he had long ago impressed it upon her that if she could not shoot quickly, and hit where she aimed, there was not much use in her attempting to shoot at all. Jean proved by her scant interest in the hawk how well she had learned the lesson, and how sure she was of hitting where she aimed.

The little brown bird had been gashed in the breast by a sharp talon. Jean was much concerned over the wound, even though it did not reach any vital organ. She was afraid of septic poisoning, she told the bird; but added comfortingly: "There—you needn't worry one minute over that. I'm almost sure there's a bottle of peroxide down at the house, that isn't spoiled. We'll go and put some on it right away; and then we'll go bug-hunting. I believe I know where there's the fattest, juiciest bugs!" She cuddled the bird against her cheek, and started back across the wide point of the benchland to where the trail led down the bluff to the house.

She was wholly absorbed in the trouble of the little brown bird; and the trail, following a crevice through the rocks and later winding along behind some scant bushes, partially concealed the buildings and the house yard from view until one was well down into the coulee. So it was not until she was at the spring, looking at the moist earth there for fat bugs for the bird, that she had any inkling of visitors. Then she heard voices and went quickly around the corner of the house toward the sound.

It seemed to her that she was lately fated to come plump into the middle of that fat Mr. Burns' unauthorized picture-making. The first thing she saw when she rounded the corner was the camera perched high upon its tripod and staring at her with its one round eye; and the humorous-eyed Pete Lowry turning a crank at the side and counting in a whisper. Close beside her the two women were standing in animated argument which they carried on in undertones with many gestures to point their meaning.

"Hey, you're in the scene!" called Pete Lowry, and abruptly stopped counting and turning the crank.

"You're in the scene, sister. Step over here to one side, will you?" The fat director waved his pink-cameoed hand impatiently.

An old bench had been placed beside the house, under a window. Jean backed a step and sat down upon the bench, and looked from one to the other. The two women glanced at her wide-eyed and moved away with mutual embracings. Jean lifted her hands and looked at the soft little crest and beady eyes of the bird, to make sure that it was not disturbed by these strangers, before she gave her attention to the expostulating Mr. Burns.

"Did I spoil something?" she inquired casually, and watched curiously the pulling of many feet of narrow film from the camera.

"About fifteen feet of good scene," Pete Lowry told her dryly, but with that queer, half smile twisting his lips.

Jean looked at him and decided that, save for the company he kept, which made of him a latent enemy, she might like that lean man in the red sweater who wore a pencil over one ear and was always smiling to himself about something. But what she did was to cross her feet and murmur a sympathetic sentence to the little brown bird. Inwardly she resented deeply this bold trespass of Robert Grant Burns; but she meant to guard against making herself ridiculous again.

She meant to be sure of her ground before she ordered them off. The memory of her humiliation before the supposed rustlers was too vivid to risk a repetition of the experience.

"When you're thoroughly rested," said Robert Grant Burns, in the tone that would have shriveled the soul of one of his actors, "we'd like to make that scene over."

"Thank you. I am pretty tired," she said in that soft, drawly voice that could hide so effectually her meaning. She leaned her head against the wall and gave a luxurious sigh, and crossed her feet the other way. She believed that she knew why Robert Grant Burns was growing so red in the face and stepping about so uneasily, and why the women were looking at her like that. Very likely they expected her to prove herself crude and uncivilized, but she meant to disappoint them even while she made them all the trouble she could.

She pushed back her hat until its crown rested against the rough boards, and cuddled the little brown bird against her cheek again, and talked to it caressingly. Though she seemed unconscious of his presence, she heard every word that Robert Grant Burns was muttering to himself. Some of the words were plain, man-sized swearing, if she were any judge of language. It occurred to her that she really ought to go and find that peroxide, but she could not forego the pleasure of irritating this man.

"I always supposed that fat men were essentially; sweet-tempered," she observed to the world in general, when the mutterings ceased for a moment.

"Gee! I'd like to make that," Pete Lowry said in an undertone to his assistant.

Jean did not know that he referred to herself and the unstudied picture she made, sitting there with her hat pushed back, and the little bird blinking at her from between her cupped palms. But she looked at him curiously, with an impulse to ask questions about what he was doing with that queer-looking camera, and how he could inject motion into photography. While she watched, he drew out a narrow, gray strip of film and made mysterious markings upon it with the pencil, which he afterwards thrust absent-mindedly behind his ear. He closed a small door in the side of the camera, placed his palm over the lens and turned the little crank several times around. Then he looked at Jean, and from her to the director.

Robert Grant Burns gave a sweeping, downward gesture with both hands,—a gesture which his company knew well,—and came toward Jean.

"You may not know it," he began in a repressed tone, "but we're in a hurry. We've got work to do. We ain't here on any pleasure excursion, and you'll be doing me a favor by getting out of the scene so we can go on with our work."

Jean sat still upon the bench and looked at him. "I suppose so; but why should I be doing you favors? You haven't seemed to appreciate them, so far. Of course, I dislike to seem disobliging, or anything like that, but your tone and manner would not make any one very enthusiastic about pleasing you, Mr. Burns. In fact, I don't see why you aren't apologizing for being here, instead of ordering me about as if I worked for you. This bench—is my bench. This ranch—is where I have lived nearly all my life. I hate to seem vain, Mr. Burns, but at the same time I think it is perfectly lovely of me to explain that I have a right here; and I consider myself an angel of patience and graciousness and many other rare virtues, because I have not even hinted that you are once more taking liberties with other people's property." She looked at him with a smile at the corners of her eyes and just easing the firmness of her lips, as if the humor of the situation was beginning to appeal to her.

"If you would stop dancing about, and let your naturally sweet disposition have a chance, and would explain just why you are here and what you want to do, and would ask me nicely,—it might help you more than to get apoplexy over it."

The two women exclaimed under their breaths to each other and moved farther away, as if from an impending explosion. The assistant camera man gurgled and turned his back abruptly. Lee Milligan, wandering up from the stables, stopped and stared. No one, within the knowledge of those present, had ever spoken so to Robert Grant Burns; no one had ever dreamed of speaking thus to him. They had seen him when rage had mastered him and for slighter cause; it was not an experience that one would care to repeat.

Robert Grant Burns walked up to Jean as if he meant to lift her from the bench and hurl her by sheer brute force out of his way. He stopped so close to her that his shadow covered her.

"Are you going to get out of the way so we can go on?" he asked, in the tone of one who gives a last merciful chance of escape from impending doom.

"Are you going to explain why you're here, and apologize for your tone and manner, which are extremely rude?" Jean did not pay his rage the compliment of a glance at him. She was looking at the dainty beak of the little brown bird, and was telling herself that she could not be bullied into losing control of herself. These two women should not have the satisfaction of calling her a crude, ignorant, country girl; and Robert Grant Burns should not have the triumph of browbeating her into yielding one inch of ground. She forced herself to observe the wonderfully delicate feathers on the bird's head. It seemed more content now in the little nest her two palms

had made for it. Its heart did not flutter so much, and she fancied that the tiny, bead-like eyes were softer in their bright regard of her.

Robert Grant Burns came to a pause. Jean sensed that he was waiting for some reply, and she looked up at him. His hand was just reaching out to her shoulder, but it dropped instead to his coat pocket and fumbled for his handkerchief. Her eyes strayed to Pete Lowry. He was looking upward with that measuring glance which belongs to his profession, estimating the length of time the light would be suitable for the scene he had focussed. She followed his glance to where the shadow of the kitchen had crept closer to the bench. Jean was not stupid, and she had passed through the various stages of the kodak fever; she guessed what was in the mind of the operator, and when she met his eyes full, she smiled at him sympathetically.

"I should dearly love to watch you work," she said to him frankly. "But you see how it is; Mr. Burns hasn't got hold of himself yet. If he comes to his senses before he has a stroke of apoplexy, will you show me how you run that thing?"

"You bet I will," the red-sweatered one promised her cheerfully.

"How much longer will it be before this bench is in the shade?" she asked him next.

"Half an hour,—maybe a little longer." Pete glanced again anxiously upward.

"And—how long do these spasms usually last?" Jean's head tilted toward Robert Grant Burns as impersonally as if she were indicating a horse with colic.

But the camera man had gone as far as was wise, if he cared to continue working for Burns, and he made no reply whatever. So Jean turned her attention to the man whose bulk shaded her from the sun, and whose remarks would have been wholly unforgivable had she not chosen to ignore them.

"If you really are anxious to go on making pictures, why don't you stop all that ranting and be sensible about it?" she asked him. "You can't bully me into being afraid of you, you know. And really, you are making an awful spectacle of yourself, going on like that."

"Listen here! Are you going to get off that bench and out of the scene?" By a tremendous effort Robert Grant Burns spoke that sentence with a husky kind of calm.

"That all depends upon yourself, Mr. Burns. First, I want to know by what right you come here with your picture-making. You haven't explained that yet, you know."

The highest paid director of the Great Western Film Company looked at her long. With her head tilted back, Jean returned the look.

"Oh, all right—all right," he surrendered finally. "Read that paper. That ought to satisfy you that we ain't trespassing here or anywhere else. And if you'd kindly,"—and Mr. Burns emphasized the word "kindly,"—"remove yourself to some other spot that is just as comfortable—"

Jean did not even hear him, once she had the paper in her hands and had begun to read it. So Robert Grant Burns folded his arms across his heaving chest and watched her and studied her and measured her with his mind while she read. He saw the pulling together of her eyebrows, and the pinching of her under-lip between her teeth. He saw how she unconsciously sheltered the little brown bird under her left hand in her lap because she must hold the paper with the other, and he quite forgot his anger against her.

Sitting so, she made a picture that appealed to him. Had you asked him why, he would have said that she was the type that would photograph well, and that she had a screen personality; which would have been high praise indeed, coming from him.

Jean read the brief statement that in consideration of a certain sum paid to him that day by Robert G. Burns, her uncle, Carl Douglas, thereby gave the said Robert G. Burns permission to use the Lazy A ranch and anything upon it or in any manner pertaining to it, for the purpose of making motion pictures. It was plainly set forth that Robert G. Burns should be held responsible for any destruction of or damage to the property, and that he might, for the sum named, use any cattle bearing the Lazy A or Bar O brands for the making of pictures, so long as he did them no injury and returned them in good condition to the range from which he had gathered them.

Jean recognized her uncle's ostentatious attempt at legal phraseology and knew, even without the evidence of his angular writing, that the document was genuine. She knew also that Robert Grant Burns was justified in ordering her off that bench; she had no right there, where he was making his pictures. She forced back the bitterness that filled her because of her own helplessness, and folded the paper carefully. The little brown bird chirped shrilly and fluttered a feeble protest when she took away her sheltering hand. Jean returned the paper hastily to its owner and took up the bird.

"I beg your pardon for delaying your work," she said coldly, and rose from the bench. "But you might have explained your presence in the first place." She wrapped the bird carefully in her handkerchief so that only its beak and its bright eyes were uncovered, pulled her hat forward

upon her head, and walked away from them down the path to the stables.

Robert Grant Burns turned slowly on his heels and watched her go, and until she had led out her horse, mounted and ridden away, he said never a word. Pete Lowry leaned an elbow upon the camera and watched her also, until she passed out of sight around the corner of the dilapidated calf shed, and he was as silent as the director.

"Some rider," Lee Milligan commented to the assistant camera man, and without any tangible reason regretted that he had spoken.

Robert Grant Burns turned harshly to the two women. "Now then, you two go through that scene again. And when you put out your hand to stop Muriel, don't grab at her, Mrs. Gay. Hesitate! You want your son to get the warning, but you've got your doubts about letting her take the risk of going. And, Gay, when you read the letter, try and show a little emotion in your face. You saw how that girl looked—see if you can't get that hurt, bitter look GRADUALLY, as you read. The way she got it. Put in more feeling and not so much motion. You know what I mean; you saw the girl. That's the stuff that gets over. Ready? Camera!"

CHAPTER IX

A MAN-SIZED JOB FOR JEAN

Jean was just returning wet-lashed from burying the little brown bird under a wild-rose bush near the creek. She had known all along that it would die; everything that she took any interest in turned out badly, it seemed to her. The wonder was that the bird had lived so long after she had taken it under her protection.

All that day her Aunt Ella had worn a wet towel turban-wise upon her head, and the look of a martyr about to enter a den of lions. Add that to the habitual atmosphere of injury which she wore, and Aunt Ella was not what one might call a cheerful companion. Besides, the appearance of the wet towel was a danger signal to Jean's conscience, and forbade any thought of saddling Pard and riding away from the Bar Nothing into her own dream world and the great outdoors. Jean's conscience commanded her instead to hang her riding-clothes in the closet and wear striped percale and a gingham apron, which she hated; and to sweep and dust and remember not to whistle, and to look sympathetic,—which she was not, particularly; and to ask her Aunt Ella frequently if she felt any better, and if there was anything Jean could do for her. There never was anything she could do, but conscience and custom required her to observe the ceremony of asking. Aunt Ella found some languid satisfaction in replying dolorously that there was nothing that anybody could do, and that her part in life seemed to be to suffer.

You may judge what Jean's mood was that day, when you are told that she came to the point, not an hour before the bird died, of looking at her aunt with that little smile at the corners of her eyes and just easing her lips. "Well, you certainly play your part in life with a heap of enthusiasm," she had replied, and had gone out into the kitchen and whistled when she did not feel in the least like whistling. Her conscience knew Jean pretty well, and did not attempt to reprove her for what she had done.

Then she found the bird dead in the little nest she had made for it, and things went all wrong.

She was returning from the burial of the bird, and was trying to force herself back to her normal attitude of philosophic calm, when she saw her Uncle Carl sitting on the edge of the front porch, with his elbows resting loosely upon his knees, his head bowed, and his boot-heel digging a rude trench in the hard-packed earth.

The sight of him incensed her suddenly. Once more she wished that she might get at his brain and squeeze out his thoughts; and it never occurred to her that she would probably have found them extremely commonplace thoughts that strayed no farther than his own little personal business of life, and that they would easily be translated to the dollar sign. His attitude was one of gloomy meditation, and her own mood supplied the subject. She watched him for a minute or two, and his abstraction was so deep that he did not feel her presence.

"Uncle Carl, just how much did the Lazy A cost you?" she asked so abruptly that she herself was surprised at the question. "Or putting it another way, just how many dollars and cents did you spend in defending dad?"

Carl started, which was perfectly natural, and glared at her, which was natural also, when one considers that Jean had without warning opened a subject tacitly forbidden upon that ranch. His eyes hardened a little while he looked at her, for between these two there was scant affection.

"What do you want to know for?" he countered, when she persisted in looking at him as though she was waiting for an answer.

"Because I've a right to know. Some time,—within four years,—I mean to buy back the Lazy A. I want to know how much it will take." Until that moment Jean had merely dreamed of some day buying it back. Until she spoke she would have named the idea a beautiful, impossible desire.

"Where you going to get the money?" Carl looked at her curiously, as if he almost doubted her sanity.

"Rob a bank, perhaps. How much will it take to square things with you? Of course, being a relative, I expect to be cheated a little. So I am going to adopt sly, sleuth-like methods and find out just how much dad owed you before—it happened, and just how much the lawyers charged, and what was the real market value of the outfit, and all that. Dad told me—dad told me that there was something left over for me. He didn't explain—there wasn't time, and I—couldn't listen to dollar-talk then. I've gone along all this time, just drifting and getting used to facts, and taking it for granted that everything is all right—"

"Well, what's wrong? Everything is all right, far as I know. I can see what you're driving at—"

"And I'm a pretty fair driver, too," Jean cut in calmly. "I'll reach my destination, I think,—give me time enough."

"Whatever fool notion you've got in your head, you'd better drop it," Carl told her harshly. "There ain't anything you can do to better matters. I came out with the worst of it, when you come right down to facts, and all the nagging-"

Jean went toward him as if she would strike him with her uplifted hand. "Don't dare say that! How can you say that,—and think of dad? He got the worst of it. He's the one that suffers most—and—he's as innocent as you or I. You know it."

Carl rose from the porch and faced her like an enemy. "What do you mean by that? I know it? If I knew anything like that, do you think I'd leave a stone unturned to prove it? Do you think—"

"I think we both know dad. And some things were not proved,—to my satisfaction, at least. And you know how long the jury was out, and what a time they had agreeing. Some points were weak. It was simply that they couldn't point to any one else. You know that was it. If I could find Art Osgood—"

"What's he got to do with it?" Her uncle leaned a little and peered into her face, which the dusk was veiling.

"That is what I want to find out." Jean's voice was quiet, but it had a quality which he had never before noticed.

"You'd better," he advised her tritely, "let sleeping dogs lie."

"That's the trouble with sleeping dogs; they do lie, more often than not. These particular dogs have lied for nearly three years. I'm going to stir them up and see if I can't get a yelp of the truth out of them."

"Oh, you are!" Carl laughed ironically. "You'll stir up a lot of unpleasantness for yourself and the rest of us, is what you'll do. The thing's over and done with. Folks are beginning to forget it. You've got a home—"

Jean laughed, and her laugh was extremely unpleasant.

"You get as good as the rest of us get," her uncle reminded her sharply. "I came near going broke myself over the affair, if you want to know; and you stand there and accuse me of cheating you out of something! I don't know what in heaven's name you expect. The Lazy A didn't make me rich, I can tell you that. It just barely helped to tide things over. You've got a home here, and you can come and go as you please. What you ain't got," he added bitterly, "is common gratitude."

He turned away from her and went into the house, and Jean sat down upon the edge of the porch and stared away at the dimming outline of the hills, and wondered what had come over her.

Three years on this ranch, seeing her uncle every day almost, living under the same roof with him, talking with him upon the everyday business of life,—and to-night, for the first time, the forbidden subject had been opened. She had said things that until lately she had not realized were in her mind. She had never liked her uncle, who was so different from her father, but she had never accused him in her mind of unfairness until she had written something of the sort in her ledger. She had never thought of quarrelling,—and yet one could scarcely call this encounter less than a quarrel. And the strange part of it was that she still believed what she had said; she still intended to do the things she declared she would do. Just how she would do them she did not know, but her purpose was hardening and coming clean-cut out of the vague background of her mind.

After awhile the dim outline of the high-shouldered hills glowed under a yellowing patch of light. Jean sat with her chin in her palms and watched the glow brighten swiftly. Then some unseen force seemed to be pushing a bright yellow disk up through a gap in the hills, and the gap was almost too narrow, so that the disk touched either side as it slid slowly upward. At last it was up, launched fairly upon its leisurely, drifting journey across to the farther hills behind her. It was not quite round. That was because one edge had scraped too hard against the side of the hill, perhaps. But warped though it was, its light fell softly upon Jean's face, and showed it set and still and stern-eyed and somber.

She sat there awhile longer, until the slopes lay softly revealed to her, their hollows filled with inky shadows. She drew a long breath then, and looked around her at the familiar details of the Bar Nothing dwelling-place, softened a little by the moonlight, but harsh with her memories of unhappy days spent there. She rose and went into the house and to her room, and changed the hated striped percale for her riding-clothes.

A tall, lank form detached itself from the black shade of the bunk-house as she went by, hesitated perceptibly, and then followed her down to the corral. When she had gone in with a rope and later led out Pard, the form stood forth in the white light of the moon.

"Where are you going, Jean?" Lite asked her in a tone that was soothing in its friendliness.

"That you, Lite? I'm going—well, just going. I've got to ride." She pulled Pard's bridle off the peg where she always hung it, and laid an arm over his neck while she held the bit against his clinched teeth. Pard never did take kindly to the feel of the cold steel in his mouth, and she spoke to him sharply before his jaws slackened.

"Want me to go along with you?" Lite asked, and reached for his saddle and blanket.

"No, I want you to go to bed." Jean's tone was softer than it had been for that whole day. "You've had all the riding you need. I've been shut up with Aunt Ella and her favorite form of torture."

"Got your gun?" Lite gave the latigo a final pull which made Pard grunt.

"Of course. Why?"

"Nothing,—only it's a good night for coyotes, and you might get a shot at one. Another thing, a gun's no good on earth when you haven't got it with you."

"Yes, and you've told me so about once a week ever since I was big enough to pull a trigger," Jean retorted, with something approaching her natural tone. "Maybe I won't come back, Lite. Maybe I'll camp over home till morning."

Lite did not say anything in reply to that. He leaned his long person against a corral post and watched her out of sight on the trail up the hill. Then he caught his own horse, saddled it leisurely, and rode away.

Jean rode slowly, leaving the trail and striking out across the open country straight for the Lazy A. She had no direct purpose in riding this way; she had not intended to ride to the Lazy A until she named the place to Lite as her destination, but since she had told him so, she knew that was where she was going. The picture-people would not be there at night, and she felt the need of coming as close as possible to her father; at the Lazy A, where his thoughts would cling, she felt near to him,—much nearer than when she was at the Bar Nothing. And that the gruesome memory of what had happened there did not make the place seem utterly horrible merely proves how unshakable was her faith in him.

A coyote trotted up out of a hollow facing her, stiffened with astonishment, dropped nose and tail, and slid away in the shadow of the hill. A couple of minutes later Jean saw him sitting alert upon his haunches on a moon-bathed slope, watching to see what she would do. She did nothing; and the coyote pointed his nose to the moon, yap-yap-yapped a quavering defiance, and slunk out of sight over the hill crest.

Her mind now was more at ease than it had been since the day of horror when she had first stared black tragedy in the face. She was passing through that phase of calm elation which follows close upon the heels of a great resolve. She had not yet come to the actual surmounting of the obstacles that would squeeze hope from the heart of her; she had not yet looked upon the possibility of absolute failure.

She was going to buy back the Lazy A from her Uncle Carl, and she was going to tear away that atmosphere of emptiness and desolation which it had worn so long. She was going to prove to all men that her father never had killed Johnny Croft. She was going to do it! Then life would begin where it had left off three years ago. And when this deadening load of trouble was lifted, then perhaps she could do some of the glorious, great things she had all of her life dreamed of doing. Or, if she never did the glorious, great things, she would at least have done something to justify her existence. She would be content in her cage if she could go round and round doing things for dad.

A level stretch of country lay at the foot of the long bluff, which farther along held the Lazy A coulee close against its rocky side. The high ridges stood out boldly in the moonlight, so that she could see every rock and the shadow that it cast upon the ground. Little, soothing night noises fitted themselves into her thoughts and changed them to waking dreams. Crickets that hushed while she passed them by; the faint hissing of a half-wakened breeze that straightway slept upon the grasses it had stirred; the sleepy protest of some bird which Pard's footsteps had startled.

She came into Lazy A coulee, half fancying that it was a real home-coming. But when she reached the gate and found it lying flat upon the ground away from the broad tread of the picture-people's machine, her mind jarred from dreams back to reality. From sheer habit she dismounted, picked up the spineless thing of stakes and barbed wire, dragged it into place across the trail, and fastened it securely to the post. She remounted and went on, and a little of the hopefulness was gone from her face.

"I'll just about have to rob a bank, I guess," she told herself with a grim humor at the tremendous undertaking to which she had so calmly committed herself. "This is what dad would call a man-sized job, I reckon." She pulled up in the white-lighted trail and stared along the empty, sagging-roofed sheds and stables, and at the corral with its open gate and warped rails and leaning posts. "I'll just about have to rob a bank,—or write a book that will make me famous."

She touched Pard with a rein end and went on slowly. "Robbing a bank would be the quickest and easiest," she decided whimsically, as she neared the place where she always sheltered Pard. "But not so ladylike. I guess I'll write a book. It should be something real thrilly, so the people will rush madly to all the bookstores to buy it. It should have a beautiful girl, and at least two handsome men,—one with all the human virtues, and the other with all the arts of the devil and the cruel strength of the savage. And—I think some Indians and outlaws would add several dollars' worth of thrills; or else a ghost and a haunted house. I wonder which would sell the best? Indians could steal the girl and give her two handsome men a chance to do chapters of stunts, and the wicked one could find her first and carry her away in front of him on a horse (they do those things in books!) and the hero could follow in a mad chase for miles and miles—

"But then, ghosts can be made very creepy, with tantalizing glimpses of them now and then in about every other chapter, and mysterious hints here and there, and characters coming down to breakfast with white, drawn faces and haggard eyes. And the wicked one would look over his shoulder and then utter a sardonic laugh. Sardonic is such an effective word; I don't believe Indians would give him any excuse for sardonic laughter."

She swung down from the saddle and led Pard into his stall, that was very black next the manger and very light where the moon shone in at the door. "I must have lots of moonlight and several stormy sunsets, and the wind soughing in the branches. I shall have to buy a new dictionary,—a big, fat, heavy one with the flags of all nations and how to measure the contents of an empty hogshead, and the deaf and dumb alphabet, and everything but the word you want to know the meaning of and whether it begins with ph or an f."

She took the saddle off Pard and hung it up by a stirrup on the rusty spike where she kept it, with the bridle hung over the stirrup, and the saddle blanket folded over the horn. She groped in the manger and decided that there was hay enough to last him till morning, and went out and closed the door. Her shadow fell clean cut upon the rough planks, and she stood for a minute looking at it as if it were a person. Her Stetson hat tilted a little to one side, her hair fluffed loosely at the sides, leaving her neck daintily slender where it showed above the turned-back collar of her gray sweater; her shoulders square and capable and yet not too heavy, and the slim contour of her figure reaching down to the ground. She studied it abstractedly, as she would study herself in her mirror, conscious of the individuality, its likeness to herself.

"I don't know what kind of a mess you'll make of it," she said to her shadow, "but you're going to tackle it, just the same. You can't do a thing till you get some money."

She turned then and went thoughtfully up to the house and into her room, which had as yet been left undisturbed behind the bars she had placed against idle invasion.

The moon shone full into the window that faced the coulee, and she sat down in the old, black wooden rocker and gazed out upon the familiar, open stretch of sand and scant grass-growth that lay between the house and the corrals. She turned her eyes to the familiar bold outline of the bluff that swung round in a crude oval to the point where the trail turned into the coulee from the southwest. Half-way between the base and the ragged skyline, the boulder that looked like an elephant's head stood out, white of profile, hooded with black shade. Beyond was the fat shelf of ledge that had a small cave beneath, where she had once found a nest full of little, hungry birds and upon the slope beneath the telltale, scattered wing-feathers, to show what fate had fallen upon the mother. Those birds had died also, and she had wept and given them Christian burial, and had afterwards spent hours every day with her little rifle hunting the destroyer of that small home. She remembered the incident now as a small thread in the memory-pattern she was weaving.

While the shadows shortened as the moon swung high, she sat and looked out upon the coulee and the bluff that sheltered it, and she saw the things that were blended cunningly with the things that were not. After a long while her hands unclasped themselves from behind her

head and dropped numbly to her lap. She sighed and moved stiffly, and knew that she was tired and that she must get some sleep, because she could not sit down in one spot and think her way through the problems she had taken it upon herself to solve. So she got up and crept under the Navajo blanket upon the couch, tucked it close about her shoulders, and shut her eyes deliberately. Presently she fell asleep.

CHAPTER X

JEAN LEARNS WHAT FEAR IS LIKE

Sometime in the still part of the night which comes after midnight, Jean woke slowly from dreaming of the old days that had been so vivid in her mind when she went to sleep. Just at first she did not know what it was that awakened her, though her eyes were open and fixed upon the lighted square of the window. She knew that she was in her room at the Lazy A, but just at first it seemed to her that she was there because she had always been sleeping in that room. She sighed and turned her face away from the moonlight, and closed her eyes again contentedly.

Half dreaming she opened them again and stared up at the low ceiling. Somewhere in the house she heard footsteps. Very slowly she wakened enough to listen. They were footsteps,—the heavy, measured tread of some man. They were in the room that had been her father's bedroom, and at first they seemed perfectly natural and right; they seemed to be her dad's footsteps, and she wondered mildly what he was doing, up at that time of night.

