

The Coming of the Law

Charles Alden Seltzer

The background of the lower half of the page is a solid cyan color. Overlaid on this is an abstract, geometric pattern of thick magenta lines. These lines form various shapes, including vertical bars, horizontal bars, and diagonal lines that intersect to create a complex, maze-like structure. The lines vary in length and orientation, creating a sense of depth and movement.

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE COMING OF THE LAW ***

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“What have you done with Hollis?” demanded Norton,
thrusting his big six-shooter against Ten Spot’s stomach.
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THE COMING OF THE LAW

BY CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER

Author of “The Range Riders,” “The Two-Gun Man,”
“The Triangle Cupid,” etc.

emblem

WITH FRONTISPIECE IN COLORS

BY R. W. AMICK

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THE COMING OF THE LAW

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CHAPTER I

THE ARRIVAL OF THE MAN

If the passengers on the west-bound train that pulled up at the little red wooden station at Dry Bottom at the close of a June day in 18—, were interested in the young man bearing the two suit cases, they gave no evidence of it. True, they noted his departure; with casual glances they watched him as he stepped down upon the platform; but immediately they forgot his athletic figure and his regular featured, serious face as their thoughts returned to the heat, the dust, and the monotony of travel.

There was the usual bustle and activity which always follows the arrival of a train. A mail bag was dumped out of the mail car, another thrown in; some express packages were unceremoniously deposited near the door of the station by the agent; the conductor ran to the telegrapher's window to receive an order; ran back, signaling as he ran; the engine bell clanged, the drivers clanked, the wheels ground, the passengers sighed, and the train departed on its way.

The young man who had alighted stood motionless for a moment, listening to the clatter of the wheels over the rail-joints, watching the smoke from the engine-stack befoul the clear blue of the sky. Then he smiled grimly, threw a rapid glance toward a group of loungers standing at a corner of the station, and walked over to where the station agent stood examining some newly arrived packages.

“Do you mind directing me to the courthouse?” said the young man.

The agent looked up, turned, and ran a measuring, speculative eye over the new arrival. He noted the Eastern cut of the young man's clothing and beneath the dust of travel the clear, healthy white skin of his face. “Stranger here?” observed the agent, with a slight, humorous narrowing of the eyes.

“Yes.”

“No, I don't mind,” resumed the agent, answering the young man's question. “You won't have any trouble findin' the courthouse. There's only one street in this town an' the courthouse is down to the other end of it—you couldn't miss it if you tried.” He grinned with some amusement at the young man's back as the latter with a cordial “thank you,” returned to his suit cases, gripped them firmly

by the handles, and strode down the wooden platform toward the street, ignoring the group of loungers at the corner of the station.

“Nother tenderfoot,” remarked one of the loungers as the young man passed out of hearing; “they’re runnin’ this country plum to hell!”

The young man strode slowly down the board sidewalk that paralleled the buildings on one side of the street, mentally taking in the dimensions of the town. It was not an inviting picture. Many buildings of various descriptions snuggled the wide, vacant space which the station agent had termed a “street.” Most of the buildings were unpainted and crude, composed of rough boards running perpendicularly, with narrow battens over the joints. There were several brick buildings two stories in height, bearing the appearance of having been recently erected, and these towered over the squat, one-story frames in seeming contemptuous dignity. There were many private dwellings, some stores, but the young man’s first impression was that there was an enormous number of saloons.

He saw few people; those who came within range of vision were apparently cowboys, for they were rigged in the picturesque garb that he had studied many times in the illustrations of Eastern magazines. He had admired them afar, for there was something about them, something in the free, wild life they led, that appealed to him; something that struck at the primitive in his heart. He had heard tales of them; travelers returning from these regions had related sundry stories of these wild men of the plains; stories of their hardihood, of their recklessness, of their absolute fearlessness—clothing them with a glamor and romance that had deeply impressed the young man. His own life had been rather prosaic.

He saw some cowponies hitched to rails in front of several of the saloons; in front of a store he observed a canvas-covered wagon which he recognized (from sketches he had seen) as a “prairie schooner”; in front of another store he saw a spring wagon of the “buckboard” variety. That was all. The aroma of sage-brush filled his nostrils; the fine, flint-like, powdered alkali dust lay thick everywhere. It was unattractive and dismal.

The town, as it lay before him, began in desolation and ended in desolation. Except that it was a trifle larger it differed in no important particular from many others that littered the face of the world through which he had passed during the last twenty-four hours. It was a mere dot in the center of a flat grass country covering a vast area. It sat, serene in its isolation, as far from civilization as Genesis from Revelation. In the stifling heat of the lazy June afternoon it drowsed, seemingly deserted except for the ponies and the two wagons, and the

few incurious cowboys who had rewarded the young man with their glances. Apparently whatever citizens were here were busy in the saloons. As this thought flashed upon the young man his lips straightened grimly. But he continued slowly on his way, giving much attention to objects that came within his range of vision. The more he saw of the town, the less pleased he was with it.

The suit cases were heavy; he paused in front of a building and set them down, while with his handkerchief he mopped the dust and perspiration from his forehead. He saw a flaring sign on the roof of the building in front of which he had stopped and he read the legend with a smile of derision: "The Fashion Saloon." Several ponies were hitched to the rail in front of the building; the bridle of one was gaily decorated with a bow of ribbon. Only a woman would have decorated a pony thus, the young man decided with a smile. Yet what sort of woman would hitch her pony in front of a saloon? He looked about him for some explanation and saw a vacant space beside him and beside the vacant space a store. There was no hitching rail in front of the store, therefore here was the explanation. He heard a sound behind him and turning he beheld the figures of a man and a woman in the vacant space between the two buildings.

The woman seemed to be little more than a girl, for as the young man watched she turned slightly toward him—though not seeing him—and he saw youth pictured on her face, and innocence, though withal she gave the young man an impression of sturdy self-reliance that awakened instant admiration for her in his mind.

She was attired in picturesque costume, consisting of short riding skirt, boots, felt hat, woolen blouse with a flowing tie at the throat, gloves, and spurs. It was not the sort of thing to which the young man was accustomed, but she made an attractive picture and he took in every detail of her appearance with eager eyes.

It was some time before he noticed the man. The latter stood facing the girl and he could not get a view of his face. He had a gigantic frame, with huge shoulders that loomed above the girl, dwarfing her. The young man remained motionless, watching the two, for there was something in the big man's attitude that held him. The man turned presently and the young man had a glimpse of his face. It was heavy featured, coarse, and an unmistakable brutality was betrayed in it. The young man's lips curled. He did not like the type, and it was the girl's face that held him now that he had seen the man's.

He leaned easily against the front of the building, not over fifteen feet distant from the two, trying to appear uninterested, but not concealing his interest. He believed the girl had not seen him, for though she had looked in his direction he

was sure that her glance had passed him to rest on the pony at the hitching rail. Swift as the glance had been the young man had seen in her face an expression that caused him to decide to remain where he was until the girl mounted her pony, no matter how long that time might be. So he relaxed, leaning against the building—attentive, listening, though apparently entirely unconcerned over their conversation.

The girl seemed moved with some deep emotion over something the big man had said, for her slight figure had stiffened and she stood looking at him with an angry, intense gaze. The big man had been taunting her, for his teeth showed in a mocking grin as he hovered near her, apparently sure of her. It was like a lion playing with a mouse. Then the young man heard the big man's voice:

“So you don't take kindly to my courting? Don't want anything to do with me at all?” His forced laugh had a harshness in it that caused the young man's muscles to stiffen. He took a sly glance at the girl and saw her chin uplift with disdain.

“Do you think it necessary for me to tell you that—again?” she said.

A strange satisfaction thrilled the young man; sympathy for her drew his mouth into a peculiarly grim smile. But he had no time to enjoy his satisfaction for the big man spoke and this time he did not laugh.

“Well,” he said shortly, “you're going to have something to do with me. You're going to hook up with me or I'm putting that crazy brother of yours out of business!”

The girl was suddenly rigid and a deep red as suddenly suffused her cheeks. The young man's face paled at the threat, his teeth came together with a snap, and he leaned forward, wishing to hear some more of this extraordinary conversation. More of it came quickly. The girl spoke, her voice even and well controlled, though burdened with a biting sarcasm:

“What a terrible man you are, to be sure, to threaten to make war upon a defenseless girl and her afflicted brother. But I'm not afraid of you!”

She took a step toward him, standing very close to him and looking straight into his eyes. She was fighting bravely for her composure, but the young man had seen that her lips had quivered pitifully during her brief speech. He stiffened with sympathy. He could not, of course, understand this strange conversation, but he could discern its drift, and the suggestive underplay in the big man's words. But plainly he had not been mistaken in his estimate of the young woman—she seemed entirely able to take care of herself.

He crowded a little closer, though he knew that this conversation was none of his affair further than that he was interested—as any man would be interested—in seeing that the young woman received decent treatment. Certainly so far she had not received that, yet neither had the big man said anything to warrant interference by a stranger. Stealing another glance, the young man saw a heavy revolver at the man’s hip, and he did not doubt, from what he had thus far seen of him, that he would use the weapon should he turn and discover that there was a listener to his conversation. Such an action would accord perfectly with tales that the young man had heard of this section of the country. But he edged closer.

The big man’s face had become poisonously bloated. The girl’s defiance seemed to have enraged him.

“Hell!” he said venomously. “You’re talking damn brave!” He leaned closer to her. “And you think you’d be disgraced if folks knowed you was a friend of mine?” He laughed harshly. “Most folks are tickled to be known as my friend. But I’m telling you this: If I ain’t a friend I’m an enemy, and you’re doing as I say or I’m making things mighty unpleasant for you and your poor, ‘afflicted’ brother!”

The young man saw the girl’s hands clench, saw her face grow slowly pale. Twice now had the big man taunted her about her brother, and plainly his words had hurt her. Words trembled on her lips but refused to come. But for an instant she forced her eyes to meet those of the man and then they suddenly filled with tears. She took a backward step, her shoulders drooping. The big man followed her, gloating over her. Again the young man’s thoughts went to the lion and the mouse.

“Hurts, does it?” said the big man, brutally. “Well, you’ve brought it on yourself, being such a damn prude!”

He reached out and grasped her by the shoulder. She shrank back, struggling with him, trying to grasp the butt of an ivory-handled revolver that swung at her right hip. The big man pinned her arms and the effort was futile.

And then retribution—like an avalanche—struck the big man. He heard the movement, sensed the danger, and flung his right hand toward his pistol butt. There was a silent struggle; a shot, one of the young man’s arms swung out—flail like—the clenched hand landing with a crash. The big man went down like a falling tree—prone to the ground, his revolver flying ten feet distant, a little blue-white smoke curling lazily upward out of its muzzle. The big man was raised again—bodily—and hurled down again. He lay face upward in the white sunlight—

a mass of bruised and bleeding flesh.

The young man's anger had come and gone. He stood over the big man, looking down at him, his white teeth gleaming through his slightly parted lips.

"I think that will do for you," he said in an even, passionless voice.

For an instant there was a tense silence. The young man turned and looked at the girl, who was regarding him with surprised and bewildered eyes.

The young man smiled mirthlessly. "I think I waited rather too long. But he won't bother you again—at least for a few minutes."

He saw the girl's gaze directed to a point somewhere behind him and he turned to see that a door in the side of the Fashion Saloon was vomiting men. They came rushing out, filling the space between the two buildings—cowboys mostly, with a sprinkling of other men whose appearance and attire proclaimed them citizens. The young man stood silent while the newcomers ranged themselves about him, others giving their attention to the big man who still lay on the ground. The girl had not moved; she was standing near the young man, her face pale, her slight figure rigid, her eyes wide and flashing. The young man looked from her to the men who had crowded about him and he became aware that one of the men—a slender, olive-skinned cowboy—evidently a half-breed—was speaking to him. He stood looking at the man, saw menace in his eyes, heard his voice, writhing in profane accusation:

"So you've shot Beeg Beel, you tenderfoot—!" said the man. His right hand was hooked in his cartridge belt, near the butt of his six-shooter.

The young man had been coldly scrutinizing the face of the half-breed; he had seen a sneering insolence on the thin, snarling lips, and he knew instantly that this man was a friend of his fallen adversary. He had smiled grimly when the man had begun speaking, being willing to argue the justice of his action in striking the big man, but at the man's vile insult his white teeth gleamed again and his right arm flew out—like a flail—the fist crashing against the half-breed's jaw. Like the big man the half-breed collapsed in a heap on the ground. There was a sudden movement in the crowd, and pistols flashed in the sunlight. The young man took a backward step, halted, drew himself up and faced them, his lips curling.

"Of course you'll shoot now," he said bitterly.

He heard a rustle beside him, and turned to see the girl standing within a foot of him, the ivory-handled pistol in hand, her eyes flashing coldly.

“I don’t think that any of them are going to shoot,” she declared evenly, her voice resounding in the sudden silence that had fallen; “Big Bill got just what he deserved, and this gentleman will not be molested. He isn’t armed,” she said, with a dry laugh; “shooting him would be murder, and if he is shot I promise to avenge him immediately.” She turned slightly, speaking to the young man while keeping her eyes on the men around her. During the pause that followed her words several of the men stealthily sheathed their weapons and stepped back.

“I think Big Bill is able to fight his own battles,” continued the girl, taking advantage of the evident reluctance of the men to force trouble.

Her face became slightly paler as she saw the big man sit up and stare about him. He got to his feet and stood, swaying dizzily for an instant, and then his gaze sought out the young man and was fixed on him with foreboding malignance. His right hand fell to his holster, and finding no weapon there he turned and sought it, finding it, and returning to a point near the young man, the weapon in hand. As he halted there was another movement and the half-breed was on his feet and dragging at his revolver. The young man crouched, prepared to spring, and the big man spoke sharply to the half-breed.

“Quit it!” he said, snarling. “Mind your own business!” Then he seemed to realize that the half-breed had been worsted also, for he looked at the latter, saw the dust on his clothing and grinned expressively.

“So he got you too, did he, Yuma?” His heavy features wreathed into a mocking sneer as he faced the young man.

“Knocked me down!” he said in a silky, even voice. “Knocked me cold with a punch. Knocked Yuma Ed down too!” He took another step toward the young man and surveyed him critically, his eyes glinting with something very near amusement. Then he stepped back, laughing shortly.

“I ain’t shooting you,” he said. “I’ve got an idea that you and me will meet again.” There was an ominous threat in his voice as he continued: “Shooting you wouldn’t half pay you back. Mark that, young man—shooting you wouldn’t half pay you back.”

He stepped away from the young man, motioning the other men into the door through which they had emerged to come to his assistance, and they filed slowly in without protest. The big man paused long enough to look again at the young man.

“Knocked me down!” he said as though scarcely able to realize the truth;

“knocked me cold with a punch!” He laughed, his coarse features twisting into an odd expression. “Well, I’ll be damned!” He turned abruptly and disappeared through the door through which the other men had gone.

For an instant the young man stood, looking after him. Then he turned and saw the young woman, standing near her pony, regarding him with grave eyes.

“Thank you,” she said. He caught a flashing smile and then she was in the saddle, loping her pony down the street toward the station. For a moment the young man looked after her and then with a smile he returned to his suit cases and was off down the street toward the courthouse, which he saw in the distance.

CHAPTER II

THE RULE OF CATTLE

The courthouse was a low, one-story redbrick building, sitting well back from the street. It was evidently newly built, for an accumulation of débris, left by the workmen, still littered the ground in the vicinity. A board walk led from the street to the wide, arched entrance. From the steps one could look down the street at the station and the other buildings squatting in the sunlight, dingy with the dust of many dry days. Except for the cowponies and the buckboard and the prairie schooner there was a total absence of life or movement, offering a striking contrast to the bustling cities to which the young man had been accustomed.

He walked rapidly down the board walk, entered the courthouse, and paused before a door upon which appeared the legend: "United States District Court. J. Blackstone Graney." The young man set his suit cases down, mopped his forehead with his handkerchief, making a wry face at the dust that appeared on the linen after his use of it, and then knocked lightly, but firmly, on the door. A voice inside immediately admonished him to "come in." The young man smiled with satisfaction, turned the knob and opened the door, standing on the threshold. A man seated at one of the windows of the room was gazing steadily out at the vast, dry, sun-scorched country. He turned at the young man's entrance and got slowly to his feet, apparently waiting for the visitor to speak. He was a short man, not heavily, but stockily built, giving a clear impression of stolidity. Yet there was a certain gleam in his eyes that gave the lie to this impression, a gleam that warned of an active, analytical mind. Judicial dignity lurked all over him.

The young man bowed respectfully. "Are you Judge Graney?" he questioned.

The judge nodded and the young man smiled slightly. "I am Kent Hollis," he said.

The judge had been approaching a big table that stood in the center of the room and at the young man's words he took a second glance at him, but did not hesitate in his walk toward the table. However, he smiled when he reached it, sinking into a chair and motioning the young man to another.

“I have been expecting you,” he said after he had become seated. “Take a chair.” He waited until the young man had drawn a chair opposite him and then he leaned over the table and stretched out his hand in greeting. “I’m glad to see you,” he continued cordially. He held the young man’s hand for an instant, peering steadily into the latter’s unwavering eyes, apparently making a mental estimate of him. Then he dropped the hand and sat back, a half smile on his face. “You look like your father,” he said.

The young man’s face clouded. “Poor dad,” he said slowly.

For a moment there was a silence; the judge studied the young man’s face. Something that he saw in it must have pleased him, for he smiled, becoming serious instantly.

“I am sorry you could not get here in time,” he said. “We buried your father yesterday.”

“I couldn’t make it,” returned the young man regretfully. “I should have liked to see him before he died. Where did you bury him?”

“We took him out to his ranch—the Circle Bar,” returned the judge, “where he said he wanted to be buried when he died. You’ll find that the Circle Bar boys have done their best for him—which was little enough. Poor fellow, he deserved something better.” He looked keenly at the young man.

Lines of pain came into the latter’s face; he bowed his head, nodding at the Judge’s words.

“I have always thought that it was his own fault,” he said gently. “It might have been different.” He looked slowly up at the judge, his face reddening with embarrassment. “Of course you know something of his life,” he said. “You were his friend—he wrote me a while back, telling me that. I don’t pretend to know what came between him and mother,” he continued; “mother would never tell and father never mentioned it in his letters. I have thought it was drink,” he added, watching the judge’s face closely. He caught the latter’s slight nod and his lips straightened. “Yes, it must have been drink,” he continued; “I have inferred that from what mother has hinted now and then. But—” and a wistful gleam came into his eyes—“I have hoped that it would not be drink that would cause his —”

He caught the judge’s slow, grave nod and he broke off abruptly, his eyes filling with an expression of resignation. “Well,” he said, “it is ended, no matter what did it.” He shoved back his chair. “I thank you for what you did for him,” he

added, rising; "I assure you that if it is possible for me to repay—"

"Sit down," said the judge, waving a hand to the young man's chair. "No thanks are due me. I did only what any friend would do for another. I have arranged for you to go out to the Circle Bar," he informed Hollis as the latter hesitated over resuming his chair. "Neil Norton, your range boss, is to be here at six o'clock with the buckboard." He consulted his watch. "He ought to be here in half an hour—if he is on time. Meantime there are some things I would like to say to you."

Hollis smiled. "Fire away," he directed.

The judge leaned his elbows on the table and narrowed his eyes at Hollis. "Don't think my questions impertinent," he said gravely, "for I assure you that nothing is further from my mind than a desire to pry into your affairs. But I take it you will need some advice—which, of course, you may disregard if you wish. I suppose you don't make a secret of your age?"

"No," was the instant reply, given with a grin, "I am twenty-six."

The judge smiled dryly. "We have great ambitions at twenty-six," he said. "I remember that at twenty-six I was rather determined on making the Supreme bench. You can see for yourself how far I missed it. I do not say that we never realize our ambitions," he added quickly as he saw a flash light up the young man's eyes; "I merely wish to show that in my case they were rather extravagant." He grimaced, continuing with a smile: "You are a college man, of course—I can see that."

Hollis nodded. The judge continued, with an admiring glance at the young man's muscular frame and broad shoulders.

"Went in for athletics—football, and such?" he said. "Well," he added, catching the young man's nod, "it didn't hurt you a particle—it doesn't hurt anybody. Rather prepares a man for hard knocks—which he is sure to get sooner or later. If you have decided to live in this country you must expect hard knocks. And I presume you are going to live here?"

"That depends." returned Hollis. "If father has left his affairs in such shape that it is necessary for me to stay here and straighten them out, why of course I shall stay. Otherwise—" He hesitated and laughed quietly, continuing: "Well, I also have an ambition, and if I am compelled to remain here it will have to be sacrificed. It is a rather humble ambition compared to yours," he laughed. "It is journalism," he continued, suddenly serious; "I want to own a newspaper. I am

city editor now and in a few years—” He laughed. “I am not going to prophesy, but I have been working hard.”

The judge’s eyelashes flickered, but his face remained grave. “I am afraid that you will have to remain here. That is”—he added dryly—“if you expect to realize anything from the property.”

“I expect there can’t be much property,” observed Hollis.

The judge smiled. “A thousand acres of good grass land, some buildings, and”—here the judge’s eyes gleamed and he drawled his words—“a newspaper.”

Hollis sat erect. “A newspaper!” he gasped. “A newspaper in this country? Why, man, a newspaper—”

The judge laughed. “So you will not have to go back East in order to be able to realize your ambition—you can own a newspaper here—your father’s newspaper—the *Dry Bottom Kicker*. It was quite a recent venture; I believe it appeared about a dozen times—intermittently. Ostensibly it was a weekly, but in reality it was printed at those times when your father’s affliction sat least heavily upon him. He used to hire a compositor from Las Vegas to set the type,—a man named Potter—a worthless sort of fellow, but a genius in his way—when sober. I suspect that much of the matter that went into the *Kicker* emanated from the brain of Dave Potter.”

Hollis’s smile revealed just a trace of derision. “You don’t happen to know how father happened to think that a newspaper would pay—in this place?” he asked.

The judge looked at him meditatively, a gleam of quiet amusement in his eyes. “I don’t remember to have said that the paper made any money for your father,” he returned slowly; “nor do I remember hearing your father say that he expected it to make any money. As I understand the situation, your father founded the paper on principle. He expected to use it as a weapon.”

“Please go on,” urged Hollis. “That strikes me as a rather Quixotic proceeding.”

“It was, rather,” admitted the judge; “that is, it would seem Quixotic as viewed by an Eastern newspaper man. But out here people are apt to ignore money and methods in considering results. After you have been here a while you will be able to see the force and truth of that statement. Your father was after results and he seized upon the idea of founding a newspaper as a means by which to obtain them. And I feel certain that had he lived he would have succeeded.”

“I plead ignorance,” said Hollis, watching the judge closely. “What particular result did my father desire?”

Judge Graney's eyes gleamed with earnestness. He leaned forward, speaking slowly and distinctly.

"I am going to illustrate my point by giving you a brief history of your father's experiences out here—as I had it from him. He came out here about fifteen years ago and took up a quarter-section of land over on Rabbit-Ear Creek, the present site of the Circle Bar ranch. For quite a few years he was a nester—as the small owner is called in this country, but he was unmolested for the reason that there were few large owners in the vicinity and each man was willing that his neighbor should succeed. Your father prospered and after a few years began to buy land. He finally acquired a thousand acres; he told me that at one time he had about five thousand head of cattle. Of course, these cattle could not live on your father's thousand acres, but the ranges are free and the thousand acres answered very well as a headquarters.

"Eight years ago some men in Santa Fe organized what is known as the Union County Cattlemen's Association. This company secured a section of land adjoining your father's property, on the other side of Rabbit-Ear Creek. The company called its ranch the Circle Cross. Perhaps it strikes you as peculiar that the Association should have chosen a brand so closely resembling your father's. I will digress long enough to explain the action."

The judge drew out a pencil and picked up a piece of paper that lay near him on the desk, making some crude hieroglyphics and poising his pencil above them.

"Here," he explained, indicating a sketch which he had drawn, "is the Circle Bar brand—a bar within a circle. And this—" indicating another sketch, "—is the Circle Cross—a cross within a circle. It is of course, perfectly obvious that all the Circle Cross company had to do when it desired to appropriate one of the Circle Bar cattle was to add a vertical bar to the Circle Bar brand and the brand became the Circle Cross. From a mechanical standpoint it was a very trifling operation, the manipulator of the brands having merely to apply the hot iron through a piece of wet blanket—that gives a new brand the appearance of age.

"To get back to the main subject. The new company called its ranch the Circle Cross and it erected new buildings within a few miles of the Circle Bar buildings. Not long after the advent of the new company it tried to buy the Circle Bar, but your father refused to sell. Bill Dunlavey, the Circle Cross manager, attempted to negotiate the purchase of the Circle Bar and when he was met with refusal hard words passed between him and your father. Not long after that your father began to miss cattle—rustlers began a systematic attack upon his herds. Your father recognized this thievery as the work of the Cattlemen's Association

and he fought back.

“A number of times he changed his brands but each time the company checkmated him. To illustrate: Your father changed his brand to appear thus:” The judge drew again on the paper. “That is the ‘Wine-Glass’ brand. You can see that it resembles a wine glass when held up vertically, though of course as it appeared on the Circle Bar cattle it lay on its side. But this move was futile, for among the Circle Cross cattle now appeared many branded with the sign of the ‘Hour-Glass,’ thus:” The judge drew again. “This was achieved by merely adding a semi-circle to the wine-glass, closing over the bowl.”

“As I have said your father altered his brand a good many times. But the Circle Bar cattle continued to disappear. Years of warfare followed. The Cattlemen’s Association lost no opportunity to harass your father or, for that matter, all the other small owners in the vicinity. Desperate, dissolute men were imported from Texas and Arizona, men who took delight in the shedding of human blood. These men roamed the ranges, stealing the Circle Bar cattle and killing Circle Bar cowboys. Your father had trouble in keeping men; in order to surround himself with enough men to protect his cattle and resist the aggressions of Dunlavey’s hired assassins he was forced to pay ruinous wages.

“Even then he could not prevent rustling. Dunlavey bribed his men; his herds dwindled; he saw that he was facing ruin if he did not devise some means to successfully cope with his enemies. He went over to Santa Fe to see the governor—a piffling carpet-bagger. He was told that the government was powerless; that the same condition existed all over the country, and that the government was unable to combat it. The Law had not come.

“Your father returned home, discouraged but not beaten. He approached the several other small owners in the vicinity, asking for co-operation and assistance. Fearful of Dunlavey’s wrath, the small owners refused to organize. But your father decided to carry on the fight alone. He recognized the fact that nothing but the Law could defeat the association’s aims, and he determined to force the Law into the Territory. With this end in view he established his newspaper. He succeeded in arousing public interest with the result that a court was established here.”

The judge smiled dryly, continuing: “Yes, the Law is here. Or what is more to the point, a representative of the Law is here. ‘I am the Law,’” he quoted, ironically. “But my hands are tied; this court is a mere travesty upon justice. The government at Washington has seen fit to send me here—alone. I can’t go out and get evidence; I couldn’t secure a conviction if I did. The people here who are not

Dunlavey's friends were afraid of him. I can't get a jury. Dunlavey elects the sheriff—controls the election machinery. I am powerless—a mere figurehead. This is the situation in a nutshell. I could go into detail, but I imagine it is plain enough as it is.”

Hollis's face had become gravely serious; his lips were straightened with an expression that hinted at the conflict that was going on in his mind.

“Isn't there an army post near?” he questioned.

“Over at Fort Union—a hundred miles or so southwest. I have pleaded for a detail, but have been informed that it can't be had; that the soldiers are needed to keep the Indians in order. Independent cattlemen are supposed to fight it out alone. At least that is the inference, if we are to consider the attitude of the government.”

Hollis was gravely silent. The judge leaned back in his chair, watching him with a queer expression. He realized that he had said enough to discourage the average young man from remaining in the country a moment longer than was absolutely necessary. He would not have been surprised had Hollis told him that he did not intend to remain. But from what he had seen of the young man he felt sure that his decision, when it did come, would be final. More than once since Hollis had been in the office had the judge observed the serene, steady gleam in his eyes, and he had catalogued him with the rare class of men whose mental balance is so perfect that nothing disturbs it. The judge had met a few such men in the West and he knew the type. As he sat looking at the young man he decided that Providence had made a mistake in allowing him to waste his time in the East. The West teemed with opportunities for men of his kind.

He was not surprised at Hollis's next question; it showed that he was considering the situation from many angles before committing himself.

“What is the condition of Circle Bar ranch at present?” he asked.

“The title to the land is intact and cannot be assailed. But Norton informs me that there are not above two hundred head of cattle on the range, and that the buildings are run down. Not a very cheerful prospect?”

He had told the truth about the land and the cattle, but he had purposely exaggerated concerning the condition of the buildings, being grimly determined to place the situation in its most unfavorable light that he might be the better able to test the young man's mettle. He smiled as Hollis thoughtfully stroked his chin.

“Well, now,” admitted the latter, flashing a queer smile at the judge, “I quite

agree with you that the prospect isn't cheering. But so long as the condition is such as it is there is no need to grumble. I didn't come out here expecting to fall into a bed of roses."

"Then you won't be disappointed," returned the judge dryly. He filled and lighted a pipe, smoking meditatively, his eyes on the younger man with a curious expression. He had determined to push the test a little farther.

"You could probably sell the Circle Bar," he said finally. "Your father told me before he died that he had been offered ten dollars an acre for his land. That would total to a tidy sum."

Hollis looked quickly at the judge, his eyes flashing with grim amusement. "Would you advise me to sell?" he questioned.

The judge laughed quietly. "That is an unfair question," he equivocated, narrowing his eyes whimsically. "If I were heir to the property and felt that I did not care to assume the danger of managing it I should sell, without doubt. If, on the other hand, I had decided to continue my father's fight against an unscrupulous company, I would stay no matter what the consequences. But"—He puffed slowly at his pipe, his voice filling with unmistakable sarcasm—"it would be so much easier to sell and return at once to a more peaceful atmosphere. With ten thousand dollars you could go back East and go on with your newspaper work, well equipped, with a chance of realizing your ambition—and not be troubled with continuing a fight in which, no doubt, there would be many blows to be taken."

"Thank you," returned Hollis quietly. He looked steadily into the judge's eyes, his own glinting with a grim humor. "You have succeeded in making it very plain," he continued slowly. "But I am not going to run—I have decided on that. Of course I feel properly resentful over the way my father has been treated by this man Dunlavey and his association." His eyes flashed with a peculiar hardness. "And I would stay here and fight Dunlavey and his parcel of ruffians if for no other reason than to secure revenge on personal grounds.

"But there is one other reason. There is a principle at stake. I don't care very much about the personal side of the question; little as I knew my father, I believe he would have ignored personalities were he confronted with the condition that confronts me. It is my belief that as an American citizen he chafed under conditions that prevented him from enjoying that freedom to which we are all entitled under the Constitution. Judging from your conversation you are in entire sympathy with that sentiment." He smiled at the judge. "Of course I am not

mistaken?” he added.

The tobacco in the bowl of the judge’s pipe spluttered; he brought his right fist heavily down upon the table, rattling the pens and ink bottles that littered its top. “No, young man; you are not mistaken—you have hit the nail squarely on the head. If you are going to stay here and fight Dunlavey and his crew, Blackstone Graney is with you until—”

“Until the Law comes,” suggested Hollis.

“Yes, by thunder!” declared the judge. “You can go further than that and say: ‘until the Law rules!’”

CHAPTER III

NORTON MAKES A DISCOVERY

Judge Graney rose and leaned over the table, taking the young man's hand and holding it tightly. Then he sat down again and resumed smoking. Neither man said a word during the hand-clasp and yet both knew that their hearts and minds were united in a common cause. Words would have been unnecessary and futile.

Hollis's path of duty lay straight and open before him. There was no by-way that would lead him around the dangers that were sure to beset him. Nor had he thought to search for any. Long before the judge had concluded his recital of conditions in the county Hollis had decided to meet the issue squarely. He had been able to see beyond the petty, personal side of the question; had even ignored it to get at the big, pithy principle of equal rights. The Law must come. If he could assist in bringing it he would be accomplishing something real and tangible and he would be satisfied. He did not believe that Destiny had anything to do with his appearance upon the scene at this particular time; rather he felt that his coming was merely a result of a combination of circumstances such as might have occurred to any man. And like any man with courage and deeply settled convictions he was prepared to move forward to the issue, trusting himself. He had no thought of appearing heroic.

Yet to the judge he appeared so. The latter had been prepared to hear excuses from him; had been prepared to resist a natural inclination to berate the young man soundly for lack of parental loyalty, though conscious that he could advance no valid reason for the young man sacrificing himself upon the altars of an old feud. It was against human nature for any man to so sacrifice himself, he had assured himself when trying to build up a defense for the young man.

And now that Hollis had shown that he needed no defender; that he was willing to take up the cudgels in behalf of his father, the judge was scarcely able to restrain himself. To state calmly that he intended to fight the Cattlemen's Association when there was a life of comparative safety awaiting him in another section of the country was an heroic decision. Many another man would have cringed—would have surrendered without striking a blow.

Judge Graney had long known that the action of his government in sending him

to Union County was an ironical surrender on the part of the government to the forces in the West which had been long demanding the Law. He had been sent here, presumably to enforce the law, but in reality to silence the government's critics. He was not expected to convict anyone. Theoretically he was supposed to uphold the majesty of the law in Union County, but in reality he merely remained and drew his salary. There was no law to enforce.

In the fight that had been waged between the elder Hollis and the Cattlemen's Association his sympathies had been with Hollis, though he had never been able to assist him in a legal way. But the judge knew that eventually the Law must come, and so he encouraged Hollis, assuring him that victory would be his in the end.

And then Hollis had died—suddenly. The Las Vegas doctor who had attended him had shaken his head sagely when the judge had questioned him regarding his patient and had pointed significantly to one of Dry Bottom's saloons. The doctor had told the judge there was no hope, and the latter had telegraphed East. The appearance of young Hollis had been the result. The judge's heart had warmed toward the young man.

"What are your intentions regarding the newspaper—the *Kicker*?" he questioned.

Hollis looked up quickly, his face grave. "Perhaps if there had been no *Kicker* here my decision might have been different," he said. "But so long as it is here it is in business to stay!"

"I expect that decision won't please Dunlavey a whole lot," the judge returned.

"Perhaps not," drawled Hollis; "still, we can't aim to please everybody. I expect I might be able to get hold of that printer—Potter I believe you called him?"

"Potter won't be hard to find," assured the judge; "a search of the saloons would uncover him, I imagine." He smiled. "When you get ready to get the *Kicker* out just let me know; I promise to have Potter on hand."

To the ears of the two men came a rattle of wheels and a voice. The judge leaned back in his chair and looked out through the window. His face wreathed into a broad smile as he resumed his former position and looked at Hollis. "Your range boss is here," he said.

They heard a step on the board walk, and a man stood in the doorway looking at them.

The newcomer gave an instant impression of capability. He stood on the threshold, entirely composed, saturnine, serene eyed, absolutely sure of himself.

He was arrayed in high heeled boots, minus spurs; the bottoms of a pair of dust-covered overalls were tucked into the boot legs; a woolen shirt, open at the throat, covered a pair of admirable shoulders; a scarlet handkerchief was knotted around his neck; and a wide brimmed hat, carelessly dented in the crown, was shoved rakishly back from his forehead. Sagging from his slim waist was a well filled cartridge belt and at the right hip a heavy revolver.

“Howdy, judge!” he said with a smile, in response to Judge Graney’s cordial greeting.

“Just come in?” questioned the judge.

“Been in town an hour,” returned Norton.

He flashed a searching glance at Hollis, which that young man met steadily. The thought crossed Hollis’s mind that the buckboard that he had seen in front of a store soon after leaving the station must have been Norton’s. But now Norton was speaking again and Hollis listened.

“Dropped into the Fashion to see my friend Red Eggers,” resumed Norton, smiling broadly. “Same old crowd—Dunlavey, Yuma Ed, Ten Spot, Greasy—most of the bunch which has been makin’ things interestin’ for us hereabouts.”

At the mention of “Yuma Ed” Hollis looked up. That was the name of the second man he had struck in the affair near the Fashion Saloon. He wondered if Norton knew. He did not remember to have seen the latter among the men who had surrounded him in the space between the two buildings. But the judge was now introducing him to Norton and he stood up, holding the latter’s hand and meeting his inspecting gaze fairly. He found that the range boss was fully as tall as he; indeed, Hollis discovered that he was compelled to look up slightly in order to meet the latter’s level gaze. Norton smiled peculiarly; there was a friendly expression in his eyes, but mingled with it was a reserved, appraising, speculative gleam, which drew a smile to Hollis’s lips.

“So you’re Jim Hollis’s boy?” said Norton. “My new boss?” He grinned, evidently willing to go more than half way in forming a friendship with his “new boss”. “I don’t reckon that you’re much stuck on this here country—much as you’ve seen of it?”

“I’ve been used to keeping busy,” laughed Hollis, “and my impression is that it seems rather dull out here.”

Norton’s eyelashes flickered. He deliberately closed one eye at the judge, carefully averting his face so that Hollis could not see.

“So you’re lookin’ for action?” he said to Hollis in a grave voice. “Mebbe it ain’t none of my business,” he added, his eyes gleaming, “but I’m askin’ you if you’re thinkin’ to stay in this country—keepin’ your dad’s ranch an’ his newspaper?”

Hollis nodded. Norton’s eyes gleamed with a savage delight. “Bully!” he declared. “If you stay here you’ll get plenty of action. I was afraid you wouldn’t stay.” He turned to Judge Graney, a grin of satisfaction on his face. “I’m tellin’ you somethin’ that will tickle you a heap,” he said. “I told you that I had stopped in Red Egger’s saloon. I did. Dunlavey’s bunch was feelin’ mighty sore over somethin’. I stayed there a while, tryin’ to find out what it was all about, but there wasn’t none of them sayin’ anything to me. But pretty soon I got Red over into a corner an’ he told me. Accordin’ to him Dunlavey had corraled that Hazelton girl outside an’ was tellin’ her somethin’ pretty strong when a tenderfoot, which hadn’t any regard for Dunlavey’s delicate feelin’s, up an’ lambasted him in the jaw!”

“Struck him?” queried the judge, grinning delightedly.

“Knocked him cold,” affirmed Norton, his eyes dancing. “Pasted him so hard that he thought it was night an’ went to sleep. Then Yuma busted in an’ thought to work his guns. He got his’n, too. That there tenderfoot didn’t have no respect for guns. Red says he never thought any man could hit so hard. It must have been sumptuous!” He laughed delightedly. “I’d like to shake hands with that tenderfoot—he’s my friend!”

Hollis pulled out a cigar case, selected a cigar, lighted it, and smoked in silence.

So her name was Hazelton. Admiration over the manner in which she had held the men at bay before Dunlavey got to his feet still lingered; she had impressed him deeply. But a deeper satisfaction overshadowed his thoughts of the girl, for he had slugged Dunlavey, his father’s enemy. His satisfaction grew to amusement. Did Dunlavey know who had slugged him? He must have suspected, for Hollis recalled the man’s significant expression when, after he had risen from the ground he said: “I’ve got an idea that you an’ me will meet again.”

Hollis’s thoughts flitted rapidly from Dunlavey to the girl. Now that he had decided to stay he had determined to search her out. He remembered that Dunlavey had spoken slightingly of her brother and he assured himself that he would not be entirely satisfied until he had uncovered the mystery. He might have questioned Norton or the judge, for both men evidently knew the girl, but he was reluctant to betray his interest in her to either man.

He heard Norton make an exclamation of surprise, and looking up he saw him

holding his right hand out, the palm upward, examining it. There was a splotch of blood on the palm and another on the under side of the thumb.

“Shucks!” Norton was saying. “Now where in thunder did I get that?” He looked again at the hand and then suddenly dove forward to Hollis’s side, seized his right hand, peered at the knuckles and held the hand triumphantly aloft.

“I reckon this is where I got it!” he grinned.

Hollis looked ruefully down at his knuckles. The skin was gashed—evidently where it had come in contact with a bone in either Dunlavey’s or Yuma’s jaw. He had intended to keep the story of adventure to himself. But he saw that Norton had stepped back and was gazing soberly at the suitcases, which Hollis had deposited near the door. Norton suddenly let out a chirp of delight.

“Two of them!” he said, suppressing his excitement; “Two grips! Red Eggers said there was two an’ that the tenderfoot had come down toward the court house!” He walked to Hollis and halted in front of him, looking at him with admiration and satisfaction.

“Own up now!” he said. “You ain’t tellin’ us that it wasn’t you, durn you! Oh, say!” He uttered a whoop that must have startled the horses in front of the building. Then he sobered down, speaking in a low, regretful voice: “You durn tenderfoot! Here I’ve been waitin’ for years to get a crack at that big four-flusher, an’ here you come, a-fannin’ along from your little old East an’ get ahead of me!” He stifled a cackle of mirth. “An’ so you’re lookin’ for action? Lordy! If you don’t call what you done to Dunlavey an’ Yuma action this country’s goin’ to set up an’ take notice when you get to goin’ in earnest!”

Judge Graney loomed somberly over the table. “I suppose it must have been you?” he said gravely.

Hollis nodded. “I may as well confess,” he said. “I saw a man giving a young lady a mighty bad moment and I slugged him. Another man called me a vile name and I slugged him, too. That was all.”

The judge sat down again, his face slightly pale. A significant glance passed between him and Norton, but the latter laughed grimly.

“I reckon he’s opened the ball, right off the reel,” he suggested.

Judge Graney drew a deep breath. “Yes,” he returned. “I suppose that way is as good as any other. It was bound to come anyway. It will be war to the finish now!”

CHAPTER IV

AT THE CIRCLE BAR

In the two weeks that followed his arrival at Dry Bottom, Hollis had much time to meditate upon the great change that had come into his life. His conclusion that there was nothing in common between cattle raising and journalism was not a result of an involved process of reasoning, and had he not been endowed with a sense of humor he might have become embittered. Though a sacrifice be made cheerfully, there lingers always its ghost to draw mental pictures of "what might have been." Hollis would have been more than human had he not felt some little regret over his sacrifice.

It had seemed to him, as two weeks before he had ridden away from the court house—sitting on the seat of the buckboard beside Neil Norton, his suitcases tucked snugly away underneath—that he was once and for all severing his connection with the big, bustling world in which he had moved; in whose busy scenes he had been so vitally interested. His had been a big work; seated at his desk in the "city" room of his newspaper he had many times likened himself unto an argus-eyed recording angel whose business it was to keep in view each of the many atoms of a busy multitude and to accord to them that amount of space that their importance seemed to demand. He had loved his work; it had broadened him, had provided him with exactly the proportion of mental exercise needed to keep him on edge and in a position to enjoy life. He had lived in the East—really lived. Out here he would merely exist, though, he assured himself grimly, his enemies would have to pay dearly for his sacrifice.

The picture of his journey to the Circle Bar ranch was still fresh in his mind as he rode slowly away from Neil Norton, whom he had left sitting in his saddle on a ridge, watching him. The long twilight had brought its lengthening shadows that night before Norton had struck the Circle Bar trail, and before they had traveled a mile of the ten that lay before them night had come. Hollis had been little inclined to talk and Norton did not disturb him, but gave his attention to the horses. There had been no moon and few stars, and darkness, as under a blanket, had settled over them before they were many miles from Dry Bottom.

