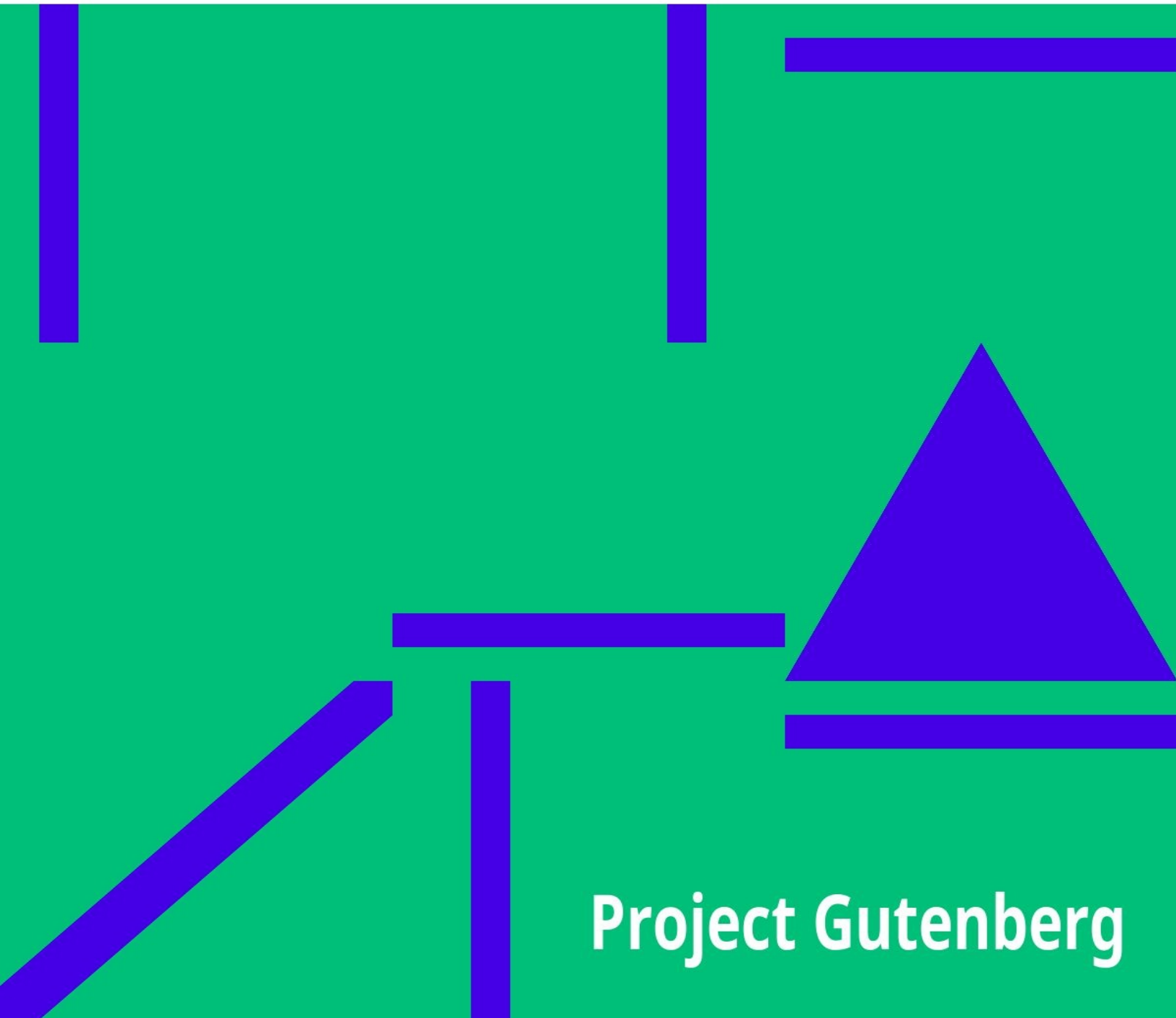
The Range Boss

Charles Alden Seltzer



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THE RANGE BOSS

BY

CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER

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THE BOSS OF THE LAZY Y, ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY
FRANK E. SCHOONOVER

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THE RANGE BOSS

CHAPTER I

AT CALAMITY CROSSING

Getting up the shoulder of the mesa was no easy job, but judging from the actions and appearance of wiry pony and rider it was a job that would be accomplished. For part of the distance, it is true, the man thought it best to dismount, drive the pony ahead of him, and follow on foot. At length, however, they reached the top of the mesa, and after a breathing spell the man mounted and rode across the table-land.

A short lope brought pony and rider to a point where the mesa sloped down again to meet a plain that stretched for miles, to merge into some foothills. A faint trail came from somewhere through the foothills, wound over the plain, and followed a slope that descended to a river below the rider, crossed the stream, led over a level, up another slope, to another plain, and so away into the distance.

Up and down the river the water ran deeply in a canyon, the painted buttes that flanked it lending an appearance of constriction to its course, but at the crossing it broadened formidably and swirled splashingly around numerous rocks that littered its course.

The man’s gaze rested briefly on the river and the crossing.

“She’s travelin’ some, this mornin’,” he said aloud, mentally referring to the water. “I reckon that mud over there must be hub deep on a buckboard,” he added, looking at the level on the opposite side of the crossing. “I’d say, if anybody was to ask me, that last night’s rain has made Calamity some risky this mornin’—for a buckboard.” He drew out a silver timepiece and consulted it with grave deliberation. “It’s eleven. They’d be due about now—if the Eight O’clock was on time—which she’s never been knowed to be.” He returned the timepiece to the pocket and rode along the edge of the mesa away from the river, his gaze concentrated at the point where the trail on the plains below him vanished into the distant foothills. A little later he again halted the pony, swung crossways in the saddle and rolled a cigarette, and while smoking and watching drew out two

pistols, took out the cylinders, replaced them, and wiped and polished the metal until the guns glittered brightly in the swimming sunlight. He considered them long before restoring them to their places, doubt in his gaze. “I reckon she’s been raised a lot different,” was his mental conclusion.

“But anyway, I reckon there ain’t nothin’ in Poughkeepsie’s name to give anyone comin’ from there any right to put on airs.” He tossed the butt of the cigarette away and frowned, continuing his soliloquy: “The Flyin’ W ain’t no place for a lady. Jim Pickett an’ Tom Chavis ain’t fit for no lady to look at—let alone talkin’ to them. There’s others, too. Now, if she was comin’ to the Diamond H—why, shucks! Mebbe she wouldn’t think I’m any better than Pickett an’ Chavis! If she looks anything like her picture, though, she’s got sense. An’—”

He saw the pony flick its ears erect, and he followed its gaze to see on the plain’s trail, far over near where it melted into the foothills, a moving speck crawling toward him.

He swung back into the saddle and smilingly patted the pony’s neck.

“You was expectin’ them too, wasn’t you, Patches? I reckon you’re a right knowin’ horse!”

He wheeled the pony and urged it slowly back over the mesa, riding along near the edge until he reached a point behind a heavy post-oak thicket, where he pulled the pony to a halt. From here he would not be observed from the trail on the plains, and he again twisted in the saddle, sagging against the high pommel and drawing the wide brim of his hat well over his eyes, shading them as he peered intently at the moving speck.

He watched for half an hour, while the speck grew larger in his vision, finally assuming definite shape. He recognized the buckboard and the blacks that were pulling it; they had been inseparable during the past two years—for Bill Harkness, the Flying W owner, would drive no others after his last sickness had seized him, the sickness which had finally finished him some months before. The blacks were coming rapidly, shortening the distance with the tireless lope that the plains’ animal uses so effectively, and as they neared the point on the mesa where the rider had stationed himself, the latter parted the branches of the thicket and peered between them, his eyes agleam, the color deepening in his face.

“There’s four of them in the buckboard,” he said aloud, astonished, as the vehicle came nearer; “an’ Wes Vickers ain’t with them! Now, what do you think of that! Wes told me there’d be only the girl an’ her aunt an’ uncle. It’s a man,

too, an' he's doin' the drivin'! I reckon Wes got drunk an' they left him behind." He reflected a moment, watching with narrowed eyes, his brows in a frown. "That guy doin' the drivin' is a stranger, Patches," he said. "Why, it's mighty plain. Four in the buckboard, with them bags an' trunks an' things, makes a full house, an' there wasn't no room for Wes!" He grinned.

The buckboard swung close to the foot of the slope below him, and he eagerly scrutinized the occupants, his gaze lingering long on the girl on the seat beside the driver. She had looked for one flashing instant toward him, her attention drawn, no doubt, by the fringing green of the mesa, and he had caught a good glimpse of her face. It was just like the picture that Wes Vickers had surreptitiously brought to him one day some weeks before, after Harkness' death, when, in talking with Wes about the niece who was now the sole owner of the Flying W, and who was coming soon to manage her property, he had evinced curiosity. He had kept the picture, in spite of Vickers' remonstrances, and had studied it many times. He studied it now, after the passage of the buckboard, and was supremely pleased, for the likeness did not flatter her.

Displeasure came into his eyes, though, when he thought of the driver. He was strangely disturbed over the thought that the driver had accompanied her from the East. He knew the driver was an Easterner, for no Westerner would ever rig himself out in such an absurd fashion—the cream-colored Stetson with the high pointed crown, extra wide brim with nickel spangles around the band, a white shirt with a broad turndown collar and a flowing colored tie—blue; a cartridge belt that fitted snugly around his waist, yellow with newness, so that the man on the mesa almost imagined he could hear it creak when its owner moved; corduroy riding-breeches, tight at the knees, and glistening boots with stiff tops. And—here the observer's eyes gleamed with derision—as the buckboard passed, he had caught a glimpse of a nickeled spur, with long rowels, on one of the ridiculous boots.

He chuckled, his face wreathing in smiles as he urged the pony along the edge of the mesa, following the buckboard. He drew up presently at a point just above the buckboard, keeping discreetly behind some brush that he might not be seen, and gravely considered the vehicle and its occupants. The buckboard had stopped at the edge of the water, and the blacks were drinking. The girl was talking; the watcher heard her voice distinctly.

"What a rough, grim country!" she said. "It is beautiful, though."

"She's a knowin' girl," mused the rider, strangely pleased that she should like the

world he lived in. For it was his world; he had been born here.

“Don’t you think so, Willard?” added the girl.

The rider strained his ears for the answer. It came, grumblingly:

“I suppose it’s well enough—for the clodhoppers that live here.”

The girl laughed tolerantly; the rider on the mesa smiled. “I reckon I ain’t goin’ to like Willard a heap, Patches,” he said to the pony; “he’s runnin’ down our country.” He considered the girl and the driver gravely, and again spoke to the pony. “Do you reckon he’s her brother, Patches? I expect it ain’t possible—they’re so different.”

“Do you think it is quite safe?” The girl’s voice reached him again; she was looking at the water of the crossing.

“Vickers said it was,” the driver replied. “He ought to know.” His tone was irritable.

“He’s her brother, I reckon,” reflected the man on the mesa; “no lover would talk that way to his girl.” There was relief in his voice, for he had been hoping that the man was a brother.

“Vickers said to swing sharply to the left after passing the middle,” declared the driver sonorously, “but I don’t see any wagon tracks—that miserable rain last night must have obliterated them.”

“I reckon the rain has *obliterated* them,” grinned the rider, laboring with the word, “if that means wipin’ them out. Leastways, they ain’t there any more.”

“I feel quite sure that Mr. Vickers said to turn to the right after passing the middle, Willard,” came the girl’s voice.

“I certainly ought to be able to remember that, Ruth!” said the driver, gruffly. “I heard him distinctly!”

“Well,” returned the girl with a nervous little laugh, “perhaps I was mistaken, after all.” She placed a hand lightly on the driver’s arm. And the words she spoke then were not audible to the rider, so softly were they uttered. And the driver laughed with satisfaction. “You’ve said it!” he declared. “I’m certainly able to pilot this ship to safety!” He pulled on the reins and spoke sharply to the blacks. They responded with a jerk that threw the occupants of the buckboard against the backs of the seats.

The rider’s eyes gleamed. “Hush!” he said, addressing no one in particular.

“Calamity’s goin’ to claim another victim!” He raised one hand to his lips, making a funnel of it. He was about to shout at the driver, but thought better of the idea and let the hand drop. “Shucks,” he said, “I reckon there ain’t any real danger. But I expect the boss gasser of the outfit will be gettin’ his’n pretty quick now.” He leaned forward and watched the buckboard, his lean under jaw thrown forward, a grim smile on his lips. He noted with satisfaction that the elderly couple in the rear seat, and the girl in the front one, were holding on tightly, and that the driver, busy with the reins, was swaying from one side to the other as the wagon bumped over the impeding stones of the river bed.

The blacks reached the middle of the stream safely and were crowding of their own accord to the right, when the driver threw his weight on the left rein and swung them sharply in that direction. For a few feet they traveled evenly enough but when they were still some distance from the bank, the horse on the left sank quickly to his shoulders, lunged, stood on his hind legs and pawed the air impotently, and then settled back, snorting and trembling.

Too late the driver saw his error. As the left horse sank he threw his weight on the right rein as though to remedy the accident. This movement threw him off his balance, and he slipped off the seat, clawing and scrambling; at the instant the front of the buckboard dipped and sank, disappearing with a splash into the muddy water. It had gone down awry, the girl’s side high out of the water, the girl herself clinging to the edge of the seat, out of the water’s reach, the elderly couple in the rear also safe and dry, but plainly frightened.

The girl did not scream; the rider on the mesa noted this with satisfaction. She was talking, though, to the driver, who at first had disappeared, only to reappear an instant later, blowing and cursing, his head and shoulders out of the water, his ridiculous hat floating serenely down stream, the reins still in his hands.

“I reckon he’s discovered that Vickers told him to swing to the right,” grinned the rider from his elevation. He watched the driver until he gained the bank and stood there, dripping, gesticulating, impotent rage consuming him. The buckboard could not be moved without endangering the comfort of the remaining occupants, and without assistance they must inevitably stay where they were. And so the rider on the mesa wheeled his pony and sent it toward the edge of the mesa where a gentle slope swept downward to the plains.

“I reckon I’ve sure got to rescue her,” he said, grinning with some embarrassment, “though I’m mighty sorry that Willard had to get his new clothes wet.”

He spoke coaxingly to the pony; it stepped gingerly over the edge of the mesa and began the descent, sending stones and sand helter-skelter before it, the rider sitting tall and loose in the saddle, the reins hanging, he trusting entirely to the pony’s wisdom.

CHAPTER II

THE SYMPATHETIC RESCUER

Halfway down the slope, the rider turned and saw that Willard and the occupants of the buckboard were watching him. The color in his cheeks grew deeper and his embarrassment increased, for he noted that the girl had faced squarely around toward him, had forgotten her precarious position; her hands were clasped as though she were praying for his safety. The aunt and uncle, too, were twisted in their seat, leaning toward him in rigid attitudes, and Willard, safe on his bank, was standing with clenched hands.

“Do you reckon we’re goin’ to break our necks, you piebald outlaw,” the rider said to the pony. “Well,” as the animal whinnied gently at the sound of his voice, “there’s some people that do, an’ if you’ve got any respect for them you’ll be mighty careful.”

The descent was accomplished in a brief time, and then Patches and his rider went forward toward the mired buckboard and its occupants, the pony unconcernedly, its rider, having conquered his embarrassment, serene, steady of eye, inwardly amused.

When he reached the water’s edge he halted Patches. Sitting motionless in the saddle, he quietly contemplated the occupants of the buckboard. He had come to help them, but he was not going to proffer his services until he was sure they would be welcomed. He had heard stories of the snobbishness and independence of some Easterners.

And so he sat there long, for the occupants of the buckboard, knowing nothing of his intentions, were in their turn awaiting some word from him.

No word came. He looked down, interestedly watching Patches drink. Then, when the pony had finished, he looked up, straight at the girl. She was sitting very erect—as erect as she could in the circumstances, trying hard to repress her

anger over his inaction. She could see that he was deliberately delaying. And she met his gaze coldly.

He looked from the girl to Willard. The Easterner was examining a small pistol that he had drawn from a yellow holster at his waist, so high on his waist that he had been compelled to bend his elbow in an acute angle to get it out. His hands were trembling, whether from the wetting he had received or from doubt as to the rider's intentions, was a question that the rider did not bother with. He looked again at the girl. Doubt had come into her eyes; she was looking half fearfully at him, and he saw that she half suspected him of being a desperado, intent on doing harm. He grinned, moved to mirth.

She was reassured; that smile had done it. She returned it, a little ruefully. And she felt that, in view of the circumstances, she might dispense with formalities and get right down to business. For her seat was uncomfortable, and Aunt Martha and Uncle Jepson were anxious, to say nothing of Willard, who had placed his pistol behind him, determined, if the man turned out to be a highwayman, to defend his party to the last.

But still the rider did not move. There was no hurry; only Willard seemed to be really suffering, for the winter's chill had not yet gone out of the air. But then, Willard had earned his ducking.

The girl cleared her throat. "We have had an accident," she informed the rider, her voice a little husky.

At this word he swept his hat from his head and bowed to her. "Why, I reckon you have, ma'am," he said. "Didn't you have no driver?"

"Why, yes," returned the girl hesitatingly, for she thought she detected sarcasm in his voice, and she had to look twice at him to make sure—and then she couldn't have told. "The gentleman on the bank, there, is our driver."

"The gentleman on the bank, eh?" drawled the rider. And now for the first time he seemed to become aware of Willard's presence, for he looked narrowly at him. "Why, he's all wet!" he exclaimed. "I expect he come pretty near drownin', didn't he, ma'am?" He looked again at the girl, astonishment in his eyes. "An' so he drove you into that suck-hole, an' he got throwed out! Wasn't there no one to tell him that Calamity ain't to be trusted?"

"Mr. Vickers told us to keep to the right after reaching the middle," said the girl.

"I distinctly understood him to say the left, Ruth," growled Willard.

The rider watched the girl's face, saw the color come into it, and his lips twitched with some inward emotion. "I reckon your brother's right, ma'am. Vickers wanted to drownd you-all."

"Mr. Masten isn't my brother," denied the girl. The color in her face heightened.

"Well, now," said the rider. He bent his head and patted the pony's mane to hide his disappointment. Again, so it seemed to the girl, he was deliberately delaying, and she bit her lips with vexation.

Willard also seemed to have the same thought, for he shouted angrily: "While you are talking there, my man, I am freezing. Isn't there some way for you to get my party and the wagon out of there?"

"Why, I expect there's a way," drawled the rider, fixing Masten with a steady eye; "I've been wonderin' why you didn't mention it before."

"Oh Lord!" said Masten to the girl, his disgust making his voice husky, "can you imagine such stupidity?"

But the girl did not answer; she had seen a glint in the rider's eyes while he had been looking at Masten which had made her draw a deep breath. She had seen guile in his eyes, and subtlety, and much humor. Stupidity! She wondered how Masten could be so dense!

Then she became aware that the rider was splashing toward her, and the next instant she was looking straight at him, with not more than five feet of space between them. His gaze was on her with frank curiosity, his lean, strong face glowing with the bloom of health; his mouth was firm, his eyes serene, virility and confidence in every movement of his body. And then he was speaking to her, his voice low, gentle, respectful, even deferential. He seemed not to have taken offense at Willard, seemed to have forgotten him.

"I reckon you-all will have to ride out of here on my horse, ma'am," he said, "if you reckon you'd care to. Why, yes, I expect that's right; I'd ought to take the old lady an' gentleman first, ma'am," as the girl indicated them.

He backed his pony and smiled at Aunt Martha, who was small, gray, and sweet of face. He grinned at her—the grin of a grown boy at his grandmother.

"I reckon you'll go first, Aunty," he said to her. "I'll have you high an' dry in a jiffy. You couldn't ride there, you know," he added, as Aunt Martha essayed to climb on behind him. "This Patches of mine is considerable cantankerous an' ain't been educated to it. It's likely he'd dump us both, an' then we'd be freezin'

too.” And he glanced sidelong at Willard.

Aunt Martha was directed to step on the edge of the buckboard. Trembling a little, though smiling, she was lifted bodily and placed sidewise on the saddle in front of him, and in this manner was carried to the bank, far up on the slope out of the deep mud that spread over the level near the water’s edge, and set down gently, voicing her thanks.

Then the rescuer returned for Uncle Jepson. On his way to join Aunt Martha, Uncle Jepson, who had watched the rider narrowly during his talk with Willard, found time to whisper:

“I had a mule once that wasn’t any stubborner than Willard Masten.”

“You don’t recollect how you cured him of it?”

“Yes sir, I do. I thumped it out of him!” And Uncle Jepson’s eyes glowed vindictively.

“I reckon you’ve got a heap of man in you, sir,” said the rider. He set Uncle Jepson down beside Aunt Martha and turned his pony back toward the river to get his remaining passenger. Masten waved authoritatively to him.

“If it’s just the same to you, my man, I’ll assist Miss Ruth to land. Just ride over here!”

The rider halted the pony and sat loosely in the saddle, gravely contemplating the driver across the sea of mud that separated them.

“Why, you ain’t froze yet, are you!” he said in pretended astonishment. “Your mouth is still able to work considerable smooth! An’ so you want to ride my horse!” He sat, regarding the Easterner in deep, feigned amazement. “Why, Willard,” he said when it seemed he had quite recovered, “Patches would sure go to sun-fishin’ an’ dump you off into that little ol’ suck-hole ag’in!” He urged the pony on through the water to the buckboard and drew up beside the girl.

Her face was crimson, for she had not failed to hear Masten, and it was plain to the rider that she had divined that jealously had impelled Masten to insist on the change of riders. Feminine perverseness, or something stronger, was in her eyes when the rider caught a glimpse of them as he brought his pony to a halt beside her. He might now have made the mistake of referring to Masten and thus have brought from her a quick refusal to accompany him, for he had made his excuse to Masten and to have permitted her to know the real reason would have been to attack her loyalty. He strongly suspected that she was determined to make

Masten suffer for his obstinacy, and he rejoiced in her spirit.

“We’re ready for you now, ma’am.”

“Are you positively certain that Patches won’t go to ‘sunfishing’ with me?” she demanded, as she poised herself on the edge of the buckboard. He flashed a pleased grin at her, noting with a quickening pulse the deep, rich color in her cheeks, the soft white skin, her dancing eyes—all framed in the hood of the rain cloak she wore.

He reached out his hands to her, clasped her around the waist and swung her to the place on the saddle formerly occupied by Aunt Martha. If he held her to him a little more tightly than he had held Aunt Martha the wind might have been to blame, for it was blowing some stray wisps of her hair into his face and he felt a strange intoxication that he could scarcely control.

And now, when she was safe on his horse and there was no further danger that she would refuse to ride with him, he gave her the answer to her question:

“Patches wouldn’t be unpolite to a lady, ma’am,” he said quietly, into her hair; “he wouldn’t throw you.”

He could not see her face—it was too close to him and his chin was higher than the top of her head. But he could not fail to catch the mirth in her voice:

“Then you lied to Willard!”

“Why, yes, ma’am; I reckon I did. You see, I didn’t want to let Patches get all muddied up, ridin’ over to Willard.”

“But you are riding him into the mud now!” she declared in a strangely muffled voice.

“Why, so I am, ma’am,” he said gleefully; “I reckon I’m sure a box-head!”

He handed her down a minute later, beside Uncle Jepson and Aunt Martha, and he lingered another moment near her, for his proximity to her had set his blood tingling, and there was an unnamable yearning in his breast to be near her. He had passed hours in looking upon her picture, dreaming of this minute, or another like it, and now that his dream had come true he realized that fulfilment was sweeter than anticipation. He was hugely pleased with her.

“She’s a lot better lookin’ than her picture,” he told himself as he watched her. She had her back to him, talking with her relatives, but she did not need to face him to arouse his worship. “Didn’t I know she was little,” he charged himself,

estimating her height, “she won’t come anywhere near reachin’ my shoulder.”

He had not forgotten Masten. And a humorous devil sported in his eye as he wheeled his pony and fixed his gaze on that gentleman.

“Speciments travel around most anywheres,” he reflected. “This here’s a swell head with a grouch. I reckon he ain’t a serious friend of hers, or she wouldn’t have stood for me rescuin’ her when he offered himself that generous.” The recollection convulsed him, and he bowed his head over the pony’s neck to hide the laugh. When he looked up, it was to see Masten standing rigid, watching him, wrath on his face.

“I suppose I’m to stand here and freeze while you sit over there and laugh your fool head off!” shouted the Easterner. “I’ve got some dry clothing in my trunk on the wagon, which I might put on, if I could induce you to hurry a little.”

“Why, shucks. I come mighty near forgettin’ you, Willard,” said the rider. “An’ so you’ve got other clothes! Only they’re in your trunk on the buckboard, an’ you can’t get ’em. An’ you’re freezin’ an’ I’m laughin’ at you. You’ve got a heap of trouble, ain’t you, Willard. An’ all because you was dead set on goin’ to the left when you ought to have gone to the right.”

“Do hurry! Wont you, please?” said the girl’s voice, close to his stirrup.

He looked guiltily at her, for he had been about to say some vitriolic things to Masten, having almost lost patience with him. But at her words his slow good nature returned.

“I’m sure goin’ to hurry, ma’am.”

He urged the pony into the water again, rode to the buckboard, stepped off, and kneeling in the seat reached into the water and worked with the harness. Then, walking along the wagon tongue, which was slightly out of the water, he again reached into the water and fumbled with the harness. Then he stepped back, slapped the blacks and urged them with his voice, and they floundered out of the water and gained the bank, where they stood shaking the water from their glistening bodies.

He mounted his pony again and rode to the rear of the buckboard. Taking the braided hair rope that hung from the pommel of his saddle he made a hitch around the center of the rear axle. Then he wheeled his pony until it faced away from the buckboard, rode the length of the rope carefully, halted when it was taut, and then slowly, with his end of the rope fastened securely to the saddle horn, pulled the buckboard to a level on the river bottom.

Returning to the rear of the buckboard he unfastened the rope, coiled it, and rode to the bank, catching the blacks and leading them up the slope beyond where the girl, her aunt and uncle stood. He gently asked Uncle Jepson to hold the blacks, for fear they might stray, and then with a smile at the girl and Aunt Martha, he returned to the buckboard. There he uncoiled his rope again and attached one end of it to the tongue of the wagon, again, as before, riding away until the rope grew taut. Then, with a word to the pony, the wagon was drawn through the water to the edge of the sea of mud.

This mud looked treacherous, but it was the only way out; and so, after a pause for rest, he urged the pony on again. The buckboard traveled its length—then lurched into a rut and refused to move another foot, in spite of the straining of the pony and its rider's urgings.

The rider paused, turned in the saddle and scratched his head in perplexity.

"I reckon we've run ag'in a snag, Patches," he said. He scrutinized the slopes. "I expect we'll have to try one of them, after all," he decided.

"You were foolish to try to draw the wagon out with that thing, in the first place," loudly criticized Masten. "If you had hitched the horses to the wagon after you had pulled it out of the hole, why—"

The rider looked at the fault-finder, his eyes narrowed.

"Why, if it ain't Willard!" he said, amazed. "Standin' there, workin' his little old jaw ag'in! An' a-mournin' because I ain't goin' to get my feet wet! Well, shucks. I reckon there ain't nothin' to do now but to get the blacks an' hitch 'em onto the wagon. There's a heap of mud there, of course, but I expect some mud on them right pretty boots of yours wouldn't spoil 'em. I'll lead the blacks over an' you can work your jaw on 'em."

"Thanks," said Masten, sneering, "I've had enough wettings for one day. I have no doubt that you can get the wagon out, by your own crude methods. I shall not interfere, you may be sure."