The footsteps passed from there into the kitchen and stopped in the corner where stood the old-fashioned cupboard with perforated tin panels in the doors and at the sides, and the little drawers at the top,—the kind that old people call a "safe." She heard a drawer pulled out. Without giving any conscious thought to it, she knew which drawer it was; it was the one next the wall,—the one that did not pull out straight, and so had to be jerked out. What was her dad...?

Jean thrilled then with a tremor of fear. She had wakened fully enough to remember. That was not her dad, out there in the kitchen. She did not know who it was; it was some strange man prowling through the house, hunting for something. She felt again the tremor of fear that is the heritage of womanhood alone in the dark. She pulled the Navajo blanket up to her ears with the instinct of the woman to hide, because she is not strong enough to face and fight the danger that comes in the dark. She listened to the sound of that drawer being pushed back, and the other drawer being pulled out, and she shivered under the blanket.

Then she reached out her hand and got hold of her six-shooter which she had laid down unthinkingly upon a chair near the couch. She wondered if she had locked the outside door when she came in. She could not remember having done so; probably she had not, since it is not the habit of honest ranch-dwellers to lock their doors at night. She wanted to get up and see, and fasten it somehow; but she was afraid the man out there might hear her. As it was, she reasoned nervously with herself, he probably did not suspect that there was any one in the house. It was an empty house. And unless he had seen Pard in the closed stall.... She wondered if he had heard Pard there, and had investigated and found him. She wondered if he would come into this room. She remembered how securely she had nailed up the door from the kitchen, and she breathed freer. She remembered also that she had her gun, there under her hand. She closed her trembling fingers on the familiar grip of it, and the feel of it comforted her and steadied her.

Yet she had no desire, no slightest impulse to get up and see who was there. She was careful not to move, except to cover the doorway to the kitchen with her gun.

After a few minutes the man came and tried the door, and Jean lifted herself cautiously upon her elbow and waited in grim desperation. If he forced that door open, if he came in, she certainly would shoot; and if she shot,—well, you remember the fate of that hawk on the wing.

The man did not force the door open, which was perhaps the luckiest thing that ever happened to him. He fussed there until he must have made sure that it was fastened firmly upon the inside, and then he left it and went into what had been the living-room. Jean did not move from her half-sitting position, nor did she change the aim of her gun. He might come back and try again.

She heard him moving about in the living-room. Surely he did not expect to find money in an empty house, or anything else of any commercial value. What was he after? Finally he came back to the kitchen, crossed it, and stood before the barred door. He pushed against it tentatively, then stood still for a minute and finally went out. Jean heard him step upon the porch and pull the kitchen door shut behind him. She knew that squeal of the bottom hinge, and she knew the final gasp and click that proved the latch was fastened. She heard him step off the porch to the path, she heard the soft crunch of his feet in the sandy gravel as he went away toward the stable. Very cautiously she got off the couch and crept to the window; and with her gun gripped tight in her

hand, she looked out. But he had moved into a deep shadow of the bluff, and she could see nothing of him save the deeper shadow of his swift-moving body as he went down to the corral. Jean gave a long sigh of nervous relaxation, and crept shivering under the Navajo blanket. The gun she slid under the pillow, and her fingers rested still upon the cool comfort of the butt.

Soon she heard a horse galloping, and she went to the window again and looked out. The moon hung low over the bluff, so that the trail lay mostly in the shadow. But down by the gate it swung out in a wide curve to the rocky knoll, and there it lay moon-lighted and empty. She fixed her eyes upon that curve and waited. In a moment the horseman galloped out upon the curve, rounded it, and disappeared in the shadows beyond. At that distance and in that deceptive light, she could not tell who it was; but it was a horseman, a man riding at night in haste, and with some purpose in mind.

Jean had thought that the prowler might be some tramp who had wandered far off the beaten path of migratory humans, and who, stumbling upon the coulee and its empty dwellings, was searching at random for whatever might be worth carrying off. A horseman did not fit that theory anywhere. That particular horseman had come there deliberately, had given the house a deliberate search, and had left in haste when he had finished. Whether he had failed or succeeded in finding what he wanted, he had left. He had not searched the stables, unless he had done that before coming into the house. He had not forced his way into her room, probably because he did not want to leave behind him the evidence of his visit which the door would have given, or because he feared to disturb the contents of Jean's room.

Jean stared up in the dark and puzzled long over the identity of that man, and his errand. And the longer she thought about it, the more completely she was at sea. All the men that she knew were aware that she kept this room habitable, and visited the ranch often. That was no secret; it never had been a secret. No one save Lite Avery had ever been in it, so far as she knew,—unless she counted those chance trespassers who had prowled boldly through her most sacred belongings. So that almost any one in the country, had he any object in searching the house, would know that this room was hers, and would act in that knowledge.

As to his errand. There could be no errand, so far as she knew. There were no missing papers such as plays and novels are accustomed to have cunningly hidden in empty houses. There was no stolen will, no hidden treasure, no money, no Rajah's ruby, no ransom of a king; these things Jean named over mentally, and chuckled at the idea of treasure-hunting at the Lazy A. It vas very romantic, very mysterious, she told herself. And she analyzed the sensation of little wet alligators creeping up her spine (that was her own simile), and decided that her book should certainly have a ghost in it; she was sure that she could describe with extreme vividness the effect of a ghost upon her various characters.

In this wise she recovered her composure and laughed at her fear, and planned new and thrilly incidents for her novel.

She would not tell Lite anything about it, she decided. He would try to keep her from coming over here by herself, and that would precipitate one of those arguments between them that never seemed to get them anywhere, because Lite never would yield gracefully, and Jean never would yield at all,—which does not make for peace.

She wished, just the same, that Lite was there. It would be much more comfortable if he were near instead of away over to the Bar Nothing, sound asleep in the bunk-house. As a self-appointed guardian, Jean considered Lite something of a nuisance, when he wasn't funny. But as a big, steady-nerved friend and comrade, he certainly was a comfort.

CHAPTER XI

LITE'S PUPIL DEMONSTRATES

Jean awoke to hear the businesslike buzzing of an automobile coming up from the gate. Evidently they were going to make pictures there at the house, which did not suit her plans at all. She intended to spend the early morning writing the first few chapters of that book which to her inexperience seemed a simple task, and to leave before these people arrived. As it was, she was fairly caught. There was no chance of escaping unnoticed, unless she slipped out and up the bluff afoot, and that would not have helped her in the least, since Pard was in the stable.

From behind the curtains she watched them for a few minutes. Robert Grant Burns wore a light overcoat, which made him look pudgier than ever, and he scowled a good deal over some untidy-looking papers in his hands, and conferred with Pete Lowry in a dissatisfied tone, though his words were indistinguishable. Muriel Gay watched the two covertly, it seemed to Jean, and she also looked dissatisfied over something.

Burns and the camera man walked down toward the stables, studying the bluff and the immediate surroundings, and still talking together. Lee Milligan, with his paint-shaded eyes and his rouged lips and heavily pencilled eyebrows, came up and stood close to Muriel, who was sitting now upon the bench near Jean's window.

"Burns ought to cut out those scenes, Gay," he began sympathetically. "You can't do any more than you did yesterday. And believe me, you put it over in good style. I don't see what he wants more than you did."

"What he wants," said Muriel Gay dispiritedly, "is for me to pull off stunts like that girl. I never saddled a horse in my life till he ordered me to do it in the scene yesterday. Why didn't he tell me far enough ahead so I could rehearse the business? Latigo! It sounds like some Spanish dish with grated cheese on top. I don't believe he knows himself what he meant."

"He's getting nutty on Western dope," sympathized Lee Milligan. "I don't see where this country's got anything on Griffith Park for atmosphere, anyway. What did he want to come away up here in this God-forsaken country for? What is there TO it, more than he could get within an hour's ride of Los Angeles?"

"I should worry about the country," said Muriel despondently, "if somebody would kindly tell me what looping up your latigo means. Burns says that he's got to retake that saddling scene just as soon as the horses get here. It looks just as simple," she added spitefully, "as climbing to the top of the Berry Building tower and doing a leap to a passing airship. In fact, I'd choose the leap."

A warm impulse of helpfulness stirred Jean. She caught up her hat, buckled her gun belt around her from pure habit, tucked a few loose strands of hair into place, and went out where they were.

"If you'll come down to the stable with me," she drawled, while they were staring their astonishment at her unexpected appearance before them, "I'll show you how to saddle up. Pard's awfully patient about being fussed with; you can practice on him. He's mean about taking the bit, though, unless you know just how to take hold of him. Come on."

The three of them,—Muriel Gay and her mother and Lee Milligan,—stared at Jean without speaking. To her it seemed perfectly natural that she should walk up and offer to help the girl; to them it seemed not so natural. For a minute the product of the cities and the product of the open country studied each other curiously.

"Come on," urged Jean in her lazily friendly drawl. "It's simple enough, once you get the hang of it." And she smiled before she added, "A latigo is just the strap that fastens the cinch. I'll show you."

"I'll bet Bobby Burns doesn't know that," said Muriel Gay, and got up from the bench. "It's awfully good of you; Mr. Burns is so—"

"I noticed that," said Jean, while Muriel was waiting for a word that would relieve her feelings without being too blunt.

Burns and Pete Lowry and the assistant had gone down the coulee, still studying the bluff closely. "I've got to ride down that bluff," Muriel informed Jean, her eyes following her director gloomily. "He asked me last night if I could throw a rope. I don't know what for; it's an extra punch he wants to put in this picture somewhere. I wish to goodness they wouldn't let him write his own scenarios; he just lies awake nights, lately, thinking up impossible scenes so he can bully us afterwards. He's simply gone nutty on the subject of punches."

"Well, it's easy enough to learn how to saddle a horse," Jean told Muriel cheerfully. "First you want to put on the bridle—"

"Burns told me to put on the saddle first; and then he cuts the scene just as I pick up the bridle. The trouble is to get the saddle on right, and then—that latigo dope!"

"But you ought to bridle him first," Jean insisted. "Supposing you just got the saddle on, and your horse got startled and ran off? If you have the bridle on, even if you haven't the reins, you can grab them when he jumps."

"Well, that isn't the way Burns directed the scene yesterday," Muriel Gay contended. "The scene ends where I pick up the bridle."

"Then Robert Grant Burns doesn't know. I've seen men put on the bridle last; but it's wrong. Lite Avery, and everybody who knows—"

Muriel Gay looked at Jean with a weary impatience. "What I have to do," she stated, "is what Burns tells me to do. I should worry about it's being right or wrong; I'm not the producer."

Jean faced her, frowning a little. Then she laughed, hung the bridle back on the rusty spike, and took down the saddle blanket. "We'll play I'm Robert Grant Burns," she said. "I'll tell you what to do: Lay the blanket on straight,—it's shaped to Pard's back, so that ought to be easy,—

with the front edge coming forward to his withers; that's not right. Maybe I had better do it first, and show you. Then you'll get the idea."

So Jean, with the best intention in the world, saddled Pard, and wondered what there was about so simple a process that need puzzle any one. When she had tightened the cinch and looped up the latigo, and explained to Muriel just what she was doing, she immediately unsaddled him and laid the saddle down upon its side, with the blanket folded once on top, and stepped close to the manger.

"If your saddle isn't hanging up, that's the way it should be put on the ground," she said. "Now you do it. It's easy."

It was easy for Jean, but Muriel did not find it so simple. Jean went through the whole performance a second time, though she was beginning to feel that nature had never fitted her for a teacher of young ladies. Muriel, she began to suspect, rather resented the process of being taught. In another minute Muriel confirmed the suspicion.

"I think I've got it now," she said coolly. "Thank you ever so much."

Robert Grant Burns returned then, and close behind him rode Gil Huntley and those other desperados who had helped to brand the calf that other day. Gil was leading a little sorrel with a saddle on,—Muriel's horse evidently. Jean had started back to the house and her own affairs, but she lingered with a very human curiosity to see what they were all going to do.

She did not know that Robert Grant Burns was perfectly conscious of her presence even when he seemed busiest, and was studying her covertly even when he seemed not to notice her at all. Of his company, Pete Lowry was the only one who did know it, but that was because Pete himself was trained in the art of observation. Pete also knew why Burns was watching Jean and studying her slightest movement and expression; and that was why Pete kept smiling that little, hidden smile of his, while he made ready for the day's work and explained to Jean the mechanical part of making moving-pictures.

"I'd rather work with live things," said Jean after a while. "But I can see where this must be rather fascinating, too."

"This is working with live things, if anybody wants to know," Pete declared. "Wait till you see Burns in action; handling bronks is easy compared to—"

"About where does the side line come, Pete?" Burns interrupted. "If Gil stands here and holds the horse for that close-up saddling—" He whirled upon Gil Huntley. "Lead that sorrel up here," he commanded. "We'll have to cut off his head so the halter won't show. Now, how's that?"

This was growing interesting. Jean backed to a convenient pile of old corral posts and sat down to watch, with her chin in her palms, and her mind weaving shuttle-wise back and forth from one person to another, fitting them all into the pattern which made the whole. She watched Robert Grant Burns walking back and forth, growling and chuckling by turns as things pleased him or did not please him. She watched Muriel Gay walk to a certain spot which Burns had previously indicated, show sudden and uncalled-for fear and haste, and go through a pantomime of throwing the saddle on the sorrel.

She watched Lee Milligan carry the saddle up and throw it down upon the ground, with skirts curled under and stirrups sprawling.

"Oh, don't leave it that way," she remonstrated. "Lay it on its side! You'll have the skirts kinked so it never will set right."

Muriel Gay gasped and looked from her to Robert Grant Burns. For betraying your country and your flag is no crime at all compared with telling your director what he must do.

"Bring that saddle over here," commanded Burns, indicating another spot eighteen inches from the first. "And don't slop it down like it was a bundle of old clothes. Lay it on its side. How many times have I got to tell you a thing before it soaks into your mind?" Not by tone or look or manner did he betray any knowledge that Jean had spoken, and Muriel decided that he could not have heard.

Lee Milligan moved the saddle and placed it upon its side, and Burns went to the camera and eyed the scene critically for its photographic value. He fumbled the script in his hands, cocked an eye upward at the sun, stepped back, and gave a last glance to make sure that nothing could be bettered by altering the detail.

"How's Gil; outside the line, Pete? All right. Now, Miss Gay, remember, you're in a hurry, and you're worried half to death. You've just time enough to get there if you use every second. You were crying when the letter-scene closed, and this is about five minutes afterwards; you just had time enough to catch your horse and lead him out here to saddle him. Register a sob when you turn to pick up the saddle. You ought to do this all right without rehearsing. Get into the scene and start your action at the same time. Pete, you pick it up just as she gets to the horse's shoulder and starts to turn. Don't forget that sob, Gay. Ready? Camera!"

Jean was absorbed, fascinated by this glimpse into a new and very busy little world,—the world of moving-picture makers. She leaned forward and watched every moment, every little detail. "Grab the horn with your right hand, Miss Gay!" she cried involuntarily, when Muriel stooped and started to pick up the saddle.

"Don't—oh, it looks as if you were picking up a wash-boiler! I told you—"

"Register that sob!" bawled Robert Grant Burns, shooting a glance at Jean and stepping from one foot to the other like a fat gobbler in fresh-fallen snow.

Muriel registered that sob and a couple more before she succeeded in heaving the saddle upon the back of the flinching sorrel. Because she took up the saddle by horn and cantle instead of doing it as Jean had taught her, she bungled its adjustment upon the horse's back. Then the sorrel began to dance away from her, and Robert Grant Burns swore under his breath.

"Stop the camera!" he barked and waddled irately up to Muriel. "This," he observed ironically, "is drama, Miss Gay. We are not making slap-stick comedy to-day; and you needn't give an imitation of boosting a barrel over a fence."

Tears that were real slipped down over the rouge and grease paint on Muriel's cheeks. "Why don't you make that girl stop butting in?" she flashed unexpectedly. "I'm not accustomed to working under two directors!"

She registered another sob which the camera never got.

This brought Jean over to where she could lay her hand contritely upon the girl's shoulder. "I'm awfully sorry," she drawled with perfect sincerity. "I didn't mean to rattle you; but you know you never in the world could throw the stirrup over free, the way you had hold of the saddle. I thought—"

Burns turned heavily around and looked at Jean, as though he had something in his mind to say to her; but, whatever that something may have been, he did not say it. Jean looked at him questioningly and walked back to the pile of posts.

"I won't butt in any more," she called out to Muriel. "Only, it does look so simple!" She rested her elbows on her knees again, dropped her chin into her palms, and concentrated her mind upon the subject of picture-plays in the making.

Muriel recovered her composure, stood beside Gil Huntley at the horse's head just outside the range of the camera, waited for the word of command from Burns, and rushed into the saddle scene. Burns shouted "Sob!" and Muriel sobbed with her face toward the camera. Burns commanded her to pick up the saddle, and Muriel picked up the saddle and flung it spitefully upon the back of the sorrel.

"Oh, you forgot the blanket!" exclaimed Jean, and stopped herself with her hand over her too-impulsive mouth, just as Burns stopped the camera.

The director bowed his head and shook it twice slowly and with much meaning. He did not say anything at all; no one said anything. Gil Huntley looked at Jean and tried to catch her eye, so that he might give her some greeting, or at least a glance of understanding. But Jean was wholly concerned with the problem which confronted Muriel. It was a shame, she thought, to expect a girl,—and when she had reached that far she straightway put the thought into speech, as was her habit.

"It's a shame to expect that girl to do something she doesn't know how to do," she said suddenly to Robert Grant Burns. "Work at something else, why don't you, and let me take her somewhere and show her how? It's simple—"

"Get up and show her now," snapped Burns, with some sarcasm and a good deal of exasperation. "You seem determined to get into the foreground somehow; get up and go through that scene and show us how a girl gets a saddle on a horse."

Jean sat still for ten seconds and deliberated while she looked from him to the horse. Again she made a picture that drove its elusive quality of individuality straight to the professional soul of Robert Grant Burns.

"I will if you'll let me do it the right way," she said, just when he was thinking she would not answer him. She did not wait for his assurance, once she had decided to accept the challenge, or the invitation; she did not quite know which he had meant it to be.

"I'm going to bridle him first though," she informed him. "And you can tell that star villain to back out of the way. I don't need him."

Still Burns did not say anything. He was watching her, studying her, measuring her, seeing her as she would have looked upon the screen. It was his habit to leave people alone until they betrayed their limitations or proved their talent; after that, if they remained under his direction, he drove them as far as their limitations would permit.

Jean went first and placed the saddle to her liking upon the ground. "You want me to act just as if you were going to take a picture of it, don't you?" she asked Burns over her shoulder. She was not sure whether he nodded, but she acted upon the supposition that he did, and took the lead-rope from Gil's hand.

"Shall I be hurried and worried—and shall I sob?" she asked, with the little smile at the corners of her eyes and just easing the line of her lips.

Robert Grant Burns seemed to make a quick decision. "Sure," he said. "You saw the action as Miss Gay went through it. Do as she did; only we'll let you have your own ideas of saddling the horse." He turned his head toward Pete and made a very slight gesture, and Pete grinned. "All ready? Start the action!" After that he did not help her by a single suggestion. He tapped Pete upon the shoulder, and stood with his feet far apart and his hands on his hips, watching her very intently.

Jean was plainly startled, just at first, by the business-like tone in which he gave the signal. Then she laughed a little. "Oh, I forgot. I must be hurried and worried—and I must sob," she corrected herself.

So she hurried, and every movement she made counted for something accomplished. She picked up the bridle and shortened her hold upon the lead rope, and discovered that the sorrel had a trick of throwing up his head and backing away from the bit. She knew how to deal with that habit, however; but in her haste she forgot to look as worried as Muriel had looked, and so appeared to her audience as being merely determined. She got the bridle on, and then she saddled the sorrel. And for good measure she picked up the reins, caught the stirrup and went up, pivoting the horse upon his hind feet as though she meant to dash madly off into the distance. But she only went a couple of rods before she pulled him up sharply and dismounted.

"That didn't take me long, did it?" she asked. "I could have hurried a lot more if I had known the horse." Then she stopped dead still and looked at Robert Grant Burns.

"Oh, my goodness, I forgot to sob!" she gasped. And she caught her hat brim and pulling her Stetson more firmly down upon her head, turned and ran up the path to the house, and shut herself into her room.

CHAPTER XII

TO "DOUBLE" FOR MURIEL GAY

While she breakfasted unsatisfactorily upon soda crackers and a bottle of olives which happened to have been left over from a previous luncheon, Jean meditated deeply upon the proper beginning of a book. The memory of last night came to her vividly, and she smiled while she fished with a pair of scissors for an olive. She would start the book off weirdly with mysterious sounds in an empty room. That, she argued, should fix firmly the interest of the reader right at the start.

By the time she had fished the olive from the bottle, however, her thoughts swung from the artistic to the material aspect of those mysterious footsteps. What had the man wanted or expected to find? She set down the olive bottle impulsively and went out and around to the kitchen door and opened it. In spite of herself, she shuddered as she went in, and she walked close to the wall until she was well past the brown stain on the floor. She went to the old-fashioned cupboard and examined the contents of the drawers and looked into a cigar-box which stood open upon the top. She went into her father's bedroom and looked through everything, which did not take long, since the room had little left in it. She went into the living-room, also depressingly dusty and forlorn, but try as she would to think of some article that might have been left there and was now wanted by some one, she could imagine no reason whatever for that nocturnal visit. At the same time, there must have been a reason. Men of that country did not ride abroad during the still hours of the night just for the love of riding. Most of them went to bed at dark and slept until dawn.

She went out, intending to go back to her literary endeavors; if she never started that book, certainly it would never make her rich, and she would never be able to make war upon circumstances. She thought of her father with a twinge of remorse because she had wasted so much time this morning, and she scarcely glanced toward the picture-people down by the corrals, so she did not see that Robert Grant Burns turned to look at her and then started hurriedly up the path to the house.

"Say," he called, just before she disappeared around the corner. "Wait a minute. I want to talk to you."

Jean waited, and the fat man came up breathing hard because of his haste in the growing heat of the forenoon.

"Say, I'd like to use you in a few scenes," he began abruptly when he reached her. "Gay can't put over the stuff I want; and I'd like to have you double for her in some riding and roping scenes. You're about the same size and build, and I'll get you a blond wig for close-ups, like that saddling scene. I believe you've got it in you to make good on the screen; anyway, the practice you'll get doubling for Gay won't do you any harm."

Jean looked at him, tempted to consent for the fun there would be in it. "I'd like to," she told him after a little silence. "I really would love it. But I've got some work that I must do."

"Let the work wait," urged Burns, relieved because she showed no resentment against the proposal. "I want to get this picture made. It's going to be a hummer. There's punch to it, or there will be, if—"

"But you see," Jean's drawl slipped across his eager, domineering voice, "I have to earn some money, lots of it. There's something I need it for. It's—important."

"You'll earn money at this," he told her bluntly. "You didn't think I'd ask you to work for nothing, I hope. I ain't that cheap. It's like this: If you'll work in this picture and put over what I want, it'll be feature stuff. I'll pay accordingly. Of course, I can't say just how much,—this is just a try-out; you understand that. But if you can deliver the goods, I'll see that you get treated right. Some producers might play the cheap game just because you're green; but I ain't that kind, and my company ain't that kind. I'm out after results." Involuntarily his eyes turned toward the bluff. "There's a ride down the bluff that I want, and a roping—say, can you throw a rope?"

Jean laughed. "Lite Avery says I can," she told him, "and Lite Avery can almost write his name in the air with a rope."

"If you can make that dash down the bluff, and do the roping I want, why—Lord! You'll have to be working a gold mine to beat what I'd be willing to pay for the stuff."

"There's no place here in the coulee where you can ride down the bluff," Jean informed him, "except back of the house, and that's out of sight. Farther over there's a kind of trail that a good horse can handle. I came down it on a run, once, with Pard. A man was drowning, over here in the creek, and I was up on the bluff and happened to see him and his horse turn over,—it was during the high water. So I made a run down off the point, and got to him in time to rope him out. You might use that trail."

Robert Grant Burns stood and stared at her as though he did not see her at all. In truth, he was seeing with his professional eyes a picture of that dash down the bluff. He was seeing a "close-up" of Jean whirling her loop and lassoing the drowning man just as he had given up hope and was going under for the third time. Lee Milligan was the drowning man! and the agony of his eyes, and the tenseness of Jean's face, made Robert Grant Burns draw a long breath.

"Lord, what feature-stuff that would make!" he said under his breath. "I'll write a scenario around that rescue scene." Whereupon he caught himself. It is not well for a director to permit his enthusiasm to carry him into injudicious speech. He chuckled to hide his eagerness. "Well, you can show me that location," he said, "and we'll get to work. You'll have to use the sorrel, of course; but I guess he'll be all right. This saddling scene will have to wait till I send for a wig. You can change clothes with Miss Gay and get by all right at a distance, just as you are. A little make-up, maybe; she'll fix that. Come on, let's get to work. And don't worry about the salary; I'll tell you to-night what it'll be, after I see you work."

When he was in that mood, Robert Grant Burns swept everything before him. He swept Jean into his plans before she had really made up her mind whether to accept his offer or stick to her literary efforts. He had Muriel Gay up at the house and preparing to change clothes with Jean, and he had Lee Milligan started for town in the machine with the key to Burns' emergency wardrobe trunk, before Jean realized that she was actually going to do things for the camera to make into a picture.

"I'm glad you are going to double in that ride down the bluff, anyway," Muriel declared, while she blacked Jean's brows and put shadows around her eyes. "I could have done it, of course; but mamma is so nervous about my getting hurt that I hate to do anything risky like that. It upsets her for days."

"There isn't much risk in riding down the bluff," said Jean carelessly. "Not if you've got a good horse. I wonder if that sorrel is rope broke. Have you ever roped off him?"

"No," said Muriel, "I haven't." She might have added that she never roped off any horse, but she did not.

"I'll have to try him out and see what he's like, before I try to rope for a picture. I wonder if there'll be time now?" Jean was pleasantly excited over this new turn of events. She had dreamed of doing many things, but never of helping to make moving pictures. She was eager and full of curiosity, like a child invited to play a new and fascinating game, and she kept wondering what

Lite would have to say about her posing for moving pictures. Try to stop her, probably,—and fail, as usual!

When she went out to where the others were grouped in the shade, she gave no sign of any inner excitement or perturbation. She went straight up to Burns and waited for his verdict.

"Do I look like Miss Gay?" she drawled.

The keen eyes of Burns half closed while he studied her.

"No, I can't say that you do," he said after a moment. "Walk off toward the corrals,—and, say! Mount the sorrel and start off like you were in a deuce of a hurry. That'll be one scene, and I'd like to see how you do it when you can have your own way about it, and how close up we can make it and have you pass for Gay."

"How far shall I ride?" Jean's eyes had a betraying light of interest.

"Oh—to the gate, maybe. Can you get a long shot down the trail to the gate, Pete, and keep skyline in the scene?"

Pete moved the camera, fussed and squinted, and then nodded his head. "Sure, I can. But you'll have to make it right away, or else wait till to-morrow. The sun's getting around pretty well in front."

"We'll take it right after this rehearsal, if the girl can put the stuff over right," Burns muttered. "And she can, or I'm badly mistaken. Pete, that girl's—" He stopped short, because the shadow of Lee Milligan was moving up to them. "All right, Miss—say, what's your name, anyway?" He was told, and went on briskly. "Miss Douglas, just start from off that way,—about where that round rock is. You'll come into the scene a little beyond. Hurry straight up to the sorrel and mount and ride off. Your lover is going to be trapped by the bandits, and you've just heard it and are hurrying to save him. Get the idea? Now let's see you do it."

"You don't want me to sob, do you?" Jean looked over her shoulder to inquire. "Because if I were going to save my lover, I don't believe I'd want to waste time weeping around all over the place."

Burns chuckled. "You can cut out the sob," he permitted. "Just go ahead like it was real stuff."

Jean was standing by the rock, ready to start. She looked at Burns speculatively. "Oh, well, if it were real, I'd run!"