The country seemed nothing more than a vast plain, broken here and there by

ridges and depressions. Occasionally a low hill loomed out of the darkness, the shadows deepening around it; now and then the buckboard passed through a draw, the wheels sinking hub-deep in the loose sand. Several dry arroyos crossed the trail, but with a knowledge that seemed almost marvelous Norton cleverly avoided these pitfalls. Hollis could not see a foot ahead, but the location of the trail seemed to be no mystery to the range boss, for he drove the horses steadily on, hesitating for nothing.

Once during the ride Norton broke the silence with a subdued cackle of mirth, and at another time he laughed aloud.

“I’d liked to have seen Big Bill when you hit him!” he observed, regret in his voice. “I reckon he might have been just a little surprised!”

To which Hollis made no reply. At another time Norton broke the silence long enough to inquire:

“I reckon mebbe you wouldn’t have hit him so hard if you’d knowed who he was?”

“I think I should have hit a little harder,” returned Hollis quietly.

“Why, hell!” declared Norton with a laugh; “I reckon you would have done just that!”

About ten o’clock they came in sight of some straggling posts, and Norton assured Hollis that the posts were strung with wire, forming a fence which skirted one side of the Circle Bar pasture. A few minutes later a dog barked and at Norton’s call came bounding up to the buckboard, yipping joyously. Hollis could make out his shape as he cavorted about.

“My dog,” offered the range boss. “Half wolf, the other half just dog.” He chuckled over his joke. “Best dog you ever see,” he boasted; “money couldn’t buy him. Like dogs?”

Hollis nodded and then realizing that Norton could not see him in the darkness, voiced a quick “yes”.

In the distance Hollis saw a sudden square of light illuminate the wall of darkness into which they had been driving; a door had been opened. Evidently the dog’s barking had aroused the inmates of the building, for as the buckboard drew nearer Hollis saw several figures flit out of the door-way. Norton drove the horses close to the building and brought them to a halt with a sonorous “whoa”! Then he turned to Hollis and spoke with a drawl: “This here building is the Circle Bar bunkhouse; them’s some of your men.”

Hollis remarked the size of the building and Norton laughed grimly. "There was a time when it wasn't any too big," he said. "Five years ago your dad had twenty-seven men on the pay-roll. If Dunlavey an' his damn association hadn't showed up he'd have had them yet." He turned toward three men who were lounging in the doorway. "Hey, you guys!" he yelled; "this here's your new boss. If you-all ain't glued there you might grab his grips an' tote them up to the ranchhouse. Tell the missus that I'll be along directly with the boss."

Amusement over the Southern twang that marked Norton's speech filled Hollis. He had noticed it before and it had made plain to him the reason of Norton's unhurried movements, his slow humor, his habit of quiet scrutiny.

But he had little time for reflection. At Norton's words two men sprang forward to the buckboard and he saw his suitcases disappear into the darkness in the direction of a light that he now saw flickering from some little distance. He jumped out of the buckboard and saw another man spring to the horses' heads and lead them away into the darkness. Then he followed Norton into the light from the open doorway. Presently he was shaking hands with a man who stood there, whose chief articles of raiment were overalls, boots, and a woolen shirt. Almost instantly, it seemed, two of the others had returned and Norton was introducing them as "Ace," "Lanky," and "Weary." These pseudonyms were picturesque and descriptive, though at the time Hollis was in a state of pained incomprehension concerning them. Later he was informed that Ace had been so named on account of having once been caught slipping a playing card of that character into his bootleg during a game of poker. Incidentally—Hollis was told—gun-play had resulted. That Ace was still active proved that the other man might have profited by keeping his knowledge to himself. Obviously, Lanky deserved his appellation—he was a trifle over six feet tall and proportioned like a young sapling. Weary had been born tired—so Hollis was told by the latter's defamers; defamers, for later Hollis discovered that no man in the outfit could show more surprising agility on occasion than this same Weary.

Hollis found himself inside the bunkhouse, where he was critically inspected by the three men—and before he left, by the fourth, who answered to the name of "Bud." Norton told him that these four comprised his outfit—Bud acting as blacksmith. Hollis remained with the men only long enough to announce that there would be no change; that he intended to hang on and fight for his rights. When Norton told them that Hollis had already begun the fight by slugging Dunlavey and Yuma Ed, the enthusiasm of the four men was unbounded. They assured him profanely that they were with him to the "finish"—whatever it might

be. After which Hollis departed to the ranchhouse.

He found Mrs. Norton to be a pleasant faced woman of twenty-seven or eight, who had—according to Norton—“bossed him for seven years.” Norton grinned hugely over his wife’s embarrassed protest.

“I haven’t ‘bossed’ him,” she told Hollis, while Norton looked on with amusement, “though there have been times when he richly deserved it.” There was a spirited flash in the lady’s eyes as she looked at her lord.

“I don’t wish to take sides in any marital controversy,” Hollis told them. “I don’t care to parade my ignorance. However,” he smiled, with a wink at Norton, “most men need a boss, if for no other reason than to teach them the value of discipline.”

“There!” said Mrs. Norton with a triumphant laugh, and immediately left the two men and went into the kitchen.

After partaking of a hearty meal Hollis and Norton went out on the porch for a smoke and a talk, and it was near midnight when Hollis tumbled into bed, distinctly pleased with the range boss and his admirable wife. He was asleep within five minutes.

The sun was streaming into his window when he hopped out of bed the next morning, refreshed and eager to make a trip of inspection over his property. He came down stairs lightly, in the hope of being able to slip outside without disturbing anybody, but upon opening the stair door he was surprised to find the cloth on the table in the dining room already spread and hot food steaming upon it. Mrs. Norton was bustling about from the kitchen to the dining room. Evidently the Nortons had been astir for hours.

Mrs. Norton smilingly directed him to a wash basin on a bench just outside the door and stood in the opening a moment, watching him as he drenched his face with the cold water. There was in her manner only the solicitous concern of the hostess whose desire is to place a guest at ease. Hollis decided that Norton had been most fortunate in his choice of a “boss.”

“Neil has gone down into the big basin to look after the men,” she told him from the doorway. “I don’t expect him to return for some little time. Come in to breakfast when you are ready.”

To his protest that he would wait until Norton’s return before breakfasting she replied with a smile that her husband had already breakfasted, telling him also that in this part of the country everyone rose with the sun.

He stood on the edge of the porch for a moment after washing, drinking in the air that came to him from the plains—a breeze laden with the clear aroma of the sage-brush moist with the dew of the night. When he entered the house Mrs. Norton was nowhere to be seen and he drew up a chair and breakfasted alone.

A little later he embarked upon a tour of inspection. All of the buildings, with the exception of the ranchhouse, which was constructed of logs, with a gable roof and plastered interstices—were built of adobe, low, squat structures with flat roofs. There were six of them—the bunkhouse, mess house, blacksmith shop, the range boss's private shack (from which Norton and his wife had removed after the death of the elder Hollis), the stable, and one other building for the storing of miscellaneous articles. Hollis inspected them all and was not quite convinced that they had reached the stage of dilapidation suggested by Judge Graney.

During his inspection Hollis had seen a patch of garden, some chickens, and down in a small pasture some cows that he supposed were kept for milking. He was leaning on the top rail of the corral fence after he had concluded his trip of inspection when he heard a clatter of hoofs behind him and turned to observe Norton, just riding up to the corral gate. The range boss wore a grin of pleasure.

“How you findin' things?” he questioned.

“In better shape than I expected—after listening to Judge Graney,” smiled Hollis.

Norton looked critically at him. “Then you ain't changed your mind about stayin' here?” he inquired.

“No,” returned Hollis; “I believe I shall get used to it in time.”

Norton dismounted, his eyes alight with satisfaction. “That's the stuff!” he declared. He threw the reins over his pony's head and seized Hollis by an arm. “Come along with me—down to my shack,” he said; “I've got somethin' to show you.”

Without further words he led Hollis toward a building—the one he had occupied previous to the death of the elder Hollis. There were three rooms in the building and in the front one were several articles of furniture and some boxes. One of these boxes Norton opened, taking therefrom several articles of wearing apparel, consisting of a pair of corduroy trousers, a pair of leathern chaps, boots, spurs, two woolen shirts, a blue neckerchief, a broad felt hat, and last, with a grin of amusement over Hollis's astonished expression, a cartridge belt to which was attached a holster containing a Colt .45.

“I bought this outfit over at Santa Fé two months ago,” he informed Hollis, who

was gravely contemplating the lay-out, “expectin’ to wear them myself some day. But when I got home I found they didn’t quite fit.” He surveyed Hollis with a critical eye. “I’ve been thinkin’ ever since you come that you’d fit pretty snug in them.” He raised a protesting hand as Hollis was about to speak. “I ain’t givin’ them to you,” he grinned. “But you can’t wear no tenderfoot clothes out here. Some day when we’re together an’ we’ve got time you can blow me to another outfit; I won’t hesitate about takin’ it.” He leaned over and tapped the butt of the Colt. “You ever handle one of them?” he questioned.

Hollis nodded. Once during a shooting tournament he had done good work with a pistol. But Norton laughed at his nod.

“Mebbe we do it a little different out here,” he smiled. “You hop into them duds an’ we’ll go out into the cottonwood yonder an’ try out your gun.” He pointed through the door to a small clump of cottonwoods beyond the bunkhouse.

He went out and fifteen minutes later Hollis joined him, looking thoroughly at home in his picturesque rigging. An hour later they returned to the corral fence, where Norton caught up his pony and another, saddling the latter for Hollis. He commented briefly upon the new owner’s ability with the six-shooter.

“You use your fists a little better than you use a gun,” he remarked with his peculiar drawl, “but I reckon that on the whole you’ll be able to take care of yourself—after you’ve had a little practise gettin’ your gun out.” He laughed with a grim humor. “More men have been killed in this country on account of bein’ slow on the draw than for any other reason. Don’t never monkey with it unless you intend to use it, an’ then see that you get it out middlin’ rapid. That’s the recipe,” he advised.

The pony that he had selected for Hollis was a slant-eyed beast, larger than the average, with rangy limbs, black in color with a white muzzle and fetlocks. Hollis voted him a “beaut” after he had ridden him a mile or two and found that he had an easy, steady stride.

Together they made a round of the basin, returning to the ranchhouse for dinner. Hollis was saddle weary and when Norton proposed another trip during the afternoon he was met with the response that the new owner purposed enjoying the cool of the ranchhouse porch for the remainder of the day.

The next morning Hollis was up with the dawn and out on the porch splashing water over his face from the wash basin that stood outside the door. For a long time after washing he stood on the porch, looking out over the big basin at this new and strange world. Endless it seemed, lying before him in its solemn

silence; a world of peace, of eternal sunlight, smiling skies, and infinite distance. It seemed unreal to him. Did this same planet hold the busy cities to which he had been accustomed? The stuffy room, with its smell of damp ink, its litter of papers—his room in the newspaper offices, filled with desks and the clatter of typewriters? Through whose windows came the incessant clamor that welled up from the streets below? He laughed at the thought and turned to see Norton standing in the doorway looking at him with a smile.

“Comparin’ her with your little old East?” inquired the latter.

Hollis confessed that he had been doing something of that sort.

“Well,” returned Norton, “there ain’t any way to compare this country with anything else. Seems as though when the world was made the Lord had a few million miles left which he didn’t know what to do with an’ so he just dumped it down out here. An’ then, havin’ business somewhere else about that time he forgot about it an’ left it to get along as best it could—which wasn’t none too rapid.”

This conversation had taken place just twelve days ago, yet Norton’s words still remained fresh in Hollis’s mind. Yet he did not altogether agree with Norton. The West had impressed him far more than he cared to admit.

This morning, directly after breakfast Hollis and Norton had saddled their horses and ridden out of the basin toward the river, into a section of the country that Hollis had not yet explored. Emerging from the basin, they came to a long, high ridge. On its crest Norton halted. Hollis likewise drew in his pony. From here they could see a great stretch of country, sweeping away into the basin beneath it, toward a mountain range whose peaks rose barren and smooth in the white sunlight.

“This here’s ‘Razor-Back’ ridge,” explained Norton as the ponies halted; “called that on account of bein’ so unusually narrow on the top.” He pointed to some buildings which Hollis had seen but to which he had given very little attention, thinking they were those of the Circle Bar. “Them’s the Circle Cross buildings,” resumed Norton. “They’re about three miles from the Circle Bar ranchhouse, directly north through that cottonwood back of the bunkhouse where you tried your gun the day after you come out here. Down below there—where you see them two big cottonwood trees—is ‘Big Elk’ crossin’. There’s another somethin’ like it back up the crick a ways, on the other side of the ranchhouse, called the ‘Narrows.’” He laughed grimly. “But we don’t use them crossins’ much—they’re dead lines; generally you’ll find there’s a Circle Cross man or so hangin’ around

them—with a rifle. So it don't pay to go monkeyin' around there unless you've got pressin' business."

He made a grimace. "It's my opinion that a good many Circle Bar cattle have crossed the crick in them two places—never to come back." He swept a hand up the river, indicating the sentinel like buttes that frowned above the bed of the stream. "The crick is pretty shallow," he continued, "but Big Elk an' the Narrows are the only two places where a man can cross in safety—if we consider that there wouldn't be any Circle Cross man hangin' around them two places. But there ain't no other place to cross an' so we don't go on the other side much."

He turned to Hollis, looking at him with a quaint smile. "From here you can see everything that amounts to anything in this section—which ain't a heap. Of course over there are some mountains—where we was a few days ago lookin' up the boys"—he pointed to some serrated peaks that rose somberly in the southwestern distance—"but as you saw there ain't much to them except rocks an' lava beds. There's some hills there"—pointing to the south—"but there ain't nothin' to see in them. They look a heap better from here than they do when you get close to them. That's the way with lots of things, ain't it?"

Hollis smiled. "I like it," he said quietly, "much better than I did when I came." He turned to Norton with a whimsical smile. "I suppose it will strike you as peculiar, but I've got a notion that I would like to ride around a while alone. I don't mean that I don't like your company, for I do. But the notion has just struck me."

Norton laughed indulgently. "I reckon I won't consider that you're trying to slight me," he returned. "I know exactly how you feel; that sort of thing comes over everybody who comes to this country—sooner or later. Generally it's later, when a man has got used to the silence an' the bigness an' so on. But in your case it's sooner. You'll have to have it out with yourself."

His voice grew serious. "But don't go ridin' too far. An' keep away from the river trail."

In spite of his ready acquiescence he sat for some time on his pony, watching Hollis as the latter urged his pony along the ridge. Just before Hollis disappeared down the slope of the ridge he turned and waved a hand to Norton, and the latter, with a grim, admiring smile, wheeled his pony and loped it over the back trail.

Once down the slope of the ridge Hollis urged his pony out into the level of the basin, through some deep saccatone grass, keeping well away from the river trail as advised by the range boss.

In spite of his serious thoughts Hollis had not been dismayed over the prospect of remaining at the Circle Bar to fight Dunlavey and his crew. He rather loved a fight; the thought of clashing with an opposing force had always filled him with a sensation of indefinable exultation. He reveled in the primitive passions. He had been endowed by nature with those mental and physical qualities that combine to produce the perfect fighter. He was six feet of brawn and muscle; not an ounce of superfluous flesh encumbered him—he had been hammered and hardened into a state of physical perfection by several years of athletic training, sensible living, and good, hard, healthy labor. Circumstances had not permitted him to live a life of ease. The trouble between his parents—which had always been much of a mystery to him—had forced him at a tender age to go out into the world and fight for existence. It had toughened him; it had trained his mind through experience; it had given him poise, persistence, tenacity—those rare mental qualities without which man seldom rises above mediocrity.

Before leaving Dry Bottom to come to the Circle Bar he had telegraphed his mother that he would be forced to remain indefinitely in the West, and the sending of this telegram had committed him irrevocably to his sacrifice. He knew that when his mother received a letter from him explaining the nature of the work that required his presence in Dry Bottom she would approve his course. At least he was certain that she would not advise surrendering.

After riding for more than an hour he came to a shallow draw and urged his pony through the deep sand of its center. On the other side of the draw the country became suddenly rocky; great boulders were strewn indiscriminately about, as though some giant hand had distributed them carelessly, without regard to their final resting place. A lava bed, looming gray and dead under a barren rock hill, caught his attention, and he drew his pony to a halt and sat quietly in the saddle examining it. From the lava bed his gaze went to a weird mineral shape that rose in the distance—an inverted cone that seemed perfectly balanced on its narrowest point. He studied this long without moving, struck with the miraculous stability of the thing; it seemed that a slight touch would send it tumbling down.

He realized that he had stumbled upon a spot that would have provided pleasure to a geological student. To him it was merely a source of wonder and awe. Some mighty upheaval of nature had created this, and he continued to gaze at it, his mind full of conjecture.

To his right rose a precipitous rock wall surmounted by a fringe of thick shrubbery. On the left was another wall, perpendicular, flat on its top and stretching away into the distance, forming a grass plateau. Directly in front of

him was a narrow canyon through which he could see a plain that stretched away into the unknown distance.

It was a magnificent country; he did not now regret his decision to remain here. He pulled out his watch, noting that its hands pointed to ten, and realized that he must be off if he expected to reach the Circle Bar by noon.

He sat erect in the saddle, about to wheel his pony toward the draw through which he had entered, when he heard a sharp sound. Startled, he glanced swiftly to his right, searching the immediate vicinity for the agency which had created sound in this vast silence. He stiffened slowly in the saddle, his face gradually paling. Not over a hundred feet from him, partly concealed by a big boulder, stood a man with a rifle, the muzzle of the weapon trained fairly on him.

CHAPTER V

THE GIRL OF DRY BOTTOM

Hollis was not frightened, though he was in a position that might have aroused fear or apprehension in any man's mind. He was alone, the man had him covered with the rifle, and assuredly this was one of Dunlavey's hirelings.

Hollis glanced swiftly around. Certain signs—some shrubbery that he saw through the canyon, a bald butte or two rising in the distance—told him that he was near the river. And Norton had told him to keep away from the river trail. In his eagerness to explore the country he had forgotten all about Norton's warning.

The prospect was not a hopeful one, yet Hollis could not have admitted to feeling any alarm. He realized that had the man intended any immediate harm he would have shot him down long before this—while he had sat motionless in the saddle inspecting the place. Concerning the man's intentions he could only speculate, but assuredly they were not peaceful.

For a little time the man remained motionless and Hollis sat quiet, looking at him. The weapon had not moved; its muzzle still menaced him and he watched it closely, wondering whether the man would give him any warning when about to pull the trigger.

Many minutes dragged and the man did not move. A slow anger began to steal over Hollis; the man's inaction grated on his nerves.

"Well!" he challenged sharply. "What do you want?"

There was no answer. Hollis could see only the man's head and shoulders projecting above the boulder, and the rifle—steady and level—menacing him. With an exclamation of rage and disdain he seized the bridle rein and pulled sharply on it, swinging the pony's head around. The rifle crashed venomously; Hollis felt the right sleeve of his shirt flutter, and he pulled the pony abruptly up.

"Just to show you!" came the man's voice, mockingly. "If you move again until I give the word you won't know where you've been hit!"

Hollis was satisfied—the man undoubtedly meant business. He settled back into the saddle and looked down at his shirt sleeve. The bullet had passed very close

to the arm. If the man had meant the bullet for that particular spot he was a deadly marksman. In the face of such marvelous shooting Hollis did not care to experiment further. But his anger had not yet abated.

“No doubt you are enjoying yourself!” he said with bitter sarcasm. “But the pleasure is all yours. I am not enjoying myself a bit, I assure you. And I don’t like the idea of being a target for you to shoot at!”

A laugh came back to Hollis—a strange, unnatural, sardonic cackle that, in spite of his self-control, caused his flesh to creep. And then the man’s voice:

“No, you don’t like it. I knew that all along. But you’re going to stay here for seven weeks while I shoot holes in you!” He laughed again, his voice high and shrill, its cackling cadences filling the place.

“Seven weeks in Devil’s Hollow!” came the voice again. “Seven weeks! Seven weeks!”

Hollis felt his heart thumping heavily against his ribs, while a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach told him that his courage was touched. He realized now why the man had not shot him down immediately. He was a maniac!

For a few terrible seconds Hollis sat in the saddle while the world reeled around him; while the rocks and cliffs danced fantastically. Courage he had to be sure; he had already become resigned to death before the man’s rifle, but he had imagined the man to be in full possession of his senses; imagined his death to have been planned out of the deliberate coolness of reason. Such a death would have been bad enough, but to meet death at the hands of a man mentally unbalanced! Somehow it seemed different, seemed horribly unreal—like a terrible nightmare.

It was some seconds before he regained control of himself, and then he steadied himself in the saddle, assuring himself in a burst of bitter, ironic humor that death at the hands of a crazy man could be no worse than death at the hands of a rational one.

He looked up again, a defiant smile on his lips, to see that both man and rifle had disappeared. In a flash he saw his chance and took advantage of it. In an instant he was off his pony; in another he was behind a convenient rock, breathing easier, his senses alert. For some little time he remained in the shelter of the rock, awaiting the other man’s movements. He did not doubt that acting upon some freakish impulse, the man had left his boulder and was even now stalking him from some other direction. He peered carefully about him. He had no

thought of shooting the man—that would be murder, for the man was not mentally responsible for his actions. His efforts must be centered solely upon some plan for saving his own life.

To do this he realized that he must be careful. In view of the man's unerring marksmanship it would be certain death for him to expose himself for an instant. But he must take some chances. Convinced of this he peered around the edge of his rock, taking a flashing glance around him. The man was nowhere to be seen. Hollis waited some little time and then taking another glance and not seeing the man, rose slowly to his feet and crouched. Then, filled with a sudden, reckless impulse, he sprang for another rock a dozen feet distant, expecting each instant to hear the crash of the man's rifle. But he succeeded in gaining the shelter of the other rock intact. Evidently the man was looking for him in some other direction.

Emboldened with his success he grimly determined on advancing to another rock some twenty or thirty feet farther on. As in the first instance he succeeded in gaining it in safety. His maneuvering had been circuitous, bringing him into a position from which he could see partly behind the rock where the man had been concealed.

And now, having gained the second rock in safety, Hollis decided to take no more chances. Sooner or later, he was convinced, the man was sure to see him as he jumped. He did not like the picture that his imagination conjured up. Therefore his actions were now marked with more caution. It took him a long time to gain a position where he could peer over the upper edge of the rock behind which he was concealed. But he gained it finally and then dropped back with an exclamation of surprise. He had caught a glimpse of the man. He was lying face upward behind the boulder, his arms outstretched, his rifle lying in the dust near him.

Hollis was tempted to make a run for his pony, mount, and race out of the hollow. But a second thought restrained him. He had considered the man's action merely a ruse, but why should he attempt it after he had once had an opportunity to make use of his rifle? Still for an instant Hollis hesitated, for he knew there was no rule by which a maniac's actions might be judged. Then with a grim laugh he sprang over the few feet that separated him from the man, approaching him carefully, still slightly doubtful.

But the man was not shamming; Hollis could see that when he had approached close enough to see his face. It bore a curious pallor, his eyes were wide open and staring, and some foam flecked his lips. Evidently he had been overcome by a paroxysm of his malady at about the moment Hollis had discovered it.

Hollis stepped back and heaved a sigh of relief. Then he stepped over to where the man's rifle lay, taking it up and removing the cartridges. Returning to the man he removed the cartridges from his belt and drew his six-shooter from its holster, determined that when the man recovered from his stupor there would be no danger of a recurrence of the previous incident. Then he leaned against the boulder to await the man's recovery.

Ten minutes later, while he still watched the man, he heard a clatter of hoofs. Determined not to be taken by surprise again he drew his own six-shooter and peered cautiously around the edge of the boulder. What he saw caused him to jam the weapon back into its holster very hurriedly. Then he stepped out of his concealment with a red, embarrassed face to greet a young woman whose expression of doubt and fear was instantly replaced by one of pleasure and recognition as she caught sight of him. It was the girl of Dry Bottom.

"Oh!" she said. "Is it you? I was afraid—" And then she saw the man and was off her pony in a flash and at his head, supporting it and pouring something down his throat from a bottle.

She rose presently, embarrassment crimsoning her face. Hollis saw her lips quiver when she turned and spoke to him.

"He will be all right—now," she said, facing Hollis, her eyes drooping as though ashamed to meet his. "He has had another attack of his—his trouble." She looked suddenly up at Hollis, bravely trying to repress her emotion—but with little success.

"You heard what he—Big Bill Dunlavey—said about my brother?" she questioned, her eyes full and moist. Hollis nodded and she continued rapidly, her voice quavering: "Well, he told the truth." Her voice trailed away into a pitiful wail, and she stepped over and leaned against the boulder, sobbing quietly into her hands. "That's why it hurts so," she added.

Hollis yielded to a sudden wave of sympathy. He stood close to her, aware of his inability to cope with this strange situation. She looked so small, so out of place, he felt that whatever he did or said would not help matters. What he did say, however, assisted in restoring her composure.

"I am glad I slugged him!" he said heatedly.

She turned suddenly to him, her eyes flashing spiritedly through the moisture in them.

"Oh, it was great!" she declared, her hands clenching at the recollection. "I could

have shaken hands with you—with the hand that struck him!”

Hollis smiled whimsically. “I’ve still got the hand,” he said significantly, extending it toward her—“if you have not reconsidered.” He laughed as she took it and pressed it firmly. “I rather think that we’ve both got a shake coming on that,” he added. “I didn’t understand then about your brother or I would have added a few extra pounds to that punch.”

Her face clouded as he mentioned her brother. “Poor Ed,” she said in a low voice. She went over to the man, leaning over him and smoothing back the hair from his forehead, Hollis looking glumly on, clenching his teeth in impotent sympathy.

“These attacks do not come often,” she volunteered as she again approached Hollis. “But they do come,” she added, her voice catching. Hollis did not reply, feeling that he had no right to be inquisitive. But she continued, slightly more at ease and plainly pleased to have some one in whom she might confide.

“Ed was injured a year ago through a fall,” she informed Hollis. “He was breaking a wild horse and a saddle girth broke and he fell, striking on his head. The wound healed, but he has never been the same. At intervals these attacks come on and then he is irresponsible—and dangerous.” She shuddered. “You were watching him,” she added, looking suddenly at him; “did you find him as he is or did he attack you? Frequently when he has these attacks he comes here to Devil’s Hollow, explaining that he expects to find some of Dunlavey’s men. He doesn’t like Dunlavey,” she added with a flush, “since Dunlavey—” She hesitated and then went on determinedly—“well, since Dunlavey told him that he wanted to marry me. But Ed says that Dunlavey has a wife in Tucson and—well, I wouldn’t have married him anyway—the brute!”

“Exactly,” agreed Hollis gravely, trying to repress a thrill of satisfaction; “of course you couldn’t marry him.” He understood now the meaning of Dunlavey’s words to her in Dry Bottom. “If you wasn’t such a damn prude,” he had said. He looked at the girl with a sudden, grim smile. “He said something about running you and your brother out of the country,” he said; “of course you won’t allow him to do that?”

The girl’s slight figure stiffened. “I would like to see him try it!” she declared defiantly.

Hollis grinned. “That’s the stuff!” he sympathized. “I rather think that Dunlavey is something of a bluffer—that folks in this country have allowed him to have his own way too much.”

She shook her head doubtfully. "I don't know about that," she returned. Then she smiled. "You are the new owner of the Circle Bar, aren't you?"

Hollis startled, looking at her with a surprised smile. "Yes," he returned, "I am the new owner. But how did you know it? I haven't told anyone here except Neil Norton and Judge Graney. Have Norton and the Judge been talking?"

"They haven't talked to me," she assured him with a demure smile. "You see," she added, "you were a stranger in Dry Bottom, and after you left the Fashion you went right down to the court house. I knew Judge Graney had been your father's friend. And then I saw Neil Norton coming into town with the buckboard." She laughed. "You see, it wasn't very hard to add two and two."

"Why, no," Hollis agreed, "it wasn't. But how did you happen to see me go down to the court house?"

"Why, I watched you!" she returned. And then suddenly aware of her mistake in admitting that she had felt an interest in him at their first meeting, she lowered her gaze in confusion and stood, kicking with her booted toe into a hummock, her face suddenly very red.

The situation might have been embarrassing for her had not her brother created a diversion by suddenly sighing and struggling to sit up. The girl was at his side in an instant, assisting him. The young man's bewilderment was pitiful. He sat silent for a full minute, gazing first at his sister and then at Hollis, and finally at his surroundings. Then, when a rational gleam had come into his eyes he bowed his head, a blush of shame sweeping over his face and neck.

"I expect I've been at it again," he muttered, without looking up.

The girl leaned over him, reassuring him, patting his face lovingly, letting him know by all a woman's arts of the sympathy and love she bore for him. Hollis watched her with a grim, satisfied smile. If he had had a sister he would have hoped that she would be like her. He stepped forward and seized the young man by the arm, helping him to his feet.

"You are right now," he assured him; "there has been no harm done."

Standing, the young man favored Hollis with a careful inspection. He flushed again. "You're the man that rode through the draw," he said. "I saw you and thought you were one of Dunlavey's men. I shot at you once, and was going to shoot again, but something cracked in my head. I hope I didn't hit you." Embarrassment again seized him; his eyes drooped. "Of course you are not one of Dunlavey's men," he added, "or you wouldn't be here, talking to sis. No

friend of Dunlavey's could do that." He looked at the girl with a tender smile. "I don't know what I'd do if it wasn't for her," he added, speaking to Hollis. "But I expect it's a good thing that I'm not crazy all the time." He looked searchingly at Hollis. "I've never seen you before," he said. "Who are you?"

"I am Kent Hollis."

The young man's eyes lighted. "Not Jim Hollis's son?" he asked.

Hollis nodded. The young man's face revealed genuine pleasure. "You going to stay in this here country?" he asked.

"I am going to run the Circle Bar," returned Hollis slowly.

"Bully!" declared the young man. "There's some folks around here said you wouldn't have nerve enough to stay." He made a wry face. "But I reckon you've got nerve or you'd have hit the breeze when I started to stampede." He suddenly held out a hand. "I like you," he said impulsively. "You and me are going to be friends. Shake!"

Hollis saw a smile of pleasure light up the girl's face, which she tried to conceal by brushing the young man's clothing with a gloved hand, meanwhile keeping him between her and Hollis.

Hollis stood near the boulder, watching them as they prepared to depart, the girl telling her brother that he would find his pony on the plains beyond the canyon.

"I am glad I didn't hit you," the young man told Hollis as he started away with the girl. "If you are not scared off you might take a run down to the shack some time—it's just down the creek a ways."

Hollis hesitated and then, catching the girl's glance, he smiled.

"I can't promise when," he said, looking at the girl, "but you may be sure that I will look you up the first chance I get."

He stood beside the boulder until he saw them disappear around the wall of the canyon. Then with a satisfied grin he walked to his pony, mounted, and was off through the draw toward the Circle Bar ranchhouse.

CHAPTER VI

HOLLIS RENEWS AN ACQUAINTANCE

Rumor, that mysterious disseminator of news whose tongues are legion, whispered that the Dry Bottom *Kicker* was to come to life. Wherefore curiosity led many of Dry Bottom's citizens past the door of the *Kicker* office to steal covert glances at the young man whose figure was bent over the desk inside. Many passed in silence after looking at the young man—he did not see them. Others commented gravely or humorously according to their whim—the young man did not hear them. Seated at the desk he gave his attention to the tasks before him—he was not concerned with rumor; the curiosity of Dry Bottom's citizens did not affect him. Seriously, methodically, steadily, he worked at his desk, while rumor wagged her tongues and curiosity lounged past the window.

It was Hollis's first visit to the *Kicker* office; he had come to work and there was much that he could do. He had found the *Kicker* installed in a one story frame building, verging upon dilapidation, unpainted, dingy. The appearance of its exterior had given Hollis a queer sensation in the pit of the stomach. He was cheered a little by the businesslike appearance of the interior. It was not what he had been used to, but he felt that it would answer very well in this locality, and—well, he planned to make improvements.

About twenty by forty, he estimated the size of the interior. Originally there had been only one room. This had been divided into three sections by partitions. An old, flat-topped desk sat near the front window, a swivel chair before it. Along the wall above the desk were several rows of shelving with paste-board boxes and paper piled neatly up. Calendars, posters, and other specimens of the printer's art covered the walls. In the next room was another desk. Piles of advertising electrotypes, empty forms, and papers filled the corners. The composing room was in the rear. Everything was in order here; type cases, stands, forms. There were a proof press, some galley racks, a printing press, with a forlorn-looking gasolene engine near it. A small cast-iron stove stood in a corner with its door yawning open, its front bespattered with tobacco juice. A dilapidated imposing stone ranged along the rear wall near a door that opened into the sunlight. A man stood before one of the type cases distributing type. He did not look up at Hollis's entrance.

“Hello!” greeted Hollis.

The man hesitated in his work and looked up. “Hello,” he returned, perfunctorily.

“I suppose your name is Potter?” Hollis inquired cordially. Judge Graney had told him that if he succeeded in finding the compositor he would have him at the *Kicker* office this morning. Potter had gone to work without further orders.

“Yes,” said the man. He came forward.

“I am the new owner of the *Kicker*,” Hollis informed him with a smile.

“Jim Hollis’s boy?” inquired Potter, straightening. At Hollis’s nod he stepped quickly forward and grasped the hand the latter offered him, squeezing it tightly. “Of course you are Jim Hollis’s boy!” he said, finishing his inspection. “You are the living image of him!” He swept his hand around toward the type case. “I am working, you see. Judge Graney wrote me last week that you wanted me and I came as soon as I could. Is it true that the *Kicker* is going to be a permanent institution?”

“The *Kicker* is here to stay!” Hollis informed him.

Potter’s face lighted with pleasure. “That’s bully!” he said. “That’s bully!”

He was of medium height, slender, lean faced, with a magnificent head, and a wealth of brown hair thickly streaked with silver. His thin lips were strong; his chin, though a trifle weak, was well formed; his eyes slightly bleared, but revealing, in spite of this defect, unmistakable intelligence. In the first flashing glance which Hollis had taken at him he had been aware that here was a person of more than ordinary mental ability and refinement. It was with a pang of pity that he remembered Judge Graney’s words to the effect that he was a good workman—“when sober.” Hollis felt genuinely sorry for him.

“I have had a talk with Judge Graney,” volunteered Potter. “He tells me that you are a newspaper man. Between us we ought to be able to get out a very respectable paper.”

“We will,” calmly announced Hollis; “and we’ll get the first issue out Saturday. Come in here and we’ll talk about it.”

He led the way to the front room and seated himself at the desk, motioning Potter to another chair. Within the next hour he knew all about the *Kicker*. It was a six-column sheet of four pages. The first page was devoted to local news. The second carried some local advertisements, exchange clippings, and two or three

columns of syndicate plate matter. On the third page two columns were devoted to editorials, one to advertisements, and three to local news in large type. The fourth, and last page was filled with more plate matter and a litter of “foreign” advertising—patent-medicines, soaps, hair-dye.

At the first glance it appeared that the paper must be a paying proposition, for there were a goodly proportion of advertisements. Yet Hollis had his suspicions about the advertisements. When he had spoken to Potter about them he discovered that quite a number of them were what is known to the craft as “dead ads”—which meant advertisements upon which payment had ceased and which were carried either for the purpose of filling up the paper or because it was found cheaper to run them than to set type for the space which would be left by their absence.

“We won’t carry any dead ads!” announced Hollis.

“Several of these are big merchants,” said Potter, pointing them out with inky forefinger; “though the contracts have run out the appearance of their ads lends the *Kicker* a certain moral support—the little fellows don’t know that they are not paid for and it draws their business.”

“We don’t care for that kind of business,” smiled Hollis; “we’re going to run a real newspaper. We’re going to get paid ads!”

“I hope so,” hesitatingly replied Potter.

“Of course you do,” laughed Hollis; “but whether we get paid ads or not this newspaper is coming out regularly and on time. Furthermore, we’re going to cut down on this plate stuff; we don’t want a paper filled with stale articles on snakes, antedated ocean disasters, Egyptian monoliths, and the latest style in opera hats. We’ll fill the paper with local news—we’ll ginger things up a little. You are pretty well acquainted here—I’ll leave the local items to you. What town near here compares with Dry Bottom in size?”

“There’s Lazette,” returned Potter; “over in Colfax County.”

“How far from here?”

“Eighty miles.”

“Got a newspaper?”

“Yes; the *Eagle*.”

“Bully! Step on the *Eagle*’s toes. Make the *Eagle* scream. Get into an argument with it about something—anything. Tell Lazette that as a town it’s forty miles

behind Dry Bottom. That will stir up public spirit and boom our subscription list. You see, Potter, civic pride is a big asset to a newspaper. We'll start a row right off the reel. Furthermore, we're going to have some telegraph news. I'll make arrangements for that to-day."

Hollis's enthusiasm was infectious; a flash of spirit lighted up Potter's eyes as he rose from his chair. "I'm going to set up the head for the first page," he said. "Probably you'll want a slogan; that sort of thing is the style out here."

"We'll have one," returned Hollis briskly. "Set this in triple leads: '*We Herald the Coming of the Law! The Kicker is Here to Stay!*'"

"Good!" declared Potter. He went into the composing room and Hollis saw his fine old head bent over a type case. Hollis turned to his desk.

He sat there long, his tall, lithe body slack, grim, serious lines in his lean face. He had thought of his conversation with Judge Graney concerning ambition—his ambition, the picture upon which his mind had dwelt many times. A little frame printing office in the West was not one of its features. He sighed with resignation and began methodically to look over the papers in the desk, finding many things to interest him. He discovered that in spite of his father's one great fault he had been a methodical man. He smiled regretfully, wishing that he might have been able to have seen more of him. Among the papers he hoped to find a personal note—a word—from his father. He found nothing of that character.

After a time he took up a pen and began to write. Long ago he had decided that in the first issue of the paper he would attack the Cattlemen's Association. Judge Graney had ridden out to the Circle Bar on the previous Saturday afternoon, remaining over Sunday, and accompanying Hollis on the return trip Monday morning.

While at the ranch the Judge had spent much of his time in communicating to Hollis his views of the situation in Union County and in acquainting him with the elder Hollis's intentions regarding the newspaper. Hollis had made some inquiries on his own account, with the result that when he reached the *Kicker* office this morning he felt that he had acquired a good and sufficient knowledge of the situation.

Looking over the old copy of the *Kicker* he studied some of the advertisements. Evidently some Dry Bottom merchants had been brave enough to antagonize Dunlavey by advertising in the *Kicker*. With this copy of the *Kicker* in hand Hollis rose from his desk, told Potter he was going out, and proceeded to visit some of the merchants whose advertisements appeared in the paper, hoping that

their bravery still abided with them. He made a good solicitor. Some of the merchants flatly refused, saying they did not care to risk Dunlavey's anger. Others demurred, confidentially announcing that they had never considered the paper seriously and that there was really no good in advertising in Dry Bottom anyway—the town wasn't big enough. Half a dozen listened quietly while he told them that the *Kicker* was in Dry Bottom to stay and then smiled and told him to run their advertisements. They rather admired his "nerve" and were not afraid of Dunlavey.

At noon Hollis stepped into a restaurant called the Alhambra. While he ate he was critically inspected; the Alhambra swarmed with customers, and the proprietor quietly informed him that he was a "drawin' card" and hoped he'd "grub" there regularly. In return for his promise to do so Hollis secured his advertisement.

Leaving the Alhambra he returned to the *Kicker* office, seating himself again at his desk. The sun came slantwise through the window full upon him; the heat was oppressive; the flint-like alkali dust sifted through the crevices in the building and settled over everything in the room; myriad flies droned in the white sunlight before the open door. He heard nothing, felt nothing, saw nothing—for his thoughts were miles away, in an upper story of a big office building in the East from whose windows he even now looked down upon a bustling city.

Life would be so different here. He heard a sound behind him and turned. Dunlavey was standing just inside the door, his great arms folded over his chest. He had been watching Hollis, his eyes narrowed with a cynically humorous expression.

Hollis knew that by this time Dunlavey must have discovered his identity. He swung slowly around in his chair, his face wearing an expression of whimsical amusement as he greeted his victim of a few days previous.

"Welcome to the *Kicker* office," he said quietly.

Dunlavey did not move. Evidently he had expected another sort of greeting and was slightly puzzled over Hollis's manner. He remained motionless and Hollis had an opportunity to study him carefully and thoroughly. His conclusions were brief and comprehensive. They were expressed tersely to himself as he waited for Dunlavey to speak: "A trickster and a cheat—dangerous."

Dunlavey's eyes flashed metallically for an instant, but immediately the humorous cynicism came into them again. "I don't think you mean all of that,"

he said evenly.

Hollis laughed. "I am not in the habit of saying things that I do not mean," he said quietly. "I am here to do business and I am ready to talk to anybody who wants to do business with me."

Dunlavey's hands fell to his sides and were shoved into his capacious trousers' pockets. "Right," he said tersely: "that's what I'm here for—to talk business."

He pulled a chair over close to Hollis and seated himself in it, moving deliberately, a certain grim reserve in his manner. Hollis watched him, marveling at his self-control. He reflected that it required will power of a rare sort to repress or conceal the rage which he surely must feel over his humiliation of two weeks before. That Dunlavey was able to so mask his feelings convinced Hollis that he had to deal with a man of extraordinary character.

"I recollect meeting you the other day," said Dunlavey after he had become seated. He smiled with his lips, his eyes glittering again. "I'll say that we got acquainted then. There ain't no need for us to shake hands now." He showed his teeth in a mirthless grin. "I didn't know you then, but I know you now. You're Jim Hollis's boy."

Hollis nodded. Dunlavey continued evenly: "Your father and me wasn't what you might call bosom friends. I reckon Judge Graney has told you that—if he ain't you've heard it from some one else. It don't make any difference. So there won't be any misunderstanding I'll tell you that I ain't figgering on you and me hitching up to the mutual friendship wagon either. I might say that we wasn't introduced right." He grinned evilly. "But I ain't letting what happened interfere with the business that's brought me here to-day. I've heard that you're intending to start the *Kicker* again; that you're figgering on staying here and running the Circle Bar. What I'm here for is to buy you out. I'm offering you fifteen thousand dollars for the Circle Bar and this damn newspaper."

Dunlavey had lost a little of the composure which had characterized his actions since entering the office and the last words of his speech had writhed venomously through his lips.

Hollis's face betrayed absolutely no emotion. Though Dunlavey's visit to the *Kicker* office had surprised him he was not surprised at his offer for the ranch and the newspaper, for according to Judge Graney he had made some such offer to the elder Hollis. Coming now, with an addition of five thousand dollars, Dunlavey's offer seemed to advertise his reluctance to continue the war that he had waged. Hollis appreciated the situation. If Dunlavey were to buy him off

now there would come an end to the warfare that had already been an expensive one for the interests represented by Dunlavey. Likewise, the acceptance of the offer would give Hollis an opportunity to withdraw gracefully. Dunlavey had placed the issue squarely before him. The young man held his future in his hands and he did not reply at once.