He stalked away from the water's edge and ascended the slope to a point several feet in advance of the wagon. Standing there, he looked across the mud at the girl and the others, as though disdaining to exchange further words with the rider.

The latter gazed at him, sidelong, with humorous malice in his glance. Then he wheeled his pony, rode back toward the wagon, veered when almost to it and forced the pony to climb the slope, thus getting Masten between the rope and the

mud. He pulled the rope taut again, swinging wagon tongue and wheels at a sharp angle toward him, drove the spurs into the flanks of the pony and headed it toward the mud level, swinging so that the rope described a quarter circle. It was a time-honored expedient which, he expected, would produce the jerk releasing the wagon.

If he expected the action would produce other results, the rider gave no indication of it. Only the girl, watching him closely and seeing a hard gleam in his eyes, sensed that he was determined to achieve a double result, and she cried out to Masten. The warning came too late. The taut rope, making its wide swing, struck Masten in the small of the back, lifted him, and bore him resistlessly out into the mud level, where he landed, face down, while the wagon, released, swished past him on its way to freedom.

The rider took the wagon far up the sloping trail before he brought it to a halt. Then, swinging it sideways so that it would not roll back into the mud, he turned and looked back at Masten. The latter had got to his feet, mud-bespattered, furious.

The rider looked from Masten to the girl, his expression one of hypocritical gravity. The girl's face was flushed with indignation over the affront offered her friend. She had punished him for his jealousy, she had taken her part in mildly ridiculing him. But it was plain to the rider when he turned and saw her face, that she resented the indignity she had just witnessed. She was rigid; her hands were clenched, her arms stiff at her sides; her voice was icy, even, though husky with suppressed passion.

"I suppose I must thank you for getting the wagon out," she said. "But that—that despicable trick—" Her self-control deserted her. "I wish I were a man; you would not go unpunished!"

There was contrition in his eyes. For an infinitesimal space he regretted the deed, and his active mind was already framing an excuse. And then out of the tail of his eye he saw Uncle Jepson winking violent applause at him, and a broad grin suffused his face. He made some effort to suppress it, but deepening wrinkles around his eyes contradicted the gravity of his lips.

"Why, I wasn't reckonin' to hurt him, ma'am," he said. "You see, he was right in the way, an' I reckon I was feelin' a bit wild right at that minute, an'—" His gaze went to Masten, who was scraping mud from his garments with a small flat stone. The rider's eyes grew wide; more wrinkles appeared around them.

"Why, I've spoiled his white shirt," he said as though speaking to himself, his

voice freighted with awe. And then, as Masten shook a threatening fist at him, he suddenly yielded to the mirth that was consuming him and he bowed his head.

It was Uncle Jepson's warning shout that impelled him to raise his head. He saw Masten coming toward him, clawing at the foolish holster at his waist, his eyes flashing murder, his teeth bared in a snarl.

"You, Patches!" said the rider, his voice coming with a cold, quick snap. And the piebald pony, his muscles and thews alive with energy in an instant, lunged in answer to the quick knee-press, through the mud, straight at Masten.

So it was a grim and formidable figure that Masten looked up at before he could get his weapon out of his holster. The lean face of the rider was close to his own, the rider's eyes were steady, blue, and so cold that they made Masten forget the chill in the air. And one of the heavy pistols that the rider carried was close to Masten's head, its big muzzle gaping forebodingly at him, and the rider's voice, as he leaned from the saddle, came tense and low. The girl could not hear:

"Listen to this gospel, you mud-wallowin' swine," he said. "This is a man's country, an' you play a man's game or you lose out so quick it'll make you dizzy! You been playin' kid all through this deal. You're grumblin' an' whinin' ever since I set eyes on you from the edge of the mesa, there. That little girl thinks you're all wool an' a yard wide. You come across, clean—you hear me! You shape up to man's size or I'll hunt you up an' tear the gizzard out of you! You jam that there cap-shooter back where it belongs or I'll take it away from you an' make you eat it! You hear me!"

The pistol went back; Masten's face was ashen beneath the mud on it.

"Now grin, you sufferin' shorthorn!" came the rider's voice again, low as before. "Grin like you'd just discovered that I'm your rich uncle come from Frisco with a platter full of gold nuggets which I'm set on you spendin' for white shirts. Grin, or I'll salivate you!"

It was a grin that wreathed Masten's lips—a shallow, forced one. But it sufficed for the rider. He sat erect, his six-shooter disappearing magically, and the smile on his face when he looked at the girl, had genuine mirth in it.

"I've apologized to Willard, ma'am," he said. "We ain't goin' to be cross to each other no more. I reckon you c'n forgive me, now, ma'am. I sure didn't think of bein' mean."

The girl looked doubtfully at Masten, but because of the mud on his face could see no expression.

“Well, I’m glad of that,” she said, reddening with embarrassment. “I certainly would not like to think that anyone who had been so accommodating as you could be so mean as to deliberately upset anyone in the mud.” She looked downward. “I’m sorry I spoke to you as I did,” she added.

“Why, I’m sorry too, ma’am,” he said gravely. He urged his pony through the mud and brought it to a halt beside her. “If you’d shake hands on that, ma’am, I’d be mighty tickled.”

Her hand went out to him. He took it and pressed it warmly, looking at it, marveling at it, for the glove on it could not conceal its shapeliness or its smallness. He dropped it presently, and taking off his hat, bowed to her.

“Thank you, ma’am,” he said; “I’ll be seein’ you ag’in some time. I hope you’ll like it here.”

“I am sure I shall.”

He grinned and turned away. Her voice halted him.

“May I know who has been so kind to us in our trouble?”

He reddened to the roots of his hair, but faced her.

“Why, I reckon you’ll know, ma’am. I’m King Randerson, foreman of the Diamond H, up the crick a ways. That is,” he added, his blush deepening, “I was christened ‘King.’ But a while ago a dago professor who stayed overnight at the Diamond H tipped the boys off that ‘King’ was Rex in Latin lingo. An’ so it’s been Rex Randerson since then, though mostly they write it ‘*W-r-e-c-k-s*.’ There’s no accountin’ for notions hereabouts, ma’am.”

“Well, I should think not!” said the lady, making mental note of the blueness of his eyes. “But I am sure the boys make a mistake in spelling your name. Judging from your recent actions it should be spelled ‘*R-e-c-k-l-e-s-s*.’ Anyway, we thank you.”

“The same to you, ma’am. So long.”

He flashed a smile at Aunt Martha; it broadened as he met Uncle Jepson’s eyes; it turned to a grin of derision as he looked at Masten. And then he was splashing his pony across the river.

They watched him as he rode up the slope on the opposite side; they held their breath as pony and rider climbed the steeper slope to the mesa. They saw him halt when he reached the mesa, saw him wave his hat to them. But they did not

see him halt the pony after he had ridden a little way, and kiss the palm of the hand that had held hers.

CHAPTER III

AT THE FLYING W

It fell to Uncle Jepson to hitch the blacks to the buckboard—in a frigid silence Masten had found his trunk, opened it and drawn out some very necessary dry clothing; then marching behind a thick clump of alder, he proceeded to make the change. After this he climbed down to the river and washed the mud from visible portions of his body. Then he returned to the buckboard, to find the others waiting for him. In a strained silence he climbed up to the seat beside Ruth, took up the reins, and sent the blacks forward.

It was ten miles to the Flying W ranchhouse, and during the ride the silence was broken only once. That was when, at about the fifth mile, Ruth placed a hand on Masten's arm and smiled at him.

"I really think Mr. Randerson *was* sorry that he upset you in the mud, Willard," she said gently. "I don't think he did it to be mean. And it was so manly of him to apologize to you." She laughed, thinking that time had already removed the sting. "And you really *did* look funny, Willard, with the mud all over you. I—I could have laughed, myself, if I hadn't felt so indignant."

"I'll thank you to not refer to it again, Ruth," he said crossly.

She flushed and looked straight ahead of her at the unfolding vistas that their passage revealed: at the undulating plains, green with bunch-grass that the rain of the night before had washed and reinvigorated; into gullies where weeds grew thick; peering into arroyos—visible memories of washouts and cloudbursts; glimpsing barrancas as they flashed by; wondering at the depth of draws through which the trail led; shivering at the cacti—a brilliant green after the rain—for somehow they seemed to symbolize the spirit of the country—they looked so grim, hardy, and mysterious with their ugly thorns that seemed to threaten and mock. She shrank, too, when the buckboard passed the skeleton of a steer, its bleached bones ghastly in the sunlight, but she smiled when she saw a sea of

soap-weed with yellow blossoms already unfolding, and she looked long at a mile-wide section of mesquite, dark and inviting in the distance. She saw a rattler cross the trail in front of the buckboard and draw its loathsome length into a coil at the base of some crabbed yucca, and thereafter she made grimaces at each of the ugly plants they passed. It was new to her, and wonderful. Everything, weird or ugly, possessed a strange fascination for her, and when they lurched over the crest of a hill and she saw, looming somberly in the distance in front of her, a great cottonwood grove, with some mountains behind it, their peaks gleaming in the shimmering sunlight, thrusting above some fleecy white clouds against a background of deep-blue sky, her eyes glistened and she sat very erect, thrilled. It was in such a country that she had longed to live all the days of her life.

Somehow, it gave her a different viewpoint. The man who had accommodated them back at the river seemed to fit very well here. The spirit of the young, unfettered country was in his eyes, in his serene manner; he was as hardy and rugged as this land from which he had sprung.

When the buckboard came to a halt in the Flying W ranchhouse yard, Ruth Harkness' first emotion was one of a great happiness that the Harknesses had always been thrifty and neat, and also that Uncle William had persisted in these habits. She had greatly feared, for during the last day of her ride on the train she had passed many ranchhouses and she had been appalled and depressed by the dilapidated appearance of their exteriors, and by the general atmosphere of disorder and shiftlessness that seemed to surround them. So many of them had reminded her of the dwelling places of careless farmers on her own familiar countryside, and she had assured herself that if the Flying W were anything like those others she would immediately try to find a buyer, much as she wished to stay.

But the first glance at the Flying W convinced her that her fears had been groundless. The ranchhouse was a big two-story structure built of heavy timber, with porches in front and rear, and wide cornices, all painted white and set on a solid foundation of stone. It looked spacious and comfortable. The other buildings—stables, bunkhouse, messhouse, blacksmith shop, and several others—did not discredit the ranchhouse. They all were in good repair. She had already noted that the fences were well kept; she had seen chickens and pigs, flowers and a small garden; and behind the stable, in an enclosure of barbed wire, she had observed some cows—milkers, she was certain.

The ranchhouse was well sheltered by timber. The great cottonwood grove that she had seen from the plains was close to the house on the south; it extended east and west for perhaps half a mile, and a grove of firs rose to the north, back of the pasture fence. The general character of the land surrounding the house was a sort of rolling level. The foothills belonging to the mountains that she had seen while approaching the ranchhouse were behind the cottonwood grove. She had seen, too, that the river they had crossed at the ford which Wes Vickers had called "Calamity" was not more than a mile from the house, and therefore she concluded that it doubled widely. Later, she learned from Vickers that her conclusion was correct, and that the river was called "Rabbit Ear." Why it was called that she was never able to discover.

When the buckboard came to a halt, two men who had been seated in the doorway of one of the buildings—she discovered, later, that it was the bunkhouse—got up, lazily, and approached the buckboard. Ruth felt a pulse of trepidation as they sauntered close to the wagon. Vickers had told her nothing directly concerning the character of the men at the ranch, but during their conversation at Red Rock that morning he had mentioned that the "boys are a good lot, taken together, but they's some that don't measure up." And she wondered whether these two came under that final vague, though significant classification.

Their appearance was against them. The one in advance, a man of medium height, looked positively villainous with his long, drooping black mustache and heavy-thatched eyebrows. He eyed the occupants of the buckboard with an insolent half-smile, which the girl thought he tried—in vain—to make welcoming.

The other was a man of about thirty; tall, slender, lithe, swarthy, with thin, expressive lips that were twisted upward at one corner in an insincere smirk. This taller man came close to the wagon and paused in an attitude of quiet impudence.

"I reckon you're Ruth Harkness—the ol' man's niece?" he said.

"Yes," returned the girl, smiling. Perhaps she had misjudged these men.

"Well," said the man, looking at her with a bold glance that made her pulse skip a beat, "you're a stunner for looks, anyway." He reached out his hand. She took it, feeling that it was the proper thing to do, although with the action she heard a grumble from Masten.

"You're welcome to the Flyin' W," said the man, breaking an awkward silence.

“Tom Chavis is special glad to see a pretty woman around these parts.”

She felt, in his eyes more than his words, a veiled significance. She reddened a little, but met his gaze fairly, her eyes unwavering.

“Who is Tom Chavis?” she asked.

“I’m reckonin’ to be Tom Chavis,” he said, studying her. He waved a hand toward the other man, not looking at him. “This is my friend Jim Pickett. We was foreman an’ straw boss, respective, under Bill Harkness.”

She could not help wishing that her uncle had discharged the two men before his death. She was wondering a little at Masten’s silence; it seemed to her that he must see her embarrassment, and that he might relieve her of the burden of this conversation. She looked quickly at him; he appeared to be unconcernedly inspecting the ranchhouse. Perhaps, after all, there was nothing wrong with these men. Certainly, being a man himself, Masten should be able to tell.

And so she felt a little more at ease.

“I’m glad to meet you, Mr. Chavis,” she said. “Your friend Mr. Pickett too.” She indicated Masten with a nod of her head toward him. “This is Mr. Willard Masten, a very dear friend of mine.” The color in her face deepened with the words.

Chavis had looked twice at Masten before Ruth spoke. He looked again now, meeting the Easterner’s eyes. Chavis had been ready to sneer at Masten because of his garments—they were duplicates of those he had worn before the ducking, and quite as immaculate—but something in the Easterner’s eyes kept the sneer back; his own eyes gleamed with a quick, comprehensive fire, and he smiled. In the buckboard, fresh from that civilization which Chavis was ready to scorn, he had recognized a kindred spirit. There was exultation in his voice when he spoke, and he reached over Ruth to grasp Masten’s hand.

“An’ so this is Willard, a very dear friend of yourn, eh? Well, now, I’m sure glad, an’ I reckon him an’ me will get on.” He urged Pickett forward and introduced him, and Pickett gave Masten one quick, appraising glance. Then he, too, grinned.

Ruth was gratified. These men were rough, but they had been quick to recognize and appreciate Masten’s good qualities. They had gone more than half way in welcoming him. Of course, there was Chavis’ bold allusion to a “pretty woman,” but the very uncouthness of the men must be the explanation for that breach of etiquette. She was much relieved.

Masten was suave and solicitous. He jumped out of the buckboard and helped her down, performing a like service for Aunt Martha. Uncle Jepson got out himself. Then, as Ruth hesitated an instant, Masten bent over her.

“You must be tired, dear. Go in and explore the house. Get some refreshment and take a rest. I’ll attend to the baggage and the horses.”

He gave her a gentle pressure of the hand, and, followed by Uncle Jepson and Aunt Martha, she went indoors.

CHAPTER IV

A MEMORY OF THE RIDER

A quiet satisfaction shone from Ruth's eyes when, accompanied by Aunt Martha and Uncle Jepson, she completed her inspection of the ranchhouse.

"It isn't all that could be desired," she told Aunt Martha, "but it is better than I expected."

"It's comfortable, dearie," mildly smiled Aunt Martha.

"An' big enough for a feller to stretch his legs in," added Uncle Jepson. He was sitting in a big chair at one of the front windows of the sitting-room, having already adjusted himself to his new surroundings, and was smoking a short briar pipe and looking out of the window at the bunkhouse, in front of which stood Pickett, Chavis, and Masten, talking and laughing.

While Ruth and her relatives had been inspecting one of the upstairs rooms, she had heard the men bringing the baggage in, had heard them clumping up the stairs and setting the trunks down. Then they went out, and a little later, peering from one of the windows upstairs, Ruth had seen Masten and the other two walking toward the stable. They were talking pleasantly; their liking for each other seemed to be mutual. Ruth was delighted, but Uncle Jepson had frowned several times when looking at them.

"I cal'late them two critters'll bear a heap of watchin'," he said now. "They don't look honest."

"Jep," said Aunt Martha before Ruth could speak, "you're always criticising folks."

"It's in their faces drat 'em," insisted Uncle Jepson. He turned a vindictive eye on his niece. "If I'd have been fifty year younger I'd have give that Chavis a durn good thrashin' for sayin' what he did to you about pretty gals. Durn his

hide, anyhow! That there Wil—”

“I felt that way myself, at first,” smiled Ruth. “Afterwards, though, I felt differently. I suppose they were glad to see the new owner. Perhaps they haven’t seen a lady in a long time.”

“There’s ways of showin’ gladness,” contended Uncle Jepson. “I cal’late if I wanted to compliment a girl, I wouldn’t look at her like I wanted to carry her off to the mountains.”

“Jep, they’re only cowboys—they don’t know any different,” remonstrated Aunt Martha.

“They don’t, eh?” sniffed Uncle Jepson. “I cal’late that feller, Rex Randerson, is some different, ain’t he? There’s a gentleman, Ruth. You didn’t see him makin’ no ox-eyes. An’ I’ll bet you wouldn’t ketch him gettin’ thick with them two plug-uglies out there!”

Ruth turned away, smiling tolerantly, after having caught a glimpse of Aunt Martha’s brows, uplifted in resignation. She was as fully aware of Uncle Jepson’s dislike of Willard Masten as she was of Uncle Jepson’s testiness and of his habit of speaking his thoughts without reservation.

Also, she had always avoided opposing him. It did not seem to be worth while. He had been left destitute, except for the little farm back near Poughkeepsie which he had sold at her request to accompany her here, and she felt that habits of thought and speech are firmly fixed at sixty-nine, and argument cannot shake them.

That first day at the ranchhouse was the beginning of a new existence for Ruth. Bound for years by the narrow restrictions and conventionality of the Poughkeepsie countryside, she found the spaciousness and newness of this life inviting and satisfying. Here there seemed to be no limit, either to the space or to the flights that one’s soul might take, and in the solemn grandeur of the open she felt the omnipotence of God and the spell of nature.

She had plenty of time after the first day to hold communion with the Creator. Masten was rarely near her. His acquaintance with Pickett and Chavis seemed destined to develop into friendship. He rode much with them—“looking over the range,” he told her—and only in the evening did he find time to devote to her.

Wes Vickers returned from Red Rock on the morning following Ruth’s arrival. Apparently, in spite of Randerson’s prediction, Vickers did not get drunk in town. Through him Ruth learned much about the Flying W. He gave her the fruit

of his experience, and he had been with the Flying W as range boss for nearly five years.

Vickers was forty. His hair was gray at the temples; he was slightly stoop-shouldered from years in the saddle, and his legs were bowed from the same cause. He was the driving force of the Flying W. Ruth's uncle had written her to that effect the year before during his illness, stating that without Vickers' help he would be compelled to sell the ranch. The truth of this statement dawned upon Ruth very soon after her acquaintance with Vickers. He was argus-eyed, omnipresent. It seemed that he never slept. Mornings when she would arise with the dawn she would find Vickers gone to visit some distant part of the range. She was seldom awake at night when he returned.

He had said little to her regarding the men. "They 'tend to business," was his invariable response when she sought to question him. "It's a pretty wild life," he told her when one day about two weeks after her coming she had pressed him; "an' the boys just can't help kickin' over the traces once in a while."

"Chavis and Pickett good men?" she asked.

"You saw anything to show you they ain't?" he said, with a queer look at her.

"Why, no," she returned. But her cheeks reddened.

He looked at her with a peculiar squint. "Seems like Masten runnin' with them shows that they ain't nothin' wrong with them," he said.

She had no reply to make to this, but she was vaguely disturbed over the expression in Vickers' eyes; that look seemed to indicate that her own first impression of the two men, and Uncle Jepson's later condemnation of them, might be correct. However, they did not bother her, and she felt certain that Masten could care for himself.

With Masten absent with Chavis and Pickett nearly every day, Ruth had much time to herself. The river attracted her, and she rode to it many times, on a slant-eyed pony that Vickers had selected for her, and which had been gentled by a young cowpuncher brought in from an outlying camp solely for that purpose by the range boss. The young puncher had been reluctant to come, and he was equally reluctant to go.

"This here cayuse," he said to Vickers, when the latter instructed him to return to his outfit, saying that Miss Ruth thought she could now ride the pony without trouble, "is got a heap of devilment in him, yet—which ought to come out."

“Miss Ruth’s got a fellow,” said the range boss, in seeming irrelevance. But the young puncher sneered a malignant denial and rode away to his camp.

There were fourteen other men employed by the Flying W. Ruth met them at various times. Invariably they were looking for strays. They seemed—some of them—content to look at her; others, bolder, manufactured ingenuous pretexts to talk; but—all were gentlemen.

She arose one morning during the third week of her stay at the ranch, to be greeted by one of those perfect days that late spring brings. It had been dry for a week, with a hint of receding chill in the air, and the comfort of a wrap was still felt. But on this morning the sun was showing his power, and a balmy south breeze that entered her window was burdened with the aroma of sage, strong and delicious. She got out of bed and looked out of the window. It was a changed world. Summer had come overnight. No morning in the East had ever made her feel quite like this.

Out on the front porch later in the morning, with Chavis and Pickett standing near, she asked Masten to ride with her.

He seemed annoyed, but spoke persuasively.

“Put it off a day, won’t you, Ruth? There’s a good girl. I’ve promised to go to Lazette with the boys this morning, and I don’t want to disappoint them.” Then, seeing the disappointment in her eyes, he added: “Where did you want to ride?”

“Why,” she said, hoping that, after all, he might change his mind, “I’m only going to the box canyon, down the river. There’s such a pretty stretch of timber there.”

He smiled indulgently. “I’ll try to meet you there, this afternoon about three, if I can make it. But don’t wait longer.” He turned his back to her and presently went away with Chavis and Pickett.

She stood for a little time, watching them as they mounted down near the corral gate and rode away, and then she turned and observed Uncle Jepson standing near a corner of the house, smoking, and watching her. She forced a smile and went into the house.

A little after noon she saddled her pony and rode away toward the river. She had decided that perhaps Masten might keep his appointment in spite of the obvious insincerity that had been expressed on his face during their talk.

It was fully five miles to the grove at the head of the box canyon, and she made a

leisurely ride of it, so that it must have been nearly two o'clock when she dismounted and hitched the pony to a tree. Seating herself on a flat rock near the canyon edge, she settled herself to wait.

It seemed a long time. Twice after half-past two she looked at her watch, impatiently. At three she looked again; and, disappointed, she was about to rise to go to her pony, when she heard the rapid drumming of hoofs near her.

With leaping heart and flushed face she turned her back to the direction from which the sounds seemed to come and waited listening, trying to appear unconcerned. She would make him believe she had not heard him. He did care, after all, enough to part with his companions—for her sake. She had misjudged him, and she was sincerely repentant. And when she heard his pony come to a halt near her she had to clench her hands to keep from turning to face him.

She heard him dismount, heard the rustle and crackling of twigs under his feet as he approached, and then, feeling that it would be futile to dissemble further, she turned, a smile on her lips.

Standing within five feet of her, grinning with amusement, was Tom Chavis. Curiously enough, despite her former fear of the man she did not fear him now, and after the first shock of surprise she looked at him composedly, for she half suspected that Masten had sent him, fearing that she *would* wait in spite of his admonition not to do so. She got up and faced Chavis.

"Mr. Masten couldn't come, I suppose?" she said.

"That's right," he said, looking at her oddly; "he couldn't come. You see, he's sort of taken a shine to a biscuit shooter in Crogan's, over in Lazette, an' he couldn't very well break away."

"A biscuit shooter!" she said, uncomprehendingly.

"Sure. I reckon that back East you'd call her a waitress, or somethin'. I ain't admirin' his taste none. She ain't nowheres near as good-lookin' as you."

Her first emotion was one of sickening, maddening jealousy. It made her physically weak, and she trembled as she fought it down. But the sensation passed and, though she felt that her face was hot and flushed, the cold calm of righteous resentment was slowly seizing her.

"Did Mr. Masten send you here to tell me this?" she asked icily.

"Why, no. I did it on my own hook. I knowed you'd be waitin'—I heard you makin' the date with Willard, this mornin'. An' I figgered that what was fair for

one was fair for another. So I sneaked away from Willard an' come here. I've taken quite a shine to you, ma'am; you've sure got me some flustered. An' I reckon—" here he took a step toward her and grinned significantly "that I'll make a rattlin' good substitute for Willard."

She struck at him, blindly, savagely. She felt her open hand strike his cheek, heard him curse, and then, in a daze she was running toward her pony. She did not turn, but furiously raced the animal across the plains toward the ranchhouse.

She was calmer when she reached the house, but went directly to her room, where she changed her clothes and sat for a long time at one of the windows, looking toward the river—and toward Lazette.

Downstairs, Uncle Jepson, who from a window of the bunkhouse had seen her come in, had followed her into the house, to remark grumblingly to Aunt Martha:

"Willard didn't meet her, drat him!"

Ruth passed a miserable night, thinking over Chavis' words. The man might have been lying. Obviously, common fairness demanded that she tell Masten of the circumstance. On one thing she was determined: that Chavis should leave the ranch, whether he had lied to her or not. She would have instructed Vickers to attend to that, but Vickers had gone again to Red Rock on business, and would not return for two or three days. She would wait until Vickers returned to discharge Chavis, but she must tell Masten of the insult, for she yearned to see Chavis punished.

She waited until after breakfast the following morning, and then she induced Masten to walk with her, under pretext of examining the flower beds. Reaching them, she faced him fairly.

"Willard," she said, her lips white and stiff, "there must be no double-dealing between you and me. Tom Chavis told me yesterday that you are interested in a waitress in Lazette. Is that true?"

He started, flushed darkly, and then smiled blandly.

"Tom Chavis is romancing, my dear. If there is a waitress in Lazette I have not seen her." He seized her by the shoulders and spoke earnestly. "I am interested in Ruth Harkness, my dear. You surely don't believe such a story, do you, Ruth?"

He looked at her so frankly that her jealousy took wings, and she blushed and lowered her eyes. She raised them again, almost instantly, however; they were

glowing vindictively.

“Tom Chavis came to the box canyon at three yesterday afternoon,” she said firmly. “He insulted me. I want you to discharge him; Vickers is not here to do it. And I do not want to see him again.”

He pressed his lips together and avoided her gaze, and a slow red stole into his face. Then he laughed mirthlessly.

“Tom Chavis is a valuable man here, Ruth,” he said. “If the insult was one that can be overlooked, you would do well to let the matter rest. But be assured that I shall have a talk with Chavis, and you may believe that he will not repeat the offense.” He patted her shoulder. “In the meantime,” he said, with a hurt expression in his eyes, “do have some faith in me.”

Reassured, convinced that she had done him an injustice in believing Chavis, she passed the remainder of the day in comparative light-heartedness. But when the awesome darkness of the West settled over the country, and deep, stirring thoughts came to her on her pillow, she found herself thinking of the rider of the river. He grew very vivid in her thoughts, and she found herself wondering,—remembering the stern manliness of his face,—whether he, listening to the story of Chavis’ insult from her lips, would have sought to find excuses for her insulter.

CHAPTER V

LOVE VS. BUSINESS

On Sunday afternoon Ruth, Masten, Aunt Martha, and Uncle Jepson were sitting on the front porch of the Flying W ranchhouse. Ruth was reading and thinking—thinking most of the time, the book lying open in her lap. Masten was smoking a cigar—one of the many that he had brought with him—and which he selfishly kept exclusively for his own use. Masten seemed to be doing a great deal of thinking, too, for he was silent during long periods, reclining easily in a big rocker, well-groomed and immaculate as usual, looking decidedly out of place in this country, where extravagant personal adornment was considered an indication of effeminacy.