"Go ahead and run then!" Burns commanded.

Run she did, and startled the sorrel so that it took quick work to catch him.

"Camera! She might not do it like that again, ever!" cried Burns.

She was up in the saddle and gone in a flurry of dusts while Robert Grant Burns stood with his hands on his hips and watched her gloatingly.

"Lord! But that girl's a find!" he ejaculated, and this time he did not seem to care who heard him. He cut the scene just as Jean pulled up at the gate. "See how she set that sorrel down on his haunches?" he chuckled to Pete. "Talk about feature-stuff; that girl will jump our releases up ten per cent., Pete, with the punches I can put into Gay's parts now. How many feet was that scene, twenty-five?"

"Fifteen," corrected Pete. "And every foot with a punch in it. Too bad she's got to double for Gay. She's got the face for close-up work, believe me!"

To this tentative remark Robert Grant Burns made no reply whatever. He went off down the path to meet Jean, critically watching her approach to see how nearly she resembled Muriel Gay, and how close she could come to the camera without having the substitution betrayed upon the screen. Muriel Gay was a leading woman with a certain assured following among movie audiences. Daring horsewomanship would greatly increase that following, and therefore the financial returns of these Western pictures. Burns was her director, and it was to his interest to build up her popularity. Since the idea first occurred to him, therefore, of using Jean as a substitute for Muriel in all the scenes that required nerve and skill in riding, he looked upon her as a double for Muriel rather than from the viewpoint of her own individual possibilities on the screen.

"I don't know about your hair," he told her, when she came up to him and stopped. "We'll run the negative to-night and see how it shows up. The rest of the scene was all right. I had Pete make it. I'm going to take some scenes down here by the gate, now, with the boys. I won't need you till after lunch, probably; then I'll have you make that ride down off the bluff and some close-up rope work."

"I suppose I ought to ride over to the ranch," Jean said undecidedly. "And I ought to try out this sorrel if you want me to use him. Would some other day do just—"

"In the picture business," interrupted Robert Grant Burns dictatorially, "the working-hours of an actor belong to the director he's working for. If I use you in pictures, your time will belong to me on the days when I use you. I'll expect you to be on hand when I want you; get that?"

"My time," said Jean resolutely, "will belong to you if I consider it worth my while to let you have it. Otherwise it will belong to me."

Burns chuckled. "Well, we might as well get down to brass tacks and have things thoroughly understood," he decided. "I'll use you as an extra to double for Miss Gay where there's any riding stunts and so on. Miss Gay is a good actress, but she can't ride to amount to anything. With the clothes and make-up you—impersonate her. See what I mean? And for straight riding I'll pay you five dollars a day; five dollars for your time on the days that I want to use you. For any feature stuff, like that ride down the bluff, and the roping, and the like of that, it'll be more. Twenty-five dollars for feature-stuff, say, and five dollars for straight riding. Get me?"

"I do, yes." Jean's drawl gave no hint of her inner elation at the prospect of earning so much money so easily. What, she wondered, would Lite say to that?

"Well, that part's all right then. By feature-stuff, I mean anything I want you to do to put a punch in the story; anything from riding bucking horses and shooting—say can you shoot?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Well, I'll have use for that, too, later on. The more stunts you can pull off, the bigger hits these pictures are going to make. You see that, of course. And what I've offered you is a pretty good rate; but I expect to get results. I told you I wasn't any cheap John to work for. Now get this point, and get it right: I'll expect you to report to me every morning here, at eight o'clock. I may need you that day and I may not, but you're to be on hand. If I do need you, you get paid for that day, whether it's one scene or twenty you're to work in. If I don't need you that day, you don't get anything. That's what being an extra means. You start in to-day, and if you make the ride down the bluff, it'll be twenty-five to-day. But you can't go riding off somewhere else, and maybe not be here when I want you. You're under my orders, like the rest of the company. Get that?"

"I'll try it for a week, anyway," she said. "Obeying your orders will be the hardest part of it, Mr. Burns. I always want to stamp my foot and say 'I won't' when any one tells me I must do something." She laughed infectiously. "You'll probably fire me before the week's out," she prophesied. "I'll be as meek as possible, but if we quarrel,—well, you know how sweet-tempered I can be!"

Burns looked at her queerly and laughed. "I'll take a chance on that," he said, and went chuckling back to the camera. To have a girl absolutely ignore his position and authority, and treat him in that off-hand manner of equality was a new experience to Robert Grant Burns, terror among photo-players.

Jean went over to where Muriel and her mother were sitting in the shade, and asked Muriel if she would like to ride Pard out into the flat beyond the corrals, where she meant to try out the sorrel.

"I'd like to use you, anyway," she added frankly, "to practice on. You can ride past, you know, and let me rope you. Oh, it won't hurt you; and there'll be no risk at all," she hastened to assure the other, when she saw refusal in Muriel's eyes. "I'll not take any turns around the horn, you know."

"I don't want Muriel taking risks like that," put in Mrs. Gay hastily. "That's just why Burns is going to have you double for her. A leading woman can't afford to get hurt. Muriel, you stay here and rest while you have a chance. Goodness knows it's hard enough, at best, to work under Burns."

Jean looked at her and turned away. So that was it—a leading woman could not afford to be hurt! Some one else, who didn't amount to anything, must take the risks. She had received her first little lesson in this new business.

She went straight to Burns, interrupted him in coaching his chief villain for a scene, and asked him if he could spare a man for half an hour or so. "I want some one to throw a rope over on the run," she explained naively, "to try out this sorrel."

Burns regarded her somberly; he hated to be interrupted in his work.

"Ain't there anybody else you can rope?" he wanted to know. "Where's Gay?"

"'A leading woman,'" quoted Jean serenely, "'can't afford to get hurt!'"

Burns chuckled. He knew who was the author of that sentence; he had heard it before. "Well, if you're as fatal as all that, I can't turn over my leading man for you to practice on, either," he pointed out to her. "What's the matter with a calf or something?"

"You won't let me ride out of your sight to round one up," Jean retorted. "There are no calves

handy; that's why I asked for a man."

Whereupon the villains looked at one another queerly, and the chuckle of their director exploded into a full-lunged laugh.

"I'm going to use all these fellows in a couple of scenes," he told her. "Can't you practice on a post?"

"*I* don't have to practice. It's the sorrel I want to try out." Jean's voice lost a little of its habitual, soft drawl. Really, these picture-people did seem very dense upon some subjects!

"Well, now look here." Robert Grant Burns caught at the shreds of his domineering manner. "My part of this business is producing the scenes. You'll have to attend to the getting-ready part. You—you wouldn't expect me to help you put on your make-up, would you?"

"No, now that I recognize your limitations, I shall not ask any help which none of you are able or have the nerve to give," she returned coolly. "I wish I had Lite here; but I guess Pard and I can handle the sorrel ourselves. Sorry to have disturbed you."

Robert Grant Burns, his leading man and all his villains stood and watched her walk away from them to the stable. They watched her lead Pard out and turn him loose in the biggest corral. When they saw her take her coiled rope, mount the sorrel and ride in, they went, in a hurried group, to where they might look into that corral. They watched her pull the gate shut after her, lean from the saddle, and fasten the chain hook in its accustomed link. By the time she had widened her loop and turned to charge down upon unsuspecting Pard, Robert Grant Burns, his leading man and all his villains were lined up along the widest space between the corral rails, and Pete Lowry was running over so as to miss none of the show.

"Oh, I thought you were all so terribly busy!" taunted Jean, while her loop was circling over her head. Pard wheeled just then upon his hind feet, but the loop settled true over his head and drew tight against his shoulders.

The sorrel lunged and fought the rope, and snorted and reared. It took fully two minutes for Jean to force him close enough to Pard so that she might flip off the loop. Pard himself caught the excitement and snorted and galloped wildly round and round the enclosure, but Jean did not mind that; what brought her lips so tightly together was the performance of the sorrel. While she was coiling her rope, he was making half-hearted buck jumps across the corral. When she swished the rope through the air to widen her loop, he reared and whirled. She jabbed him smartly with the spurs, and he kicked forward at her feet.

"Say," she drawled to Burns, "I don't know what sort of a picture you're going to make, but if you want any roping done from this horse, you'll have to furnish meals and beds for your audiences." With that she was off across the corral at a tearing pace that made the watchers gasp. The sorrel swung clear of the fence. He came near going down in a heap, but recovered himself after scrambling along on his knees. Jean brought him to a stand before Burns.

"I'll have to ask you to raise your price, Mr. Burns, if you want me to run this animal down the bluff," she stated firmly. "He's just what I thought he was all along: a ride-around-the-block horse from some livery stable. When it comes to range work, he doesn't know as much as—"

"Some people. I get you," Burns cut in drily. "How about that horse of yours? Would you be willing to let me have the use of him—at so much per?"

"If I do the riding, yes. Now, since you're here, and don't seem as busy as you thought you were, I'll show you the difference between this livery-stable beast and a real rope-horse."

She dismounted and called to Pard, and Pard came to her, stepping warily because of the sorrel and the rope. "Just to save time, will one of you boys go and bring my riding outfit from the stable?" she asked the line at the fence, whereupon the leading man and all the villains started unanimously to perform that slight service, which shows pretty well how Jean stood in their estimation.

"Now, that's a real, typical, livery-stable saddle and bridle," she observed to Burns, pointing scornfully at the sorrel. "I was going to tell you that I'd hate to be seen in a picture riding that outfit, anyway. Now, you watch how differently Pard behaves with a rope and everything. And you watch the sorrel get what's coming to him. Shall I 'bust' him?"

"You mean throw him?" Burns, in his eagerness, began to climb the corral fence,—until he heard a rail crack under his weight. "Yes, BUST him, if you want to. John Jimpson! if you can rope and throw that sorrel—"

Jean did not reply to that half-finished sentence. She was busy saddling Pard; now she mounted and widened her loop with a sureness of the result that flashed a thrill of expectation to her audience. Twice the loop circled over her head before she flipped it out straight and true toward the frantic sorrel as he surged by. She caught him fairly by both front feet and swung Pard half away from him. Pard's muscles stiffened against the jerk of the rope, and the sorrel went down with a bump. Pard backed knowingly and braced himself like the trained rope-horse

he was, and Jean looked at Robert Grant Burns and laughed.

"I didn't bust him," she disclaimed whimsically. "He done busted himself!" She touched Pard with her heel and rode up so that the rope slackened, and she could throw off the loop. "Did you see how Pard set himself?" she questioned eagerly. "I could have gotten off and gone clear away, and Pard would have kept that horse from getting on his feet. Now you see the difference, don't you? Pard never would have gone down like that."

"Oh, you'll do," chuckled Robert Grant Burns, "I'll pay you a little more and use you and your horse together. Call that settled. Come on, boys, let's get to work."

CHAPTER XIII

PICTURES AND PLANS AND MYSTERIOUS FOOTSTEPS

When Lite objected to her staying altogether at the Lazy A, Jean assured him that she was being terribly practical and cautious and businesslike, and pointed out to him that staying there would save Pard and herself the trip back and forth each day, and would give her time, mornings and evenings to work on her book.

Lite, of course, knew all about that soon-to-be-famous book. He usually did know nearly everything that concerned Jean or held her interest. Whether, after three years of futile attempts, Lite still felt himself entitled to be called Jean's boss, I cannot say for a certainty. He had grown rather silent upon that subject, and rather inclined to keep himself in the background, as Jean grew older and more determined in her ways. But certainly he was Jean's one confidential friend, —her pal. So Lite, perforce, listened while Jean told him the plot of her story. And when she asked him in all earnestness what he thought would be best for the tragic element, ghosts or Indians, Lite meditated gravely upon the subject and then suggested that she put in both. That is why Jean lavishly indulged in mysterious footsteps all through the first chapter, and then opened the second with blood-curdling war-whoops that chilled the soul of her heroine and led her to suspect that the rocks behind the cabin concealed the forms of painted savages.

Her imagination must have been stimulated by her new work, which called for wild rides after posses and wilder flights away from the outlaws, while the flash of blank cartridges and the smoke-pots of disaster by fire added their spectacular effect to a scene now and then.

Jean, of course, was invariably the wild rider who fled in a blond wig and Muriel's clothes from pursuing villains, or dashed up to the sheriff's office to give the alarm. Frequently she fired the blank cartridges, until Lite warned her that blank cartridges would ruin her gun-barrel; after which she insisted upon using bullets, to the secret trepidation of the villains who must stand before her and who could never quite grasp the fact that Jean knew exactly where those bullets were going to land.

She would sit in her room at the Lazy A, when the sun and the big, black automobile and the painted workers were gone, and write feverishly of ghosts and Indians and the fair maiden who endured so much and the brave hero who dared so much and loved so well. Lee Milligan she visualized as the human wolf who looked with desire upon Lillian. Gil Huntley became the hero as the story unfolded; and while I have told you absolutely nothing about Jean's growing acquaintance with these two, you may draw your own conclusions from the place she made for them in her book that she was writing. And you may also form some idea of what Lite Avery was living through, during those days when his work and his pride held him apart, and Jean did "stunts" to her heart's content with these others.

A letter from the higher-ups in the Great Western Company, written just after a trial run of the first picture wherein Jean had worked, had served to stimulate Burns' appetite for the spectacular, so that the stunts became more and more the features of his pictures. Muriel Gay was likely to become the most famous photo-play actress in the West, he believed. That is, she would if Jean continued to double for her in everything save the straight dramatic work.

Jean did not care just at that time how much glory Muriel Gay was collecting for work that Jean herself had done. Jean was experiencing the first thrills of seeing her name written upon the face of fat, weekly checks that promised the fulfillment of her hopes, and she would not listen to Lite when he ventured a remonstrance against some of the things she told him about doing. Jean was seeing the Lazy A restored to its old-time home-like prosperity. She was seeing her dad there, going tranquilly about the everyday business of the ranch, holding his head well up, and looking every man straight in the eye. She could not and she would not let even Lite persuade her to give up risking her neck for the money the risk would bring her.

If she could change these dreams to reality by dashing madly about on Pard while Pete Lowry wound yards and yards of narrow gray film around something on the inside of his camera, and

watched her with that little, secret smile on his face; and while Robert Grant Burns waddled here and there with his hands on his hips, and watched her also; and while villains pursued or else fled before her, and Lee Milligan appeared furiously upon the scene in various guises to rescue her,—if she could win her dad's freedom and the Lazy A's possession by doing these foolish things, she was perfectly willing to risk her neck and let Muriel receive the applause.

She did not know that she was doubling the profit on these Western pictures which Robert Grant Burns was producing. She did not know that it would have hastened the attainment of her desires had her name appeared in the cast as the girl who put the "punches" in the plays. She did not know that she was being cheated of her rightful reward when her name never appeared anywhere save on the pay-roll and the weekly checks which seemed to her so magnificently generous. In her ignorance of what Gil Huntley called the movie game, she was perfectly satisfied to give the best service of which she was capable, and she never once questioned the justice of Robert Grant Burns.

Jean started a savings account in the little bank where her father had opened an account before she was born, and Lite was made to writhe inwardly with her boasting. Lite, if you please, had long ago started a savings account at that same bank, and had lately cut out poker, and even pool, from among his joys, that his account might fatten the faster. He had the same object which Jean had lately adopted so zealously, but he did not tell her these things. He listened instead while Jean read gloatingly her balance, and talked of what she would do when she had enough saved to buy back the ranch. She had stolen unwittingly the air castle which Lite had been three years building, but he did not say a word about it to Jean. Wistful eyed, but smiling with his lips, he would sit while Jean spoiled whole sheets of perfectly good story-paper, just figuring and estimating and building castles with the dollar sign. If Robert Grant Burns persisted in his mania for "feature-stuff" and "punches" in his pictures, Jean believed that she would have a fair start toward buying back the Lazy A long before her book was published and had brought her the thousands and thousands of dollars she was sure it would bring. Very soon she could go boldly to a lawyer and ask him to do something about her father's case. Just what he should do she did not quite know; and Lite did not seem to be able to tell her, but she thought she ought to find out just how much the trial had cost. And she wished she knew how to get about setting some one on the trail of Art Osgood.

Jean was sure that Art Osgood knew something about the murder, and she frequently tried to make Lite agree with her. Sometimes she was sure that Art Osgood was the murderer, and would argue and point out her reasons to Lite. Art had been working for her uncle, and rode often to the Lazy A. He had not been friendly with Johnny Croft,—but then, nobody had been very friendly with Johnny Croft. Still, Art Osgood was less friendly with Johnny than most of the men in the country, and just after the murder he had left the country. Jean laid a good deal of stress upon the circumstance of Art Osgood's leaving on that particular afternoon, and she seemed to resent it because no one had tried to find Art. No one had seemed to think his going at that time had any significance, or any bearing upon the murder, because he had been planning to leave, and had announced that he would go that day.

Jean's mind, as her bank account grew steadily to something approaching dignity, worked back and forth incessantly over the circumstances surrounding the murder, in spite of Lite's peculiar attitude toward the subject, which Jean felt but could not understand, since he invariably assured her that he believed her dad was innocent, when she asked him outright.

Sometimes, in the throes of literary composition, she could not think of the word that she wanted. Her eyes then would wander around familiar objects in the shabby little room, and frequently they would come to rest upon her father's saddle or her father's chaps: the chaps especially seemed potent reminders of her father, and drew her thoughts to him and held them there. The worn leather, stained with years of hard usage and wrinkled permanently where they had shaped themselves to his legs in the saddle, brought his big, bluff presence vividly before her, when she was in a certain receptive mood. She would forget all about her story, and the riding and shooting and roping she had done that day to appease the clamorous, professional appetite of Robert Grant Burns, and would sit and stare, and think and think. Always her thoughts traveled in a wide circle and came back finally to the starting point: to free her father, and to give him back his home, she must have money. To have money, she must earn it; she must work for it. So then she would give a great sigh of relaxed nervous tension and go back to her heroine and the Indians and the mysterious footsteps that marched on moonlight nights up and down a long porch just outside windows that frequently framed white, scared faces with wide, horror-stricken eyes which saw nothing of the marcher, though the steps still went up and down.

It was very creepy, in spots. It was so creepy that one evening when Lite had come to smoke a cigarette or two in her company and to listen to her account of the day's happenings, Lite noticed that when she read the creepy passages in her story, she glanced frequently over her shoulder.

"You want to cut out this story writing," he said abruptly, when she paused to find the next page. "It's bad enough to work like you do in the pictures. This is going a little too strong; you're as jumpy to-night as a guilty conscience. Cut it out."

"I'm all right. I'm just doing that for dramatic effect. This is very weird, Lite. I ought to have a green shade on the lamp, to get the proper effect. I—don't you think—er—those footsteps are

terribly mysterious?"

Lite looked at her sharply for a minute. "I sure do," he said drily. "Where did you get the idea, Jean?"

"Out of my head," she told him airily, and went on reading while Lite studied her curiously.

That night Jean awoke and heard stealthy footsteps, like a man walking in his socks and no boots, going all through the house but never coming to her room. She did not get up to see who it was, but lay perfectly still and heard her heart thump. When she saw a dim, yellow ray of light under the door which opened into the kitchen, she drew the blanket over her head, and got no comfort whatever from the feel of her six-shooter close against her hand.

The next morning she told herself that she had given in to a fine case of nerves, and that the mysterious footsteps of her story had become mixed up with the midnight wanderings of a pack-rat that had somehow gotten into the house. Then she remembered the bar of light under the door, and the pack-rat theory was spoiled.

She had taken the board off the doorway into the kitchen, so that she could use the cookstove. The man could have come in if he had wanted to, and that knowledge she found extremely disquieting. She went all through the house that morning, looking and wondering. The living-room was now the dressing-room of Muriel and her mother, and the make-up scattered over the centertable was undisturbed; the wardrobe of the two women had apparently been left untouched. Yet she was sure that some one had been prowling in there in the night. She gave up the puzzle at last and went back to her breakfast, but before the company arrived in the big, black automobile, she had found a stout hasp and two staples, and had fixed the door which led from her room into the kitchen so that she could fasten it securely on the inside.

Jean did not tell Lite about the footsteps. She was afraid that he might insist upon her giving up staying at the Lazy A. Lite did not approve of it, anyway, and it would take very little encouragement in the way of extra risk to make him stubborn about it. Lite could be very obstinate indeed upon occasion, and she was afraid he might take a stubborn streak about this, and perhaps ride over every night to make sure she was all right, or do something equally unnecessary and foolish.

She did not know Lite as well as she imagined, which is frequently the case with the closest of friends. As a matter of fact, Jean had never spent one night alone on the ranch, even though she did believe she was doing so. Lite had a homestead a few miles away, upon which he was supposed to be sleeping occasionally to prove his good faith in the settlement. Instead of spending his nights there, however, he rode over and slept in the gable loft over the old granary, where no one ever went; and he left every morning just before the sky lightened with dawn. He did not know that Jean was frightened by the sound of footsteps, but he had heard the man ride up to the stable and dismount, and he had followed him to the house and watched him through the uncurtained windows, and had kept his fingers close to his gun all the while. Jean did not dream of anything like that; but Lite, going about his work with the easy calm that marked his manner always, was quite as puzzled over the errand of the night-prowler as was Jean herself.

For three years Lite had lain aside the mystery of the footprints on the kitchen floor on the night after the inquest, as a puzzle he would probably never solve. He had come to remember them as a vagrant incident that carried no especial meaning. But now they seemed to carry a new significance,—if only he could get at the key. For three years he had gone along quietly, working and saving all he could, and looking after Jean in an unobtrusive way, believing that Aleck was guilty,—and being careful to give no hint of that belief to any one. And now Jean herself seemed to be leading him unconsciously face to face with doubt and mystery. It tantalized him. He knew the prowler, and for that reason he was all the more puzzled. What had he wanted or expected to find? Lite was tempted to face the man and ask him; but on second thought he knew that would be foolish. He would say nothing to Jean. He thanked the Lord she slept soundly! and he would wait and see what happened.

Jean herself was thoughtful all that day, and was slow to lighten her mood or her manner even when Gil Huntley rode beside her to location and talked enthusiastically of the great work she was doing for a beginner, and of the greater work she would do in the future, if only she took advantage of her opportunities.

"It can't go on like this forever," he told her impressively for the second time, before he was sure of her attention and her interest. "Think of you, working extra under a three-day guarantee! Why, you're what's making the pictures! I had a letter from a friend of mine; he's with the Universal. He'd been down to see one of our pictures,—that first one you worked in. You remember how you came down off that bluff, and how you roped me and jerked me down off the bank just as I'd got a bead on Lee? Say! that picture was a RIOT! Gloomy says he never saw a picture get the hand that scene got. And he wanted to know who was doubling for Gay, up here. You see, he got next that it was a double; he knows darned well Gay never could put over that line of stuff. The photography was dandy,—Pete's right there when it comes to camera work, anyway,—and that run down the bluff, he said, had people standing on their hind legs even before the rope scene. You could tell it was a girl and no man doubling the part. Gloomy says everybody around the studio has begun to watch for our releases, and go just to see you ride and

rope and shoot. And Gay gets all the press-notices! Say, it makes me sick!" He looked at Jean wistfully.

"The trouble is, you don't realize what a raw deal you're getting," he said, with much discontent in his tone. "As an extra, you're getting fine treatment and fine pay; I admit that. But the point is, you've no business being an extra. Where you belong is playing leads. You don't know what that means, but I do. Burns is just using you to boost Muriel Gay, and I say it's the rawest deal I ever saw handed out in the picture game; and believe me, I've seen some raw deals!"

"Now, now, don't get peevish, Gil." Jean's drawl was soft, and her eyes were friendly and amused. So far had their friendship progressed. "It's awfully dear of you to want to see me a real leading lady. I appreciate it, and I won't take off that lock of hair I said I'd take when I shoot you in the foreground. Burns wants a real thrilling effect close up, and he's told me five times to remember and keep my face turned away from the camera, so they won't see it isn't Gay. If I turn around, there will have to be a re-take, he says; and you won't like that, Gil, not after you've heard a bullet zip past your ear so close that it will fan your hair. Are—aren't you afraid of me, Gil?"

"Afraid of you?" Gil's horse swung closer, and Gil's eyes threatened the opening of a tacitly forbidden subject.

"Because if you get nervous and move the least little bit— To make it look real, as Bobby described the scene to me, I've got to shoot the instant you stop to gather yourself for a spring at me. It's that lightning-draw business I have to do, Gil. I'm to stand three quarters to the camera, with my face turned away, watching you. You keep coming, and you stop just an instant when you're almost within reach of me. In that instant I have to grab my gun and shoot; and it has to look as if I got you, Gil. I've got to come pretty close, in order to bring the gun in line with you for the camera. Bobby wants to show off the quick draw that Lite Avery taught me. That's to be the 'punch' in the scene. I showed him this morning what it is like, and Bobby is just tickled to death. You see, I don't shoot the way they usually do in pictures—"

"I should say not!" Gil interrupted admiringly.

"You haven't seen that quick work, either. It'll look awfully real, Gil, and you mustn't dodge or duck, whatever you do. It will be just as if you really were a man I'm deadly afraid of, that has me cornered at last against that ledge. I'm going to do it as if I meant it. That will mean that when you stop and kind of measure the distance, meaning to grab me before I can do anything, I'll draw and shoot from the level of my belt; no higher, Gil, or it won't be the lightning-draw—as advertised. I won't have time to take a fine aim, you know."

"Listen!" said Gil, leaning toward her with his eyes very earnest. "I know all about that. I heard you and Burns talking about it. You go ahead and shoot, and put that scene over big. Don't you worry about me; I'm going to play up to you, if I can. Listen! Pete's just waiting for a chance to register your face on the film. Burns has planned his scenes to prevent that, but we're just lying low till the chance comes. It's got to be dramatic, and it's got to seem accidental. Get me? I shouldn't have told you, but I can't seem to trick you, Jean. You're the kind of a girl a fellow's got to play fair with."

"Bobby has told me five times already to remember and keep my face away from the camera," Jean pointed out the second time. "Makes me feel as if I had lost my nose, or was cross-eyed or something. I do feel as if I'd lose my job, Gil."

"No, you wouldn't; all he'd do would be to have a re-take of the whole scene, and maybe step around like a turkey in the snow, and swear to himself. Anyway, you can forget what I've said, if you'll feel more comfortable. It's up to Pete and me, and we'll put it over smooth, or we won't do it at all. Bobby won't realize it's happened till he hears from it afterwards. Neither will you." He turned his grease-painted face toward her hearteningly and smiled as endearingly as the sinister, painted lines would allow.

"Listen!" he repeated as a final encouragement, because he had sensed her preoccupation and had misread it for worry over the picture. "You go ahead and shoot, and don't bother about me. Make it real. Shoot as close as you like. If you pink me a little I won't care,—if you'll promise to be my nurse. I want a vacation, anyway."

CHAPTER XIV

PUNCH VERSES PRESTIGE

It seems to be a popular belief among those who are unfamiliar with the business of making

motion pictures that all dangerous or difficult feats are merely tricks of the camera, and that the actors themselves take no risks whatever. The truth is that they take a good many more risks than the camera ever records; and that directors who worship what they call "punch" in their scenes are frequently as tender of the physical safety of their actors as was Napoleon or any other great warrior who measured results rather than wounds.

Robert Grant Burns had discovered that he had at least two persons in his company who were perfectly willing to do anything he asked them to do. He had set tasks before Jean Douglas that many a man would have refused without losing his self-respect, and Jean had performed those tasks with enthusiasm. She had let herself down over a nasty bit of the rim-rock whose broken line extended half around the coulee bluff, with only her rope between herself and broken bones, and with her blond wig properly tousled and her face turned always towards the rock wall, lest the camera should reveal the fact that she was not Muriel Gay. She had climbed that same rock-rim, with the aid of that same rope, and with her face hidden as usual from the camera. She had been bound and gagged and flung across Gil Huntley's saddle and carried away at a sharp gallop, and she had afterwards freed herself from her bonds in the semi-darkness of a hut that half concealed her features, and had stolen the knife from Gil Huntley's belt while he slept, and crept away to where the horses were picketed. In the revealing light of a very fine moon-effect, which was a triumph of Pete's skill, she slashed a rope that held a high-strung "mustang" (so called in the scenario), and had leaped upon his bare back and gone hurtling out of that scene and into another, where she was riding furiously over dangerously rough ground, the whole outlaw band in pursuit and silhouetted against the skyline and the moon (which was another photographic triumph of Pete Lowry).