He sat silent for a few moments, studying the coarse, brutal face of the man seated before him, noting that his under jaw had come forward slightly, and that the cold, hard glitter had come again in his eyes. However, Hollis's silence meant nothing beyond the fact that he was going slowly over the history of the fight between his father and the man who sat there representing the interests which had begun the war. He had no thought of surrendering—that would be dishonorable. He was merely revolving the situation in his mind, considering how best to word his refusal. He did not want to appear belligerent; he did not want to precipitate war. But he did want Dunlavey to know that he purposed to have his rights; he wanted Dunlavey to know that he could not be frightened into surrendering them. He clasped one hand over his knee and leaned back in his chair, his gaze meeting Dunlavey's steadily.

“Dunlavey,” he said quietly, “what is the actual value of the Circle Bar ranch?”

Dunlavey smiled blandly. “You couldn't find any man around these parts to take it at any price,” he returned.

“Why?” questioned Hollis.

Dunlavey grinned mysteriously. “I reckon you know why,” he returned; “you're pretty much of a tenderfoot, but I reckon Judge Graney has put you wise to the situation. There ain't nobody wants to buy the Circle Bar except me.”

“Why?” persisted Hollis.

“I reckon you know that too,” laughed Dunlavey. “It ain't no secret. The Cattlemen's Association is running things in this here county and it ain't wanting anyone to buy the Circle Bar except me. And nobody is fool enough to antagonize the Association. That's the why, if you want to know real bad.”

“You are frank about it at any rate,” conceded Hollis smiling slightly. “But that doesn't get us anywhere. What I am trying to get at is this: what would the Circle Bar bring in cash if the Cattlemen's Association ceased to be a factor in the county?” Dunlavey grinned broadly. “For a tenderfoot you're real amusing,” he derided. “There ain't nobody out here crazy enough to think that the Cattlemen's Association will ever be put out of business!”

Hollis's lips curled a little, but his gaze was still steady.

"That's evasion, Dunlavey," he said quietly. "You will remember that I asked you what the Circle Bar would bring 'if' the Association ceased to be a factor."

Dunlavey favored Hollis with a perplexed grin. "I don't know what difference that makes," he returned. "We're dealing with what's before us now—we ain't considering what might be. But if you want to know my personal opinion it's that the Circle Bar might bring thirty thousand."

"Thanks," said Hollis dryly; "that's getting somewhere. And now we'll be able to talk business. We've got thirty thousand to start with. I am told that when the Association began its war against my father he was rather prosperous. Usually he rounded up about two thousand head of cattle. But we'll call it a thousand. We'll say that they brought about thirty dollars a head, which would make an income of thirty thousand dollars a year, gross. We'll deduct fifty per cent for operating expenses, losses, and so on. That would leave about fifteen thousand. You've been fighting the Circle Bar for several years. We'll call it five. Five times fifteen thousand is seventy-five thousand. That represents the sum which my father would have made from the Circle Bar if you had not fought him. Add to that the thirty thousand which you admit would be a fair figure for the ranch if the Association were eliminated as a factor, and we have a total of one hundred and five thousand dollars." He smiled and leaned a little farther back in his chair, narrowing his eyes at Dunlavey. "Now we have reached a point where we can get somewhere. I'll take one hundred thousand dollars for the Circle Bar."

The calm announcement had no effect upon Dunlavey except to cause him to grin derisively.

"For a tenderfoot you're pretty slick," he allowed, his teeth showing. "You've figgered it out so that it sounds right reasonable. But you've forgot one thing. The Cattlemen's Association ain't eliminated. It says that the Circle Bar is worth fifteen thousand. You'll take that or—" He smiled grimly, holding back the threat.

"I think I know what you mean," said Hollis quietly, without changing color. "You mean that the Cattlemen's Association will continue its fight and eventually ruin the Circle Bar. Perhaps it will—no man can tell what lies in the future. But I can tell you this: you can't retard progress."

"No?" said Dunlavey with an irritating drawl.

Hollis smiled composedly. He spoke without bitterness. "Dunlavey," he said,

“I’m going to tell you something which you perhaps know but will not admit. Your Association has been successful in pulling the strings which make the politicians at Washington jump to do your bidding. I don’t accuse you of buying them, but in any event they have greased the ways over which your Association has slipped to power. And now you think that the impetus you have gained will carry you along indefinitely. It won’t. Everything in this world runs its natural course and when it does there comes an end.

“If you were endowed with the average foresight you would be able to see that things cannot always go on the way they have. The law must come. It is inevitable. Its coming will be facilitated by such organizations as the Cattlemen’s Association and by such men as you. Back in the East the forces of Good and Bad are battling. The forces of Good will be victorious. The government at Washington is familiar with the conditions that exist here and sooner or later will be compelled to act. When it does the small cattle owner will receive protection.”

“We’re holding tight till the law comes,” sneered Dunlavey; “which won’t be soon.”

“Perhaps not,” admitted Hollis dryly; “good things come slowly. Meanwhile, if you don’t care to accept my figure for the Circle Bar I shall follow your example and hold tight until the law comes.”

“Meaning that you won’t sell, I suppose?” sneered Dunlavey.

“Meaning just that,” returned Hollis quietly. “I am going to fight you. I have offered the Circle Bar at a fair figure and you have responded with threats. I wouldn’t sell to you now if you offered one hundred and fifty thousand. The Circle Bar is not for sale!”

Dunlavey had not moved. He sat quiet, leaning a little forward, his hands resting on his knees, his eyes narrowed to glittering pin-points as he watched Hollis. When the latter had concluded he leaned back, laughing hoarsely.

“What are you going to do with this damn newspaper?” he demanded.

“The newspaper will be used as a weapon against you,” returned Hollis. “It will kick loud and long against such organizations as the Cattlemen’s Association—against such men as you. Ostensibly the *Kicker* will be a Dry Bottom newspaper, but it will appear in every city in the East; the matter that appears in it will be reprinted in Chicago, in Washington, in New York—in fact in every city in which I have a friend engaged in the newspaper business—and I have a number. I am

going to stir up sentiment against you. I am going to be the Law's advance agent!"

Dunlavey rose, his lips curling with contempt. "You make me sick!" he sneered. He turned his back and walked to the door, returning and standing in front of Hollis, ominously cool and deliberate. "So that's the how of it?" he said evenly. "You've come out here looking for fight. Well, you'll get it—plenty of it. I owe you something—"

"Wait, Dunlavey," Hollis interrupted, without excitement; "I want you to understand that there isn't anything personal in this. I am going to fight you because you are a member of the Cattlemen's Association and not because you were my father's enemy. I am not afraid of you. I suspect that you will try to make things decidedly interesting for me from now on and I suppose I ought to be properly troubled. But I am not. I shall not be surprised at anything you do. I think that is all. Please close the door when you go out."

He turned to the desk, ignoring Dunlavey. Sitting there, his senses alert, he heard the door slam. From beyond it came a curse. Silence again reigned in the office; Hollis was alone with the dust and the heat—and some very original thoughts.

CHAPTER VII

THE “KICKER” BECOMES AN INSTITUTION

It was mid-July—and hot. The sun shone continually; the nights were uncomfortable, stifling. The dust was everywhere and grew deeper and lighter as the days passed. Water grew scarce; cattle suffered, lowing throughout the night, during the day searching the bogs and water holes for drops of moisture. Men looked up at the clear, cloudless sky and prayed—and cursed—for rain. The rain did not come. It was one long, continuous nightmare of heat.

The *Kicker* had appeared four times—on Saturdays—on time. Telegraphic communication with the outside world had been established. Potter had taken up his residence at the Circle Bar. War had been declared between the *Kicker* and the *Lazette Eagle*. Hollis had written an argumentative essay on the virtues of Dry Bottom as a town, dwelling upon its superiority over Lazette. The editor of the *Eagle* had replied with some bitterness, setting forth in detail why Dry Bottom did *not* compare with Lazette. As the editor of the *Eagle* mentioned population and civic spirit in his bill of particulars the war promised to be of long duration—questions of superiority between spirited persons are never settled. And Hollis had succeeded in arousing the spirit of Dry Bottom’s citizens. They began to take some interest in the *Kicker*. Many subscribed; all read it.

From the “local” columns of the paper one might have discovered that many public and private improvements were contemplated. Among these the following items were of the greatest interest:

Steps are being taken by the government toward the erection of a fence around the court house grounds. Judge Graney is contemplating a lawn and flowers. When these improvements are completed there will be no comparison between our court house and the dilapidated hovel which disgraces the county seat of Colfax. The *Lazette Eagle* please notice.

William Dunn, the proprietor of the Alhambra eating house, announces that in the near future he will erect a new sign. Thereafter the Alhambra will be known as the Alhambra Restaurant. This is a step forward. We have been informed that there is no restaurant in Lazette. Good boy, Dunn.

Chet Miller's general merchandise store is to be repainted throughout. Chet is public spirited.

Everybody of any importance in Dry Bottom received weekly mention of some sort in the *Kicker*. Chet Miller was heard to say that the *Kicker* was a "hummer," and no one ascribed his praise of the paper to thanks for the appearance of his name therein, for all who would have criticized were silenced by the appearance of their own names.

In the fourth issue of the paper appeared several new advertisements. Judicious personal mention and lively news locals had aroused public spirit to a point where it ignored thoughts of Dunlavey's displeasure.

Upon the Saturday which had marked the first issue of the *Kicker* under Hollis's ownership he had employed a circulation manager. That afternoon on the street near the *Kicker* office he had almost collided with a red haired youth of uncertain age who had bounded out through the door of a private dwelling. In order to keep from knocking the youth over Hollis was forced to seize him by the arms and literally lift him off his feet. While in the air the youth's face was close to Hollis's and both grinned over the occurrence. When Hollis set the youth down he stood for an instant, looking up into Hollis's face and a grin of amusement overspread his own.

"Shucks!" he said slowly. "If it ain't the tenderfoot editor!"

"That's just who it is," returned Hollis with a smile.

The youth grinned as he looked critically at Hollis. "You gittin' out that there paper to-day, mister?" he questioned.

"Right now," returned Hollis.

"Bully!" exclaimed the youth. He surveyed Hollis with a frank admiration. "They said you wouldn't have the nerve to do it," he said; "but, say! I reckon they ain't got you sized up right!"

Hollis smiled, remembering that though the paper had been printed it was not yet distributed. He placed a hand on the youth's shoulder.

"Have you got nerve enough to pass the *Kicker* around to the people of this town?" he questioned.

"I reckon," grinned the youth. "I was comin' down to ast you for the job when you bumped into me. I used to peddle them for your dad. My name's Jiggs Lenehan—mebbe you've heard of me?"

Hollis smiled. "The question of delivering the *Kicker* was one of the details that I overlooked," he said. "But fortunately it is arranged now. Henceforth, Jiggs, you are the *Kicker*'s official circulation manager. Likewise, if you care to add to your income, you can help Potter around the office."

So it had been arranged, and Jiggs entered upon his duties with an energy that left little doubt in his employer's mind that he would prove a valuable addition to the force.

In Hollis's "Salutatory" to the people of Dry Bottom he had announced in a quiet, unostentatious paragraph that while he had not come to Dry Bottom for a free fight, he would permit no one to tread on his toes. His readers' comprehension of the metaphor was complete—as was evidenced by the warm hand-clasps which he received from citizens who were not in sympathy with the Dunlavey regime. It surprised him to find how many such there were in town. He was convinced that all this element needed was a leader and he grimly determined to step quietly into that position himself.

The second issue of the *Kicker* was marked by a more aggressive spirit—a spirit engendered by the sympathetic reception of the first issue. In it he stated concisely his views of the situation in Union County, telling his readers that the best interests of the community demanded that Dunlavey's evil influence be wiped out. This article was headed: "Dry Bottom's Future," and won him many friends.

The third issue contained stronger language, and the fourth was energetically aggressive. As he had decided before the first appearance of the paper, he took a certain number of copies of each issue, folded them neatly, stamped and addressed them, and mailed them to a number of newspapers throughout the country whose editors he knew. He also directed copies to a number of his friends in the East—to the president of his college, and last, to the Secretary of the Interior at Washington, who had formerly resided near him in Boston, and with whom he had a long acquaintance. There had been a change of administration the fall previous and he was certain that the new administration would not ignore the situation. To the Secretary, and also to a number of his friends, he wrote personal letters, explaining in detail the exact condition of affairs in Union County.

He had not seen Dunlavey since the day the latter had come to the *Kicker* office to negotiate for the purchase of the paper. On several of his rides to and from the Circle Bar ranch he had seen signs of life at the Circle Cross; once or twice he thought he saw someone watching him from a hill on the Circle Cross side of the

Rabbit-Ear, but of this he was not quite certain, for the hill-top was thickly wooded and the distance great.

He had been warned by Norton not to ride too often over the same trail lest Dunlavey send someone to ambush him.

Hollis had laughed at the warning, though thanking Norton for it. He told his range boss that he did not anticipate any immediate trouble with Dunlavey.

“It all depends on how Big Bill feels,” returned Norton with a grim smile. “If you’ve got him mad there’s no telling. And there are plenty of places between here and Dry Bottom where a man might be shot from ambush. And nobody’d ever know who done it. I wouldn’t ride the Dry Bottom trail every day. There’s the old Coyote trail, that takes you past the Razor-Back and through Devil’s Hollow to Little Canyon an’ along the hills to the other side.”

He laughed. “There’s only one thing you need to be afraid of if you take the Coyote trail, an’ that’s Ed Hazelton. Ed gets spells when he’s plum crazy. He’s Nellie Hazelton’s brother—her that Dunlavey was pesterin’ when you slammed him.” He laughed again, significantly. “Though if Ed knowed you was the man who took his sister’s part you wouldn’t need to be much scared of him—I’ve heard that he’s got a pretty good memory for his friends—even when he’s off.”

Hollis had not told Norton of his experience in Devil’s Hollow, nor did he tell him now. But he followed his advice about taking the Coyote trail, and the following day when he made the trip to Dry Bottom he returned that way. About half way between Dry Bottom and the Circle Bar he came upon a little adobe cabin snuggling an arroyo through which trickled a small stream of water.

It was an ideal location for a small rancher, and Hollis observed that the buildings were in order—evidently Nellie Hazelton and her brother were provident. He saw some cattle grazing on the edge of a small grass plateau which began at the slope of the arroyo through which the stream of water ran. A shout reached his ears as he sat motionless in the saddle looking about him, and he saw Ed Hazelton on the plateau among the cattle, waving a hand to him. The young man began to descend the side of the plateau, but before he had fairly started Nellie Hazelton had come out of the front door of the cabin and stood on the edge of the small porch, smiling at him.

“So you did come, after all?” was her greeting.

Hollis spurred his pony closer and sat smiling down at her. “I don’t think anything could have stopped me after your invitation,” he returned quickly.

“Oh!” she said. The sudden color that came into her face told of her confusion. It betrayed the fact that she knew he had come because of her. Her brother’s invitation in Devil’s Hollow had been merely formal; there had been another sort of invitation in her eyes as she and her brother had left him that day.

“Won’t you get off your horse?” she said while he still sat motionless. “It’s quite a while before sundown and you have plenty of time to reach the Circle Bar before dark.”

He had determined to discover something of the mystery that surrounded her and her brother, and so he was off his pony quickly and seating himself in a chair that she drew out of the cabin for him. By the time her brother had reached the porch Hollis was stretched comfortably out in the chair and was answering several timid questions concerning his opinion of the country and his new responsibilities.

She was glad he liked the country, she said. It was wonderful. In the five years they had been here they had enjoyed it thoroughly—that was, of course, barring the trouble they had had with Dunlavey.

Of their trouble with Dunlavey Hollis would hear much later, he told himself. At present he was more interested in discovering something about her and her brother, though he did not wish to appear inquisitive. Therefore his voice was politely casual.

“Then you are not a Westerner?” he said.

She smiled mournfully. “No,” she returned; “we—Ed and I—were raised in Illinois, near Springfield. We came out here five years ago after—after mother died.” Her voice caught. “Sometimes it seems terribly lonesome out here,” she added; “when I get to thinking of—of our other home. But”—she smiled bravely through the sudden moisture that had come into her eyes—“since Ed got hurt I don’t have much time to think of myself. Poor fellow.”

Hollis was silent. He had never had a sister but he could imagine how she must feel over the misfortune that had come to her brother. It must be a sacrifice for her to remain in this country, to care for a brother who must be a great burden to her at times, to fight the solitude, the hardships, to bear with patience the many inconveniences which are inevitable in a new, unsettled country. He felt a new admiration for her and a profound sympathy.

“I think that you must be a very brave young woman,” he said earnestly.

“Oh!” she returned with a sudden, illuminating smile. “It isn’t hard to be brave.

But at times I find it hard to be patient.”

“Patience is one of the cardinal virtues,” declared Hollis, “but it takes bravery of a rare sort to remain in this country, surrounded with the care—”

Her fingers were suddenly over her lips warningly, and he saw Ed Hazelton nearing the porch.

“I wouldn’t have him know for the world,” she said rapidly. “It isn’t a care to look after someone you love.”

Hollis smiled grimly at the reproach in her voice and rose to greet her brother.

The latter seemed to be quite recovered from the attack he had suffered in Devil’s Hollow and talked freely and intelligently of affairs in the country. Hollis found that on the whole he was a well informed young man—quiet, modest, and apparently well able to give a good account of himself in spite of his affliction. He was bitter against Dunlavey and thanked Hollis warmly for his defense of his sister.

At sundown Hollis departed, telling the Hazeltons that since he was their neighbor he would not neglect to see them occasionally. As he rode away into the dusk Nellie Hazelton stood on the porch smilingly waving her hand at him. As he threaded his way through the rapidly growing darkness he felt an unaccountable satisfaction over the fact that he had elected to remain in Union County; that henceforth his fortunes were to be linked with those of a brave young woman who had also accepted the robes of sacrifice and who was committed to war against their common enemy—Dunlavey. Curiously, during the past few days he had felt a decided change in his attitude toward life. His old ambition was no longer uppermost in his mind—it had been crowded out of his existence. In its place had been erected a new pinnacle of promise. A seat among the mighty was a worthy goal. Yet the lowly bench of sacrifice was not without its compensations.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCERNING THE “SIX-O’CLOCK”

On Friday evening previous to the Saturday on which the *Kicker* was to be issued for the fifth consecutive time by Hollis, Potter did not ride out to the Circle Bar. There still remained some type to be set and Potter had declared his intention of completing the work and staying overnight in town. Hollis had acquiesced and had departed for the Circle Bar alone.

When he reached Dry Bottom the following morning he found a small crowd of people in front of the *Kicker* office. During the night someone had posted a written notice on the front door, and when Hollis dismounted from his pony there were perhaps a dozen interested citizens grouped about the door, reading the notice. There were several of the town’s merchants and a number of cowboys—new arrivals and those who had remained overnight to gamble and participate in the festivities that were all-night features of the dives. There were also the usual loafers, who constitute an element never absent in any group of idlers in any street. All, however, gave way before Hollis and allowed him to reach the door without molestation, though in passing he observed significant grins on several faces.

The notice was written in a bold, legible hand.

“Mr. Hollis:”—it read, the prefix under-scored—“The express leaves town this afternoon at six o’clock—goin’ east. Better be on it.”

Signed—“Y. Z.”

Hollis read the notice and then turned and quietly surveyed his watchful, interested audience. He smiled grimly, seeing several faces which, though plainly expressing amusement, seemed quietly sympathetic. He felt that these were wishing him success, though doubting his ability to cope with his enemies. Other faces were plainly antagonistic in expression. He looked at both for an instant and then turned again to the notice and producing a pencil printed boldly on its face the slogan he had devised:

“We Herald the Coming of the Law! The Kicker is Here to Stay!”

And below he indulged in this sarcasm: *“Don’t hold the express on my*

account!”

Signed—“KENT HOLLIS”

Leaving his audience to stare after him Hollis pushed open the door of the office and entered.

He found Potter bending over the imposing table, hard at work on one of the forms. Three other forms, locked and ready for the press, stood in a corner. Potter looked up and smiled as his chief entered.

“See the notice on the door?” he inquired.

“Some of Dunlavey’s work, I suppose,” returned Hollis.

“Well, yes. I suppose Dunlavey is back of it. But Yuma tacked the sign up.” He smiled soberly as Hollis flashed a grin at him. “They tried hard last night to get me to drink. Of course their purpose was to get me drunk so that I wouldn’t be able to get the paper out today. I am not going to tell you how hard I had to fight myself to resist the temptation to drink. But you can see for yourself that I succeeded. The *Kicker* will be ready to go to press in an hour.”

He felt Hollis’s hand patting his shoulder approvingly and he continued, a little hoarsely. “I took one drink at the Fashion last night after I got through here. Then I came back and went to sleep. I am a light sleeper and when some time after midnight I heard a sound at the door I got up and peered out of the window. I saw Yuma tacking up the notice. I suppose Dunlavey wrote it.” He looked at Hollis with a whimsical expression. “I suppose you are going to take the express?” he inquired.

“Tried to get you drunk, did they?” shaking his head negatively to Potter’s question, a smile on his face. “I can’t understand that game,” he continued, soberly. “Of course getting you drunk would have prevented the appearance of the paper on scheduled time. But if they wanted to do serious damage—of course I mean to the paper,” he apologized with a grim smile, “why didn’t they come down here—some of them—during your absence, and smash things up? That would have made the thing sure for them.”

Potter laughed mirthlessly. “Of course they could have done that,” he said; “it would have been easy—will be easy any time. But it wouldn’t be artistic, would be coarse in fact. Dunlavey doesn’t do things that way. If they smash your stuff, destroy your plant here, ruin your type and press, and so forth, they invite sympathy in your behalf. But if they prevent the appearance of your paper without having done any damage to your plant they accomplish something—they

expose you to ridicule. And in this country ridicule is a potent weapon—even if it involves nothing more serious than a drunken printer.”

Hollis shook Potter’s hand in silence. He had expected violence from Dunlavey; long before this he had expected him to show his hand, to attempt some covert and damaging action. And he had been prepared to fight to get the *Kicker* out. He had not expected subtlety from Dunlavey.

He went to his desk and sat in the chair, looking out through the window at the crowd that still lingered in front of the office. Most of the faces wore grins. Plainly they were amused, but Hollis saw that the amusement was of a grim sort. They appreciated the situation and enjoyed its humor but felt the tragedy behind it. Probably most of them were acquainted with Dunlavey’s methods; some of them probably knew of the attempt that had been made to incapacitate Potter. Certainly those of them that did know had seen the failure of the attempt and were now speculating upon Dunlavey’s next move. Looking out of the window Hollis felt that some of his audience must be wondering whether the editor of the *Kicker* would pay any attention to the notice on the door. Would he scare?

Hollis had already decided that he would not “scare.” He grinned at several of the men who watched him and then turned and instructed Potter to take down a column of type on the first page of the paper to make room for an article that he intended to write. Then he seized a pen and wrote a red hot defiance directed at the authors of the notice, which Potter set up under the heading:

“Why the Editor of the *Kicker* Won’t Take the Express.”

In clear, terse language he told his audience his reasons. This was America; he was an American, and he didn’t purpose to allow the Cattlemen’s Association—or any other association, gang, or individual—to dictate the policy of his paper or influence his private actions. Least of all did he purpose to allow anyone to “run him out of town.” He printed the notice entire, adding his answer, assuring readers that he was sending copies of the *Kicker* to every newspaper in the East and that notices such as had been affixed to his door would react against the authors. He ended with the prophecy that the law would come into Union County and that meanwhile the *Kicker* purposed to fight.

At noon Hollis took the usual number of copies to the station and mailed them. Walking down the street on his return from the station he attracted much attention. Men stood in the open doorways of saloons watching him, a number openly jeered; others sent subtle jibes after him. Still others were silent, their faces expressing amusement.

But he looked at none of them. He swung along the board walk, his face a little pale, his lips tightly closed, determined to pay no attention to the jeers that reached his ears.

When he passed the Fashion there were a number of men draped along its front; and he was conscious of many grins. Passing the men he heard low laughter and profane reference which caused his cheeks to redden. But he walked steadily on. Near the *Kicker* office he met Jiggs Lenehan. Followed by the youth he reached the office to find that Potter had completed the press work and that several hundred copies of the paper, the ink still moist on its pages, were stacked in orderly array on the imposing stone. In a very brief time Jiggs burst out of the office door, a bundle of papers under his arm, and began the work of distribution. Standing back from the window with Potter, Hollis watched Jiggs until the latter reached the crowd in front of the Fashion saloon. Then all that Hollis could see of him was his red head. But that trade was brisk was proved by the press around Jiggs—the youth was passing out papers at a rapid rate and soon nearly every man in the crowd about the Fashion was engaged in reading, or,—if this important feature of his education had been neglected—in questioning his neighbor concerning the things that appeared in the paper.

Presently Jigg's customers in front of the Fashion were all supplied. Then other purchasers appeared. Soon the *Kicker* was being read by—it seemed—nearly every grown person in Dry Bottom. Business was suspended. Down the street men were congregated about the doors of many of the stores; others were sitting in doorways, still others leaned against buildings; some, not taking time to search for support, read while walking, or stood motionless on the board sidewalks, satisfying their curiosity.

Hollis watched through the window until he began to be certain that every person in town was supplied with a paper. Then with a grim smile he left the window and sought his chair beside the desk. He was satisfied. Dunlavey had made the first aggressive movement and the fight was on.

CHAPTER IX

HOW A BAD MAN LEFT THE “KICKER” OFFICE

It was about one o'clock in the afternoon when the *Kicker* appeared on Dry Bottom's street. At about five minutes after one, Potter left the front of the office and walked to the rear room where he halted at the imposing stone. There he proceeded to “take down” the four forms. This done he calmly began distributing type.

While Potter worked Hollis sat very quietly at his desk in the front office, his arms folded, one hand supporting his chin, his lips forming straight lines, his eyes narrowed with a meditative expression. Occasionally Potter glanced furtively at him, his eyes filled with mingled expressions of sympathy, admiration, and concern.

Potter appreciated his chief's position. It meant something for a man of Hollis's years and training to bury himself in this desolate sink-hole of iniquity; to elect to carry on an unequal war with interests that controlled the law machinery of the county and Territory—whose power extended to Washington. No doubt the young man was even now brooding over the future, planning his fight, pessimistically considering his chances of success. Potter's sympathy grew. He thought of approaching his chief with a word of encouragement. But while he hesitated, mentally debating the propriety of such an action, Hollis turned quickly and looked fairly at him, his forehead perplexed.

“Potter,” he remarked, “I suppose there isn't a good brain specialist in this section of the country?”

“Why—why—” began Potter. Then he stopped and looked at his chief in wordless astonishment. His sympathy had been wasted.

“No,” laughed Hollis, divining the cause of the compositor's astonishment, “personally I have no use for a brain specialist. I was thinking of some other person.”

“Not me?” grinned Potter from behind his type case. He flushed a little at the thought of how near he had come to offering encouragement to a man who had not been in need of it, who, evidently, had not been thinking of the big fight at

all. "Perhaps I need one," he added, eyeing Hollis whimsically; "a moment ago I thought you were in the dumps on account of the situation here—you seemed rather disturbed. It surprised me considerably to find that you had not been thinking of Dunlavey at all."

"No," admitted Hollis gravely, "I was not thinking of Dunlavey. I was wondering if something couldn't be done for Ed Hazelton."

"Something ought to be done for him," declared Potter earnestly. "I have watched that young man closely and I am convinced that with proper care and treatment he would recover fully. But I never heard of a specialist in this section—none, in fact, nearer than Chicago. And I've forgotten his name."

"It is Hammond," supplied Hollis. "I've been thinking of him. I knew his son in college. I am going to write to him."

He turned to his desk and took up a pen, while Potter resumed his work of distributing type.

About half an hour later Jiggs Lenehan strolled into the office wearing a huge grin on his face. "Pears like everybody in town wants to read the *Kicker* today," he said with a joyous cackle. "Never had so much fun sellin' them. Gimme some more," he added breathlessly; "they's a gang down to the station howlin' for them. Say," he yelled at Hollis as he went out of the door with a big bundle of *Kickers* under his arm, "you're cert'nly some editor man!" He grinned admiringly and widely as he disappeared.

Hollis finished his letter to Hammond and then leaned back in his chair. For half an hour he sat there, looking gravely out into the street and then, answering a sudden impulse, he rose and strode to the door.

"Going down to the court house," he informed Potter.

He found Judge Graney in his room, seated at the big table, a copy of the *Kicker* spread out in front of him. At his appearance the Judge pushed back his chair and regarded him with an approving smile.

"Well, Hollis," he said, "I see Dunlavey has played the first card."

"He hasn't taken the first trick," was the young man's quick reply.

"Fortunately not," laughed the judge. He placed a finger on a column in the *Kicker*. "This article about the Cattlemen's Association is a hummer—if I may be allowed the phrase. A straight, manly citation of the facts. It ought to win friends for you."

“I’ve merely stated the truth,” returned Hollis, “and if the article seems good it is merely because it defends a principle whose virtue is perfectly obvious.”

“But only a man who felt strongly could have written it,” suggested the Judge.

“Perhaps. I admit feeling a deep interest in the question of cattle.”

“Your ambition?” slyly insinuated the Judge.

“Is temporarily in abeyance—perhaps permanently.”

“Then your original decision about remaining here has been—well, strengthened?”

Hollis nodded. The Judge grinned mysteriously. “There is an article on the first page of the *Kicker* which interested me greatly,” he said. “It concerns the six o’clock train—going east. Do you happen to know whether the editor of the *Kicker* is going to use the express?”

Hollis smiled appreciatively. “The editor of the *Kicker* is going to use the express,” he admitted, “though not in the manner some people are wishing. The usual number of copies of the *Kicker* are going to ride on the express, as are also some very forceful letters to the President of the United States and the Secretary of the Interior.”

“Good!” said the Judge. He looked critically at Hollis. “I know that you are going to remain in Dry Bottom,” he said slowly; “I have never doubted your courage. But I want to warn you to be careful. Don’t make the mistake of thinking that the notice which you found on the door of the *Kicker* office this morning is a joke. They don’t joke like that out here. Of course I know that you are not afraid and that you won’t run. But be careful—there are men out here who would snuff out a human life as quickly as they would the flame of a candle, and with as little fear of the consequences. I shouldn’t like to hear of you using your revolver, but if you do have occasion to use it, use it fast and make a good job of it.”

“I don’t like to use a gun,” returned Hollis gravely, “but all the same I shall bear your advice in mind.” An expression of slight disgust swept over his face. “I don’t see why men out here don’t exhibit a little more courage,” he said. “They all ‘pack’ a gun, as Norton says, and all are apparently yearning to use one. I don’t see what satisfaction there could be in shooting a man with whom you have had trouble; it strikes me as being a trifle cowardly.” He laughed grimly. “For my part,” he added, “I can get more satisfaction out of slugging a man. Perhaps it isn’t so artistic as shooting, but you have the satisfaction of knowing

that your antagonist realizes and appreciates his punishment.”

Judge Graney’s gaze rested on the muscular frame of the young man. “I suppose if all men were built like you there would be less shooting done. But unfortunately nature has seen fit to use different molds in making her men. Not every man has the strength or science to use his fists, nor the courage. But there is one thing that you will do well to remember. When you slug a man who carries a gun you only beat him temporarily; usually he will wait his chance and use his gun when you least expect him.”

“I suppose you refer to Yuma Ed and Dunlavey?” suggested Hollis.

“Well, no, not Dunlavey. I have never heard of Dunlavey shooting anybody; he plays a finer game. But Yuma Ed, Greasy, Ten Spot, and some more who belong to the Dunlavey crowd are professional gun-men and do not hesitate to shoot. The chances are that Dunlavey will try to square accounts with you in some other manner, but I would be careful of Yuma—a blow in the face never sets well on a man of that character.”

An hour later, when Hollis sat at his desk in the *Kicker* office, Judge Graney’s words were recalled to him. He was thinking of his conversation with the Judge when Jiggs Lenehan burst into the office, breathless, his face pale and his eyes swimming with news. He was trembling With excitement.

“Ten Spot is comin’ down here to put you out of business!” he blurted out when he could get his breath. “I was in the Fashion an’ I heard him an’ Yuma talkin’ about you. Ten Spot is comin’ here at six o’clock!”

Hollis turned slowly in his chair and faced the boy. His cheeks whitened a little. Judge Graney had been right. Hollis had rather expected at some time or other he would have to have it out with Yuma, but he had expected he would have to deal with Yuma himself. He smiled a little grimly. It made very little difference whether he fought Yuma or some other man; when he had elected to remain in Dry Bottom he had realized that he must fight somebody—everybody in the Dunlavey crew. He looked at his watch and saw that the hands pointed to four. Therefore he had two hours to prepare for Ten Spot’s coming. He smiled at the boy, looked back into the composing room and saw that Potter had ceased his labors and was leaning on a type case, watching him soberly. He grinned broadly at Potter and turned to Jiggs.

“How many *Kickers* did you sell?”

“Two hundred an’ ten,” returned the latter; “everybody bought them.” He took a

step forward; his hands clenching with the excitement that still possessed him. "I told you Ten Spot was comin' down here to kill you!" he said hoarsely and insistently. "Didn't you hear me?"

"I heard you," smiled Hollis, "and I understand perfectly. But I don't think we need to get excited over it. Just how much money did you receive for the two hundred and ten papers?"

"Six dollars an' two bits," responded the boy, regarding Hollis wonderingly.

"It is yours," Hollis informed him; "there was to be no charge for the *Kicker* today."

The boy grinned with pleasure. "Don't you want none of it?" he inquired.

"It is yours," repeated Hollis. He reached out and grasped the boy by the arm, drawing him close. "Now tell me what you heard at the Fashion," he said.

Rapidly, but with rather less excitement in his manner than he had exhibited on his entrance, the boy related in detail the conversation he had overheard at the Fashion. When he had finished Hollis patted him approvingly on the back.

"The official circulation manager of the *Kicker* has made good," he said with a smile. "Now go home and take a good rest and be ready to deliver the *Kicker* next Saturday."

The boy backed away and stood looking at Hollis in surprise. "Why!" he said in an awed voice, "you ain't none scared a-tall!"

"I certainly am scared," laughed Hollis; "scared that Ten Spot will change his mind before six o'clock. Do you think he will?"

"No!" emphatically declared the boy. "I don't reckon that Ten Spot will change his mind a-tall. He'll sure come down here to shoot you!"

"That relieves me," returned Hollis dryly. "Now you go home. But," he warned, "don't tell anyone that I am scared."

For an instant the boy looked at Hollis critically, searching his face with all a boy's unerring judgment for signs which would tell of insincerity. Seeing none, he deliberately stretched a hand out to Hollis, his lips wreathing into an approving grin.

"Durned if you ain't the stuff!" he declared. "I'm just bettin' that Ten Spot ain't scarin' you none!" Then he backed out of the door and still grinning, disappeared.

After Jiggs had gone Hollis turned and smiled at Potter. "I suppose you know this man Ten Spot," he said. "Will he come?"

"He will come," returned Potter. His face was pale and his lips quivered a little as he continued: "Ten Spot is the worst of Dunlavey's set," he said; "a dangerous, reckless taker of human life. He is quick on the trigger and a dead shot. He is called Ten Spot because of the fact that once, with a gun in each hand, he shot all the spots from a ten of hearts at ten paces."

Hollis sat silent, thoughtfully stroking his chin. Potter smiled admiringly.

"I know that you don't like to run," he said; "you aren't that kind. But you haven't a chance with Ten Spot—unfortunately you haven't had much experience with a six-shooter." Potter's hands shook as he tried to resume work at the type case. "I didn't think they would have nerve enough for that game," he added, advancing again toward Hollis. "I rather thought they would try some other plan—something not quite so raw. But it seems they have nerve enough for anything. Hollis" he concluded dejectedly, "you've got to get out of town before six o'clock or Ten Spot will kill you!

"You've got plenty of time," he resumed as Hollis kept silent; "it's only a little after four. You can get on your horse and be almost at the Circle Bar at six. No one can blame you for not staying—everybody knows that you can't handle a gun fast enough to match Ten Spot. Maybe if you do light out and don't show up in town for a week or so this thing will blow over."

"Thank you very much for that advice, Potter," said Hollis slowly. "I appreciate the fact that you are thinking of my safety. But of course there is another side to the situation. You of course realize that if I run now I am through here—no one would ever take me seriously after it had been discovered that I had been run out of town by Ten Spot."

"That's a fact," admitted Potter. "But of course—"

"I think that is settled," interrupted Hollis. "You can't change the situation by argument. I've got to face it and face it alone. I've got to stay here until Ten Spot comes. If I can't beat him at his game he wins and you can telegraph East to my people." He rose and walked to the window, his back to the printer.

"You can knock off for to-day, Potter. Jump right on your pony and get out to Circle Bar. I wouldn't say anything to Norton or anyone until after nine to-night and then if I don't show up at the ranch you will know that Ten Spot has got me."

He stood at the window while Potter slowly drew off his apron, carefully folded it and tucked it into a corner. He moved very deliberately, as though reluctant to leave his chief. Had Hollis shown the slightest sign of weakening Potter would have stayed. But watching closely he saw no sign of weakness in the impassive face of his chief, and so, after he had made his preparations for departure, he drew a deep breath of resignation and walked slowly to the back door, where his pony was hitched. He halted at the threshold, looking back at his chief.

“Well, good-bye then,” he said.

Hollis did not turn. “Good-bye,” he answered.

Potter took one step outward, hesitated, and then again faced the front of the office.

“Damn it, Hollis,” he said hoarsely, “don’t wait for Ten Spot to start anything; when you see him coming in the door bore him. You’ve got a right to; that’s the law in this country. When a man gives you notice to leave town you’ve got a right to shoot him on sight!”

For a moment he stood, awaiting an answer. None came. Potter sighed and stepped out through the door, leaving his chief alone.

At one minute to six Hollis pulled out his watch. He sighed, replaced the time-piece, and leaned back in his chair. A glance out through the window showed him that the street was deserted except for here and there a cow pony drooping over one of the hitching rails and a wagon or two standing in front of a store. The sun was coming slantwise over the roofs; Hollis saw that the strip of shade in front of the *Kicker* building had grown to wide proportions. He looked at his watch again. It was one minute after six—and still there were no signs of Ten Spot.

A derisive grin appeared on Hollis’s face. Perhaps Ten Spot had reconsidered. He decided that he would wait until ten minutes after six; that would give Ten Spot a decent margin of time for delay.

And then there was a sudden movement and a man stood just inside the office door, a heavy revolver in his right hand, its muzzle menacing Hollis. The man was tall and angular, apparently about thirty years old, with thin, cruel lips and insolent, shifty eyes.

“Nds up!” he said sharply, swinging the revolver to a threatening poise. “It’s six o’clock, you tenderfoot — — — —!”

This was the vile epithet that had been applied to Hollis by Yuma Ed, which had been the direct cause of Yuma's downfall the day of Hollis's arrival in Dry Bottom. Hollis's eyes flashed, but the man was several feet from him and out of reach of his fists. Had Hollis been standing he would have had no chance to reach the man before the latter could have made use of his weapon. Therefore Hollis remained motionless in his chair, catching the man's gaze and holding it steadily with unwavering, narrowed eyes.

Though he had waited for the coming of Ten Spot, he had formulated no plan of action; he had felt that somehow he would come out of the clash with him without injury. He still thought so. In spite of his danger he felt that some chance of escape would be offered him. Grimly confident of this he smiled at the man, though still holding his gaze, determined, if he saw the faintest flicker of decision in his eyes, to duck and tackle him regardless of consequences.

"I suppose you are Ten Spot?" he said slowly. He was surprised at the steadiness of his voice.

The man grinned, his eyes alert, shifty, filled with a chilling menace. "You've got her right, tenderfoot," he said; "'Ten Spot's' m' handle, an' if you're a-feelin' like criticizin' of her do her some rapid before I starts dealin' out the lead which is in my pritty."

Just how one man could be so entirely remorseless as to shoot another when that other man was looking straight into his eyes Hollis could not understand. He could readily realize how a man could kill when provoked to anger, or when brooding over an injury. But he had done nothing to Ten Spot—did not even know him—had never seen him before, and how Ten Spot could deliberately shoot him—without provocation—was incomprehensible. He was convinced that in order to shoot, Ten Spot must work himself into an artificial rage, and he believed that the vile epithet which Ten Spot had applied to him immediately upon his entrance must be part of his scheme. He was convinced that had he shown the slightest resentment over the application of the epithet Ten Spot would have shot him down at once. Therefore he resolved to give the man no opportunity to work himself into a rage. He smiled again as Ten Spot concluded and carelessly twisted himself about in his chair until he was in a position to make a quick spring.

"'Ten Spot' is a picturesque name," he remarked quietly, not removing his gaze from Ten Spot's eyes for the slightest fraction of a second; "I have no criticism to make. I have always made it a point to refrain from criticizing my visitors. At least I do not recollect ever having criticized a visitor who carried a gun," he

concluded with a smile.

Ten Spot's lips curled sarcastically. Apparently he would not swerve in his determination to provoke trouble.

"Hell," he said truculently, "that there palaver makes me sick. I reckon you're too damn white livered to criticize a man that's lookin' at you. There ain't no tenderfoot (here he applied the unprintable epithet again) got nerve enough to criticize nothin'!"

Hollis slowly raised his hands and placed them on the arms of his chair, apparently to steady himself, but in reality to be ready to project himself out of the chair in case he could discern any indication of action on Ten Spot's part.

"Ten Spot," he said in a low, even, well controlled voice, conciliatory, but filled with a manliness which no man could mistake, "at four o'clock this afternoon I heard that you and Yuma Ed were framing up your present visit. I am not telling who gave me the information," he added as he saw Ten Spot's eyes brighten, "but that is what happened. So you see I know what you have come for. You have come to kill me. Is that correct?"

Ten Spot's eyes narrowed—into them had come an appraising, speculative glint. He nodded. "You've got her right," he admitted gruffly. "But if you knowed why didn't you slope?" He looked at Hollis with a half sneer, as though unable to decide whether Hollis was a brave man or merely a fool.

Hollis saw the indecision in Ten Spot's eyes and his own brightened. At last he had planned a form of action and he coolly estimated the distance between himself and Ten Spot. While Hollis had been speaking Ten Spot had taken a step forward and he was now not over four or five feet distant. Into Ten Spot's eyes had come an amused, disdainful gleam; Hollis's quiet, argumentative attitude had disarmed him. This was exactly what Hollis had been waiting for.

Ten Spot seemed almost to have forgotten his weapon; it had sagged, the muzzle pointing downward—the man's mind had become temporarily diverted from his purpose. When he saw Hollis move suddenly forward he remembered his gun and tried to swing its muzzle upward, but it was too late. Hollis had lunged forward, his left hand closing on Ten Spot's right wrist, his right fist reaching Ten Spot's jaw in a full, sweeping, crashing uppercut.

The would-be killer did not have even time enough to pull the trigger of his six-shooter. It fell from his hand and thudded dully to the floor as his knees doubled under him and he collapsed in an inert, motionless heap near the door.