Yet it was this immaculateness that had attracted Ruth to Masten in the first place when a year and a half before she had met him at a party in Poughkeepsie. Fresh from a big city near by, he had outshone the country gallants at the party as he had outshone the cowboys that Ruth had seen since coming to the Flying W. His courtship had been gallant, too; he had quite captivated her, and after their engagement—which had been a rather matter-of-fact affair—she had not found it possible to refuse him permission to accompany her to the West.

“Have you visited your neighbor yet, Ruth?” Masten inquired at last.

“Neighbor!” Ruth showed astonishment by letting her book close and losing her place. “Why, I didn’t know we had a neighbor nearer than the Diamond H!”

Masten’s lips curled. Her reference to the Diamond H recalled unpleasant memories.

“A nester,” he said, and then added after a pause—“and his daughter. Only two miles from here, across the river. There’s a trail, through a break in the canyon, leading to their ranch on the other side of the river. The man’s name is Catherson—Abe Catherson. Chavis tells me he was something of a bother to your uncle,

because of his propensity to steal Flying W cattle. He's an old savage."

"And the daughter?" inquired Ruth, her eyes alight with interest.

"Half wild, bare-footed, ragged. She's pretty, though."

"How old is she, Willard?"

"A mere child. Fifteen, I should judge."

"I shall visit them tomorrow," declared Ruth.

"Sakes alive! Half wild? I should think she would be—living in that wilderness!" said Aunt Martha, looking up from her knitting, over the tops of her glasses.

"Everything is wild in this country," said Masten, a slight sneer in his voice. "The people are repulsive, in dress, manner, and speech." He delicately flecked some cigar ash from a coat sleeve.

Uncle Jepson wrinkled his nose belligerently. He sniffed in eloquent preparation for speech, but Aunt Martha averted the imminent clash by saying sharply:

"Jep, you hop in there and get that ball of yarn off the dining-room table!"

So potent is habit that Uncle Jepson started to obey automatically, Ruth interjected a word, speaking to Masten, and Uncle Jepson's opportunity was lost.

Silence reigned again until Ruth, who was facing the Calamity Trail, suddenly exclaimed:

"Some one is coming!"

During the silence she had again been thinking of Rex Randerson, and seeing the figure on the trail she had leaped to the conclusion that it was he. Her face had flushed. Masten noticed it, for he looked narrowly at her and, though he said nothing, there was that in his eyes which told he had divined what was in her mind.

It was not Randerson, however, but Vickers, who was coming. They all recognized him when he came closer, and they watched him with that peculiar concertedness which seizes upon an expectant company, until he dismounted at the corral gates and came toward them.

Plainly there was something on Vickers' mind, for he smiled mechanically as he stepped upon the porch and looked at them.

"Well, I'm back," he said. He looked at Ruth. "There's somethin' I'd like to say

to you. It’s business. If you’d rather hear it private—”

“I think there is nothing—” she began.

“Well,” he said, “I’ve got to leave here.”

Ruth’s face grew long. Uncle Jepson gagged on a mouthful of smoke. Aunt Martha ceased knitting. Masten alone seemed unmoved, but an elated gleam was in his eyes.

“Isn’t that a rather sudden decision, Mr. Vickers?” questioned Ruth after a silence.

“Well, mebbe it is, to you,” said Vickers, with some embarrassment. “But the fact is, I’ve been thinkin’ of goin’ for a long time—about a year to be exact. I was goin’ before your uncle died, but I kept holdin’ on because he wanted me to. You see, ma’am, I’ve got a mother back East. She’s been poorly for quite a while now, an’ has been wantin’ me to come. I’ve been puttin’ it off, but it’s got to the point where it can’t be put off any longer. I got a letter from her doctor the other day, an’ he says that she can’t last a heap longer. So—I’m goin’.”

“That’s too bad,” sympathized Ruth. “You ought to go, and go quickly.”

“I’m aimin’ to, ma’am. But I’ve got to tell you somethin’ before I go. Me an’ your uncle was pretty thick; he trusted me a heap.”

“Yes,” said Ruth; “he told me that he liked and trusted you.”

“Well, you’ll understand then. A couple of months before he cashed in, we was talkin’ of him goin’. He knowed it, ma’am. We was talkin’ about the ranch. He knowed I wanted to leave. ‘What’ll I do for a range boss when you’re gone?’ he asked me. ‘I won’t go till you ain’t here any more,’ I tells him. An’ he grinned. ‘I’m goin’ to leave the Flyin’ W to my niece, Ruth Harkness of Poughkeepsie,’ he says. ‘I’d like her to stay an’ run it—if she likes it here. You’ll be gone then, an’ who in Sam Hill will be range boss then?’ I told him I didn’t have no thoughts on the subject, an’ he continues: ‘Rex Randerson, Vickers—he’ll be range boss. Do you understand? If you was to pull your freight right now, Rex Randerson would be range boss as soon as I could get word over to him. An’ if you’ve got any say-so after I’m gone, an’ Ruth wants to keep the ranch, you tell her that—that Bill Harkness wants Rex Randerson to be range boss after Wes Vickers don’t want it any more.’ That’s what he said, ma’am; them’s his very words.”

Ruth looked at Masten. He was staring stonily out into the plains. Ruth’s cheeks

reddened, for she felt that she knew his thoughts. But still, Randerson hadn't really used him ill at the river, and besides, he had apologized, and it seemed to her that that should end the incident. Also, she still felt rather resentful toward Masten for his attitude toward Tom Chavis after she had complained. And also, lurking deep in her unsophisticated mind was a most feminine impulse to sting Masten to jealousy. She looked up to meet Vickers' gaze, fixed curiously upon her.

"Could you recommend this man—Randerson?" she asked.

"Why, ma'am, he's got the best reputation of any man in these parts!"

"But is he efficient?"

"Meanin' does he know his business? Well, I reckon. He's got the best head for range work of any man in the country! He's square, ma'am. An' there ain't no man monkeyin' with him. I've knowed him for five years, an' I ain't ever knowed him to do a crooked trick, exceptin'"—and here he scratched his head and grinned reminiscently—"when he gets the devil in him which he does occasionally, ma'am—an' goes to jokin', ma'am. But they're mostly harmless jokes, ma'am; he's never hurt nobody, bad. But he got a level head—a heap leveler than a lot of folks that—"

"I think Tom Chavis would make a good range boss, Ruth," said Masten. He did not look at her, and his words were expressionless.

"Mister man," said Vickers evenly, "what do you know about Tom Chavis?"

Masten looked quickly at Vickers, and as quickly looked away, his face slowly reddening.

"He's foreman now, isn't he?" he said. "It seems that Harkness trusted him that much."

"There's a first time for every man to go wrong, Mister," said Vickers.

Masten's voice was almost a sneer.

"Why don't you tell Chavis that?"

"I've told him, Mister—to his face." Vickers' own face was growing dark with wrath.

"You were range boss after Harkness' death," persisted Masten. "Why didn't you discharge Chavis?"

"I'm askin' the new boss for permission to do it now," declared Vickers. "It'll be

a good wind-up for my stay here."

"We shall keep Chavis for the present," said Ruth. "However," she added firmly, "he shall not be range boss. I do not like him."

Vickers grinned silent applause. And again Uncle Jepson had trouble with his pipe. Aunt Martha worked her knitting needles a little faster. Masten's face paled, and the hand that held the cigar quickly clenched, so that smoking embers fell to the porch floor. Whatever his feelings, however, he retained his self-control.

"Of course, it is your affair, Ruth," he said. "I beg your pardon for offering the suggestion."

But he left them shortly afterward, lighting a fresh cigar and walking toward the bunkhouse, which was deserted, for Chavis and Pickett had gone to a distant part of the range.

Thus Masten did not see Vickers, when a little later he came out on the porch with his war-bag. He said good-bye to Aunt Martha and Uncle Jepson, and then he took Ruth's hand and held it long.

"You'll never go a heap wrong when you use your own judgment, girl," he said. "I'm ridin' over to the Diamond H to tell Randerson about his new job. Don't make no mistake, girl. Rex Randerson is square. An' if any trouble comes sneakin' around you, take it to Rex; he'll stick on the right side till hell freezes over."

"I am Ruth Harkness, the new owner of the Flying W"

CHAPTER VI

A MAN AND HIS JOB

Just what Ruth's sensations were the next morning she could not have told. She could correctly analyze one emotion: it was eager anticipation. Also, she could account for it—she wanted to see Randerson. But her reason for wanting to see him was a mystery that she could not fathom, though between the time of arising and the moment when she got downstairs she devoted much thought to it. She knew she did not like Randerson well enough to wish to see him merely on that account—that was ridiculous, in spite of the vivid recollection of him that still lingered with her, for she had met him only once, and she assured herself that she was too practical-minded to fall in love with anyone at first sight. Yet by afternoon Ruth had tired of waiting; she had no special reason for certainty that Randerson would arrive that day, and so she went riding. She went alone, for Masten seemed to have hidden himself—at least, she could not find him. She rode to the break in the wall of the canyon that he had told her about, found it, sent her pony through it and over a shallow crossing, emerging at length in a tangle of undergrowth in a wood through which wound a narrow bridle path. She followed this for some distance, and after a while came to a clearing. A little adobe house stood near the center of the clearing. Ruth halted her pony, and was debating whether to call out or to ride boldly up, when a dog came out of the door of the cabin, growling, its hair bristling belligerently. The dog was big, black, and undoubtedly savage, for the pony instantly wheeled, and when the dog came closer, lashed out with both hind hoofs at it.

"Nig, you ol' duffer, git in hyeh where you b'long! Can't you see that that there's a *lady!*" came a voice, unmistakably feminine. And the dog, still growling, but submissive, drew off.

Ruth urged the pony on and rode the remaining distance to the door. A girl, attired in a ragged underskirt and equally ragged waist of some checkered material, and a faded house-apron that was many sizes too small for her, stood in

the open doorway, watching. She was bare-footed, her hair was in tumbling disorder, though Ruth could tell that it had been combed recently. But the legs, bare almost to the knees, were clean, though brown from tan, and her face and arms glowed pink and spotless, in spite of the rags. In her eyes, as she watched Ruth, was a strange mixture of admiration and defiance.

“Dad ain’t hyeh this mornin’,” she volunteered as Ruth climbed off her pony.

“I came to see you,” said Ruth, smiling. She threw the reins over the pony’s head and advanced, holding out a hand. “I am Ruth Harkness,” she added, “the new owner of the Flying W. I have been here almost a month, and I just heard that I had a neighbor. Wont you shake hands with me?”

“I reckon,” said the girl. Reluctantly, it seemed, she allowed Ruth to take her hand. But she drew it away immediately. “I’ve heard of you,” she said; “you’re a niece of that ol’ devil, Bill Harkness.” She frowned. “He was always sayin’ dad was hookin’ his doggoned cattle. Dad didn’t steal ’em—ol’ Bill Harkness was a liar!” Her eyes glowed fiercely. “I reckon you’ll be sayin’ the same thing about dad.”

“No indeed!” declared Ruth. “Your dad and I are going to be friends. I want to be friends with you, too. I am not going to charge your dad with stealing my cattle. We are going to be neighbors, and visit each other. I want to know your dad, and I want you to come over to the Flying W and get acquainted with my aunt and uncle. Aren’t you going to invite me inside? I would if you came to visit me, you know.” She smiled winningly.

The girl flushed, and cast a glance at the interior of the cabin, which, Ruth had already noted through the open door, was scantily furnished but clean. Then the girl led the way in, motioned Ruth to a chair near a rough-topped table, and stood over beside a cast-iron stove, her hands hanging at her sides, the fingers crumpling the cloth of the ragged apron. Her belligerence had departed; she seemed now to be beginning to realize that this visit was really meant to honor her, and she grew conscious of her rags, of the visible signs of poverty, of the visitor’s raiment, gorgeous in comparison with her own—though Ruth’s was merely a simple riding habit of brown corduroy.

Ruth had set out for this visit with a definite intention: she wanted to discover just how the girl and her father lived, and if conditions were as she suspected she was determined to help them. Conditions were worse than she had expected, but her face gave no indication. Perhaps Ruth’s wisdom was not remarkable where men were concerned, but she had a wealth of delicacy, understanding and

sympathy where her own sex was in question. She stayed at the cabin for more than an hour and at the end of that time she emerged, smiling happily, her arm around the girl, with the girl's pledge to visit her soon and an earnest invitation to come again. Best of all, she had cleverly played upon the feminine instinct for fine raiment, slyly mentioned a trunk that she had brought with her from the East, packed to the top with substantial finery which was not in the least needed by her—an incumbrance, rather—and which, she hinted, might become the property of another, if suitable in size.

The girl followed her to the edge of the clearing, walking beside the pony. There they took leave of each other, a glow in the eyes of both that gave promise of future sincere friendship.

"Good-bye, Hagar," said the Flying W girl.

"Good-bye, lady," said the girl. "Ruth," she changed, as the Flying W girl held up an admonishing finger. And then, with a last smile, Ruth rode down the bridle path homeward, pleasure and pity mingling in her eyes.

Randerson reached the Flying W ranchhouse late in the afternoon. He rode first to the bunkhouse, and seeing nobody there he made a round of the buildings. Still seeing no one, he urged Patches toward the house, halted him at the edge of the front porch and sat in the saddle, looking at the front door. He was about to call, when the door opened and Uncle Jepson came out. There was a broad grin on Uncle Jepson's face.

"I cal'late you've got here," he said.

"Looks mighty like it," returned the horseman. "You reckon my new boss is anywheres around?"

"She's gone off ridin'," Uncle Jepson told him. "It's likely she'll be back shortly."

"I reckon I'd better wait," said Randerson. He wheeled Patches.

"There's plenty of sittin' room on the porch here," invited Uncle Jepson, indicating the chairs.

"Thank you—reckon the bunkhouse will be my quarters."

He spoke to the pony. Uncle Jepson spoke at the same instant, and Patches halted:

"I cal'late you'd better wait here."

“If you insist,” said Randerson. He swung off and walked to the edge of the porch, grinning mildly at Uncle Jepson. The handclasp between them was warm, for Uncle Jepson had been strongly attracted to this son of the plains; and the twinkle in Randerson’s eyes as his met Uncle Jepson’s was not to be mistaken.

“So Vickers has gone,” said Randerson as he dropped into a chair. “He’s a mighty fine man.”

“Willard wanted Chavis to have his job,” whispered Uncle Jepson.

“You don’t say!” Randerson’s eyes gleamed. “An’ Miss Ruth didn’t want him, I reckon.” He caught Uncle Jepson’s nod. “She’s allowin’ that she’s goin’ to be boss. But of course she would,” he added. He stood up, for Aunt Martha had opened the door and was standing in it, looking at him. He removed his hat and bowed to her, his eyes gleaming with something near affection, for Aunt Martha had found a place in his heart. He stepped forward, took her hand, and escorted her to the largest and most comfortable of the rockers on the porch, and when she sat down she looked up at him and smiled.

“I reckon you like it here?” he said gently to Aunt Martha.

“I like it very much. But there are differences—after Poughkeepsie. One doesn’t notice them so much at first.”

“I expect you find it sort of rough here,” he said, looking at her. “They tell me that in the East folks live pretty close together—that there’s conveniences. There ain’t a heap of conveniences here.” He pronounced the word slowly and laboriously. It was plain that he was trying to put on his best manners.

“No—no conveniences,” said Aunt Martha. “But it’s a wonderful country, my boy—wonderful!”

A pulse of something shot through him at the word, “boy.”

“I’m glad you like it,” he said gravely.

Aunt Martha folded her hands in her lap and looked long at him over the rims of her glasses. There was interest in her eyes, and kindliness. For she saw something in this figure of a new type that sat before her—something that the two big guns, at his hips did not hint at—nor his leather chaps, the cartridge belt, the broad hat, the spurs, the high-heeled boots, the colored scarf at his throat. These things were the badges of his calling, and were, of course, indispensable, but she saw them not. But the virile manhood of him; the indomitability; the quiet fearlessness, indicated by his steady, serene eyes; the rugged, sterling

honesty that radiated from him, she saw—and admired. But above all she saw the boy in him—the generous impulses that lay behind his mask of grimness, the love of fun that she had seen him exhibit at Calamity.

“You were born here?” she asked.

“In Colfax, ma’am.”

“Is that a city?”

“Bless yu’, ma’am, no. It’s a county.”

“And you were born on a ranch, then.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She was asking questions that a man would not have dared to ask him, and he was answering them as a boy might have answered. It did not seem an impertinence to him or to her, so great was her interest in him, so deep was his admiration of her.

“And your parents?”

“Both dead, ma’am.” A shadow crossed his face, a look of wistfulness, and she abruptly ceased questioning. And when, a little later, they saw Ruth coming across the plains toward them, Aunt Martha got up. He held the screen door open for her, and she paused on the threshold and patted his bare head.

“If I had had a son, I could have wished he would be like you,” she said.

He blushed crimson. “Why, ma’am—” he began. But Aunt Martha had gone in, and he turned to face Ruth, who was dismounting at the edge of the porch.

“Oh!” she said, as though his appearance had surprised her, though she had seen him from afar, “you are here already!”

“I expect it’s me, ma’am,” he said gravely. “You see, Wes Vickers stopped at the Diamond H last evenin’, an’ I come right over.”

It was quite evident that he would not attempt to be familiar. No longer was he the free lance rider of the plains who had been at liberty to exchange words with her as suited his whim; here was the man who had been given a job, and there stood his employer; he would not be likely to step over that line, and his manner showed it.

“Well,” she said, “I am glad you decided to come right away; we miss Vickers already, and I have no doubt, according to his recommendation, that you will be

able to fill his place acceptably."

"Thank you, ma'am. I reckon I'm to take up my quarters in the bunkhouse?" He paused. "Or mebbe the foreman's shanty?"

"Why," she said, looking at him and noting his grave earnestness, so strikingly in contrast to his wild frolicksomeness at Calamity that day. "Why, I don't know about that. Vickers stayed at the ranchhouse, and I suppose you will stay here too."

"All right, ma'am; I'll be takin' my war-bag in." He was evidently feeling a slight embarrassment, and would have been glad to retreat. He got his war-bag from its place behind the saddle, on Patches, shouldered it, and crossed the porch. He was opening the door when Ruth's voice stopped him.

"Oh," she said, "your room. I forgot to tell you; it is the one in the northwest corner."

"Thank you, ma'am." He went in.

"Come down when you have straightened around," she called to him, "I want to talk with you about some things."

"I'll have to put Patches away, ma'am," he said, "I'd sure have to come down, anyway."

That talk was held with Uncle Jepson looking on and listening and smoking his pipe. And when it was over, Randerson took the saddle and bridle off Patches, turned him loose in the corral and returned to the porch to talk and smoke with Uncle Jepson.

While they sat the darkness came on, the kerosene lamp inside was lighted, delicious odors floated out to them through the screen door. Presently a horseman rode to the corral fence and dismounted.

"One of the boys, I reckon," said Randerson.

Uncle Jepson chuckled. "It's Willard," he said. He peered into Randerson's face for some signs of emotion. There were none.

"I'd clean forgot him," said Randerson.

Masten came in a few minutes later. He spoke a few words to Uncle Jepson, but ignored Randerson.

Supper was announced soon after Masten's entrance, and Uncle Jepson led Randerson around to the rear porch, where he introduced him to a tin washbasin

and a roller towel. Uncle Jepson also partook of this luxury, and then led the new range boss inside.

If Ruth had any secret dread over the inevitable meeting between Masten and the new range boss, it must have been dispelled by Randerson's manner, for he was perfectly polite to Masten, and by no word or sign did he indicate that he remembered the incident of Calamity.

Ruth watched him covertly during the meal, and was delighted to find his conduct faultless. He had not Masten's polish, of course, that was not to be expected. But she noticed this—it was quickly impressed upon her—he was not self-conscious, but entirely natural, possessing the easy grace of movement that comes of perfect muscular and mental control. He seemed to relegate self to the background; he was considerate, quiet, serene. And last—the knowledge pleased her more than anything else—he continued to keep between himself and the others the bars of deference; he made them see plainly that there would be no overstepping his position. It was his job to be here, and he had no illusions.

CHAPTER VII

HOW AN INSULT WAS AVENGED

As the days passed, it became plain to Ruth, as it did to everyone else on the ranch—Chavis, Pickett, and Masten included—that Vickers had not talked extravagantly in recommending Randerson. Uncle Jepson declared that “he took right a-hold,” and Aunt Martha beamed proudly upon him whenever he came within range of her vision.

There was no hitch; he did his work smoothly. The spring round-up was carried to a swift conclusion, the calves were branded and turned loose again to roam the range during the summer; the corral fences were repaired, new irrigation ditches were laid, others extended—the numerous details received the attention they merited, and when summer came in earnest, the Flying W was spick and span and prospering.

Chavis and Pickett still retained their old positions, but Ruth noticed that they did not spend so much of their time around the bunkhouse as formerly, they seemed to have work enough to keep their time fully employed. Nor did Masten accompany them very often. He seemed to take a new interest in Ruth; he found various pretexts to be near her, and Ruth secretly congratulated herself on her wisdom in securing her new range boss. She had scarcely expected such amazing results.

She was conscious of a vague disappointment, though. For she would have liked to see more of her range boss. Twice, under pretense of wanting to look over the property, she had accompanied him to outlying cow camps, and she had noted that the men seemed to like him—they called him “Rex,” and in other ways exhibited their satisfaction over his coming. Several times she had observed meetings between him and Chavis and Pickett; invariably Chavis was sullen and disagreeable in his presence, and a number of times she had seen Pickett sneer when Randerson’s back was turned. No one had told her of the open enmity that

existed between Pickett and Randerson; the latter had not hinted of it.

And Randerson was at the ranchhouse even less frequently than his predecessor; he spent much of his time with the outfit. But he came in one afternoon, after Ruth's friendship with Hagar Catherson had progressed far, and met the nester's daughter on the porch as he was about to enter the house.

By ingenious artifice and persuasion Ruth had induced the girl to accept for her own many of the various garments in the alluring trunk, and Ruth herself had been surprised at the wonderful transformation in her appearance when arrayed in them. Hagar was attired this afternoon in a dark-blue riding habit, with short skirt—shortened by Aunt Martha—riding boots, a waist with a low collar and a flowing tie, and a soft hat that Ruth had re-made for her. She had received lessons in hair-dressing, and her brown, wavy tresses were just obstinate enough, through long neglect, to refuse to yield fully to the influence of comb and brush; they bulged under the brim of the soft hat, and some stray wisps persisted in blowing over her face.

She had just taken leave of Ruth who, at the instant Randerson stepped on the porch, was standing inside the doorway, watching her. She had given the girl a trinket that had long been coveted by her, and Hagar's eyes were bright with delight as she took leave of her friend. They grew even brighter when she saw Randerson on the porch, and a swift color suffused her face.

The girl stood still, looking at the range boss. A sudden whim to discover if he recognized her, took possession of her—for she had known him long and he had been a friend to her father when friends were few; she stood looking straight at him.

He gave her one quick, penetrating glance, and then stepped back, astonishment and recognition in his eyes. Then he took a quick step forward and seized her hands, holding her at arm's length, his eyes leaping in admiration.

"Why, if it ain't Hagar Catherson!" he said, wonder in his voice. "Have you just got out of a fairy book?"

Old friendship was speaking here; Ruth could not fail to understand that.

But he had not yet finished. "Why, I reckon—" he began. And then he saw Ruth, and his lips wreathed in a delighted grin. "You're the fairy, ma'am." And then he sobered. "Shucks. I'm talkin' nonsense, ma'am. I've come to tell you that the grass ain't what it ought to be where we've been, an' tomorrow we're drivin' past here to go down the river." He was still holding Hagar's hands, and now he

seemed to realize that perhaps he had been too effusive, and he flushed and dropped them. “You was just goin’, I reckon,” he said to the girl. And at her nod, and a quick, pleased glance from her eyes, he added: “Tell your dad that I’m comin’ over to see him, pretty soon. I’d have been over before, but I’ve been sort of busy.”

“We’ve been a-hopin’ you’d come,” answered Hagar. And with another smile at Ruth she stepped off the porch and mounted her pony.

Randerson went directly to his room, and Ruth stood for a long time at the door, watching Hagar as she rode her pony over the plains. There was a queer sensation of resentment in her breast over this exhibition of friendship; she had never thought of them knowing each other. She smiled after a while, however, telling herself that it was nothing to her. But the next time that she saw Hagar she ascertained her age. It was seventeen.

The outfit came in the next morning—fourteen punchers, the horse-wrangler having trouble as usual with the *remuda*, the cook, Chavis, and Pickett. They veered the herd toward the river and drove it past the ranchhouse and into a grass level that stretched for miles. It was near noon when the chuck wagon came to a halt near the bunkhouse door, and from the porch of her house Ruth witnessed a scene that she had been anticipating since her first day in the West—a group of cowboys at play.

Did these men of the plains know that their new boss had been wanting to see them in their unrestrained moments? They acted like boys—more mischievous than boys in their most frolicsome moods. Their movements were grotesque, their gestures extravagant, their talk high-pitched and flavored with a dialect that Ruth had never heard. They were “showing off”; the girl knew that. But she also knew that in their actions was much of earnestness, that an excess of vigor filled them. They were like their horses which now unleashed in the corral were running, neighing, kicking up their heels in their momentary delight of freedom.

The girl understood and sympathized with them, but she caught a glimpse of Chavis and Pickett, sitting close together on a bench at the front of the messhouse, talking seriously, and a cloud came over her face. These two men were not light-hearted as the others. What was the reason? When she went into the house a few minutes later, a premonition of impending trouble assailed her and would not be dismissed.

She helped Aunt Martha in the kitchen. Uncle Jepson had gone away—“nosin’ around,” he had said; Masten had ridden away toward the river some time before

—he had seemed to ride toward the break in the canyon which led to the Catherson cabin; she did not know where Randerson had gone—had not seen him for hours.

Hilarious laughter reached her, busy in the kitchen, but it did not banish the peculiar uneasiness that afflicted her. And some time later, when the laughter ceased and she went to the window and looked out, the cowboys had vanished. They had gone in to dinner. But Chavis and Pickett still sat on their bench, talking. Ruth shivered and turned from the window.

She was in better spirits shortly after dinner, and went out to the stable to look at her pony. Because of the coming of the *remuda* she had thought it best to take her pony from the corral, for she feared that in company with the other horses her own animal would return to those ungentle habits which she disliked.

She fed it from some grain in a bin, carried some water in a pail from the trough at the windmill, and stood at the pony's head for some time, watching it. Just as she was about to turn to leave the stable, she felt the interior darken, and she wheeled quickly to see that the door had closed, and that Jim Pickett stood before it, grinning at her.

For a moment her knees shook, for she could not fail to interpret the expression of his face, then she heard a gale of laughter from the direction of the bunkhouse, and felt reassured. But while she stood, she heard the sounds of the laughter growing gradually indistinct and distant, and she gulped hard. For she knew that the cowboys were riding away—no doubt to join the herd.

She pretended to be interested in the pony, and stroked its mane with a hand that trembled, delaying to move in the hope that she might be mistaken in her fears and that Pickett would go away. But Pickett did not move. Glancing at him furtively, she saw that the grin was still on his face and that he was watching her narrowly. Then, finding that he seemed determined to stay, she pretended unconcern and faced him, meeting his gaze fearlessly.

"Is there something that you wanted to talk to me about, Pickett?" she questioned.

"Yes, ma'am," he said respectfully, though his voice seemed slightly hoarse, "I've got a letter here which I want you to read to me—I just can't sorta make out the writin'."