Gil Huntley had also done many things that were risky. Jean had shot at him with real bullets so many times that her nervousness on this particular day was rather unaccountable to him. Jean had lassoed him and dragged him behind Pard through brush. She had pulled him from a quicksand bed,—made of cement that showed a strong tendency to "set" about his form before she could rescue him,—and she had fought with him on the edge of a cliff and had thrown him over; and his director, anxious for the "punch" that was his fetish, had insisted on a panorama of the fall, so that there was no chance for Gil to save himself the bruises he got. Gil Huntley's part it was always to die a violent death, or to be captured spectacularly, because he was the villain whose horrible example must bear a moral to youthful brains.

Since Jean had become one of the company, he nearly always died at her hands or was captured by her. This left Muriel Gay unruffled and unhurt, so that she could weep and accept the love of Lee Milligan in the artistic ending of which Robert Grant Burns was so fond.

Jean had never before considered it necessary to warn Gil and implore him not to be nervous, and Gil took her solicitude as an encouraging sign and was visibly cheered thereby. He knew little of guns and fine marksmanship, and he did not know that it is extremely difficult to shoot a revolver accurately and instantaneously; whereas Jean knew very well that Gil Huntley might be thrown off ledges every day in the week without taking the risk he would take that day.

The scene was to close a full reel of desperate attempts upon the part of Gil Huntley to win Muriel; such desperate attempts, indeed, that Muriel Gay spent most of the time sitting at ease in the shade, talking with Lee Milligan, who was two thirds in love with her and had half his love returned, while Jean played her part for her. Sometimes Muriel would be called upon to assume the exact pose which Jean had assumed in a previous scene, for "close-up" that would reveal to audiences Muriel's well-known prettiness and help to carry along the deception. Each morning the two stood side by side and were carefully inspected by Robert Grant Burns, to make sure that hair and costumes were exactly alike in the smallest detail. This also helped to carry on the deception—to those who were not aware of Muriel's limitations. Their faces were not at all alike; and that is why Jean's face must never be seen in a picture.

This shooting scene was a fitting climax to a long and desperate chase over a difficult trail; so difficult that Pard stumbled and fell,—supposedly with a broken leg,—and Jean must run on and on afoot, and climb over rocks and spring across dangerous crevices. She was not supposed to know where her flight was taking her. Sometimes the camera caught her silhouetted against the sky (Burns was partial to skyline silhouettes), and sometimes it showed her quite close,—in which case it would be Muriel instead of Jean,—clinging desperately to the face of a ledge (ledges were also favorite scenes), and seeking with hands or feet for a hold upon the rough face of the rock. During the last two or three scenes Gil Huntley had been shown gaining upon her.

So they came to the location where the shooting scene was to be made that morning. Burns, with the camera and Pete and Muriel and her mother and Lee Milligan, drove to the place in the machine. Jean and Gil Huntley found them comfortably disposed in the shade, out of range of the camera which Pete was setting up somewhat closer than usual, under the direction of Burns.

"There won't be any rehearsal of this," Burns stated at last, stepping back. "When it's done, if you don't bungle the scene, it'll be done. You stand here, Jean, and kind of lean against the rock as if you're all in from that chase. You hear Gil coming, and you start forward and listen, and look,—how far can she turn, Pete; without showing too much of her face?"

Pete squinted into the finder and gave the information.

"Well, Gil, you come from behind that bush. She'll be looking toward you then without turning too much. You grin, and come up with that eager, I-got-you-now look. Don't hurry too much; we'll give this scene plenty of time. This is the feature scene. Jean, you're at the end of your rope. You couldn't run another step if you wanted to, and you're cornered anyway, so you can't get away; get me? You're scared. Did you ever get scared in your life?"

"Yes," said Jean simply, remembering last night when she had pulled the blanket over her head.

"Well, you think of that time you were scared. And you make yourself think that you're going to shoot the thing that scared you. You don't put in half the punch when you shoot blanks; I've noticed that all along. So that's why you shoot a bullet. See? And you come as close to Gil as you can and not hit him. Gil, when you're shot, you go down all in a heap; you know what I mean. And Jean, when he falls, you start and lean forward, looking at him,—remember and keep your face away from the camera!—and then you start toward him kind of horrified. The scene stops right there, just as you start towards him. Then Gay takes it up and does the remorse and horror stuff because she's killed a man. That will be a close-up.

"All right, now; take your places. Sure your gun is loose so you can pull it quick? That's the feature of this scene, remember. You want to get it across BIG! And make it real,—the scare, and all that. Hey, you women get behind the camera! Bullets glance, sometimes, and play the very mischief." He looked all around to make sure that everything was as it should be, faced Jean again, and raised his hand.

"All ready? Start your action! Camera!"

Jean had never before been given so much dramatic work to do, and Burns watched her anxiously, wishing that he dared cut the scene in two and give Muriel that tense interval when Gil Huntley came creeping into the scene from behind the bush. But after the first few seconds his strained expression relaxed; anxiety gave place to something like surprise.

Jean stood leaning heavily against the rock, panting from the flight of the day before,—for so must emotion be carried over into the next day when photo-players work at their profession. Her face was dropped upon her arms flung up against the rock in an attitude of complete exhaustion and despair. Burns involuntarily nodded his head approvingly; the girl had the idea, all right, even if she never had been trained to act a part.

"Come into the scene, Gil!" he commanded, when Jean made a move as though she was tempted to drop down upon the ground and sob hysterically. "Jean, register that you hear him coming."

Jean's head came up and she listened, every muscle stiffening with fear. She turned her face toward Gil, who stopped and looked at her most villainously. Gil, you must know, had come from "legitimate" and was a clever actor. Jean recoiled a little before the leering face of him; pressed her shoulder hard against the ledge that had trapped her, and watched him in an agony of fear. One felt that she did, though one could not see her face. Gil spoke a few words and came on with a certain tigerish assurance of his power, but Jean did not move a muscle. She had backed as far away from him as she could get. She was not the kind to weep and plead with him. She just waited; and one felt that she was keyed up to the supreme moment of her life.

Gil came closer and closer, and there was a look in his eyes that almost frightened Jean, accustomed as she had become to his acting a part; there was an intensity of purpose which she instinctively felt was real. She did not know what it was he had in mind, but whatever it was, she knew what it meant. He was almost within reach, so close that one saw Jean shrink a little from his nearness. He stopped and gathered himself for a quick, forward lunge—

The two women screamed, though they had been expecting that swift drawing of Jean's gun and the shot that seemed to sound the instant her hand dropped. Gil stiffened, and his hand flew up to his temple. His eyes became two staring questions that bored into the soul of Jean. His hand dropped to his side, and his head sagged forward. He lurched, tried to steady himself and then went down limply.

Jean dropped her gun and darted toward him, her face like chalk, as she turned it for one horrified instant toward Burns. She went down on her knees and lifted Gil's head, looking at the red blotch on his temple and the trickle that ran down his cheek. She laid his head down with a gentleness wholly unconscious, and looked again at Burns. "I've killed him," she said in a small, dry, flat voice. She put out her hands gropingly and fell forward across Gil's inert body. It was the first time in her life that Jean had ever fainted.

"Stop the camera!" Burns croaked tardily, and Pete stopped turning. Pete had that little, twisted grin on his face, and he was perfectly calm and self-possessed.

"You sure got the punch that time, Burns," he remarked unfeelingly, while he held his palm over the lens and gave the crank another turn or two to divide that scene from the next.

"She's fainted! She's hit him!" cried Burns, and waddled over to where the two of them lay. The two women drew farther away, clinging to each other with excited exclamations.

And then Gil Huntley lifted himself carefully so as not to push Jean upon the ground, and when he was sitting up, he took her in his arms with some remorse and a good deal of tenderness.

"How was that for a punch?" he inquired of his director. "I didn't tell her I was going to furnish the blood-sponge; I thought it might rattle her. I never thought she'd take it so hard—"

Robert Grant Burns stopped and looked at him in heavy silence. "Good Lord!" he snapped out at last. "I dunno whether to fire you off the job—or raise your salary! You got the punch, all right. And the chances are you've ruined her nerve for shooting, into the bargain." He stood looking down perturbedly at Gil, who was smoothing Jean's hair back from her forehead after the manner of men who feel tenderly toward the woman who cries or faints in their presence. "I'm after the punch every time," Burns went on ruefully, "but there's no use being a hog about it. Where's that water-bag, Lee? Go get it out of the machine. Say! Can't you women do something besides stand there and howl? Nobody's hurt, or going to be."

While Muriel and Gil Huntley did what they could to bring Jean back to consciousness and composure, Robert Grant Burns paced up and down and debated within himself a subject which might have been called "punch versus prestige." Should he let that scene stand, or should he order a "re-take" because Jean had, after all, done the dramatic part, the "remorse stuff"? Of course, when Pete sent the film in, the trimmers could cut the scene; they probably would cut the scene just where Gil went down in a decidedly realistic heap. But it hurt the professional soul of Robert Grant Burns to retake a scene so compellingly dramatic, because it had been so absolutely real.

Jean was sitting up with her back against the ledge looking rather pale and feeling exceedingly foolish, while Gil Huntley explained to her about the "blood-sponge" and how he had held it concealed in his hand until the right moment, and had used it in the interest of realism and not to frighten her, as she might have reason to suspect. Gil Huntley was showing a marked tendency to repeat himself. He had three times assured her earnestly that he did not mean to scare her so, when the voice of the chief reminded him that this was merely an episode in the day's work. He jumped up and gave his attention to Burns.

"Gil, take that same position you had when you fell. Put a little more blood on your face; you wiped most of it off. That right leg is sprawled out too far. Draw it up a little. Throw out your left arm a little more. Whoa— Enough is plenty. Now, Gay, you take Jean's gun and hold it down by your side, where her hand dropped right after she fired. You stand right about here, where her tracks are. Get INTO her tracks! We're picking up the scene right where Gil fell. She looked straight into the camera and spoiled the rest, or I'd let it go in. Some acting, if you ask me, seeing it wasn't acting at all." He sent one of his slant-eyed glances toward Jean, who bit her lips and looked away.

"Lean forward a little, and hold that gun like you knew what it was made for, anyway!" He regarded Muriel glumly. "Say! that ain't a stick of candy you're trying to hide in your skirt," he pointed out, with an exasperated, rising inflection at the end of the sentence. "John Jimpson! If I could take you two girls to pieces and make one out of the two of you, I'd have an actress that could play Western leads, maybe!

"Oh, well—thunder! All you can do is put over the action so they'll forget the gun. Say, you drop it the second the camera starts. You pick up the action where Jean dropped the gun and started for Gil. See if you can put it over the way she did. She really thought she'd killed him, remember. You saw the real, honest-to-John, horror-dope that time. Now see how close you can copy it.

"All ready? START your ACTION!" he barked. "Camera!"

Brutally absorbed in his work he might be; callous to the tragedy in Jean's eyes at what might have happened; unfeeling in his greedy seizure of her horror as good "stuff" for Muriel Gay to mimic. Yet the man's energy was dynamic; his callousness was born of his passion for the making of good pictures. He swept even Jean out of the emotional whirlpool and into the calm, steady current of the work they had to do.

He instructed Pete to count as spoiled those fifteen feet of film which recorded Jean's swift horror. But Pete Lowry did not always follow slavishly his instructions. He sent the film in as it was, without comment. Then he and Gil Huntley counted on their fingers the number of days that would probably elapse before they might hope to hear the result, and exchanged knowing glances now and then when Robert Grant Burns seemed especially careful that Jean's face should not be seen by the recording eye of the camera. And they waited; and after awhile they began to show a marked interest in the mail from the west.

CHAPTER XV

A LEADING LADY THEY WOULD MAKE OF JEAN

Sometimes events follow docilely the plans that would lead them out of the future of possibilities and into the present of actualities, and sometimes they bring with them other events which no man may foresee unless he is indeed a prophet. You would never think, for instance, that Gil Huntley and his blood sponge would pull from the future a chain of incidents that would eventually—well, never mind what. Just follow the chain of incidents and see what lies at the end.

Pete Lowry and Gil had planned cunningly for a certain readjustment of Jean's standing in the company, for no deeper reasons than their genuine liking for the girl and a common human impulse to have a hand in the ordering of their little world. In ten days Robert Grant Burns received a letter from Dewitt, president of the Great Western Film Company, which amply fulfilled those plans, and, as I said, opened the way for other events quite unforeseen.

There were certain orders from the higher-ups which Robert Grant Burns must heed. They were, briefly, the immediate transfer of Muriel Gay to the position of leading woman in a new company which was being sent to Santa Barbara to make light comedy-dramas. Robert Grant Burns grunted when he read that, though it was a step up the ladder for Muriel which she would be glad to take. The next paragraph instructed him to place the young woman who had been doubling for Miss Gay in the position which Miss Gay would leave vacant. It was politely suggested that he adapt the leading woman's parts to the ability of this young woman; which meant that he must write his scenarios especially with her in mind. He was informed that he should feature the young woman in her remarkable horsemanship, etc. It was pointed out that her work was being noticed in the Western features which Robert Grant Burns had been sending in, and that other film companies would no doubt make overtures shortly, in the hope of securing her services. Under separate cover they were mailing a contract which would effectually forestall such overtures, and they were relying upon him to see that she signed up with the Great Western as per contract. Finally, it was suggested, since Mr. Dewitt chose always to suggest rather than to command, that Robert Grant Burns consider the matter of writing a series of short stories having some connecting thread of plot and featuring this Miss Douglas. (This, by the way, was the beginning of the serial form of motion-picture plays which has since become so popular.)

Robert Grant Burns read that letter through slowly, and then sat down heavily in an old arm-chair in the hotel office, lighted one of his favorite fat, black cigars, and mouthed it absently, while he read the letter through again. He said "John Jimpson!" just above a whisper. He held the letter in his two hands and regarded it strangely. Then he looked up, caught the quizzical, inquiring glance of Pete Lowry, and beckoned that secret-smiling individual over to him. "Read that!" he grunted. "Read it and tell me what you think of it."

Pete Lowry read it carefully, and grinned when he handed it back. He did not, however, tell Robert Grant Burns just exactly what he thought of it. He merely said that it had to come sometime, he guessed.

"She can't put over the dramatic stuff," objected Robert Grant Burns. "She's got the face for it, all right, and when she registers real emotions, it gets over big. The bottled-up kind of people always do. But she's never acted an emotion she didn't feel—"

"How about that all-in stuff, and the listening-and—waiting business she put across before she took a shot at Gil that time she fainted?" Pete reminded him. "If you ask me, that little girl can act."

"Well, whether she can or not, she's got to try it," said Burns with some foreboding. "She's been going big, with Gay to do all the close-up, dramatic work. The trouble is, Pete, that girl always does as she darn pleases! If I put her opposite Lee in a scene and tell her to act like she is in love with him, and that he's to kiss her and she's to kiss back,—" he flung out his hands expressively. "You must know the rest, as well as I do. She'd turn around and give me a call-down, and get on her horse and ride off; and I and my picture could go to thunder, for all of her. That's the point; she ain't been through the mill. She don't know anything about taking orders—from me or anybody else." It is a pity that Lite did not hear that! He might have amended the statement a little. Jean had been taking orders enough; she knew a great deal about receiving ultimatums. The trouble was that she seldom paid any attention to them. Lite was accustomed to that, but Robert Grant Burns was not, and it irked him sore.

"Well, she's sure got the screen personality," Pete defended. "I've said it all along. That girl don't have to act. Put her in the part, and she is the part! She's got something better than technique, Burns. She's got imagination. She puts herself in a character and lives it."

"Put her on a horse and she does," Burns conceded gloomily. "But will you tell me what kind of work she'll make of interior scenes, and love scenes, and all that? You've got to have it, to pad out your story. You can't let your leading character do a whole two—or three-reel picture on horseback. There wouldn't be any contrast. Dewitt don't know that girl the way I do. If he'd had to side-step and scheme and give in the way I've done to keep her working, he wouldn't put her playing straight leads, not until she'd had a year or two of training—"

"Taming is a better word," Pete suggested drily. "There'll be fun when she gets to playing love scenes opposite Lee. You better let him take the heavies, and put Gil in for leads, Burns."

Robert Grant Burns was so cast down by the prospect that he made no attempt to reply, beyond grunting something about preferring to drive a team of balky mules to making Jean do something she did not want to do. But, such is the mind trained to a profession, insensibly he drifted away into the world of his imagination, and began to draw therefrom the first tenuous threads of a plot wherein Jean's peculiar accomplishments were to be featured. Robert Grant Burns had long ago learned to adjust himself to circumstances which in themselves were not to his liking. He adjusted himself now to the idea of making Jean the Western star his employers seemed to think was inevitable.

That night before he went to bed he wrote a play which had in it fifty-two scenes. Thirty-five of them were what is known technically as exteriors. In most of them Jean was to ride on horseback through wild places. The rest were dramatic close-ups. Robert Grant Burns went over it carefully when it was finished, and groaning inwardly he cut out two love scenes which were tense, and which Muriel Gay and Lee Milligan would have "eaten up," as he mentally expressed it. The love interest, he realized bitterly, must be touched upon lightly in his scenarios from now on; which would have lightened appreciably the heart of Lite Avery, if he had only known it, and would have erased from his mind a good many depressing visions of Jean as the film sweetheart of those movie men whom he secretly hated.

Jean did not hesitate five minutes before she signed the contract which Burns presented to her the next morning. She was human, and she had learned enough about the business to see that, speaking from a purely professional point of view, she was extremely fortunate. Not every girl, surely, can hope to jump in a few weeks from the lowly position of an inexperienced "extra" to the supposedly exalted one of leading woman. And to her that hundred dollars a week which the contract insured her looked a fortune. It spelled home to her, and the vindication of her beloved dad, of whom she dared not think sometimes, it hurt her so.

Her book was not progressing as fast as she had expected when she began it. She had been working at it sporadically now for eight weeks, and she had only ten chapters done,—and some of these were terribly short. She had looked through all of the novels that she owned, and had computed the average number of chapters in each; thirty she decided would be a good, conservative number to write. She had even divided those thirty into three parts, and had impartially allotted ten to adventure, ten to mystery and horror, and ten to love-making. Such an arrangement should please everybody, surely, and need only be worked out smoothly to prove most satisfying.

But, as it happened, comedy would creep into the mystery and horror, which she mentally lumped together as agony. Adventure ran riot, and straight love-making chapters made her sleepy, they bored her so. She had tried one or two, and she had found it impossible to concentrate her mind upon them. Instead, she had sat and planned what she would do with the money that was steadily accumulating in the bank; a pitiful little sum, to be sure, to those who count by the thousands, but cheering enough to Jean, who had never before had any money of her own.

So she signed the contract and worked that day so light-heartedly that Robert Grant Burns forgot his pessimism. When the light began to fade and grow yellow, and the big automobile went purring down the trail to town, she rode on to the Bar Nothing to find Lite, and tell him how fortune had come and tapped her on the shoulder.

She did not see Lite anywhere about the ranch, and so she did not put her hopes and her plans and her good fortune into speech. She did see her Aunt Ella, who straightway informed her that people were talking about the way she rode here and there with those painted-up people, and let the men put their arms around her and make love to her. Her Aunt Ella made it perfectly plain to Jean that she, for one, did not consider it respectable. Her Aunt Ella said that Carl was going to do something about it, if things weren't changed pretty quick.

Jean did not appear to regard her aunt's disapproval as of any importance whatever, but the words stung. She had herself worried a little over the love-making scenes which she knew she would now be called upon to play. Jean, you will have observed, was not given to sentimental adventurings; and she disliked the idea of letting Lee Milligan make love to her the way he had made love to Muriel Gay through picture after picture. She would do it, she supposed, if she had to; she wanted the salary. But she would hate it intolerably. She made reply with sarcasm which she knew would particularly irritate her Aunt Ella, and left the house feeling that she never wanted to enter it again as long as she lived.

The sight of her uncle standing beside Pard in an attitude of disgusted appraisement of the new Navajo blanket and the silver-trimmed bridle and tapideros which Burns had persuaded her to add to her riding outfit,—for photographic effect,—brought a hot flush of resentment. She went up quietly enough, however. Indeed, she went up so quietly that he started when she appeared almost beside him and picked up Pard's reins, and took the stirrup to mount and ride away. She did not speak to him at all; she had not spoken to him since that night when the little brown bird had died! Though perhaps that was because she had managed to keep out of his way.

"I see you've been staking yourself to a new bridle," Carl began in a tone quite as sour as his look. "You must have bought out all the tin decorations they had in stock, didn't you?"

Jean swung up into the saddle before she looked at him. "If I did, it's my own affair," she retorted. "I paid for the tin decorations with my own money."

"Oh, you did! Well, you might have been in better business than paying for that kind of thing. You might," he sneered up at her, "have been paying for your keep these last three years, if you've got more money of your own than you know what to do with."

Jean could not ride off under the sting of that gratuitous insult. She held Pard quiet and looked down at him with hate in her eyes. "I expect," she said in a queer, quiet wrath, "to prove before long that my own money has been paying for my 'keep' these last three years; for that and for other things that did not benefit me in the least."

"I'd like to know what you mean by that!" Carl caught Pard by the bridle-rein and looked up at her in a white fury that startled even Jean, accustomed as she was to his sudden rages that contrasted with his sullen attitude toward the world.

"What do you think I would mean? Let go my bridle. I don't want to quarrel with you."

"What did you mean by proving—what do you expect to prove?" His hand was heavy on the rein, so that Pard began to fret under the restraint. "You've got to quit running around all over the country with them show folks, and stay at home and behave yourself. You've got to quit hanging out at the Lazy A. I've stood as much as I'm going to stand of your performances. You get down off that horse and go into the house and behave yourself; that's what you'll do! If you haven't got any shame or decency—"

Jean scarcely knew what she did, just then. She must have dug Pard with her spurs, because the first thing that she realized was the lunge he gave. Carl's hold slipped from the rein, as he was jerked sidewise. He made an ineffective grab at Jean's skirt, and he called her a name she had never heard spoken before in her life. A rod or so away she pulled up and turned to face him, but the words she would have spoken stuck in her throat. She had never seen Carl Douglas look like that; she had seen him when he was furious, she had seen him when he sulked, but she had never seen him look like that.

He called her to come back. He made threats of what he would do if she refused to obey him. He shook his fist at her. He behaved like a man temporarily robbed of his reason; his eyes, as he came up glaring at her, were the eyes of a madman.

Jean felt a tremor of dread while she looked at him and listened to him. He was almost within reach of her again when she wheeled and went off up the trail at a run. She looked back often, half fearing that he would get a horse and follow her, but he stood just where she had left him, and he seemed to be still uttering threats and groundless accusations as long as she was in sight.

CHAPTER XVI

FOR ONCE AT LEAST LITE HAD HIS WAY

Half a mile she galloped, and met Lite coming home. She glanced over her shoulder before she pulled Pard down to a walk, and Lite's greeting, as he turned and rode alongside her, was a question. He wanted to know what was the matter with her. He listened with his old manner of repression while she told him, and he made no comment whatever until she had finished.

"You must have made him pretty sore," he said dispassionately. "I don't think myself that you ought to stay over to the ranch alone. Why don't you do as he says?"

"And go back to the Bar Nothing?" Jean shivered a little. "Nothing could make me go back there! Lite, you don't understand. He acted like a crazy man; and I hadn't said anything to stir him up like that. He was—Lite, he scared me! I couldn't stay on the ranch with him. I couldn't be in the same room with him."

"You can't go on staying at the Lazy A," Lite told her flatly.

"There's no other place where I'd stay."

"You could," Lite pointed out, "stay in town and go back and forth with the rest of the bunch. It would be a lot better, any way you look at it."

"It would be a lot worse. There's my book; I wouldn't have any chance to write on that. And there's the expense. I'm saving every nickel I possibly can, Lite, and you know what for. And

there's the bunch—I see enough of them during working hours. I'd go crazy if I had to live with them. Lite, they've put me in playing leads! I'm to get a hundred dollars a week! Just think of that! And Burns says that I'll have to go back to Los Angeles with them when they go this fall, because the contract I signed lasts for a year."

She sighed. "I rode over to tell you about it. It seemed to be good news, when I left home. But now, it's just a part of the black tangle that life's made up of. Aunt Ella started things off by telling me what a disgrace it is for me to work in these pictures. And Uncle Carl—" She shivered in spite of herself. "I just can't understand Uncle Carl's going into such a rage. It was—awful."

Lite rode for some distance before he lifted his head or spoke. Then he looked at Jean, who was staring straight ahead and seeing nothing save what her thoughts pictured.

He did not say a word about her going to Los Angeles.

He was the bottled-up type; the things that hit him hardest he seldom mentioned, so by that rule it might be inferred that her going hit hard. But his voice was normally calm, and his tone was the tone of authority, which Jean knew very well, and which nearly always amused her because she firmly believed it to be utterly useless.

He said in the tone of an ultimatum: "If you're bound to stay at the ranch, you've got to have somebody with you. I'll ride in and get Hepsy Atwood in the morning. You're getting thin. I don't believe you take time to cook enough to eat. You can't work on soda crackers and sardines. The old lady won't charge much to come and stay with you. I'll come over after I'm through work to-morrow and help her get things looking a little more like living."

"You'll do nothing of the sort." Jean looked at him mutinously. "I'm all right just as I am. I won't have her, Lite. That's settled."

"Sure, it's settled," Lite agreed, with more than his usual pertinacity. "I'll have her out here by noon, and a supply of real grub. How are you fixed for bedding?"

"I won't have her, I tell you. You're always trying to make me do things I won't do. Don't be silly."

"Sure not." Lite shifted in the saddle with the air of a man who rides at perfect ease with himself and with the world. "She'll likely have plenty of bedding of her own," he meditated, after a brief silence.

"Lite, if you haul Hepsibah out here, I'll send her back!"

"I'll haul her out," said Lite in a tone of finality, "but you won't send her back." He paused. "She ain't much protection, maybe," he remarked somewhat enigmatically, "but it'll beat staying alone nights. You—you can't tell who might come prowling around the place."

"What do you mean? Do you know about—" Jean caught herself on the verge of betrayal.

"You want to keep your gun handy. Just on general principles," Lite remonstrated. "You can't tell; it's away off from everywhere."

"I won't have Hepsy Atwood. Haven't I enough to drive me mad, without her?"

"Is there anybody else that you'd rather have?" Lite looked at her speculatively.

"No, there isn't. I won't have anybody. It would be a nuisance having some old lady in the house gabbling and gossiping. I'm not the least bit afraid, except,—I'm not afraid, and I like to be alone. I won't have her, Lite."

Lite said no more about it until they reached the house, huddled lonesomely against the barren bluff, its windows staring black into the dusk. Jean did not seem to expect Lite to dismount, but he did not wait to see what she expected him to do. In his most matter-of-fact manner he dismounted and turned his horse, still saddled, into the stable with Pard. He preceded Jean up the path, and went into the kitchen ahead of her; lighted a match and found the lamp, and set its flame to brightening the dingy room.

Jean had not done much in the way of making that part of the house more attractive. She used the kitchen to cook in, because the stove was there, and the dishes. She had spread an old braided rug over the brown stain on the floor, and she ate in her own room with the door shut.