With a grim smile on his face Hollis picked up Ten Spot's weapon and placed it on the desk. For an instant he stood at the window, looking out into the street. Down near the Fashion he saw some men—Yuma Ed among them. No doubt they were waiting the sound of the pistol shot which would tell them that Ten Spot had disposed of Hollis. Hollis grinned widely—Yuma and his gang were due for a surprise. For perhaps a minute Hollis stood beside the desk, watching Ten Spot. Then when the latter's hands began to twitch and a trace of color appeared in his face, Hollis pulled out his own revolver and approached him, standing within a few feet of him and looking down at him.

There was no mark on Ten Spot's jaw to show where Hollis's blow had landed, for his fist had struck flush on the point, its force directed upward. Ten Spot's mouth had been open at the instant and the snapping of his teeth from the impact of the blow no doubt had much to do with his long period of unconsciousness.

He stirred presently and then with an effort sat up and looked at his conqueror with a glance of puzzled wonderment. Seeing Hollis's weapon and his own on the desk, the light of past events seemed to filter into his bewildered brain. He grinned owlshly, felt of his jaw and then bowed his head, a flush of shame overspreading his face.

"Herd-rode!" he said dismally. "Herd-rode, an' by a tenderfoot! Oh, Lordy!" He suddenly looked up at Hollis, his eyes flashing with rage and defiance.

"Damn your hide, why don't you shoot?" he demanded. He placed his hands, palm down, on the floor, preparatory to rising, but ceased his efforts when he heard Hollis's voice, coldly humorous:

"I shall shoot you just the instant you get to your feet. I rather think that I am running things here now."

Ten Spot sagged back and looked up at him. "Why I reckon you are," he said. No method of action having suggested itself to him, he continued to sit, watching Hollis narrowly.

The latter retreated to his chair and dropped into it, moving deliberately. When he spoke his voice was cold and metallic.

"When you first came into the office," he said, "you applied a vile epithet to me. Once after that you did it again. You have asked me why I don't shoot you. If you really want me to shoot you you can keep your mouth closed for just one minute. If you want to continue to live you can tell me that you didn't mean a word of what you said on those two occasions. It's up to you." He sat silent,

looking steadily at Ten Spot.

The latter fidgeted, shame again reddening his cheeks. “Why,” he said finally, “I reckon she don’t go, tenderfoot. You see, she’s only a noma de ploom which we uses when we wants to rile somebody. I cert’nly didn’t mean nothin’ by it.”

“Thanks,” drawled Hollis dryly; “I’ll call that sufficient. But you certainly did ‘rile’ me some.”

“I reckon I must have done just that,” grinned Ten Spot ruefully. “You’re shorely some she-wolf with them there claws of your’n. An’ I done laffed at Dunlavey an’ Yuma after you’d clawed them.” His face sobered, his eyes suddenly filling with an expression of defiant resignation.

“I reckon when you’re done triflin’ with me you c’n start to pumpin’ your lead,” he said. “There ain’t no use of prolongin’ the agony.” He looked steadily at Hollis, his eyes filling with decision as he again placed his hands beside him on the floor to rise.

“You c’n open the ball when you get damn good an’ ready,” he sneered, “but I’m gettin’ up right now. I ain’t goin’ to die off my pins like a damn coyote!”

He rose quickly, plainly expecting to be shot down the moment he reached his feet. When he discovered that Hollis evidently intended to delay the fatal moment he stiffened, his lips twitching queerly.

“Ten Spot,” said Hollis quietly, “by apologizing for what you said when you came in you have shown that there is a great deal of the man left in you despite your bad habits and associations. I am going to show you that I think there is enough of the man left in you to trust you with your gun.”

He turned abruptly to the desk and took up Ten Spot’s weapon, holding it by the muzzle and presenting it to the latter. Ten Spot looked from the weapon to Hollis and back again to the weapon, blank amazement pictured on his face. Then he reached out mechanically, taking the weapon and holding it in his hands, turning it over and over as though half inclined to believe that it was not a revolver at all.

“Chuck full of cattridges, too!” he exclaimed in amazement, as he examined the chambers.

“Why, hell—” He crouched and deftly swung the six-shooter around, the butt in his hand, his finger resting on the trigger. In this position he looked at Hollis.

The latter had not moved, but his own weapon was in his right hand, its muzzle covering Ten Spot, and when the latter swung his weapon up Hollis smiled

grimly at him.

“Using it?” he questioned.

For an instant it seemed that Ten Spot would. An exultant, designing expression came into his eyes, he grinned, his teeth showing tigerishly. Then suddenly he snapped himself erect and with a single, dexterous movement holstered the weapon. Then his right hand came suddenly out toward Hollis.

“Shake!” he said. “By —, you’re white!”

Hollis smiled as he returned the hearty handclasp.

“You’re cert’nly plum grit,” assured Ten Spot as he released Hollis’s hand and stepped back the better to look at the latter. “But I reckon you’re some damn fool too. How did you know that I wouldn’t turn you into a colander when you give me back my gun?”

“I didn’t know,” smiled Hollis. “I just took a chance. You see,” he added, “it was this way. I never intended to shoot you. That sort of thing isn’t in my line and I don’t intend to shoot anyone if there is any way out of it. But I certainly wasn’t going to allow you to shoot me.” He smiled oddly. “So I watched my chance and slugged you. Then when I was certain that you weren’t dangerous any more I had to face another problem. If I had turned you loose after taking your gun what would you have done?”

“I’d have gone out an’ rustled another gun an’ come back here an’ salivated you.”

“That’s just what you would have done,” smiled Hollis. “I intend to stay in this country, Ten Spot, and if I had turned you loose without an understanding you would have shot me at the first opportunity. As it stands now you owe me——”

“As it stands now,” interrupted Ten Spot, a queer expression on his face, “I’m done shootin’ as far as you’re concerned.” He walked to the door, hesitated on the threshold and looked back. “Mister man,” he said slowly, “mebbe you won’t lick Big Bill in this here little mix-up, but I’m telling you that you’re goin’ to give him a damn good run for his money! So-long.”

He stepped down and disappeared. For a moment Hollis looked after him, and then he sat down at the desk, his face softening into a satisfied smile. It was something to receive a tribute from a man like Ten Spot.

CHAPTER X

THE LOST TRAIL

It was after seven o'clock when Hollis mounted his pony in the rear of the *Kicker* office and rode out over the plains toward the Circle Bar. He was properly elated by the outcome of his affair with Ten Spot. The latter had come to the *Kicker* office as an enemy looking for an opportunity to kill. He had left the office, perhaps not a friend, but at least a neutral, sympathetic onlooker, for according to Hollis's interpretation of his words at parting he would take no further part in Dunlavey's campaign—at least he would do no more shooting.

Hollis was compelled to make a long detour in order to strike the Circle Bar trail, and when at seven-thirty o'clock he rode down through a dry arroyo toward a little basin which he must cross to reach a ridge that had been his landmark during all his trips back and forth from Dry Bottom to the Circle Bar, dusk had fallen and the shadows of the oncoming night were settling somberly down over the plains.

He rode slowly forward; there was no reason for haste, for he had told Potter to say nothing about the reason of his delay in leaving Dry Bottom, and Potter would not expect him before nine o'clock. Hollis had warmed toward Potter this day; there had been in the old printer's manner that afternoon a certain solicitous concern and sympathy that had struck a responsive chord in his heart. He was not a sentimentalist, but many times during his acquaintance with Potter he had felt a genuine pity for the man. It had been this sentiment which had moved him to ask Potter to remove temporarily to the Circle Bar, though one consideration had been the fact at the Circle Bar he would most of the time be beyond the evil influence of Dry Bottom's saloons. That Potter appreciated this had been shown by his successful fight against temptation the night before, when postponement of the publication of the *Kicker* would have been fraught with serious consequences.

Riding down through the little basin at the end of the arroyo Hollis yielded to a deep, stirring satisfaction over the excellent beginning he had made in his fight against Dunlavey and the interests behind him. Many times he smiled, thinking of the surprise his old friends in the East must have felt over the perusal of their

copies of the *Kicker*; over the information that he—who had been something of a figure in Eastern newspaperdom—had become the owner and editor of a newspaper in a God-forsaken town in New Mexico, and that at the outset he was waging war against interests that ridiculed a judge of the United States Court. He smiled grimly. They might be surprised, but they must feel, all who knew him, that he would stay and fight until victory rewarded him or until black, bitter defeat became his portion. There could be no compromise.

When he reached the ridge toward which he had been riding for the greater part of an hour night had come. The day had been hot, but there had been a slight breeze, and in the *Kicker* office, with the front and rear doors open, he had not noticed the heat very much. But just as he reached the ridge he became aware that the breeze had died down; that waves of hot, sultry air were rising from the sun-baked earth. Usually at this time of the night there were countless stars, and now as he looked up into the great, vast arc of sky he saw no stars at all except away down in the west in a big rift between some mountains. He pulled up his pony and sat motionless in the saddle, watching the sky. A sudden awe for the grandeur of the scene filled him. He remembered to have seen nothing quite like it in the East.

Back toward Dry Bottom, and on the north and south, rose great, black thunderheads with white crests, seeming like mountains with snowcapped peaks. Between the thunder-heads were other clouds, of grayish-white, fleecy, wind-whipped, weird shapes, riding on the wings of the Storm-Kings. Other clouds flanked these, moving slowly and majestically—like great ships on the sea—in striking contrast to the fleecy, unstable shapes between the thunderheads, which, though rushing always onward, were riven and broken by the irresistible force behind them. To Hollis it seemed there were two mighty opposing forces at work in the sky, marshalling, maneuvering, preparing for conflict. While he sat motionless in the saddle watching, a sudden gust of cold wind swirled up around him, dashed some fine, flint-like sand against his face and into his eyes, and then swept onward. He was blinded for an instant, and allowed the reins to drop on his pony's neck while he rubbed his eyes with his fingers. He sat thus through an ominous hush and then to his ears came a low, distant rumble.

He touched his pony lightly on the flanks with his spurs and headed it along the ridge, convinced that a storm was coming and suddenly realizing that he was many miles from shelter.

He had traveled only a little distance when clouds of sand and dust, wind-driven, enveloped him, blinding him again, stinging his face and hands and blotting out

the landmarks upon which he depended to guide him to the Circle Bar. The sky had grown blacker; even the patch of blue that he had seen in the rift between the distant mountains was now gone. There was nothing above him—it seemed—except inky black clouds, nothing below but chaos and wind. He could not see a foot of the trail and so he gave the pony the rein, trusting to its instinct.

When Norton had provided him with an outfit the inevitable tarpaulin had not been neglected. Hollis remembered that this was attached to the cantle of the saddle, and so, after he had proceeded a little way along the crest of the ridge, he halted the pony, dismounted, unstrapped the tarpaulin, and folded it about him. Then he remounted and continued on his way, mentally thanking Norton for his foresight.

The pony had negotiated the ridge; had slowly loped down its slope to a comparatively low and level stretch of country, and was traveling steadily forward, when Hollis noticed a change in the atmosphere. It had grown hot again—sultry; the heat seemed to cling to him. An ominous calm had succeeded the aerial disturbance. From a great distance came a slight sound—a gentle sighing—gradually diminishing until it died away entirely. Then again came the ominous, premonitory silence—an absolute absence of life and movement. Hollis urged the pony forward, hoping the calm would last until he had covered a goodly part of the distance to the Circle Bar. For a quarter of an hour he went on at a good pace. But he had scarcely reached the edge of a stretch of broken country—which he dreaded even in the daylight—when the storm was upon him.

It did not come unheralded. A blinding flash of lightning illuminated miles of the surrounding country, showing Hollis the naked peaks of ridges and hills around him; gullies, draws, barrancas, the levels, lava beds, fantastic rock shapes—mocking his ignorance of the country. He saw them all for an instant and then they were gone and darkness—blackier than before—succeeded. It was as though a huge map had suddenly been thrust before his eyes by some giant hand, an intense light thrown upon it, and the light suddenly turned off. Immediately there came a heavy crash as though the Storm-Kings, having marshalled their forces, had thrown them together in one, great, clashing onrush. And then, straight down, roaring and shrieking, came the deluge.

The wise little plains-pony halted, standing with drooping head, awaiting the end of the first fierce onslaught. It lasted long and when it had gone another silence, as ominous as the preceding one, followed. The rain ceased entirely and the pony again stepped forward, making his way slowly, for the trail was now slippery and hazardous. The baked earth had become a slimy, sticky clay which

clung tenaciously to the pony's hoofs.

For another quarter of an hour the pony floundered through the mud, around gigantic boulders, over slippery hummocks, across little gullies, upon ridges and small hills and down into comparatively level stretches of country. Hollis was beginning to think that he might escape a bad wetting after all when the rain came again.

This time it seemed the Storm-Kings were in earnest. The rain came down in torrents; Hollis could feel it striking against his tarpaulin in long, stinging, vicious slants, and the lightning played and danced along the ridges and into the gullies with continuing energy, the thunder following, crashing in terrific volleys. It was uncomfortable, to say the least, and the only consoling thought was that the deluge would prove a God-send to the land and the cattle. Hollis began to wish that he had remained in Dry Bottom for the night, but of course Dry Bottom was not to be thought of now; he must devote all his energy to reaching the ranch.

It was slow work for the pony. After riding for another quarter of an hour Hollis saw, during another lightning flash, another of his landmarks, and realized that in the last quarter of an hour he had traveled a very short distance. The continuing flashes of lightning had helped the pony forward, but presently the lightning ceased and a dense blackness succeeded. The pony went forward at an uncertain pace; several times it halted and faced about, apparently undecided about the trail. After another half hour's travel and coming to a stretch of level country, the pony halted again, refusing to respond to Hollis's repeated urging to go forward without guidance. For a long time Hollis continued to urge the animal—he cajoled, threatened—but the pony would not budge. Hollis was forced to the uncomfortable realization that it had lost the trail.

For a long time he sat quietly in the saddle, trying in the dense darkness to determine upon direction, but he finally gave it up and with a sudden impulse took up the reins and pulled the pony to the left, determined to keep to the flat country as long as possible.

He traveled for what seemed several miles, the pony gingerly feeling its way, when suddenly it halted and refused to advance. Something was wrong. Hollis leaned forward, attempting to peer through the darkness ahead, but not succeeding. And now, as though having accomplished its design by causing Hollis to lose the trail, the lightning flashed again, illuminating the surrounding country for several miles.

Hollis had been peering ahead when the flash came and he drew a deep breath of horror and surprise. The pony had halted within a foot of the edge of a high cliff whose side dropped away sheer, as though cut with a knife. Down below, perhaps a hundred feet, was an immense basin, through which flowed a stream of water. To Hollis's right, parallel with the stream, the cliff sloped suddenly down, reaching the water's edge at a distance of two or three hundred feet. Beyond that was a stretch of sloping country many miles in area, and, also on his right, was a long, high, narrow ridge. He recognized the ridge as the one on which he and Norton had ridden some six weeks before—on the day he had had the adventure with Ed Hazelton. Another flash of lightning showed him two cotton-wood trees—the ones pointed out to him by Norton as marking Big Elk crossing—the dead line set by Dunlavey and his men.

Hollis knew his direction now and he pulled the pony around and headed it away from the edge of the cliff and toward the flat country which he knew led down through the canyon to Devil's Hollow, where he had taken leave of Ed and Nellie Hazelton. He was congratulating himself upon his narrow escape when a flash of lightning again illuminated the country and he saw, not over a hundred feet distant, sitting motionless on their ponies, a half dozen cowboys. Also on his pony, slightly in advance of the others, a grin of derision on his face, was Dunlavey.

CHAPTER XI

PICKING UP THE TRAIL

At about the time that the storm had overtaken Hollis, Potter was unsaddling his pony at the Circle Bar corral gate. A little later he was on the wide lower gallery of the ranchhouse washing the stains of travel from his face and hands. At supper he was taciturn, his face deeply thoughtful. Had Ten Spot come? What had been the outcome of the meeting? These questions preyed on his mind and brought furrows into his face.

At supper he caught Norton watching him furtively and he flushed guiltily, for he felt that in spite of Hollis's order to say nothing to Norton he should have told. He had already informed Norton that Hollis intended remaining in Dry Bottom until a later hour than usual, but he had said nothing about the intended visit of Ten Spot to the *Kicker* office. Loyalty to Hollis kept him from communicating to Norton his fears for Hollis's safety. It was now too late to do anything if he did tell Norton; whatever had been done had been done already and there was nothing for him to do but to wait until nine o'clock.

After he finished his meal he drew a chair out upon the gallery and placing it in a corner from where he could see the Dry Bottom trail he seated himself in it and tried to combat the disquieting fears that oppressed him. When Norton came out and took a chair near him he tried to talk to the range boss upon those small subjects with which we fill our leisure, but he could not hold his thoughts to these trivialities. He fell into long silences; his thoughts kept going back to Dry Bottom.

When the rain came he felt a little easier, for he had a hope that Hollis might have noticed the approach of the storm and decided to remain in town until it had passed. But after the rain had ceased his fears again returned. He looked many times at his watch and when Mrs. Norton came to the door and announced her intention of retiring he scarcely noticed her. Norton had repeatedly referred to Hollis's absence, and each time Potter had assured him that Hollis would come soon. Shortly before nine o'clock, when the clouds lifted and the stars began to appear, Potter rose and paced the gallery floor. At nine, when it had become light enough to see quite a little distance down the Dry Bottom trail and

there were still no signs of Hollis, he blurted out the story of the day's occurrences.

The information acted upon Norton like an electric shock. He was on his feet before Potter had finished speaking, grasping him by the shoulders and shaking him roughly.

"Why didn't you say something before?" he demanded. "Why did you leave him? Wasn't there somebody in Dry Bottom that you could have sent out here to tell me?" He cursed harshly. "Ten Spot's got him!" he declared sharply, his eyes glittering savagely. "He'd have been here by this time!" He was taking a hitch in his cartridge belt while talking, and before concluding he was down off the gallery floor and striding toward the corral.

"Tell my wife that I've gone to Dry Bottom," he called back to Potter. "Important business! I'll be back shortly after midnight!"

Leaving Potter on the porch staring after him he ran to the corral, roped his pony, threw on a saddle and bridle and mounted with the animal on a run.

The stars were shining brilliantly now and from the porch Potter could see Norton racing down the Dry Bottom trail with his pony in a furious gallop. For a time Potter watched him, then he disappeared and Potter went into the house to communicate his message to his wife.

The rain had been heavy while it lasted, but by the time Norton had begun his race to Dry Bottom very little evidence of it remained and the pony's flying hoofs found the sand of the trail almost as dry and hard as before the storm. Indeed, there was now little evidence that there had been a storm at all.

Norton spared the pony only on the rises and in something over an hour after the time he had left the Circle Bar he drew up in front of the *Kicker* office in Dry Bottom, dismounted, and bounded to the door. It was locked. He placed a shoulder against it and crashed it in, springing inside and lighting a match. He smiled grimly when he saw no signs of Hollis; when he saw that the interior was in an orderly condition and that there were no signs of a conflict. If Ten Spot had killed Hollis he had done the deed outside the *Kicker* office.

Norton came out again, pulling the wreck of the door after him and closing it as well as he could. Then, leaving his pony, he strode toward the Fashion saloon. As he came near he heard sounds of revelry issuing from the open door and he smiled coldly. A flashing glance through the window showed him that Ten Spot was there, standing at the bar. In the next instant Norton was inside, confronting

Ten Spot, his big six-shooter out and shoved viciously against Ten Spot's stomach.

"What have you done with Hollis, you mangy son-of-a-gun?" he demanded.

Several men who had been standing at the bar talking and laughing fell silent and looked at the two men, the barkeeper sidled closer, crouching warily, for he knew Norton.

Ten Spot had spread his arms out on the bar and was leaning against it, looking at Norton in unfeigned bewilderment. He did not speak at once. Then suddenly aware of the foreboding, savage gleam in Norton's eyes, a glint of grim humor came into his own and his lips opened a little, curling sarcastically.

"Why," he said, looking at Norton, "I don't reckon to be anyone's keeper." He smiled widely, with a suddenly ludicrous expression. "If you're talkin' about that tenderfoot noospaper guy, he don't need no keeper. What have I done to him?" he repeated, his smile growing. "Why, I reckon I didn't do a heap; I went down to call on him. He was right sociable. I was goin' to be mean to him, but I just couldn't. When he left he was sayin' that he'd be right glad to see me again—he'd been right playful durin' my talk with him. I reckon by now he's over at the Circle Bar laffin' hisself to sleep over the mean way I treated him. You just ast him when you see him."

A flicker of doubt came into Norton's eyes—Ten Spot's words had the ring of truth.

"You went down there to shoot him!" he said coldly, still unconvinced.

"Mebbe I did," returned Ten Spot. "Howsomever, I didn't. I ain't tellin' how I come to change my mind—that's my business, an' you can't shoot it out of me. But I'm tellin' you this: me an' that guy has agreed to call it quits, an' if I hear any man talkin' extravagant about him, me an' that man's goin' to have a run in mighty sudden!" He laughed. "Someone's been funnin' you," he said. "When he handed me back my gun after sluggin'—"

But he was now talking to Norton's back, for the range boss was at the door, striding rapidly toward his pony. He mounted again and rode out on the trail, proceeding slowly, convinced that something had happened to Hollis after he had left Dry Bottom. It was more than likely that he had lost his way in the storm, and in that case he would probably arrive at the Circle Bar over some round-about trail. He was now certain that he had not been molested in town; if he had been some of the men in the Fashion would have told him about it. Hollis

would probably be at the ranch by the time he arrived, to laugh at his fears. Nevertheless he rode slowly, watching the trail carefully, searching the little gullies and peering into every shadow for fear that Hollis had been injured in some accident and might be lying near unable to make his presence known.

The dawn was just showing above the horizon when he rode up to the ranchhouse to find Potter standing on the porch—apparently not having left there during his absence. Beside Potter stood Ed Hazelton, and near the latter a drooping pony, showing signs of hard riding.

Norton passed the corral gate and rode up to the two men. A glance at their faces told him that something had gone wrong. But before he could speak the question that had formed on his lips Hazelton spoke.

“They got him, Norton,” he said slowly.

“Dead?” queried Norton sharply, his lips straightening.

“No,” returned Hazelton gloomily; “he ain’t dead. But when I found him he wasn’t far from it. Herd-rode him, the damned sneaks! Beat him up so’s his own mother wouldn’t know him!”

“Wait!” commanded Norton. “I’m going with you. I suppose you’ve got him over to your shack?” He caught Hazelton’s nod and issued an order to Potter. “Go down to the bunkhouse and get Weary out. Tell him to hit the breeze to Cimarron for the doctor. If the doc’ don’t want to come drag him by the ears!”

He spurred his pony furiously to the corral gate and in a short time had saddled another horse and was back where Hazelton was awaiting him. Without speaking a word to each other the two men rode rapidly down the Coyote trail, while Potter, following directions, his face haggard and drawn from loss of sleep and worry, hurried to the bunkhouse to arouse Weary and send him on his long journey to Cimarron.

CHAPTER XII

AFTER THE STORM

Hollis's tall figure lay pitifully slack on a bed in the Hazelton cabin. Nellie Hazelton had given him what care she could out of her limited knowledge and now nothing more could be done until the arrival of the Cimarron doctor. Swathed in bandages, his clothing torn and soiled—as though after beating him his assailants had dragged him through the mud—one hand queerly twisted, his face swollen, his whole great body looking as though it had received the maximum of injury, Hollis moved restlessly on the bed, his head rolling oddly from side to side, incoherent words issuing from between his bruised and swollen lips.

Norton stood beside the bed, looking down at the injured man with a grim, savage pity.

“The damned cowards!” he said, his voice quivering. “There must have been a dozen of them—to do him up like that!”

“Seven,” returned Ed Hazelton grimly. “They left their trail there; I counted the hoof prints, an’ they led down the slope toward Big Elk crossin’.” He looked at Norton with a frown. “We can’t do anything here,” he said shortly, “until the doctor comes. I’ll take you down where I found him.”

They went out and mounted their ponies. Down the trail a mile or so they came to a level that led away toward Rabbit-Ear Creek. From the level they could see the Circle Cross buildings, scattered over a small stretch of plain on the opposite side of the river. There was no life around them, no movement. Norton grimaced toward them.

Hazelton halted his pony in some tall grass near a bare, sandy spot on the plains. The grass here grew only in patches and Norton could plainly see a number of hoof prints in the sand. One single set led away across the plains toward the Dry Bottom trail. Seeing the knowing expression in Norton’s eyes, Hazelton spoke quietly.

“That’s Hollis’s trail. He must have took the Dry Bottom trail an’ lost it in the storm. Potter says he would probably take it because it’s shorter. Anyways, it’s

his trail; I followed it back into the hills until I was sure. I saw that he had been comin' from Dry Bottom. He lost his way an' rode over here. I remember there was an awful darkness, for I was out scoutin' around to see if my stock was all right. Well, he got this far—rode right up to the edge of the butte over there an' then come back this way. Then he met—well, the men that did it.”

“They all stood there for a little while; you can see where their horses pawed. Then mebbe they started somethin', for you can see where Hollis's pony throwed up a lot of sand, tryin' to break out. The others were in a circle—you can see that. I've figured it out that Hollis saw there wasn't any chance for him against so many an' he tried to hit the breeze away from here. I'll show you.”

They followed the hoof prints down the slope and saw that all the riders must have been traveling fast at this point, for the earth was cut and the hoof prints bunched fore and aft. They ran only a little way, however. About a hundred yards down the slope, in a stretch of bare, sandy soil, the horses had evidently come to a halt again, for they were bunched well together and there were many of them, showing that there had been some movement after the halt.

Norton dismounted and examined the surrounding soil.

“They all got off here,” he said shortly, after the examination; “there's the prints of their boots. They caught him here and handed it to him.”

Hazelton silently pointed to a queer track in the sand—a shallow groove running about fifty feet, looking as though some heavy object had been drawn over it. Norton's face whitened.

“Drug him!” he said grimly, his lips in two straight lines. “It's likely they roped him!” He remounted his pony and sat in the saddle, watching Hazelton as the latter continued his examination. “They're a fine, nervy bunch!” he sneered as Hazelton also climbed into his saddle. “They must have piled onto him like a pack of wolves. If they'd have come one at a time he'd have cleaned them up proper!”

They rode away down the trail toward the cabin. Norton went in and looked again at Hollis, and then, telling Hazelton that he would return in the afternoon, he departed for the Circle Bar. He stopped at the ranchhouse and communicated the news to his wife and Potter and then rode on up the river to a point about ten miles from the ranchhouse—where the outfit was working.

The men received his news with expressions of rage and vengeance. They had come to admire Hollis for his courage in electing to continue the fight against

Dunlavey; they had seen that in spite of his ignorance of the customs of their world he possessed a goodly store of common sense and an indomitable spirit. Yet none of them expressed sympathy, though their faces showed that they felt it. Expressions of sympathy in a case such as this would have been unnecessary and futile. But their expressions of rage showed how the news had affected them. Though they knew that Dunlavey's forces outnumbered their own they were for striking back immediately. But Norton discouraged this.

"We're layin' low for a while," he said. "Mebbe the boss will get well. If he does he'll make things mighty interestin' for Dunlavey—likely he'll remember who was in the crowd which beat him up. If he dies—" His eyes flashed savagely. "Well, if he dies you boys can go as far as you like an' I'll go with you without doin' any kickin'."

"What's goin' to be done with that noospaper of his'n?" inquired Ace. "You reckon she'll miss fire till he's well again?"

Norton's brows wrinkled; he had not thought of the newspaper. But he realized now that if the paper failed to appear on scheduled time the people in Union County would think that Hollis had surrendered; they would refuse to believe that he had been so badly injured that he could not issue the paper, and Dunlavey would be careful to circulate some sort of a story to encourage this view. Now that Ace had brought the matter to his attention he began to suspect that this had been the reason of the attack on Hollis. That they had not killed him when they had the opportunity, showed that they must have had some purpose other than that of merely desiring to get him out of the way. That they had merely beaten him showed that their wish was only to incapacitate him temporarily. Norton's eyes flashed with a sudden determination.

"I don't reckon that the *Kicker* will miss fire," he declared; "not if I have to go to Dry Bottom an' get her out myself!"

Ace eyed him furtively and now spoke with an embarrassed self-consciousness.

"I've been considerin' this here situation ever since you told us about the boss," he said diffidently, "an' if you're goin' to get that paper out, a little poem or two might help out considerable."

"Meanin'?" interrogated Norton, his eyelashes flickering.

Ace's face reddened painfully. "Meanin' that I've got several little pieces which I've wrote when I didn't have anything else to do an' that I'd be right willin' to have them put into the *Kicker* to help fill her up. Some of the boys think they're

right classy.”

Norton looked around at the other men for confirmation of the truth of this modest statement. He caught Lanky’s glance.

“I reckon that’s about right,” said that sober-faced puncher; “Ace is the pote lariat of this here outfit, an’ he sure has got a lot of right clever lines in his pomes. I’ve read them which wasn’t one-two-three with his’n.”

Norton smiled, a little cynically. He wasn’t quite sure about it, he said, but if Ace could write poetry he hadn’t any doubt that during the next few weeks there would be plenty of opportunity to print some of it in the *Kicker*. He smiled when he saw Ace’s face brighten. But he told him he would have to see Hollis—if the latter got well enough to endure an interview. If the boss recovered enough to be able to look at Ace’s poetry before it was printed, why of course it would have to be shown him. He didn’t want anything to go into the *Kicker* which the boss wouldn’t like. But if he wasn’t able to look at it, why he would leave the decision to Potter, and if it suited the latter he would be satisfied. He would keep the boys posted on the boss’s condition. Then he rode away toward the ranchhouse.

Late in the afternoon he again visited the Hazelton cabin. He found the Cimarron doctor already there. Hollis was still unconscious, though resting easier. The doctor declared that he would remain with him throughout the night. He followed Norton out on to the porch and told him that at present he could not tell just how serious Hollis’s injuries were. There was a great wound in his head which he feared might turn out seriously, but if not, Hollis would recover quickly and be as good as ever within a few weeks—except for his left wrist—which was broken. He praised Nellie Hazelton for the care she was giving the injured man. Convinced that there was nothing more to be done, Norton returned to the Circle Bar to give his attention to his work.

CHAPTER XIII

“WOMAN—SHE DON’T NEED NO TOOTER”

The Cimarron doctor’s fears for the wound on Hollis’s head had proved unfounded and on the tenth day after his experience on the night of the storm, Hollis was sitting on the Hazelton porch, his head still swathed in bandages, his left wrist in a splint, but his spirit still untouched. The marks on his face had all disappeared, except an ugly gash under his right eye—which still showed a slight discoloration—and a smaller cut on the chin. The Cimarron doctor had told him that the wound under his eye would leave a permanent scar—the wound had been deep and in spite of the doctor’s care, had drawn together queerly, affecting the eye itself and giving it an odd expression. Many times since becoming able to move about had Hollis looked at his face in his mirror, and each time there had come into his eyes an expression that boded ill for the men who had been concerned in the attack on him.

It was mid-afternoon and the sun was coming slant-wise over the roof of the cabin, creating a welcome shade on the porch. Ed Hazelton had been gone since morning, looking after his cattle, and Nellie was in the house, busily at work in the kitchen—Hollis could hear her as she stepped about the room.

Norton had left the cabin an hour before and a little later Potter had stopped in on his way over to Dry Bottom to set up an article that he had written at Hollis’s dictation. Hollis had told Norton of his experiences on the night of the storm.

After the flash of lightning had revealed Dunlavey and his men, Hollis had attempted to escape, knowing that Dunlavey’s intentions could not be peaceable, and that he would have no chance in a fight with several men. He had urged his pony toward the two buttes that he had seen during the lightning flash, making a circuit in order to evade his enemies. He might have succeeded, but unfortunately the darkness had lifted and they had been able to intercept him. He could give no clear account of what had happened after they had surrounded him. There had been no words spoken. He had tried to break out of the circle; had almost succeeded when a loop settled over his shoulders and he was dragged from his pony—dragged quite a distance.

The fall had hurt him, but when the rope had slackened he had regained his feet—

to see that all the men had surrounded him. One man struck at him and he had immediately struck back, knocking the man down. After that the blows came thick and fast. He hit several more faces that were close to him and at one time was certain he had put three of his assailants out of the fight. But the others had crowded him close. He fought them as well as he could with the great odds against him, and once was inspired with a hope that he might escape. Then had come a heavy blow on the head—he thought that one of the men had used the butt of a revolver. He could dimly remember receiving a number of other blows and then he knew nothing more until he had awakened in the Hazelton cabin.

Hollis's opinion of Dunlavey's motive in thus attacking him coincided with Norton's. They might easily have killed him. That they did not showed that they must have some peculiar motive. Aside from a perfectly natural desire on Dunlavey's part to deal to Hollis the same sort of punishment that Hollis had inflicted on Dunlavey on the occasion of their first meeting, the latter could have no motive other than that of preventing the appearance of the *Kicker* on its regular publication day.

Hollis was convinced that Dunlavey had been inspired by both motives. But though Dunlavey had secured his revenge for the blow that Hollis had struck him in Dry Bottom, Hollis did not purpose to allow him to prevent the appearance of the *Kicker*. It had been impossible for him to make the trip to Dry Bottom, but he had summoned Potter and had dictated considerable copy, Potter had written some, and in this manner they had managed to get the *Kicker* out twice.

Ace had not been able to get any of his poems into the *Kicker*. He had submitted some of them to Potter, but the printer had assured him that he did not care to assume the responsibility of publishing them. Thereupon Ace had importuned Norton to intercede with Hollis on his behalf. On his visit this morning Norton had brought the matter to Hollis's attention. The latter had assured the range boss that he appreciated the puncher's interest and would be glad to go over some of his poems. Therefore Hollis was not surprised when in the afternoon he saw Ace loping his pony down the Coyote trail toward the Hazelton cabin.

Ace's approach was diffident, though ambition urged him on. He rode up to the edge of the porch, dismounted, and greeted his boss with an earnestness that contrasted oddly with his embarrassment. He took the chair that Hollis motioned him to, sitting on the edge of it and shifting nervously under Hollis's direct gaze.

"I reckon Norton told you about my poems," he began. He caught Hollis's nod and continued: "Well, I got a bunch of 'em here which I brung over to show you.

Folks back home used to say that I was a genyus. But I reckon mebbe they was hittin' her up a little bit strong," he admitted, modestly; "folks is that way—they like to spread it on a bit. But"—and the eyes of the genius flashed proudly—"I reckon I've got a little talyunt, the evidence of which is right here!" With rather more composure than had marked his approach he now drew out a prodigious number of sheets of paper, which he proceeded to spread out on his knee, smoothing them lovingly.

"Mebbe I ain't much on spellin' an' grammar an' all that sort of thing," he offered, "but there's a heap of sense to be got out of the stuff I've wrote. Take this one, for instance. She's a little oday to 'Night,' which I composed while the boys was poundin' their ears one night—not bein' affected in their feelin's like I was. If you ain't got no objections I'll read her." And then, not waiting to hear any objections, he began:

The stars are bright to-night;
They surely are a sight,
Sendin' their flickerin' light
From an awful, unknown height.

Why do they shine so bright?
I'm most o'ercome with fright—

"Of course I reely wasn't scared," he offered with a deprecatory smile, "but there wasn't any other word that I could think of just then an' so I shoved her in. It rhymes anyhow an' just about says what I wanted."

He resumed:

When I look up into the night,
An' see their flickerin' light.

He ceased and looked at Hollis with an abashed smile. "It don't seem to sound so good when I'm readin' her out loud," he apologized. "An' I've thought that mebbe I've worked that 'night' an' 'light' rhyme over-time. But of course I've got 'fright' an' 'sight' an' 'height' in there to kind of off-set that." He squirmed in his chair. "You take her an' read her." He passed the papers over to Hollis and rose from his chair. "I'll be goin' back to the outfit; Norton was sayin' that he wanted me to look up some strays an' I don't want him to be waitin' for me. But I'd like to have one of them pomes printed in the *Kicker*—just to show the folks in this here country that there's a real pote in their midst."

"Why—" began Hollis, about to express his surprise over his guest's sudden

determination to depart. But he saw Nellie Hazelton standing just outside the door, and the cause of Ace's projected departure was no longer a mystery. He had gone before Hollis could have finished his remonstrance, and was fast disappearing in a cloud of dust down the trail when Hollis turned slowly to see Nellie Hazelton smiling broadly.

"I just couldn't resist coming out," she said. "It rather startled me to discover that there was a real poet in the country."

"There seems to be no doubt of it," returned Hollis with a smile. But he immediately became serious. "Ace means well," he added. "I imagine that it wasn't entirely an ambition to rush into print that moved him to submit his poems; he wants to help fill up the paper."

Miss Hazelton laughed. "I really think," she said, looking after the departing poet, "that he might have been fibbing a little when he said that the 'night' had not 'scared' him. He ran from me," she added, amusement shining in her eyes, "and I should not like to think that any woman could appear so forbidding and mysterious as the darkness."

Hollis had been scanning one of the poems in his hand. He smiled whimsically at Miss Hazelton as she concluded.

"Here is Ace's opinion on that subject," he said. "Since you have doubted him I think it only fair that you should give him a hearing. Won't you read it?"

She came forward and seated herself in the chair that the poet had vacated, taking the mass of paper that Hollis passed over to her.

"Shall I read it aloud?" she asked with a smile at him.

"I think you had better not," he returned; "it might prove embarrassing."

She blushed and gave her attention to the poem. It was entitled: "Woman," and ran;

"Woman she dont need no tooter,
be she skule mam or biscut shooter.
she has most curyus ways about her,
which leads a man to kinda dout her.

Though lookin at her is shure a pleasur
there aint no way to get her measure
i reckon she had man on the run
a long while before the world begun.

I met a biscut shooter in the chance saloon
when i was blowin my coin in ratoon
while the coin lasted i owned her an the town
but when it was gone she throwed me down.

An so i say she dont need no tooter
be she skule mam or biscut shooter
she fooled me an my hart she stole
which has opened my eyes an hurt my sole.”

Miss Hazelton laid the manuscript in her lap and laughed heartily.

“What a harrowing experience!” she declared. Hollis was grinning at her.

“That was a bad thing to have happen to a man,” he observed; “I suppose it rather shattered Ace’s faith in woman. At least you could observe by his actions just a moment ago that he isn’t taking any more chances.”

She fixed him with a defiant eye. “But he still admits that he takes pleasure in looking at a woman!” she told him triumphantly.

“So he does. Still, that isn’t remarkable. You see, a man couldn’t help that—no matter how badly he had been treated.”

She had no reply to make to this, though she gave him a look that he could not mistake. But he laughed. “I think Ace’s effort ought to go into the *Kicker*” he said. “I have no doubt that many who read the poem will find in it a great deal of truth—perhaps a reflection of their own personal experiences.”

Her face clouded and she regarded him a little soberly. “Of your own, perhaps?” she suggested.

“Not guilty,” he returned laughing. “You see, I have never had any time to devote to the study of women, let alone time to allow them to fool me. Perhaps when I do have time to study them I may find some truth in Ace’s effort.”

“Then women do not interest you?” She was looking down the Coyote trail.

“Well, no,” he said, thinking of the busy days of his past, and not being aware of the furtive, significant glance she threw toward him. “You see, there have always been so many important things to engage my attention.”

“How fortunate!” she said mockingly, after a pause during which he had time to realize that he had been very ungracious. He saw Ace’s manuscript flutter

toward him, saw her rise and heard the screen door slam after her. During the remainder of the afternoon he was left alone on the porch to meditate upon the evils that arise from thoughtless speech.

CHAPTER XIV

THE COALITION

Perhaps there were some persons in Union County who, acquainted with the details of the attack on Hollis, expected to read an account of it in the *Kicker*. If there were any such they were disappointed. There was nothing about the attack printed in the *Kicker*—nor did Hollis talk to any stranger concerning it.

Ace's poem entitled "Woman" had gone into the paper, causing the poet—for many days following the appearance of his composition—to look upon his fellow punchers with a sort of condescending pity. On the second day after his discussion with Miss Hazelton over Ace's poem Hollis returned to the Circle Bar. He had succeeded in convincing Nellie that he had answered thoughtlessly when he had informed her that he took no interest in women, and though she had defiantly assured him that she had not taken offense, there had been a light in her eyes upon his departure which revealed gratification over his repentance. She stood long on the porch after he had taken leave of her, watching him as he rode slowly down the trail and disappeared around a turn. Then she smiled regretfully, sighed, and went into the house.

Hollis's return to the Circle Bar was unostentatious and quite in keeping with his method of doing things. Within the next few days he met several of the Circle Bar men and there were mutterings against Dunlavey, but Hollis discouraged action, assuring the mutterers that his differences with Dunlavey were entirely personal and that he intended carrying on the fight alone.

His wounds mended rapidly, and within two weeks—except for the broken wrist—he was well as ever. Meanwhile Potter had succeeded in getting the *Kicker* out on time, though there had been a noticeable lack of aggressiveness in the articles. Especially was this true of the articles bearing upon the situation in Union County. Hollis had dictated some of these, but even those which he had dictated had seemed to lack something.

Nothing had been heard of Dunlavey—it seemed that after the attack upon Hollis he had withdrawn from the scene to await the latter's next move.

But Hollis was in no hurry; he had lost some of the enthusiasm that had marked

his attitude in the beginning, but this enthusiasm had been replaced by determination. He was beginning to realize that in Dunlavey he had met a foe worthy of his most serious efforts. He had determined that there would be no repetition of the attack upon him, and therefore during his convalescence he had sent to Las Vegas for a repeating rifle, and this he carried with him on his trips to and from Dry Bottom.

Meanwhile the drought continued. The sky was cloudless, the desultory breezes that swept the plains blighted growing things, raising little whirlwinds of fine, flinty alkali dust and spreading it over the face of the world. The storm that had caught Hollis on the Dry Bottom trail had covered only a comparatively small area; it had lasted only a brief time and after its passage the country was dry as before.

Rabbit-Ear Creek of all the streams in the vicinity of Dry Bottom held water. From all points of the compass cattle drifted to the Rabbit-Ear, slaking their thirst and refusing to leave. Bronzed riders on drooping ponies trailed them, cutting them out, trying to keep their herds intact, but not succeeding. Confusion reigned. For miles in both directions Rabbit-Ear Creek became one huge, long watering trough. Temporary camps were made; chuck wagons rattled up to them, loaded with supplies for the cowboys, and rattled back to distant ranches for more. There had been other droughts, but this one was unexpected—unprecedented. There had always been a little water everywhere. Now Rabbit-Ear Creek held all there was.

Only the small cattle owners suffered because of the drought. Riders told of the presence of plenty of water in the Canadian, the Cimarron, and the Ute. Carrizo held some. In fact, nearly all the streams held by the large ranchers seemed to contain plenty. The smaller owners, whose herds were smaller and whose complement of punchers was necessarily limited, had apparently been selected by Providence for ruin.

There were mutterings against the large owners, against Providence. Particularly were there mutterings against Dunlavey when word came to the owners of the herds that if the drought was not broken within the next ten days the Circle Cross manager would drive all foreign cattle from the Rabbit-Ear. He would not allow his own herds to suffer to save theirs, he said.

On the night following the day upon which the small owners had received this word from Dunlavey a number of the former waited upon Hollis. They found him seated on the lower gallery of the ranchhouse talking to Norton and Potter. Lemuel Train, of the Pig-pen outfit, had been selected as their spokesman. He

stood before Hollis, a big man, diffident in manner and rough in appearance, surrounded by his fellow ranchers, bronzed, bearded, serious of face. Though the sun had been down three hours the heat was frightful and the visitors shuffled their feet and uncomfortably wiped the perspiration from their brows.