She almost sighed with relief. Leaving the stall she went to Pickett's side and took from his hand a paper that he held out to her. And now, in her relief over

her discovery that his intentions were not evil, it suddenly dawned on her that she had forgotten that the door was closed.

“It is dark here,” she said; “open the door, please.”

Instead of answering, he seized the hand holding the paper, and with a swift pull tried to draw her toward him. But her muscles had been tensed with the second fear that had taken possession of her, and she resisted—almost broke away from him. His fingers slipped from her wrist, the nails scratching the flesh deeply, and she sprang toward the door. But he was upon her instantly, his arms around her, pinning her own to her sides, and then he squeezed her to him, so tightly that the breath almost left her body, and kissed her three or four times full on the lips. Then, still holding her, and looking in her eyes with an expression that filled her with horror, he said huskily:

“Lord, but you’re a hummer!”

Then, as though that were the limit of his intentions, he released her, laughed mirthlessly and threw the door open.

She had spoken no word during the attack. She made no sound now, as she went toward the house, her face ashen, her breath coming in great gasps. But a few minutes later she was in her room in the ranchhouse, on her bed, her face in the pillow, sobbing out the story of the attack to Aunt Martha, whose wrinkled face grew gray with emotion as she listened.

Masten came in an hour later. Ruth was in a chair in the sitting-room, looking very white. Aunt Martha was standing beside her.

“Why, what has happened?” Masten took a few steps and stood in front of her, looking down at her.

“Aunty will tell you.” Ruth hid her face in her hands and cried softly.

Aunt Martha led the way into the kitchen, Masten following. Before he reached the door he looked back at Ruth, and a slight smile, almost a sneer, crossed his face. But when he turned to Aunt Martha, in the kitchen, his eyes were alight with well simulated curiosity.

“Well?” he said, questioningly.

“It is most outrageous,” began Aunt Martha, her voice trembling. “That man, Pickett, came upon Ruth in the stable and abused her shamefully. He actually kissed her—three or four times—and—Why, Mr. Masten, the prints of his fingers are on her wrists!”

Ruth, in the sitting-room, waited, almost in dread, for the explosion that she knew would follow Aunt Martha's words.

None came, and Ruth sank back in her chair, not knowing whether she was relieved or disappointed. There was a long silence, during which Masten cleared his throat three times. And then came Aunt Martha's voice, filled with mingled wonder and impatience:

"Aren't you going to do something Mr. Masten? Such a thing ought not to go unpunished."

"Thunder!" he said fretfully, "what on earth *can* I do? You don't expect me to go out and *fight* that man, Pickett. He'd kill me!"

"Mebbe he would," said Aunt Martha in a slightly cold voice, "but he would know that Ruth was engaged to a *man!*" There was a silence. And again came Aunt Martha's voice:

"There was a time when men thought it an honor to fight for their women. But it seems that times have changed mightily."

"This is an age of reason, and not muscle and murder," replied Masten. "There is no more reason why I should go out there and allow Pickett to kill me than there is a reason why I should go to the first railroad, lay my head on the track and let a train run over me. There is law in this country, aunty, and it can reach Pickett."

"Your self-control does you credit, Mr. Masten." Aunt Martha's voice was low, flavored with sarcasm. Masten turned abruptly from her and went in to Ruth. Her face was still in her hands, but she felt his presence and involuntarily shrank from him.

He turned his head from her and smiled, toward the stable, and then he laid a hand on Ruth's shoulder and spoke comfortingly.

"It's too bad, Ruth. But we shall find a way to deal with Pickett without having murder done. Why not have Randerson discharge him? He is range boss, you know. In the meantime, can't you manage to stay away from places where the men might molest you? They are all unprincipled scoundrels, you must remember!"

He left her, after a perfunctory caress which she suffered in silence. She saw him, later, as he passed her window, talking seriously to Chavis, and she imagined he was telling Chavis about the attack. Of course, she thought, with a wave of bitterness, Chavis would be able to sympathize with him. She went to

her room shortly afterward.

The sun was swimming in a sea of saffron above the mountains in the western distance when Ruth again came downstairs. Hearing voices in the kitchen she went to the door and looked. Aunt Martha was standing near the kitchen table. Randerson was standing close to her, facing her, dwarfing her, his face white beneath the deep tan upon it, his lips straight and hard, his eyes narrowed, his teeth clenched; she could see the corded muscles of his lean under-jaw, set and stiff. Aunt Martha's hands were on his sleeves; her eyes were big and bright, and glowing with a strange light.

They did not see Ruth, and something in their attitudes kept her from revealing herself; she stood silent, listening, fascinated.

"So he done that!" It was Randerson's voice, and it made Ruth's heart feel heavy and cold within her, for in it was contempt, intolerance, rage suppressed—she felt that the words had come through clenched teeth. "I reckon I'll be seein' Pickett, aunty."

And then he patted Aunt Martha's shoulders and started for the back door. Ruth heard him open it; he must have been standing on the threshold when he spoke again. And this time he spoke in a drawl—slow, gentle:

"I reckon I'll go wash. It was mighty dusty ridin' today. I passed Calamity, aunty. There ain't no mud there any more; Willard wouldn't get mussed up, now. The suck-hole ain't a foot deep any more."

"You're a scapegrace," said Aunt Martha severely. Ruth felt that she was shaking a deprecatory finger at him. "Your manners have been neglected." But Aunt Martha's voice gave the words an exactly opposite meaning, and Ruth blushed.

There had been a dread fear in Ruth's heart. For she had seen warning of impending tragedy in Randerson's face when she had looked at him. It seemed to have passed. His, "I reckon I'll be seein' Pickett," meant, perhaps, that he would discharge the man. Relieved, she went upstairs again and sat in a chair, looking out of a window.

A little later she saw several of the cowboys come in. She saw Pickett standing near a corner of the bunkhouse. She watched him closely, for there was something strange in his actions. He seemed to be waiting for something, or somebody. Occasionally he leaned against the corner of the bunkhouse, but she noted that he kept turning his head, keeping a lookout in all directions. Again a premonition of imminent trouble oppressed her.

And then she saw Randerson going from the ranchhouse toward the men who were congregated in front of the bunkhouse; saw Pickett's right hand fall to his side as though it rested on a holster, and she started out of her chair, for illumination now came to her.

Half way to the bunkhouse, Randerson was met by Uncle Jepson. She saw Randerson stop, observed that Uncle Jepson seemed to say something to him. She could not, of course, hear the words, "Look out, Randerson; Pickett's layin' for you," but she saw Randerson lay a hand on Uncle Jepson's shoulder.

And then he continued on his way.

She saw Randerson go close to Pickett, noted that the other men had all turned and were watching the two. Randerson seemed to be speaking, to Pickett; the latter had faced him. Then, as she breathlessly watched, she saw Pickett reach for his gun. Randerson leaped. Pickett's gun did not come out, Randerson's hand had closed on Pickett's wrist.

There was a brief, fierce struggle, blows were struck, and then the men sprang apart. Ruth saw Randerson's right arm describe a rapid half-circle; she seemed to hear a thud as his fist landed, and Pickett reeled and fell sideways to the ground, close to the wall of the bunkhouse. She heard him curse; saw him reach again for the gun at his hip. The toe of Randerson's right boot struck Pickett's hand, driving it away from the holster; the hand was ground into the dust by Randerson's boot. And then, so quickly that she could not follow the movement, Randerson's gun was out, and Pickett lay still where he had fallen.

Presently Ruth saw Pickett get up, still menaced by Randerson's gun. Cursing, crouching, evidently still awaiting an opportunity to draw his gun, Pickett began to walk toward the ranchhouse, Randerson close behind him. At a safe distance, the other men followed—Ruth saw Masten and Chavis come out of the bunkhouse door and follow also. The thought struck her that they must have witnessed the incident from a window. She saw them all, the cowboys at a respectable distance, Pickett and Randerson in front, with Masten and Chavis far behind, come to a halt. She divined—she believed she had suspected all along—what the march to the ranchhouse meant, but still she did not move, for she feared she could not stand.

Ruth was roused, however, by Randerson's voice. It reached her, sharp, cold, commanding. Evidently he was speaking to Aunt Martha, or to Uncle Jepson, who had gone into the house:

"Tell Miss Ruth to come here!"

Ruth obeyed. A moment later she stood on the front porch, looking at them all. This scene seemed unreal to her—the cowboys at a distance, Masten and Chavis in the rear, looking on, Pickett near the edge of the porch, his face bloated with impotent rage, his eyes glaring; the grim figure that Randerson made as he stood near Pickett, gun in hand, his eyes narrowed, alert. It seemed to her to be a dream from which she would presently awaken, trembling from the horror of it.

And then again she heard Randerson's voice. It was low, but so burdened with passion that it seemed to vibrate in the perfect silence. There was a threat of death in it:

"You can tell Miss Ruth that you're never goin' to play the skunk with a woman ag'in!"

Pickett writhed. But it seemed to Ruth, as her gaze shifted from Randerson to him, that Pickett's manner was not what it should be. He was not embarrassed enough, did not seem to feel his disgrace keenly enough. For though he twisted and squirmed under the threat in Randerson's voice, there was an odd smirk on his face that impressed her as nearly concealing a malignant cunning. And his voice sounded insincere to her—there was even no flavor of shame in them:

"I'm sorry I done what I did, ma'am."

"I reckon that's all, Pickett. You draw your time right now."

Randerson sheathed his pistol and turned slightly sidewise to Pickett, evidently intending to come up on the porch.

Ruth gasped. For she saw Pickett reach for his gun. It was drawn half out of its holster. As though he had divined what was in Pickett's mind, Randerson had turned slightly at Pickett's movement. There was a single rapid movement to his right hip, the twilight was split by a red streak, by another that followed it so closely as to seem to make the two continuous. Pickett's hand dropped oddly from the half-drawn weapon, his knees sagged, he sighed and pitched heavily forward, face down, at Randerson's feet.

Dimly, as through a haze, Ruth saw a number of the cowboys coming toward her, saw them approach and look curiously down at the thing that lay almost at her feet. And then someone took her by the arm—she thought it was Uncle Jepson—and she was led toward the door. At the threshold she paused, for Randerson's voice, cold and filled with deadly definiteness, reached her:

"Do you want to take his end of this?" Ruth turned. Randerson was pointing to Pickett's body, ghastly in its prone slackness. He was looking at Chavis.

Evidently Chavis elected not to avenge his friend at that moment. For there was a dead silence while one might have counted fifty. Then Ruth was drawn into the house.

The twilight was split by a red streak

CHAPTER VIII

WHAT UNCLE JEPSON HEARD

Every detail of the killing of Jim Pickett remained vivid in Ruth's recollection. She felt that she would never forget it. But her horror gradually abated, and at the end of a week she was able to look at Randerson without shuddering. During the week she had evaded him. And he, divining the state of her feelings, kept away from the house as much as possible.

Masten's demeanor on hearing of the insult that had been offered her by Pickett had seemed that of a man who was lacking in courage: at the time she had not been able to make it conform to her ideas of a man's duty to the woman he had promised to marry—or to any woman. She had heard him speak of reason in connection with the affair, as though there were no such thing in the world as rage so justifiable as to make a man yearn to inflict punishment upon another man who had attacked his woman. He had looked upon the matter cold-bloodedly, and she had resented that. But now that she had been avenged, she felt that she had been wrong. It had been such a trivial thing, after all; the punishment seemed monstrous in comparison with it. She had seen Pickett's movement when Randerson had momentarily turned his back to him, but she had also seen Randerson's retaliatory movement. She had known then, that Randerson had expected Pickett's action, and that he had been prepared for it, and therefore it seemed to her that in forcing the trouble Randerson had not only foreseen the ending but had even courted it.

Remorse over her momentary doubt of Masten's motive in refusing to call Pickett to account, afflicted her. He had been wiser than she; he had traced the line that divided reason from the primitive passions—man from beast. His only reference to the incident—a wordless one, which she felt was sufficiently eloquent—came when one day, while they were standing beside the corral fence, looking at the horses, they saw Randerson riding in. Masten nodded toward him and shook his head slowly from side to side, compressing his lips as he did so.

And then, seeing her looking at him, he smiled compassionately, as though to say that he regretted the killing of Pickett as well as she.

She seized his arm impulsively.

“I was wrong, Willard,” she said.

“Wrong, dear?” he said. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“But I thought—things about you that I shouldn’t have thought. I felt that you ought to have punished Pickett. I am glad, now, that you didn’t.” She shuddered, and looked again at Randerson, just dismounting at the bunkhouse, paying no attention to them.

“Then you wouldn’t have me like him?” He indicated Randerson.

“No,” she said.

He gave her shoulder a slight pressure, and turning his head, smiled triumphantly.

Later, when they had walked to a far corner of the pasture, talking confidentially and laughing a little, he halted and drew her close to him.

“Ruth,” he said, gently, “the world is going very well for you now. You are settled here, you like it, and things are running smoothly. Why not take a ride over to Lazette one of these days. There is a justice of the peace over there. It won’t need to be a formal affair, you know. Just on the quiet—a sort of a lark. I have waited a long time,” he coaxed.

She smiled at his earnestness. But that spark which he had tried in vain to fan into flame still smoldered. She felt no responsive impulse; a strange reluctance dragged at her.

“Wait, Willard,” she said, “until after the fall round-up. There is no hurry. We are sure of each other.”

They went on toward the ranchhouse. When they passed the bunkhouse, and through the open door saw Randerson and Uncle Jepson sitting on a bench smoking, Ruth quickened her step, and Masten made a grimace of hatred.

Inside the bunkhouse, Uncle Jepson, who had been speaking, paused long enough to wrinkle his nose at Masten. Randerson’s expression did not change; it was one of grave expectancy.

“You was sayin’—” he prompted, looking at Uncle Jepson.

“That the whole darned deal was a frame-up,” declared Uncle Jepson. “I was settin’ in the messhouse along in the afternoon of the day of the killin’—smokin’ an’ thinkin’, but most of the time just settin’, I cal’late, when I heard Chavis an’ Pickett talkin’ low an’ easy outside. They was a crack in the wall, an’ I plastered one ear up ag’in it, an’ took in all they was sayin’. First, they was talkin’ about the bad feelin’ between you an’ Pickett. Pickett said he wanted to ‘git’ you, an’ that Masten wanted to get you out of the way because of what you’d done to him at Calamity. But I reckon that ain’t the real reason; he’s got some idea that you an’ Ruth—”

“Shucks,” said Randerson impatiently.

“Anyway,” grinned Uncle Jepson, “for some reason, he don’t want you hangin’ around. Far as I could gather, Pickett wanted some excuse to have you fire him, so’s he could shoot you. He talked some to Masten about it, an’ Masten told him to tackle Ruth, but not to get too rough about it, an’ not to go too far.”

“Great guns! The low-down, mean, sneakin’—” said Randerson. His eyes were glowing; his words came with difficulty through his straightened lips.

“Masten wouldn’t take it up, he told Pickett,” went on Uncle Jepson. “He’d put it up to you. An’ when you’d tackle Pickett about it, Pickett would shoot you. If they was any chance for Chavis to help along, he’d do it. But mostly, Pickett was to do the job. I cal’late that’s about all—except that I layed for you an’ told you to look out.”

“You heard this talk after—after Pickett had—”

“Of course,” growled Uncle Jepson, a venomous flash in his eyes, slightly reproachful.

“Sure—of course,” agreed Randerson. He was grim-eyed; there was cold contempt in the twist of his lips. He sat for a long time, silent, staring out through the door, Uncle Jepson watching him, subdued by the look in his eyes.

When he spoke at last, there was a cold, bitter humor in his voice.

“So that’s Willard’s measure!” he said. “He grades up like a side-winder slidin’ under the sagebrush. There’s nothin’ clean about him but his clothes. But he’s playin’ a game—him an’ Chavis. An’ I’m the guy they’re after!” He laughed, and Uncle Jepson shivered. “She’s seen one killin’, an’ I reckon, if she stays here a while longer, she’ll see another: Chavis’.” He stopped and then went on: “Why, I reckon Chavis dyin’ wouldn’t make no more impression on her than Pickett dyin’. But I reckon she thinks a heap of Willard, don’t she, Uncle Jep?” “If a girl

promises—” began Uncle Jepson.

“I reckon—” interrupted Randerson. And then he shut his lips and looked grimly out at the horses in the corral.

“Do you reckon she’d—” Randerson began again, after a short silence. “No,” he answered the question himself, “I reckon if you’d tell her she wouldn’t believe you. No good woman will believe anything bad about the man she loves—or thinks she loves. But Willard—”

He got up, walked out the door, mounted Patches and rode away. Going to the door, Uncle Jepson watched him until he faded into the shimmering sunshine of the plains.

“I cal’late that Willard—”

But he, too, left his speech unfinished, as though thought had suddenly ceased, or speculation had become futile and ridiculous.

CHAPTER IX

“SOMETHIN’S GONE OUT OF THEM”

As Randerson rode Patches through the break in the canyon wall in the afternoon of a day about a week after his talk with Uncle Jepson in the bunkhouse, he was thinking of the visit he intended to make. He had delayed it long. He had not seen Abe Catherson since taking his new job.

“I reckon he’ll think I’m right unneighborly,” he said to himself as he rode.

When he reached the nester’s cabin, the dog Nig greeted him with vociferous affection, bringing Hagar to the door.

“Oh, it’s Rex!” cried the girl delightedly. And then, reproachfully: “Me an’ dad allowed you wasn’t comin’ any more!”

“You an’ dad was a heap mistaken, then,” he grinned as he dismounted and trailed the reins over the pony’s head. “I’ve had a heap to ’tend to,” he added as he stepped on the porch and came to a halt, looking at her. “Why, I reckon the little kid I used to know ain’t here any more!” he said, his eyes alight with admiration, as he critically examined her garments from the distance that separated her from him—a neat house dress of striped gingham, high at the throat, the bottom hem reaching below her shoe-tops; a loose-fitting apron over the dress, drawn tightly at the waist, giving her figure graceful curves. He had never thought of Hagar in connection with beauty; he had been sorry for her, pitying her—she had been a child upon whom he had bestowed much of the unselfish devotion of his heart; indeed, there had been times when it had assumed a practical turn, and through various ruses much of his wages had been delicately forced upon the nester. It had not always been wisely expended, for he knew that Catherson drank deeply at times.

Now, however, Randerson realized that the years must inevitably make a change in Hagar. That glimpse he had had of her on the Flying W ranchhouse porch had

made him think, but her appearance now caused him to think more deeply. It made constraint come into his manner.

“I reckon your dad ain’t anywhere around?” he said.

“Dad’s huntin’ up some cattle this mornin’,” she told him. “Shucks,” she added, seeing him hesitate, “ain’t you comin’ in?”

“Why, I’ve been wonderin’” and he grinned guiltily “whether it’d be exactly proper. You see, there was a time when I busted right in the house without waitin’ for an invitation—tickled to get a chance to dawdle a kid on my knee. But I reckon them dawdle-days is over. I wouldn’t think of tryin’ to dawdle a *woman* on my knee. But if you think that you’re still Hagar Catherson, an’ you won’t be dead-set on me dawdlin’ you—Why, shucks, I reckon I’m talkin’ like a fool!” And his face blushed crimson.

Her face was red too, but she seemed to be less conscious of the change in herself than he, though her eyes drooped when he looked at her.

He followed her inside and formally took a chair, sitting on its edge and turning his hat over and over in his hands, looking much at it, as if it were new and he admired it greatly.

But this constraint between them was not the only thing that was new to him. While she talked, he sat and listened, and stole covert glances at her, and tried to convince himself that it was really Hagar that was sitting there before him.

But before long he grew accustomed to the strangeness of the situation, and constraint dropped from him. “Why, I reckon it’s all natural,” he confided to her. “Folks grow up, don’t they? Take you. Yesterday you was a kid, an’ I dawdled you on my knee. Today you’re a woman, an’ it makes me feel some breathless to look at you. But it’s all natural. I’d been seein’ you so much that I’d forgot that time was makin’ a woman of you.”

She blushed, and he marveled over it. “She can’t see, herself, how she’s changed,” he told himself. And while they talked he studied her, noting that her color was higher than he had ever seen it, that the frank expression of her eyes had somehow changed—there was a glow in them, deep, abiding, embarrassed. They drooped from his when he tried to hold her gaze. He had always admired the frank directness of them—that told of unconsciousness of sex, of unquestioning trust. Today, it seemed to him, there was subtle knowledge in them. He was puzzled and disappointed. And when, half an hour later, he took his leave, after telling her that he would come again, to see her “dad,” he took

her by the shoulders and forced her to look into his eyes. His own searched hers narrowly. It was as in the old days—in his eyes she was still a child.

“I reckon I won’t kiss you no more, Hagar,” he said. “You ain’t a kid no more, an’ it wouldn’t be square. Seventeen is an awful old age, ain’t it?”

And then he mounted and rode down the trail, still puzzled over the lurking, deep glow in her eyes.

“I reckon I ain’t no expert on women’s eyes,” he said as he rode. “But Hagar’s—there’s somethin’ gone out of them.”

He could not have reached the break in the canyon leading to the plains above the river, when Willard Masten loped his horse toward the Catherson cabin from an opposite direction.

Hagar was standing on the porch when he came, and her face flooded with color when she saw him. She stood, her eyes drooping with shy embarrassment as Masten dismounted and approached her. And then, as his arm went around her waist, familiarly, he whispered:

“How is my little woman today?”

She straightened and looked up at him, perplexity in her eyes.

“Rex Randerson was just hyeh,” she said. “I wanted to tell him about you wantin’ me to marry you. But I thought of what you told me, an’ I didn’t. Do you sure reckon he’d kill you, if he knowed?”

“He certainly would,” declared Masten, earnestly. “No one—not even your father—must know that I come here to see you.”

“I reckon I won’t tell. But Miss Ruth? Are you sure she don’t care for you any more?”

“Well,” he lied glibly; “she has broken our engagement. But if she knew that I come here to see you she’d be jealous, you know. So it’s better not to tell her. If you do tell her, I’ll stop coming,” he threatened.

“It’s hard to keep from tellin’ folks how happy I am,” she said. “Once, I was afraid Rex Randerson could see it in my eyes—when he took a-hold of my arms hyeh, an’ looked at me.”

Masten looked jealously at her. “Looked at you, eh?” he said. “Are you sure he didn’t try to do anything else—didn’t *do* anything else? Like kissing you, for instance?”

“I’m certain sure,” she replied, looking straight at him. “He used to kiss me. But he says I’m a woman, now, an’ it wouldn’t be square to kiss me any more.” Her eyes had drooped from his.

“An’ I reckon that’s right, too, ain’t it?” She looked up again, not receiving an answer. “Why, how red your face is!” she exclaimed. “I ain’t said nothin’ to hurt you, have I?”

“No,” he said. But he held her tightly to him, her head on his shoulder, so that she might not see the guilt in his eyes.

CHAPTER X

THE LAW OF THE PRIMITIVE

Randerson continued his policy of not forcing himself upon Ruth. He went his way, silent, thoughtful, attending strictly to business. To Ruth, watching him when he least suspected it, it seemed that he had grown more grim and stern-looking since his coming to the Flying W. She saw him, sometimes, laughing quietly with Uncle Jepson; other times she heard him talking gently to Aunt Martha—with an expression that set her to wondering whether he were the same man that she had seen that day with the pistol in hand, shooting the life out of a fellow being. There were times when she wavered in her conviction of his heartlessness.

Since Ruth had announced her decision not to marry Masten until after the fall round-up, she had not seen so much of him. He rode alone, sometimes not even asking her to accompany him. These omissions worked no great hardship on her, for the days had grown hot and the plains dry and dusty, so that there was not so much enjoyment in riding as formerly. Besides, she knew the country rather well now, and had no need to depend upon Masten.

Chavis had severed his connection with the Flying W. He had ridden in to the ranchhouse some weeks ago, found Ruth sitting on the porch, announced that he was “quittin’” and wanted his “time.” She did not ask him why he wanted to quit so pleased was she with his decision, but he advanced an explanation while she counted the money due him.

“Things don’t suit me here,” he said venomously. “Randerson is too fresh.” He looked at her impudently. “Besides,” he added, “he stands in too well with the boss.”

She flushed with indignation. “You wouldn’t dare say that to *him*!” she declared.

He reddened darkly. “Meanin’ what he done to Pickett, I reckon,” he sneered.

“Well, Randerson will be gettin’ his’n some day, too!”

Ruth remembered this conversation, and on a day about a month later when she had gone riding alone, she saw Randerson at a distance and rode toward him to tell him, for she had meant to, many times.

Evidently Randerson had seen her, too, for he had already altered his pony’s course when she wheeled hers. When their ponies came to a halt near each other it was Randerson who spoke first. He looked at her unsmilingly over his pony’s head.

“I was ridin’ in to the house to see you, ma’am. I thought you ought to know. This mornin’ the boys found two cows with their hoofs burned, an’ their calves run off.”

“Their hoofs burned!” she exclaimed. “Why, who would be so inhuman as to do that? But I suppose there was a fire somewhere, and it happened that way.”

“There was a fire, all right,” he said grimly. “Some one built it, on purpose. It was rustlers, ma’am. They burned the hoofs of the mothers so the mothers couldn’t follow when they drove their calves off—like any mother would.” He eyed her calmly. “I reckon it was Chavis, ma’am. He’s got a shack down the crick a ways. He’s been there ever since you paid him off. An’ this mornin’ two of the boys told me they wanted their time. I was goin’ in to get it for them. It’s likely they’re goin’ to join Chavis.”

“Well, let them,” she said indignantly. “If they are that kind of men, we don’t want them around!”

He smiled now for the first time. “I reckon there ain’t no way to stop them from goin’, ma’am. An’ we sure don’t want them around. But when they go with Chavis, it’s mighty likely that we’ll miss more cattle.”

She stiffened. “Come with me,” she ordered; “they shall have their money right away.”

She urged her pony on, and he fell in beside her, keeping his animal’s muzzle near her stirrup. For he was merely an employee and was filled with respect for her.

“I suppose I could have Chavis charged with stealing those two calves?” she asked, as they rode. She looked back over her shoulder at him and slowed her pony down so that he came alongside.

“Why, yes, ma’am, I reckon you could. You could charge him with stealin’ them.

But that wouldn’t prove it. We ain’t got any evidence, you see. We found the cows, with the calves gone. We know that Chavis is in the country, but we didn’t see him doin’ the stealin’; we only think he done it.”

“If I should complain to the sheriff?”

“You could do that, ma’am. But I reckon it’s a waste of time.”

“How?”

“Well, you see, ma’am, the sheriff in this county don’t amount to a heap—considered as a sheriff. He mostly draws his salary an’ keeps out of trouble, much as he can. There ain’t no court in the county nearer than Las Vegas, an’ that’s a hundred an’ fifty miles from here. An’, mostly, the court don’t want to be bothered with hearin’ rustler cases—there bein’ no regular law governin’ them, an’ conviction bein’ hard to get. So the sheriff don’t bother.”

“But there must be some way to stop them from stealing!” she said sharply.

“I reckon there’s a way, ma’am.” And now she heard him laugh, quietly, and again she turned and looked at him. His face grew grave again, instantly. “But I reckon you wouldn’t approve of it, ma’am,” he added.

“I would approve of most any method of stopping them—within reason!” she declared vindictively, nettled by his tone.

“We mostly hang them, ma’am,” he said. “That’s a sure way of stoppin’ them.”

She shuddered. “Do you mean that you hang them without a court verdict—on your own responsibility?”

“That’s the way, ma’am.”

“But doesn’t the sheriff punish men who hang others in that manner?” she went on in tones of horror.