Without being told, Lite seemed to know all about her secret aversion to the kitchen. He took up the lamp and went now on a tour of inspection through the house. Jean followed him, wondering a little, and thinking that this was the way that mysterious stranger came and prowled at night, except that he must have used matches to light the way, or a candle, since the lamp seemed never to be disturbed. Lite went into all the rooms and held the lamp so that its brightness searched out all the corners. He looked into the small, stuffy closets. He stood in the middle of her father's room and seemed to meditate deeply, while Jean stood in the doorway and watched him inquiringly. He came back finally to the kitchen and looked into the cupboard, as though he was taking an inventory of her supply of provisions.

"You might cook me some supper, Jean," he said, when he had put the lamp on the table. "I see you've got eggs and bacon. I'm pretty hungry,—for a man that had his dinner six or seven hours ago."

Jean cooked supper, and they ate together in the kitchen. It did not seem so gruesome with Lite there, and she told him some funny things that had happened in her work, and mimicked Robert Grant Burns with an accuracy of manner and tone that would have astonished that pompous person a good deal and flattered him not at all. She almost recovered her spirits under the stimulus of Lite's presence, and she quite forgot that he had threatened her with Hepsibah Atwood.

But when he had wiped the dishes and had taken up his hat to go, Lite proved how tenaciously his mind could hold to an idea, and how even Jean could not quite match him for stubbornness.

"That mattress in the little bedroom looks all right," he said. "I'll pack it outside before I go, so it will have all day to-morrow out in the sun. I'll have Hepsy bring her own bedding. Well—so long."

Jean would have sworn in perfect good faith that Lite led his horse out of the stable, mounted it, and rode away to the Bar Nothing. He did mount and ride away as far as the mouth of the coulee. But that night he spent in the loft over the shop, and he did not sleep five minutes during the night. Most of the time he spent leaning against his rolled bedding, smoking and gazing at the silent house where Jean slept. You may interpret that as you will.

Jean did not see or hear anything more of him, until about four o'clock the next afternoon, when he drove calmly up to the house and deposited Hepsibah Atwood upon the kitchen steps. He did not wait for Jean to order them away. He hurried the unloading, released the wagon brake, and drove off. So Jean, coming from the spring behind the house, really got her first sight of him as he went rattling down to the gate.

Jean stood and looked after him, twitched her shoulders in a mental yielding of the point for the time being, and said "How-da-do" to the old lady.

She was not so old, as years go; fifty-five or thereabouts. And she could have whispered into Lite's ear without standing on her toes or asking him to bend his head. Lite was a tall man, at that. She had gray hair that was frizzy around her brows and at the back of her neck, and she had an Irish disposition without the brogue to go with it.

The first thing she did was to find an axe and chop a lot of fence-posts into firewood, as easily as Lite himself could have done it, and in other ways proceeded to make herself very much at home. The next day she dipped the spring almost dry, and used up all the soap in the house; and for three days went around with her skirts tucked up and her arms bare and the soles of her shoes soggy from wet floors. Jean kept out of her way, but she owned to herself that, after all, it was not unpleasant to come home tired and not have to cook a solitary supper and eat it in silent meditation.

The third night after Hepsy's arrival, Jean awoke to hear a man's furtive footsteps in her father's room. This was the fifth time that the prowler had come in the night, and custom had dulled her fear a little. She had not reached the point yet of getting up to see who it was and what he wanted. It was much easier to lie perfectly still with her six-shooter gripped in her hand and wait for him to go. Beyond stealthily trying her door and finding it fastened on the inside, he had never shown any disposition to invade her room.

To-night was as all other nights when he came and made that mysterious search, until he went into the little bedroom where slept Hepsibah Atwood. Jean listened to the faint creaking of old boards which told her that he was approaching Hepsy's room, and she wondered if Hepsy would hear him. Hepsy did hear him. There was a squeak of the old bedstead that told how a hundred and seventy-two pounds of indignant womanhood was rising to do battle.

"Who's that? Git outa here, or I'll smash you!" There was no fear but a great deal of determination in Hepsy's voice, and there was the sound of her bare feet spatting on the floor.

The man's footsteps retreated hurriedly. Jean heard the kitchen door open and slam shut with a shrill squeal of its rusty hinges, and the sound of a man running down the path. She heard Hepsy muttering threats while she followed to the door and looked out, and she heard the muttering continue while Hepsy returned to bed.

It was very comforting. Jean tucked her gun under her pillow, laughed to herself for having shuddered under the blankets at the sound of a man so easily put to flight, and went to sleep feeling quite secure and for the first time really glad that Hepsibah Atwood was in the house.

She listened the next morning to Hepsy's colorful account of the affair, but she did not tell Hepsy that the man had been there before. She did not even tell her that she had heard the disturbance, and was lying with her gun in her hand ready to shoot if he came into her room. For a girl as frank and outspoken as was Jean, she had almost as great a talent as Lite for holding her tongue.

CHAPTER XVII

"WHY DON'T YOU GIVE THEM SOMETHING REAL?"

"Well, you don't seem crazy about it. What's the matter?" Robert Grant Burns stood in his favorite attitude with his hands on his hips and his feet far apart, and looked down at Jean with a secret anxiety in his eyes. Without realizing it in the least, Jean's opinion had come to have a certain weight with Robert Grant Burns. "What's wrong with that?" Burns, having sat up until two o'clock to finish that particular scenario to his liking, plainly resented the expression on Jean's face while she read it.

"Oh, nothing, only I'm getting awfully sick of these kidnap-and-rescue, and kiss-in-the-last-scene pictures, and Wild West stuff without a real Western man in the whole thing. I'd like to do something real for a change."

Robert Grant Burns grunted and reached for his slighted brain-child. "What you want? Mother on, knitting. Girl washing dishes. Lover arrives; they sit on front steps and spoon. Become engaged. Lover hitches up team, girl climbs into wagon, they drive to town. Ten scenes of driving to town. Lover gets out, ties team in front of courthouse. Goes in and gets license. Three scenes of license business. Goes out. Two scenes of driving to minister and hitching team to gate. One scene of getting to door. One scene getting inside the house. One scene preacher calling his wife and hired girl. One scene 'Do you take this woman,' one scene 'I do.' Fifteen scenes getting team untied and driving back to ranch. That's about as much pep as there is in real life in the far West, these days. Something like that would suit you, maybe. It don't suit the people who pay good nickels and dimes to get a thrill, though."

"Neither does this sort of junk, if they've got any sense. Think of paying nickel after nickel to see Lee Milligan rush to the girl's door, knock, learn the fatal news, stagger back and clap his hand to his brow and say 'Great Heaven! GONE!'" Jean, stirred to combat by the sarcasm of Robert Grant Burns, did the stagger and the hand-to-brow and great-heaven scene with a realism that made Pete Lowry turn his back suddenly. "They've seen Gil abduct me or Muriel seven times in a perfectly impossible manner, and they—oh, why don't you give them something REAL? Things that are thrilling and dangerous and terrible do happen out here, Mr. Burns. Real adventures and real tragedies—" She stopped, and Burns turned his eyes involuntarily toward the kitchen. He had heard all about the history of the Lazy A, though he had been very careful to hide the fact that he had heard it. Jean's glance, following that of her director, was a revealing one. She bit her lip; and in a moment she went on, with her chin held a shade higher and her pride revolting against subterfuge.

"I didn't mean that," she said quietly. "But—well, up to a certain point, I don't mind if you put in real things, if it will be good picture-stuff. You're featuring me, anyway, it seems. Listen." Jean's face changed. Her eyes took that farseeing look of the dreamer. She was looking full at Burns, but he knew that she did not see him at all. She was looking at a mental picture of her own conjuring, he judged. He stood still and waited curiously, wondering, to use his manner of speech, what the girl was going to spring now.

"Listen: Instead of all this impossible piffle, let's start a real story. I—I've—"

"What kind of a real story?" The tone of Robert Grant Burns was carefully non-committal, but his eyes betrayed his eagerness. The girl did have some real ideas, sometimes! And Robert Grant Burns was not the one to refuse a real idea because it did not come from his own brain.

"Well," Jean flushed with an adorable shyness at the apparent egotism of her idea, "since you seem to want me for the central figure in everything, suppose we start a story like this: Suppose I am left here at the Lazy A with my mother to take care of and a ranch and a lot of cattle; and suppose it's a hard proposition, because there's really a gang of rustlers that have been running off stock and never getting caught, and they have a grudge against my family and grab our cattle every chance they get. Suppose—suppose they killed my brother when he was about to round them up, and they want to drive me and my mother out of the country. Scare us out, you know. Well,—" she hesitated and glanced diffidently at the boys who had edged up to listen,—"that would leave room for all kinds of feature stuff. Say that I have just one or two boys that I can depend on, boys that I know are loyal. With an outfit the size of ours, that keeps me in the saddle every day and all day; and I would have some narrow escapes, I reckon. You've got your rustlers all made to order,—only I'd make them up differently, if I were doing it. Have them look real, you know, instead of stagey." (Whereat Robert Grant Burns winced.) "Lee could be one of my loyal cowboys; you'd want some dramatic acting, I reckon, and he could do that. But I'd want one puncher who can ride and shoot and handle a rope. For that, to help me do the real work in the picture, I want Lite Avery. There are things I can do that you have never had me do, for the simple reason that you don't know the life well enough ever to think of them. Real stunts, not these made-to-order, shoot-the-villain-and-run-to-the-arms-of-the-hero stuff. I'd have to have Lite

Avery; I wouldn't start without him."

"Well, go on." Robert Grant Burns still tried to sound non-committal, but he was plainly eager to hear all that she had to say.

"Well, that's the idea. They're trying to drive us out of the country, without really hurting me. And I've got my mind set on staying. Not only that, but I believe they killed my brother, and I'm going to hunt them down and break up their gang or die in the attempt. There's your plot. It needn't be overdone in the least, to have thrills enough. And there would be all kinds of chance for real range-stuff, like the handling of cattle and all that.

"We can use this ranch just as it is, and have the outlaws down next the river. I'm glad you haven't taken any scenes that show the ranch as a whole. You've stuck to your close-up, great-heaven scenes so much," she went on with merciless frankness, "that you've really not cheapened the place by showing more than a little bit at a time.

"You might start by making Lee up for my brother, and kill him in the first reel; show the outlaws when they shoot him and run off with a bunch of stock they're after. Lite can find him and bring him home. Lite would know just how to do that sort of thing, and make people see it's real stuff. I believe he'd show he was a real cow-puncher, even to the people who never saw one. There's an awful lot of difference between the real thing and your actors." She was so perfectly sincere and so matter-of-fact that the men she criticised could do no more than grin.

"You might, for the sake of complications, put a traitor and spy on the ranch. Oh, I tell you! Have Hepsibah be the mother of one of the outlaws. She wouldn't need to do any acting; you could show her sneaking out in the dark to meet her son and tell him what she has overheard. And show her listening, perhaps, through the crack in a door. Mrs. Gay would have to be the mother. Gil says that Hepsibah has the figure of a comedy cook and what he calls a character face. I believe we could manage her all right, for what little she would have to do, don't you?"

Jean having poured out her inspiration with a fluency born of her first enthusiasm, began to feel that she had been somewhat presumptuous in thus offering advice wholesale to the highest paid director of the Great Western Film Company. She blushed and laughed a little, and shrugged her shoulders.

"That's just a suggestion," she said with forced lightness. "I'm subject to attacks of acute imagination, sometimes. Don't mind me, Mr. Burns. Your scenario is a very nice scenario, I'm sure. Do you want me to be a braid-down-the-back girl in this? Or a curls-around-the-face girl?"

Robert Grant Burns stood absent-mindedly tapping his left palm with the folded scenario which Jean had just damned by calling it a very nice scenario. Nice was not the adjective one would apply to it in sincere admiration. Robert Grant Burns himself had mentally called it a hummer. He did not reply to Jean's tentative apology for her own plot-idea. He was thinking about the idea itself.

Robert Grant Burns was not what one would call petty. He would not, for instance, stick to his own story if he considered that Jean's was a better one. And, after all, Jean was now his leading woman, and it is not unusual for a leading woman to manufacture her own plots, especially when she is being featured by her company. There was no question of hurt pride to be debated within the mind of him, therefore. He was just weighing the idea itself for what it was worth.

"Seems to me your plot-idea isn't so much tamer than mine, after all." He tested her shrewdly after a prolonged pause. "You've got a killing in the first five hundred feet, and outlaws and rustling—"

"Oh, but don't you see, it isn't the skeleton that makes the difference; it's the kind of meat you put on the bones! Paradise Lost would be a howling melodrama, if some of you picture-people tried to make it. You'd take this plot of mine and make it just like these pictures I've been working in, Mr. Burns: Exciting and all that, but not the real West after all; spectacular without being probable. What I mean,—I can't explain it to you, I'm afraid; but I have it in my head." She looked at him with that lightening of the eyes which was not a smile, really, but rather the amusement which might grow into laughter later on.

"You'd better fine me for insubordination," she drawled whimsically, "and tell me whether it's to be braids or curls, so I can go and make up." At that moment she saw Gil Huntley beckoning to her with a frantic kind of furtiveness that was a fair mixture of pinched-together eyebrows and slight jerkings of the head, and a guarded movement of his hand that hung at his side. Gil, she thought, was trying to draw her away before she went too far with her trouble-inviting freedom of speech. She laughed lazily.

"Braids or curls?" she insisted. "And please, sir, I won't do so no more, honest."

Robert Grant Burns looked at her from under his eyebrows and made a sound between his grunt of indignation and his chuckle of amusement. "Sure you won't?" he queried shortly. "Stay the way you are, if you want to; chances are you won't go to work right away, anyhow."

Jean flashed him a glance of inquiry. Did that mean that she had at last gone beyond the limit? Was Robert Grant Burns going to FIRE her? She looked at Gil, who was sauntering off with the perfectly apparent expectation that she would follow him; and Mrs. Gay, who was regarding her with a certain melancholy conviction that Jean's time as leading woman was short indeed. She pursed her lips with a rueful resignation, and followed Gil to the spring behind the house.

"Say, you mustn't hand out things like that, Jean!" he protested, when they were quite out of sight and hearing of the others. "Let me give you a tip, girl. If you've got any photo-play ideas that are worth talking about, don't go spreading them out like that for Bobby to pick and choose!"

"Pick to pieces, you mean," Jean corrected.

"You're going to tell me I'm in bad. But I can't help it; he's putting on some awfully stagey plots, and they cost just as much to produce as—"

"Listen here. You've got me wrong. That plot of yours could be worked up into a dandy series; the idea of a story running through a lot of pictures is great. What I mean is, it's worth something. You don't have to give stuff like that away, make him a present of it, you know. I just want to put you wise. If you've got anything that's worth using, make 'em pay for it. Put 'er into scenario form and sell it to 'em. You're in this game to make money, so why overlook a bet like that?"

"Oh, Gil! Could I?"

"Sure, you could! No reason why you shouldn't, if you can deliver the goods. Burns has been writing his own plays to fit his company; but aside from the features you've been putting into it, it's old stuff. He's a darned good director, and all that, but he hasn't got the knack of building real stories. You see what I mean. If you have, why—"

"I wonder," said Jean with a sudden small doubt of her literary talents, "if I have!"

"Sure, you have!" Gil's faith in Jean was of the kind that scorns proof. "You see, you've got the dope on the West, and he knows it. Why, I've been watching how he takes the cue from you right along for his features. Ever since you told Lee Milligan how to lay a saddle on the ground, Burns has been getting tips; and half the time you didn't even know you were giving them. Get into this game right, Jean. Make 'em pay for that kind of thing."

Jean regarded him thoughtfully, tempted to yield. "Mrs. Gay says a hundred dollars a week—"

"It's good pay for a beginner. She's right, and she's wrong. They're featuring you in stuff that nobody else can do. Who would they put in your place, to do the stunts you've been doing? Muriel Gay was a good actress, and as good a Western lead as they could produce; and you know how she stacked up alongside you. You're in a class by yourself, Jean. You want to keep that in mind. They aren't just trying to be nice to you; it's hard-boiled business with the Great Western. You're going awfully strong with the public. Why, my chum writes me that you're announced ahead on the screen at one of the best theaters on Broadway! 'Coming: Jean Douglas in So-and-so.' Do you know what that means? No, you don't; of course not. But let me tell you that it means a whole lot! I wish I'd had a chance to tip you off to a little business caution before you signed that contract. That salary clause should have been doctored to make a sliding scale of it. As it is, you're stuck for a year at a hundred dollars a week, unless you spring something the contract does not cover. Don't give away any more dope. You've got an idea there, if Burns will let you work up to it. Make 'em pay for it."

"O-h-h, Gil!" came the throaty call of Burns; and Gil, with a last, earnest warning, left her hurriedly.

Jean sat down on a rock and meditated, her chin in her palms, and her elbows on her knees. Vague shadows; of thoughts clouded her mind and then slowly clarified into definite ideas. Unconsciously she had been growing away from her first formulated plans. She was gradually laying aside the idea of reaching wealth and fame by way of the story-trail. She was almost at the point of admitting to herself that her story, as far as she had gone with it, could never be taken seriously by any one with any pretense of intelligence. It was too unreal, too fantastic. It was almost funny, in the most tragic parts. She was ready now to dismiss the book as she had dismissed her earlier ambitions to become a poet.

But if she and Lite together could really act a story that had the stamp of realism which she instinctively longed for, surely it would be worth while. And if she herself could build the picture story they would later enact before the camera,—that would be better, much better than writing silly things about an impossible heroine in the hope of later selling the stuff!

Automatically her thoughts swung over to the actual building of the scenes that would make for continuity of her lately-conceived plot. Because she knew every turn and every crook of that coulee and every board in the buildings snuggled within it, she began to plan her scenes to fit the Lazy A, and her action to fit the spirit of the country and those countless small details of life which go to make what we call the local color of the place.

There never had been an organized gang of outlaws just here in this part of the country, but

—there might have been. Her dad could remember when Sid Cummings and his bunch hung out in the Bad Lands fifty miles to the east of there. Neither had she ever had a brother, for that matter; and of her mother she had no more than the indistinct memory of a time when there had been a long, black box in the middle of the living-room, and a lot of people, and tears which fell upon her face and tickled her nose when her father held her tightly in his arms.

But she had the country, and she had Lite Avery, and to her it was very, very easy to visualize a story that had no foundation in fact. It was what she had done ever since she could remember—the day-dreaming that had protected her from the keen edge of her loneliness.

CHAPTER XVIII

A NEW KIND OF PICTURE

"What you doing now?" Robert Grant Burns came around the corner of the house looking for her, half an hour later, and found her sitting on the doorstep with the old atlas on her knees and her hat far back on her head, scribbling away for dear life.

Jean smiled abstractedly up at him. "Why, I'm—why-y, I'm becoming a famous scenario writer! Do you want me to go and plaster my face with grease-paint, and become a mere common leading lady again?"

"No, I don't." Robert Grant Burns chuckled fatly and held out his hand with a big, pink cameo on his little finger. "Let's see what a famous scenario looks like. What is it,—that plot you were telling me awhile ago?"

"Why, yes. I'm putting on the meat." There was a slight hesitation before Jean handed him the pages she had done. "I expect it's awfully crude," she apologized, with one of her diffident spells. "I'm afraid you'll laugh at me."

Robert Grant Burns was reading rapidly, mentally photographing the scenes as he went along. He held out his hand again without looking toward her. "Lemme take your pencil a minute. I believe I'd have a panoram of the coulee,—a long shot from out there in the meadow. And show the brother and you leaving the house and riding toward the camera; at the gate, you separate. You're going to town, say. He rides on toward the hills. That fixes you both as belonging here at the ranch, identifies you two and the home ranch both in thirty feet or so of the film, with a leader that tells you're brother and sister. See what I mean?" He scribbled a couple of lines, crossed out a couple, and went on reading to where he had interrupted Jean in the middle of a sentence.

"I see you're writing in a part for that Lite Avery; how do you know he'd do it? Or can put it over if he tries? He don't look to me like an actor."

"Lite," declared Jean with a positiveness that would have thrilled Lite, had he heard her, "can put over anything he tries to put over. And he'll do it, if I tell him he must!" Which showed what were Jean's ideas, at least on the subject of which was the master.

"What you going to call it a The Perils of the Prairie, say?" Burns abandoned further argument on the subject of Lite's ability.

"Oh, no! That's awfully cheap. That would stamp it as a melodrama before any of the picture appeared on the screen."

Robert Grant Burns had not been serious; he had been testing Jean's originality. "Well, what will we call it, then?"

"Oh, we'll call it—" Jean nibbled the rubber on her pencil and looked at him with that unseeing, introspective gaze which was a trick of hers. "We'll call it—does it hurt if we use real names that we've a right to?" She got a head-shake for answer. "Well, we'll call it,—let's just call it—Jean, of the Lazy A. Would that sound as if—"

"Great! Girl, you're a winner! Jean, of the Lazy A! Say, that title alone will jump the releases ten per cent., if I know the game. Featuring Jean herself; pictures made right at the Lazy A Ranch. Say, the dope I can give our publicity man—"

Thereupon Jean, remembering Gil Huntley's lecture on the commercial side of the proposition, startled his enthusiasm with one naive question.

"How much will the Great Western Film Company pay me extra for furnishing the story I play in?"

"How much?" Robert Grant Burns blurted the words automatically.

"Yes. How much? If it will jump your releases ten per cent. they ought to pay me quite a lot more than they're paying me now."

"You're doing pretty well as it is," Burns reminded her, with a visible dampening of his eagerness.

"For keeping your cut-and-dried stories from falling flat, yes. But for writing the kind of play that will have just as many 'punches' and still be true to life, and then for acting it all out and putting in those punches,—that's a different matter, Mr. Burns. And you'll have to pay Lite a decent salary, or I'll quit right here. I'm thinking up stunts for us two that are awfully risky. You'll have to pay for that. But it will be worth while. You wait till you see Lite in action!"

Gil would have been exuberant over the literal manner in which Jean was taking his advice and putting it to the test, had he overheard her driving her bargain with Robert Grant Burns. He would have been exuberant, but he would never have dared to say the things that Jean said, or to have taken the stand that she took. Robert Grant Burns found himself very much in the position which Lite had occupied for three years. He had well-defined ideas upon the subject before them, and he had the outer semblance of authority; but his ideas and his authority had no weight whatever with Jean, since she had made up her mind.

Before Jean left the subject of salary, Robert Grant Burns found himself committed to a promise of an increase, provided that Jean really "delivered the goods" in the shape of a scenario serial, and did the stunts which she declared she could and would do.

Before she settled down to the actual planning of scenes, Robert Grant Burns had also yielded to her demands for Lite Avery, though you may think that he thereby showed himself culpably weak, unless you realize what sort of a person Jean was in argument. Without having more than a good-morning acquaintance with Lite, Burns agreed to put him on "in stock" and to pay him the salary Jean demanded for him, provided that, in the try-out of the first picture, Lite should prove he could deliver the goods. Burns was always extremely firm in the matter of having the "goods" delivered; that was why he was the Great Western's leading director. Mere dollars he would yield, if driven into a corner and kept there long enough, but he must have results.

These things being settled, they spent about two hours on the doorstep of Jean's room, writing the first reel of the story; which is to say that Jean wrote, and Burns took each sheet from her hands as it was finished, and read and made certain technical revisions now and then. Several times he grunted words of approbation, and several times he let his fat, black cigar go out, while he visualized the scenes which Jean's flying pencil portrayed.

"I'll go over and get Lite," she said at last, rubbing the cramp out of her writing-hand and easing her shoulders from their strain of stooping. "There'll be time, while you send the machine after some real hats for your rustlers. Those toadstool things were never seen in this country till you brought them in your trunk; and this story is going to be real! Your rustlers won't look much different from the punchers, except that they'll be riding different horses; we'll have to get some paint somewhere and make a pinto out of that wall-eyed cayuse Gil rides mostly. He'll lead the rustlers, and you want the audience to be able to spot him a mile off. Lite and I will fix the horse; we'll put spots on him like a horse Uncle Carl used to own."

"Maybe you can't get Lite," Burns pointed out, eyeing her over a match blaze. "He never acted to me like he had the movie-fever at all. Passes us up with a nod, and has never showed signs of life on the subject. Lee can ride pretty well," he added artfully, "even if he wasn't born in the saddle. And we can fake that rope work."

"All right; you can send the machine in with a wire to your company for a leading woman." Jean picked up her gloves and turned to pull the door shut behind her, and by other signs and tokens made plain her intention to leave.

"Oh, well, you can see if he'll come. I said I'd try him out, but—"

"He'll come. I told you that before." Jean stopped and looked at her director coldly. "And you'll keep your word. And we won't have any fake stuff in this,—except the spots on the pinto." She smiled then. "We wouldn't do that, but there isn't a pinto in the country right now that would be what we want. You had better get your bunch together, because I'll be back in a little while with Lite."

As it happened, Lite was on his way to the Lazy A, and met Jean in the bottom of the sandy hollow. His eyes lightened when he saw her come loping up to him. But when she was close enough to read the expression of his face, it was schooled again to the frank friendship which Jean always had accepted as a matter of course.

"Hello, Lite! I've got a job for you with the movies," Jean announced, as soon as she was within speaking distance. "You can come right back with me and begin. It's going to be great. We're going to make a real Western picture, Lite, you and I. Lee and Gil and all the rest will be in it, of course; but we're going to put in the real West. And we're going to put in the ranch,—the REAL Lazy A, Lite. Not these dinky little sets that Burns has toggled up with bits of the bluff

showing for background, but the ranch just as it—it used to be." Jean's eyes grew wistful while she looked at him and told him her plans.

"I'm writing the scenario myself," she explained, "and that's why you have to be in it. I've written in stuff that the other boys can't do to save their lives. REAL stuff, Lite! You and I are going to run the ranch and punch the cows,—Lazy A cattle, what there are left of them,—and hunt down a bunch of rustlers that have their hangout somewhere down in the breaks; we don't know just where, yet. The places we'll ride, they'll need an airship to follow with the camera! I haven't got it all planned yet, but the first reel is about done; we're going to begin on it this afternoon. We'll need you in the first scenes,—just ranch scenes, with you and Lee; he's my brother, and he'll get killed— Now, what's the matter with you?" She stopped and eyed him disapprovingly. "Why have you got that stubborn look to your mouth? Lite, see here. Before you say a word, I want to tell you that you are not to refuse this. It—it means money, Lite; for you, and for me, too. And that means—dad at home again. Lite—"

Bite looked at her, looked away and bit his lips. It was long since he had seen tears in Jean's steady, brown eyes, and the sight of them hurt him intolerably. There was nothing that he could say to strengthen her faith, absolutely nothing. He did not see how money could free her father before his sentence expired. Her faith in her dad seemed to Lite a wonderful thing, but he himself could not altogether share it, although he had lately come to feel a very definite doubt about Aleck's guilt. Money could not help them, except that it could buy back the Lazy A and restock it, and make of it the home it had been three years ago.

Lite, in the secret heart of him, did not want Jean to set her heart on doing that. Lite was almost in a position to do it himself, just as he had planned and schemed and saved to do, ever since the day when he took Jean to the Bar Nothing, and announced to her that he intended to take care of her in place of her father. He had wanted to surprise Jean; and Jean, with her usual headlong energy bent upon the same object, seemed in a fair way to forestall him, unless he moved very quickly.

"Lite, you won't spoil everything now, just when I'm given this great opportunity, will you?" Jean's voice was steady again. She could even meet his eyes without flinching. "Gil says it's a great opportunity, in every way. It's a series of pictures, really, and they are to be called 'Jean, of the Lazy A.' Gil says they will be advertised a lot, and make me famous. I don't care about that; but the company will pay me more, and that means—that means that I can get out and find Art Osgood sooner, and—get dad home. And you will have to help. The whole thing, as I have planned it, depends upon you, Lite. The riding and the roping, and stuff like that, you'll have to do. You'll have to work right alongside me in all that outdoor stuff, because I am going to quit doing all those spectacular, stagey stunts, and get down to real business. I've made Burns see that there will be money in it for his company, so he is perfectly willing to let me go ahead with it and do it my way. Our way, Lite, because, once you start with it, you can help me plan things." Whereupon, having said almost everything she could think of that would tend to soften that stubborn look in Lite's face, Jean waited.