“Sit down,” invited Hollis. He rose and stood while the men draped themselves on the edge of the gallery floor—all except the spokesman, Lemuel Train. The latter faced Hollis. His face was grim in the dusk.

“We’ve come to see what you’ve got to say about water,” he said.

Days before Norton had told Hollis that these men who were now herding at the Rabbit-Ear were the small ranchers who had refused to aid the elder Hollis in his fight against Dunlavey some years before. Therefore Hollis did not answer at once. When he did his voice was dry and cold. He too had heard of Dunlavey’s ultimatum concerning the water.

“Before I say anything on that subject I should like to know to whom I am talking,” he said.

Train swept a ponderous hand toward his fellow visitors, pointing them out in turn. “There’s Truxton, of the Diamond Dot; Holcomb, of the Star; Henningson, of the Three Bar; Yeager, of the Three Diamond; an’ Clark, of the Circle Y.”

“Correct,” affirmed Norton, behind Hollis.

Hollis smiled grimly; he had caught a belligerent note in Norton’s voice. Plainly, if the range boss were allowed a voice in the matter, these visitors would have now received as little encouragement as they had received from Dunlavey. But Hollis’s smile showed that he held different views.

“I am Kent Hollis,” he said to the men; “I suppose you know that.”

“I reckon we know you,” said Train; “you’re Jim Hollis’s boy.”

“Then you know that Dunlavey and my father were not exactly bosom friends,” returned Hollis.

Several heads bobbed affirmatively; others sat grimly silent. Hollis smiled.

“How many of you offered to help my father when he came to you asking for assistance in his fight against Dunlavey?”

Train fidgeted. “I reckon they wasn’t much chance—” he began, and then hesitated, looking around at his fellows.

“Of course,” returned Hollis quietly, after an embarrassed pause, “there wasn’t

much chance for you to win then. And you had to take a big risk to help my father. But he had to take a bigger risk to fight alone. Still he fought. And he fought alone. He was almost ruined. And now you men are facing ruin. And you have come to Jim Hollis's son to help you. Do you think he ought?"

The men sat silent; the spokesman was without words.

"How many men can the six of you muster—in case Dunlavey should try to carry out his decision to drive your cattle from the Rabbit-Ear—or shoot them?"

"Eighteen, I reckon," returned Train, looking at the others, who nodded affirmatively to his question.

Hollis turned to Norton. "How many men does Dunlavey employ?" he questioned.

"Thirty," snapped Norton. "But in case he needed them he c'n get a hundred."

"Big odds," smiled Hollis. "Why should I volunteer to help you fight Dunlavey? My cattle are certain of getting enough water. Why should I not be selfish, as you men were when my father went to you for assistance?"

There was no answer. The faces that surrounded Hollis in the semi-darkness showed plainly that their owners had given up thoughts of assistance. Grim, hard lines came into them; two or three sneered. Of course they would fight Dunlavey; there was no alternative, for they could not stand idly by and see their cattle slain—Dunlavey could not drive them from water, they would have to be shot. They had reckoned on securing help from Hollis; he held one side of the Rabbit-Ear and with his support they were in a position to make things very unpleasant for any of Dunlavey's men who might, from the opposite side of the river, attempt to shoot their cattle. But with Hollis against them they would be powerless; with Hollis against them Dunlavey's men could swarm both sides of the river and the destruction of their cattle would be certain.

All of the men knew this. Yet they did not answer Hollis's question. They had not come to plead with him; they knew that the situation had narrowed down to a point where they could depend only on their own resources. They would not plead, yet as they silently started to file off the gallery there were bitter smiles on several of their faces. There were no threats; perhaps Hollis had succeeded in showing them the similarity between his conduct and their own in the long ago, when his father had gone to them for assistance. At least this was what he had tried to show them.

Lemuel Train was the last man down the gallery. He turned as he reached the

ground and looked back over his shoulder at Hollis.

“So-long,” he said shortly. “I reckon you’re even now.”

Hollis had not moved. “Wait, Train!” he said. The visitors halted and faced him.

“Men,” he said quietly, “you have not answered my question. I am going to repeat it: Why should I not be selfish, as you men were when my father went to you for assistance?”

Lemuel Train smiled ironically. “Why, I reckon it’s your trick, mister man,” he said; “you’ve got all the cards.”

“Come back here, men,” said Hollis. “Since none of you care to answer my question I will answer it myself.” He stood silent while the men filed back and resumed seats on the gallery edge. Darkness had come on while he had been talking to the men and inside the ranchhouse Mrs. Norton had lighted the kerosene lamp and its weak, flickering rays straggled out into the darkness and upon Hollis’s face and the faces of several of the men who sat on the edge of the gallery.

Hollis knew that he might readily become melodramatic in the few words that he purposed to say to the men, and so when he began talking he adopted a low, even tone, confidential, serious. He told them that the things he had written in his salutatory in the *Kicker*, months before, had been an honest declaration of the principles in which he believed. This was America, he repeated; they were all Americans; they were all entitled to that freedom of thought, speech, and movement for which their forefathers had fought. For one, he purposed to fight, if necessary, to retain his rights.

He told them that he held no ill-feeling against them on account of their refusal to assist his father. That was past history. But now they were to look into the future; they were all facing ruin if they did not combine in a common cause. So far as he was concerned their cattle might remain at the Rabbit-Ear until the drought ended, or until the stream went dry. And if Dunlavey fought them—well, he would be with them to the finish.

When he had concluded Lemuel Train stepped forward and shook his hand. The others followed. There was no word spoken. The men filed down from the gallery, sought their horses, mounted, and rode slowly away into the darkness. When they had gone Hollis turned to resume his chair, but found Norton standing near him, looking at him with a curious smile.

“Shake!” said the latter. “I knowed you’d do it that way!”

CHAPTER XV TO SUPPORT THE LAW

Hollis alone, of all the men whose cattle grazed on the Circle Bar side of the Rabbit-Ear, really doubted that Dunlavey would have the courage to inaugurate a war against the small owners. Lemuel Train was particularly strong in his belief that Dunlavey would not hesitate to shoot whatever cattle infringed on what he considered were his rights. "I know the skunk!" he declared heatedly to Hollis a day or two after the conversation on the porch at the Circle Bar. "He'll do it. I'm only scared that he won't wait till the tenth day before beginnin'. Why in hell don't it rain?"

This remained the great, universal interrogation. But at the end of a week it was unanswered. The sun swam in its endless circles, a great ball of molten silver at which no man could look with the naked eye, traveling its slow way through a blurred, white sky, sinking to the horizon in the evening and leaving a scorched, blasted, gasping country behind. The nights brought no relief. Clark, of the Circle Y, sarcastically declared it to be his belief that some meddler in things firmamental was paying the owner of the sun to work it overtime.

Hollis's daily twenty mile ride from the Circle Bar to Dry Bottom and return became a trial to him. At night, when he returned from the trip, hot, dry, dusty, he would draw a chair out on the gallery floor and scan the sky for signs of rain. To his recollection since his adventure on the night of the storm there had not been a cloud in the sky. On the trails the dust was inches deep and light as a feather. It rose in stifling whirlwinds, filling the nostrils and the lungs, parching the tongues of man and beast and accentuating the suffering caused by lack of water.

All the pleasure had been drawn from Hollis's rides because of the dryness and heat. On a morning a week following the day upon which Dunlavey had issued his warning to the cattle owners, Hollis made his usual trip to Dry Bottom. Norton accompanied him, intending to make some purchases in town. They rode the ten miles without incident and Hollis left Norton at the door of the *Kicker* office, after telling the range boss to come back to the office when he had made his purchases as he intended returning to the Circle Bar before noon. Hollis

found Potter inside. The latter had remained in Dry Bottom over night and was busy at a type case when his chief entered. Hollis did not remain long in the office. He looked over some letters that Potter had placed on his desk, placed one in a pocket and rose, telling Potter that he would be back and instructing him to tell Norton to await his coming should the latter return before him. Then he went down to the court house.

He found the door of Judge Graney's court room slightly ajar and without knocking he pushed it open and entered. On the threshold he halted and drew a deep breath. Judge Graney was seated at the big table, and directly opposite him, leaning heavily on his elbows, his face inflamed with anger, sat Dunlavey. Near a window at the side of the room stood a grave faced man of medium height, slender and muscular, who was watching the Judge and Dunlavey soberly.

At Hollis's sudden appearance the Judge looked up and smiled, while Dunlavey faced around, a derisive, mocking grin on his face. Hollis bore no marks of the recent attack beyond the left wrist, still in splints.

"Come in," invited Judge Graney, his smile growing, his eyes glinting oddly. "I think, since you are responsible for the startling innovation which we have been discussing, that you are entitled to a word."

He gravely waved Hollis to a chair and stood silent while the latter sank into it. Then he smiled, glancing furtively at Dunlavey and addressing Hollis.

"Perhaps you will remember that some time ago you printed an article in the *Kicker* urging upon the Government the necessity of bringing the law into Union County?"

Hollis nodded. "Yes," he said quietly; "I remember."

"Well," resumed the Judge, "the article has borne fruit. But perhaps not in the manner you expected." He laughed around at the three, deliberately closing an eye at Hollis. "You know," he resumed, addressing them all, his eyes twinkling as his gaze met Dunlavey's, "that the law is an expensive institution. It is a fundamental principle—at least of some governments," he smiled—"that a community that desires the law must pay, and pay dearly—for it. In short, if it wants the law it must pay taxes. I do not say that that is a principle which our government is applying, but I do say that it is an eminently fair proposition.

"At all events I have received word from the Interior Department that if we want the law to come out here we must pay for it. That is not said in so many words, but that is the inference, if we are to consider the instructions of the Secretary of

the Interior—which are: ‘I am informed that several large ranch owners in Union County are inclined to evade taxation. Especially is this true—I am told—of a man named Dunlavey, who, if the report is correct, paid, during the last half year, taxes on five hundred head of cattle, whereas it is claimed that his holdings will amount to about five thousand, yearly average. In view of this ridiculously low return it seems incumbent upon me to appoint an inquisitor, whose duty—’

Dunlavey laughed harshly, interrupting the Judge. Then he turned suddenly to Hollis, his face inflamed with passion.

“I reckon this is some of your work?” he snarled.

Hollis met his gaze steadily. “I imagine it is,” he said quietly. He could not keep a flash of triumph from his eyes. “Nothing could please me better than to discover that I had a hand in bringing the law to this country. It needs plenty of law.”

Judge Graney cleared his throat. “This does not apply to you alone, Dunlavey,” he said, facing the latter. “Letters have been sent to every cattleman in Union County, demanding their appearance before me. The government is determined to re-adjust conditions out here—to enforce this new law to the letter. Beginning on the first of next month,—September—which will be the day after to-morrow, every cattle owner in the county will be required to register his brand and return a list of his cattle, for taxation. Any owner refusing to make a fair return on his stock will make a grave mistake. Upon his failure to make such return the government will seize his stock and dispose of it to the highest bidder, deducting such an amount as will cover taxes, court costs, and fines, and returning the remainder, if any, to the owner.” Judge Graney faced Hollis. “I suppose you have received your notification to that effect?” he inquired.

“I haven’t paid much attention to my mail since—since I met Mr. Dunlavey and several of his friends one night—some weeks ago.” He smiled grimly at Dunlavey, who met his gaze with a derisive grin. “I haven’t been very much interested in anything except getting well,” continued Hollis. “But whether I have been notified or not I shall take pleasure in complying with the law. I shall have my list ready on time—likewise I shall register my brand.”

Dunlavey sneered. “That won’t be such an almighty big job—counting your steers,” he said.

Hollis laughed shortly. “Perhaps not as big a job as it would have been had conditions been different,” he observed dryly.

“Meaning?” snapped Dunlavey, stiffening in his chair.

“You may draw your own inference,” drawled Hollis.

For an instant it seemed that Dunlavey contemplated attacking Hollis; he placed both hands on the table before him, preparatory to rising, evidently thought better of the idea and sank into the chair again, his eyes flashing venomously as they met Hollis’s.

“This country’s going plum to hell!” he sneered; “when tenderfeet and half-baked lawyers get to running things it will be time for the cattlemen to pull up stakes and hit the breeze! But I’m telling you one thing!” He banged his fist heavily down upon the table in front of him and scowled at the Judge, his voice vibrating with passion: “You let your damned tenderfoot owners bring in their lists. Mebbe they don’t know any better. But I ain’t bringin’ in no list. It’s one thing to pass a law and another thing to enforce it!” He sat silent for an instant, glaring at the Judge, who smiled quietly at him, then he turned to Hollis.

“You’ve been carrying on like you was intending to own this here country some day,” he sneered; “with your damned newspaper and your lawyer friend here. What we handed you the other night was just a sample of what you’ll get if you don’t hit the breeze out of this country!” He got to his feet and stood beside the table, glaring around at the three men.

For a moment neither of the three spoke. There was a saturnine, almost mocking, smile on the face of the man who stood at the window. In his expression one could discover much appreciation of the character of the man at whom he was looking—it revealed the fact that he had met such men before—and admired them little. There was no fear in the expression, yet had one of the other men taken the trouble to look at him they would have seen that his right hand was now lingering very close to the butt of the revolver at his hip.

Judge Graney cleared his throat. The smile was still on his face, but a sudden brightness of the eyes and a flush in each cheek showed that Dunlavey’s defiance had affected him. Both he and the man at the window watched closely as Hollis got to his feet and approached Dunlavey.

Hollis’s face was slightly pale, but there was a steady, unwavering gleam in his eyes as he walked to within five feet of Dunlavey and stood quietly beside the table looking at him.

“Dunlavey,” he began slowly, in a soft, even voice, in which there was not a hint of excitement, “I haven’t anything to do with enforcing the law that seems to

have come to Union County. You can defy the law if you please. But I have something to say in reply to what you have said to me. It is this: I haven't any ambition to own the entire country—such talk from a grown man is childish. But I do intend to own the little I've got in spite of you or anyone else. I am not in the least afraid of you. I owe you something on account of the other night and some day I am going to thrash you within an inch of your life!"

Dunlavey's hand fell suggestively to his side. "There's no time like the present," he sneered.

"Of course I know that you carry a gun," said Hollis still evenly, without excitement; "most of you folks out here don't seem to be able to get along without one—it seems to be the fashion. Also, I might add, every man that carries one seems to yearn to use it. But it has always seemed to me that a man who will use a gun without great provocation is a coward!" He smiled grimly into Dunlavey's face.

For an instant Dunlavey did not move. His eyes glittered malevolently as they bored into Hollis's. Then his expression changed until it was a mingling of contempt, incredulity, and mockery.

"So you're thinking of thrashing me?" he sniffed, backing away a little and eyeing Hollis critically. "You slugged me once and you're thinking to do it again. And you think that any man who uses a gun on another is a coward?" He laughed sardonically. "Well, all I've got to say to you is that you ain't got your eye-teeth cut yet." He deliberately turned his back on Hollis and the others and walked to the door. On the threshold he halted, looking back at them all with a sneering smile.

"You know where I live," he said to Judge Graney. "I ain't bringing in no list nor I ain't registering my brand. I don't allow no man to come monkeying around on my range and if you come out there, thinking to run off any of my stock, you're doing it at your own risk!" His gaze went from the Judge to Hollis and his smile grew malignant.

"I'm saying this to you," he said, "no man ain't ever thrashed Bill Dunlavey yet and I ain't allowing that any man is ever going to. Put that in your pipe and smoke it!"

He slammed the door and was gone. Hollis turned from the door to see a dry smile on the face of the man at the window.

"Fire eater, ain't he?" observed the latter, as he caught Hollis's glance.

CHAPTER XVI

THE BEARER OF GOOD NEWS

Hollis smiled. The Judge got to his feet and approached the two men.

“Hollis,” he said, “shake hands with Mr. Allen, of Lazette.”

Allen’s hand came out quickly and was grasped by Hollis’s, both grips being hearty and warm.

“My name’s Ben Allen,” explained the stranger with a smile. “Tacking on a handle like ‘Mister’ would sure make me feel like a stranger to myself.”

“We’ll not quarrel about that,” remarked the Judge with a smile; “we’ll call you Ben.” He looked soberly at Hollis, continuing:

“Allen has been sent over here from Lazette to assist us in establishing the law. He was formerly sheriff of Colfax County, having been defeated by the Cattlemen’s Association because he refused to become a party to its schemes. On several occasions since severing his official connection with Colfax County he has acted in a special capacity for the government. He is an old acquaintance of the new Secretary of the Interior and much trusted by him. He is to be the inquisitor mentioned in the letter which I read in the presence of Dunlavey.”

Hollis looked at Allen with a new interest. After noting again the steady, serene eyes, narrowed always with a slight squint; the firm straight lips, the well set jaws, Hollis mentally decided that the Secretary of the Interior could not have made a better choice. Certainly, if he had served as sheriff of Colfax County, he had had some excellent experiences, for from reading the *Lazette Eagle*, Hollis had acquired considerable knowledge of the character of the inhabitants of Colfax. The editor of the *Eagle* had many times felicitated himself upon the fact that his town (Lazette) had not been built ten miles farther east—in which case he would have been a resident of Union—and ashamed of it.

“I think we need you,” said Hollis simply. “But I imagine you will have to concentrate your efforts upon one ranch only—the Circle Cross. If you make Dunlavey bow to the law you may consider your work finished.”

“I think Dunlavey will change his views of things shortly,” remarked Allen,

quietly, but significantly. He smiled at Hollis. "I have read your paper regularly," he said. "You've got the editor of our paper hopping mad—with your claims about Dry Bottom being superior to Lazette. Also, you've stirred up the Secretary of the Interior some. I was called to Washington three weeks ago and invited to tell what I knew of conditions out here. I didn't exaggerate when I told the Secretary that hell was a more peaceful place for a law loving man to live in. Though," he added with a smile, "I wasn't ever in hell and couldn't be positive. I was just accepting what I've heard preachers say about it. The Secretary asked me if I knowed you and I told him that though I didn't I would be right glad to if you was doing anything in my line. He laughed and said he'd miss his guess if you wasn't making things interesting. Told me to get you to one side and tell you to go to it." He smiled dryly. "According to what I've read in the *Kicker* you don't need to be told that and so I'm keeping my mouth shut."

He dropped his humor and spoke seriously, questioning Hollis about the location of his ranch, listening quietly and attentively to the latter's answers. Half an hour later after having arranged with Judge Graney for the registering of his brand and the listing of his cattle, Hollis left the court house and went to his office. In running through his mail he came upon Judge Graney's notification and also another letter, postmarked "Chicago," which drew a pleased smile to his face. A few minutes later Norton came in, and though Hollis had done very little on the paper he rose and smilingly announced his intention of returning to the Circle Bar.

"We'll take the Coyote trail," he informed Norton, after they had mounted and were riding away from the *Kicker* office; "I'm stopping for a moment at the Hazelton cabin. Of course," he added, seeing a knowing grin on Norton's face, "I expected you would be suspicious—married folks have a habit of adopting a supercilious and all-wise attitude toward those of us who have been unfortunate enough to remain in a state of single blessedness."

"Meanin' that you're some sore because you ain't got hooked up yet?" grinned Norton.

"Perhaps," laughed Hollis. "But I have been thinking seriously of trying to reach your altitude."

"Girl willin'?" queried Norton, as they rode down through a little gully, then up to a stretch of plain that brought them to the Coyote trail.

"That's where I am all at sea," returned Hollis. He laughed. "I suppose you've read Ace's poem in the *Kicker*?" He caught Norton's nod and continued. "Well,

Ace succeeded in crowding a whole lot of truth into that effort. Of course you remember the first couplet:

““Woman—she don’t need no tooter,
Be she skule ma’am or biscut shooter.””

he quoted.

“A woman seems to have an intuitive knowledge of man’s mental processes. At least she gauges him pretty well without letting him into the mystery of how she does it. A man can never tell where he will land.” Ace came very near striking the nail on the head when he wrote in the second couplet that:

‘She has most curyus ways about her,
Which leads a man to kinda dout her.’

“And then, knowing man so well, she absolutely refuses to let him know anything of her thoughts. Which again, Ace has noted in this manner:

‘Though lookin’ at her is sure a pleasure;
There ain’t no way to get her measure.
I reckon she had man on the run
A long while before the world begun.’

“That seems to be the exact truth,” he laughed.

Norton grinned at him. “You single guys have certa’nly got a whole lot to learn,” he said, “for a fact. Of course if she’s any kind of a woman at all she’s got him runnin’. But which way?”

“Why, toward her, of course!” laughed Hollis.

Norton’s smile widened. “You’ve tumbled to that, then,” he observed dryly. “Then you’re ready for the next lesson.”

“And that?” questioned Hollis.

Norton smiled with ineffable pity. “Lordy!” he laughed; “you single guys don’t know a thing not a durned thing!”

After that they rode on in silence. When they came in sight of the Hazelton cabin Norton reined in his pony and sat motionless in the saddle, grinning at Hollis.

“You run along now,” he advised. “I’ll be hittin’ her off toward the Dry Bottom trail for the rest of the way—I sorta like that trail better anyway.”

He urged his pony off at a tangent and Hollis continued on his way. He found Nellie alone, her brother having gone out on the range. She came out on the porch, hearing his pony’s hoofs on the hard sand and rocks of the trail, and there was a sincere welcome in her eyes. It was the first time that he had visited the

cabin since he had returned to the Circle Bar.

“Oh!” she said delightedly. And then, aware of the sudden light that had come into Hollis’s eyes at this evidence of interest, she blushed and looked down at the hem of her skirt, nervously pushing it out with the toe of her shoe.

During the days of Hollis’s convalescence at the Hazelton cabin he had seen the young woman in many moods. In none of them, however, had she seemed so attractive as now. Confusion became her, he decided, and he regarded her with a new interest as he sat on his pony, awaiting her invitation to dismount. It came presently.

“It is frightfully hot,” she said, moving over to where stood two chairs—one in which he had passed many hours during the days of his convalescence, the other in which she had sat quite often—near him. Not until now did he realize how full and satisfying those days had been. As he dismounted and tied his pony to one of the slender porch columns he smiled—thinking of Norton’s question during their discussion of Ace’s poem. “Of course”—the range boss had said—“if she’s any kind of a woman at all she’s got him runnin’. But which way?” Of course—literally—she did not have him running, but he knew that some uncommon passion had gripped him and that he was unaccountably pleased.

His smile grew when he remembered her sudden indignation over his thoughtless statement that women had never interested him. Of course he would not tell her that he felt a serious interest in *one* woman. When he dropped into his favorite chair, removing his hat and mopping the perspiration from his forehead with his handkerchief, he caught her looking swiftly at the scar under his right eye—which would always be a reminder of his experience on the night of the storm. She saw his brows contract in a frown.

“You have quite recovered,” she said; “except for that slight scar under the eye you are the same as before the meeting with Dunlavey’s men.”

He looked beyond her at the tawny mountains that rose in the distance,—miles on the other side of the big basin—swimming in the shimmering blur of white sky—somber guardians of a mysterious world. What secret did they guard? What did they know of this world of eternal sunlight, of infinite distance? Did they know as much of the world upon which they frowned as he knew of the heart of the slender, motherly girl whose eyes betrayed her each time he looked into them?

A smile that lurked deep within him did not show in his face—it was unborn and it gripped him strangely, creating a sensation in his breast that he could not analyze, but which pleaded to be expressed. He could not express it—now. He

feared to trust himself and so he fought it down, assuring himself that it was not yet time. But he knew that he was not the same as before his experience with Dunlavey on the night of the storm. Something had stolen into his heart and was enthroned there; something deeper than a mere scar—a girl who had mothered him in his extremity; who had hovered over him, attending to his bruises, binding his wounds, tenderly smoothing his brow during the days and nights of the fever; attending his wants during convalescence; erecting a citadel in his heart which would stand as a monument to his gratitude. No, not gratitude merely. The smile was born. He turned and looked at her, meeting her eyes fairly, and hers dropped in confusion.

“Do you think that I am the same as before?” he asked suddenly.

She stood up, radiant, pointing a finger toward the Coyote trail. “Ed is coming!” she declared.

Before he could say another word she was down off the porch and running toward her brother, holding his horse while he dismounted, kissing him, patting him lovingly as they came toward the porch.

The latter greeted Hollis warmly. “A fellow couldn’t help but feel good with a sister like that—now could he?” he inquired as he came upon the porch and took the chair which Nellie had vacated. She had disappeared into the cabin, not even looking at Hollis, but she could not have heard Hollis’s reply had she remained. For it was wordless. There are times when men understand perfectly without speech.

Hollis stayed for dinner. Nellie was radiantly silent during the meal, attending to the wants of the two men, listening while they discussed recent happenings in the county. Ed was much pleased to hear of the coming of Ben Allen.

“That guy is business—through and through,” he assured Hollis. “He was the best sheriff Colfax County ever had—and it’s had some good ones. Allen’s quiet, but there ain’t anyone going to herdrive him. Some have tried it, but they found it didn’t pay and so they don’t try it any more.”

After dinner they went out on the porch for a smoke, leaving Nellie inside. They could hear her singing as she washed the dishes. Hazelton smiled as a particularly happy note reached his ears. “I don’t know what’s got into Sis,” he said, flashing a swift glance at Hollis. “I don’t know as I ever heard her sing that well before.”

Hollis made no reply and the conversation turned to the drought—as all

conversations did during that period. Word had come to Hazelton of Dunlavey's warning to the cattle owners. He had heard also of Hollis's announced intention of taking sides with the small owners.

"Dunlavey's ten days is up the day after tomorrow," said Hazelton. "If Dunlavey starts anything what are you going to do?"

"That will depend on what Dunlavey starts," smiled Hollis.

"H'm!" inexpressively grunted Hazelton. He flashed a glance at the face of the young man beside him, noting the firm mouth, the steady eyes, and the faint, grim smile. "H'm!" he said again. "I suppose you know who you're going to give your water to?" he questioned.

Hollis nodded. "To men who refused to help my father when he needed help," he returned.

Hazelton smiled oddly. "I've heard about that," he said. He laughed. "It strikes me that I wouldn't give such men any water," he added.

Hollis turned and looked at him, meeting his gaze fairly, and holding it.

"Yes, you would, Hazelton," he said, a broad smile on his face.

"How do you know that?" queried the latter, slightly defiant.

Hollis motioned toward the kitchen door. "I know," he said; "you're her brother."

"Well," began Hazelton hesitatingly,— "I—"

The screen door opened—slammed, and Nellie Hazelton came out upon the porch. She had found time to change her morning dress for a soft, fluffy creation of some sort, and she stood before them, flushing slightly as both looked at her, a picture that smote Hollis's heart with a sudden longing. Only one glance did she give him and then she was over near Ed's chair, leaning over him, stroking his hair.

For a long time Hollis sat, watching them with sympathetic, appreciative eyes. Then he thought of the letter in his pocket, the one postmarked "Chicago," which he had discovered at the *Kicker* office on returning from the court house. He drew it from his pocket and read the legend in the upper left hand corner:

"Dr. J. J. Hammond, — Hospital, Chicago, Ill."

He studied the legend for some little time, his thoughts busy with the contents of the envelope. Fortunately, his letter to the great physician had fallen into the hands of the son, Tom Hammond, and the latter, not forgetting his old

schoolmate, had appealed to his father. This was what the surgeon had written in the letter—he would not have agreed to accept the case had it not been for the fact that Hollis had been, and was Tom’s friend. He would be pleased if the patient would make the journey to Chicago within a month, that he might be able to take up his case before entering upon some scientific investigations which had been deferred a long time, etc.

Hollis had been reading the letter again. He finished it and looked up, to see Ed and Nellie watching him. He flushed and smiled, holding out the letter to Nellie.

“I beg your pardon,” he said. “I found this interesting. Perhaps you will also find it so.”

He leaned back with a smile and watched them. But he did not, watch long. He saw Nellie start, saw the color slowly recede from her face, saw her hands clench tightly—as she began to read the letter. He turned away, not caring to watch them during that sacred moment in which they would read the line of hope that the great surgeon had written. He looked—it seemed—for a long time down the Coyote trail, and when he finally turned his head toward them he saw Ed Hazelton sitting erect in his chair, apparently stunned by the news. But before him, close to him, so close that he felt her breath in his face—her eyes wide with delight, thankfulness—and perhaps something more—Nellie was kneeling.

“Oh, thank you, Mr. Hollis!” she said earnestly, her lips all a-quiver; “Thank you, and God bless you!”

He tried to sit erect; tried to open his lips to tell her that he had done only what any man would have done under the circumstances. But he moved not, nor did he speak, for her arms had gone around his shoulders, and her lips were suddenly pressed firmly and quickly to his. Then he was released and she turned, crying:

“Come and thank him, Ed!”

But Ed had taken himself off—perhaps he did not care to allow anyone to witness his joy.

Some time during the evening Hollis took his departure from the Hazelton cabin. Ed had come back, silently taking Hollis’s hand and gripping it earnestly. And before Hollis had departed Ed had taken himself into the house. Perhaps he divined that there were other’s joys beside his.

That night before retiring Nellie stole softly into her brother’s room and kissed him lightly on the forehead. That same night also Hollis rode up to the Circle Bar corral gate—singing. Norton and Potter were sitting on the gallery, waiting

for him. While Hollis was removing the saddle from his pony Norton rose from his chair and smiled at Potter.

“Well,” he said to the latter, “I’m goin’ to bed.” He moved a few steps toward the door and then turned and looked back at Potter, who had also risen. He laughed.

“Listen, Potter,” he said. Then he quoted:

“Woman—she don’t need no tooter
Be she skule ma’am or biscuit shooter.”

He hesitated and looked again at Potter. “Why,” said the latter, puzzled, “that’s from Ace’s poem!”

“Sure,” laughed Norton; “that’s just what it is!”

CHAPTER XVII

THE RUSTLER

The following day Hollis rode to town over the Dry Bottom trail. Had he followed a perfectly natural inclination he would have taken the Coyote, for it would have brought him to the Hazelton cabin. But he succeeded in forcing himself to go the other way, arguing that Nellie and her brother might wish to be alone to consider the great good fortune that had come upon them.

And so they did, though had Hollis appeared to them this morning as they sat upon the porch he would have been assured of a royal welcome. Indeed, during the early morning hours Nellie had cast many furtive, expectant glances down the Coyote trail. When eight o'clock came and Hollis did not appear she gave him up.

The dawn found her kneeling beside her brother's bed.

"Ed!" she said, leaning over him, waking him, her eyes alight with joy; "Ed, he says you can be cured!"

He struggled and sat up, rubbing his eyes.

"Gosh, sis!" he said in an awed voice. "Then it's true! I was afraid I'd been dreaming!"

"It is no dream," she returned ecstatically; "it is reality—beautiful reality! Wasn't it simply *great* of him to take such an interest in us?"

"Us?" grinned Ed, noting her crimson, happy face. "Well, mebbe he did it for *us*," he added subtly, "but I take it I've got a right to have another opinion on that."

She fled from him without answering and a little later he heard her singing as she prepared breakfast. After the meal Ed made a short trip out into the basin to look after his cattle and then returned to the cabin. Sitting on the porch he and Nellie devoted several hours to a grave discussion of the situation. They discovered that it had a serious side.

In the first place there was the dangerous nature of the operation. Here Ed laughed away his sister's fears by assuring her that he had an excellent

constitution and that since the fall from the pony had not killed him he was in no danger from the knife. If Nellie entertained any doubt of this she wisely remained silent, though Ed could see that she was not entirely reassured. He swept away her last objection to this forbidding feature when he told her that he preferred taking the risk to living in constant dread of a recurrence of an acute attack of his malady—such as he had experienced when he had attacked Hollis in Devil’s Hollow.

There were many other things to be discussed—chiefly the care of the cattle and the cabin during his absence in Chicago. He would not listen to her suggestion to accompany him—he would prefer to have her remain at the cabin. Or he would try to arrange with Hollis for her to stay at the Circle Bar. There she would have Mrs. Norton for a companion, and she might ride each day to the cabin. He was certain that Hollis would arrange to have his men care for the cattle. He assured her that he would settle that question with Hollis when the latter passed the cabin that night on his return to the Circle Bar. Of course Hollis would take the Coyote trail to-night, he insinuated, grinning hugely at the blushes that reached her face.

But Hollis did not pass the cabin that night. He had taken the Dry Bottom trail on his return to the Circle Bar.

He had accomplished very little that day on account of the heat—and a certain vision that had troubled him—taking his mind off his work and projecting it to a little cabin in a small basin, to a porch where sat a girl—the girl of his vision. She had voluntarily kissed him. Had it been all on account of gratitude? Of course—though—Well, memory of the kiss still lingered and he was willing to forgive her the slight lapse of modesty because he had been the recipient.

There had been one interesting development in Dry Bottom during the day. All day the town had swarmed with ranch owners who had come in to the court house to list their cattle for taxation and register their brands. Shortly after noon Ben Allen had dropped into the *Kicker* office with the news that every owner in the county with the exception of Dunlavey had responded to the law’s demands.

To Hollis’s inquiry regarding the course he would pursue in forcing Dunlavey to comply with the law, Allen remarked with a smile that there was “plenty of time.” He had had much experience with men of the Dunlavey type.

Potter and Hollis exchanged few words during the ride to the Circle Bar. The heat—the eternal, scorching, blighting heat—still continued; the dust had become an almost unbearable irritation. During the trip to the ranch the two men came upon an arroyo over which Hollis had passed many times. At a water hole where

he had often watered his horse they came upon several dead steers stretched prone in the green slime. The water had disappeared; the spring that had provided it had dried and there was nothing to tell of it except a small stretch of damp earth, baking in the sun. The steers were gaunt, lanky creatures, their hides stretched tight as drum-heads over their ribs, their tongues lolling out, black and swollen, telling mutely of their long search for water and their suffering. Coyotes had been at work on them; here lay a heap of bare bones; there a skull glistened in the white sunlight.

A few miles farther on they came upon one of the punchers from the Circle Y with a calf thrown over the saddle in front of him. He was driving several gaunt, drooping cattle toward the Rabbit-Ear. The calf bellowed piteously at sight of Hollis and Potter. The puncher hailed them.

“You’re Hollis, of the Circle Bar, ain’t you?” he said when the latter had spurred his pony close to him. At Hollis’s nod he grinned ironically. “Hot!” he said, coming quickly to the universal topic of conversation; “I reckon this wouldn’t be called hot in some places—in hell, for instance. Say,” he said as he saw Hollis’s lips straighten, “to-morrow the ten days is up. Mebbe it’ll be hotter then. The damned skunk!”

Of course he referred to Dunlavey—the latter’s threat to drive all foreign cattle from the Rabbit-Ear had been carried far and wide by riders—the whole country knew of it. There had been much condemnation and some speculation, but there was nothing to be done until after the tenth day. Even then much depended upon Hollis’s attitude. Would he make war upon Dunlavey in defense of the men who had refused aid to his father in time of need?

Hollis was still of the opinion that Dunlavey would not attempt to carry out his threat. He smiled at the malevolent expression in the puncher’s eyes.

“Somehow,” he said quietly, “I have always been able to distinguish between empty boast and determination. Dunlavey has done some foolish things, no doubt, and is doing a foolish thing in defying the law, but I don’t anticipate that he will do anything quite so rash as to further antagonize the small owners.”

The puncher sat erect and laughed harshly. “You don’t?” he inquired in an over-gentle, polite voice. “Mister Hollis,” he added, as the latter looked quickly at him, “you ain’t heard nothin’ from the Circle Bar to-day, I reckon?”

Hollis’s answer was negative. The Circle Y man’s face grew suddenly serious. “You ain’t! Well, then, that’s the reason you’re talkin’ so. The last I heard from the Circle Bar was that Norton an’ some of your men had captured one of

Dunlavey's men—Greasy—rebrandin' some Circle Bar steers an' was gettin' ready to string him up. I reckon mebbe you'd call that doin' somethin'!"

Hollis straightened. He had suddenly forgotten the heat, the dust, and the problem of water.

"How long ago did you hear this?" he demanded sharply.

"'Bout an hour ago," returned the Circle Y man. "I was rustlin' up these strays down in the basin an' headin' them toward the crick when I runs plum into a man from the Three Bar outfit. He was plum excited over it. Said they'd ketched Greasy down by the Narrows sometime after noon an'—"

But the Circle Y man finished to the empty air for Hollis's pony had leaped forward into a cloud of dust, running desperately.

The Circle Y man sat erect, startled. "Well, I'll be—" he began, speaking to Potter. But the printer was following his chief and was already out of hearing. "Now what do you suppose—" again began the Circle Y man, and then fell silent, suddenly smitten with the uselessness of speech. He yelled at his gaunt steers and shifted the calf in front of him to a more comfortable position. Then he proceeded on his way. But as he rode his lips curled, his eyes narrowed, and speech again returned to him. "Now why in hell would a man get so damned excited over hearin' that someone was goin' to string up a measly rustler?"

The interrogation remained unanswered. The Circle Y man continued on his way, watching the fast disappearing dust clouds on the Circle Bar trail.

When Hollis reached the Circle Bar ranchhouse there was no one about. He rode up to the front gallery and dismounted, thinking that perhaps Norton would be in the house. But before he had crossed the gallery Mrs. Norton came to the door. She was pale and laboring under great excitement, but instantly divined Hollis's errand.

"They've taken him down to the cottonwood" she told Hollis, pointing toward the grove in which Hollis had tried the six-shooter that Norton had given him the first day after his arrival at the ranch. "They are going to hang him! Hurry!"

Hollis was back in the saddle in an instant and racing his pony down past the bunk house at break-neck speed. He urged the little animal across an intervening stretch of plain, up a slight rise, down into a shallow valley, and into the cottonwood, riding recklessly through the trees and urging the pony at a headlong pace through the underbrush—crashing it down, scaring the rattlers from their concealment, and startling the birds from their lofty retreats.

For ten minutes he rode as he had never ridden before. And then he came upon them. They stood at the base of a fir-balsam, whose gnarled limbs spread flatly outward—three Circle Bar men, a half dozen from the various outfits whose herds grazed his range, and the rustler—Greasy—a rope knotted about his neck, standing directly under one of the out-spreading limbs of the tree, his head bowed, but his face wearing a mocking, defiant grin. The rope had been thrown over the limb and several men were holding it, preparatory to drawing it taut. Norton was standing near, his face pale, his lips straight and grim with determination. Apparently Hollis had arrived just in time.

None of the men moved from their places when Hollis dismounted, but all looked at him as though expecting him to express approval of what they were about to do. Several lowered their gaze with embarrassment when they saw that he did not approve.

“What is all this about, Norton?” he asked, speaking to the latter, who had stepped forward and now stood beside Greasy. Whatever excitement had resulted from the sudden discovery that his men had captured a rustler and were about to hang him, together with the strain of his hard ride to the cottonwood, had disappeared, and Hollis’s voice was quiet as he addressed his range boss.

Norton smiled grimly. “We were roundin’ up a few strays just the other side of the Narrows this morning, and Ace and Weary were workin’ down the river. In that little stretch of gully just the other side of the Narrows they came upon this sneak brandin’ two of our beeves through a piece of wet blanket. He’d already done it an’ so we ketched him with the goods. It’s the first time we’ve ever been able to lay a hand on one of Dunlavey’s pluguglies, an’ we was figgerin’ on makin’ an example of him.”

Hollis met Norton’s grim gaze and smiled. “I want to thank you—all of you, for guarding my interests so zealously,” he said. “There is no doubt that this man richly deserves hanging—that is, of course, according to your code of ethics. I understand that is the way things have been done heretofore. But I take it none of you want to make me appear ridiculous?”

“Sure not,” came several voices in chorus.

Hollis laughed. “But you took the surest way of making me appear so,” he returned.

He saw Norton’s face flush and he knew that the latter had already grasped the significance of his words. But the others, simpler of mind, reasoning by no involved process, looked at him, plainly puzzled. He would have to explain more

fully to them. He did so. When he had shown them that in hanging the rustler he would be violating the principle that he had elected to defend, they stood before him abashed, thoroughly disarmed. All except Ace. The poet's mind was still active.

"I reckon you might say you didn't know nothin' about us hangin' him?" he suggested.

"So I might," returned Hollis. "But people would not think so. And there is my conscience. It wouldn't be such a weight upon it—the hanging of this man; I believe I would enjoy standing here and watching him stretch your rope. But I would not be able to reconcile the action with the principle for which I am fighting. I believe none of you men would trust me very much if I advocated the law one day and broke it the next. The application of this principle would be much the same as if I stole a horse to-day and to-morrow had you arrested for stealing one."

"That's so," they chorused, and fell silent, regarding him with a new interest.

"But what are you goin' to do with the cuss?" queried one man.

"We have a sheriff in Dry Bottom, I expect?" questioned Hollis.

Grins appeared on the faces of several of the men; the prisoner's face lighted.

"Oh, yes," said one; "I reckon Bill Watkins is the sheriff all right."

"Then we'll take him to Bill Watkins," decided Hollis.

The grins on the faces of several of the men grew. Norton laughed.

"I reckon you ain't got acquainted with Bill yet, Hollis," he said. "Bill owes his place to Dunlavey. There has never been a rustler convicted by Watkins yet. I reckon there won't ever be any convicted—unless he's been caught stealin' Dunlavey's cattle. Bill's justice is a joke."

Hollis smiled grimly. He had learned that much from Judge Graney. He did not expect to secure justice, but he wished to have something tangible upon which to work to force the law into the country. His duty in the matter consisted only in delivering the prisoner into the custody of the authorities, which in this case was the sheriff. The sheriff would be held responsible for him. He said this much to the men. There was no other lawful way.

He was not surprised that they agreed with him. They had had much experience in dealing with Dunlavey; they had never been successful with the old methods of warfare and they were quite willing to trust to Hollis's judgment.

“I reckon you’re just about right,” said one who had spoken before. “Stringin’ this guy up would finish him all right. But that wouldn’t settle the thing. What’s needed is to get it fixed up for good an’ all.”

“Correct!” agreed Hollis; “you’ve got it exactly. We might hang a dozen men for stealing cattle and we could go on hanging them. We’ve got no right to hang anyone—we’ve got a law for that purpose. Then let us make the law act!”

The prisoner had stood in his place, watching the men around him, his face betraying varying emotions. When it had been finally agreed to take him to Dry Bottom and deliver him over to the sheriff he grinned broadly. But he said nothing as they took the rope from around his neck, forced him to mount a horse and surrounding him, rode out of the cottonwood toward the Circle Bar ranchhouse.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE TENTH DAY

Dusk had fallen by the time Greasy had been brought to the bunkhouse, and Mrs. Norton had lighted the kerosene lamps when Norton and Hollis, assured of the safety of the prisoner, left the bunkhouse and went into the house for supper. Potter had washed the dust of travel from him and when Norton and Hollis arrived he was seated on the porch, awaiting them. Mrs. Norton greeted them with a smile. Her eyes expressed gratitude as they met Hollis's.

"I am so glad you were in time," she said. "I told Neil not to do it, but he was determined and wouldn't listen to me."