His voice was quietly humorous. “Them sort of hangin’s ain’t advertised a heap. It’s hard to find anybody that will admit he had a hand in it. Nobody knows anything about it. But it’s done, an’ can’t be undone. An’ the rustlin’ stops mighty sudden.”

“Oh,” she exclaimed, “what a barbarous custom!”

“I reckon it ain’t exactly barbarous, ma’am,” he contended mildly. “Would you have the rustlers go on stealin’ forever, an’ not try to stop them?”

“There are the courts,” she insisted.

“Turnin’ rustlers off scot-free, ma’am. They can’t hold them. An’ if a rustler is hung, he don’t get any more than is comin’ to him. Do you reckon there’s a lot of difference between a half dozen men hangin’ a man for a crime he’s done, than for one man, a judge for instance, orderin’ him to be hung? If, we’ll say, a hundred men elect a judge to do certain things, is it any more wrong for the hundred men to do them things than for the man they’ve elected to do them? I reckon not, ma’am. Of course, if the hundred men did somethin’ that the judge hadn’t been elected to do, why then, it might make some difference.”

“But you say there is no law that provides hanging for rustling.” She thought she had him.

“The men that elected the judge made the laws,” he said. “They have a right to make others, whenever they’re needed.”

“That’s mob law,” she said with a shiver. “What would become of the world if that custom were followed everywhere?”

“I wouldn’t say that it would be a good thing everywhere. Where there’s courts that can be got at easy, there’d be no sense to it. But out here there’s no other way for a man to protect his property. He’s got to take the law into his own hands.”

“It is a crude and cold-blooded way.”

She heard him laugh, and turned to see him looking at her in amusement.

“There ain’t no refinement in punishment, ma’am. Either it’s got to shock some one or not get done at all. I reckon that back East you don’t get to see anyone punished, or hung. You hear about it, or you read about it, an’ it don’t seem so near you, an’ that kind of takes the edge off it. Out here it comes closer, an’ it seems a lot cruel. But whether a man’s punished by the law or by the men who make the law wouldn’t make a lot of difference to the man—he’d be punished anyway.”

“We won’t talk about it any further,” she said. “But understand, if there are any cattle thieves caught on the Flying W they must not be hanged. You must capture them, if possible, and take them to the proper officials, that they may have a fair trial. And we shall abide by the court’s decision. I don’t care to have any more murders committed here.”

His face paled. “Referrin’ to Pickett, I reckon, ma’am?” he said.

“Yes.” She flung the monosyllable back at him resentfully.

She felt him ride close to her, and she looked at him and saw that his face was grimly serious.

“I ain’t been thinkin’ of the killin’ of Pickett as murder, ma’am. Pickett had it comin’ to him. You was standin’ on the porch, an’ I reckon you used your eyes. If you did, you saw Pickett try to pull his gun on me when my back was turned. It was either him or me, ma’am.”

“You anticipated that he would try to shoot you,” she charged. “Your actions showed that.”

“Why, I reckon I did. You see, I’ve knowed Pickett for a long time.”

“I was watching you from an upstairs window,” she went on. “I saw you when you struck Pickett with your fist. You drew your pistol while he was on the ground. You had the advantage—you might have taken his pistol away from him, and prevented any further trouble. Instead, you allowed him to keep it. You expected he would try to shoot you, and you deliberately gave him an opportunity, relying upon your quickness in getting your own pistol out.”

“I give him his chance, ma’am.”

“His chance.” There was derision in her voice. “I have talked to some of the men about you. They say you are the cleverest of any man in this vicinity with a weapon. You deliberately planned to kill him!”

He rode on, silently, a glint of cold humor in his eyes. He might now have confounded her with the story of Masten’s connection with the affair, but he had no intention of telling her. Masten had struck the blow at him—Masten it must be, who would be struck back.

However, he was disturbed over her attitude. He did not want her to think that he had killed Pickett in pure wantonness, for he had not thought of shooting the man until Uncle Jepson had warned him.

“I’ve got to tell you this, ma’am,” he said, riding close to her. “One man’s life is as good as another’s in this country. But it ain’t any better. The law’s too far away to monkey with—law like you’re used to. The gun a man carries is the only law anyone here pays any attention to. Every man knows it. Nobody makes any mistakes about it, unless it’s when they don’t get their gun out quick enough. An’ that’s the man’s fault that pulls the gun. There ain’t no officials to do any guardin’ out here; you’ve got to do it yourself or it don’t get done. A man can’t take too many chances—an’ live to tell about it. When you know a man’s lookin’ for you, yearnin’ to perforate you, it’s just a question of who can shoot the

quickest an' the straightest. In the case of Pickett, I happened to be the one. It might have been Pickett. If he wasn't as fast as me in slingin' his gun, why, he oughtn't to have taken no chance. He'd have been plumb safe if he'd have forgot all about his gun. I don't reckon that I'd have pined away with sorrow if I hadn't shot him."

She was much impressed with his earnestness, and she looked quickly at him, nearly convinced. But again the memory of the tragic moment became vivid in her thoughts, and she shuddered.

"It's too horrible to think of!" she declared.

"I reckon it's no picnic," he admitted. "I ain't never been stuck on shootin' men. I reckon I didn't sleep a heap for three nights after I shot Pickett. I kept seein' him, an' pityin' him. But I kept tellin' myself that it had to be either him or me, an' I kind of got over it. Pickett *would* have it, ma'am. When I turned my back to him I was hopin' that he wouldn't try to play dirt on me. Do you reckon he oughtn't to have been made to tell you that he had been wrong in tacklin' you? Why, ma'am, I kind of liked Pickett. He wasn't all bad. He was one of them kind that's easy led, an' he wasn't a heap responsible; he fell in with the wrong kind of men—men like Chavis. I've took a lot from Pickett."

"You might have shown him in some other way that you liked him," she said with unsmiling sarcasm. "It seems to me that men who go about thinking of shooting each other must have a great deal of the brute in them."

"Meanin' that they ain't civilized, I reckon?"

"Yes. Mr. Masten had the right view. He refused to resort to the methods you used in bringing Pickett to account. He is too much a gentleman to act the savage."

For an instant Randerson's eyes lighted with a deep fire. And then he smiled mirthlessly.

"I reckon Mr. Masten ain't never had anybody stir him up right proper," he said mildly. "It takes different things to get a man riled so's he'll fight—or a woman, either. Either of 'em will fight when the right thing gets them roused. I expect that deep down in everybody is a little of that brute that you're talkin' about. I reckon you'd fight like a tiger, ma'am, if the time ever come when you had to."

"I never expect to kill anybody," she declared, coldly.

"You don't know what you'll do when the time comes, ma'am. You've been

livin’ in a part of the country where things are done accordin’ to hard an’ fast rules. Out here things run loose, an’ if you stay here long enough some day you’ll meet them an’ recognize them for your own—an’ you’ll wonder how you ever got along without them.” He looked at her now with a subtle grin. But his words were direct enough, and his voice rang earnestly as he went on: “Why, I reckon you’ve never been tuned up to nature, ma’am. Have you ever hated anybody real venomous?”

“I have been taught differently,” she shot back at him. “I have never hated anybody.”

“Then you ain’t never loved anybody, ma’am. You’d be jealous of the one you loved, an’ you’d hate anybody you saw makin’ eyes at them.”

“Well, of all the odd ideas!” she said. She was so astonished at the turn his talk had taken that she halted her pony and faced him, her cheeks coloring.

“I don’t reckon it’s any odd idea, ma’am. Unless human nature is an odd idea, an’ I reckon it’s about the oldest thing in the world, next to love an’ hate.” He grinned at her unblushingly, and leaned against the saddle horn.

“I reckon you ain’t been a heap observin’, ma’am,” he said frankly, but very respectfully. “You’d have seen that odd idea worked out many times, if you was. With animals an’ men it’s the same. A kid—which you won’t claim don’t love its mother—is jealous of a brother or a sister which it thinks is bein’ favored more than him, an’ if the mother don’t show that she’s pretty square in dealin’ with the two, there’s bound to be hate born right there. What do you reckon made Cain kill his brother, Abel?

“Take a woman—a wife. Some box-heads, when their wife falls in love with another man, give her up like they was takin’ off an old shoe, sayin’ they love her so much that they want to see her happy—which she can’t be, she says, unless she gets the other man. But don’t you go to believin’ that kind of fairy romance, ma’am. When a man is so willin’ to give up his wife to another man he’s sure got a heap tired of her an’ don’t want her any more. He’s got his eye peeled for Number Two, an’ he’s thankin’ his wife’s lover for makin’ the trail clear for the matrimonial wagon. But givin’ up Number One to the other man gives him a chance to pose a lot, an’ mebbe it’s got a heap of effect on Number Two, who sort of thinks that if she gets tied up to such a sucker she’ll be able to wrap him around her finger. But if he loves Number Two, he’ll be mighty grumpy to the next fellow that goes to makin’ sheeps eyes at her.”

“That is a highly original view,” she said, laughing, feeling that she ought to be

offended, but disarmed by his ingenuousness. “And so you think that love and hate are inseparable passions.”

“I reckon you can’t know what real love is unless you have hated, ma’am. Some folks say they get through life without hatin’ anybody, but if you’ll look around an’ watch them, you’ll find they’re mostly an unfeelin’ kind. You ain’t one of them kind, ma’am. I’ve watched you, an’ I’ve seen that you’ve got a heap of spirit. Some of these days you’re goin’ to wake up. An’ when you do, you’ll find out what love is.”

“Don’t you think I love Mr. Masten?” she said, looking at him unwaveringly.

He looked as fairly back at her. “I don’t reckon you do, ma’am. Mebbe you think so, but you don’t.”

“What makes you think so?” she demanded, defiantly.

“Why, the way you look at him, ma’am. If I was engaged to a girl an’ she looked at me as critical as you look at him, sometimes, I’d sure feel certain that I’d drawed the wrong card.”

Still her eyes did not waver. She began to sense his object in introducing this subject, and she was determined to make him feel that his conclusions were incorrect—as she knew they were.

“That is an example of your wonderful power of observation,” she said, “the kind you were telling me about, which makes you able to make such remarkable deductions. But if you are no more correct in the others than you are in trying to determine the state of my feelings toward Mr. Masten, you are entirely wrong. I *do* love Mr. Masten!”

She spoke vehemently, for she thought herself very much in earnest.

But he grinned. “You’re true blue,” he said, “an’ you’ve got the grit to tell where you stand. But you’re mistaken. You couldn’t love Masten.”

“Why?” she said, so intensely curious that she entirely forgot to think of his impertinence in talking thus to her. “Why can’t I love Mr. Masten?”

He laughed, and reddened. “Because you’re goin’ to love me, ma’am,” he said, gently.

She would have laughed if she had not felt so indignant. She would have struck him as she had struck Chavis had she not been positive that behind his words was the utmost respect—that he did not intend to be impertinent—that he

seemed as natural as he had been all along. She would have exhibited scorn if she could have summoned it. She did nothing but stare at him in genuine amazement. She was going to be severe with him, but the mild humor of his smile brought confusion upon her.

“You don’t lack conceit, whatever your other shortcomings,” she managed, her face rosy.

“Well now, I’m thankin’ you, ma’am, for lettin’ me off so easy,” he said. “I was expectin’ you’d be pretty hard on me for talkin’ that way. I’ve been wonderin’ what made me say it. I expect it’s because I’ve been thinkin’ it so strong. Anyway, it’s said, an’ I can’t take it back. I wouldn’t want to, for I was bound to tell you some time, anyway. I reckon it ain’t conceit that made me say it. I’ve liked you a heap ever since I got hold of your picture.”

“So that is where the picture went!” she said. “I have been hunting high and low for it. Who gave it to you?”

“Wes Vickers, ma’am.” There was disgust in his eyes. “I never meant to mention it, ma’am; that was a slip of the tongue. But when I saw the picture, I knowed I was goin’ to love you. There ain’t nothin’ happened yet to show that you won’t think a lot of me, some day.”

“You frighten me,” she mocked.

“I reckon you ain’t none frightened,” he laughed. “But I expect you’re some disturbed—me sayin’ what I’ve said while you’re engaged to Masten. I’m apologizing ma’am. You be loyal to Masten—as I know you’d be, anyway. An’ some day, when you’ve broke off with him, I’ll come a-courtin’.”

“So you’re sure that I’m going to break my engagement with Masten, are you?” she queried, trying her best to be scornful, but not succeeding very well. “How do you know that?”

“There’s somethin’ that you don’t see that’s been tellin’ me, ma’am. Mebbe some day that thing will be tellin’ you the same stuff, an’ then you’ll understand,” he said enigmatically.

“Well,” she said, pressing her lips together as though this were to be her last word on the subject; “I have heard that the wilderness sometimes makes people dream strange dreams, and I suppose yours is one of them.” She wheeled her pony and sent it scampering onward toward the ranchhouse.

He followed, light of heart, for while she had taunted him, she had also listened

to him, and he felt that progress had been made.

CHAPTER XI

HAGAR'S EYES

Randerson had been in no hurry to make an attempt to catch the rustlers whose depredations he had reported to Ruth. He had told the men to be doubly alert to their work, and he had hired two new men—from the Diamond H—to replace those who had left the Flying W. His surmise that they wanted to join Chavis had been correct, for the two new men—whom he had put on special duty and had been given permission to come and go when they pleased—had reported this fact to him. There was nothing to do, however, but to wait, in the hope that one day the rustlers would attempt to run cattle off when one or more of the men happened to be in the vicinity. And then, if the evidence against the rustlers were convincing enough, much would depend on the temper of himself and the men as to whether Ruth's orders that there should be no hanging would be observed. There would be time enough to decide that question if any rustlers were caught.

He had seen little of the Easterner during the past two or three weeks. Masten rarely showed himself on the range any more—to Randerson's queries about him the men replied that they hadn't seen him. But Randerson was thinking very little about Masten as he rode through the brilliant sunshine this afternoon. He was going again to Catherson's, to see Hagar. Recollections of the change that had come over the girl were disquieting, and he wanted to talk to her again to determine whether she really had changed, or whether he had merely fancied it.

Far down the river he crossed at a shallow ford, entered a section of timber, and loped Patches slowly through this. He found a trail that he had used several times before, when he had been working for the Diamond H and necessity or whim had sent him this way, and rode it, noting that it seemed to have been used much, lately.

"I reckon old Abe's poundin' his horses considerable. Why, it's right plain," he added, after a little reflection, "this here trail runs into the Lazette trail, down

near the ford. An' Abe's wearin' it out, ridin' to Lazette for red-eye. I reckon if I was Abe, I'd quit while the quittin's good." He laughed, patting Patches' shoulder. "Shucks, a man c'n see another man's faults pretty far, but his own is pretty near invisible. You've rode the Lazette trail a heap, too, Patches," he said, "when your boss was hittin' red-eye. We ain't growin' no angels' wings, Patches, which would give us the right to go to criticizin' others."

Presently he began to ride with more caution, for he wanted to surprise Hagar. A quarter of a mile from the cabin he brought Patches to a halt on a little knoll and looked about him. He had a good view of the cabin in the clearing, and he watched it long, for signs of life. He saw no such signs.

"Abe's out putterin' around, an' Hagar's nappin', I reckon—or tryin' on her new dresses," he added as an after-thought.

He was about to ride on, when a sound reached his ears, and he drew the reins tight on Patches and sat rigid, alert, listening.

The perfect silence of the timber was unbroken. He had almost decided that his ears had played him a trick when the sound came again, nearer than before—the sound of voices. Quickly and accurately he determined from which direction they came, and he faced that way, watching a narrow path that led through the timber to a grass plot not over a hundred feet from him, from which he was screened by some thick-growing brush at his side.

He grinned, fully expecting to see Abe and Hagar on the path presently. "Abe's behavin' today," he told himself as he waited. "I'll sure surprise them, if—"

Suddenly he drew his breath sharply, his teeth came together viciously, and his brows drew to a frown, his eyes gleaming coldly underneath. For he saw Willard Masten coming along the path, smiling and talking, and beside him, his arm around her waist, also smiling, but with her head bent forward a little, was Hagar Catherson.

The color slowly left Randerson's face as he watched. He had no nice scruples about eavesdropping at this moment—here was no time for manners; the cold, contemptuous rage that fought within him was too deep and gripping to permit of any thought that would not center about the two figures on the path. He watched them, screened by the brush, with the deadly concentration of newly aroused murder-lust. Once, as he saw them halt at the edge of the grass plot, and he observed Masten draw Hagar close to him and kiss her, his right hand dropped to the butt of his pistol at his right hip, and he fingered it uncertainly. He drew the hand away at last, though, with a bitter, twisting smile.

Five minutes later, his face still stony and expressionless, he dismounted lightly and with infinite care and caution led Patches away from the knoll and far back into the timber. When he was certain there was no chance of his being seen or heard by Masten and Hagar, he mounted, urged Patches forward and made a wide detour which brought him at length to the path which had been followed by Masten and Hagar in reaching the grass plot. He loped the pony along this path, and presently he came upon them—Hagar standing directly in the path, watching him, red with embarrassment which she was trying hard to conceal; Masten standing on the grass plot near her, staring into the timber opposite; Randerson, trying to appear unconcerned and making a failure of it.

“It’s Rex!” ejaculated the girl. Her hands had been clasped in front of her; they dropped to her sides when she saw Randerson, and her fingers began to twist nervously into the edges of her apron. A deep breath, which was almost a sigh of relief, escaped her. “I thought it was Dad!” she said.

Evidently Masten had likewise expected the horseman to be her father, for at her exclamation he turned swiftly. His gaze met Randerson’s, his shoulders sagged a little, his eyes wavered and shifted from the steady ones that watched him.

His composure returned quickly, however, and he smiled blandly, but there was a trace of derision in his voice:

“You’ve strayed off your range, haven’t you, Randerson?” he said smoothly.

“Why, I reckon I have.” Randerson’s voice was low, almost gentle, and he smiled mildly at Hagar, who blushingly returned it but immediately looked downward.

“I expect dad must be gone somewhere—that you’re lookin’ for him,” Randerson said. “I thought mebbe I’d ketch him here.”

“He went to Red Rock this mornin’,” said the girl. She looked up, and this time met Randerson’s gaze with more confidence, for his pretense of casualness had set her fears at rest. “Mr. Masten come over to see him, too.”

The lie came hesitatingly through her lips. She looked at Masten as though for confirmation, and the latter nodded.

“Catherson is hard to catch,” he said. “I’ve been over here a number of times, trying to see him.” His voice was a note too high, and Randerson wondered whether, without the evidence of his eyes, he would have suspected Masten. He decided that he would, and his smile was a trifle grim.

“I reckon Catherson is a regular dodger,” he returned. “He’s always gallivantin’ around the country when somebody wants to see him.” He smiled gently at Hagar, with perhaps just a little pity.

“It’s getting along in the afternoon, Hagar,” he said. “Dad ought to be amblin’ back here before long.” His face grew grave at the frightened light in her eyes when he continued: “I reckon me an’ Masten better wait for him, so’s he won’t dodge us any more.” He cast a glance around him. “Where’s your cayuse?” he said to Masten.

“I left him down near the ford,” returned the other.

“Right on your way back to the Flyin’ W,” said Randerson, as though the discovery pleased him. “I’m goin’ to the Flyin’ W, too, soon as I see Catherson. I reckon, if you two ain’t got no particular yearnin’ to go prowlin’ around in the timber any longer, we’ll all go back to Catherson’s shack an’ wait for him there. Three’ll be company, while it’d be mighty lonesome for one.”

Masten cleared his throat and looked intently at Randerson’s imperturbable face. Did he know anything? A vague unrest seized Masten. Involuntarily he shivered, and his voice was a little hoarse when he spoke, though he attempted to affect carelessness:

“I don’t think I will wait for Catherson,” he said, “I can see him tomorrow, just as well.”

“Well, that’s too bad,” drawled Randerson. “After waitin’ this long, too! But I reckon you’re right; it wouldn’t be no use waitin’. I’ll go too, I reckon. We’ll ride to the Flyin’ W together.”

“I don’t want to force my company on you, Randerson,” laughed Masten nervously. “Besides, I had thought of taking the river trail—back toward Lazette, you know.”

Randerson looked at him with a cold smile. “The Lazette trail suits me too,” he said; “we’ll go that way.”

Masten looked at him again. The smile on Randerson’s face was inscrutable. And now the pallor left Masten’s cheeks and was succeeded by a color that burned. For he now was convinced and frightened. He heard Randerson speaking to Hagar, and so gentle was his voice that it startled him, so great was the contrast between it and the slumbering threat in his eyes and manner:

“Me an’ Masten is goin’ to make a short cut over to where his horse is, Hagar;

we’ve changed our minds about goin’ to the shack with you. We’ve decided that we’re goin’ to talk over that business that he come here about—not botherin’ your dad with it.” His lips straightened at the startled, dreading look that sprang into her eyes. “Dad ain’t goin’ to know, girl,” he assured her gravely. “I’d never tell him. You go back to the shack an’ pitch into your work, sort of forgettin’ that you ever saw Mr. Masten. For he’s goin’ away tonight, an’ he ain’t comin’ back.”

Hagar covered her face with her hands and sank into the grass beside the path, crying.

“By God, Randerson!” blustered Masten, “what do you mean? This is going too —”

A look silenced him—choked the words in his throat, and he turned without protest, at Randerson’s jerk of the head toward the ford, and walked without looking back, Randerson following on Patches.

When they reached the narrow path that led to the crossing, just before entering the brush Randerson looked back. Hagar was still lying in the grass near the path. A patch of sunlight shone on her, and so clear was the light that Randerson could plainly see the spasmodic movement of her shoulders. His teeth clenched tightly, and the muscles of his face corded as they had done in the Flying W ranchhouse the day that Aunt Martha had told him of Pickett’s attack on Ruth.

He watched silently while Masten got on his horse, and then, still silent, he followed as Masten rode down the path, across the river, through the break in the canyon wall and up the slope that led to the plains above. When they reached a level space in some timber that fringed the river, Masten attempted to urge his horse through it, but was brought to a halt by Randerson’s voice:

“We’ll get off here, Masten.”

Masten turned, his face red with wrath.

“Look here, Randerson,” he bellowed; “this ridiculous nonsense has gone far enough. I know, now, that you were spying on us. I don’t know why, unless you’d selected the girl yourself—”

“That’s ag’in you too,” interrupted Randerson coldly. “You’re goin’ to pay.”

“You’re making a lot of fuss about the girl,” sneered Masten. “A man—”

“You’re a heap careless with words that you don’t know the meanin’ of,” said Randerson. “We don’t raise men out here that do things like you do. An’ I expect you’re one in a million. They all can’t be like you, back East; if they was, the

East would go to hell plenty rapid. Get off your horse!”

Masten demurred, and Randerson’s big pistol leaped into his hand. His voice came at the same instant, intense and vibrant:

“It don’t make no difference to me *how* you get off!”

He watched Masten get down, and then he slid to the ground himself, the pistol still in hand, and faced Masten, with only three or four feet of space separating them.

Masten had been watching him with wide, fearing eyes, and at the menace of his face when he dismounted Masten shrank back a step.

“Good Heavens, man, do you mean to shoot me?” he said, the words faltering and scarcely audible.

“I reckon shootin’ would be too good for you.” Again Randerson’s face had taken on that peculiar stony expression. Inexorable purpose was written on it; what he was to do he was in no hurry to be about, but it would be done in good time.

“I ain’t never claimed to be no angel,” he said. “I reckon I’m about the average, an’ I’ve fell before temptation same as other men. But I’ve drawed the line where you’ve busted over it. Mebbe if it was some other girl, I wouldn’t feel it like I do about Hagar. But when I tell you that I’ve knowed that girl for about five years, an’ that there wasn’t a mean thought in her head until you brought your dirty carcass to her father’s shack, an’ that to me she’s a kid in spite of her long dresses and her newfangled furbelows, you’ll understand a heap about how I feel right now. Get your paws up, for I’m goin’ to thrash you so bad that your own mother won’t know you—if she’s so misfortunate as to be alive to look at you! After that, you’re goin’ to hit the breeze out of this country, an’ if I ever lay eyes on you ag’in I’ll go gunnin’ for you!”

While he had been speaking he had holstered the pistol, unstrapped his cartridge belt and let guns and belt fall to the ground. Then without warning he drove a fist at Masten’s face.

The Easterner dodged the blow, evaded him, and danced off, his face alight with a venomous joy. For the dreaded guns were out of Randerson’s reach, he was a fair match for Randerson in weight, though Randerson towered inches above him; he had had considerable experience in boxing at his club in the East, and he had longed for an opportunity to avenge himself for the indignity that had been offered him at Calamity. Besides, he had a suspicion that Ruth’s refusal to marry

before the fall round-up had been largely due to a lately discovered liking for the man who was facing him.

“I fancy you’ll have your work cut out for you, you damned meddler!” he sneered as he went in swiftly, with a right and left, aimed at Randerson’s face.

The blows landed, but seemingly had no effect, for Randerson merely gritted his teeth and pressed forward. In his mind was a picture of a girl whom he had “dawdled” on his knee—a “kid” that he had played with, as a brother might have played with a younger sister.

CHAPTER XII

THE RUSTLERS

At about the time Randerson was crossing the river near the point where the path leading to Catherson's shack joined the Lazette trail, Ruth Harkness was loping her pony rapidly toward him. They passed each other within a mile, but both were unconscious of this fact, for Randerson was riding in the section of timber that he had entered immediately after crossing the river, and Ruth was concealed from his view by a stretch of intervening brush and trees.

Ruth had been worried more than she would have been willing to admit, over the presence of Chavis and his two men in the vicinity, and that morning after she had questioned a puncher about the former Flying W foreman, she had determined to ride down the river for the purpose of making a long distance observation of the "shack" the puncher and Randerson had mentioned as being inhabited by Chavis. That determination had not been acted upon until after dinner, however, and it was nearly two o'clock when she reached the ford where she had passed Randerson.

The puncher had told her that Chavis' shack was about fifteen miles distant from the Flying W ranchhouse, and situated in a little basin near the river, which could be approached only by riding down a rock-strewn and dangerous declivity. She had no intention of risking the descent; she merely wanted to view the place from afar, and she judged that from the edge of a plateau, which the puncher had described to her, she would be able to see very well.

When she passed the ford near the Lazette trail, she felt a sudden qualm of misgiving, for she had never ridden quite that far alone—the ford was about ten miles from the ranchhouse—but she smiled at the sensation, conquering it, and continued on her way, absorbed in the panoramic view of the landscape.

At a distance of perhaps a mile beyond the ford she halted the pony on the crest of a low hill and looked about her. The country at this point was broken and

rocky; there was much sand; the line of hills, of which the one on which her pony stood was a part, were barren and uninviting. There was much cactus. She made a grimace of abhorrence at a clump that grew near her in an arid stretch, and then looked beyond it at a stretch of green. Far away on a gentle slope she saw some cattle, and looking longer, she observed a man on a horse. One of the Flying W men, of course, she assured herself, and felt more secure.

She rode on again, following a ridge, the pony stepping gingerly. Another half mile and she urged the pony down into a slight depression where the footing was better. The animal made good progress here, and after a while they struck a level, splotched with dry bunch-grass, which rustled noisily under the tread of the pony's hoofs.

It was exhilarating here, for presently the level became a slope, and the slope merged into another level which paralleled the buttes along the river, and she could see for miles on the other side of the stream, a vista of plain and hills and mountains and forest so alluring in its virgin wildness; so vast, big, and silent a section that it awed her.