Lite did a great deal of thinking in the next two or three minutes, but being such a bottled-up person, he did not say half of what he thought; and Jean, closely as she watched his face, could not read what was in his mind. Of Aleck he thought, and the slender chance there was of any one doing what Jean hoped to do; of Art Osgood, and the meager possibility that Art could shed any light upon the killing of Johnny Croft; of the Lazy A, and the probable price that Carl would put upon it if he were asked to sell the ranch and the stock; of the money he had already saved, and the chance that, if he went to Carl now and made him an offer, Carl would accept. He weighed mentally all the various elements that went to make up the depressing tangle of the whole affair, and decided that he would write at once to Rossman, the lawyer who had defended Aleck, and put the whole thing into his hands. He would then know just where he stood, and what he would have to do, and what legal steps he must take.

He looked at Jean and grinned a little. "I'm not pretty enough for a picture actor," he said whimsically. "Better let me be a rustler and wear a mask, if you don't want folks to throw fits."

"You'll be what I want you to be," Jean told him with the little smile in her eyes that Lite had learned to love more than he could ever say. "I'm going to make us both famous, Lite. Now, come on, Bobby Burns has probably chewed up a whole box of those black cigars, waiting for us to show up."

I am not going to describe the making of "Jean, of the Lazy A." It would be interesting, but this is not primarily a story of the motion-picture business, remember. It is the story of the Lazy A and the problem that both Jean and Lite were trying to solve. The Great Western Film Company became, through sheer chance, a factor in that problem, and for that reason we have come into rather close touch with them; but aside from the fact that Jean's photo-play brought Lite into the company and later took them both to Los Angeles, this particular picture has no great bearing upon the matter.

Robert Grant Burns had intended taking his company back to Los Angles in August, when the hot winds began to sweep over the range land. But Jean's story was going "big." Jean was throwing herself into the part heart and mind. She lived it. With Lite riding beside her, helping her with all his skill and energy and much enthusiasm, she almost forgot her great undertaking

sometimes, she was so engrossed with her work. With his experience, suggesting frequent changes, she added new touches of realism to this story that made the case-hardened audience of the Great Western's private projection room invent new ways of voicing their enthusiasm, when the negative films Pete Lowry sent in to headquarters were printed and given their trial run.

They were just well started when August came with its hot winds. They stayed and worked upon the serial until it was finished, and that meant that they stayed until the first October blizzard caught them while they were finishing the last reel.

Do you know what they did then? Jean changed a few scenes around at Lite's suggestion, and they went out into the hills in the teeth of the storm and pictured Jean lost in the blizzard, and coming by chance upon the outlaws at their camp, which she and Lite and Lee had been hunting through all the previous installments of the story. It was great stuff,—that ride Jean made in the blizzard,—and that scene where, with numbed fingers and snow matted in her dangling braid, she held up the rustlers and marched them out of the hills, and met Lite coming in search of her.

You will remember it, if you have been frequenting the silent drama and were fortunate enough to see the picture. You may have wondered at the realism of those blizzard scenes, and you may have been curious to know how the camera got the effect. It was wonderful photography, of course; but then, the blizzard was real, and that pinched, half frozen look on Jean's face in the close-up where she met Lite was real. Jean was so cold when she turned the rustlers over to Lite that when she started to dismount and fell in a heap,—you remember?—she was not acting at all. Neither was Lite acting when he plunged through the drift and caught Jean in his arms and held her close against him just as that scene ended. In the name of realism they cut the scene, because Lite showed that he forgot all about the outlaws and the part he was playing.

So they finished the picture, and the whole company packed their trunks thankfully and turned their faces and all their thoughts westward.

Jean was not at all sure that she wanted to go. It seemed almost as though she were setting aside her great undertaking; as though she were weakly deserting her dad when she closed the door for the last time upon her room and turned her back upon Lazy A coulee. But there were certain things which comforted her; Lite was going along to look after the horses, he told her just the day before they started. For Robert Grant Burns, with an eye to the advertising value of the move, had decided that Pard must go with them. He would have to hire an express car, anyway, he said, for the automobile and the scenery sets they had used for interiors. And there would be plenty of room for Pard and Lite's horse and another which Robert Grant Burns had used to carry him to locations in rough country, where the automobile could not go. The car would run in passenger service, Burns said,—he'd fix that,—so Lite would be right with the company all the way out.

Jean appreciated all that as a personal favor, which merely proved how unsophisticated she really was. She did not know that Robert Grant Burns was thinking chiefly of furnishing material for the publicity man to use in news stories. She never once dreamed that the coming of "Jean, of the Lazy A" and Jean's pet horse Pard, and of Lite, who had done so many surprising things in the picture, would be heralded in all the Los Angeles papers before ever they left Montana.

Jean was concerned chiefly with attending to certain matters which seemed to her of vital importance. If she must go, there was something which she must do first,—something which for three years she had shrunk from doing. So she told Robert Grant Burns that she would meet him and his company in Helena, and without a word of explanation, she left two days in advance of them, just after she had had another maddening talk with her Uncle Carl, wherein she had repeated her intention of employing a lawyer.

When she boarded the train at Helena, she did not tell even Lite just where she had been or what she had been doing. She did not need to tell Lite. He looked into her face and saw there the shadow of the high, stone wall that shut her dad away from the world, and he did not ask a single question.

CHAPTER XIX

IN LOS ANGELES

When she felt bewildered, Jean had the trick of appearing merely reserved; and that is what saved her from the charge of rusticity when Robert Grant Burns led her through the station gateway and into a small reception. No less a man than Dewitt, President of the Great Western Film Company, clasped her hand and held it, while he said how glad he was to welcome her. Jean, unawed by his greatness and the honor he was paying her, looked up at him with that distracting little beginning of a smile, and replied with that even-more distracting little drawl in her voice,

and wondered why Mrs. Gay should become so plainly flustered all at once.

Dewitt took her by the arm, introduced her to a curious-eyed group with a warming cordiality of manner, and led her away through a crowd that stared and whispered, and up to a great, beautiful, purple machine with a colored chauffeur in dust-colored uniform. Dewitt was talking easily of trivial things, and shooting a question now and then over his shoulder at Robert Grant Burns, who had shed much of his importance and seemed indefinably subservient toward Mr. Dewitt. Jean turned toward him abruptly.

"Where's Lite? Did you send some one to help him with Pard?" she asked with real concern in her voice. "Those three horses aren't used to towns the size of this, Mr. Burns. Lite is going to have his hands full with Pard. If you will excuse me, Mr. Dewitt, I think I'll go and see how he's making out."

Mr. Dewitt glanced over her head and met the delighted grin of Jim Gates, the publicity manager. The grin said that Jean was "running true to form," which was a pet simile with Jim Gates, and usually accompanied that particular kind of grin. There would be an interesting half column in the next day's papers about Jean's arrival and her deep concern for Lite and her wonderful horse Pard, but of course she did not know that.

"I've got men here to help with the horses," Mr. Dewitt assured her, while he gently urged her into the machine. "They'll be brought right out to the studio. I'm taking you home with me in obedience to my wife's, orders. She is anxious to meet the young woman who can out-ride and out-shoot any man on the screen, and can still be sweet and feminine and lovable. I'm quoting my wife, you see, though I won't say those are not my sentiments also."

"Your poor wife is going to receive a shock," said Jean in an unimpressed tone. "But it's dear of her to want to meet me." Back of her speech was an irritated impatience that she should be gobbled and carried off like this, when she was sure that she ought to be helping Lite get that fool Pard unloaded and safely through the clang and clatter of the down-town district.

Robert Grant Burns, half facing her on a folding seat, sent her a queer, puzzled glance from under his eyebrows. Four months had Jean been working under his direction; four months had he studied her, and still she puzzled him. She was not ignorant—the girl had been out among civilized folks and had learned town ways; she was not stupid—she could keep him guessing, and he thought he knew all the quirks of human nature, too. Then why, in the name of common sense, did she take Dewitt and his patronage in this matter-of-fact way, as if it were his everyday business to meet strange employees and take them home to his wife? He glanced at Dewitt and caught a twinkle of perfect understanding in the bright blue eyes of his chief. Burns made a sound between a grunt and a chuckle, and turned his eyes away immediately; but Dewitt chose to make speech upon the subject.

"You haven't spoiled our new leading woman—yet," he observed idly.

"Oh, but he has," Jean dissented. "He has got me trained so that when he says smile, my mouth stretches itself automatically. When he says sob, I sob. He just snaps his fingers, Mr. Dewitt, and I sit up and go through my tricks very nicely. You ought to see how nicely I do them."

Mr. Dewitt put up a hand and pulled at his close-cropped, white mustache that could not hide the twitching of his lips. "I have seen," he said drily, and leaned forward for a word with the liveried chauffeur. "Turn up on Broadway and stop at the Victoria," he said, and the chin of the driver dropped an inch to prove he heard.

Dewitt laid his fingers on Jean's arm to catch her attention. "Do you see that picture on the billboard over there?" he asked, with a special inflection in his nice, crisp voice. "Does it look familiar to you?"

Jean looked, and pinched her brows together. Just at first she did not comprehend. There was her name in fancy letters two feet high: "JEAN, OF THE LAZY A." It blared at the passer-by, but it did not look familiar at all. Beneath was a high-colored poster of a girl on a horse. The horse was standing on its hind feet, pawing the air; its nostrils flared red; its tail swept like a willow plume behind. The machine slowed and stopped for the traffic signal at the crossing, and still Jean studied the poster. It certainly did not look in the least familiar.

"Is that supposed to be me, on that plum-colored horse?" she drawled, when they slid out slowly in the wake of a great truck.

"Why, don't you like it?" Dewitt looked at Jim Gates, who was again grinning delightedly and surreptitiously scribbling something on the margin of a folded paper he was carrying.

Jean turned upon him a mildly resentful glance. "No, I don't. Pard is not purple; he's brown. And he's got the dearest white hoofs and a white sock on his left hind foot; and he doesn't snort fire and brimstone, either." She glanced anxiously at the jam of wagons and automobiles and clanging street-cars. "I don't know, though," she amended ruefully, "I think perhaps he will, too, when he sees all this. I really ought to have stayed with him."

"You don't think Lite quite capable of taking care of him."

"Oh, yes, of course he is! But I just feel that way."

Dewitt shifted a little, so that he was half facing her, and could look at her without having to turn his head. If his eyes told anything of his thoughts, the President of the Great Western Film Company was curious to know how she felt about her position and her sudden fame and the work itself. Before they had worked their way into the next block, he decided that Jean was not greatly interested in any of these things, and he wondered why.

The machine slowed, swung to the curb, and crept forward and stopped in front of the Victoria. Dewitt looked at Burns and Pete Lowry, who was on the front seat.

"I thought you'd like to take a glance at the lobby display the Victoria is making," he said casually. "They are running the Lazy A series, you know,—to capacity houses, too, they tell me. Shall we get out?"

The chauffeur reached back with that gesture of toleration and infinite boredom common to his kind and swung open the door.

Robert Grant Burns started up. "Come on, Jean," he said eagerly. "I don't suppose that eternal calm of yours will ever show a wrinkle on the surface, but let's have a look, anyway."

Pete Lowry was already out and half way across the pavement. Pete had lain awake in his bed, many's the night, planning the posing of "stills" that would show Jean at her best; he had visioned them on display in theater lobbies, and now he collided with a hurrying shopper in his haste to see the actual fulfillment of those plans.

Jean herself was not so eager. She went with the others, and she saw herself pictured on Pard; on her two feet; and sitting upon a rock with her old Stetson tilted over one eye and her hair tousled with the wind. She was loading her six-shooter, and talking to Lite, who was sitting on his heels with a cigarette in his fingers, looking at her with that bottled-up look in his eyes. She did not remember when the picture was taken, but she liked that best of all. She saw herself leaning out of the window of her room at the Lazy A. She remembered that time. She was talking to Gil outside, and Pete had come up and planted his tripod directly in front of her, and had commanded her to hold her pose. She did not count them, but she had curious impressions of dozens of pictures of herself scattered here and there along the walls of the long, cool-looking lobby. Every single one of them was marked: "Jean, of the Lazy A." Just that.

On a bulletin board in the middle of the entrance, just before the marble box-office, it was lettered again in dignified black type: "JEAN OF THE LAZY A." Below was one word: "To-day."

"It looks awfully queer," said Jean to Mr. Dewitt, who wanted to know what she thought of it all; "they don't explain what it's all about, or anything."

"No, they don't." Dewitt pulled his mustache and piloted her back to the machine. "They don't have to."

"No," echoed Robert Grant Burns, with the fat chuckle of utter content in the knowledge of having achieved something. "From the looks of things, they don't have to." He looked at Jean so intently that she stared back at him, wondering what was the matter; and when he saw that she was wondering, he gave a snort.

"Good Lord!" he said to himself, just above a whisper, and looked away, despairing of ever reading the riddle of Jean's unshakable composure. Was it pose Was the girl phlegmatic,—with that face which was so alive with the thoughts that shuttled back and forth behind those steady, talking eyes of hers? She was not stupid; Robert Grant Burns knew to his own discomfiture that she was not stupid. Nor was she one to pose; the absolute sincerity of her terrific frankness was what had worried Robert Grant Burns most. She must know that she had jumped into the front rank of popular actresses, and stood out before them all,—for the time being, at least. And,—he stole a measuring sidelong glance at her, just as he had done thousands of times in the past four months,—here she was in the private machine of the President of the Great Western Film Company, with that great man himself talking to her as to his honored guest. She had seen herself featured alone at one of the biggest motion-picture theaters in Los Angeles; so well known that "Jean, of the Lazy A" was deemed all-sufficient as information and advertisement. She had reached what seemed to Robert Grant Burns the final heights. And the girl sat there, calm, abstracted, actually not listening to Dewitt when he talked! She was not even thinking about him! Robert Grant Burns gave her another quick, resentful glance, and wondered what under heaven the girl WAS thinking about.

As a matter of fact, having accepted the fact that she seemed to have made a success of her pictures, her thoughts had drifted to what seemed to her more vital. Had she done wrong to come away out here, away from her problem? The distance worried her. She had not even found out who was the mysterious night-prowler, or what he wanted. He had never come again, after that night when Hepsy had scared him away. From long thinking about it, she had come to a vague, general belief that his visits were somehow connected with the murder; but in what manner, she could not even form a theory. That worried her. She wished now that she had told Lite about it. She was foolish not to have done something, instead of sticking her head under the bedclothes and just shivering till he left. Lite would have found out who the man was, and what

he wanted. Lite would never have let him come and go like that. But the visits had seemed so absolutely without reason. There was nothing to steal, and nothing to find. Still, she wished she had told Lite, and let him find out who it was.

Then her talk with the great lawyer had been disquieting. He had not wanted to name his fee for defending her dad; but when he had named it, it did not seem so enormous as she had imagined it to be. He had asked a great many questions, and most of them puzzled Jean. He had said that he would take up the matter,—by which she believed he meant an investigation of her uncle's title to the Lazy A. He said that he would see her father, and he told her that he had already been retained to investigate the whole thing, so that she need not worry about having to pay him a fee. That, he said, had already been arranged, though he did not feel at liberty to name his client. But he wanted to assure her that everything was being done that could be done.

She herself had seen her father. She shrank within herself and tried not to think of that horrible meeting. Her soul writhed under the tormenting memory of how she had seen him. She had not been able to talk to him at all, scarcely. The words would not come. She had said that she and Lite were on their way to Los Angeles, and would be there all winter. He had patted her shoulder with a tragic apathy in his manner, and had said that the change would do her good. And that was all she could remember that they had talked about. And then the guard came, and—

That is what she was thinking about while the big, purple machine slid smoothly through the tunnel, negotiated a rough stretch where the street-pavers were at work, and sped purring out upon the boulevard that stretched away to Hollywood and the hills. That was what she kept hidden behind the "eternal calm" that so irritated Robert Grant Burns and so delighted Dewitt and so interested Jim Gates, who studied her for what "copy" there was in her personality.

It was the same when, the next day, Dewitt himself took her over to the big plant which he spoke of as the studio. It was immense, and yet Jean seemed unimpressed. She was gladder to see Pard and Lite again than she was to meet the six-hundred-a-week star whose popularity she seemed in a fair way to outrival. Men and women who were "in stock," and therefore within the social pale, were introduced to her and said nice, hackneyed things about how they admired her work and were glad to welcome her. She felt the warm air of good-fellowship that followed her everywhere. All of these people seemed to accept her at once as one of themselves. When she noticed it, she was amused at the way the "extras" stood back and looked at her and whispered together. More than once she overheard what seemed almost to have become a catch-phrase out here; "Jean of the lazy A" was the phrase.

Jean was not made of wood, understand. In a manner she recognized all these little tributes, and to a certain degree she appreciated them. She was glad that she had made such a success of it, but she was glad because it would help her to take her dad away from that horrible, ghastly place and that horrible, ghastly death-in-life under which he lived. In three years he had grown old and stooped—her dad!

And Burns twitted her ironically because she could not simper and lose her head over the attentions these people were loading upon her! Save for the fact that in this way she could earn a good deal of money, and could pay that lawyer Rossman, and trace Art Osgood, she would not have stayed; she could not have endured the staying. For the easier they made life for her, the greater contrast did they make between her and her dad.

Gil brought her a great bunch of roses, unbelievably beautiful and fragrant, and laughed and told her they didn't look much like those snowdrifts she waded through the last day they worked on the Lazy A serial. For just a minute he thought Jean was going to throw them at him, and he worried himself into sleeplessness, poor boy, wondering how he had offended her, and how he could make amends. Could he have looked into Jean's soul, he would have seen that it was seared with the fresh memory of iron bars and high walls and her dad who never saw any roses; and that the contrast between their beauty and the terrible barrenness that surrounded him was like a blow in her face.

Dewitt himself sensed that something was wrong with her. She was not her natural self, and he knew it, though his acquaintance with her was a matter of hours only. Part of his business it was to study people, to read them; he read Jean now, in a general way. Not being a clairvoyant, he of course had no inkling of the very real troubles that filled her mind, though the effect of those troubles he saw quite plainly. He watched her quietly for a day, and then he applied the best remedy he knew.

"You've just finished a long, hard piece of work," he said in his crisp, matter-of-fact way, on the second morning after her arrival. "There is going to be a delay here while we shape things up for the winter, and it is my custom to keep my people in the very best condition to work right up to the standard. So you are all going to have a two-weeks vacation, Jean-of-the-Lazy-A. At full salary, of course; and to put you yourself into the true holiday spirit, I'm going to raise your salary to a hundred and seventy-five a week. I consider you worth it," he added, with a quieting gesture of uplifted hand, "or you may be sure I wouldn't pay it.

"Get some nice old lady to chaperone you, and go and play. The ocean is good; get somewhere on the beach. Or go to Catalina and play there. Or stay here, and go to the movies. Go and see 'Jean, of the Lazy A,' and watch how the audience lives with her on the screen. Go up

and talk to the wife. She told me to bring you up for dinner. You go climb into my machine, and tell Bob to take you to the house now. Run along, Jean of the Lazy A! This is an order from your chief."

Jean wanted to cry. She held the roses, that she almost hated for their very beauty and fragrance, close pressed in her arms, while she went away toward the machine. Dewitt looked after her, thought she meant to obey him, and turned to greet a great man of the town who had been waiting for five minutes to speak to him.

Jean did not climb into the purple car and tell Bob to drive her to "the house." She walked past it without even noticing that it stood there, an aristocrat among the other machines parked behind the great studio that looked like a long, low warehouse. She knew the straightest, shortest trail to the corrals, you may be sure of that. She took that trail.

Pard was standing in a far corner under a shed, switching his tail methodically at the October crop of flies. His head lay over the neck of a scrawny little buckskin, for which he had formed a sudden and violent attachment, and his eyes were half closed while he drowsed in lazy content. Pard was not worrying about anything. He looked so luxuriously happy that Jean had not the heart to disturb him, even with her comfort-seeking caresses. She leaned her elbows on the corral gate and watched him awhile. She asked a bashful, gum-chewing youth if he could tell her where to find Lite Avery. But the youth seemed never to have heard of Lite Avery, and Jean was too miserable to explain and describe Lite, and insist upon seeing him. She walked over to the nearest car-line and caught the next street car for the city. Part of her chief's orders at least she would obey. She would go down to the Victoria and see "Jean, of the Lazy A," but she was not going because of any impulse of vanity, or to soothe her soul with the applause of strangers. She wanted to see the ranch again. She wanted to see the dear, familiar line of the old bluff that framed the coulee, and ride again with Lite through those wild places they had chosen for the pictures. She wanted to lose herself for a little while among the hills that were home.

CHAPTER XX

CHANCE TAKES A HAND

A huge pipe organ was filling the theater with a vast undertone that was like the whispering surge of a great wind. Jean went into the soft twilight and sat down, feeling that she had shut herself away from the harsh, horrible world that held so much of suffering. She sighed and leaned her head back against the curtained enclosure of the loges, and closed her eyes and listened to the big, sweeping harmonies that were yet so subdued.

Down next the river, in a sheltered little coulee, there was a group of great bull pines. Sometimes she had gone there and leaned against a tree trunk, and had shut her eyes and listened to the vast symphony which the wind and the water played together. She forgot that she had come to see a picture which she had helped to create. She held her eyes shut and listened; and that horror of high walls and iron bars that had haunted her for days, and the aged, broken man who was her father, dimmed and faded and was temporarily erased; the lightness of her lips eased a little; the tenseness relaxed from her face, as it does from one who sleeps.

But the music changed, and her mood changed with it. She did not know that this was because the story pictured upon the screen had changed, but she sat up straight and opened her eyes, and felt almost as though she had just awakened from a vivid dream.

A Mexican series of educational pictures were being shown. Jean looked, and leaned forward with a little gasp. But even as she fixed her eyes and startled attention upon it, that scene was gone, and she was reading mechanically of refugees fleeing to the border line.

She must have been asleep, she told herself, and had gotten things mixed up in her dreams. She shook herself mentally and remembered that she ought to take off her hat; and she tried to fix her mind upon the pictures. Perhaps she had been mistaken; perhaps she had not seen what she believed she had seen. But—what if it were true? What if she had really seen and not imagined it? It couldn't be true, she kept telling herself; of course, it couldn't be true! Still, her mind clung to that instant when she had first opened her eyes, and very little of what she saw afterwards reached her brain at all.

Then she had, for the first time in her life, the strange experience of seeing herself as others saw her. The screen announcement and expectant stir that greeted it caught her attention, and pulled her back from the whirl of conjecture into which she had been plunged. She watched, and she saw herself ride up to the foreground on Pard. She saw herself look straight out at the audience with that peculiar little easing of the lips and the lightening of the eyes which was just the infectious beginning of a smile. Involuntarily she smiled back at her pictured self, just as every one else was smiling back. For that, you must know, was what had first endeared her so to

the public; the human quality that compelled instinctive response from those who looked at her. So Jean in the loge smiled at Jean on the screen. Then Lite—dear, silent, long-legged Lite!—came loping up, and pushed back his hat with the gesture that she knew so well, and spoke to her and smiled; and a lump filled the throat of Jean in the loge, though she could not have told why. Then Jean on the screen turned and went riding with Lite back down the trail, with her hat tilted over one eye because of the sun, and with one foot swinging free of the stirrup in that absolute unconsciousness of pose that had first caught the attention of Robert Grant Burns and his camera man. Jean in the loge heard the ripple of applause among the audience and responded to it with a perfectly human thrill.

Presently she was back at the Lazy A, living again the scenes which she herself had created. This was the fourth or fifth picture,—she did not at the moment remember just which. At any rate, it had in it that incident when she had first met the picture-people in the hills and mistaken Gil Huntley and the other boys for real rustlers stealing her uncle's cattle. You will remember that Robert Grant Burns had told Pete to take all of that encounter, and he had later told Jean to write her scenario so as to include that incident.

Jean blushed when she saw herself ride up to those three and "throw down on them" with her gun. She had been terribly chagrined over that performance! But now it looked awfully real, she told herself with a little glow of pride. Poor old Gil! They hadn't caught her roping him, anyway, and she was glad of that. He would have looked absurd, and those people would have laughed at him. She watched how she had driven the cattle back up the coulee, with little rushes up the bank to head off an unruly cow that had ideas of her own about the direction in which she would travel. She loved Pard, for the way he tossed his head and whirled the cricket in his bit with his tongue, and obeyed the slightest touch on the rein. The audience applauded that cattle drive; and Jean was almost betrayed into applauding it herself.

Later there was a scene where she had helped Lite Avery and Lee Milligan round up a bunch of cattle and cut out three or four, which were to be sold to a butcher for money to take her mother to the doctor. Lite rode close to the camera and looked straight at her, and Jean bit her lips sharply as tears stung her lashes for some inexplicable reason. Dear old Lite! Every line in his face she knew, every varying, vagrant expression, every little twitch of his lips and eyelids that meant so much to those who knew him well enough to read his face. Jean's eyes softened, cleared, and while she looked, her lips parted a little, and she did not know that she was smiling.

She was thinking of the day, not long ago, when she had seen a bird fly into the loft over the store-house, and she had climbed in a spirit of idle curiosity to see what the bird wanted there. She had found Lite's bed neatly smoothed for the day, the pillow placed so that, lying there, he could look out through the opening and see the house and the path that led to it. There was the faint aroma of tobacco about the place. Jean had known at once just why that bed was there, and almost she knew how long it had been there. She had never once hinted that she knew; and Lite would never tell her, by look or word, that he was watching her welfare.

Here came Gil, dashing up to the brow of the hill, dismounting and creeping behind a rock, that he might watch them working with the cattle in the valley below. Jean met his pictured approach with a little smile of welcome. That was the scene where she told him he got off the horse like a sack of oats, and had shown him how to swing down lightly and with a perfect balance, instead of coming to the earth with a thud of his feet. Gil had taken it all in good faith; the camera proved now how well he had followed her instructions. And afterwards, while the assistant camera-man (with whom Jean never had felt acquainted) shouldered the camera and tripod, and they all tramped down the hill to another location, there had been a little scene in the shade of that rock, between Jean and the star villain. She blushed a little and wondered if Gil remembered that tentative love-making scene which Burns had unconsciously cut short with a bellowing order to rehearse the next scene.

It was wonderful, it was fascinating to sit there and see those days of hard, absorbing work relived in the story she had created. Jean lost herself in watching how Jean of the Lazy A came and went and lived her life bravely in the midst of so much that was hard. Jean in the loge remembered how Burns had yelled, "Smile when you come up; look light-hearted! And then let your face change gradually, while you listen to your mother crying in there. There'll be a cut-back to show her down on her knees crying before Bob's chair. Let that tired, worried look come into your face,—the load's dropping on to your shoulders again,—that kind of dope. Get me?" Jean in the loge remembered how she had been told to do this deliberately, just out of her imagination. And then she saw how Jean on the screen came whistling up to the house, swinging her quirt by its loop and with a spring in her walk, and making you feel that it was a beautiful day and that all the meadow larks were singing, and that she had just had a gallop on Pard that made her forget that she ever looked trouble in the face.

Then Jean in the loge looked and saw screen—Jean's mother kneeling before Bob's chair and sobbing so that her shoulders shook. She looked and saw screen Jean stop whistling and swinging her quirt; saw her stand still in the path and listen; saw the smile fade out of her eyes. Jean in the loge thought suddenly of that moment when she had looked at dad coming in where she waited, and swallowed a lump in her throat. A woman near her gave a little stifled sob of sympathy when screen-Jean turned and went softly around the corner of the house with all the light gone from her face and all the spring gone out of her walk.