"You might have tried 'bossing' him," suggested Hollis, remembering his range boss's words on the occasion of his first meeting with Norton's wife. He looked straight at Norton, his eyes narrowing quizzically. "You know you told me once that—"

"Mebbe I was stretchin' things a little when I told you that," interrupted Norton, grinning shamelessly. "If a man told the truth all the time he'd have a hard time keepin' ahead of a woman."

"'Woman—she don't need no tooter,'" quoted Hollis. "It has taken you a long time to discover what Ace has apparently known for years. And Ace is only a bachelor."

Norton's eyes lighted. "You're gettin' back at me for what I said to you the day before yesterday—when you stopped off at Hazelton's," he declared. "All the same you'll know more about women when you've had more experience with them. When I told you that I'd been 'bossed,' I didn't mean that I'd been bossed regular. No woman that knows just how much she can run a man ever lets him know that she's bossin' him. Mebbe she'll act like she's lettin' him have his own way. But she's bossin' him just the same. He sort of likes it, I reckon. At least it's only when a man gets real mad that he does a little bossin' on his own account. And then, like as not, he'll find that he's made a big mistake. Like I did to-day about hangin' Greasy, for instance."

Hollis bowed gravely to Mrs. Norton. "I think he ought to be forgiven, Mrs.

Norton,” he said. “Day before yesterday he presumed to lecture me on the superiority of the married male over the unmarried one. And now he humbly admits to being bossed. What then becomes of his much talked of superiority? Shall I—free and unbossed—admit inferiority?”

Mrs. Norton smiled wisely as she moved around the table, arranging the dishes. “I couldn’t decide that,” she said, “until it is explained to me why so many men are apparently so eager to engage a boss.”

“I reckon that settles that argument!” gloated Norton.

Had this conversation taken place two months before Hollis might have answered, Why, indeed, were men so eager to engage a boss? Two months before he might have answered cynically, remembering the unhappiness of his parents. That he did not answer now showed that he was no longer cynical; that he had experienced a change of heart.

Of course Mrs. Norton knew this—Norton must have told her. He could appreciate the subtle mockery that had suggested the question, but he did not purpose to allow Norton to sit there and enjoy the confusion that was sure to overtake him did he attempt to continue the argument with Mrs. Norton. He was quite certain that Norton anticipated such an outcome.

“Perhaps Norton can answer that?” he suggested mildly.

“I ain’t no good at guessin’ riddles,” jeered Norton. “But I reckon you know—if you wanted to tell.”

But Hollis did not tell, and the conversation shifted to other subjects. After supper they went out upon the porch. A slight breeze had sprung up with the dusk, though the sky was still cloudless. At ten o’clock, when they retired, the breeze had increased in velocity, sighing mournfully through the trees in the vicinity of the ranchhouse, though there was no perceptible change in the atmosphere—it seemed that the wind was merely shifting the heat waves from one point to another.

“A good, decent rain would save lots of trouble to-morrow,” said Norton as he and Hollis stood on the porch, taking a last look at the sky before going to bed.

“Do you really think Dunlavey will carry out his threat?” questioned Hollis. “Somehow I can’t help but think that he was bluffing when he said it.”

“He don’t do much bluffin’,” declared Norton. “At least he ain’t done much up to now.”

“But there is plenty of water in the Rabbit-Ear,” returned Hollis; “plenty for all the cattle that are here now.”

Norton flashed a swift glance at him. “That’s because you don’t know this country,” he said. “Four years ago we had a dry spell. Not so bad as this, but bad enough. The Rabbit-Ear held up good enough for two months. Then she went dry sudden. There wasn’t water enough in her to fill a thimble. I reckon you ain’t been watchin’ her for the last day or so?”

Hollis admitted that he had not seen the river within that time. Norton laughed shortly.

“She’s dry in spots now,” he informed Hollis. “There ain’t any water at all in the shallows. It’s tricklin’ through in some places, but mostly there’s nothin’ but water holes an’ dried, baked mud. In two days more, if it don’t rain, there won’t be water enough for our own stock. Then what?”

“There will be water for every steer on the range as long as it lasts,” declared Hollis grimly. “After that we’ll all take our medicine together.”

“Good!” declared Norton. “That’s what I expected of you. But I don’t think it’s goin’ to work out that way. Weary was ridin’ the Razor Back this mornin’ and he says he saw Dunlavey an’ Yuma and some more Circle Cross guys nosin’ around behind some brush on the other side of the creek. They all had rifles.”

Hollis’s face paled slightly. “Where are the other men—Train and the rest?” he inquired.

“Down on Razor Back,” Norton informed him; “they sneaked down there after Weary told me about seein’ Dunlavey on the other side. Likely they’re scattered by now—keepin’ an eye out for trouble.”

“Well,” decided Hollis, “there isn’t any use of looking for it. It finds all of us soon enough. To-morrow is the tenth day and I am sure that if Dunlavey carries out his threat he won’t start anything until to-morrow. Therefore I am going to bed.” He laughed. “Call me if you hear any shooting. I may want to take a hand in it.”

They parted—Hollis going to his room and Norton stepping down off the porch to take a turn down around the pasture to look after the horses.

Hollis was tired after his experiences of the day and soon dropped off to sleep. It seemed that he had been asleep only a few minutes, however, when he felt a hand shaking him, and a voice—Norton’s voice.

“Hollis!” said the range boss. “Hollis! Wake up!”

Hollis sat erect, startled into perfect wakefulness. He could not see Norton’s face in the dark, but he swung around and sat on the edge of the bed.

“What’s up?” he demanded. “Have they started?”

He heard Norton laugh, and there was satisfaction in the laugh. “Started?” he repeated. “Well, I reckon something’s started. Listen!”

Hollis listened. A soft patter on the roof, a gentle sighing of the wind, and a distant, low rumble reached his ears. He started up. “Why, it’s raining!” he said.

Norton chuckled. “Rainin’!” he chirped joyously. “Well, I reckon it might be called that by someone who didn’t know what rain is. But I’m tellin’ you that it ain’t rainin’—it’s pourin’! It’s a cloud-burst, that’s what it is!”

Hollis did not answer. He ran to the window and stuck his head out. The rain came against his head and shoulders in stinging, vicious slants. There was little lightning, and what there was seemed distant, as though the storm covered a vast area. He could dimly see the pasture—the horses huddled in a corner under the shelter that had been erected for them; he could see the tops of the trees in the cottonwood grove—bending, twisting, leaning from the wind; the bunkhouse door was open, a stream of light illuminating a space in which stood several of the cowboys. Some were attired as usual, others but scantily, but all were outside in the rain, singing, shouting, and pounding one another in an excess of joy. For half an hour Hollis stood at the window, watching them, looking out at the storm. There was no break anywhere in the sky from horizon to horizon. Plainly there was to be plenty of rain. Convinced of this he drew a deep breath of satisfaction, humor moving him.

“I do hope Dunlavey and his men don’t get wet.” he said. He went to his trousers and drew forth his watch. He could not see the face of it and so he carried it to the window. The hands pointed to fifteen minutes after one. “It’s the tenth day,” he smiled. “Dunlavey might have saved himself considerable trouble in the future if he had placed a little trust in Providence—and not antagonized the small owners. I don’t think Providence has been looking out for my interests, but I wonder who will stand the better in the estimation of the people of this county—Dunlavey or me?”

He smiled again, sighed with satisfaction, and rolled into bed. For a long time he lay, listening to the patter of the rain on the roof, and then dropped off to sleep.

CHAPTER XIX

HOW A RUSTLER ESCAPED

When Hollis got out of bed at six o'clock that same morning he heard surprising sounds outside. Slipping on his clothes he went to the window and looked out. Men were yelling at one another, screeching delightful oaths, capering about hatless, coatless, in the rain that still came steadily down. The corral yard was a mire of sticky mud in which the horses reared and plunged in evident appreciation of the welcome change from dry heat to life-giving moisture. Riderless horses stood about, no one caring about the saddles, several calves capered awkwardly in the pasture. Norton's dog—about which he had joked to Hollis during the latter's first ride to the Circle Bar—was yelping joyously and running madly from one man to another.

Norton himself stood down by the door of the bunkhouse, grinning with delight. Near him stood Lemuel Train, and several of the other small ranchers whose stock had grazed for more than two weeks on the Circle Bar range without objection from Hollis. They saw him and motioned for him to come down, directing original oaths at him for sleeping so late on so "fine a morning."

He dressed hastily and went down. They all ate breakfast in the mess house, the cook being adjured to "spread it on for all he was worth"—which he did. Certainly no one left the mess house hungry. During the meal Lemuel Train made a speech on behalf of himself and the other owners who had enjoyed Hollis's hospitality, assuring him that they were "with him" from now on. Then they departed, each going his separate way to round up his cattle and drive them back to the home ranch.

The rain continued throughout the day and far into the night. The dried, gasping country absorbed water until it was sated and then began to shed it off into the arroyos, the gullies, the depressions, and the river beds. Every hollow overflowed with it; it seemed there could never be another drought.

Before dawn on the following day all the small ranchers had departed. Several of them, on their way to their home ranches, stopped off at the Circle Bar to shake hands with Hollis and assure him of their appreciation. Lemuel Train did not forget to curse Dunlavey.

“We ain’t likely to forget how he stood on the water proposition,” he said.

After Train had departed Norton stood looking after him. Then he turned and looked at Hollis, his eyes narrowing quizzically. “You’ve got in right with that crowd,” he said. “Durned if I don’t believe you knowed all the time that it was goin’ to rain before Dunlavey’s tenth day was over!”

Hollis smiled oddly. “Perhaps,” he returned; “there is no law, moral or otherwise, to prevent a man from looking a little ahead.”

After breakfast Hollis gave orders to have Greasy prepared for travel, and an hour later he and the range boss, both armed with rifles, rode out of the corral yard with Greasy riding between them and took the Dry Bottom trail.

The earth had already dried; the trail was hard, level, and dustless, and traveling was a pleasure. But neither of the three spoke a word to one another during the entire trip to Dry Bottom. Greasy bestrode his horse loosely, carelessly defiant; Norton kept a watchful eye on him, and Hollis rode steadily, his gaze fixed thoughtfully on the trail.

At ten o’clock they rode into Dry Bottom. There were not many persons about, but those who were gave instant evidence of interest in the three by watching them closely as they rode down the street to the sheriff’s office, dismounted, and disappeared inside.

The sheriff’s office was in a little frame shanty not over sixteen feet square, crude and unfinished. There were a front and back door, two windows—one in the side facing the court house, the other in the front. For furniture there were a bench, two chairs, some shelves, a cast iron stove, a wooden box partly filled with saw-dust which was used as a cuspidor, and a rough wooden table which served as a desk. In a chair beside the desk sat a tall, lean-faced man, with a nose that suggested an eagle’s beak, with its high, thin, arched bridge, little, narrowed, shifting eyes, and a hard mouth whose lips were partly concealed under a drooping, tobacco-stained mustache. He turned as the three men entered, leaning back in his chair, his legs a-sprawl, motioning them to the chairs and the bench. They filed in silently. Greasy dropped carelessly into one of the chairs, Norton took another near him, but Hollis remained standing.

“You are the sheriff, I suppose?” inquired the latter.

The official spat copiously into the wooden box without removing his gaze from the three visitors.

“Yep,” he returned shortly, his voice coming with a truculent snap. “You wantin’

the sheriff?"

Hollis saw a swift, significant glance pass between him and Greasy and he smiled slightly.

"Yes," he returned quietly; "we want you. We are delivering this man into your custody."

"What's he done?" demanded the sheriff.

"I charge him with stealing two of my steers," returned Hollis. "Several of my men discovered him at work the day before yesterday and—"

"Hold on a minute now!" interrupted the sheriff. "Let's git this thing goin' accordin' to the law." He spat again into the wooden box, cocked his head sideways and surveyed Hollis with a glance in which there was much insolence and contempt. "Who might you be?" he questioned.

"My name is Hollis," returned the latter quietly, his eyes meeting the other's steadily. "I own the Circle Bar."

"H'm!" The sheriff crossed his legs and stuck his thumbs into the arm-holes of his vest, revealing a nickle-plated star on the lapel of the latter. "H'm. Your name's Hollis, an' you own the Circle Bar. Seems I've heard of you." He squinted his eyes at Hollis. "You're Jim Hollis's boy, ain't you?" His eyes flashed with a sudden, contemptuous light. "Tenderfoot, ain't you? Come out here to try an' show folks how to run things?"

Hollis's face slowly paled. He saw Greasy grinning. "I suppose it makes little difference to you what I am or what I came out here for," he said quietly; "though, if I were to be required to give an opinion I should say that there is room for improvement in this county in the matter of applying its laws."

The sheriff laughed harshly. "You'll know more about this country after you've been here a while," he sneered.

"Mebbe he'll know more about how to run a law shebang, too," dryly observed Norton, "after he's watched Bill Watkins run her a little."

"I don't reckon anyone ast you to stick your gab in this here affair?" demanded the sheriff of Norton.

"No," returned Norton, drawling, "no one asked me. But while we're handin' out compliments we might as well all have a hand in it. It strikes me that when a man's runnin' a law shop he ought to run her."

“I reckon I’ll run her without any help from you, Norton!” snapped the sheriff.

“Why, sure!” agreed the latter, his gaze level as his eyes met the sheriff’s, his voice even and sarcastic. “But I’m tellin’ you that this man’s my friend an’ if there’s any more of them compliments goin’ to be handed around I’m warnin’ you that you want to hand them out soft an’ gentle like. That’s all. I reckon we c’n now proceed.”

The sheriff’s face bloated poisonously. He flashed a malignant glance at Hollis. “Well,” he snapped, “what’s the charge?”

“I have already told you,” returned Hollis. “It is stealing cattle.”

“How stealin’ them?” demanded the Sheriff truculently.

“Changing the brand,” Hollis informed him. He related how Ace and Weary had come upon the prisoner while the latter was engaged in changing his brand to the Circle Cross.

“They see him brandin’?” questioned the sheriff when Hollis had concluded.

Hollis told him that the two men had come upon Greasy after the brand had been applied, but that the cattle bore the Circle Bar ear-mark, and that Greasy had built a fire and that branding irons had been found in his possession—which which he had tried to hide when discovered by the Circle Bar men.

“Then your men didn’t really see him doin’ the brandin’?” questioned Watkins.

Hollis was forced to admit that they had not. Watkins smiled sarcastically.

“I reckon you’re runnin’ a little bit wild,” he remarked. “Some of your stock has been rebranded an’ you’re chargin’ a certain man with doin’ it—only you didn’t see him doin’ it.” He turned to Greasy. “What you got to say about this, Greasy?” he demanded.

Greasy grinned blandly at Hollis. “This guy’s talkin’ through his hat,” he sneered. “I ain’t allowin’ that I branded any of his cattle.”

Watkins smiled. “There don’t seem to be nothin’ to this case a-tall—not a-tall. There ain’t nobody goin’ to be took into custody by me for stealin’ cattle unless they’re ketched with the goods—an’ that ain’t been proved so far.” He turned to Hollis. “You got anything more to say about it?” he demanded.

“Only this,” returned Hollis slowly and evenly, “I have brought this man here. I charge him with stealing my cattle. To use your term—he was caught ‘with the goods.’ He is guilty. If you take him into custody and bring him to trial I shall

have two witnesses there to prove what I have already told you. If you do not take him into custody, it is perfectly plain that you are deliberately shielding him—that you are making a joke of the law.”

Watkins’s face reddened angrily. “Mebbe I’m makin’ a joke of it—” he began.

“Of course we can’t force you to arrest this man,” resumed Hollis, interrupting Watkins. “Unfortunately the government has not yet awakened to the fact that such men as you are a public menace and danger. I did not expect you to arrest him—I tell you that frankly. I merely brought him here to see whether it were true that you were leagued with Dunlavey against the other ranchers in the country. You are, of course. Therefore, as we cannot secure justice by appealing to you we will be forced to adopt other means.”

The sheriff’s right hand dropped to his gun-holster. He sneered, his lips writhing. “Mebbe you mean—” he began.

“I ain’t lettin’ this here situation get beyond my control,” came Norton’s voice, cold and even, as his six-shooter came out and was shoved menacingly forward. “Whatever he means, Watkins, he’s my friend an’ you ain’t runnin’ in no cold lead proposition on him.” He smiled mirthlessly.

Watkins’s face paled; his right hand fell away from the pistol holster. There was a sound at the door; it swung suddenly open and Dunlavey’s gigantic frame loomed massively in the opening.

“I’m looking for Greasy!” he announced in a soft, silky voice, looking around at the four men with a comprehending, appreciative smile. “I was expecting to find him here,” he added as his gaze sought out the prisoner, “after I heard that he’d been nabbed by the Circle Bar men.”

Norton smiled coldly. “He’s here, Bill,” he said evenly. “He’s stayin’ here till Mr. Hollis says it’s time for him to go.”

He did not move the weapon in his hand, but a certain glint in his eyes told Dunlavey that the pistol was not in his hand for mere show. The latter smiled knowingly.

“I’m not interfering with the law,” he said mockingly. “And I certainly ain’t bucking your game, Norton.” He turned to Watkins, speaking with broad insinuation: “Of course you are putting a charge against Greasy, Watkins?” he said.

They all caught the sheriff’s flush; all saw the guilty embarrassment in his eyes as he answered that he had not. Dunlavey turned to Hollis with a bland smile.

“Have you any objection to allowing Greasy to go now, Mr. Hollis?”

Hollis’s smile was no less bland as his gaze met Dunlavey’s. “Not the slightest objection, Mr. Dunlavey,” he returned. “I congratulate you upon the manner in which you have trained your servants!” He ignored Dunlavey and smiled at Norton. “Mr. Norton,” he said with polite mockery, “I feel certain that you agree with me that we have no wish to contaminate this temple of justice with our presence.”

He bowed with mock politeness as he strode to the door and stepped down into the street. Norton followed him, grinning, though he did not sheath his weapon until he also was in the street.

As they strode away from the door they turned to see Dunlavey looking out after them, his face wreathed in a broad smile.

“There is plenty of law in Union County, Mr. Hollis,” he said, “if you know how to handle it!”

CHAPTER XX

THE “KICKER’S” CANDIDATE

The next issue of the *Kicker* contained many things of interest to its readers. Now that the drought had been broken, Union County could proceed with its business of raising cattle without fear of any future lack of water, with plenty of grass, and no losses except those from the usual causes. Dry Bottom merchants—depending upon the cattlemen for their trade—breathed easier and predicted a good year in spite of the drought. Their worries over, they had plenty of time—and inclination—to discuss the *Kicker*.

More advertisements were appearing in the paper. Dry Bottom merchants were beginning to realize that it deserved their support, and with few exceptions they openly began to voice their opinions that the editor would “make good.” The advertisements began to take on a livelier tone and the *Lazette Eagle* grew more sarcastic.

When the *Kicker* appeared following the incident in the sheriff’s office, there was a detailed account of Dunlavey’s now famous “ten day edict,” together with some uncomplimentary comments upon the latter’s action. This was signed by Hollis. He called attention to Dunlavey’s selfishness, to the preparations that had been made by him to shoot down all the foreign cattle on the Rabbit-Ear. He made no reference to his part in the affair—to his decision to allow the small ranchers to water their cattle in the river at the imminent risk of losing his own. But though he did not mention this, the small owners and his friends took care that the matter received full publicity, with the result that Hollis was kept busy assuring his admirers that the incident had been much magnified—especially his part of it. Then his friends applauded his modesty.

In the same issue of the paper was also related the story of Greasy’s capture by the Circle Bar men. But in telling this story Hollis was not so modest, for he spoke frankly of his part in it—how he had refused to allow his men to hang the thief, telling his readers that though Greasy deserved hanging, he did not purpose to violate the law while advocating it. Following the story of the capture was a detailed report of the incident in the sheriff’s office and a scathing commentary upon the subservience of the latter official to Dunlavey’s will. The article was

entitled: "Handling the Law," and Dunlavey's exact words when he stood in the door of the sheriff's office as Hollis and Norton departed were repeated.

Below this, under the rubric, "Union County Needs a New Sheriff," appeared an article that created a sensation. This dwelt upon the necessity of the county having a sheriff who would not permit his office to be prostituted by any man or influence. The *Kicker* named a man who would not be bribed or cowed and declared that his name would appear on the ballot at the next election—to be held on the first Monday in November. At the end of the article he printed the man's name—Ben Allen!

He had made this announcement without authority, and therefore he was not surprised, soon after the appearance of the issue containing the article, to see Allen's tall figure darken the door of the *Kicker* office while he sat at his desk.

"Durn your hide!" cried the latter as he stood in the doorway; "you're the biggest disturber in seven states!"

"Perhaps," smiled Hollis, motioning Allen to a chair. "Still, you don't need to thank me. You see, I have decided to clean up this county and I need some help. I supposed you were interested. Of course you may refuse if you like."

"Refuse!" Allen's eyes flashed as he took Hollis's hand and wrung it heartily. "My boy," he declared earnestly, "you couldn't have done anything to suit me better. I'm just yearning to take a big hand in this game!"

"Interesting, isn't it?" smiled Hollis.

"Some," returned Allen. He grasped Hollis's hand and wrung it heartily. "You're a winner and I'm mighty glad to be able to work with you." He spoke seriously. "Do you think there's a chance for us to beat Dunlavey?"

Hollis laughed. "I flatter myself that a certain editor in this town stands rather well with the people of this county since a certain thing happened."

"You sure do!" grinned Allen. "Lordy! how this county has needed a man like you!"

Hollis smiled. "Then you won't object to being the *Kicker's* candidate?" he inquired.

"Object!" returned Allen with mock seriousness. "Say, young man, if you don't keep my name at the head of your editorial column from now till the first Monday in November I'll come down here and manhandle you!"

And so it was arranged. Dry Bottom gasped in public but rejoiced in secret.

Many of the town's merchants personally congratulated Hollis.

But for two days following the appearance of the issue of the *Kicker* containing these sensations, Hollis stayed away from Dry Bottom. Now that he had launched Allen's campaign and placed the other matters before his readers, he began to devote some attention to the problem of arranging for Ed Hazelton's visit to the great Chicago surgeon. Both Nellie and Ed had been disappointed because of his continued absence, and when, on an afternoon a few days after his activity in Dry Bottom, he rode up to the Hazelton cabin his welcome was a cordial one.

"It seems like a year since I've seen you!" declared Hazelton as he came down from the porch to lead Hollis's pony into the shade at the rear of the cabin.

While he was gone with the pony Hollis stood looking up at Nellie, who had remained seated in her chair on the porch and who was now regarding him with eyes in which shone unconcealed pleasure.

"It hasn't really been so long, you know," said Hollis, smiling at her. "But then, I have been so busy that I may not have noticed it."

Of course she could not tell him how many times she had sat on the porch during Ed's absences watching the Coyote trail. But she blushed and made room for him on the porch. Ed appeared presently and joined them there. The young man was not able to conceal his joy over the prospect of his ultimate recovery from the peculiar malady that afflicted him, and gratitude mingled with it as he looked at his benefactor. He had not recovered from an attack the day before.

"We've got it all arranged," he told Hollis with a wan smile. "I'm going to Chicago just as soon as I can get things fixed." He reddened with embarrassment as he continued: "There's some things that I'd like to talk to you about before I make up my mind when to start," he said; "I've been worrying about what to do with my stock while I'm gone. I wouldn't want it to stray or be run off by Dunlavey's gang." The appeal in his eyes did not escape Hollis's keen observation.

"I have thought of that too," smiled the latter. "In fact, I have talked it over with Norton. He tells me that he won't have any trouble in caring for your stock while you are away."

"Thanks." Hazelton did not trust himself to say more at that moment. He knew how great would be the task of caring for his stock during his absence, and had not Hollis come to his aid with this offer he would have had to give up the

proposed trip. He sat silent until his composure returned, and then he looked up at Hollis gratefully.

“That will make things much easier for Nellie,” he said. And then, remembering that Hollis knew nothing of his intention to ask him for permission to allow Nellie to remain at the Circle Bar during his absence, he fell silent again.

“Easier?” inquired Hollis, puzzled. He had supposed that Nellie would accompany her brother to Chicago. He did not look at either of the two for a time. He had been anticipating a period of lonesomeness and this unexpected news came like a bright shaft of light into the darkness.

“But you can’t allow her to stay at the cabin alone!” he said when Ed did not answer. And then the thought struck him that this peculiar silence on Ed’s part could mean only one thing—that he and Nellie had decided that she was not to accompany him, and that the problem that was now confronting them—since he had told them that his men would care for the cattle—was the girl’s welfare. He appreciated the situation and smiled wisely into the yawning distance. But a deep sympathy made the smile grim.

“I have sometimes wondered how it were possible for a woman to live in this country without having close at hand one of her sex with whom to gossip,” he remarked, looking at Ed and deliberately closing an eye at him. “It doesn’t bother a man so much—this being alone. If he is a drinking man there are the saloons; if a poet he may write wise saws concerning the inconstancy of women; he may punch cows, another man’s head—or run a newspaper. In any case his mind is occupied.

“But a woman! Of course it is different with a woman. A woman must talk—she simply can’t help it. There’s Mrs. Norton. Only this morning I chanced to hear her remark to her lord and master that if he did not soon provide her with a companion with whom she might discuss the things which are dear to the feminine heart, he might as well make up his mind to requisition the mourners. All of which suggests the thought that perhaps it would not be a bad idea for Miss Hazelton to bundle up her things and advance on the Circle Bar. Thus two ends will be served—Mrs. Norton will secure her companion and Norton will find peace.” He turned to Nellie. “Of course if you are afraid that the cabin will stray during your absence I could manage to ride the Coyote trail each morning and evening—or you could ride over yourself occasionally.”

He could tell by the light in her eyes that she was pleased over the suggestion. He was sure of it when she smiled at him.

“If you really think that Mrs. Norton would like some one to talk to—” she began, and then hesitated, her eyes suddenly widening as she saw an odd light in his. “Oh!” she said, “it isn’t true about Mrs. Norton wanting to talk. You have guessed that I—that Ed—wanted me to go—” But confusion descended upon her and she flushed crimson with embarrassment.

“If you think it isn’t true, why don’t you ride over to the Circle Bar and inquire?” he smiled.

“Perhaps I may,” she replied, looking at him in mock defiance.

As a precaution against the carrying out of this threat, Hollis that night acquainted Mrs. Norton with the facts in the case, even going so far as to inform the lady brazenly that he had deliberately lied about her. But when she had been fully informed, she told Hollis that she did not blame him very much, and that should Nellie carry out her threat to come to her upon an errand having as its object a question of his veracity, she would assure the young lady that he had spoken the plain truth. Would that be sufficient?

Hollis told her that it would, and the following morning on his way to Dry Bottom, he took the Coyote trail and stopped off at the Hazelton cabin, where he informed Ed that he had decided to send Weary with him on his trip to Chicago.

Nellie spoke a few words to him while he lingered beside the porch, but her threat of the night before was not repeated and Hollis rightly guessed that it would never be carried out.

CHAPTER XXI

DUNLAVEY PLAYS A CARD

During the week following Ed Hazelton's departure for Chicago Hollis did not see much of Nellie. In the few days preceding his departure she had not allowed her brother to see how his refusal to allow her to accompany him had hurt her, but once he had boarded the east-bound express at Dry Bottom, she had yielded to the emotions that she had so far succeeded in concealing. Hollis had ridden in to town with them, and not until Nellie and he had seen Ed and Weary safely on the train—indeed, not until the train was well under way and the two figures on the back platform could no longer be discerned—did Nellie break down. Then Hollis turned to her with a smile to see the sudden tears well up into her eyes. He had not attempted to console her, feeling the awkwardness of the situation.

He was much relieved when she refused his offer to make the return trip with her, for he was certain that a few hours alone in which to meditate over her loss would enable her to regain her composure. But before leaving her he secured her promise not to stop at the cabin, but to go on to the Circle Bar. On her arrival at the ranch she was to tell Norton to send one of the men to the cabin after the few personal effects that she had decided to transfer. But once out of Hollis's sight Nellie forgot her promise through fear over the safety of her things. She took the Coyote trail, riding slowly through the clear sunshine of the morning.

After taking leave of Nellie Hollis rode slowly down the street to the *Kicker* office. He looked in through the window and seeing that Potter had not yet arrived, continued down to the court house. He talked for a few minutes with Judge Graney. Nothing new had developed. Ben Allen had gone to visit several small ranchers the day before and had not returned.

Hollis returned to the *Kicker* office. At noon Potter had arrived, bearing the news that he had seen Nellie Hazelton on the Coyote trail, within a few miles of the Circle Bar. She had stopped at her cabin and there were several bundles strapped to the cantle of her saddle.

That night Hollis did not see her at all. He did not inquire for her, but surmised that she was in her room. The next morning soon after he had awakened and while he still debated the question of arising, he heard her singing in the kitchen.

He smiled, thinking how quickly she had adapted herself to her new surroundings.

At breakfast he looked closely at her several times, searching for evidence of her grief of yesterday. There was none. Therefore he was not surprised when, after breakfast, she told him that she intended riding with him as far as the cabin for the purpose of bringing the remainder of her effects. He gravely reminded her that she had broken her promise of yesterday, and that as a punishment he contemplated refusing her request. But when, an hour later, he urged his pony down the river trail she was riding beside him.

But she did not ride again that week. She did not tell Hollis the reason; that returning that evening she had reached the Razor-Back and was riding along its crest when she happened to glance across the Rabbit-Ear toward the Circle Cross. On the opposite side of the river she had seen two men, sitting quietly in their saddles, watching her. They were Dunlavey and Yuma. She did not know what their presence there meant, but the sight was disquieting and she feared to return to the cabin for the few things that were still here.

But as the days went her fears were dispersed. Time and the lure of her old home had revived her courage, and on a day about a week following her previous trip, she herself saddled and bridled her pony and set out over the Coyote trail toward her cabin.

She had not told Hollis of her intention to ride there, fearing that the knowledge of what she had seen on the day of the other ride would be revealed in her eyes. It was a good hour after noon when she stole out of the house to her pony, mounted, and rode away toward the river.

For many days she had been wondering at Dunlavey's continued inaction. He had been known as an energetic enemy, and though at their last meeting in Dry Bottom he had threatened her and her brother, he had so far made no hostile move. Usually he would go a considerable distance out of his way to speak to her. Perhaps, she thought, at their last meeting she had shown him that he was wasting his time. Yet she could not forget that day when she had seen Yuma and Dunlavey on the Circle Cross side of the Rabbit-Ear. The sight somehow had been significant and forbidding.

But when she reached her cabin she had forgotten Dunlavey and Yuma; her thoughts dwelt upon more pleasant people. Had she done right in allowing Hollis to see that she was interested in him? Would he think less of her for revealing this interest? She could not answer these questions, but she could answer

another—one that brought the blushes to her cheeks. Why had Hollis shown an interest in her? She had known this answer for a long time—when she had read Ace’s poem to him while sitting on the porch beside him, to be perfectly accurate. She had pretended then to take offense when he had assured her that Ace had succeeded in getting much truth into his lines, especially into the first couplet, which ran:

“Woman—she don’t need no tutor,
Be she school ma’am or biscuit shooter.”

The language had not been graceful, nor the diction, yet she knew that Ace had struck the mark fairly, for woman indeed needed no tutor to teach her to understand man—woman had always understood him.

She dismounted from her pony at the edge of the porch, hitching the animal to one of the slender porch columns. Then she went into the house to gather up the few things that still remained there.

But for a long time after entering the cabin she sat on a chair in the kitchen, sobbing softly, for now that Ed had gone she felt the desolation of the country more than ever. Presently she rose and with a start looked out of the door. The dusk had fallen; darkness was stealing into the valley around the cabin!

Flitting here and there, she hurriedly began packing things which she took from shelves and racks. It was an engrossing task and she was much interested in it, so much so that she did not hear a slight sound at the door that led out to the front porch. But when she saw a shadow darken the doorway of the room in which she was working she stood suddenly erect and with rapidly beating heart stole softly forward and peered around the door-jamb. Of course it could be no one but Hollis. He had taken the Coyote trail to-night. He would be surprised to see her.

But it was she who was surprised. Yuma stood near the table in the center of the kitchen, looking straight at her, his insolent, evil face drawn into a foreboding smile.

After the first gasp of horror and surprise a righteous anger stiffened her.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded.

Yuma’s evil smile grew. She had seen him often, usually at a distance, for she had abhorred him, with his olive skin, his thin, cruel lips and small glittering eyes. He had always seemed like an animal to her, though she could not have told why. She thought it must be something in his attitude, in the stoop which was almost a crouch, in the stealthy, cat-like manner in which he walked. She

had spoken to Ed about him more than once, conveying to him her abhorrence of the man, and he had told her that he felt the same about him. She shuddered now, thinking of what her brother had told her of the man's cruelty. Dunlavey had often boasted that Yuma was the most venomous and bloodthirsty of his crew of cut-throats.

"What are you doing here?" she repeated, her anger growing.

Yuma laughed softly. "I saw you ridin' the Razor Back the other day," he said, showing his teeth as the words came—even, smooth, burdened with a subtle mockery. "I saw you again thees afternoon—but you not see me like the other day—I watch you thees long." He held up three fingers to denote that he had watched her three hours. She shuddered, suddenly realizing the significance of his attitude that day she had seen him from the Razor Back.

"Ed gone," he continued, watching her narrowly; "nobody here; I come. I like you—much." He grinned, his eyes brightening. "I reckon you know—you girl that understan'?"

She drew a slow deep breath. Curiously enough, next to the horror and doubt that she felt over Yuma's presence at the cabin was a wonder for the idioms of cowboy speech that were interjected with his own. He had caught them from association, she supposed. She made a pretense of boldness, though she felt more like screaming.

"Leave this cabin!" she commanded sharply.

Yuma did not change his position. "Leave heem?" he laughed. "I theenk not. Dunlavey says me come here—make um love me—same as tenderfoot noospaper man!" He laughed again, exultantly. "Dunlavey say you spark tenderfoot—you spark me!"

She trembled, realizing that a crisis was at hand and that she must meet it boldly. She thought of the ivory-handled weapon in the holster at her hip and involuntarily her right hand dropped to its butt. She had learned to shoot, but she had never yet shot at a man and she drew her hand away from the butt of the weapon with a shudder. Yuma had been watching her closely, his evil little eyes glittering, and when he saw her hand drop away he laughed derisively.

"You no shoot heem!" he said. "You 'fraid. Dunlavey say he reckon you no shoot—say you make love to um right away!"

He smiled significantly and took a step toward her. She made an involuntary step backward and her right hand again sought the butt of the revolver, the left

closing on the edge of the door that opened into her room. Terror had given her courage and as Yuma continued to advance with a soft, cautious, cat-like sliding movement, she drew the revolver and presented it, though her hand wavered a little.

“If you take another step toward me, Yuma, I will kill you!” she declared.

She saw his little eyes glitter with decision, saw him measure the distance between them, saw him crouch for a spring.

She fired, aiming at the lower edge of the scarf that sagged at his throat. The smoke from the pistol blinded her; she heard his laugh, heard the rush of his feet as he hurled himself forward. Terror stricken over her failure to hit him, she dropped the pistol and whirled, grasping the edge of the door and slamming it shut in his face. She felt his weight against it, but he had been taken by surprise by the movement; there was the strength of desperation in her body and she held the door closed against him while she shoved the fastenings into place.

Then, suddenly overcome, she leaned weakly against the jamb, her heart thumping hard, her nerves tingling.

For a long time she did not move, and there came no sound from the other side of the door to tell her of Yuma’s movements. There was a wild hope in her heart that he had gone, but presently, becoming a little calmer, she pressed her ear against the door. There was no doubt of Yuma’s presence; she could hear him stepping softly about the room. Had there been a window in the room in which she had imprisoned herself she might have escaped, but unfortunately there was not.

She fell to thinking of the revolver she had dropped when Yuma had sprung upon her. It must have dropped very close to the door. Had Yuma picked it up? There was a chance that he had not. If the weapon were still there and she could open the door and secure it and close the door again, she would be in a position to defend herself. She could not defend herself without it. If Yuma should burst the door open she would be at his mercy. She must get the revolver.

Convinced of this she stood for some little time at the door, her ear pressed against it, listening for any sound that might tell her of the whereabouts of Yuma in the cabin. She heard nothing. Perhaps he had gone? But she listened a while longer, determined to be certain before loosening the fastenings of the door. Silence—a premonitory silence—filled the room beyond the door. She could hear nothing except her own rapid breathing. Presently she heard a horse whinny. Was Yuma at the horses? It seemed incredible that any man should visit the

cabin purposely to attack her. Perhaps Yuma had only intended to frighten her; he had said that Dunlavey had told him to follow her, but she believed that Dunlavey, in spite of his reputation for lawlessness and trickery, was not so unmanly as to incite the half-breed to attack her. He may have told him to steal the horses—she could believe that of him!

But for a long time, in spite of the quieting influence of these thoughts, she kept her ear pressed against the door. Then, moved by a sudden impulse—an accession of courage inspired by the continued silence—she cautiously loosened the fastenings and swung the door slowly open.

Her revolver lay close and with a swift movement she reached for it. As her fingers grasped its butt she heard a slight sound and Yuma was upon her from behind, pinning her arms to her sides. She felt his breath on her neck, heard his laugh, exultant and derisive, mocking her. His right hand, gripping hers tightly, was slipping slowly down toward the hand that held the revolver. She struggled desperately, squirming and twisting in his grasp, silently matching her strength against his. Finding this hopeless and feeling his hand gradually slipping toward the revolver, she suddenly raised her hand toward her face, bringing Yuma's hand, still on her arm, with it. Then she dropped her head to his arm near the wrist, and sank her teeth savagely into the flesh.

Yuma howled in anguish, loosening his hold momentarily. In an instant she had wrenched herself free and had bounded to the center of the room, placing the kitchen table between herself and her assailant.

But he was after her with a bound, his little eyes gleaming with a venomous expression, his face contorted with passion. She raised the revolver and fired. For a breathless instant she thought that she had hit him, for he sank almost to the floor. But she saw that it was only a trick for he was up again on the instant, a mocking smile on his face and closer than ever. She fired again, and when she saw him sink to the floor she pulled the trigger a second time. He had been very close to the table when she fired the last time and before she could press the trigger again he had lurched forward under it, raising it on his shoulders and sending it crashing down behind him as he confronted her, his evil face close to hers, his hands again gripping her arms.

She fought him silently, and together they reeled around the cabin. She bit him again, and then in an outburst of savage fury he brutally twisted the arm in which she still held the revolver, sending the weapon crashing to the floor. While twisting her arm he had been compelled to loosen his grasp of the other slightly, and she again wrenched herself free and darted toward the door leading to the

porch. But he bounded forward, intercepting her, and with a last, despairing effort she raised both hands to his face and clawed furiously at his eyes.

She heard a savage curse from him, saw the lust of murder in his little, glittering eyes, felt his sinewy fingers at her throat. Then objects within the cabin swam in a dizzy, blurring circle before her. She heard a crash—seeming to come from a great distance; heard Yuma curse again. And then, borne resistlessly forward by the weight of his body, she tumbled to the floor in an inert heap.

CHAPTER XXII

PROOF OF GRATITUDE

Shortly after noon on the same day Hollis, finding work irksome, closed his desk with a bang, told Potter that he was going home, mounted his pony, and loped the animal out the Dry Bottom trail. He remembered hearing Norton tell one of the men that morning that he suspected that several of Ed Hazelton's cattle were still in the vicinity of the basin near the Hazelton cabin, and he determined to ride around that way and try to turn them back toward the Circle Bar. It would be recreation for him after a hot morning in the office.

He also remembered another thing that had occurred that morning at the ranch house. Mrs. Norton had assured him—with a sly, eloquent glance at him—that he might do worse than to make arrangements to keep Nellie Hazelton at the Circle Bar indefinitely. At the risk of being considered obtuse Hollis had ignored the hint, broad though it had been. But Mrs. Norton's words had shown him that Nellie stood high in her estimation and he felt a queer, unaccountable elation.

After striking the Dry Bottom trail he took a circuitous route and some time later came out upon a high ridge overlooking a basin. There were some cattle down there and he made a mental note of the locality so that he would be able to tell Norton where to have the men look for the cattle. Then he rode along the ridge until he could no longer see the basin. He spent most of the afternoon exploring the surrounding country, and then when the dusk began to fall he retraced his steps to the ridge upon which he had ridden earlier in the afternoon. Something familiar in the shape of the hills near him struck him and he halted his pony and smiled. These were the hills that he had seen many times from the Hazelton porch. He faced around, certain that if the hills could be seen from the porch he would be able to discern the porch from some point on the ridge, for he was satisfied that he must be nearly in line with it. He rode back and forth a few moments, and then, coming out on a bald spot on the ridge, he saw the cabin.

It was about a mile away, snuggled comfortably down in a little basin, with some trees and shrubbery flanking it on both sides. He smiled as he looked at it, and then suddenly his face clouded, for he saw two ponies hitched to the porch. His forehead wrinkled perplexedly over this. He was certain that Nellie rode the

same animal each time, because she would not trust any of the others that were now with the remuda. One of the horses belonged to her of course, for he could see the gay ribbon with which she was accustomed to decorate her animal's bridle. But to whom did the other horse belong? He gazed steadily toward the cabin, searching for signs of life on the porch. But though he could see clearly—even into the shadows from a rambling rose bush that clung to the eaves of the roof—no human figure appeared on the porch.

Certainly Nellie must have a visitor. But who? He was not aware that the Hazeltons had made friends with anyone in the neighborhood besides himself and the Nortons. He smiled. Probably some cowboy from the Circle Bar had been in the vicinity looking for Hazelton's cattle, had met Nellie, and had stopped at the cabin. He remembered to have heard Norton say that he was sending a man in that direction some time that day.

That must be the explanation. But while he sat, debating the propriety of riding down to the cabin to satisfy his curiosity, the sound of a pistol shot floated to his ears on the slight breeze that was blowing toward him.

He sat erect, his face paling. Then he smiled again. He had been in the West long enough to become acquainted with the cowboy nature and he surmised that Nellie's visitor was very likely exhibiting his skill with the revolver. But he turned his pony and urged it down the sloping side of the ridge, riding slowly in the direction of the cabin.

After striking the bottom of the slope he rode cut upon a broad level that stretched away for half a mile. He made better time here and had almost covered half the width of the plain when two more reports reached his ears. He was close enough now to hear them distinctly and it seemed to him that they sounded muffled. He halted the pony and sat stiffly in the saddle, his gaze on the cabin. Then he saw a thin stream of blue-white smoke issue from the doorway and curl lazily upward.

A grave doubt assailed him. No cowboy would be likely to exhibit his skill with a weapon in the cabin! Nellie's visitor must be an unwelcome one!

The pony felt the sudden spurs and raced like a whirlwind over the remaining stretch of plain. Hollis had become suddenly imbued with a suspicion that brought an ashen pallor to his face and an awful rage into his heart. He slid his pony down one side of a steep arroyo, sent it scrambling up the other side, jumped it over some rocks that littered the rise, spurred savagely through a little basin, and reaching the edge of the porch, dismounted and bounded to the door.

He saw two figures—Nellie Hazelton and a man. He saw the man's fingers gripping the girl's throat and the lust of murder surged over and blinded him. In the dusk that had fallen he could only dimly see the man's head and he swung his right fist at it, putting every ounce of his strength into the blow. He felt the fist strike, realized that it had glanced, and tried to recover for a second blow.