When she saw the sun swimming just above the peaks of some mountains in the dim distance, she began to have some doubts of the wisdom of making the trip, but she pressed on, promising herself that she would have a brief look at the shack and the basin, and then immediately return. She had expected to make much better time than she had made. Also, she had not anticipated that a fifteen-mile ride would tire her so. But she believed that it was not the ride so far, but the prospect of another fifteen-mile ride to return, that appalled her—for she had ridden much since her coming to the Flying W, and was rather hardened to it. In one of his letters to her, her uncle had stated that his men often rode sixty miles in a day, and that he remembered one ride of ninety miles, which a cowpuncher had made with the same pony in twenty-two hours of straight riding. He had told her that the tough little plains pony could go any distance that its rider was able to "fork" it. She believed that, for the little animal under her had never looked tired when she had ridden him to the ranchhouse at the end of a hard day.

But these recollections did not console her, and she urged the pony on, into a gallop that took her over the ground rapidly.

At last, as she was swept around a bend in the plateau, she saw spreading beneath her a little valley, green-carpeted, beautiful. A wood rose near the river, and at its edge she saw what she had come to see—Chavis' shack.

And now she realized that for all the knowledge that a look at Chavis' shack

would give her, she might as well have stayed at the Flying W. She didn't know just what she had expected to see when she got here, but what she did see was merely the building, a small affair with a flat roof, the spreading valley itself, and several steers grazing in it.

There were no other signs of life. She got off the pony and walked to the edge of the plateau, discovering that the valley was much shallower than she thought it would be, and that at her side, to the left, was the declivity that the puncher had told her about. She leaned over the edge and looked at it.

It was not so steep as she had expected when listening to the puncher's description of it. But she thought it looked dangerous. At the point from which she viewed it, it was not more than fifteen or twenty feet below her. It cut into the plateau, running far back and doubling around toward her, and the stretch below her, that was within range of her eyes, was almost level. The wall of the cut on which she stood was ragged and uneven, with some scraggly brush thrusting out between the crevices of rocks, and about ten feet down was a flat rock, like a ledge, that projected several feet out over the level below.

She was about to turn, for she had seen all she cared to see, when an impulse of curiosity urged her to crane her neck to attempt to peer around a shoulder of the cut where it doubled back. She started and turned pale, not so much from fright as with surprise, for she saw a horse's head projecting around the shoulder of the cut, and the animal was looking directly at her. As she drew back, her breath coming fast, the animal whinnied gently.

Almost instantly, she heard a man's voice:

"My cayuse is gettin' tired of loafin', I reckon." Ruth held her breath. The voice seemed to come from beneath her feet—she judged that it really had come from beneath the rock that projected from the wall of the cut below her. And it was Chavis' voice!

Of course, he would not be talking to himself, and therefore there must be another man with him. At the risk of detection, and filled with an overwhelming curiosity to hear more she kneeled at the edge of the cut and listened intently, first making sure that the horse she had seen could not see her.

"I reckon Linton didn't pull it off—or them Flyin' W guys are stickin' close to the herd," said another voice. "He ought to have been here an hour ago."

"Linton ain't no rusher," said Chavis. "We'll wait."

There was a silence. Then Chavis spoke again:

“Flyin’ W stock is particular easy to run off. Did I tell you? B—— told me”—Ruth did not catch the name, she thought it might have been Bennet, or Ben—“that the girl had give orders that anyone ketched runnin’ off Flyin’ W stock wasn’t to be hung!” Ruth heard him chuckle. “Easy boss, eh, Kester?” He sneered. “Ketch that damned Flyin’ W outfit hangin’ anybody!”

Kester was one of the men who had quit the day that Ruth had met Randerson, when the latter had been riding in for the money due them. It did not surprise Ruth to discover that Kester was with Chavis, for Randerson had told her what might be expected of him. Linton was the other man.

Nor did it surprise Ruth to hear Chavis talking of stealing the Flying W stock. But it angered her to discover that her humane principles were being ridiculed; she was so incensed at Chavis that she felt she could remain to hear him no longer, and she got up, her face red, her eyes flashing, to go to her pony.

But the pony was nowhere in sight. She remembered now, her heart sinking with a sudden, vague fear, that she had neglected to trail the reins over the animal’s head, as she had been instructed to do by the puncher who had gentled the pony for her; he had told her that no western horse, broken by an experienced rider, would stray with a dragging rein.

She gave a quick, frightened glance around. She could see clearly to the broken section of country through which she had passed some time before, and her glance went to the open miles of grass land that stretched south of her. The pony had not gone that way, either. Trembling from a sudden weakness, but driven by the urge of stern necessity, she advanced cautiously to the edge of the cut again and looked over.

Her pony was standing on the level below her, almost in front of the rock under which had been Chavis and Kester! It had evidently just gone down there, for at the instant she looked over the edge of the cut she saw Chavis and Kester running toward it, muttering with surprise.

For one wild, awful instant, Ruth felt that she would faint, for the world reeled around her in dizzying circles. A cold dread that seized her senses helped her to regain control of herself presently, however, and scarcely breathing she stole behind some dense weeds at the edge of the cut, murmuring a prayer of thankfulness for their presence.

What Chavis and Kester had said upon seeing the pony, she had not heard. But now she saw crafty smiles on their faces; Chavis’ was transfigured by an expression that almost drew a cry of horror from her. Through the weeds she

could see their forms, and even hear the subdued exclamation from Chavis:

“It’s the girl’s cayuse, sure. I’d know it if I saw it in the Cannibal islands. I reckon she’s been snoopin’ around here somewheres, an’ it’s sloped! Why, Kester!” he cried, standing erect and drawing great, long breaths, his eyes blazing with passion as for an instant she saw them as they swept along the edge of the cut, “I’d swing for a kiss from them lips of hers!”

“You’re a fool!” declared Kester. “Let the women alone! I never knowed a man to monkey with one yet, that he didn’t get the worst of it.”

Chavis paid no attention to this remonstrance. He seized Ruth’s pony by the bridle and began to lead it up the slope toward the plateau. Kester laid a restraining hand on his arm. He spoke rapidly; he seemed to have become, in a measure, imbued with the same passion that had taken possession of Chavis.

“Leave the cayuse here; she’ll be huntin’ for it, directly; she’ll come right down here. Give her time.”

Chavis, however, while he obeyed the suggestion about leaving the pony where it was, did not follow Kester’s suggestion about waiting, but began to run up the slope toward the plateau, scrambling and muttering. And Kester, after a short instant of silent contemplation, followed him.

Ruth no longer trembled. She knew that if she was to escape from the two men she would have to depend entirely upon her own wit and courage, and in this crisis she was cool and self-possessed. She waited until she saw the two men vanish behind the shoulder of the cut where she had seen the horse’s head, and then she clambered over the edge of the wall, grasping some gnarled branches, and letting herself slide quickly down. In an instant she felt her feet come in contact with the flat rock under which the men had been when she had first heard them talking. It seemed a great distance to the ground from the rock, but she took the jump bravely, not even shutting her eyes. She landed on all fours and pitched headlong, face down, in the dust, but was up instantly and running toward her pony.

Seizing the bridle, she looped it through her arm, and then, pulling at the animal, she ran to where the horses of the two men stood, watching her, and snorting with astonishment and fright. With hands that trembled more than a little, she threw the reins over their heads, so that they might not drag, and then, using the quirt, dangling from her wrist by a rawhide thong, she turned their heads toward the declivity and lashed them furiously. She watched them as they went helter-skelter, down into the valley, and then with a smile that might have been grim if

it had not been so quavering, she mounted her own animal and rode it cautiously up the slope toward the plateau.

As she reached the plateau, her head rising above its edge, she saw that Chavis and Kester were a good quarter of a mile from her and running toward some timber a few hundred yards beyond them.

With a laugh that was almost derisive, Ruth whipped her pony and sent it flying over the plateau at an angle that took her almost directly away from the running men. She had been riding only a minute or two, however, when she heard a shout, and saw that the men had stopped and were facing in her direction, waving their hands at her. They looked grotesque—like jumping jacks—in the sudden twilight that had fallen, and she could not withhold a smile of triumph. It did not last long, for she saw the men begin to run again, this time toward the cut, and she urged her pony to additional effort, fearful that the men might gain their ponies and overtake her.

And now that the men were behind her, she squared her pony toward the trail over which she had ridden to come here, determined to follow it, for she felt that she knew it better than any other.

The pony ran well, covering the ground with long, agile jumps. For about two miles she held it to its rapid pace, and then, looking backward for the first time she saw the plateau, vast, dark and vacant, behind her, and she drew the pony down, for she had come to the stretch of broken country and realized that she must be careful.

She shuddered as she looked at the darkening world in front of her. Never had it seemed so dismal, so empty, and at the same time so full of lurking danger. The time which precedes the onrush of darkness is always a solemn one; it was doubly solemn to Ruth, alone, miles from home, with a known danger behind her and unknown dangers awaiting her.

Fifteen miles! She drew a long breath as the pony scampered along; anxiously she scanned the plains to the south and in front of her for signs of Flying W cattle or men. The cattle and horseman that she had previously seen, far over on the slope, had vanished, and it looked so dismal and empty over there that she turned her head and shivered.

There seemed to be nothing in front of her but space and darkness. She wondered, gulping, whether Uncle Jepson and Aunt Martha were worried about her. They would be, of course, for she had never stayed like this before. But, she thought, with a pulse of joy, they would be lighting the lamps presently, and

when she got to the big level beyond the ford, she would be able to see the lights, and the sight of them would make her feel better. She had never realized before how companionable a horse felt, and as her pony ran on, she began to give some attention to his work, noting how his muscles rippled and contracted, how his sides heaved, with what regularity his legs moved. Involuntarily, she felt of his shoulder—it was moist, and the muscles under the smooth hair writhed like living things. She laughed, almost hysterically, for the touch made her feel that she was not alone—she was with the most faithful of man's friends, and she knew that the little animal under her would do his best for her—would run himself to death in her service, if she insisted.

She had a glorious start over her pursuers. They would never catch her. Twice, after she entered the broken stretch she looked back, but could see no sign of them. She did not know that at that moment Chavis and Kester, enraged and disgusted over the trick she had played on them, were riding slowly through the valley toward their shack.

She was almost through the broken stretch when the pony stumbled. She pulled quickly on the reins, and the pony straightened. But instantly she felt its forelegs stiffen, felt it slide; the thought came to her that it must have slid on a flat rock or a treacherous stretch of lava. It struggled like a cat, to recover its balance, grunting and heaving with the effort, but went down, finally, sideways, throwing her out of the saddle.

She had anticipated the fall and had got her feet out of the stirrups, and she alighted standing, braced for the shock. Her left foot struck the top of a jagged rock, slipped, doubled under her, and she felt a sharp, agonizing pain in the ankle. For a moment she paid no attention to it, however, being more concerned for the pony, but when she noted that the animal had got up, seemingly none the worse for the fall, she suddenly realized that the ankle pained her terribly, and she hopped over to a flat rock and sat on it, to examine the injury. She worked the ankle rapidly back and forth, each movement bringing tears to her eyes. She had almost forgotten about her pursuers, and when she thought of them she got up and limped toward the pony, which had wandered a little away from where it had fallen.

And now the pony, which had performed so nobly for her during the miles she had ridden to reach this spot, suddenly seemed determined to undo all his service by yielding to a whim to avoid capture.

She tried threats, flattery, cajolery. Twice more she hobbled painfully near him,

and each time he unconcernedly walked away. The third time, he allowed her to come very close, and just when she felt that success was very near, he snorted with pretended fright, wheeled, and slashed out with both hoofs at her and galloped off a full quarter of a mile. She could see him standing and looking at her, his ears erect, before the darkness blotted him from view altogether.

She tried again, groping her way painfully over rocks, slipping, stumbling, holding her breath from fear of snakes—but she could not find the pony. And then, white, shaking, clammy from her dread of the darkness, the awesome silence, and the possibility of Chavis and Kester finding her here, she groped blindly until she found a big rock rising high above its fellows, and after a struggle during which she tore the skin from her hands and knees, she climbed to its top and crouched on it, shuddering and crying. And she thought of Randerson; of his seriousness and his earnestness when he had said:

“I reckon you don’t know hate or fear or desperation.... Out here things run loose, an’ if you stay here long enough, some day you’ll meet them an’ recognize them for your own—an’ you’ll wonder how you ever got along without them.”

Well, she hated now; she hated everything—the country included—with a bitterness that, she felt, would never die. And she had felt fear, too, and desperation. She felt them now, and more, she felt a deep humility, and she felt a genuine respect for Randerson—a respect which more than counterbalanced her former repugnance toward him for the killing of Pickett. For she knew that a while ago, if she had had a pistol with her, she would have killed Chavis and Kester without hesitation.

CHAPTER XIII

THE FIGHT

At about the time that Chavis and Kester had discovered Ruth's pony and had clambered up the slope in search of the girl, the two figures on the timber-fringed level near the break in the canyon wall were making grotesque shadows as they danced about in the dying sunlight.

Masten's science had served him well. He had been able, so far, to evade many of Randerson's heavy blows, but some of them had landed. They had hurt, too, and had taken some of the vigor out of their target, though Masten was still elusive as he circled, with feet that dragged a little, feinting and probing for openings through which he might drive his fists.

A great many of his blows had reached their mark also. Randerson's face was covered with livid lumps and welts. But he seemed not to mind them, to be unconscious of them, for on his lips was still the dogged smile that had reached them soon after the fight had started, and in his eyes was the same look of cold deliberation and unrelenting purpose.

He had spoken no word since the fight began; he had taken Masten's heaviest punches without sign or sound to indicate that they had landed, always crowding forward, carrying the battle to his adversary, refusing to yield a step when to yield meant to evade punishment. Passion, deep and gripping, had made him for the moment an insensate automaton; he was devoid of any feeling except a consuming desire to punish the despoiler of his "kid."

But he was holding this passion in check; he was its master—it had not mastered him; he had made it a vassal to his deliberation. To have unleashed it all at once would have made him too eager, would have weakened him. He had chosen this punishment for Masten, and he would see that it was sufficient.

But, as Randerson had well known, Masten was no mean opponent. He stepped

in and out rapidly, his blows lacking something in force through his inability to set himself. But he landed more often than Randerson; he blocked and covered cleverly; he ducked blows that would have ended the fight had they struck him with their full force.

Masten had been full of confidence when the fight started. Some of that confidence had gone now. He was beginning to realize that he could not beat Randerson with jabs and stinging counters that hurt without deadening the flesh where they struck; nor could he hope to wear the Westerner down and finally finish him. And with this realization came a pulse of fear. He began to take more risks, to set himself more firmly on his feet in order to give his blows greater force when they landed. For he felt his own strength waning, and he knew what the end would be, should he no longer be able to hold Randerson off.

He went in now with a left jab, and instead of dancing back to avoid Randerson's counter, he covered with the left, swiftly drawn back from the jab, and hooked his right to Randerson's face. The blow landed heavily on Randerson's jaw, shaking him from head to foot. But he shook his head as though to dissipate the effect of it, and came after Masten grimly. Again Masten tried the maneuver, and the jab went home accurately, with force. But when he essayed to drive in the right, it was blocked, and Randerson's right, crooked, rigid, sent with the force of a battering ram, landed fairly on Masten's mouth, with deadening, crushing effect.

It staggered Masten, sent him back several feet, and his legs shook under him, sagging limply. His lips, where the blow had landed, were smashed, gaping hideously, red-stained. Randerson was after him relentlessly. Masten dared not clinch, for no rules of boxing governed this fight, and he knew that if he accepted rough and tumble tactics he would be beaten quickly. So he trusted to his agility, which, though waning, answered well until he recovered from the effects of the blow.

And then, with the realization that he was weakening, that the last blow had hurt him badly, came to Masten the sickening knowledge that Randerson was fighting harder than ever. He paid no attention to Masten's blows, not even attempting to fend them off, but bored in, swinging viciously. His blows were landing now; they left deadened flesh and paralyzed muscles as marks of their force.

Masten began to give way. Half a dozen times he broke ground, or slipped to one side or the other. It was unavailing. Blows were coming at him now from all angles, ripping, tearing, crashing blows that seemed to increase in force as the

fight went on. One of them caught Masten just below the ear on the right side. He reeled and went to his haunches, and dizzy, nauseated, he sat for an instant, trying to fix the world correctly in his vision, for it was all awry—trees, the plains, himself—all were dancing. Dimly he sensed the form of Randerson looming over him. He still was able to grasp the danger that menaced him, and reeling, he threw himself headlong, to escape Randerson, landing on his side on the ground, and with an inarticulate shriek of fury, he pulled the small caliber pistol from his hip pocket, aimed it at the shadowy form of his adversary and pressed the trigger.

And then it seemed that an avalanche had struck him; that he was whirled along by it, then buried under it.

Evidently he had been buried for a long time, for when he opened his eyes the dense blackness of the Western night had descended. He felt a dull, heavy pain in his right wrist, and he raised it—it seemed to have been crushed. He laid the hand down again, with a groan, and then he heard a voice. Looking up, he saw the shadowy figure of his conqueror standing over him.

“I reckon I’ve handed it to you pretty bad,” said Randerson. “But you had it comin’ to you. If you hadn’t tried to play the skunk at the last minute, you’d have got off easier. I reckon your hand ain’t so active as it’s been—I had to pretty near stamp it off of you—you would keep pullin’ the trigger of that pop-gun. Do you reckon you c’n get up now, an’ get on your horse?”

Masten felt himself lifted; he did not resist. Then he felt the saddle under him; he made an effort and steadied himself. Then, still only half conscious he rode, reeling in the saddle, toward a light that he saw in the distance, which, he dimly felt, must come from the Flying W ranchhouse.

CHAPTER XIV

THE ROCK AND THE MOONLIGHT

Randerson did not leave the scene of the fight immediately. He stood for a long time, after buckling on his belt and pistols, looking meditatively toward the break in the canyon beyond which was Catherson's shack.

"Did the dresses have anything to do with it?" he asked himself, standing there in the darkness. "New dresses might have—puttin' foolish notions in her head. But I reckon the man—" He laughed grimly. He had thought it all over before, back there on the path when he had been talking to Masten and Hagar. He reflected again on it now. "Lookin' it square in the face, it's human nature. We'll allow that. We'll say a man has feelin's. But a man ought to have sense, too—or he ain't a man. If Masten was a boy, now, not realizin', there'd be excuses. But he's wised up.... If his intentions had been honorable—but he's engaged to Ruth, an' they couldn't. I reckon he'll pull his freight now. Catherson would sure muss him up some."

He mounted his pony and rode toward the Flying W ranchhouse. Halfway there he passed Masten. The moon had risen; by its light he could see the Easterner, who had halted his horse and was standing beside it, watching him. Randerson paid no heed to him.

"Thinkin' it over, I reckon," he decided, as he rode on. Looking back, when he reached the house, he saw that Masten was still standing beside his horse.

At the sound of hoof beats, Uncle Jepson came out on the porch and peered at the rider. Randerson could see Aunt Martha close behind him. Uncle Jepson was excited. He started off the porch toward Randerson.

"It's Randerson, mother!" he called shrilly back to Aunt Martha, who was now on the porch.

In a brief time Randerson learned that Ruth had gone riding—alone—about

noon, and had not returned. Randerson also discovered that the girl had questioned a puncher who had ridden in—asking him about Chavis' shack and the basin. Randerson's face, red from the blows that had landed on it, paled quickly.

"I reckon she's takin' her time about comin' in," he said. "Mebbe her cayuse has broke a leg—or somethin'." He grinned at Uncle Jepson. "I expect there ain't nothin' to worry about. I'll go look for her."

He climbed slowly into the saddle, and with a wave of the hand to the elderly couple rode his pony down past the bunkhouse at a pace that was little faster than a walk. He urged Patches to slightly greater speed as he skirted the corral fence, but once out on the plains he loosened the reins, spoke sharply to the pony and began to ride in earnest.

Patches responded nobly to the grim note in his master's voice. With stretching neck and flying hoofs he swooped with long, smooth undulations that sent him, looking like a splotched streak, splitting the night. He ran at his own will, his rider tall and loose in the saddle, speaking no further word, but thinking thoughts that narrowed his eyes, made them glint with steely hardness whenever the moonlight struck them, and caused his lips to part, showing the clenched teeth between them, and shoved his chin forward with the queer set that marks the fighting man.

For he did not believe that Ruth's pony had broken a leg. She had gone to see Chavis' shack, and Chavis—

One mile, two, three, four; Patches covered them in a mad riot of recklessness. Into depressions, over rises, leaping rocks and crashing through chaparral clumps, scaring rattlers, scorpions, toads, and other denizens to wild flight, he went, with not a thought for his own or his rider's safety, knowing from the ring in his master's voice that speed, and speed alone, was wanted from him.

After a five mile run he was pulled down. He felt the effects of the effort, but he was well warmed to his work now and he loped, though with many a snort of impatience and toss of the head, by which he tried to convey to his master his eagerness to be allowed to have his will.

On the crest of a hill he was drawn to a halt, while Randerson scanned the country around him. Then, when the word came again to go, he was off with a rush and a snort of delight, as wildly reckless as he had been when he had discovered what was expected of him.

They flashed by the ford near the Lazette trail; along a ridge, the crest of which was hard and barren, making an ideal speedway; they sank into a depression with sickening suddenness, went out of it with a clatter, and then went careening over a level until they reached a broken stretch where speed would mean certain death to both.

Patches was determined to risk it, but suddenly he was pulled in and forced to face the other way. And what he saw must have made him realize that his wild race was ended, for he deflated his lungs shrilly, and relaxed himself for a rest.

Randerson had seen her first. She was sitting on the top of a gigantic rock not more than fifty feet from him; she was facing him, had evidently been watching him; and in the clear moonlight he could see that she was pale and frightened—frightened at him, he knew, fearful that he might not be a friend.

This impression came to him simultaneously with her cry—shrill with relief and joy: “Oh, it’s Patches! It’s Randerson!” And then she suddenly stiffened and stretched out flat on the top of the rock.

He lifted her down and carried her, marveling at her lightness, to a clump of bunch-grass near by, and worked, trying to revive her, until she struggled and sat up. She looked once at him, her eyes wide, her gaze intent, as though she wanted to be sure that it was really he, and then she drew a long, quavering breath and covered her face with her hands.

“Oh,” she said; “it was horrible!” She uncovered her face and looked up at him. “Why,” she added, “I have been here since before dark! And it must be after midnight, now!”

“It’s about nine. Where’s your horse?”

“Gone,” she said dolorously. “He fell—over there—and threw me. I saw Chavis—and Kester—over on the mesa. I thought they would come after me, and I hurried. Then my pony fell. I’ve hurt my ankle—and I couldn’t catch him—my pony, I mean; he was too obstinate—I could have killed him! I couldn’t walk, you know—my ankle, and the snakes—and the awful darkness, and—Oh, Randerson,” she ended, with a gulp of gratitude, “I never was so glad to see you—anybody—in my life!”

“I reckon it *was* kind of lonesome for you out here alone with the snakes, an’ the dark, an’ things.”

She was over her scare now, he knew—as he was over his fears for her, and he grinned with a humor brought on by a revulsion of feeling.

“I reckon mebbe the snakes would have bothered you some,” he added, “for they’re natural mean. But I reckon the moon made such an awful darkness on purpose to scare you.”

“How can you joke about it?” she demanded resentfully.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” he said with quick contrition. “You see, I was glad to find you. An’ you’re all right now, you know.”

“Yes, yes,” she said, quickly forgiving. “I suppose I *am* a coward.”

“Why, no, ma’am, I reckon you ain’t. Anybody sittin’ here alone, a woman, especial, would likely think a lot of curious thoughts. They’d seem real. I reckon it was your ankle, that kept you from walkin’.”

“It hurts terribly,” she whispered, and she felt of it, looking at him plaintively. “It is so swollen I can’t get my boot off. And the leather seems like an iron band around it.” She looked pleadingly at him. “Won’t you please take it off?”

His embarrassment was genuine and deep.

“Why, I reckon I can, ma’am,” he told her. “But I ain’t never had a heap of experience—” His pause was eloquent, and he finished lamely “with boots—boots, that is, that was on swelled ankles.”

“Is it necessary to have experience?” she returned impatiently.

“Why, I reckon not, ma’am.” He knelt beside her and grasped the boot, giving it a gentle tug. She cried out with pain and he dropped the boot and made a grimace of sympathy. “I didn’t mean to hurt you, ma’am.”

“I know you didn’t”—peevishly. “Oh,” she added as he took the boot in hand again, this time giving it a slight twist; “men are *such* awkward creatures!”

“Why, I reckon they are, ma’am. That is, one, in particular. There’s times when I can’t get my own boots on.” He grinned, and she looked icily at him.

“Get hold of it just above the ankle, please,” she instructed evenly and drew the hem of her skirt tightly. “There!” she added as he seized the limb gingerly, “now pull!”

He did as he had been bidden. She shrieked in agony and jerked the foot away, and he stood up, his face reflecting some of the pain and misery that shone in hers.

“It’s awful, ma’am,” he sympathized. “Over at the Diamond H, one of the boys got his leg broke, last year, ridin’ an outlaw, or tryin’ to ride him, which ain’t

quite the same thing—an' we had to get his boot off before we could set the break. Why, ma'am; we had to set on his head to keep him from scarin' all the cattle off the range, with his screechin'."

She looked at him with eyes that told him plainly that no one was going to sit on *her* head—and that she would "screech" if she chose. And then she spoke to him with bitter sarcasm:

"Perhaps if you *tried* to do something, instead of standing there, telling me something that happened *ages* ago, I wouldn't have to sit here and endure this awful m-m-misery!"

The break in her voice brought him on his knees at her side. "Why, I reckon it *must* hurt like the devil, ma'am." He looked around helplessly.

"Haven't you got something that you might take it off with?" she demanded tearfully. "Haven't you got a knife?"

He reddened guiltily. "I clean forgot it ma'am." He laughed with embarrassment. "I expect I'd never do for a doctor, ma'am; I'm so excited an' forgetful. An' I recollect, now that you mention it, that we had to cut Hiller's boot off. That was the man I was tellin' you about. He—"

"Oh, dear," she said with heavy resignation, "I suppose you simply *must* talk! Do you *like* to see me suffer?"

"Why, shucks, I feel awful sorry for you, ma'am. I'll sure hurry."

While he had been speaking he had drawn out his knife, and with as much delicacy as the circumstances would permit, he accomplished the destruction of the boot. Then, after many admonitions for him to be careful, and numerous sharp intakings of her breath, the boot was withdrawn, showing her stockinged foot, puffed to abnormal proportions. She looked at it askance.

"Do you think it is b-broken?" she asked him, dreading.

He grasped it tenderly, discovered that the ankle moved freely, and after pressing it in several places, looked up at her.

"I don't think it's broke, ma'am. It's a bad sprain though, I reckon. I reckon it ought to be rubbed—so's to bring back the blood that couldn't get in while the boot was on."

The foot was rubbed, he having drawn off the stocking with as much delicacy as he had exhibited in taking off the boot. And then while Randerson considerately

withdrew under pretense of looking at Patches, the stocking was put on again. When he came back it was to be met with a request:

“Won’t you please find my pony and bring him back?”

“Why, sure, ma’am.” He started again for Patches, but halted and looked back at her. “You won’t be scared again?”

“No,” she said. And then: “But you’ll hurry, won’t you?”

“I reckon.” He was in the saddle quickly, loping Patches to the crest of a hill near by in hopes of getting a view of the recreant pony. He got a glimpse of it, far back on the plains near some timber, and he was about to shout the news to Ruth, who was watching him intently, when he thought better of the notion and shut his lips.

Urging Patches forward, he rode toward Ruth’s pony at a moderate pace. Three times during the ride he looked back. Twice he was able to see Ruth, but the third time he had swerved so that some bushes concealed him from her. He was forced to swerve still further to come up with the pony, and he noted that Ruth would never have been able to see her pony from her position.