Jean in the loge gave a sigh of relaxed tension and looked around her. The seats were nearly all full, and every one was gazing fixedly forward, lost in the pictured story of Jean on the screen. So that was what all those made-to-order smiles and frowns meant! Jean had done them at Burns' command, because she had seen that the others simulated different emotions whenever he told them to. She knew, furthermore, that she had done them remarkably well; so well that people responded to every emotion she presented to them. She was surprised at the vividness of every one of those cut-and-dried scenes. They imposed upon her, even, after all the work and fussing she had gone through to get them to Burns' liking. And there, in the cool gloom of the Victoria, Jean for the first time realized to the full the true ability of Robert Grant Burns. For the first time she really appreciated him and respected him, and was grateful to him for what he had taught her to do.

Her mood changed abruptly when the Jean picture ended. The music changed to the strain that had filled the great place when she entered, nearly an hour before. Jean sat up straight again and waited, alert, impatient, anxious to miss no smallest part of that picture which had startled her so when she had first looked at the screen. If the thing was true which she half believed—if it were true! So she stared with narrowed lids, intent, watchful, her whole mind concentrated upon what she should presently see.

"Warring Mexico!" That was the name of it; a Lubin special release, of the kind technically called "educational." Jean held her breath, waiting for the scene that might mean so much to her. There: this must be it, she thought with a flush of inner excitement. This surely must be the one:

"NOGALES, MEXICO. FEDERAL TROOPS OF GENERAL KOSTERLISKY, WITH AMERICAN SOLDIERS OF FORTUNE SERVING ON STAFF OF NOTED GENERAL."

Jean had it stamped indelibly upon her brain. She waited, with a quick intake of breath when the picture stood out with a sudden clarity before her eyes.

A "close-up" group of officers and men,—and some of the men Americans in face, dress, and manner. But it was one man, and one only, at whom she looked. Tall he was, and square-shouldered and lean; with his hat set far back on his head and a half smile curling his lips, and his eyes looking straight into the camera. Standing there with his weight all on one foot, in that attitude which cowboys call "hipshot." Art Osgood! She was sure of it! Her hands clenched in her lap. Art Osgood, at Nogales, Mexico. Serving on the staff of General Kosterlisky. Was the man mad, to stand there publicly before the merciless, revealing eye of a motion-picture camera? Or did his vanity blind him to the risk he was taking?

The man at whom she sat glaring glanced sidewise at some person unseen; and Jean knew that glance, that turn of the head. He smiled anew and lifted his American-made Stetson a few inches above his head and held it so in salute. Just so had he lifted and held his hat high one day, when she had turned and ridden away from him down the trail. Jean caught herself just as her lips opened to call out to him in recognition and sharp reproach. He turned and walked away to where the troopers were massed in the background. It was thus that she had first glimpsed him for one instant before the scene ended; it was just as he turned his face away that she had opened her eyes, and thought it was Art Osgood who was walking away from the camera.

She waited a minute, staring abstractedly at the refugees who were presented next. She wished that she knew when the picture had been taken,—how long ago. Her experience with motion-picture making, her listening to the shop-talk of the company, had taught her much; she knew that sometimes weeks elapse between the camera's work and the actual projection of a picture upon the theater screens. Still, this was, in a sense, a news release, and therefore in all probability hurried to the public. Art Osgood might still be at Nogales, Mexico, wherever that was. He might; and Jean made up her mind and laid her plans while she sat there pinning on her hat.

She got up quietly and slipped out. She was going to Nogales, Mexico, wherever that was. She was going to get Art Osgood, and she didn't care whether she had to fight her way clear through "Warring Mexico." She would find him and get him and bring him back.

In the lobby, while she paused with a truly feminine instinct to tip her hat this way and that before the mirror, and give her hair a tentative pat or two at the back, the grinning face of Lite Avery in his gray Stetson appeared like an apparition before her eyes. She turned quickly.

"Why, Lite!" she said, a little startled.

"Why, Jean!" he mimicked, in the bantering voice that was like home to her. "Don't rush off; haven't seen you to-day. Wait till I get you a ticket, and then you come back and help me admire ourselves. I came down on a long lope when somebody said you caught a street car headed this way. Thought maybe I'd run across you here. Knew you couldn't stay away much longer from seeing how you look. Ain't too proud to sit alongside a rough-neck puncher, are you?"

Jean looked at him understandingly. Lite's exuberance was unusual; but she knew, as well as though he had told her, that he had been lonesome in this strange city, and that he was overjoyed at the sight of her, who was his friend. She unpinned her hat which she had been at some pains to adjust at the exact angle decreed by fashion.

"Yes, I'll go back with you," she drawled. "I want to see how you like the sight of yourself just as you are. It—it's good for one, after the first shock wears off." She would not say a word about that Mexican picture, she thought; but she wanted to see if Lite also would recognize Art Osgood, and feel as sure of his identity as she had felt. That would make her doubly sure of her self. She could do what she meant to do without any misgivings whatsoever. She could afford to wait a little while and have the pleasure of Lite's presence beside her. Lite was homesick and lonesome; —she felt it in every tone and in every look;—almost as homesick and lonesome as she was herself. She would not hurt him by going off and leaving him alone, even if she had not wanted to be with him and to watch the effect that Mexican picture would have upon him. Lite believed Art Osgood was in the Klondyke. She would wait and see what he believed after he had seen that Nogales picture.

She waited. She had missed Lite in the last day or so; she had seemed almost as far away from him as from the Lazy A. But all the while she talked to him in whispers when he had wanted to discuss the Jean picture, she was waiting, just waiting, for that Nogales picture.

When it came at last, Jean turned her head and watched Lite. And Lite gave a real start and said something under his breath, and plucked at her sleeve afterwards to attract her attention.

"Look—quick! That fellow standing there with his arms folded. Skin me alive if it isn't Art Osgood!"

"Are you sure?" Jean studied him.

"Sure? Where're your eyes? Look at him! It sure ain't anybody else, Jean. Now, what do you reckon he's doing down in Mexico?"

CHAPTER XXI

JEAN BELIEVES THAT SHE TAKES MATTERS INTO HER OWN HANDS

After all, Jean did not have to fight her way clear through "Warring Mexico" and back again, in order to reach Nogales. She let Lite take her to the snug little apartment which she was to share with Muriel and her mother, and she fancied that she had been very crafty and very natural in her manner all the while he was with her, and that Lite did not dream of what she had in her mind to do. At any rate, she watched him stalk away on his high-heeled riding-boots, and she thought that his mind was perfectly at ease. (Jean, I fear, never will understand Lite half as well as Lite has always understood Jean.)

She caught the next down-town car and went straight to the information bureau of the Southern Pacific, established for the convenience of the public and the sanity of employees who have something to do besides answer foolish questions.

She found a young man there who was not averse to talking at length with a young woman who was dressed trimly in a street suit of the latest fashion, and who had almost entrancing, soft drawl to her voice and a most fascinating way of looking at one. This young man appeared to know a great deal, and to be almost eager to pass along his wisdom. He knew all about Nogales, Mexico, for instance, and just what train would next depart in that general direction, and how much it would cost, and how long she would have to wait in Tucson for the once-a-day train to Nogales, and when she might logically expect to arrive in that squatty little town that might be said to be really and truly divided against itself. Here the nice young man became facetious.

"Bible tells us a city divided against itself cannot stand," he informed Jean quite gratuitously. "Well, maybe that's straight goods, too. But Nogales is cut right through at the waist line with the international boundary line. United States customhouse on one corner of the street, Mexican customhouse in talking distance on the other corner. Great place for holdups, that!" This was a joke, and Jean smiled obligingly. "First the United States holds you up, and then the Mexicans. You get it coming and going. Well, Nogales don't have to stand. It squats. It's adobe mostly."

Jean was interested, and she did not discourage the nice young man. She let him say all he could think of on the subject of Nogales and the Federal troops stationed there, and on warring Mexico generally. When she left him, she felt as if she knew a great deal about the end of her journey. So she smiled and thanked the nice young man in that soft drawl that lingered pleasantly in his memory, and went over to another window and bought a ticket to Nogales. She moved farther along to another window and secured a Pullman ticket which gave her lower five in car four for her comfort.

With an impulse of wanting to let her Uncle Carl know that she was not forgetting her mission, she sent him this laconic telegram:

Have located Art. Will bring him back with me.
JEAN.

After that, she went home and packed a suit-case and her six-shooter and belt. She did not, after all, know just what might happen in Nogales, Mexico, but she meant to bring back Art Osgood if he were to be found alive; hence the six-shooter.

That evening she told Muriel that she was going to run away and have her vacation—her "vacation" hunting down and capturing a murderer who had taken refuge in the Mexican army!—and that she would write when she knew just where she would stop. Then she went away alone in a taxi to the depot, and started on her journey with a six-shooter jostling a box of chocolates in her suit-case, and with her heart almost light again, now that she was at last following a clue that promised something at the other end.

It was all just as the nice young man had told her. Jean arrived in Tucson, and she left on time, on the once-a-day train to Nogales.

Lite also arrived in Tucson on time, though Jean did not see him, since he descended from the chair car with some caution just as she went into the depot. He did not depart on time as it happened; he was thirsty, and he went off to find something wetter than water to drink, and while he was gone the once-a-day train also went off through the desert. Lite saw the last pair of wheels it owned go clipping over the switch, and he stood in the middle of the track and swore. Then he went to the telegraph office and found out that a freight left for Nogales in ten minutes. He hunted up the conductor and did things to his bank roll, and afterwards climbed into the caboose on the sidetrack. Lite has been so careful to keep in the background, through all these chapters, that it seems a shame to tell on him now. But I am going to say that, little as Jean suspected it, he had been quite as interested in finding Art Osgood as had she herself. When he saw her pass through the gate to the train, in Los Angeles, that was his first intimation that she was going to Nogales; so he had stayed in the chair car out of sight. But it just shows how great minds run in the same channel; and how, without suspecting one another, these two started at the same time upon the same quest.

Jean stared out over the barrenness that was not like the barrenness of Montana, and tried not to think that perhaps Art Osgood had by this time drifted on into obscurity. Still, if he had drifted on, surely she could trace him, since he had been serving on the staff of a general and should therefore be pretty well known. What she really hated most to think of was the possibility that he might have been killed. They did get killed, sometimes, down there where there was so much fighting going on all the time.

When the shadows of the giant cactus stretched mutilated hands across the desert sand, and she believed that Nogales was near, Jean carried her suit-case to the cramped dressing-room and took out her six-shooter and buckled it around her. Then she pulled her coat down over it with a good deal of twisting and turning before the dirty mirror to see that it looked all right, and not in the least as though a perfect lady was packing a gun.

She went back and dipped fastidious fingers into the box of chocolates, and settled herself to nibble candy and wait for what might come. She felt very calm and self-possessed and sure of herself. Her only fear was that Art Osgood might have been killed, and his lips closed for all time. So they rattled away through the barrenness and drew near to Nogales.

Casa del Sonora, whither she went, was an old, two-story structure of the truly Spanish type, and it was kept by a huge, blubbery creature with piggish eyes and a bloated, purple countenance and the palsy. As much of him as appeared to be human appeared to be Irish; and Jean, after the first qualm of repulsion, when she faced him over the hotel register, detected a certain kindly solicitude in his manner, and was reassured.

So far, everything had run smoothly, like a well-staged play. Absurdly simple, utterly devoid of any element of danger, any vexatious obstacle to the immediate achievement of her purpose! But Jean was not thrown off her guard because of the smoothness of the trail.

The trip from Tucson had been terribly tiresome; she was weary in every fibre, it seemed to her. But for all that she intended, sometime that evening, to meet Art Osgood if he were in town. She intended to take him with her on the train that left the next morning. She thought it would be a good idea to rest now, and to proceed deliberately, lest she frustrate all her plans by over-eagerness.

Perhaps she slept a little while she lay upon the bed and schooled herself to calmness. A band, somewhere, playing a pulsing Spanish air, brought her to her feet. She went to the window and looked out, and saw that the street lay cool and sunless with the coming of dusk.

From the American customhouse just on the opposite corner came Lite Avery, stalking leisurely along in his high-heeled riding-boots. Jean drew back with a little flutter of the pulse and watched him, wondering how he came to be in Nogales. She had last seen him boarding a car

that would take him out to the Great Western Studio; and now, here he was, sauntering across the street as if he lived here. It was like finding his bed up in the loft and knowing all at once that he had been keeping watch all the while, thinking of her welfare and never giving her the least hint of it. That at least was understandable. But to her there was something uncanny about his being here in Nogales. When he was gone, she stepped out through the open window to the veranda that ran the whole length of the hotel, and looked across the street into Mexico.

She was, she decided critically, about fifteen feet from the boundary line. Just across the street fluttered the Mexican flag from the Mexican customhouse. A Mexican guard lounged against the wall, his swarthy face mask-like in its calm. While she leaned over the railing and stared curiously at that part of the street which was another country, from the hills away to the west, where were camped soldiers,—the American soldiers,—who prevented the war from slopping over the line now and then into Arizona, came the clear notes of a bugle held close-pressed against the lips of a United States soldier in snug-fitting khaki. The boom of the sundown salute followed immediately after. In the street below her, Mexicans and Americans mingled amiably and sauntered here and there, killing time during that bored interval between eating and the evening's amusement.

Just beyond the Mexican boundary, the door of a long, adobe cantina was flung open, and a group of men came out and paused as if they were wondering what they should do next, and where they should go. Jean looked them over curiously. Mexicans they were not, though they had some of the dress which belonged on that side of the boundary.

Americans they were; one knew by the set of their shoulders, by the little traits of race which have nothing to do with complexion or speech.

Jean caught her breath and leaned forward. There was Art Osgood, standing with his back toward her and with one palm spread upon his hip in the attitude she knew so well. If only he would turn! Should she run down the stairs and go over there and march him across the line at the muzzle of her revolver? The idea repelled her, now that she had actually come to the point of action.

Jean, now that the crisis had arrived, used her woman's wile, rather than the harsher but perhaps less effective weapons of a man.

"Oh, Art!" she called, just exactly as she would have called to him on the range, in Montana "Hello, Art!"

Art Osgood wheeled and sent a startled, seeking glance up at the veranda; saw her and knew who it was that had called him, and lifted his hat in the gesture that she knew so well. Jean's fingers were close to her gun, though she was not conscious of it, or of the strained, tense muscles that waited the next move.

Art, contrary to her expectations, did the most natural thing in the world. He grinned and came hurrying toward her with the long, eager steps of one who goes to greet a friend after an absence that makes of that meeting an event. Jean watched him cross the street. She waited, dazed by the instant success of her ruse, while he disappeared under the veranda. She heard his feet upon the stairs. She heard him come striding down the hall to the glass-paneled door. She saw him coming toward her, still grinning in his joy at the meeting.

"Jean Douglas! By all that's lucky!" he was exclaiming. "Where in the world did you light down from?" He came to a stop directly in front of her, and held out his hand in unsuspecting friendship.

CHAPTER XXII

JEAN MEETS ONE CRISIS AND CONFRONTS ANOTHER

"Well, say! This is like seeing you walk out of that picture that's running at the Teatro Palacia. You sure are making a hit with those moving-pictures; made me feel like I'd met somebody from home to stroll in there and see you and Lite come riding up, large as life. How is Lite, anyway?"

If Art Osgood felt any embarrassment over meeting her, he certainly gave no sign of it. He sat down on the railing, pushed back his hat, and looked as though he was preparing for a real soul-feast of reminiscent gossip. "Just get in?" he asked, by way of opening wider the channel of talk. He lighted a cigarette and flipped the match down into the street. "I've been here three or four months. I'm part of the Mexican revolution, though I don't reckon I look it. We been keeping things pretty well stirred up, down this way. You looking for picture dope? Lubin folks are copping all kinds of good stuff here. You ain't with them, are you?"

Jean braced herself against slipping into easy conversation with this man who seemed so friendly and unsuspicious and so conscience-free. Killing a man, she thought, evidently did not seem to him a matter of any moment; perhaps because he had since then become a professional killer of men. After planning exactly how she should meet any contingency that might arise, she found herself baffled. She had not expected to meet this attitude. She was not prepared to meet it. She had taken it for granted that Art Osgood would shun a meeting; that she would have to force him to face her. And here he was, sitting on the porch rail and swinging one spurred and booted foot, smiling at her and talking, in high spirits over the meeting—or a genius at acting. She eyed him uncertainly, trying to adjust herself to this emergency.

Art came to a pause and looked at her inquiringly. "What's the matter?" he demanded. "You called me up here—and I sure was tickled to death to come, all right!—and now you stand there looking like I was a kid that had been caught whispering, and must be kept after school. I know the symptoms, believe me! You're sore about something I've said. What, don't you like to have anybody talk about you being a movie-queen? You sure are all of that. You've got a license to be proud of yourself. Or maybe you didn't know you was speaking to a Mexican soldier, or something like that." He made a move to rise. "Ex-cuse ME, if I've said something I hadn't ought. I'll beat it, while the beating's good."

"No, you won't. You'll stay right where you are." His frank acceptance of her hostile attitude steadied Jean. "Do you think I came all the way down here just to say hello?"

"Search me." Art studied her curiously. "I never could keep track of what you thought and what you meant, and I guess you haven't grown any easier to read since I saw you last. I'll be darned if I know what you came for; but it's a cinch you didn't come just to be riding on the cars."

"No," drawled Jean, watching him. "I didn't. I came after you."

Art Osgood stared, while his cheeks darkened with the flush of confusion. He laughed a little. "I sure wish that was the truth," he said. "Jean, you never would have to go very far after any man with two eyes in his head. Don't rub it in."

"I did," said Jean calmly. "I came after you. I'd have found you if I had to hunt all through Mexico and fight both armies for you."

"Jean!" There was a queer, pleading note in Art's voice. "I wish I could believe that, but I can't. I ain't a fool."

"Yes, you are." Jean contradicted him pitilessly. "You were a fool when you thought you could go away and no one think you knew anything at all about—Johnny Croft."

Art's fingers had been picking at a loose splinter on the wooden rail whereon he sat. He looked down at it, jerked it loose with a sharp twist, and began snapping off little bits with his thumb and forefinger. In a minute he looked up at Jean, and his eyes were different. They were not hostile; they were merely cold and watchful and questioning.

"Well?"

"Well, somebody did think so. I've thought so for three years, and so I'm here." Jean found that her breath was coming fast, and that as she leaned back against a post and gripped the rail on either side, her arms were quivering like the legs of a frightened horse. Still, her voice had sounded calm enough.

Art Osgood sat with his shoulders drooped forward a little, and painstakingly snipped off tiny bits of the splinter. After a short silence, he turned his head and looked at her again.

"I shouldn't think you'd want to stir up that trouble after all this while," he said. "But women are queer. I can't see, myself, why you'd want to bother hunting me up on account of—that."

Jean weighed his words, his look, his manner, and got no clue at all to what was going on back of his eyes. On the surface, he was just a tanned, fairly good-looking young man who has been reluctantly drawn into an unpleasant subject.

"Well, I did consider it worth while bothering to hunt you up," she told him flatly. "If you don't think it's important, you at least won't object to going back with me?"

Again his glance went to her face, plainly startled. "Go back with you?" he repeated. "What for?"

"Well—" Jean still had some trouble with her breath and to keep her quiet, smooth drawl, "let's make it a woman's reason. Because."

Art's face settled to a certain hardness that still was not hostile. "Becauses don't go," he said. "Not with a girl like you; they might with some. What do you want me to go back for?"

"Well, I want you to go because I want to clear things up, about Johnny Croft. It's time—it was cleared up."

Art regarded her fixedly. "Well, I don't see yet what's back of that first BECAUSE," he sparred. "There's nothing I can do to clear up anything."

"Art, don't lie to me about it. I know—"

"What do you know?" Art's eyes never left her face, now. They seemed to be boring into her brain. Jean began to feel a certain confusion. To be sure, she had never had any experience whatever with fugitive murderers; but no one would ever expect one to act like this. A little more, she thought resentfully, and he would be making her feel as if she were the guilty person. She straightened herself and stared back at him.

"I know you left because you—you didn't want to stay and face-things. I—I have felt as if I could kill you, almost, for what you have done. I—I don't see how you can SIT there and—and look at me that way." She stopped and braced herself. "I don't want to argue about it. I came here to make you go back and face things. It's—horrible—" She was thinking of her father then, and she could not go on.

"Jean, you're all wrong. I don't know what idea you've got, but you may as well get one or two things straight. Maybe you do feel like killing me; but I don't know what for. I haven't the slightest notion of going back; there's nothing I could clear up, if I did go."

Jean looked at him dumbly. She supposed she should have to force him to go, after all. Of course, you couldn't expect that a man who had committed a crime will admit it to the first questioner; you couldn't expect him to go back willingly and face the penalty. She would have to use her gun; perhaps even call on Lite, since Lite had followed her. She might have felt easier in her mind had she seen how Lite was standing just within the glass-paneled door behind the dimity curtain, listening to every word, and watching every expression on Art Osgood's face. Lite's hand, also, was close to his gun, to be perfectly sure of Jean's safety. But he had no intention of spoiling her feeling of independence if he could help it. He had lots of faith in Jean.

"What has cropped up, anyway?" Art asked her curiously, as if he had been puzzling over her reasons for being there. "I thought that affair was settled long ago, when it happened. I thought it was all straight sailing—"

"To send an innocent man to prison for it? Do you call that straight sailing?" Jean's eyes had in them now a flash of anger that steadied her.

"What innocent man?" Art threw away the stub of the splinter and sat up straight. "I never knew any innocent man—"

"Oh! You didn't know?"

"All I know," said Art, with a certain swiftness of speech that was a new element in his manner, "I'm dead willing to tell you. I knew Johnny had been around knocking the outfit, and making some threats, and saying things he had no business to say. I never did have any use for him, just because he was so mouthy. I wasn't surprised to hear—how it ended up."

"To hear! You weren't there, when it happened?" Jean was watching him for some betraying emotion, some sign that she had struck home. She got a quick, sharp glance from him, as if he were trying to guess just how much she knew.

"Why should I have been there? The last time I was ever at the Lazy A," he stated distinctly, "was the day before I left. I didn't go any farther than the gate then. I had a letter for your father, and I met him at the gate and gave it to him."

"A letter for dad?" It was not much, but it was better than nothing. Jean thought she might lead him on to something more.

"Yes! A note, or a letter. Carl sent me over with it."

"Carl? What was it about? I never heard—"

"I never read it. Ask your dad what it was about, why don't you? I don't reckon it was anything particular."

"Maybe it was, though." Jean was turning crafty. She would pretend to be interested in the letter, and trip Art somehow when he was off his guard. "Are you sure that it was the day before —you left?"

"Yes." Some high talk in the street caught his attention, and Art turned and looked down. Jean caught at the chance to study his averted face, but she could not read innocence or guilt there. Art, she decided, was not as transparent as she had always believed him to be. He turned back and met her look. "I know it was the day before. Why?"

"Oh, I wondered. Dad didn't say— What did he do with it—the letter?"

"He opened it and read it." A smile of amused understanding of her finesse curled Art's lips. "And he stuck it in the pocket of his chaps and went on to wherever he was going." His eyes

challenged her impishly.

"And it was from Uncle Carl, you say?"

Art hesitated, and the smile left his lips. "It—it was from Carl, yes. Why?"

"Oh, I just wondered." Jean was wondering why he had stopped smiling, all at once, and why he hesitated. Was he afraid he was going to contradict himself about the day or the errand? Or was he afraid she would ask her Uncle Carl, and find that there was no letter?

"Why don't you ask your dad, if you are so anxious to know all about it?" Art demanded abruptly. "Anyway, that's the last time I was ever over there."

"Ask dad!" Jean's anger flamed out suddenly. "Art Osgood, when I think of dad, I wonder why I don't shoot you! I wonder how you dare sit there and look me in the face. Ask dad! Dad, who is paying with his life and all that's worth while in life, for that murder that you deny—"

"What's that? Paying how?" Art leaned toward her; and now his face was hard and hostile, and so were his eyes.

"Paying! You know how he is paying! Paying in Deer Lodge penitentiary—"

"Who? YOUR FATHER?" Had Art been ready to spring at her and catch her by the throat, he would not have looked much different.

"My father!" Jean's voice broke upon the word. "And you—" She did not attempt to finish the charge.

Art sat looking at her with a queer intensity. "Your father!" he repeated. "Aleck! I never knew that, Jean. Take my word, I never knew that!" He seemed to be thinking pretty fast. "Where's Carl at?" he asked irrelevantly.

"Uncle Carl? He's home, running both ranches. I—I never could make Uncle Carl see that you must have been the one."

"Been the one that shot Crofty, you mean?" Art gave a short laugh. He got up and stood in front of her. "Thanks, awfully. Good reason why he couldn't see it! He knows well enough I didn't do it. He knows—who did." He bit his lips then, as if he feared that he had said too much.

"Uncle Carl knows? Then why doesn't he tell? It wasn't dad!" Jean took a defiant step toward him. "Art Osgood, if you dare say it was dad, I—I'll kill you!"

Art smiled at her with a brief lightening of his eyes. "I believe you would, at that," he said soberly. "But it wasn't your dad, Jean."

"Who was it?"

"I—don't—know."

"You do! You do know, Art Osgood! And you ran off; and they gave dad eight years—"

Art spoke one word under his breath, and that word was profane. "I don't see how that could be," he said after a minute.

Jean did not answer. She was biting her lips to keep back the tears. She felt that somehow she had failed; that Art Osgood was slipping through her fingers, in spite of the fact that he did not seem to fear her or to oppose her except in the final accusation. It was the lack of opposition, that lack of fear, that baffled her so. Art, she felt dimly, must be very sure of his own position; was it because he was so close to the Mexican line? Jean glanced desperately that way. It was very close. She could see the features of the Mexican soldiers lounging before the cantina over there; through the lighted window of the customhouse she could see a dark-faced officer bending over a littered desk. The guard over there spoke to a friend, and she could hear the words he said.

Jean thought swiftly. She must not let Art Osgood go back across that street. She could cover him with her gun—Art knew how well she could use it!—and she would call for an American officer and have him arrested. Or, Lite was somewhere below; she would call for Lite, and he could go and get an officer and a warrant.

"How soon you going back?" Art asked abruptly, as though he had been pondering a problem and had reached the solution. "I'll have to get a leave of absence, or go down on the books as a deserter; and I wouldn't want that. I can get it, all right. I'll go back with you and straighten this thing out, if it's the way you say it is. I sure didn't know they'd pulled your dad for it, Jean."

This, coming so close upon the heels of her own decision, set Jean all at sea again. She looked at him doubtfully.

"I thought you said you didn't know, and you wouldn't go back."

Art grinned sardonically. "I'll lie any time to help a friend," he admitted frankly. "What I do draw the line at is lying to help some cowardly cuss double-cross a man. Your father got the double-cross; I don't stand for anything like that. Not a-tall!" He heaved a sigh of nervous relaxation, for the last half hour had been keyed rather high for them both, and pulled his hat down on his head.

"Say, Jean! Want to go across with me and meet the general? You can make my talk a whole lot stronger by telling what you came for. I'll get leave, all right, then. And you'll know for sure that I'm playing straight. You see that two-story 'dobe about half-way down the block,—the one with the Mexican flag over it?" He pointed. "There's where he is. Want to go over?"

"Any objections to taking me along with you?" This was Lite, coming nonchalantly toward them from the doorway. Lite was still perfectly willing to let Jean manage this affair in her own way, but that did not mean that he would not continue to watch over her. Lite was much like a man who lets a small boy believe he is driving a skittish team all alone. Jean believed that she was acting alone in this, as in everything else. She had yet to learn that Lite had for three years been always at hand, ready to take the lines if the team proved too fractious for her.

Art turned and put out his hand. "Why, hello, Lite! Sure, you can come along; glad to have you." He eyed Lite questioningly. "I'll gamble you've heard all we've been talking about," he said. "That would be you, all right! So you don't need any wising up. Come on; I want to catch the chief before he goes off somewhere."