But the terrific swing had carried him off his balance. He whirled clear around, slipped, and came down to the floor flat on his face. He was up in an instant, however, his brain afire with rage, his muscles tingling with eagerness. He did not think of the gun at his hip, for the lust of murder was in his soul and he wanted only to hit the man—to seize him and tear him apart—to crush and smash the vile hands that he had seen at the girl's throat.

Five feet from him, facing him, on his hands and knees and scrambling to rise, was the man. He recognized Yuma, and even as he bounded forward the latter gained his feet and tugged at his gun-holster. The weapon had not yet cleared the holster when Hollis was upon him. He struck again with his right fist and missed, crashing against Yuma in his eagerness and carrying him down to the floor with a force that shook the cabin. As they fell Hollis felt a sharp, agonizing pain in his left wrist, from which the splints had been only recently removed, and the hand hung limp at his side, entirely useless.

For an instant after the fall Yuma lay still, breathing heavily. Then he made a sudden movement with his right arm and Hollis caught a glint of metal. He threw himself at the arm, catching it with his right hand just above the wrist and jamming it tight to the floor. Yuma tried to squirm free, failed, and with a curse drove his left fist into the side of Hollis's face. Again he tried to squirm free and during the struggle that followed the hand holding the pistol was raised from the floor. Hollis saw it and wrenched desperately at the arm, twisting it and dragging it furiously downward to the floor. Yuma shrieked with rage and pain as the force of the impact cracked his knuckles and sent the weapon clattering ten feet away.

For an instant both men lay silent, panting from their exertions. Then Yuma succeeded in getting one leg over Hollis's body and one arm around his neck. With a quick motion—successful because of Hollis's injured wrist—he turned the latter over on his back. His eyes alight with an exultant, malevolent fire, he gripped Hollis's throat with one hand and drove at his face with the other. A quick movement of the head served to defeat Yuma's aim and his fist thumped heavily against the floor, bringing a grimace of pain to his face. Disregarding his injured wrist, Hollis wrenched savagely and succeeded in rolling free of Yuma

and reaching his feet. He had moved quickly, but the lithe, cat-like half-breed was before him, bounding toward the pistol on the floor. He was bending over it, his fingers gripping its butt, when Hollis, throwing himself forward bodily, crashed into him and hurled him heavily to the floor.

This time Yuma lay face downward, his arms outstretched, and Hollis lay sprawled out on top of him. But Yuma had succeeded in holding to the pistol; it was grasped in his outstretched right hand, just out of Hollis's reach.

For an instant again both men lay silent, breathing rapidly. Then, yielding to the rage that still possessed him, Hollis bounded to his feet, striking Yuma a crashing blow in the face as he did so. While Yuma reeled he brought his booted foot down on the hand holding the pistol, grinding it under his heel.

Yuma screamed with pain and rage and got to his feet, holding his injured hand with the other. The pistol lay on the floor where Yuma had dropped it when Hollis's boot had come in contact with his hand. For an instant Yuma stood gripping his hand, his face hideous with passion. Then with a snarl of rage and hate he drew a knife from the folds of his shirt and sprang toward Hollis.

Hollis tensed himself for the clash, rapidly measuring the distance, and when Yuma came close enough caught him squarely on the side of the jaw with a vicious right swing. But in some manner when Hollis stepped aside to avoid Yuma's knife, his feet had become entangled with the legs of the table that Yuma had previously overturned. As he struck he slipped, the blow at Yuma's jaw not having the force he intended it to have. He caught himself, slipped again and went down, turning completely over the table top and falling face downward to the floor. He saw Yuma throw himself forward and he tried to wriggle out of danger, but he failed. He felt the half-breed's weight on his body, saw the knife flash in the dull light. He tried to roll over and grasp the knife in its descent, but could not, his left arm, now useless, being pinned to the floor by Yuma's knee.

A revolver roared spitefully—once—twice. Yuma's knife hissed past Hollis's ear and struck the floor, its point sunk deep, its handle swaying idly back and forth. Yuma himself—inert, limp, rolled from Hollis's back and lay flat on his own, his eyes wide open and staring, two huge bullet holes in his forehead. And in the open doorway of the cabin stood Ten Spot.

For an instant Hollis could not realize his escape. He looked at Yuma and then again at Ten Spot. Slowly and painfully he got to his feet, looking around at the wreck of the room. Staggering a little, he walked to where Ten Spot stood, gripping the latter's hand silently, at a loss for words with which to thank him.

But apparently Ten Spot did not notice the omission, for he grinned broadly.

“I reckon there’s folks which would call that a right clever bit of shootin’,” he said, “seem’ a? there wasn’t time to pull off no fancy stuff!”

CHAPTER XXIII

TEN SPOT USES HIS EYES

The crash of Ten Spot's pistols aroused Nellie Hazelton, and she sat up and stared stupidly about—at Hollis, who was just rising from the floor; at Ten Spot, who still stood in the doorway; and then at Yuma's body, stretched out on the floor beside the overturned table. She shuddered and covered her face with her hands. The next instant Hollis was bending over her, helping her to her feet, leading her to the door and assuring her in a low, earnest voice that everything was all right, and that Yuma would never trouble her again, and that he wanted her to get on her pony and go to the Circle Bar. She allowed herself to be led out on the porch, but once there she looked at him with renewed spirit.

"It was you who came first," she said; "I didn't see you, but I heard Yuma curse, felt something strike him, and then—I must have fainted. You see, I felt it must be you—I had been expecting you."

As she spoke she seized his hands and pressed them tightly, her eyes eloquent with thankfulness. "Oh, I am so glad!" she whispered. Then she saw Ten Spot standing in the doorway and she ran over and seized his hands also, shaking them hysterically. And Ten Spot stood, red of face, grinning bashfully at her—like a big, awkward, embarrassed schoolboy.

"That's the first time I've ever been thanked for shootin' anybody!" he confided to Hollis, later. "An' it cert'nly did feel some strange!"

In spite of Hollis's remonstrances the girl insisted on returning to the interior of the cabin, to "bundle up her things." Feeling the futility of further objection, Hollis finally allowed her to enter. But while she was busy in one of the rooms he and Ten Spot carried Yuma's body outside, around to the rear of the cabin.

Then, when the girl had finally secured her "things" and they had been securely tied to her pony, and she had started down the trail toward the Circle Bar ranch, Hollis and Ten Spot returned to the rear of the cabin, took up Yuma's body, carried it to a secluded spot at some little distance from the cabin and there buried it deep and quickly.

"I want to thank you again," said Hollis as he and Ten Spot stood on the porch

when Hollis was ready to depart; “it was a great stroke of luck that brought you here just when you were needed.”

Ten Spot grinned. “I don’t think it was just luck that brought me,” he said; “though mebbe it was luck that took me into the Fashion this morning. Whatever it was, I was in there, an’ I heard Dunlavey an’ Yuma cookin’ this here deal. I wasn’t feelin’ entirely ongrateful for the way you’d treated me after you’d got my gun that day in the *Kicker* office an’ I wasn’t intendin’ to let happen what Dunlavey wanted to happen. So I got out of the Fashion as soon as I could an’ trailed Yuma. I’ve been after him all day, but somehow or other I lost him an’ didn’t find out where he’d gone till a little while ago—when I heard a gun go off. Then I hit the breeze here—after Yuma. That’s all. That’s how I come to get here so lucky.” He stuck out a hand to Hollis. “Well, so-long,” he said; “I’m hittin’ the breeze out of the country.” He stepped forward to his pony, but hesitated when he heard Hollis speak.

“Then you’re not going back to the Circle Cross—to work for Dunlavey?” questioned the latter.

“Well, no,” grinned Ten Spot. “You see, it might not be so pleasant now as it’s been. I reckon when Dunlavey hears this he won’t be exactly tickled.”

Hollis contemplated him gravely. “So you’re going to leave the country?” he said slowly, his eyes twinkling. “I take it you are not afraid—”

“Don’t!” said Ten Spot coldly and sharply. Then he grinned with feline cordiality. “I reckon I ain’t scared of anyone,” he said, “but I ain’t likin’ to go back to the Circle Cross after puttin’ Yuma out of business. I’ve done some mean things in my time, but I ain’t dealin’ double with no man, an’ I couldn’t go back to the Circle Cross an’ work for Dunlavey when I ain’t sympathizin’ with him none.”

“I’m shy of good cowhands,” offered Hollis quietly. “If forty a month would be —”

Ten Spot’s right hand was suddenly gripping Hollis’s. “You’ve hired a man, boss!” he said, his eyes alight with pleasure. “Ever since you clawed me that day in the *Kicker* office I’ve had a hankerin’ to work for you. I was wonder in’ if you’d ast me. There ain’t no damn—”

“Then it’s a bargain,” laughed Hollis, interrupting. “You can start right now.” He pointed to the ridge upon which he had been riding when he heard the shot that had brought him to the cabin. “Some of Ed Hazelton’s cattle are in the basin on

the other side of that ridge,” he said. “You go over there and keep an eye on them until I can get a chance to send some one here to help you drive them back up the river toward the Circle Bar.” As he came to the edge of the porch to mount his pony his gaze fell on Yuma’s horse, still hitched to one of the columns. “What are we going to do with Yuma’s horse?” he questioned.

Ten Spot grinned. He walked over to the pony, unhitched it, and with a vicious slap on the flank sent it loping down the trail toward the river.

“That’ll be my message to Dunlavey that Yuma ain’t here any more,” he said grimly.

Hollis mounted and rode a short distance, but halted and turned in the saddle when he heard Ten Spot call to him.

“Boss,” he said with a grin, “I ain’t exactly blind, an’ mebbe you’ve got your eyes with you, too. But I saw that there Hazelton girl lookin’ at you sorta—”

He saw a smile on Hollis’s face, but the rest of his speech was drowned in a clatter of hoofs as the “boss’s” pony tore down the Coyote trail. Then Ten Spot smiled, mounted his pony, and rode away toward the ridge.

CHAPTER XXIV

CAMPAIGN GUNS

Of course Yuma had been amply punished for his part in the attack on Nellie Hazelton, but there still remained Dunlavey—who had instigated it. Hollis was aware of the uselessness of bringing a charge against Dunlavey—he had not forgotten his experience with Bill Watkins when he had attempted to have Greasy brought to justice. He believed that he would not have brought such a charge had there been any probability of the sheriff taking action. He felt that in inciting Yuma to attack Nellie, Dunlavey had also contemplated a blow at him. The man's devilish ingenuity appalled him, but it also aroused a fierce anger in his heart that, in the absence of a powerful will, would have moved him to immediate vengeance.

But he contemplated no immediate action. Besides the attack on Nellie Hazelton there was another score to settle with Dunlavey, and when the time came for a final accounting he told himself that he would settle both. He knew there would come such a time. From the beginning he had felt that he and the Circle Cross manager were marked by fate for a clash. He was eager for it, but content to wait until the appointed time. And he knew that the time was not far distant.

Therefore he remained silent regarding the incident, and except to Norton and his wife, Nellie Hazelton, Ten Spot, and himself, the disappearance of Yuma remained a mystery.

Dunlavey, perhaps, might have had his suspicions, but if so he communicated them to no one, and so as the days passed the mystery ceased to be discussed and Yuma was forgotten.

Hollis received a letter from Weary, dated "Chicago," announcing the safe arrival of himself and Ed Hazelton. "Town" suited him to a "T," he wrote. But Doctor Hammond would not operate at once—he wanted time to study the symptoms of Ed's malady. That was all. Hollis turned this letter over to Nellie, with another from Ed, addressed to her—whose contents remained a mystery to him.

Ben Allen had returned from his visit to the small ranchers in the vicinity, had

confided to Hollis that he had “mixed a little politics with business,” and then, after receiving a telegram from the Secretary of the Interior, had taken himself off to Santa Fe to confer with the governor.

After several days he returned. He entered the *Kicker* office to greet Hollis, his face wreathed in smiles.

“You’ve got ’em all stirred up, my boy!” he declared, placing his hand on Hollis’s shoulder with a resounding “smack”; “they’re goin’ to enforce the little law we’ve got and they’ve passed some new ones. Here’s a few! First and foremost, cattle stealing is to be considered felony! Penalty, from one to twenty years! Next—free water! Being as the rivers in this Territory ain’t never been sold with what land the government sharks has disposed of, any cattleman’s got the right to water wherever he wants to. The governor told me that if it’s necessary he’ll send Uncle Sam’s blue coats anywhere in the Territory to enforce that! Third: after a man’s registered his brand he can’t change it unless he applies to the district judge. Them that ain’t registered their brand ain’t entitled to no protection. I reckon there’s trouble ahead for any man which monkeys with another man’s brand!

“Say!” Allen eyed Hollis whimsically; “that new governor’s all het up over you! Had a copy of the *Kicker* in front of him on his desk when he was talkin’ to me. Says you’re a scrapper from the word go, an’ that he’d back you up long as there was a blue coat anywhere in the Territory!”

Allen’s speech was ungrammatical, but its message was one of good cheer and Hollis’s eyes brightened. The Law was coming at last! He could not help but wonder what Dunlavey’s feelings would be when he heard of it. For himself, he felt as any man must feel who, laboring at a seemingly impossible task, endless and thankless, sees in the distance the possible, the end, and the plaudits of his friends.

Yes, he could see the end, but the end was not yet. He looked gravely at Allen.

“Did you happen to hear when these laws become effective?” he inquired.

“On the first day of October!” returned Allen, triumphantly.

Hollis smiled. “And election day is the third of November,” he said. “That gives Dunlavey, Watkins and Company a month’s grace—in case you are elected sheriff.”

Allen grinned. “They can’t do a heap in a month,” he said.

“No,” returned Hollis, “but in most elections that have come under my

observation, I have noticed that the winning candidate does not assume office for a considerable time after the election. What is the custom out here?"

Allen grinned grimly. "Usually it's two weeks," he said, "but if I'm elected it will be the next day—if I have to go down to the sheriff's office and drag Bill Watkins out by the hair!"

"That belligerent spirit does you credit," dryly observed Hollis. "It will afford me great pleasure to participate in the festivities. But there is another matter to be thought of—which we seem to have overlooked. Usually before an election there is a primary, or a convention, is there not?"

"There is," grinned Allen. "It's to-night, and I'm ready for it!" His grin expanded to a wide, whimsical smile. "I told you that I'd been mixing a little politics with business," he said. "Well, I've done so." He got up and approached the front window of the office, sweeping a hand toward the street. "If you'll just get up and look out here," he said, "you'll see that I ain't lying. There's some good in being an ex-office-holder—you get experience enough to tell you how to run a campaign." He bowed to Hollis. "Now, if you'll look close at that gang which is mixing palaver in front of the Silver Dollar you'll mebbe notice that Lemuel Train is in it, an' Truxton, of the Diamond Dot, Holcomb, of the Star, Yeager, of the Three Diamond, Clark, of the Circle Y, Henningson, of the Three Bar, Toban, of the T Down, an' some more which has come in for the racket tonight. Countin' 'em all—the punchers which have come in with the fellows I have named—there'll be about seventy-five.

"An', say!" he added, suddenly confronting Hollis and grasping him by the shoulder and shaking him playfully and admiringly, "there wouldn't a durn one of them have come over here on my account. They up an' told me so when I asked them. Said they'd nothin' ag'in me, but they wasn't considerin' votin' at all. But since Hollis wanted me—well, they'd come over just to show you that they appreciated what you'd done for them!"

Hollis smiled. He did not tell Allen that since the appearance of the *Kicker* containing the announcement that he was to be its candidate he had written every small rancher in the vicinity, requesting as a personal favor that they appear in Dry Bottom on the day of the primary; that these letters had been delivered by Ace, and that when the poet returned he had presented Hollis with a list containing the name of every rancher who had promised to come, and that several days before Hollis had known approximately how many votes Allen would receive at the primary. He did not intend that Allen should know this—or that he had been going quietly from one Dry Bottom merchant to another,

appealing to them for their support. And the earnestness with which many of them had promised had convinced him that the primary was to be the beginning of the end for Bill Watkins and Dunlavey.

When he had first come to Dry Bottom it had been universally conceded by the town's citizens that his differences with Dunlavey and the Cattlemen's Association were purely personal, and there had been a disposition on the part of the citizens to let them fight it out between themselves. But of late there had come a change in that sentiment. The change had been gradual, beginning with the day when he had told the author of the notice that had appeared on the door of the *Kicker* office not to hold the express on his account. But the change had come and it was evident that it was to be permanent. It had only been necessary to arouse the government to the situation in order to secure intervention. He had hoped to secure this intervention without being forced to a hostile clash with the opposition, but his first meeting with Dunlavey had spoiled that. Subsequent events had widened the breach.

He was satisfied. Let Bill Watkins be defeated for sheriff and Dunlavey was beaten. But there was much to be done before that desirable end could be achieved.

Following the custom the primary was to be held in the sheriff's office. Watkins had issued a proclamation some weeks before; it had appeared on the door of the sheriff's office—a written notice, tacked to the door—but it had been removed the same day. Obviously, it was the sheriff's intention to conduct the primary as quietly as possible, hoping no doubt to disarm whatever opposition might develop. But Hollis had been apprised of the appearance of the proclamation and had quietly proceeded to plant the seed of opposition to Watkins in the minds of his friends.

He had been warned by Judge Graney that Watkins would try to "pack" the sheriff's office with his friends on the night of the primary. This had been the usual method employed by Dunlavey when opposition to Watkins developed. Drunken, dissolute, dangerous men were usually on hand to overawe the opposition; the Judge told of instances in which gunplay had developed. But Hollis had determined that Watkins must be beaten.

Allen did not stay long in the *Kicker* office. Nor, for that matter, did Hollis. Once, during the morning, he went down to the court house to talk with Judge Graney. Then he returned to the *Kicker* office and worked until noon.

During the morning there had been a surprising influx of visitors. Bronzed

punchers on dusty, drooping ponies rode down the town's one street, dropped from their saddles, and sought the saloons. Groups of them swarmed the streets and the stores. As Hollis walked down to his office after leaving the court house, he was kept busy nodding to friends—many of whom had become such during the later days of the drought. Merchants grinned at him from their doorways; Dunlavey's friends sneered as he passed or sent ribald jokes after him.

At noon he went to the Alhambra for lunch. Almost the first person he saw there was Dunlavey. The latter grinned at him mockingly.

"Friends of yours in town to-day," he said with a sneer. "Well, you'll need them!"

His voice had been loud enough for all in the restaurant to hear. Hollis did not answer, though he appreciated the significance of Dunlavey's words; they told him that the Circle Cross manager was aware of the contemplated contest and was ready for it.

During the afternoon Dry Bottom presented a decidedly different appearance from the day when Hollis had first viewed it. Animation had succeeded desolation. Perhaps a hundred cowponies were hitched to the rails that paralleled the fronts of the saloons, the stores, and many of the private dwellings. It was apparent that many of the visitors had made the trip to town for the double purpose of voting and securing supplies, for mixed with the ponies were numerous wagons of various varieties, their owners loading them with boxes and crates. Men swarmed the sidewalks; the saloons buzzed.

Toward dusk the volume of noise in the saloons drowned all sound outside. Having made their purchases the ranchers who had driven in for supplies and had loaded their wagons preparatory to departure found time to join their friends and acquaintances over a convivial glass. By the time the kerosene lamps were lighted in the saloons revelry reigned. From one saloon issued the shrieking, discordant notes of a violin, accompanied by the scuffling of feet; from another came laughter and the clinking of glasses; from still another came harsh oaths and obscene shouts. In the latter place rose the laughter of women.

Seated at his desk near the front window of the *Kicker* office Hollis gravely watched the scene—listened to the sounds. In another chair sat Potter. There was no light in the office; neither man had thought of a light. As the revelry in the saloons increased the printer glanced furtively at his chief.

"There'll be hell to-night!" he said.

“I expect there will be trouble,” agreed Hollis.

Potter shifted uneasily in his chair, eyeing his employer with a worried expression. He was silent for a moment. Then he cleared his throat nervously.

“Do you intend to go there—to the sheriff’s office—to-night?” he questioned.

Hollis looked quickly at him. “Of course!” he said with emphasis. “Why?” he interrogated.

“Nothing,” returned Potter; “only—” he hesitated and then blurted out: “I wouldn’t go if I were you. They’ve been saying that if you do there’ll be trouble. You know what that means.”

“Who has been saying that?” inquired Hollis.

“I heard it at noon—in the Silver Dollar. Some of Dunlavey’s men sat near me and I heard them saying that Watkins was to win if they had to put two or three of his chief opponents out of business.”

“I have been expecting that,” returned Hollis. He said nothing more and Potter, having done his duty, felt that he had no business to interfere further.

Shortly after dark there was a clatter of hoofs outside the *Kicker* office and four men dismounted from their ponies and strode to the office door. They were Norton, Ace, Lanky, and Bud. Evidently Hollis had been awaiting their coming, for he met them at the door, greeting them with the words: “We’ll be going at once; it’s about time.”

Followed by Potter the five strode rapidly down the street. When they arrived at the sheriff’s office there were a number of men congregated about the door. Inside a kerosene lamp flickered on a table that sat in the center of the room. Another lamp stood on Watkins’s desk, and beside the desk sat Watkins himself.

Conversation died away as Hollis and his men approached the door and stood in the stream of light from the interior. A man stepped out of the shadow of the building and approached Hollis, drawing him and Norton aside. It was Allen. The latter had lost some of the sprightliness that had marked his manner during his conversation with Hollis in the *Kicker* office that morning—he was again the cool, deliberate, steady-eyed man he had been that day in Judge Graney’s office when Hollis had met him the first time.

“I’ve been waitin’ for you,” he said; “we’re goin’ to have a scrumptuous time. Dunlavey’s planning to pack her.” He swept a hand toward the interior of the office. “But each candidate is to be allowed two witnesses. I’ve selected you

two. Dunlavey and Greasy are doing the honors for Watkins. We might just as well go inside; we can't do anything out here. There won't be anything done by any of this gang until Dunlavey says the word."

He turned and stepped into the sheriff's office, Hollis and Norton following.

Watkins looked up and surveyed them with a bland smile as they entered and dropped quietly into the several chairs that had been provided.

"I reckon she's goin' to be some hot tonight?" significantly remarked Watkins, addressing himself to Allen.

"Maybe," grinned Allen.

"We're goin' to take a hand in handlin' the Law," significantly remarked Norton.

Watkins's face reddened. He stared offensively at Hollis.

"I reckon you're a witness, too," he said, sneering. "Well," he went on as Hollis gravely nodded, "the law says that a witness to the count must be a resident of the county. An' I reckon you ain't. You ain't been—"

"He stays," interrupted Allen, shortly. "That's settled."

Watkins's face bloated with a sudden anger, but he wheeled without replying and gave his attention to some papers lying on the desk in front of him.

For a long time the four sat in silence. Outside arose voices of men—growing in volume. There was a jam around the door; looking out Hollis could see the bronzed, grim faces of the punchers as they crowded close, moved by a spirit of curiosity. Hollis could hear exclamations of impatience, though the majority of the men outside stood in silence, waiting.

Plainly, nothing was to be done until the arrival of Dunlavey. And presently he came.

He had not been drinking; he was undeniably sober and self-possessed. As he entered the door of the office there was a sudden surge on the part of the crowd—several of the men tried to force their way in behind Dunlavey. But he halted on the threshold, scowling back at them and uttering the one word: "Wait!" The crowd fell back at the command and watched.

Dunlavey stepped across the room, standing beside Watkins, his rapid glance noting the presence of the three members of the opposition. He ignored Hollis and Norton, speaking to Allen.

"So you're sure enough going to run?" he said.

“Sure,” returned Allen. He rose slowly, stepped deliberately across the room, closed the door, and stood with his back to it.

“We’re all here now,” he said quietly, “and I want to talk a little. There ain’t no one going to hear what I’ve got to say but them I’m going to say it to. I reckon that goes?” He turned to Dunlavey.

Dunlavey had shown some evidence of surprise over Allen’s action in closing the door, but this immediately gave way to a sneer of mockery. “I reckon you’ve forgot Greasy,” he said.

“Why, I sure have!” returned Allen evenly. He opened the door a trifle and called: “Greasy!”

Evidently Greasy had been waiting at the door, for he immediately came in, slouching across the floor and standing beside Watkins and Dunlavey. Allen closed the door and adjusted the fastenings carefully. Then he turned again to Dunlavey.

“Now we’ll proceed to do the talking,” he said. He walked over to the chair that he had previously vacated, dropping carelessly into it and leaning comfortably back. His movements had been those of a man unquestionably sure of peace. The expression of his eyes, the tones of his voice, his deliberation hinted at a desire for a peaceful compromise.

But once seated in his chair a startling change came over him. There was a rapid movement at his sides, a mere flash of light, and two heavy six-shooters appeared suddenly in his hands and lay there, unaimed, but forbiddingly ready. He sat erect, his eyes chilled and glittering, alert, filled with menace.

“Now,” he said sharply, “the first man who peeps above a whisper gets his so plenty that he won’t care a damn who’s nominated for sheriff!” He spoke to Norton and Hollis without turning his head. “You two get whatever guns them gentlemen happen to have on them, standing to one side so’s I can see to perforate anyone who ain’t agreeable to handing them over.”

Norton rose and approached Dunlavey, while Hollis stepped forward to the sheriff and secured the weapon that reposed in a holster at his right hip. He did likewise with Greasy. While Norton was relieving Dunlavey of his weapon the sheriff opened his lips to speak, his gaze fixed doubtfully on one of Allen’s sixes.

“The law—” he began. But Allen interrupted with a grin.

“Sure,” he said, “the law didn’t figure on this. But I reckon you heard Big Bill

say once that the law could be handled. I'm handling it now. But I reckon that lets you out—you ain't in on this and the mourners'll be after you to-morrow if you open your trap again!"

The sheriff swelled with rage, but he closed his lips tightly. When Hollis and Norton had completed their search for weapons and had laid the result of their search on the table near Allen they sought their chairs.

Dunlavey had said nothing. He stood beside Watkins's desk, still self-possessed, the mocking smile still on his face, though into his eyes had come a doubting, worried expression. Plainly he had not anticipated such drastic action from Allen.

The latter laughed grimly, quietly. "Sort of unexpected, wasn't it, Bill?" he said, addressing Dunlavey. "It ain't just the sort of politics that you've been used to. But I'm kind of used to it myself. Had to pull the same game off over in Colfax County when I was runnin' for sheriff the first time. It worked, too, because the folks that was mixed up in it knowed I wasn't ringin' in any bluff." He looked at Dunlavey with a level, steady gaze, his eyes gleaming coldly. "If you think I'm bluffing now, chirp for some one of your pluguglies to bust into this game. I'd sort of like to let off my campaign guns into your dirty gizzard!"

Hollis had been watching Dunlavey closely. There was no fear in the man's eyes; even the doubt and worry that had been there had disappeared and his expression was now mildly ironical, contrasting oddly with the demeanor of Watkins—who was plainly frightened—and that of Greasy—who smirked and showed his teeth like some beast at bay and in fear of death. It was evident that Dunlavey possessed the spirit of the fighter, that indomitable courage which enables a man to face any situation and still retain his presence of mind, which permits him to face death unafraid and unyielding. In spite of the enmity that had existed between them from the beginning, Hollis had always respected Dunlavey for these very qualities, and within the last few minutes that respect had grown.

Dunlavey's eyes gleamed as he looked at Allen. "I don't think you would try to work any bluff on me, Allen," he said quietly. "You've took me by surprise, that's a fact. But let's get down to business. What's your game?"

"I reckon that's a sensible way to look at it," returned Allen evenly. "That's the way I expected you'd look at it when you begun to realize that I was holding some pretty good cards. There ain't nothing personal in this; I'm out for a square deal and I'm going to get it. I want you to understand that I'm running this game to-night and I'm running it square. If I get enough votes I'm going to be the next

sheriff. If I don't get enough votes Bill Watkins'll be it. But the votes are going to be real votes. I ain't figuring on letting your gang pack in here and keep my friends from voting.

"I'm going to put your hat on this table. Then Norton will open the door and let one man come in. That man will vote—for whoever he pleases. Then Mr. Hollis will let him out the back door and Norton will let another man in the front. There won't be any row. I'm telling you that you and Bill Watkins and Greasy are going to set here and watch the voting. I'm going to stand behind you with one of my guns tucked under your fifth rib. If you, or Watkins, or Greasy let out a yawp that can be construed as a signal for anyone to bust into the game, or if there's anything started by your friends which ain't your doing, I'm going to pump six chunks of lead into you so fast that they'll be playing tag with one another going through. I reckon you get me. That ends the palaver."

He arose, snatched Dunlavey's hat from his head, placed it on the table, and walked behind Dunlavey, standing against the wall.

"Open the door!" he directed, looking at Norton.

CHAPTER XXV

HANDLING THE LAW

Norton opened the door a trifle and called "One man at a time!" There were some hoarse shouts from without—presumably from Dunlavey's friends; a chorus of derisive laughter from Allen's. Then the first man entered.

It was Ace. The poet stood for an instant, blinking at the light, then he grinned as his gaze rested on the occupants of the room. He was directed how to cast his ballot. He took the piece of paper that was given him by Norton, scrawled "Allen" across it with a pencil that Norton had previously placed on the table, and dropped the paper into Dunlavey's hat. Hollis opened the rear door for him, but he halted on the threshold, looking back into the room with a broad grin.

"Gawd A'mighty!" he said in an awed tone; "there must have been a wad of money blowed in in this here town to-day! Drunks! Man alive there ain't nothin' but drunks; the town's reelin' with 'em! They're layin' in the street; there's a dozen in the Silver Dollar an' that many more in the Fashion—an' Gawd knows how many more in the other saloons. Their heads is under the tables; they're hangin' on the walls an' clawin' around in spittoons—gle-or-i-ously, be-ut-i-fully paralyzed!"

He was suddenly outside, pushed through the door by Hollis, and the door closed after him. Hollis glanced furtively at Dunlavey to see that gentleman scowl. He thought he saw a questioning glint in Allen's eyes as the latter looked suddenly at him, but he merely smiled and gave his attention to the next man, who was now entering.

The latter proved to be Lemuel Train. He did his voting quietly and grimly. But as he went out through the door that Hollis opened for him he growled: "Lordy, what a drunken bunch!" He looked at Hollis. "One of your men, too," he said, grinning slightly. "I thought you taught them better!"

Hollis frowned. He knew that Allen would need all his friends; none of them could be spared in this crisis. He smiled incredulously. It had been only a short time before that his men had accompanied him to the door of the sheriff's office. At that time they were perfectly sober. It would have been impossible for any of

them—

“An’ Ten Spot’s a hummer when he gits started,” Train was saying. “I’ve seen him before when he cut loose an’ he sure is a holy terror!”

Then with a word of parting Train was gone, saying that he had done all the “damage” he could and that he purposed “hitting” the trail back to his ranch.

He had certainly done some damage to Hollis. The latter’s mind now rioted with all sorts of conjecture and he mechanically did his work of letting man after man out through the rear door, scarcely seeing them.

He was aware of an odd expression that had come into Dunlavey’s eyes at the mention of Ten Spot. Had Dunlavey succeeded in bribing Ten Spot to desert him? He had left Ten Spot at the Circle Bar, not inviting him to Dry Bottom because he felt that the latter would rather not come since he had deserted Dunlavey. And Ten Spot had come to town anyway. What did it mean? Did it mean that Ten Spot had come to assist Dunlavey in nominating Watkins and defeating his new employer?

He frowned again, and for the next few minutes gravely studied Dunlavey’s face. He was sure that the latter’s manner had changed. The mocking smile which had been on his face since his arrival at the sheriff’s office had been superseded by a huge grin—plainly of anticipation. Ten Spot—dangerous, reckless, drunk, at the head of a number of dissolute men, had it in his power to make things decidedly interesting should he advance on the sheriff’s office with the intention of assisting Dunlavey.

Several times since hiring Ten Spot Hollis had doubted him. The suspicion had assailed him that perhaps the appearance of Ten Spot at the Hazelton cabin so opportunely had been a part of a plot by Dunlavey to place a spy in his employ. They might have purposely sacrificed Yuma.

During the next quarter of an hour he gave more attention to Dunlavey than to the steady stream of men that passed through the room, though he recognized a goodly number as friends he had made during the latter days of the drought.

Allen’s spirits had risen during the last quarter of an hour. His maneuver had dissipated Dunlavey’s strength and it was plain to be seen that a majority of the votes cast were for him. If nothing unusual or unexpected happened within the next hour, or until nine o’clock, the hour named in Watkins’s proclamation for the closing of the polls, he was assured of victory.

Thoughts of the same character were passing through Hollis’s mind. There was

silence in the office. A man was voting at the table—writing his favorite’s name on a piece of paper. Hollis consulted his watch. It lacked over an hour of the time for closing. The man at the table finished writing and tossed the paper into the hat. Hollis opened the rear door to allow him to go out. While the door remained open a sound floated in, which they all heard—an ear-splitting screech, followed instantly by a chorus of yells, a pistol report, more yells, and then a number of reports.

Norton did not open the door. He exchanged glances with Hollis and Allen. Dunlavey grinned widely.

“Something’s coming,” remarked Allen grimly.

Dunlavey’s grin grew derisive. “It would sure be too bad if my friends should bust up this peace meeting,” he sneered.

“There won’t be nothin’ spoiled,” grimly assured Allen. But he drew his other six-shooter.

The sounds outside grew in volume as they swept toward the sheriff’s office. They broke presently at the door and an ominous silence succeeded. Then a voice reached the interior—harsh authoritative—Ten Spot’s voice.

“Open up, you damned shorthorns!” it said.

Norton looked at Allen. The latter’s face was pale. “They come in,” he directed, “like the others—one at a time.”

Norton carefully withdrew the bar with which the door was fastened, swinging it open slightly. As he did so there was a sudden rush of bodies; Norton tried to jam the door shut, failed, and was flung back several steps by the surging, yelling crowd that piled tumultuously into the room.

There were perhaps twenty of them and as they surged into the room, shouting and cursing and laughing Hollis recognized among them many men that he had come to know by sight. They were of the reckless, lawless element upon which Dunlavey had relied for his support—men of Ten Spot’s character. They had been drinking, but in spite of their laughter and loud talking it was plain to be seen that they had determined not to be balked in the purpose which had brought them into the office.

There was now no need to guard the door; the damage had been wrought, and Norton backed away, leaving the door ajar, pale, grim eyed, alert, ready to take an active part in the trouble which he felt certain was sure to develop. Something in the faces of the men who had come in with Ten Spot proclaimed trouble.

Allen had not moved. He still stood behind Dunlavey, but his weapons no longer menaced the Circle Cross manager; their muzzles, level and forbidding, were covering the other men.

Standing quietly beside the rear door, his face pale, his eyes bright, his lips in straight lines, Hollis watched closely as the visitors, having gained entrance, gathered together in the center of the room. They were not awed by Allen's weapons; they grinned hugely at him. One man, a young man of about Hollis's age, bronzed, lean, reckless of eye, and unmistakably under the influence of liquor, lunged forward to Allen and stood within arm's length of him, grinning at him.

"Two guns!" he said with a laugh. "Why, I reckon you'd make a hell of a sheriff!"

A chorus of laughter greeted the young cowboy's words. Dunlavey grinned widely. "You boys are just in time," he said.

There was another roar of laughter. Many of the men seemed only now to have become aware of Dunlavey's presence and they surged forward around him, disregarding Allen's guns. The latter seemed to realize that the situation had passed beyond his control, for catching Hollis's eye he smiled grimly and sheathed his weapons, seeking Hollis's side.

"It's no use," he said shortly to Hollis as he came near; "they'll run things to suit themselves now. I wasn't expectin' Ten Spot to butt into the game."

"I reckon they've got us." Norton had also sought Hollis's side and the three stood near the rear door, watching the crowd around Dunlavey. Hollis tried to catch Ten Spot's gaze but failed—the latter seemed studiously to avoid him.

A wave of dull anger surged through Hollis's veins. Until now the contest had been conducted fairly; they had given Dunlavey and Watkins an honest election, even though they had found it necessary to eliminate them as active participants. From now on he was assured the contest would be a joke—though a grim one. He had depended upon Allen's success—it meant much to him. The thought of failure just when victory was within his grasp aroused him and in spite of Norton's low word of caution he stepped forward and stood beside the table on which reposed the hat into which the ballots had been placed by the men who had previously voted. He intended to take personal charge of the hat, determined upon securing a fair deal in spite of the great odds.

As he stepped forward he saw Greasy grin maliciously and try to snatch a gun

from the holster of a cowboy who stood near him. This attempt was frustrated by the puncher, who suddenly dropped his hand to his holster, where it closed upon Greasy's. The puncher snarled, muttered profanely, and struck furiously at Greasy, knocking him down in a corner.

Other men moved. There were curses; the flashing of metal as guns came out. Hollis felt rather than saw Norton and Allen advance toward the table and stand beside him. A grim smile wreathed his face over the knowledge that in the crowd there were at least two men upon whom he might depend to the end—whatever the end might be.

He heard Dunlavey snarl an oath, saw his big form loom out of the crowd, saw one of his gigantic hands reach for the hat on the table.

"I reckon I'll take charge of this now!" he sneered, his brutal face close to Hollis's.

Hollis would have struck the face that was so close to his, but at the instant he saw Dunlavey's hand reach out for the hat he saw another hand dart out from the other side of the table, seize the hat, and draw it out of Dunlavey's reach.

"I don't reckon that you'll take charge of her!" said a voice.

Hollis turned quickly. Over the table leaned Ten Spot, the captured hat in his hand, a big forty-five in the other, a cold, evil glitter in his eyes as he looked up at Dunlavey.

"I don't reckon that you're goin' to have a hand in runnin' this show a-tall, Bill," he sneered. "Me an' my friends come down here special to tend to that." He grinned the shallow, hard grin that marks the passing of a friendship and the dawn of a bitter hatred. "You see, Bill, me an' my friends has got sorta tired of the way you've been runnin' things an' we're shufflin' the cards for a new deal. This here tenderfoot which you've been a-slanderin' shameful is man's size an' we're seein' that he gits a fair shake in this here. I reckon you git me?"

Hollis felt Norton poking him in the ribs, but he did not turn; he was too intent upon watching the two principal actors in the scene. Tragedy had been imminent; comedy was slowly gaining the ascendancy. For at the expression that had come over Dunlavey's face several of the men were grinning broadly. Were the stakes not so great Hollis would have felt like smiling himself. Dunlavey seemed stunned. He stood erect, passing his hand over his forehead as though half convinced that the scene were an illusion and that the movement of the hand would dispel it. Several times his lips moved, but no words came and he turned,

looking about at the men who were gathered around him, scanning their faces for signs that would tell him that they were not in sympathy with Ten Spot. But the faces that he looked upon wore mocking grins and sneers.

“An’ I’ve been tellin’ the boys how you set Yuma on Nellie Hazelton, an’ they’ve come to the conclusion that a guy which will play a low down mean game like that on a woman ain’t no fit guy to have no hand in any law makin’.”

Ten Spot’s voice fell coldly and metallicly in the silence of the room. Slowly recovering from the shock Dunlavey attempted a sneer, which gradually faded into a mirthless smile as Ten Spot continued:

“An’ you ain’t goin’ to have a hand in any more law-makin’ in this man’s town. Me an’ my friends is goin’ to see to that, an’ my boss, Mr. Hollis. I reckon that’ll be about all. You don’t need to hang around here while we do the rest of the votin’. Watkins an’ Greasy c’n stay to see that everything goes on regular.” He grinned wickedly as Dunlavey stiffened. “I reckon you know me, Bill. I ain’t palaverin’ none. You an’ Ten Spot is quits!”

He stepped back a little, away from the table, his teeth showing in a mocking grin. Then he looked down at the hat which he still held in his hand—Dunlavey’s hat. He laughed. “Why, I’m cert’nly impolite!” he said insinuatingly. “Here you’ve been wantin’ to go an’ I’ve been keepin’ your hat!” He dumped the ballots upon the table and passed the hat to Dunlavey. Without a word Dunlavey took it, jerking it savagely, placed it on his head, and strode to the door, stepping down into the street.

There was a short silence. Then Ten Spot turned and looked at Hollis, his face wreathed in a broad grin.

“I reckon you-all think you know somethin’ about handlin’ the law,” he said, “but your little Ten Spot ain’t exactly the measliest card in the deck! We’ll do our votin’ now.”

A quarter of an hour later, after Ten Spot and his friends had cast their ballots and Watkins had been forced to make out a certificate of nomination,—which reposed safely in Ben Allen’s inside pocket—the kerosene lights were extinguished and the men filed out. Hollis and Ten Spot were the last to leave. As they stood for a moment on the threshold of the doorway Hollis seized Ten Spot’s hand and gripped it heartily.

“I want to thank you, my friend,” he said earnestly.

Ten Spot jerked his hand away. “Aw, hell!” he said as they sought the darkness of the street, “I ain’t mushin’ none. But,” he added, as a concession to his feelings, “I reckon to know a white man when I see one!”

CHAPTER XXVI

AUTUMN AND THE GODS

It was Sunday afternoon and a hazy, golden, late September sun was swimming lazily in the blue arc of sky, flooding the lower gallery of the Circle Bar ranchhouse, but not reaching a secluded nook in which sat Hollis and Nellie Hazelton. Mrs. Norton was somewhere in the house and Norton had gone down to the bunkhouse for a talk with the men—Hollis and Nellie could see him, sitting on a bench in the shade of the eaves, the other men gathered about him.

Below the broad level that stretched away from the ranchhouse sank the big basin, sweeping away to the mountains. Miles into the distance the Circle Bar cattle could be seen—moving dots in the center of a great, green bowl. To the right Razor-Back ridge loomed its bald crest upward with no verdure saving the fringe of shrubbery at its base; to the left stretched a vast plain that met the distant horizon that stretched an interminable distance behind the cottonwood. Except for the moving dots there was a total absence of life and movement in the big basin. It spread in its wide, gradual, downward slope, bathed in the yellow sunshine of the new, mellow season, peacefully slumberous, infinitely beautiful.

Many times had Hollis sat in the gallery watching it, his eyes glistening, his soul stirred to awe. Long since had he ceased regretting the glittering tinsel of the cities of his recollection; they seemed artificial, unreal. When he had first gazed out over the basin he had been oppressed with a sensation of uneasiness. Its vastness had appalled him, its silence had aroused in him that vague disquiet which is akin to fear. But these emotions had passed. He still felt awed—he would always feel it, for it seemed that here he was looking upon a section of the world in its primitive state; that in forming this world the creator had been in his noblest mood—so far did the lofty mountains, the wide, sweeping valleys, the towering buttes, and the mighty canyons dwarf the flat hills and the puny shallows of the land he had known. But he was no longer appalled; disquietude had been superseded by love.

It all seemed to hold some mystery for him—an alluring, soul-stirring mystery. The tawny mountains, immutable guardians of the basin, whose peaks rose somberly in the twilight glow—did they hold it? Or was it hidden in the basin, in

the great, green sweep that basked in the eternal sunlight?

Perhaps there was no mystery. Perhaps he felt merely the romance that would inevitably come to one who deeply appreciated the beauty of a land into which he had come so unwillingly? For romance was here.