It was more than a mile to where the animal stood, and curiously, as though to make amends for his previous bad behavior to Ruth, he came trotting forward to Randerson, whinnying gently.

Randerson seized the bridle, and grinned at the animal.

“I reckon I ought to lam you a-plenty, you miserable deserter,” he said severely, “runnin’ away from your mistress that-a-way. Is that the way for a respectable horse to do? You’ve got her all nervous an’ upset—an’ she sure roasted me. Do you reckon there’s any punishment that’d fit what you done? Well, I reckon! You come along with me!”

Leading the animal, he rode Patches to the edge of the timber. There, unbuckling one end of the reins from the bit ring, he doubled them, passed them through a gnarled root, made a firm knot and left the pony tied securely. Then he rode off and looked back, grinning.

“You’re lost, you sufferin’ runaway. Only you don’t know it.”

He loped Patches away and made a wide detour of the mesa, making sure that he appeared often on the sky line, so that he would be seen by Ruth. At the end of half an hour he rode back to where the girl was standing, watching him. He dismounted and approached her, standing before her, his expression one of grave

worry.

“That outlaw of yours ain’t anywhere in sight, ma’am,” he said. “I reckon he’s stampeded back to the ranchhouse. You sure you ain’t seen him go past here?”

“No,” she said, “unless he went way around, just after it got dark.”

“I reckon that’s what he must have done. Some horses is plumb mean. But you can’t walk, you know,” he added after a silence; “I reckon you’ll have to ride Patches.”

“You would have to walk, then,” she objected. “And that wouldn’t be fair!”

“Walkin’ wouldn’t bother me, ma’am.” He got Patches and led him closer. She looked at the animal, speculatively.

“Don’t you think he could carry both of us?” she asked.

He scrutinized Patches judicially. A light, which she did not see, leaped into his eyes.

“Why, I didn’t think of that. I reckon he could, ma’am. Anyway, we can try it, if you want to.”

He led Patches still closer. Then, with much care, he lifted Ruth and placed her in the saddle, mounting behind her. Patches moved off.

After a silence which might have lasted while they rode a mile, Ruth spoke.

“My ankle feels very much easier.”

“I’m glad of that, ma’am.”

“Randerson,” she said, after they had gone on a little ways further; “I beg your pardon for speaking to you the way I did, back there. But my foot *did* hurt terribly.”

“Why, sure. I expect I deserved to get roasted.”

Again there was a silence. Ruth seemed to be thinking deeply. At a distance that he tried to keep respectful, Randerson watched her, with worshipful admiration, noting the graceful disorder of her hair, the wisps at the nape of her neck. The delicate charm of her made him thrill with the instinct of protection. So strong was this feeling that when he thought of her pony, back at the timber, guilt ceased to bother him.

Ruth related to him the conversation she had overheard between Chavis and Kester, and he smiled understandingly at her.

“Do you reckon you feel as tender toward them now as you did before you found that out?”

“I don’t know,” she replied. “It made me angry to hear them talk like that. But as for hanging them—” She shivered. “There were times, tonight, though, when I thought hanging would be too good for them,” she confessed.

“You’ll shape up real western—give you time,” he assured. “You’ll be ready to take your own part, without dependin’ on laws to do it for you—laws that don’t reach far enough.”

“I don’t think I shall ever get your viewpoint,” she declared.

“Well,” he said, “Pickett was bound to try to get me. Do you think that if I’d gone to the sheriff at Las Vegas, an’ told him about Pickett, he’d have done anything but poke fun at me? An’ that word would have gone all over the country—that I was scared of Pickett—an’ I’d have had to pull my freight. I had to stand my ground, ma’am. Mebbe I’d have been a hero if I’d have let him shoot me, but I wouldn’t have been here any more to know about it. An’ I’m plumb satisfied to be here, ma’am.”

“How did you come to hear about me not getting home?” she asked.

“I’d rode in to see Catherson. I couldn’t see him—because he wasn’t there. Then I come on over to the ranchhouse, an’ Uncle Jepson told me about you not comin’ in.”

“Was Mr. Masten at the ranchhouse?”

He hesitated. Then he spoke slowly. “I didn’t see him there, ma’am.”

She evidently wondered why it had not been Masten that had come for her.

They were near the house when she spoke again:

“Did you have an accident today, Randerson?”

“Why, ma’am?” he asked to gain time, for he knew that the moonlight had been strong enough, and that he had been close enough to her, to permit her to see.

“Your face has big, ugly, red marks on it, and the skin on your knuckles is all torn,” she said.

“Patches throwed me twice, comin’ after you, ma’am,” he lied. “I plowed up the ground considerable. I’ve never knowed Patches to be so unreliable.”

She turned in the saddle and looked full at him. “That is strange,” she said,

looking ahead again. “The men have told me that you are a wonderful horseman.”

“The men was stretchin’ the truth, I reckon,” he said lightly.

“Anyway,” she returned earnestly; “I thank you very much for coming for me.”

She said nothing more to him until he helped her down at the edge of the porch at the ranchhouse. And then, while Uncle Jepson and Aunt Martha were talking and laughing with pleasure at her return, she found time to say, softly to him:

“I really don’t blame you so much—about Pickett. I suppose it was necessary.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” he said gratefully.

He helped her inside, where the glare of the kerosene lamps fell upon him. He saw Uncle Jepson looking at him searchingly; and he caught Ruth’s quick, low question to Aunt Martha, as he was letting her gently down in a chair:

“Where is Willard?”

“He came in shortly after dark,” Aunt Martha told her. “Jep was talking to him, outside. He left a note for you. He told Jep that he was going over to Lazette for a couple of weeks, my dear.”

Randerson saw Ruth’s frown. He also saw Aunt Martha looking intently through her glasses at the bruises on his face.

“Why, boy,” she exclaimed, “what has happened to you?”

Randerson reddened. It was going to be harder for him to lie to Aunt Martha than to Ruth. But Ruth saved him the trouble.

“Randerson was thrown twice, riding out to get me,” she explained.

“Throwed twice, eh?” said Uncle Jepson to Randerson, when a few minutes later he followed the range boss out on the porch. He grinned at Randerson suspiciously. “Throwed twice, eh?” he repeated. “Masten’s face looks like some one had danced a jig on it. Huh! I cal’late that if you was throwed twice, Masten’s horse must have *drug* him!”

“You ain’t tellin’ *her*!” suggested Randerson.

“You tell her anything *you* want to tell her, my boy,” whispered Uncle Jepson. “An’ if I don’t miss my reckonin’, she’ll *listen* to you, some day.”

CHAPTER XV

THE RUNAWAY COMES HOME

Masten's note to Ruth contained merely the information that he was going to Lazette, and that possibly he might not return for two weeks. He hinted that he would probably be called upon to go to Santa Fe on business, but if so he would apprise her of that by messenger. He gave no reason for his sudden leave-taking, or no explanation of his breach of courtesy in not waiting to see her personally. The tone of the note did not please Ruth. It had evidently been written hurriedly, on a sheet of paper torn from a pocket notebook. That night she studied it long, by the light from the kerosene lamp in her room, and finally crumpled it up and threw it from her. Then she sat for another long interval, her elbows on the top of the little stand that she used as a dressing table, her chin in her hands, staring with unseeing eyes into a mirror in front of her—or rather, at two faces that seemed to be reflected in the glass: Masten's and Randerson's.

Next morning she got downstairs late, to find breakfast over and Randerson gone. Later in the morning she saw Uncle Jepson waving a hand to her from the corral, and she ran down there, to find her pony standing outside the fence, meek and docile. The bridle rein, knotted and broken, dangled in the dust at his head.

She took up the end with the knot in it.

"He's been tied!" she exclaimed. She showed Uncle Jepson the slip knot. And then she became aware of Aunt Martha standing beside her, and she showed it to her also. And then she saw a soiled blue neckerchief twisted and curled in the knot, and she examined it with wide eyes.

"Why, it's Randerson's!" she declared, in astonishment. "How on earth did it get here?"

And now her face crimsoned, for illumination had come to her. She placed the neckerchief behind her, with a quick hope that her relatives had not seen it, nor

had paid any attention to her exclamation. But she saw Uncle Jepson grin broadly, and her face grew redder with his words:

“I cal’late the man who lost that blue bandanna wasn’t a tol’able piece away when that knot was tied.”

“Jep Coakley, you mind your own business!” rebuked Aunt Martha sharply, looking severely at Uncle Jepson over the rims of her spectacles.

“Don’t you mind him, honey,” she consoled, putting an arm around the girl as Uncle Jepson went away, chuckling. “Why, girl,” she went on, smiling at Ruth’s crimson face, “you don’t blame him, do you? If you don’t know he likes you, you’ve been blind to what I’ve been seeing for many days. Never mention to him that you know he tied the pony, dear. For he’s a gentleman, in spite of that.”

And obediently, though with cheeks that reddened many times during the process, and laughter that rippled through her lips occasionally, Ruth washed the neckerchief, folded it, to make creases like those which would have been in it had its owner been wearing it, then crumpled it, and stole to Randerson’s room when she was sure that he was not there, and placed the neckerchief where its owner would be sure to find it.

She was filled with a delightful dread against the day when he would discover it, for she felt that he might remember where he had lost it, and thus become convinced that she knew of his duplicity. But many days passed and he did not come in. She did not know that on his way out to join the outfit the next morning he had noticed that he had lost the neckerchief, and that he remembered it flapping loose around his neck when he had gone toward the timber edge for her pony. He had searched long for it, without success, of course, and had finally ridden away, shaking his head, deeply puzzled over its disappearance.

Nor did Ruth know that on the day she had discovered the neckerchief dangling from the knot, Aunt Martha had spoken again to Uncle Jep concerning it.

“Jep Coakley,” she said earnestly; “you like your joke, as well as any man. But if I ever hear of you mentioning anything to Randerson about that bandanna, I’ll tweak your nose as sure as you’re alive!”

CHAPTER XVI

TWO ARE TAUGHT LESSONS

There was one other thing that Ruth did not know—the rage that dwelt in Randerson's heart against Chavis and Kester. He had shown no indication of it when she had related to him the story of her adventure with the men, nor did he mention it to any of his associates. There had been a time in his life when he would have brought the men to a quick and final accounting, for their offense was one that the laws governing human conduct in this country would not condone; but he was not the man he had been before the coming of Ruth; her views on the taking of human life—no matter what the provocation—were barriers that effectively restrained his desires.

Yet he could not permit Kester and Chavis to think they could repeat the offense with impunity. That would be an indication of impotence, of servile yielding to the feminine edict that had already gone forth, and behind which Chavis and his men were even now hiding—the decree of the Flying W owner that there should be no taking of human life. His lips twisted crookedly as on the morning of the day following his adventure with Ruth and the recreant pony he mounted his own animal and rode away from the outfit without telling any of them where he was going. Two or three hours later, in a little basin near the plateau where Ruth had overheard the men talking, Chavis and Kester were watching the crooked smile; their own faces as pale as Randerson's, their breath swelling their lungs as the threat of impending violence assailed them; their muscles rippling and cringing in momentary expectation of the rapid movement they expected—and dreaded; their hearts laboring and pounding. For they saw in the face of this man who had brought his pony to a halt within ten feet of them a decision to adhere to the principles that had governed him all his days, and they knew that a woman's order would not stay the retributive impulse that was gleaming in his eyes.

“We’ll get to an understandin’ before we quit here,” he said, his cold, alert eyes roving over them. “You’ve made one break, an’ you’re gettin’ out of it because my boss ain’t dead stuck on attendin’ funerals. I reckon you know I ain’t got no such nice scruples, an’ a funeral more or less won’t set so awful heavy on my conscience. There’s goin’ to be more mourners requisitioned in this country damned sudden if women ain’t goin’ to be allowed range rights. I ain’t passin’ around no more warnin’s, an’ you two is talkin’ mighty sudden or the mourners will be yowlin’. What’s the verdict?”

Chavis sighed. “We wasn’t meanin’ no harm,” he apologized, some color coming into his face again.

“An’ you?” Randerson’s level look confused Kester.

“I ain’t travelin’ that trail no more,” he promised, his eyes shifting. He knew as well as Chavis that it was the only way. A word, spoken with a hint of belligerence, a single hostile movement, would have precipitated the clash they knew Randerson had come to force—a clash which they knew would end badly for them. For Randerson had chosen his position when halting Patches—it was strategic, and they knew his fingers were itching for the feel of his guns.

They saw the crooked smile fade from his lips; they curved with cold, amused contempt.

“Not runnin’ no risks to speak of, eh?” he drawled. “Well, get goin’!” He lounged in the saddle, watching them as they rode away, not looking back. When they reached the far slope of the basin he turned Patches and sniffed disgustedly. Five minutes later he was at the crest of the back slope, riding toward the outfit, miles away.

It was an hour later that he observed a moving spot on the sky line. The distance was great, but something familiar in the lines of the figure—when he presently got near enough to see that the blot was a pony and rider—made his blood leap with eager anticipation; and he spoke sharply to Patches, sending him forward at a brisk lope.

He had seen some cattle near the rider; he had passed them earlier in the morning—lean, gaunt range steers that would bother a fast pony in a run if thoroughly aroused.

He saw that the rider had halted very close to one of the steers, and a look of concern flashed into his eyes.

“She oughtn’t to do that!” he muttered. Unconsciously, his spurs touched

Patches' flanks, and the little animal quickened his pace.

Randerson did not remove his gaze from the distant horse and rider. He rode for a quarter of a mile in silence, his muscles slowly tensing as he watched.

"What's she doin' now?" he demanded of the engulfing space, as he saw the rider swing around in the saddle.

"Hell!" he snapped an instant later; "she's gettin' off her horse!" He raised his voice in a shout, that fell flat and futile on the dead desert air, and he leaned forward in the saddle and drove the spurs deep as he saw the range steer nearest the rider raise its head inquiringly and look toward the rider—for she had dismounted and was walking away from her horse at an angle that would take her very close to the steer.

Patches was running now, with the cat-like leaps peculiar to him, and his rider was urging him on with voice and spur and hand, his teeth set, his eyes burning with anxiety.

But the girl had not seen him. She was still moving away from her horse; too far away from it to return if the steer decided to charge her, and Randerson was still fully half a mile distant.

He groaned audibly as he saw the steer take a few tentative steps toward her, his head raised, tail erect, his long horns glinting in the white sunlight. Randerson knew the signs.

"Good God!" he whispered; "can't she see what that steer is up to?"

It seemed she did, for she had halted and was facing the animal. For an instant there was no movement in the vast realm of space except the terrific thunder of Patches' hoofs as they spurned the hard alkali level over which he was running; the squeaking protests of the saddle leather, and Randerson's low voice as he coaxed the pony to greater speed. But Patches had reached the limit of effort, was giving his rider his last ounce of strength, and he closed the gap between himself and the girl with whirlwind rapidity.

But it seemed he would be too late. The girl had sensed her danger. She had caught the stealthy movement of the steer; she had glimpsed the unmistakable malignance of his blood-shot eyes, and had stood for an instant in the grip of a dumb, paralyzing terror. She had dismounted to gather some yellow blossoms of soap-weed that had looked particularly inviting from the saddle, and too late she had become aware of the belligerent actions of the steer.

She realized now that she was too far from her pony to reach it in case the steer attacked her, but in the hope of gaining a few steps before the charge came she backed slowly, edging sidelong toward the pony.

She gained a considerable distance in this manner, for during the first few seconds of the movement the steer seemed uncertain and stood, swinging its head from side to side, pawing the sand vigorously.

The girl was thankful for the short respite, and she made the most of it. She had retreated perhaps twenty-five or thirty feet when the steer charged, bolting toward her with lowered head.

She had gone perhaps thirty or forty feet when Patches reached the scene. The girl saw the blur he made as he flashed past her—he had cut between her and the steer—so close to her that the thunder of his hoofs roared deafening in her ears, and the wind from his passing almost drew her off her balance as amazed, stunned, nerveless, she halted. She caught a glimpse of Randerson's profile as he swept into a circle and threw his rope. There must be no missing—there was none. The sinuous loop went out, fell over the steer's head. Thereafter there was a smother of dust in which the girl could see some wildly waving limbs. Outside of the smother she saw the pony swing off for a short distance and stiffen its legs. The rope attached to the pommel of the saddle grew taut as a bow string; there was an instant of strained suspense during which the pony's back arched until the girl thought it must surely break. It was over in an instant, though every detail was vividly impressed upon the girl's mind. For the cold terror that had seized her had fled with the appearance of Patches—she knew there could be no danger to her after that.

She watched the steer fall. He went down heavily, the impetus of his charge proving his undoing; he struck heavily on head and shoulder, grunting dismally, his hind quarters rising in the air, balancing there for an infinitesimal space and then following his head.

The rope stretched tighter; the girl saw Patches putting a steady pull on it. The loop had fallen around the steer's neck; she heard the animal cough for breath once, then its breath was cut off.

In this minute the girl's chief emotion was one of admiration for the pony. How accurate its movements in this crisis! How unerring its judgment! For though no word had been spoken—at least the girl heard none—the pony kept the rope taut, bracing against its burden as Randerson slid out of the saddle.

The girl's interest left the pony and centered on its rider. Randerson was running

toward the fallen steer, and though Ruth had witnessed this operation a number of times since her coming to the Flying W, she had never watched it with quite the interest with which she watched it now. It was all intensely personal.

Randerson had drawn a short piece of rope from a loop on the saddle when he had dismounted. It dangled from his hand as he ran toward the steer. In an instant he was bending over the beast, working at its hoofs, drawing the forehoofs and one hind hoof together, lashing them fast, twining the rope in a curious knot that, the girl knew from experience, would hold indefinitely.

Randerson straightened when his work was finished, and looked at Ruth. The girl saw that his face was chalk white. But his voice was sharp, and it rang like the beat of a hammer upon metal:

“Get on your horse!”

There was no refusing that voice, and Ruth turned and ran toward her pony, with something of the confusion and guilt that overtakes a recreant child scolded by its parent. She was scarcely in the saddle when she turned to watch Randerson.

He was pulling the loop from the steer’s head. He coiled it, with much deliberation, returned to Patches and hung the rope from its hook. Then he walked slowly back to the steer.

The latter had been choked to unconsciousness, but was now reviving. With a quick jerk Randerson removed the rope from its hoofs, retreating to Patches and swinging into the saddle, watching the movements of the steer.

The steer had got to its feet and stood with legs braced in sharp outward angles, trembling, its great head rolling from side to side, lowered almost to the dust, snorting breath into its lungs.

The girl was fascinated, but she heard Randerson’s voice again, flung at her this time:

“Get away from here—quick!”

She jerked on the reins, and the pony, wise with the wisdom of experience, knowing the danger that portended, bolted quickly, carrying her some distance before she succeeded in halting him.

When she turned to look back, there was a dust cloud near the spot where the steer had lain. In the cloud she saw the steer, Patches, and Randerson. Patches and the steer were running—Patches slightly in advance. The pony was racing, dodging to the right and left, pursuing a zig-zag course that kept the steer

bothered.

As the girl watched she found a vicious rage stealing over her, directed against the steer. Why didn't Randerson kill the beast, instead of running from it in that fashion? Somehow, she did not like to see Randerson in that role; it was far from heroic—it flavored of panic; it made her think of the panic that had gripped her a few minutes before, when she had retreated from the steer.

She watched the queer race go on for a few minutes, and then she saw an exhibition of roping that made her gasp. From a point fifteen or twenty feet in advance of the steer, Randerson threw his rope. He had twisted in the saddle, and he gave the lariat a quick flirt, the loop running out perpendicularly, like a rolling hoop, and not more than a foot from the ground, writhing, undulating, the circle constricting quickly, sinuously. The girl saw the loop topple as it neared the steer—it was much like the motion of a hoop falling. It met one of the steer's hoofs as it was flung outward; it grew taut; the rope straightened and Patches swung off to the right at an acute angle. He did not brace his legs, this time. This was a different game. He merely halted, turning his head and watching, with a well-I've-done-it-now expression of the eyes that would have brought a smile to the girl's face at any other time.

Again it was over in an instant; for the second time the steer turned a somersault. Again there followed a space during which there was no movement.

Then Randerson slacked the rope. It seemed to Ruth that Patches did this of his own accord. The steer scrambled to its feet, hesitated an instant, and then lunged furiously toward the tormenting horse and rider.

Patches snorted; Ruth was certain it was with disgust. He leaped—again the girl thought Randerson had no hand in the movement—directly toward the enraged steer, veering sharply as he neared it, and passing to its rear. For the third time the rope grew taut, and this time the pony braced itself and the steer went down with a thud that carried clearly and distinctly to the girl.

She thought the beast must be fatally injured, and felt that it richly deserved its fate. But after a period, during which Patches wheeled to face the beast, Randerson grinning coldly at it, the steer again scrambled to its feet.

This time it stood motionless, merely trembling a little. The fear of the rope had seized it; this man-made instrument was a thing that could not be successfully fought. That, it seemed to the girl, was the lesson the steer had been taught from its experience. That it was the lesson Randerson had set out to teach the animal, the girl was certain. It explained Randerson's seeming panic; it made the girl

accuse herself sharply for doubting him.

She watched the scene to its conclusion. The steer started off, shaking its head from side to side. Plainly, it wanted no more of this sort of work; the fight had all been taken out of it. Again the pony stiffened, and again the steer went down with a thud. This time, while it struggled on the ground, Randerson gave the rope a quick flirt, making undulation that ran from his hand to the loop around the steer's leg, loosening it. And when the beast again scrambled to its feet it trotted off, free, head and tail in the air, grunting with relief.

A few minutes later Randerson loped Patches toward her, coiling his rope, a grin on his face. He stopped before her, and his grin broadened.

"Range steers are sort of peculiar, ma'am," he said gently. "They're raised like that. They don't ever see no man around them unless he's forkin' his pony. No cowpuncher with any sense goes to hoofin' it around a range steer—it ain't accordin' to the rules. Your range steer ain't used to seein' a man walkin'. On his pony he's safe—nine times out of ten. The other time a range steer will tackle a rider that goes to monkeyin' around him promiscuous. But they have to be taught manners, ma'am—the same as human bein's. That scalawag will recognize the rope now, ma'am, the same as a human outlaw will recognize the rope—or the law. Of course both will be outlaws when there's no rope or no law around, but —Why, ma'am," he laughed—"I'm gettin' right clever at workin' my jaw, ain't I? Are you headin' back to the Flyin' W? Because if you are, I'd be sort of glad to go along with you—if you'll promise you won't go to galivantin' around the country on foot no more. Not that *that* steer will tackle you again, ma'am—he's been taught *his* lesson. But there's others."

She laughed and thanked him. As they rode she considered his subtle reference to the law and the rope, and wondered if it carried any personal significance to anyone. Twice she looked at him for evidence of that, but could gain nothing from his face—suffused with quiet satisfaction.

CHAPTER XVII

THE TARGET

Earlier in the morning, Ruth had watched Uncle Jepson and Aunt Martha ride away in the buckboard toward Lazette. She had stood on the porch, following them with her eyes until the buckboard had grown dim in her vision—a mere speck crawling over a sun-scorched earth, under a clear white sky in which swam a sun that for days had been blighting growing things. But on the porch of the ranchhouse it was cool.

Ruth was not cool. When the buckboard had finally vanished into the distance, with nothing left of it but a thin dust cloud that spread and disintegrated and at last settled down, Ruth walked to a rocker on the porch and sank into it, her face flushed, her eyes glowing with eager expectancy.

A few days before, while rummaging in a wooden box which had been the property of her uncle, William Harkness, she had come upon another box, considerably smaller, filled with cartridges. She had examined them thoughtfully, and at last, with much care and trepidation, had taken one of them, found Uncle Harkness' big pistol, removed the cylinder and slipped the cartridge into one of the chambers. It had fitted perfectly. Thereafter she had yielded to another period of thoughtfulness—longer this time.

A decision had resulted from those periods, for the day before, when a puncher had come in from the outfit, on an errand, she had told him to send Randerson in to the ranchhouse to her, on the following day. And she was expecting him now.

She had tried to dissuade Uncle Jep and Aunt Martha from making the trip to Lazette today, but, for reasons which she would not have admitted—and did not admit, even to herself—she had not argued very strongly. And she had watched them go with mingled regret and satisfaction; two emotions that persisted in battling within her until they brought the disquiet that had flushed her cheeks.

It was an hour before Randerson rode up to the edge of the porch, and when Patches came to a halt, and her range boss sat loosely in the saddle, looking down at her, she was composed, even though her cheeks were still a little red.

“You sent for me, ma’am.”

It was the employee speaking to his “boss.” He was not using the incident of a few nights before to establish familiarity between them; his voice was low, deferential. But Willard Masten’s voice had never made her feel quite as she felt at this moment.

“Yes, I sent for you,” she said, smiling calmly—trying to seem the employer but getting something into her voice which would not properly belong there under those circumstances. She told herself it was not pleasure—but she saw his eyes flash. “I have found some cartridges, and I want you to teach me how to shoot.”

He looked at her with eyes that narrowed with amusement, after a quick glint of surprise.

“I reckon I c’n teach you. Are you figurin’ that there’s some one in this country that you don’t want here any more?”

“No,” she said; “I don’t expect to shoot anybody. But I have decided that as long as I have made up my mind to stay here and run the Flying W, I may as well learn to be able to protect myself—if occasion arises.”

“That’s a heap sensible. You c’n never tell when you’ll have to do some shootin’ out here. Not at men, especial,” he grinned, “but you’ll run across things—a wolf, mebbe, that’ll get fresh with you, or a sneakin’ coyote that’ll kind of make the hair raise on the back of your neck, not because you’re scared of him, but because you know his mean tricks an’ don’t admire them, or a wildcat, or a hydrophobia polecat, ma’am,” he said, with slightly reddening cheeks; “but mostly, ma’am, I reckon you’ll like shootin’ at side-winders best. Sometimes they get mighty full of fight, ma’am—when it’s pretty hot.”

“How long will it take you to teach me to shoot?” she asked.

“That depends, ma’am. I reckon I could show you how to pull the trigger in a jiffy. That would be a certain kind of shootin’. But as for showin’ you how to hit somethin’ you shoot at, why, that’s a little different. I’ve knowed men that practiced shootin’ for years, ma’am, an’ they couldn’t hit a barn if they was inside of it. There’s others that can hit most anything, right handy. They say it’s all in the eye an’ the nerves, ma’am—whatever nerves are.”

“You haven’t any nerves, I suppose, or you wouldn’t speak of them that way.”

“If you mean that I go to hollerin’ an’ jumpin’ around when somethin’ happens, why I ain’t got any. But I’ve seen folks with nerves, ma’am.”

He was looking directly at her when he spoke, his gaze apparently without subtlety. But she detected a gleam that seemed far back in his eyes, and she knew that he referred to her actions of the other night.

She blushed. “I didn’t think you would remind me of *that*,” she said.

“Why, I didn’t, ma’am. I didn’t mention any names. But of course, a woman’s got nerves; they can’t help it.”

“Of course men are superior,” she taunted.

She resisted an inclination to laugh, for she was rather astonished to discover that man’s disposition to boast was present in this son of the wilderness. Also, she was a little disappointed in him.

But she saw him redden.

“I ain’t braggin’, ma’am. Take them on an average, an’ I reckon woman has got as much grit as men. But they show it different. They’re quicker to imagine things than men. That makes them see things where there ain’t anything to see. A man’s mother is always a woman, ma’am, an’ if he’s got any grit in him he owes a lot of it to her. I reckon I owe more to my mother than to my father.”

His gaze was momentarily somber, and she felt a quick, new interest in him. Or had she felt this interest all along—a desire to learn something more of him than he had expressed?