To see the three of them go down the stairs and out upon the street and across it into Mexico, —which to Jean seemed very queer,—you would never dream of the quest that had brought them together down here on the border. Even Jean was smiling, in a tired, anxious way. She walked close to Lite and never once asked him how he came to be there, or why. She was glad that he was there. She was glad to shift the whole matter to his broad shoulders now, and let him take the lead.

They had a real Mexican dinner in a queer little adobe place where Art advised them quite seriously never to come alone. They had thick soup with a strange flavor, and Art talked with the waiter in Mexican dialect that made Jean glad indeed to feel Lite's elbow touching hers, and to know that although Lite's hand rested idly on his knee, it was only one second from his weapon. She had no definite suspicion of Art Osgood, but all the same she was thankful that she was not there alone with him among all these dark, sharp-eyed Mexicans with their atmosphere of latent treachery.

Lite ate mostly with his left hand. Jean noticed that. It was the only sign of watchfulness that he betrayed, unless one added the fact that he had chosen a seat which brought his back against an adobe wall and his face toward Art and the room, with Jean beside him. That might have been pure chance, and it might not. But Art was evidently playing fair.

A little later they came back to the Casa del Sonora, and Jean went up to her room feeling that a great burden had been lifted from her shoulders. Lite and Art Osgood were out on the veranda, gossiping of the range, and in Art's pocket was a month's leave of absence from his duties. Once she heard Lite laugh, and she stood with one hand full of hairpins and the other holding the brush and listened, and smiled a little. It all sounded very companionable, very care-free,—not in the least as though they were about to clear up an old wrong.

She got into bed and thumped the hard pillow into a little nest for her tired head, and listened languidly to the familiar voices that came to her mingled with confused noises of the street. Lite was on guard; he would not lose his caution just because Art seemed friendly and helpfully inclined, and had meant no treachery over in that queer restaurant. Lite would not be easily tricked. So she presently fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXIII

A LITTLE ENLIGHTENMENT

Sometime in the night Jean awoke to hear footsteps in the corridor outside her room. She sat up with a start, and her right hand went groping for her gun. Just for the moment she thought that she was in her room at the Lazy A, and that the night-prowler had come and was beginning his stealthy search of the house.

Then she heard some one down in the street call out a swift sentence in Spanish, and get a laugh for an answer. She remembered that she was in Nogales, within talking distance of Mexico, and that she had found Art Osgood, and that he did not behave like a fugitive murderer, but like a friend who was anxious to help free her father.

The footsteps went on down the hall,—the footsteps of Lite, who had come and stood for a minute outside her door to make sure that all was quiet and that she slept. But Jean, now that she knew where she was, lay wide awake and thinking. Suddenly she sat up again, staring straight before her.

That letter,—the letter Art had taken to her father, the letter he had read and put in the pocket of his chaps! Was that what the man had been hunting for, those nights when he had come searching in that secret, stealthy way? She did not remember ever having looked into the pocket of her father's chaps, though they had hung in her room all those three years since the tragedy. Pockets in chaps were not, as a general thing, much used. Men carried matches in them sometimes, or money. The flap over her dad's chap-pocket was buttoned down, and the leather was stiff; perhaps the letter was there yet.

She got up and turned on the light, and looked at her watch. She wanted to start then, that instant, for Los Angeles. She wanted to take her dad's chaps out of her trunk where she had packed them just for the comfort of having them with her, and she wanted to look and see if the letter was there still. There was no particular reason for believing that this was of any particular importance, or had any bearing whatever upon the crime. But the idea was there, and it nagged at her.

Her watch said that it was twenty-five minutes after two o'clock. The train, Lite had told her, would leave for Tucson at seven-forty-five in the morning. She told herself that, since it was too far to walk, and since she could not start any sooner by staying up and freezing, she might just as well get back into bed and try to sleep.

But she could not sleep. She kept thinking of the letter, and trying to imagine what clue it could possibly give if she found it still in the pocket. Carl had sent it, Art said. A thought came to Jean which she tried to ignore; and because she tried to ignore it, it returned with a dogged insistence, and took clearer shape in her mind, and formed itself into questions which she was compelled at last to face and try to answer.

Was it her Uncle Carl who had come and searched the house at night, trying to find that letter? If it were her uncle, why was he so anxious to find it, after three years had passed? What was in the letter? If it had any bearing whatever upon the death of Johnny Croft, why hadn't her dad mentioned it? Why hadn't her Uncle Carl said something about it? Was the letter just a note about some ranch business? Then why else should any one come at night and prowl all through the house, and never take anything? Why had he come that first night?

Jean drew in her breath sharply. All at once, like a flashlight turned upon a dark corner of her mind, she remembered something about that night. She remembered how she had told her Uncle Carl that she meant to prove that her dad was innocent; that she meant to investigate the devious process by which the Lazy A ranch and all the stock had ceased to belong to her or her father; that she meant to adopt sly, sleuth-like methods; she remembered the very words which she had used. She remembered how bitter her uncle had become. Had she frightened him, somehow, with her bold declaration that she would not "let sleeping dogs lie" any longer? Had he remembered the letter, and been uneasy because of what was in it? But what COULD be in it, if it were written at least a day before the terrible thing had happened?

She remembered her uncle's uncontrolled fury that evening when she had ridden over to see Lite. What had she said to cause it? She tried to recall her words, and finally she did remember saying something about proving that her own money had been paying for her "keep" for three years. Then he had gone into that rage, and she had not at the time seen any connection between her words and his raving anger. But perhaps there was a connection. Perhaps—

"Oh, my goodness!" she exclaimed aloud. She was remembering the telegram which she had sent him just before she left Los Angeles for Nogales. "He'll just simply go WILD when he gets that wire!" She recalled now how he had insisted all along that Art Osgood knew absolutely nothing about the murder; she recalled also, with an uncanny sort of vividness, Art's manner when he had admitted for the second time that the letter had been from Carl. She remembered how he had changed when he found that her father was being punished for the crime.

She did not know, just yet, how all these tangled facts were going to work out. She had not yet come to the final question that she would presently be asking herself. She felt sure that her uncle knew more,—a great deal more,—about Johnny Croft's death than he had appeared to know; but she had not yet reached the point to which her reasonings inevitably would bring her; perhaps her mind was subconsciously delaying the ultimate conclusion.

She got up and dressed; unfastening her window, she stepped out on the veranda. The street was quiet at that time in the morning. A sentry stood on guard at the corner, and here and there a light flared in some window where others were wakeful. But for the most part the town lay asleep. Over in what was really the Mexican quarter, three or four roosters were crowing as if they would never leave off. The sound of them depressed Jean, and made her feel how heavy was the weight of her great undertaking,—heavier now, when the end was almost in sight, than it had seemed on that moonlight night when she had ridden over to the Lazy A and had not the faintest idea of how she was going to accomplish any part of her task which she had set herself. She shivered, and turned back to get the gay serape which she had bought from an old Mexican

woman when they were coming out of that queer restaurant last evening.

When she came out again, Lite was standing there, smoking a cigarette and leaning against a post.

"You'd better get some sleep, Jean," he reproved her when she came and stood beside him. "You had a pretty hard day yesterday; and to-day won't be any easier. Better go back and lie down."

Jean merely pulled the serape snugger about her shoulders and sat down sidewise upon the railing. "I couldn't sleep," she said. "If I could, I wouldn't be out here; I'd be asleep, wouldn't I? Why don't you go to bed yourself?"

"Ah-h, Art's learned to talk Spanish," he said drily. "I got myself all worked up trying to make out what he was trying to say in his sleep, and then I found out it wasn't my kinda talk, anyway. So I quit. What's the matter that you can't sleep?"

Jean stared down at the shadowy street. A dog ran out from somewhere, sniffed at a doorstep, and trotted over into Mexico and up to the sentry. The sentry patted it on the head and muttered a friendly word or two. Jean watched him absently. It was all so peaceful! Not at all what one would expect, after seeing pictures of all those refugees and all those soldiers fighting, and the dead lying in the street in some little town whose name she could not pronounce correctly.

"Did you hear Art tell about taking a letter to dad the day before?" she asked abruptly. "He wasn't telling the truth, not all the time. But somehow I believe that was the truth. He said dad stuck it in the pocket of his chaps. I believe it's there yet, Lite. I don't remember ever looking into that pocket. And I believe—Lite, I never said anything about it, but somebody kept coming to the house in the night and hunting around through all the rooms. He never came into my room, so I—I didn't bother him; but I've wondered what he was after. It just occurred to me that maybe—"

"I never could figure out what he was after, either," Lite observed quietly.

"You?" Jean turned her head, so that her eyes shone in the light of a street lamp while she looked up at him. "How in the world did you know about him?"

Lite laughed drily. "I don't think there's much concerns you that I don't know," he confessed. "I saw him, I guess, every time he came around. He couldn't have made a crooked move,—and got away with it. But I never could figure him out exactly."

Jean looked at him, touched by the care of her that he had betrayed in those few words. Always she had accepted him as the one friend who never failed her, but lately,—since the advent of the motion-picture people, to be exact,—a new note had crept into his friendship; a new meaning into his watching over her. She had sensed it, but she had never faced it openly. She pulled her thoughts away from it now.

"Did you know who he was?"

It was like Jean to come straight to the point. Lite smiled faintly; he knew that question would come, and he knew that he would have to answer it.

"Sure. I made it my business to know who he was."

"Who was it, Lite?"

Lite did not say. He knew that question was coming also, but he did not know whether he ought to answer it.

"It was Uncle Carl, wasn't it?"

Lite glanced down at her quickly. "You're a good little guesser."

"Then it was that letter he was after." She was silent for a minute, and then she looked at her watch. "And I can't get at those chaps before to-morrow!" She sighed and leaned back against the post.

"Lite, if it was worth all that hunting for, it must mean something to us. I wonder what it can be; don't you know?"

"No," said Lite slowly, "I don't. And it's something a man don't want to do any guessing about."

This, Jean felt, was a gentle reproof for her own speculations upon the subject. She said no more about the letter.

"I sent him a telegram," she informed Lite irrelevantly, "saying I'd located Art and was going to take him back there. I wonder what he thought when he got that!"

Lite turned half around and stared down at her. He opened his lips to speak, hesitated, and closed them without making a sound. He turned away and stared down into the street that was so empty. After a little he glanced at his own watch, with the same impulse Jean had felt. The hours and minutes were beginning to drag their feet as they passed.

"You go in," he ordered gently, "and lie down. You'll be all worn out when the time comes for you to get busy. We don't know what's ahead of us on this trail, Jean. Right now, it's peaceful as Sunday morning down in Maine; so you go in and get some sleep, while you have a chance, and stop thinking about things. Go on, Jean. I'll call you plenty early; you needn't be afraid of missing the train."

Jean smiled a little at the tender, protective note of authority in his voice and manner. Whether she permitted it or not, Lite would go right on watching over her and taking care of her. With a sudden desire to please him, she rose obediently. When she passed him, she reached out and gave his arm a little squeeze.

"You cantankerous old tyrant," she drawled in a whisper, "you do love to haze me around, don't you? Just to spite you, I'll do it!" She went in and left him standing there, smoking and leaning against the post, calm as the stars above. But under that surface calm, the heart of Lite Avery was thumping violently. His arm quivered still under the thrill of Jean's fingers. Your bottled-up souls are quick to sense the meaning in a tone or a touch; Jean, whether she herself knew it or not, had betrayed an emotion that set Lite's thoughts racing out into a golden future. He stood there a long while, staring out upon the darkness, his eyes shining.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE LETTER IN THE CHAPS

Though hours may drag themselves into the past so sluggishly that one is fairly maddened by the snail's pace of them, into the past they must go eventually. Jean had sat and listened to the wheels of the Golden State Limited clank over the cryptic phrase that meant so much. "Letter-in-the-chaps! Letter-in-the chaps!" was what they had said while the train pounded across the desert and slid through arroyas and deep cuts which leveled hills for its passing. "Letter-in-the-chaps! Letter-in-the-chaps!" And then a silence while they stood by some desolate station where the people were swarthy of skin and black of hair and eyes, and moved languidly if they moved at all. Then they would go on; and when the wheels had clicked over the switches of the various side tracks, they would take up again the refrain: "Letter-in-the-chaps! Letter-in-the-chaps!" until Jean thought she would go crazy if they kept it up much longer.

Little by little they drew near to Los Angeles. And then they were there, sliding slowly through the yards in a drab drizzle of one of California's fall rains. Then they were in a taxicab, making for the Third Street tunnel. Then Jean stared heavy-eyed at the dripping palms along the boulevard which led away from the smoke of the city and into Hollywood, snuggled against the misty hills. "Letter-in-the-chaps!" her tired brain repeated it still.

Then she was in the apartment shared with Muriel Gay and her mother. These two were over at the studio, the landlady told her when she let them in, and Jean was glad that they were gone.

She knelt, still in her hat and coat and with her gloves on, and fitted her trunk key into the lock. And there she stopped. What if the letter were not in the chaps, after all? What if it were but a trivial note, concerning a matter long since forgotten; a trivial note that had not the remotest bearing upon the murder? "Letter-in-the-chaps!" The phrase returned with a mocking note and beat insistently through her brain. She sat back on the floor and shivered with the chill of a fireless room in California, when a fall rain is at its drizzling worst.

In the next room one of the men coughed; afterwards she heard Lite's voice, saying something in an undertone to Art Osgood. She heard Art's voice mutter a reply. She raised herself again to her knees, turned the key in the lock, and lifted the trunk-lid with an air of determination.

Down next the bottom of her big trunk they lay, just as she had packed them away, with her dad's six-shooter and belt carefully disposed between the leathern folds. She groped with her hands under a couple of riding-skirts and her high, laced boots, got a firm grip on the fringed leather, and dragged them out. She had forgotten all about the gun and belt until they fell with a thump on the floor. She pulled out the belt, left the gun lying there by the trunk, and hurried out with the chaps dangling over her arm.

She was pale when she stood before the two who sat there waiting with their hats in their hands and their faces full of repressed eagerness. Her fingers trembled while she pulled at the stiff, leather flap of the pocket, to free it from the button.

"Maybe it ain't there yet," Art hazarded nervously, while they watched her. "But that's where he put it, all right. I saw him."

Jean's fingers went groping into the pocket, stayed there for a second or two, and came out holding a folded envelope.

"That's it!" Art leaned toward her eagerly. "That's the one, all right."

Jean sat down suddenly because her knees seemed to bend under her weight. Three years—and that letter within her reach all the time!

"Let's see, Jean." Lite reached out and took it from her nerveless fingers. "Maybe it won't amount to anything at all."

Jean tried to hold herself calm. "Read it—out loud," she said. "Then we'll know." She tried to smile, and made so great a failure of it that she came very near crying. The faint crackle of the cheap paper when Lite unfolded the letter made her start nervously. "Read it—no matter—what it is," she repeated, when she saw Lite's eyes go rapidly over the lines.

Lite glanced at her sharply, then leaned and took her hand and held it close. His firm clasp steadied her more than any words could have done. Without further delay or attempt to palliate its grim significance, he read the note:

> Aleck:
>
> If Johnny Croft comes to you with anything about me, kick him off the ranch. He claims he knows a whole lot about me branding too many calves. Don't believe anything he tells you. He's just trying to make trouble because he claims I underpaid him. He was telling Art a lot of stuff that he claimed he could prove on me, but it's all a lie. Send him to me if he comes looking for trouble. I'll give him all he wants.
>
> Art found a heifer down in the breaks that looks like she might have blackleg. I'm going down there to see about it. Maybe you better ride over and see what you think about it; we don't want to let anything like that get a start on us.
>
> Don't pay any attention to Johnny. I'll fix him if he don't keep his face shut.
>
> CARL.

"Carl!" Jean repeated the name mechanically. "Carl."

"I kinda thought it was something like that," Art Osgood interrupted her to say. "Now you know that much, and I'll tell you just what I know about it. It was Carl shot Crofty, all right. I rode over with him to the Lazy A; I was on my way to town and we went that far together. I rode that way to tell you good-by." He looked at Jean with a certain diffidence. "I kinda wanted to see you before I went clear outa the country, but you weren't at home.

"Johnny Croft's horse was standing outside the house when we rode up. I guess he must have just got there ahead of us. Carl got off and went in ahead of me. Johnny was eating a snack when I went in. He said something to Carl, and Carl flared up. I saw there wasn't anybody at home, and I didn't want to get mixed up in the argument, so I turned and went on out. And I hadn't more than got to my horse when I heard a shot, and Carl came running out with his gun in his hand.

"Well, Johnny was dead, and there wasn't anything I could do about it. Carl told me to beat it outa the country, just like I'd been planning; he said it would be a whole lot better for him, seeing I wasn't an eye-witness. He said Johnny started to draw his gun, and he shot in self-defense; and he said I better go while the going was good, or I might get pulled into it some way.

"Well, I thought it over for a minute, and I didn't see where it would get me anything to stay. I couldn't help Carl any by staying, because I wasn't in the house when it happened. So I hit the trail for town, and never said anything to anybody." He looked at the two contritely. "I never knew, till you folks came to Nogales looking for me, that things panned out the way they did. I thought Carl was going to give himself up, and would be cleared. I never once dreamed he was the kinda mark that would let his own brother take the blame that way."

"I guess nobody did." Lite folded the letter and pushed it back into the envelope. "I can look back now, though, and see how it come about. He hung back till Aleck found the body and was arrested; and after that he just simply didn't have the nerve to step out and say that he was the one that did it. He tried hard to save Aleck, but he wouldn't—"

"The coward! The low, mean coward!" Jean stood up and looked from one to the other, and spoke through her clinched teeth. "To let dad suffer all this while! Lite, when did you say that train left for Salt Lake? We can take the taxi back down town, and save time." She was at the door when she turned toward the two again. "Hurry up! Don't you know we've got to hurry? Dad's in prison all this while! And Uncle Carl,—there's no telling where Uncle Carl is! That wire I sent him was the worst thing I could have done!"

"Or the best," suggested Lite laconically, as he led the way down the hall and out to the rain-drenched, waiting taxicab.

CHAPTER XXV

LITE COMES OUT OF THE BACKGROUND

For hours Jean had sat staring out at the drear stretches of desert dripping under the dismal rain that streaked the car windows. The clouds hung leaden and gray close over the earth; the smoke from the engine trailed a funereal plume across the grease-wood covered plain. Away in the distance a low line of hills stretched vaguely, as though they were placed there to hold up the sky that was so heavy and dank. Alongside the track every ditch ran full of clay-colored water that wrapped little, ragged wreaths of dirty foam around every obstruction, like the tawdry finery of the slums.

From the smoking-room where he had been for the past two hours with Art Osgood, Lite came unsteadily down the aisle, heralded as it were by the muffled scream of the whistle at a country crossing. Jean turned toward him a face as depressed as the desert out there under the rain. Lite, looking at her keenly, saw on her cheeks the traces of tears. He let himself down wearily into the seat beside her, reached over calmly, and took her hand from off her lap and held it snugly in his own.

"This is likely a snowstorm, up home," he said in his quiet, matter-of-fact way. "I guess we'll have to make our headquarters in town till I get things hauled out to the ranch. That's it, when you can't look ahead and see what's coming. I could have had everything ready to go right on out, only I thought there wouldn't be any use, before spring, anyway. But if this storm ain't a blizzard up there, a couple of days will straighten things out."

Jean turned her head and regarded him attentively. "Out where?" she asked him bluntly. "What are you talking about? Have you and Art been celebrating?" She knew better than that. Lite never indulged in liquid celebrations, and Jean knew it.

Lite reached into his pocket with the hand that was free, and drew forth a telegram envelope. He released her hand while he drew out the message, but he did not hand it to her immediately. "I wired Rossman from Los Angeles," he informed her, "and told him what was up, and asked him to put me up to date on that end of the line. So he did. I got this back there at that last town." He laid his hand over hers again, and looked down at her sidelong.

"Ever since the trouble," he began abruptly, but still in that quiet, matter-of-fact way, "I've been playing a lone hand and kinda holding back and waiting for something to drop. I had that idea all along that you've had this summer: getting hold of the Lazy A and fixing it up so your dad would have a place to come back to. I never said anything, because talking don't come natural to me like it does to some, and I'd rather do a thing first and then talk about it afterwards if I have to.

"So I hung on to what money I had saved up along; I was going to get me a bunch of cattle and fix up that homestead of mine some day, and maybe have a little home." His eyes went surreptitiously to her face, and lingered there wistfully. "So after the trouble I buckled down to work and saved a little faster, if anything. It looked to me like there wasn't much hope of doing anything for your dad till his sentence ran out, so I never said anything about it. Long as Carl didn't try to sell it to anybody else, I just waited and got together all the money I could. I didn't see as there was anything else to do."

Jean was chewing a corner of her lip, and was staring out of the window. "I didn't know I was stealing your thunder, Lite," she said dispiritedly. "Why didn't you tell me?"

'Wasn't anything to tell—till there was something to tell. Now, this telegram here,—this is what I started out to talk about. It'll be just as well if you know it before we get to Helena. I showed it to Art, and he thought the same as I did. You know,—or I reckon you don't, because I never said anything,—away last summer, along about the time you went to work for Burns, I got to thinking things over, and I wondered if Carl didn't have something on his mind about that killing. So I wrote to Rossman. I didn't much like the way he handled your dad's case, but he knew all the ins and outs, so I could talk to him without going away back at the beginning. He knew Carl, too, so that made it easier.

"I wrote and told him how Carl was prowling around through the house nights, and the like of that, and to look up the title to the Lazy A—"

"Why wouldn't you wait and let me buy it myself?" Jean asked him with just a shade of sharpness in her voice. "You knew I wanted to."

"So I got Rossman started, quite a while back. He thought as I did, that Carl was acting mighty funny. I was with Carl more than you was, and I could tell he had something laying heavy on his mind. But then, the rest of us had things laying pretty heavy on our minds, too, that wasn't guilt; so there wasn't any way to tell what was bothering Carl." Lite made no attempt to answer the question she had asked.

"Now, here's this wire Rossman sent me. You don't want to get the wrong idea, Jean, and feel too bad about this. You don't want to think you had anything to do with it. Carl was gradually building up to something of this kind,—has been for a long time. His coming over to the ranch nights, looking for that letter that he had hunted all over for at first, shows he wasn't right in his mind on the subject. But—"

"Well, heavens and earth, Lite!" Jean's tone was exasperated more than it was worried. "Why don't you say what you want to say? What's it all about? Let me read that telegram and be done with it. I—I should think you'd know I can stand things, by this time. I haven't shown any weak knees, have I?"

"Well, I hate to pile on any more," Lite muttered defensively. "But you've got to know this. I wish you didn't, but—"

Jean did not say any more. She reached over and with her free hand took the telegram from him. She did not pull away the hand Lite was holding, however, and the heart of him gave an exultant bound because she let it lie there quiet under his own. She pinched her brows together over the message, and let it drop into her lap. Her head went back against the towel covered head-rest, and for a minute her eyes closed as if she could not look any longer upon trouble.

Lite waited a second, pulled her head over against his shoulder, and picked up the telegram and read it through slowly, though he could have repeated it word for word with his eyes shut.

> L Avery,
>
> En Route Train 23, S. L. & D. R. R.
>
> Carl Douglas suicided yesterday, leaving letter confessing murder of Croft. Had just completed transfer of land and cattle to your name. Am taking steps placing matter before governor immediately expect him to act at once upon pardon. Bring your man my office at once deposition may be required.
>
> J. W. ROSSMAN.

"Now, I told you not to worry about this," Lite reminded the girl firmly. "Looks to me like it takes a load off our hands,—Carl's doing what he done. Saves us dragging it all through court again; and, Jean, it'll let your dad out a whole lot quicker. Sounds kinda cold-blooded, maybe, but if you could look at it as good news,—that's the way it strikes me."

Jean did not say a word, just then. She did what you might not expect Jean to do, after all her strong-mindedness and her independence: She made an uncertain movement toward sitting up and facing things calmly, man-fashion; then she leaned and dropped her very independent brown head back upon Lite's shoulder, and behind her handkerchief she cried quietly while Lite held her close.

"Now, that's long enough to cry," he whispered to her, after a season of mental intoxication such as he had never before experienced. "I started out three years ago to be the boss. I ain't been working at it regular, as you might say, all the time. But I'm going to wind up that way. I hate to turn you over to your dad without some little show of making good at the job."

Jean gave a little gurgle that may have been related to laughter, and Lite's lips quirked with humorous embarrassment as he went on.

"I don't guess," he said slowly, "that I'm going to turn you over at all, Jean. Not altogether. I guess I've just about got to keep you. It—takes two to make a home, and—I've got my heart set on us making a home outa the Lazy A again; you and me, making a home for us and your dad. How—how does that sound to you, Jean?"

Jean was wiping her eyes as unobtrusively as she might. She did not answer.

"How does it sound, you and me making a home together?" Lite was growing pale, and his hands trembled. "Tell me."

"It sounds—good," said Jean unsteadily.

For several minutes Lite did not say a word. They sat there holding hands quite foolishly, and stared out at the drenched desert.

"Soon as your dad comes," he said at last, very simply, "we'll be married." He was silent another minute, and added under his breath like a prayer, "And we'll all go—home."

CHAPTER XXVI

HOW HAPPINESS RETURNED TO THE LAZY A

When Lite rapped with his knuckles on the door of the room where she was waiting, Jean stood with her hands pressed tightly over her face, every muscle rigid with the restraint she was putting upon herself. For Lite this three-day interval had been too full of going here and there, attending to the manifold details of untangling the various threads of their broken life-pattern, for him to feel the suspense which Jean had suffered. She had not done much. She had waited. And now, with Lite and her dad standing outside the door, she almost dreaded the meeting. But she took a deep breath and walked to the door and opened it.

"Hello, dad," she cried with a nervous gaiety. "Give your dear daughter a kiss!" She had not meant to say that at all.

Tall and gaunt and gray and old; lines etched deep ground his bitter mouth; pale with the tragic prison pallor; looking out at the world with the somber eyes of one who has suffered most cruelly,—Aleck Douglas put out his thin, shaking arms and held her close. He did not say anything at all; and the kiss she asked for he laid softly upon her hair.

Lite stood in the doorway and looked at the two of them for a moment. "I'm going down to see about—things. I'll be back in a little while. And, Jean, will you be ready?"

Jean looked up at him understandingly, and with a certain shyness in her eyes. "If it's all right with dad," she told him, "I'll be ready."

"Lite's a man!" Aleck stated unsmilingly, with a trace of that apathy which had hurt Jean so in the warden's office. "I'm glad you'll have him to take care of you, Jean."

So Lite closed the door softly and went away and left those two alone.

In a very few words I can tell you the rest. There were a few things to adjust, and a few arrangements to make. The greatest adjustment, perhaps, was when Jean begged off from that contract with the Great Western Company. Dewitt did not want to let her go, but he had read a marked article in a Montana paper that Lite mailed to him in advance of their return, and he realized that some things are greater even than the needs of a motion-picture company. He was very nice, therefore, to Jean. He told her by all means to consider herself free to give her time wholly to her father—and her husband. He also congratulated Lite in terms that made Jean blush and beat a hurried retreat from his office, and that made Lite grin all the way to the hotel. So the public lost Jean of the Lazy A almost as soon as it had learned to welcome her.

Then there was Pard, that had to leave the little buckskin and take that nerve-racking trip back to the Lazy A. Lite attended to that with perfect calm and a good deal of inner elation. So that detail was soon adjusted.

At the Lazy A there was a great deal to do before the traces of its tragedy were wiped out. We'll have to leave them doing that work, which was only a matter of time, after all, and not nearly so hard to accomplish as their attempts to wipe out from Aleck's soul the black scar of those three years. I think, on the whole, we shall leave them doing that work, too. As much as human love and happiness could do toward wiping out the bitterness they would accomplish, you may be sure,—give them time enough.

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