He turned his head slightly and looked at the girl who sat beside him. She also was looking out over the basin, her eyes filled with a light that thrilled him. He studied her face long, noting the regular features, the slight tan, through which shone the dusky bloom of perfect health; the golden brown hair, with the wind-blown wisps straggling over her temples; he felt the unaccountable, indefinable something that told him of her inborn innocence and purity—qualities that he had worshiped ever since he had been old enough to know the difference between right and wrong.

A deep respect moved him, a reverent smile wreathed his lips. Motherly? Yes, that world-thrilling word aptly described her. And as he continued to look at her he realized that this world held no mystery for him beyond that which was enthroned in the heart of the girl who sat beside him, unconscious of his thoughts.

He turned again toward the basin. He did not want to uncover the mystery—yet. There were still several things to be done before he would feel free to speak the words that he had meditated upon for some weeks. Meanwhile—if the gods were with him—the solving of the mystery would be the more enjoyable.

Two weeks of inaction had followed the primary incident. Several of Ten Spot's friends were now in his employ; in spite of the drought the Circle Bar had so far experienced a very prosperous season, and, though the addition of the men represented quite an item of expense, he felt that it was much better to employ them than to allow them to be re-engaged by Dunlavey.

He had been able to save considerable money. This he had transferred to a bank in Santa Fe, for he had determined to stay in the West. He had told his mother of this decision and had asked her to come, but she had written that she preferred to remain East for a time—at least until the following spring.

Hollis was satisfied. Affairs were progressing beyond his anticipations. Dunlavey's influence in the county had received a mighty blow in the defeat of Watkins at the primary; he had received notice of the enactment of several new laws that would appreciably assist him in his fight; he had succeeded in winning many friends because of his attitude on the water question; the increased number of advertisements appearing in the *Kicker* would soon necessitate the addition of

an extra sheet. It all presaged prosperity. Yes, he was satisfied. And yet—

He turned again and looked at the girl. This time he caught her watching him. Evidently she had been watching him for a long time for her gaze was fixed and meditative, as though she had been studying him. She started and blushed when he turned and caught her, looking down in sudden and complete confusion. But she looked up again instantly, meeting his gaze steadily, her lips in a frank smile.

“You have been thinking of this country,” she said.

“You have guessed it,” he returned gravely and gently; “I have been thinking of this country—and its people.” He smiled at her, his eyes shining with a light that caused hers to waver and droop. “But how did you discover that?” he questioned. “I was not aware that I had been speaking my thoughts.”

“Do you think it is always necessary to speak?” she answered, looking at him with a quiet smile. “Don’t you think there are times when one’s thoughts find expression in one’s eyes? When we can not conceal them—no matter how hard we try? I know that you were thinking of the country,” she went on earnestly, “because a few moments ago I had been thinking of it too and I know that my emotions were exactly the same as those expressed in your eyes. It is magnificent, isn’t it?” she said in an awed, eager voice. “It is so big, so mighty, so soul-stirring. It allures with its vastness, it dazzles with its beauty; it makes one feel closer to the Creator, even while pressing home a disquieting sense of one’s own insignificance.

“For instance,” she went on, her eyes large and luminous, a new, quiet color coming into her face “there are times when our tasks seem stupendous, when we are filled with an overpowering consciousness of the importance of them; when we feel that we are carrying such a burden that the addition of another would make the load too heavy. Then we look upon God’s work and immediately a still, small voice within us cries: ‘What have ye done in comparison to this?’ And what have we done?” she suddenly demanded.

“Nothing,” he returned gravely, awed by this fleeting illuminating glimpse into her soul.

She leaned back into her chair with a smile. “Those were the things I was thinking about. And you, too, were thinking of them,” she added. “Now, don’t deny it!” she warned, “for I saw it in your eyes!”

“No!” he said with a quick smile; “I don’t deny it. But I was thinking of the people also.”

“Oh, the people!” she said with a frown.

“Perhaps I should have said ‘person,’” he modified with a quick glance at her, under which her eyes drooped in swift confusion—as they had drooped on another occasion which he remembered.

“Oh!” she said merely.

“I have been comparing this person to God’s other works,” he said, a light in his eyes which told that the former decision to postpone an attempt to uncover the mystery had been ruthlessly put aside, “and I have come to the conclusion that in spite of the infinite care he took in forming the beautiful world out yonder he did not neglect this person to whom I refer.”

Her eyes met his in a glance of swift comprehension. She drew a slow, deep breath and averted her face, which was now crimson.

“As you have been able to illustrate man’s insignificance in comparison to God’s mighty creations, so has my own inferiority been forced upon me by my attempting to compare myself to the sweet character of the person of whom I speak,” said Hollis, his voice low and earnest. “It has been a question whether—when I speak to her of a thing which has been on my mind for many days—she could not with justice paraphrase the question asked by the still, small voice and say: What have you done to deserve this? And I should have to reply—nothing.” He had moved closer to her, leaning forward to look into her eyes.

She sat very still, her gaze on the basin. “Perhaps this very estimable person holds other views?” she returned, with a flash of mischief in her eyes. She turned suddenly and looked straight at him, meeting his gaze unwaveringly, a demure smile on her face. “I told you that sometimes a person’s thoughts were expressed in their eyes,” she said—and now her lashes flickered—“perhaps you can tell what my thoughts are?”

It was a challenge, a defiance, and an unconditional surrender. Like a flash one of Hollis’s arms went out—she was drawn, vainly protesting, toward him.

“You haven’t answered,” she laughed, in a smothered voice; “you are not certain —”

She did not finish the sentence. Mrs. Norton, coming to the door for a breath of fresh air, halted on the threshold, looked, smiled, and then quietly—very quietly—slipped back into the house.

Away out over the basin a Mexican eagle circled, winging his slow way through the golden sunshine of the afternoon. Miles away the mountain peaks rose

somberly, a mysterious, golden halo rising slowly above them. Perhaps there would always be mystery in the mountains, but a certain mystery that had troubled Hollis mightily had been successfully solved. The gods had favored him.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE SEAR AND YELLOW DAYS

“This here town,”—read a letter that Hollis received from Weary late in September—“aint fit for no man to live in which thinks anythink of hisself, in the first place theres two many folks here which dont seem to know what to do with themselves they just keep millin around an actin like they was ready to stampead any time. In the 2nd place im runnin shy of dust an id admire for to receive about a months pay which i wont charge two you bein as ive already spent more then i ought two its a good thing i got a return ticket or id be in a hell of a fix when i got ready to come back last nite the doctor at the hospittle said hed operate on ed today which hes already done this mornin an eds restin easy though the doc dont know whether hes goin to git well or not but hes hopin an ile let you know by telegraph if he gits any worse which is all for this time.

P. S. say boss dont forgit to hustel that coin ile shure make it right with you i forgot to tell you that i got cleaned out by a card sharper here i would have tore him apart but about a million sheriffs piled onto me an i didnt have no chancst what in hell does any town need with so many sheriffs.

“Weary.

“P. S. id like to be home for the round-up but reckon i wont make it.

“Weary.”

Nellie Hazelton did not see this letter, though Hollis told her that Ed had been operated on and that he was doing as well as could be expected. And the telegraph that night flashed Weary’s “coin” to him.

The days passed all too quickly now, for the time for the fall round-up was at hand and Hollis realized with regret that his daily rides—with Nellie Hazelton as a companion—must soon be discontinued.

The nights had already grown cool; snow had appeared on the mountain peaks; the basin was no longer a great green bowl, but resembled a mammoth, concave palette upon which nature had mixed her colors—yellow and gold and brown, with here and there a blotch of red and purple, a dash of green,—lingering over the season—and great, wide stretches of gray. The barren spots seemed to grow

more barren—mocked by the scarlet blossoms of the cactus that seemed to be everlasting, and the fringing, yellow soap weed, hardy, defying the advancing winter. Razor-Back ridge was a desolate place. Never attractive, it reared aloft barren and somber, frowning down upon its fringe of shrubbery the latter stripped of its leaves, its scant beauty gone and bending its bare branches stubbornly to the early winds.

With the last day of the month came a rain—a cold, bitter, driving storm that raged for three days and started a drift that the cattlemen could not stop. Arrayed in tarpaulins the cowboys went forth, suffering, cursing, laboring heroically to stem the tide. The cattle retreated steadily before the storm—no human agency could halt them. On the second day Norton came into the Circle Bar ranchhouse, wet, disgusted, but fighting mad.

“If this damn rain don’t stop pretty soon,” he told Hollis as he dried himself before the open fireplace, “we’ll have cattle down here from over the Colorado line. An’ then there’ll be hell to pay!”

But on the third day the rain ceased and the sun came out. The country lay smiling in the sunshine, mellow, glistening, inviting. But the damage had been wrought. From Lemuel Train of the Pig Pen outfit, came word that fifty per cent of his cattle were missing. Truxton of the Diamond Dot, Henningson of the Three Bar, and nearly all of the other small owners, reported losses. Of course the cattle would be recovered during the fall round up, but they were now scattered and fair prey for cattle thieves, and with the round up still two weeks away it seemed that many must be stolen.

Yet there was nothing that could be done; it is folly to attempt to “cut out” cattle on the open range.

From the editorial columns of the *Kicker* might be gleaned the fact that the Law had come into Union County. Many men of Dry Bottom entered the *Kicker* office to thank Hollis; others boldly draped their houses with flags and bunting.

Dunlavey had visited Dry Bottom twice since the incident of the primary. He had said nothing concerning the incident to anyone save possibly his intimates, but from the sneer that appeared on his face when approached by those whom he considered friendly to Hollis it was plain that he intended continuing the fight.

Hollis had been compelled to record in the *Kicker* the unpleasant news that Dunlavey had refused to comply with the new law regulating brands and the submitting of lists for taxation, and also that he had threatened to shoot the first officer trespassed on his land. Dunlavey had not complied with the law, but he

had failed to carry out his threat to “shoot the first officer that trespassed on his land,” for Allen had trespassed several times, openly and boldly. Moreover, Dunlavey had seen him, had even spoken to him, but had offered no violence.

Perhaps in a calmer mood Dunlavey had decided not to use his weapon; perhaps there was something about the quiet, cool, and deliberate Allen which convinced Dunlavey that the former might be able to give a good account of himself in the event of trouble. At any rate several times Allen had ridden the Circle Cross range unmolested by either Dunlavey or his men. He explored the farthest limits of the Circle Cross property, tallying the cattle, nosing around the corrals, examining brands, and doing sundry other things not calculated to allay Dunlavey’s anger over this new and odd condition of affairs.

Then one day he failed to visit the Circle Cross. Instead, he appeared to Potter in the office of the *Kicker* with copy for a poster announcing the sale by auction of a thousand of Dunlavey’s best cattle. He ordered Potter to print it so that he might post copies throughout the county within a week. The night following the issue of the *Kicker* containing the announcement concerning the coming of the law Potter had informed Hollis that he had that day delivered the notices to Allen.

CHAPTER XXVIII

IN DEFIANCE OF THE LAW

Hollis had demonstrated the fact that a majority of Dry Bottom's citizens welcomed the law. Dry Bottom had had a law, to be sure—the law of the six-shooter, with the cleverest man “on the trigger” as its chief advocate. Few men cared to appear before such a court with an argument against its jurisdiction. The law, as the citizens of Dry Bottom had seen it, was an institution which frowned upon such argument. Few men cared to risk an adverse decision of the established court to advocate laws which would come from civilized authority; they had remained silent against the day when it would come in spite of the element that had scoffed at it. And now that day had arrived. The Law had come.

Even the evil element knew it. The atmosphere was vibrant with suppressed excitement; in the stores men and women were congregated; in the saloons rose a buzz of continuous conversation. On the street men greeted one another with subdued voices, or halted one another to discuss the phenomenon. In a dozen conspicuous places were posted flaring, printed notices, informing the reader that a thousand of the Circle Cross cattle—a description of which followed—were, on the following day, to be sold to the highest bidder. Below this announcement, in small, neat print, was quoted the Law.

Dry Bottom gasped. The saloons swarmed. In the Fashion two bartenders and the proprietor labored heroically to supply their customers with the liquid stimulant which would nerve them to look upon Ben Allen's posters with a certain degree of equanimity. The reckless element—the gun-men who in a former day were wont to swagger forth with reckless disregard for the polite conventions—skulked in the background, sneering at this thing which had come to rob them of their power and which, they felt, presaged their ultimate downfall.

But Dry Bottom ignored the gun-men, or smiled blandly at them, giving its attention to Ben Allen's posters and discussing a rumor which had gained rapid credence, to the effect that the new governor had telegraphed Allen that he would hold a detail of United States soldiers in readiness for any contingency.

The good citizens smiled. And throughout the day many of them passed and repassed the *Kicker* office, anxious to get a glimpse of the man who had been

instrumental in bringing about this innovation.

Shortly after noon on the same day Dunlavey rode into Dry Bottom, dismounted, hitched his pony to the rail in front of the Fashion, and entered.

In former days Dunlavey's appearance within the doors of the Fashion was the signal for boisterous greetings. For here might always be found the law's chief advocates. To-day, however, there were no greetings. Minds were filled with vague and picturesque conjecture concerning Dunlavey's probable actions and the outcome of this strange affair. Thus upon Dunlavey's entrance a silence—strange and awkward—fell in the bar-room. There were short nods and men fell away from Dunlavey as he crossed the room and came to a halt before one of Ben Allen's posters. He read every line of it—every word. No man interrupted him. Then, finishing his reading, he turned and faced the crowd, his face white with wrath, his lips snarling.

“Why in hell didn't some of you damned fools tear this down?” he demanded.

No man felt it incumbent upon him to reply to this and Dunlavey watched them for an instant, sneering, his eyes glittering menacingly. Then he suddenly turned, seized the poster, savagely tore it into pieces, hurled the pieces to the floor, and stamped upon them. Then he turned again to the silent crowd, his face inflamed, his voice snapping with a bitter, venomous sarcasm.

“Scared!” he said. “Scared out clean—like a bunch of coyotes runnin' from the daylight!” He made a strange sound with his lips, expressing his unutterable contempt for men so weakly constituted.

“Quit!” he grated. “Quit clean because a tenderfoot comes out here and tries to run things! So long as things come your way you're willing to stick it out, but when things go the other way—Ugh!”

He turned abruptly, strode out through the door, mounted his pony, and rode rapidly down the street. Several of the men, who went to the door after his departure, saw him riding furiously toward the Circle Cross.

Then one of his former friends laughed harshly—sarcastically. “I reckon that there tenderfoot is botherin' Big Bill a whole lot,” he said as he turned to the bar.

It had been a busy day for Hollis. His hand had been shaken so much that it pained him. The day had been a rather warm one for the season and so when late in the afternoon Norton rode into town, “To see the excitement,” he told Hollis, the latter determined to make the return trip to the Circle Bar in the evening.

Therefore, after a short conference with Judge Graney and Allen—and a frugal, though wholesome supper in the Judge’s rooms back of the court house—which Allen cooked—he and Norton rode out upon the Coyote trail and jogged quietly toward the Circle Bar.

There was a good moon; the air was invigorating, though slightly chill, and the trail lay clear and distinct before them, hard after the rain, ideal for riding.

Many times during the first half hour of the ride Norton looked furtively at his chief. Certain things that Mrs. Norton had told him held a prominent place in his thoughts, and mingling with these thoughts was the recollection of a conversation that he had held with Hollis one day when both of them had been riding this same trail and Hollis had stopped off at the Hazelton cabin. Many times Norton smiled. He would have liked to refer to that conversation, but hesitated for fear of seeming to meddle with that which did not concern him. He remembered the days of his own courtship—how jealously he had guarded his secret.

But the longer his thoughts dwelt upon the incident that had been related to him by Mrs. Norton the harder it became to keep silent. But he managed to repress his feelings for the first half hour and then, moved by an internal mirth that simply would not be held in check longer, he cackled aloud.

He saw Hollis shoot a quick glance at him. He cackled again, his mirth swelling as he caught the surprised and puzzled expression of Hollis’s face.

“I have a very original opinion of people who laugh without any visible cause,” remarked the latter, grinning reluctantly in the semi-darkness.

Norton’s reply was another cackle. They rode in silence for a long time.

Then Norton spoke. “This is a great country,” he said.

Silence from Hollis, though taking a quick glance at him Norton again observed the puzzled grin on his face.

“And original,” he remarked, placing upon the latter word the same peculiar emphasis that Hollis had given it a moment before.

Hollis grinned widely; he began to detect a subtle meaning in the range boss’s speech and actions. But he did not answer; it would not strain his patience to await until such a time as Norton made his meaning clear.

“But there’s some things that ain’t original,” continued Norton in the same tone, after another short silence.

This remark clearly required comment. Hollis grinned mildly. "Meaning what?" he questioned.

Norton met his gaze gravely. "Meanin' that the ways of makin' love are pretty much the same in every country." He laughed. "I know there's different ways of makin' it—in books," he continued; "the folks which write books make their men an' women go at it all kinds of ways. But did you ever know anyone in real life to make love to a girl any different than anyone else?"

"I have had no experience in love making," returned Hollis, puzzled again.

Norton cackled. "No," he said, "an' that's the peculiar part of it. Mostly no one has ever had any experience when they start to makin' love the first time. But they all make it the same way. That's why it ain't original. You take a man which has got in love with a girl—any man. He don't want anyone to know that he's in love with her—he feels sorta sheepish about it. Goes around hangin' his head an' blushin', an' mostly not sayin' anything about it. Once he gets it into his system he ain't the same man any more. Takes to actin' reserved like an' gentle. But them that's had experience can see the symptoms. There ain't no way to hide it."

Had Norton looked at Hollis now he might have observed a touch of red in the young man's face. But he did not look; he was watching the trail ahead, smiling broadly.

They had been riding through a deep depression, going toward a ridge whose crest was fringed with dense, tangled shrubbery. Hollis was about to reply to Norton's remark when he saw the latter's lips suddenly straighten; saw his body stiffen as he drew himself erect in the saddle and pulled his pony abruptly up. Surprised, Hollis also reined in and sat silent, looking at Norton.

The latter's hand went to one of his ears, the fingers spreading out, fan like. "Listen!" he warned sharply.

Hollis had been listening. A low rumble greeted his ears. He looked suddenly upward at the sky, fearful that another storm, such as he had encountered months before, might be forming. But the sky was cloudless. He looked again at Norton. The latter's eyes shone brightly in the moonlight as he leaned toward Hollis. The rumbling had grown more distinct.

"It ain't a stampede," said Norton rapidly; "there wouldn't be anything to stampede cattle on a night like this. An' them's cattle!"

It was about a hundred yards to the ridge toward which they had been riding and Hollis saw Norton suddenly plunge the spurs into his pony's flanks; saw the

animal rush forward. He gave his own animal the spurs and in an instant was at Norton's side, racing toward the ridge. The range boss dismounted at the bottom, swiftly threw the reins over his pony's head, and running stealthily toward the crest. Hollis followed him. When he reached Norton's side the latter was flat on a rim rock at the edge of a little cliff, behind some gnarled brush. Below them the country stretched away for miles, level, unbroken, basking in the moonlight. Hollis recognized the section as that through which he had traveled on the night he had been overtaken by the storm—the big level that led to Big Elk crossing, where he had met Dunlavey and his men that night.

Looking out upon the plain he held his breath in amazement. During the time he had been at the Circle Bar he had seen cattle running, but never had he seen them run like this. About a quarter of a mile from the ridge on which he and Norton stood rose a dust cloud—moving swiftly. But ahead of the cloud, heads down, their horns tossing were a number of cattle, perhaps fifty, racing furiously. They were running parallel with the ridge and would probably pass it. Behind and flanking them raced several cowboys, silent, driving with their quirts.

“Rustlers!” came Norton's voice from beside him. “They're headin' for Big Elk!”

Hollis had brought his rifle, which he had carried since the attack on the night of the storm. At Norton's word he raised it. But Norton's hand touched his and his voice came again, sharply, commandingly.

“Don't shoot!” he said. “It wouldn't do any good; some of them would get away. Mebbe they'll come close enough so's we can see who they are!”

Hollis waited breathlessly. It seemed that but an instant had passed from the time he had caught a first glimpse of them until they were thundering by the ridge and he and Norton were blinded by the dust. They had gone before the dust settled, but through it as they passed, Hollis had caught sight of a familiar figure. Before the thunder of hoofs had died away Hollis felt Norton's hand on his arm and his voice in his ear.

“Dunlavey!”

There could be no doubt of that, for Hollis had recognized him also. He turned, to hear Norton's dry voice in his ear.

“The new law don't seem to be botherin' Dunlavey a heap,” he said.

Hollis stepped boldly out on the ridge, his face grim and pale. But he was pulled back by Norton. “I take it you don't want to let them see you,” he said. “When a

thing like that comes off there's always somebody sure to be lookin' back." He was pulling at Hollis's arm, directing his steps down the slope toward where they had left the horses. "You an' me ain't enough," he was saying to Hollis; "we'll hit the breeze to the Circle Bar, get some of the boys, an' hustle back here an' take them cattle!"

Hollis accompanied him willingly as far as the horses. Then he halted, his eyes flashing brightly. "We won't go to the Circle Bar," he said. "We won't fight them like that. There is a law in this country now and I am going to see that the law acts!" He seized Norton's arm in a firm commanding grip. "You follow them," he directed. "From the edge of the butte where they caught me on the night of the storm you can see the country for miles. Don't cross the river," he warned. "Stay there beside the butte until I come back—I won't be long. Watch where they take the cattle!"

Before Norton could offer a word of objection he was on his pony and racing over the back trail at terrific speed. For a moment Norton watched him. Then he disappeared and Norton grimly mounted his pony and rode down to the level following the trail taken by the thieves.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE ARM OF THE LAW

The lights in Dry Bottom's saloons were flickering brightly when Hollis rode down the street and dismounted from his drooping pony in front of the court house. He ran stiffly around the side of the building and knocked loudly on a door. There was a short silence and then a movement inside and Ben Allen stuck his head out of a window. He saw at a glance the upward turned face of the nocturnal visitor and called shortly: "Wait! I'll be down!"

There was a short wait, during which Hollis impatiently paced back and forth and then Allen appeared in the door, fully dressed. Judge Graney, in a night shirt, stood behind him.

"Something's up, of course," drawled Allen as he stepped down from the door, "or you wouldn't come around disturbing folks this way. What is it?"

Hollis briefly related the events of the night, concluding with the statement that he was determined to force the law to act.

"Correct!" laughed Allen. "She's got to act now." He caught Hollis's arm and turned him toward a small cottonwood grove about half a mile distant. A dozen white objects dotting the grove caught Hollis's gaze. He started.

"Soldiers!" he exclaimed.

"I might say that was a good guess," drawled Allen. "I sent for them because I thought I might need them if our friend Dunlavey got to cuttin' up any. It's been my experience that a detail of Uncle Sam's boys is about as good a thing to have around in case of trouble as any man could want."

"But you can't use them in this case," remarked Judge Graney, who had stepped down beside the two men. "The governor's instructions were that they should be used merely as an instrument in enforcing the court's order regarding the sale of Dunlavey's cattle. The theft of the Circle Bar cattle is a matter which comes directly under the jurisdiction of the sheriff. If he refuses to act—"

"Hell!" broke in Allen. "We know he won't do anything!"

The Judge smiled slightly. "I suspect he won't," he said dryly. He winked at

Hollis.

“Being a judge in this district I am, of course, averse to advising any infractions of the law. But if I were not a judge I would suggest that two strong, energetic men—such as you appear to be—” He leaned forward and whispered in Allen’s ear, whereat that gentleman let out a joyous whoop and almost dragged Hollis around the corner of the building toward the street, leaving the Judge standing in the doorway.

Once on the street Allen set a pace that brought the two to the door of the sheriff’s office quickly. A light shone through the window and when Allen opened the door Watkins was sitting beside his desk, gravely fumbling a deck of cards. He dropped them when he saw his visitors and made a quick movement with his right hand toward his revolver. But Allen’s weapon was already out.

“Bill,” he said in a soft, even voice, “we’re wantin’ a warrant for the arrest of Bill Dunlavey. The charge is stealin’ cattle. Of course you’ll issue it,” he added insinuatingly.

Watkins’s face slowly paled. “Why—” he began.

“Of course I knowed you wouldn’t do it when I asked you,” said Allen with a dangerously soft smile. “That’s why I come down here. This town’s got a sheriff an’ it ain’t. I wouldn’t care a damn if it didn’t have you. There’s lots of folks wouldn’t care either. So that if you’re one of them which does care you’re settin’ right still an’ not sayin’ anything which can be construed as talk till my friend here goes down to the station.” He whispered to Hollis. “Be middlin’ rapid,” he said aloud afterward, “an’ use my name.” He turned to Watkins with a smile. “While we’re waitin’ I’ll do some talkin’,” he said. “But if you let out one little wee chirp them folks which don’t care about you bein’ sheriff of this man’s town will sure have a heap of cause to rejoice.”

Hollis was already far down the street toward the station. When he got there the station was dark—evidently the agent had gone to bed. Hollis pounded heavily on the door and presently the agent opened it, appearing in his night shirt, a heavy six-shooter in hand, his eyes blinking.

“My name is Hollis,” said the latter from the darkness; “I want you to telegraph the governor.”

“Come in.” The agent disappeared within, Hollis following. “This way,” he directed, as he disappeared through another door leading into the station, his night shirt flapping about his lean legs. “What you wantin’ to telegraph?” he

questioned, as he seated himself before the instrument and looked up at Hollis. And then, before the latter could answer he continued: "You're the durndest man to stir up a muss I ever, seen in my life!"

Hollis smiled grimly as he seized a blank and wrote his message to the governor: "Cattle thieves caught red-handed. Sheriff refuses to act. Crisis. Suggest you appoint me temporarily.

BEN ALLEN."

The agent took the message, read it, and then monotonously began to drum on the keys of his instrument.

Hollis found it impossible to sit still and so he nervously paced up and down the room during the sending of the message. The agent finished and, leaned his head sleepily on the table.

"Ought to answer in half an hour—if he's home," he informed Hollis. Upon which Hollis slipped out of the door and returned down the street to the sheriff's office, peering within Watkins still sat at the table and in a chair near him lounged Allen, talking volubly. Hollis watched for a time and then returned to the station to find the agent asleep beside his instrument. Hollis had scarcely awakened him when the sounder began its monotonous ticking. He leaned over the agent's shoulder and read the governor's answer as the agent sleepily wrote it down.

"Ben Allen: You are hereby appointed sheriff of Union County in place of W. Watkins, dismissed. Have Judge certify,"

"I reckon there must be somethin' goin' on," remarked the agent. "What's the matter with Bill—"

But Hollis had snatched the message from his hand and was out into the street in an instant and running down toward the sheriff's office. When he arrived there Allen was still talking. He passed the telegram to him and the latter rose to his feet and smiled at Watkins, shoving the message under his nose.

"You can read her," he said. "Then you can go home an' quit sheriffin'—after I've got through with you. You've been called down to the court house. I'm takin' you, chargin' you with bein' an accessory before the fact, or somethin' like that. It don't make no difference what it is, you're goin' with me." His voice came sharp and chill: "Jump!"

Judge Graney had dressed himself by the time the three arrived at the court

house and Watkins was roughly tumbled into the room which had been set aside as the jail. Then the judge led Hollis and Allen into the court room where he issued Allen's certificate of appointment.

"Now, I reckon we won't have no trouble in gettin' the soldiers," he grinned.
"This sheriff is goin' to act!"

CHAPTER XXX

FORMING A FRIENDSHIP

At three o'clock in the afternoon Hollis closed his desk and announced to Potter that he was going to the Circle Bar. Potter watched him with a fond smile as he went out the door and placed the saddle on his pony, mounted and rode into the sunshine of the afternoon. The presence of the troopers in town had created a sensation and most of the town's citizens were gathered about the court house, curiously watching Dunlavey and several of his men who had been taken into custody during the early hours of the morning. Neither Hollis or Norton had been allowed to participate in the final scene, the little captain informing them curtly that the presence of civilians at what promised to be a free-for-all fight was strictly forbidden. And so Norton had returned to the Circle Bar, while Hollis had gone to Dry Bottom to finish an article for the next issue of the *Kicker*.

It had been in that bald, gray time between darkness and dawn when Ben Allen and Hollis, riding at the head of the detail of troopers beside the dapper little captain, had arrived at the edge of the butte where Hollis had directed Norton to await his coming.

Norton's only comment upon seeing the troopers had been: "Where in hell did they come from?"

He told Allen that he had watched where Dunlavey and his men had driven the cattle, and that he would find them concealed in a narrow defile between two hills about a mile on the other side of the Rabbit-Ear. He and Hollis had announced their intention to accompany the troop to the scene, but had been refused permission by the captain.

The capture of the thieves had been quite a simple matter. In single file the troopers had descended the slope of the river, crossed a shallow, and clattered up the other side. A mile dash at a gallop had brought them to one end of the defile mentioned by Norton, and in a grove of fir-balsam the captain had deployed his troopers and swooped suddenly down into the defile, surprising several men, who with Dunlavey, were busily at work altering the brands on the cattle they had stolen. There was a fire near the center of the defile, with branding irons

scattered about it.

The stolen cattle bore various brands. There were perhaps a dozen belonging to the Circle Bar, several from the Pig Pen; others bore the brands of the Three Bar and the Diamond Dot.

Proof of Dunlavey's guilt had been absolute. He had made some resistance, but had been quickly overpowered by Allen and the troopers. Then with their prisoners the troops had returned to Dry Bottom.

Hollis rode slowly toward the Circle Bar. He was tired—dead tired. When he arrived at the Hazelton cabin the shade on the porch looked so inviting that he dismounted, tied his pony to one of the slender porch columns, and seated himself, leaning wearily against the column to which he had tied his pony.

He sat there long, staring at a clump of nondescript weed that fringed the edge of the arroyo near the cabin, his thoughts filled with pictures of incidents that had occurred to him during his stay in the West. Nellie Hazelton appeared in every one of these pictures and therefore he smiled often.

He had not liked the country when he had first come here; it had seemed to offer him no field for the pursuit of his ambition. Certainly the raising of cattle had never entered into his scheme of things. Yet he now realized that there was plenty of room in this country for success in this particular industry; all a man had to do was to keep up his end until the law came. And now the law had come and he had been partly responsible for its coming. The realization of this moved his lips into a grim smile.

He filled and lighted his pipe, smoking placidly as he leaned against the slender column, his gaze shifting to a clump of dense shrubbery that skirted the trail within twenty feet of the cabin. He sat quiet, his long legs stretched out to enjoy the warmth of the sun that struck a corner of the porch floor. His pipe spluttered in depletion and he raised himself and looked around for his pony, observing that the animal was contentedly browsing the tops of some weeds at the edge of the porch. Then, resigning himself to the sensation of languor that oppressed him, he knocked the ash from the pipe, filled it again, lighted it, and resumed his former reclining position.

During the past few days he had given much thought to Dunlavey. He was thinking of the man now, as his gaze went again to the clump of shrubbery that skirted the trail.

Some men's mental processes were incomprehensible. Dunlavey was one of

these men. What did the man hope to gain by defying the law? Would there not be profit enough in the cattle business when conducted honestly?

He felt a certain contempt for the man, but mingled with it was a sort of grim pity. No doubt Dunlavey felt justified in his actions, for he had lived here a good many years, no doubt suffering the privations encountered by all pioneers; living a hard life, dealing heavy blows to his enemies, and receiving some himself. No doubt his philosophy of life had been of the peculiar sort practiced by the feudal barons of the Old World, before civilization had come, carrying its banner of justice, which, summed up epigrammatically, though ironically, had been "Might is Right." But might could never be right in this country. Dunlavey must learn this lesson; he could not hope to—!

Hollis sat suddenly erect, putting aside his pipe and his ruminations at the same instant, the languor gone from him, his eyes narrowing coldly.

For suddenly, from behind the shrubbery that skirted the edge of the trail, had appeared the man about whom he had been thinking! It was evident that he had not come upon Hollis unexpectedly. He reined in his pony and sat motionless in the saddle, his face white, his eyes alight with passion.

For an instant neither man spoke. Hollis realized that the great moment for which he had waited many days had arrived. And it had arrived unexpectedly. It had arrived to find him tired after his activities of the night and in no condition for a fight. He drew a deep breath and got to his feet, a grim smile on his face. He stepped off the porch and stood by one of the columns, watching Dunlavey closely. As he watched the grim smile on his face slowly faded, his lips curled bitterly, his eyes chilled.

"I suppose you've come to collect that thrashing?" he said.

Dunlavey dismounted quickly, his right hand flew to his holster, drawing his revolver. He came toward Hollis crouching, a cold, merciless glitter in his eyes.

"Yes, you tenderfoot — —." he snarled.

From the moment of Hollis's arrival at the court house the night before Ben Allen had been constantly in action. It was late in the morning when he had returned to the court house with his prisoners. The men who had been captured with Dunlavey were still with the troopers, there not being sufficient room at the court house for them. Watkins had been released and Dunlavey had taken his place in the little room that answered for a jail. Shortly before noon Allen proceeded to the station, where he telegraphed to the governor the story of the

capture. He had then deputized a dozen punchers and sent them to the Circle Cross to round up a thousand of Dunlavey's cattle and hold them until the late afternoon when, according to Allen's published program, they were to be sold to the highest bidder. Then, tired and hungry, Allen sought the Alhambra and ate a hearty meal.

Dry Bottom was swarming with visitors that had come in for the sale. But by the time Allen had finished eating the exodus had begun. The trail leading to the Circle Cross ranch was dotted with probable bidders, curiosity seekers, idlers, and mere residents of the town. Now that the law had come there were many who discovered that their sympathies had always been with the men who had championed it. Allen found his way to the court house strewn with men who halted him to express their good will. Many people gathered in front of the *Kicker* office, eager for a glimpse of Hollis. Those who gathered there before twelve-thirty saw him seated at his desk, tall, angular, serious of face, absolutely unaffected by this thing which had caused a sensation. Passing the *Kicker* office on his way to the court house, Allen had paused to look within and shout a greeting to him. Then he had continued on his way.

Arriving at the court house Allen looked in at Dunlavey to find him lying on the floor, apparently asleep. Allen did not disturb him. He went out, threw the saddle on his pony, and rode over to the grove where the soldiers were quartered, talking long with the captain. At two o'clock he returned to the court house to be greeted with the news that Dunlavey had escaped. Allen did not stop to inquire how the escape had been accomplished. He remounted his pony and raced down to the *Kicker* office, fearing that Dunlavey had gone there. Potter informed him that his chief had departed for the Circle Bar fully an hour and a half before. He had taken the Coyote trail—Potter had watched him.

Allen wheeled his pony and returned to the court house. He was met at the door by Judge Graney. The latter's face was white and drawn with fear.

"He's gone to kill Hollis!" the judge told him through white, set lips. "I heard him threaten Hollis this morning and a moment ago a man told me that he had seen Dunlavey, not over half an hour ago, riding out the Coyote trail at a dead run!"

Allen's own face whitened. He did not stop to answer but drove the spurs deep into his pony's flanks and rode furiously down the street toward a point near the *Kicker* office where he struck the trail.

The distance to the Circle Bar ranch was ten miles and Dunlavey had a good half

hour's start! He fairly lifted his pony over the first mile, though realizing that he could not hope to arrive at the Circle Bar in time to prevent Dunlavey from carrying out his design to kill Hollis. No, he told himself as he rode, he could not prevent him from killing Hollis, should he catch the latter unprepared, but he promised himself that Dunlavey should not escape punishment for the deed.

He had had some hope that Dunlavey would accept his defeat philosophically. The latter was not the only man he had seen who had been defeated by the law. Over in Colfax County and up in Wyoming he had dealt with many such men, and usually, after they had seen that the law was inevitable, they had resigned themselves to the new condition and had become pretty fair citizens. He had imagined that Dunlavey would prove to be no exception, that after the first sting of defeat had been removed he would meet his adversaries half way in an effort to patch up their differences. The danger was in the time immediately following the realization of defeat. A man of the Dunlavey type was then usually desperate.

So Allen communed with himself as he rode at a head-long pace down the Coyote trail, risking his neck a dozen times. Not once since he had left Dry Bottom had he considered his own danger.

He had been riding more than half an hour, and was coming up out of a little gully when he came upon a riderless pony, and close by it, browsing near a clump of shrubbery, another. He recognized one of them instantly as Dunlavey's, and his teeth came together with a snap. He rode closer to the other pony, examining it. On one of its hips was a brand—the Circle Bar. Allen's face whitened again. He had arrived too late. But he would not be too late to wreak vengeance upon Dunlavey.

He dismounted and cautiously approached the brush at the side of the trail. Parting it, he saw the roof of a cabin. He recognized it; he had passed it a number of times during his exploration of the country. He drew back and crept crept farther along in the brush, certain that he would presently see Dunlavey. But he had not gone very far when he heard voices and he cautiously parted the brush again and peered through.

He started back in surprise, an incredulous grin slowly appearing on his face. The incredulity changed to amusement a moment later—when he heard Hollis's voice!

The young man was seated on the edge of the porch—smoking a pipe! Near him, seated on a flat rock, his face horribly puffed out, with several ugly gashes disfiguring it, his eyes blackened, his clothing in tatters, one hand hanging

limply by his side, the fingers crushed and bleeding, was Dunlavey! Near him, almost buried in the sand, was a revolver. Allen's smile broadened when he saw Dunlavey's empty holster. Evidently he had met with a surprise!

While taking in these details Allen had not forgotten to listen to Hollis as the latter talked to Dunlavey. Apparently Hollis had about finished his talk, for his voice was singularly soft and even, and Dunlavey's almost comical air of dejection could not have settled over him in an instant.

"... and so of course I had to thrash you—you had it coming to you. You haven't been a man—you've acted like a sneak and a cur all through this business. You made a thrashing inevitable when you set Yuma on Nellie Hazelton. You'll have plenty of marks to remind you of the one you gave me that night." He pointed to his cheek. "I've got even for that. But I think I wouldn't have trimmed you quite so bad if you hadn't tried to shoot me a few minutes ago."

He puffed silently at his pipe for a short time, during which Dunlavey sat on the rock and squinted pathetically at him. Then he resumed:

"I've heard people talk of damned fools, but never, until I met you, have I been unfortunate enough to come into personal contact with one. I should think that when you saw the soldiers had come you would have surrendered decently. Perhaps you know by now that you can't fight the United States Army—and that you can't whip me. If you've got any sense left at all you'll quit fighting now and try your best to be a good citizen."

He smiled grimly as he rose from the porch and walked to where Dunlavey sat, standing over him and looking down at him.

"Dunlavey," he said, extending his right hand to the beaten man, "let's call it quits. You've been terribly worked up, but you ought to be over it now. You ought to be able to see that it doesn't go. I've thrashed you pretty badly, but you and your men used me up pretty well that night and so it's an even thing. Let's shake and be friends. If you show signs of wanting to be a man again I'll withdraw the charge of cattle stealing which I have placed against you, and I imagine I won't have any trouble in inducing Allen to call off that auction sale and accept settlement of the claim against you."

Until now Dunlavey had avoided looking at the outstretched hand. But now he looked at it, took it and held it for an instant, his bruised and swollen face taking on an expression of lugubrious self-pity.

"I reckon I've got it in the neck all around," he said finally. "But I ain't no

squealer and I've got—" His gaze met Hollis's and his eyes gleamed with a reluctant admiration. "By God, you're white! I reckon you could have tore the rest of me apart like you did my hand." He held up the injured member for inspection.

Allen's grin could grow no broader, and now he showed his increased satisfaction with a subdued cackle. He backed stealthily out of the shrubbery, taking a final glance at the two men. He saw Hollis leading Dunlavey toward a small water hole at the rear of the cabin; saw him bathing Dunlavey's injured hand and binding it with his handkerchief.

Then Allen proceeded to his pony, mounted, and departed for the court house to tell Judge Graney the news that kept his own face continually in a smile.

CHAPTER XXXI

AFTERWARD

From Razor-Back ridge the big basin spread away to the Blue Peak mountains. On the opposite side of the ridge began the big plain on which, snuggled behind some cottonwood trees, were the Circle Cross buildings. From where Hollis and Nellie Hazelton sat on the ridge they could look miles down the Coyote trail, into Devil's Hollow; could see the two big cottonwood trees that stood beside Big Elk crossing, above which, on the night of the storm, Hollis had been attacked by Dunlavey's men. Back on the stretch of plain above the basin they could make out the Circle Bar buildings, lying close to the banks of the river.

It was in the late afternoon and the sun had gone down behind the Blue Peaks, though its last rays were just touching the crest of the ridge near Hollis and Nellie. He had called her attention to the sinking sun, telling her that it was time they started for the Circle Bar.

"Wait," she said; "someone is coming up the Coyote trail. I have been watching him for ten minutes."

Hollis faced the trail and watched also. In a quarter of an hour the horseman came out of Devil's Hollow. Hollis and Nellie could see him plainly as he guided his pony around the huge boulders that filled the place. Hollis smiled whimsically.

"It's the poet," he told Nellie, catching her gaze and grinning widely at her. "I sent him to Dry Bottom this noon for the mail—Potter is going to stay in town over night."

For an instant it seemed that Ace would not see them, and Hollis rose from the rock on which he had been sitting and halloed to him. He responded with a shout and urged his pony up the steep side of the slope and then along the crest until he came within a few feet of where they sat. He dismounted and came forward, grinning broadly.

"Takin' the view?" he questioned. His eyes twinkled. "Sometimes there's a heap of poetry could be got out of this county. But—" and his eyelashes flickered slightly—"a fellow's got to be in the right frame of mind to get it out. I reckon

you two—”

“I suppose you got the mail?” interrupted Hollis, grimacing at him.

“I sure did,” returned the poet, “one letter. I reckon the blacksmith’ll be kickin’ because I’ve been galivantin’ around the country for one letter. Here it is.” He passed an envelope to Hollis, and the latter, with a quick glance at the legend in the upper left hand corner, tore it open and read. It was from Weary.

Dear boss i got cleaned out agin what did you send me a hundred dollars for you might have knowed that id make a gol darned fool of myself with so much coin i never could keep no coin no how but its all right anyway cause me an eds comin home tomorrow eds all right except bein a littel week which the doc says he git over in a littel while.

TA TA.
WEARY

P.S. i might have telegraphed but ed says it dont make no difference cause the letter will git there quick enough any way an hes afraid a telegram will scare some one. im dam glad i got a return ticket.

WEARY

After reading the letter Hollis passed it over to Nellie, watching her, his eyes alight with satisfaction.

“Oh!” she said. “Oh!” The letter dropped from her hand, was caught by the breezes and swirled several feet distant. Ace sprang to recover it. When he turned, the letter in hand, he saw something that brought a huge grin of sympathy to his face. But mingled with the sympathy was another emotion.

“Boss,” he said, as Hollis, disengaging himself, turned and faced him, “I’ve writ quite a nice little thing on ‘Love.’ Mebbe you’d like to—”

He caught Hollis’s frown and immediately retreated to his pony, his grin broadening as he went. He cackled with mirth as Hollis’s voice reached him.

“Ace,” he said gravely, “don’t attempt to write a poem on ‘Love’ until you’ve had some experience.”

“You havin’ yours now?” insinuated Ace, as he mounted his pony.

He alone caught Hollis’s reply. It was an expressive wink.

THE END

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