“You might get off your horse and sit in the shade for a minute. It is hot, you’ve had a long ride, and I am not quite ready to begin shooting,” she invited.

He got off Patches, led him to the shade of the house, hitched him, and then returned to the porch, taking a chair near her.

“Aunt Martha says you were born here,” Ruth said. “Have you always been a cowboy?”

A flash that came into his eyes was concealed by a turn of the head. So she had asked Aunt Martha about him.

“I don’t remember ever bein’ anything else. As far back as I c’n recollect, there’s been cows hangin’ around.”

“Have you traveled any?”

“To Denver, Frisco, Kansas City. I was in Utah, once, lookin’ over the Mormons. They’re a curious lot, ma’am. I never could see what on earth a man wanted half a dozen wives for. One can manage a man right clever. But half a dozen! Why, they’d be pullin’ one another’s hair out, fightin’ over him! One would be wantin’ him to do one thing, an’ another would be wantin’ him to do another. An’ between them, the man would be goin’ off to drown himself.”

“But a woman doesn’t always manage her husband,” she defended.

“Don’t she, ma’am?” he said gently, no guile in his eyes. “Why, all the husbands I’ve seen seemed to be pretty well managed. You can see samples of it every day, ma’am, if you look around. Young fellows that have acted pretty wild when they was single, always sort of steady down when they’re hooked into double harness. They go to actin’ quiet an’ subdued-like—like they’d lost all interest in life. I reckon it must be their wives managin’ them, ma’am.”

“It’s a pity, isn’t it?” she said, her chin lifting.

“The men seem to like it, ma’am. Every day there’s new ones makin’ contracts for managers.”

“I suppose *you* will never sacrifice yourself?” she asked challengingly.

“It ain’t time, yet, ma’am,” he returned, looking straight at her, his eyes narrowed, with little wrinkles in the corners. “I’m waitin’ for you to tell Masten that you don’t want to manage him.”

“We won’t talk about that, please,” she said coldly.

“Then we won’t, ma’am.”

She sat looking at him, trying to be coldly critical, but not succeeding very well. She was trying to show him that there was small hope of him ever realizing his desire to have her “manage” him, but she felt that she did not succeed in that very well either. Perplexity came into her eyes as she watched him.

“Why is it that you don’t like Willard Masten?” she asked at length. “Why is it that he doesn’t like you?”

His face sobered. “I don’t recollect to have said anything about Masten, ma’am,” he said.

“But you don’t like him, do you?”

A direct answer was required. “No,” he said simply.

“Why?” she persisted.

“I reckon mebbe you’d better ask Masten,” he returned, his voice expressionless. Then he looked at her with an amused grin. “If it’s goin’ to take you any time to learn to shoot, I reckon we’d better begin.”

She got up, went into the house for the pistol and cartridges, and came out again, the weapon dangling from her hand.

“Shucks!” he said, when he saw the pistol, comparing its huge bulk to the size of the hand holding it, “you’ll never be able to hold it, when it goes off. You ought to have a smaller one.”

“Uncle Jep says this ought to stop anything it hits,” she declared. “That is just what I want it to do. If I shoot anything once, I don’t want to have to shoot again.”

“I reckon you’re right bloodthirsty, ma’am. But I expect it’s so big for you that you won’t be able to hit anything.”

“I’ll show you,” she said, confidently. “Where shall we go to shoot? We shall have to have a target, I suppose?”

“Not a movin’ one,” he said gleefully. “An’ I ain’t aimin’ to hold it for you!”

“Wait until you are asked,” she retorted, defiantly. “Perhaps I may be a better shot than you think!”

“I hope so, ma’am.”

She looked resentfully at him, but followed him as he went out near the pasture fence, taking with him a soap box that he found near a shed, and standing it up behind a post, first making sure there were no cattle within range in the direction that the bullets would take. Then he stepped off twenty paces, and when she joined him he took the pistol from her hands and loaded it from the box. He watched her narrowly as she took it, and she saw the concern in his eyes.

“Oh, I have used a revolver before,” she told him, “not so large a one as this, of course. But I know better than to point it at myself.”

“I see you do, ma’am.” His hand went out quickly and closed over hers, for she had been directing the muzzle of the weapon fairly at his chest. “You ought never point it at anybody that you don’t want to shoot,” he remonstrated gently.

He showed her how to hold the weapon, told her to stand sideways to the target, with her right arm extended and rigid, level with the shoulder.

He took some time at this; three times after she extended her arm he seemed to find it necessary to take hold of the arm to rearrange its position, lingering long at this work, and squeezing the pistol hand a little too tightly, she thought.

“Don’t go to pullin’ the trigger too fast or too hard,” he warned; “a little time for the first shot will save you shootin’ again, mebbe—until you get used to it. She’ll kick some, but you’ll get onto that pretty quick.”

She pulled the trigger, and the muzzle of the pistol flew upward.

“I reckon that target feels pretty safe, ma’am,” he said dryly. “But that buzzard up there will be pullin’ his freight—if he’s got any sense.”

She fired again, her lips compressed determinedly. At the report a splinter of wood flew from the top of the post. She looked at him with an exultant smile.

“That’s better,” he told her, grinning; “you’ll be hittin’ the soap box, next.”

She did hit it at the fourth attempt, and her joy was great.

For an hour she practiced, using many cartridges, reveling in this new pastime. She hit the target often, and toward the end she gained such confidence and proficiency that her eyes glowed proudly. Then, growing tired, she invited him to the porch again, and until near noon they talked of guns and shooting.

Her interest in him had grown. His interest in her had always been deep, and the constraint that had been between them no longer existed.

At noon she went into the house and prepared luncheon, leaving him sitting on the porch alone. When she called Randerson in, and he took a chair across from her, she felt a distinct embarrassment. It was not because she was there alone with him, for he had a right to be there; he was her range boss and his quarters were in the house; he was an employee, and no conventions were being violated. But the embarrassment was there.

Did Randerson suspect her interest in him? That question assailed her. She studied him, and was uncertain. For his manner had not changed. He was still quiet, thoughtful, polite, still deferential and natural, with a quaintness of speech and a simplicity that had gripped her, that held her captive.

But her embarrassment fled as the meal progressed. She forgot it in her interest for him. She questioned him again; he answered frankly. And through her questions she learned much of his past life, of his hopes and ambitions. They were as simple and natural as himself.

“I’ve been savin’ my money, ma’am,” he told her. “I’m goin’ to own a ranch of my own, some day. There’s fellows that blow in all their wages in town, not thinkin’ of tomorrow. But I quit that, quite a while ago. I’m lookin’ out for tomorrow. It’s curious, ma’am. Fellows will try to get you to squander your money, along with their own, an’ if you don’t, they’ll poke fun at you. But they’ll respect you for not squanderin’ it, like they do. I reckon they know there ain’t any sense to it.” Thus she discovered that there was little frivolity in his make-up, and pleasure stirred her. And then he showed her another side of his character—his respect for public opinion.

“But I ain’t stingy, ma’am. I reckon I’ve proved it. There’s a difference between bein’ careful an’ stingy.”

“How did you prove it?”

He grinned at her. “Why, I ain’t mentionin’,” he said gently.

But she had heard of his generosity—from several of the men, and from Hagar Catherson. She mentally applauded his reticence.

She learned that he had read—more than she would have thought, from his speech—and that he had profited thereby.

“Books give the writer’s opinion of things,” he said. “If you read a thoughtful book, you either agree with the writer, or you don’t, accordin’ to your nature an’ understandin’. None of them get things exactly right, I reckon, for no man can know everything. He’s got to fall down, somewhere. An’ so, when you read a book, you’ve got to do a heap of thinkin’ on your own hook, or else you’ll get mistaken ideas an’ go to gettin’ things mixed up. I like to do my own thinkin’.”

“Are you always right?”

“Bless you, ma’am, no. I’m scarcely ever right. I’ll get to believin’ a thing, an’ then along will come somethin’ else, an’ I’ll have to start all over again. Or, I’ll talk to somebody, an’ find that they’ve got a better way of lookin’ at a thing. I reckon that’s natural.”

They did not go out to shoot again. Instead, they went out on the porch, and there, sitting in the shade, they talked until the sun began to swim low in the sky.

At last he got up, grinning.

“I’ve done a heap of loafin’ today, ma’am. But I’ve certainly enjoyed myself, talkin’ to you. But if you ain’t goin’ to try to hit the target any more, I reckon I’ll be ridin’ back to the outfit.”

She got up, too, and held out her hand to him. “Thank you,” she said. “You have made the day very short for me. It would have been lonesome here, without aunt and uncle.”

“I saw them goin’,” he informed her.

“And,” she continued, smiling, “I am going to ask you to come again, very soon, to teach me more about shooting.”

“Any time, ma’am.” He still held her hand. And now he looked at it with a blush, and dropped it gently. Her face reddened a little too, for now she realized that he had held her hand for quite a while, and she had made no motion to withdraw it. Their eyes met eloquently. The gaze held for an instant, and then both laughed, as though each had seen something in the eyes of the other that had been concealed until this moment. Then Ruth’s drooped. Randerson smiled and stepped off the porch to get his pony.

A little later, after waving his hand to Ruth from a distance, he rode away, his mind active, joy in his heart.

“You’re a knowin’ horse, Patches,” he said confidentially to the pony. “If you are, what do you reckon made her ask so many questions?” He gulped over a thought that came to him.

“She was shootin’ at the target, Patches,” he mused. “But do you reckon she was aimin’ at me?”

CHAPTER XVIII

THE GUNFIGHTER

Red Owen, foreman of the Flying W in place of Tom Chavis, resigned, was stretched out on his blanket, his head propped up with an arm, looking at the lazy, licking flames of the campfire. He was whispering to Bud Taylor, named by Randerson to do duty as straw boss in place of the departed Pickett, and he was referring to a new man of the outfit who had been hired by Randerson about two weeks before because the work seemed to require the services of another man, and he had been the only applicant.

The new man was reclining on the other side of the fire, smoking, paying no attention to any of the others around him. He was listening, though, to the talk, with a sort of detached interest, a half smile on his face, as though his interest were that of scornful amusement.

He was of medium height, slender, dark. He was taciturn to the point of monosyllabic conversation, and the perpetual, smiling sneer on his face had gotten on Red Owen's nerves.

"Since he's joined the outfit, he's opened his yap about three times a day—usual at grub time, when if a man loosens up at all, he'll loosen up then," Red told Taylor, glaring his disapproval. "I've got an idea that I've seen the cuss somewheres before, but I ain't able to place him."

"His mug looks like he was soured on the world—especial himself. If I had a twistin' upper lip like that, I'd sure plant some whiskers on it. A mustache, now, would hide a lot of the hyena in him."

Owen stared meditatively at the new man through the flames. "Yes," he said expressionlessly, "a mustache would make him look a whole lot different." He was straining his mental faculties in an effort to remember a man of his acquaintance who possessed a lower lip like that of the man opposite him, eyes

with the same expression in them, and a nose that was similar. He did not succeed, for memory was laggard, or his imagination was playing him a trick. He had worried over the man's face since the first time he had seen it.

He heaved a deep breath now, and looked perplexedly into the flames. "It's like a word that gits onto the end of your tongue when your brain-box ain't got sense enough to shuck it out," he remarked, lowly. "But I'll git it, some time—if I don't go loco frettin' about it."

"What you figger on gettin'—a new job?" asked Taylor, who had been sinking into a nap.

"Snakes!" sneered Owen.

"Thank yu', I don't want 'em," grinned Taylor with ineffable gentleness, as he again closed his eyes.

Owen surveyed him with cold scorn. Owen's temper, because of his inability to make his memory do his bidding, was sadly out of order. He had been longing for days to make the new man talk, that he might be enabled to sharpen his memory on the man's words.

He studied the man again. He had been studying him all day, while he and some more of the men had worked the cattle out of some timber near the foothills, to the edge of the basin—where they were now camped. But the face was still elusive. If he could only get the man to talking, to watch the working of that lower lip!

His glance roved around the fire. Seven men, besides the cook—asleep under the wagon—and Randerson, were lying around the fire in positions similar to his own. Randerson, the one exception, was seated on the edge of the chuck box, its canvas cover pushed aside, one leg dangling, his elbow resting on the other.

Randerson had been rather silent for the past few days—since he had ridden in to the ranchhouse, and he had been silent tonight, gazing thoughtfully at the fire. Owen's gaze finally centered on the range boss. It rested there for a time, and then roved to the face of the new man—Dorgan, he called himself. Owen started, and his chin went forward, his lips straightening. For he saw Dorgan watching Randerson with a bitter sneer on his lips, his eyes glittering coldly and balefully!

Evil intent was written largely here—evil intent without apparent reason for it. For the man was a stranger here; Randerson had done nothing—to Owen's knowledge—to earn Dorgan's enmity; Randerson did not deliberately make enemies. Owen wondered if Dorgan were one of those misguided persons who

take offense at a look unknowingly given, or a word, spoken during momentary abstraction.

Owen had disliked Dorgan before; he hated him now. For Owen had formed a deep attachment for Randerson. There was a determination in his mind to acquaint the range boss with his suspicions concerning Dorgan's expression, and he got up, after a while, and took a turn around the campfire in the hope of attracting Randerson's attention.

Randerson paid no attention to him. But through the corners of his eyes, as he passed Dorgan, Owen noted that the man flashed a quick, speculative glance at him. But Owen's determination had not lessened. "If he's suspicious of me, he's figgerin' on doin' some dog's trick to Wrecks. I'm puttin' Wrecks wise a few, an' if Dorgan don't like it, he c'n go to blazes!"

He walked to the rear of the chuck box and stood within half a dozen feet of Randerson.

"Figger we've got 'em all out of the timber?" he asked.

There was no answer from Randerson. He seemed absorbed in contemplation of the fire.

"W-r-e-c-k-s!" bawled Owen, in a voice that brought every man of the circle upright, to look wildly around. Taylor was on his feet, his hair bristling, the pallor of mingled fear, astonishment, and disgust on his face. Owen grinned sardonically at him. "Lay down an' turn over, you wall-eyed gorilla!" admonished Owen. He turned his grin on the others. "Can't a man gas to the boss without all you yaps buttin' in?" he demanded.

"What for are you-all a-yowlin' that-a-way for?" questioned a gentle-voiced Southerner reproachfully. "I was just a-dreamin' of rakin' in a big pot in a cyard game. An' now you've done busted it up." He sank disgustedly to his blanket.

"He thinks he's a damned coyote," said a voice.

"You're thinkin' it's a yowl," said another. "But you've got him wrong. He's a jackass, come a-courtin'."

"A man can't get no sleep at all, scarcely," grumbled another.

But Owen had accomplished his purpose. For during the exchange of amenities Randerson had answered him—without turning, though:

"What you wantin', Red?" he said.

“You figger we’ve got ’em all out of the timber?” repeated Owen.

“Shucks.” Randerson’s voice was rich with mirth. “Why, I reckon. Unless you was figgerin’ to use a fine-toothed comb. Why, the boys was all a-nappin’, Red,” he added gently.

He did not look around, so that Owen might give him the warning wink that would have put him on his guard. Owen would have tapped him on the shoulder, but glancing sidelong, he saw Dorgan watching him, and he did not. A ripple of scornful laughter greeted Randerson’s reply, and with a sneering glance around, Owen again sought his blanket.

The reception that had been accorded his effort had made him appear ridiculous, he knew. It would be days before the outfit would cease referring to it.

He stretched himself out on the blanket, but after a few moments of reflection, he sat up, doggedly. He had been imagining all sorts of dire things that Dorgan might have in mind. He had a presentiment of impending trouble, and so deep was it that his forehead was damp with perspiration.

Several of the men, disturbed by Owen, had sat up, and were smoking and talking, and when he heard one of the men, named Blair, refer to a gunman, Watt Kelso, who had formerly graced Lazette with his presence, a light leaped into Owen’s eyes, his teeth came together with a snap, his lips formed into straight lines, and he drew a slow, deep breath. For that was the word that had eluded him—Kelso! And Kelso—how plain and simple it seemed to him now—Kelso was Dorgan, sitting opposite him now! Kelso minus his mustache, looking much different than when he had seen him last, but Kelso, just the same—undeniably Kelso!

So great was Owen’s excitement over this discovery that he was forced to lie down and turn his back to the fire for fear that Kelso might look at him and thus discover that he was recognized.

As he lay there, his brain yielded to a riot of speculation. What was Kelso doing here? Why had he come, minus the mustache, assuming the name, Dorgan? What meant his glances at Randerson?

He provided an explanation presently. Memory drew a vivid picture for him. It showed him a saloon in Lazette, some card tables, with men seated around them. Among the men were Kelso and Randerson. Randerson had been a mere youth. Kelso and Randerson were seated opposite each other, at the same table. Kelso had been losing—was in bad temper. He had charged Randerson with cheating.

There had been words, and then Kelso had essayed to draw his pistol. There was a scuffle, a shot, and Kelso had been led away with a broken arm, broken by Randerson's bullet—blaspheming, and shouting threats at Randerson. And now, after years of waiting, Kelso had come to carry out his threats. It was all plain to Owen, now. And with the knowledge, Owen's excitement abated and he sat up, coldly observant, alert, to watch and listen.

For, while Owen had been thinking, Blair had continued to talk of Watt Kelso, of his deeds and his personality. And Owen saw that for the first time since joining the outfit, Kelso seemed interested in the talk around him. He was watching Blair with narrowed, glittering eyes, in which Owen could see suspicion. It was as though he were wondering if Blair knew that the man of whom he spoke now was at that minute sitting close to him, listening. But presently, Owen became convinced that Kelso thought not, for the suspicion in the gunman's eyes changed to cold, secret amusement.

"Kelso's pulled his freight from Lazette," declared Blair, during the course of his talk. "It's likely he'll drift somewhere where he ain't so well known. It got to be pretty hard pickin' for him around here—folks fight shy of him. But he was sure a killer!"

Blair paused. "I reckon I might mention a man that he didn't kill," said a man who lay near Blair. "An' he wanted to, mighty bad."

"We're wantin' to know," returned Blair. "He must have been a high-grade gun-slinger."

The man nodded toward Randerson, who apparently was not listening to this conversation. There was a subdued chuckle from the man, and grunts of admiration or skepticism from the others. Owen's gaze was fixed on Kelso; he saw the latter's eyes gleam wickedly. Yes, that was it, Owen saw now; the recollection of his defeat at Randerson's hands still rankled in the gunman's mind. Owen saw him glance covertly at Randerson, observed his lips curl.

One of the other men saw the glance also. Not having the knowledge possessed by Owen, the man guffawed loudly, indicating the gunman.

"Dorgan ain't swallerin' your yarn about Randerson puttin' a kink in Kelso," he said to Blair.

Randerson turned, a mild grin on his face. "You fellows quit your soft-soapin' about that run-in with Kelso," he said. "There ain't any compliments due me. I was pretty lucky to get out of that scrape with a whole hide. They told me

Kelso’s gun got snagged when he was tryin’ to draw it.”

So then, Randerson *had* been listening, despite his apparent abstraction. And Owen sat rigid when he saw the gunman look coldly at Randerson and clear his throat.

Plainly, if Kelso had been awaiting an opportunity to take issue with Randerson, it was now!

“Yes,” he said, “you was mighty lucky.”

There was a sneer in the words, and malevolence in the twist of his lips as his voice came through them.

A flat, dead silence followed the speech. Every man held the position in which he had been when the gunman had spoken; nothing but their eyes moved, and these were directed from Randerson to the gunman and back again, questioningly, expectantly. For in the hearts of the men who had been talking until now there had been no thought of discord; they had spoken without rancor. But hostility, cold, premeditated, had been in the new man’s speech.

Randerson moved his head slightly, and he was looking straight into Kelso’s eyes. Kelso had moved a little; he was now sitting on his saddle, having shifted his position when Blair had begun to talk, and the thumb of his right hand was hooked in his cartridge belt just above the holster of his pistol.

Randerson’s face was expressionless. Only his eyes, squinted a little, with a queer, hard glint in them, revealed any emotion that might have affected him over Kelso’s words.

“Yes, Dorgan,” he said gently, “I was mighty lucky.”

Kelso’s lips curved into a slow, contemptuous smile.

“I reckon you’ve always been lucky,” he said.

“Meanin’?”

“Meanin’ that you’ve fell into a soft place here, that you ain’t fit to fill!”

Again a silence fell, dread, premonitory. It was plain to every man of the outfit, awake and listening, that Dorgan had a grievance—whether real or imaginary, it made little difference—and that he was determined to force trouble. Only Owen, apparently, knowing the real state of affairs, knew that the reference to Randerson’s inefficiency was a mere pretext. But that violence, open, deadly, was imminent, foreshadowed by Dorgan’s word, every man knew, and all sat

tense and pale, awaiting Randerson's reply.

They knew, these men, that it was not Randerson's way to force trouble—that he would avoid it if he could do so without dishonor. But could he avoid it now? The eyes that watched him saw that he meant to try, for a slow, tolerant smile appeared on his lips.

"I reckon you're plumb excited—Owen wakin' you up out of your sleep like he did," said Randerson. "But," he added, the smile chilling a little, "I ain't askin' no man to work for me, if he ain't satisfied. You can draw your time tomorrow, if it don't suit you here."

"I'm drawin' it now!" sneered the gunman. "I ain't workin' for no pussy-kitten specimen which spends his time gallivantin' around the country with a girl, makin' believe he's bossin', when—" Here he added something that made the outfit gasp and stiffen.

As he neared the conclusion of the speech, his right hand fell to his gun-holster. Owen had been watching him, and at the beginning of the movement he shouted a warning:

"Look out, Wrecks!"

He had been afraid to tell Randerson that it was Kelso who was facing him, for fear that the information, bursting upon Randerson quickly, would disconcert him.

But Randerson had been watching, understanding the drift of the gunman's words. And when he saw the shoulder of his gun-arm move, his own right hand dropped, surely, swiftly. Kelso's gun had snagged in its holster years before. It came freely enough now. But its glitter at his side was met by the roar and flame spurt of Randerson's heavy six, the thumb snap on the hammer telling of the lack of a trigger spring, the position of the weapon indicating that it had not been drawn from its holster.

Apparently not a man in the outfit had noticed this odd performance, though they had been held with dumb astonishment over the rapidity with which it had been executed. But they saw the red, venomous streak split the night; they heard the gunman's gurgling gasp of amazement, and they watched, with ashen faces, while he dropped his weapon, sagged oddly forward and tumbled headlong into the sand near the fire. Then several of them sprang forward to drag him back.

It had seemed that none of the men had noticed that Randerson had seemed to shoot his pistol while it was still in the holster. One, however, had noticed. It was

Red Owen. And while the other men were pulling the gunman back from the fire, Owen stepped close to Randerson, lifted the holster, and examined it quickly. He dropped it, with a low exclamation of astonishment.

“I was wonderin’—Holy smoke! It’s a phony holster, fixed on the gun to look like the real thing! An’ swung from the belt by the trigger guard! Lord, man! Did you know?”

“That Dorgan was Kelso?” said Randerson, with a cold smile. “I reckon. I knowed him the day he asked for a job. An’ I knowed what he come for—figurin’ on settlin’ that grudge.”

Randerson and Owen started toward the gunman, to determine how badly he had been hit; they were met by Blair. There was amazement and incredulity in the man’s eyes.

“He’s goin’ to cash in—quick,” he said. “You got him, pretty nearly proper—just over the heart. But, but, he says he’s Watt Kelso! An’ that that eastern dude, Masten, sent him over here—payin’ him five hundred cold, to perforate you!”

Randerson ran to where Kelso lay, gasping and panting for breath. He knelt beside him.

“You talkin’ straight, Kelso?” he asked. “Did Masten hire you to put me out of business?”

“Sure,” whispered Kelso.

“Where’s Masten stayin’?”

“With Chavis—in the shack. He’s been there right along, except,” he finished, with a grim attempt at humor, “when he’s been rushin’ that biscuit-shooter in Lazette.”

Five minutes later, standing near one of the wheels of the chuck-wagon, gazing somberly at the men, who were carrying Kelso away, Randerson spoke grimly to Owen, who was standing beside him.

“Pickett an’ then Kelso! Both of them was sure bad enough. But I reckon Masten’s got them both roped an’ hog-tied for natural meanness.” He turned to Owen. “I reckon I had to do it, old man,” he said, a quaver in his voice.

“Buck up, Wrecks!” Owen slapped him on the shoulder, and turned toward the men.

Randerson watched him, but his thoughts were elsewhere. “I reckon she’d have

wanted it different," he said to himself.

CHAPTER XIX

READY GUN AND CLEAN HEART

Uncle Jepson understood the cow-punchers because he understood human nature, and because he had a strain of the wild in him that had been retained since his youth. Their simplicity, their directness, had been his own; their frankness and generosity, their warm, manly impulses—all reminded him of the days before age, with its accompanying conservatism of thought and action, had placed a governor upon them. They understood him, too, recognizing him as their kind. Blair, especially, had taken a fancy to him, and therefore it was not many days after the shooting of Kelso that Uncle Jepson got the story, with all its gruesome details, from his lips.

The tale was related in strictest confidence, and Uncle Jepson did not repeat it.

But the main fact, that Randerson had killed another man in his outfit, found its way to Ruth's ears through the medium of a roaming puncher who had stopped for an hour at the ranchhouse. Ruth had confirmed the news through questioning several Flying W men, and, because of their reluctance to answer her inquiries, their expressionless faces, she gathered that the shooting had not met with their approval. She did not consider that they had given her no details, that they spoke no word of blame or praise. She got nothing but the bare fact—that Randerson's gun had again wrought havoc.

She had not seen Masten. A month had slipped by since the day of his departure, when she got a note from him, by messenger, from Lazette, saying that his business was not yet concluded, and that possibly, two weeks more would elapse before he would be able to visit the Flying W.

Had Randerson, standing near the chuck wagon on the night of the shooting of Kelso, known what effect the news would have on Ruth? "I reckon she would have wanted it different," he had reflected, then. And he had been entirely correct, for the news had destroyed something that had been growing and

flourishing in her heart. It had filled her soul with disappointment, at least; repugnance and loathing were not very far away. She had almost been persuaded, that day when he had taught her how to use the pistol. The killing of Pickett had grown dim and distant in her mental vision; Randerson had become a compelling figure that dominated her thoughts. But this second killing! She could no longer interpret the steady, serene gleam in his eyes as mild confidence and frank directness; as she saw them now they reflected hypocrisy—the cold, designing cunning of the habitual taker of human life.

She had been very near to making a mistake; she had almost yielded to the lure of the romance that had seemed to surround him; the magnetic personality of him had attracted her. He attracted her no longer—her heart was shut to him. And, during the days of Masten's continuing absence—in the times when she reflected on her feelings toward Randerson on the day he had taught her the use of the pistol, she bitterly reproached herself for her momentary lack of loyalty to the Easterner. She had been weak for an instant—as life is measured—and she would make it up to Masten—by ceasing to be irritated by his moods, through paying no attention to his faults, which, she now saw, were infinitely less grave than those of the man who had impressed her for an instant—and by yielding to his suggestion that she marry him before the fall round-up.

In these days, too, she seriously thought of discharging Randerson, for he had not ridden in to report the killing and to offer a defense for it, but she remembered Vickers' words: "Randerson is square," and she supposed that all cowboys were alike, and would shoot—to kill—if they considered their provocation to be great enough.

But these thoughts did not occupy all of her time. She found opportunities to ride and sew and talk—the latter mostly with Aunt Martha and Uncle Jepson. And she kept making her visits to Hagar Catherson.

Of late Ruth had noticed a change in the girl's manner. She seemed to have lost the vivacity that had swept upon her with the coming of her new clothes; she had grown quiet and thoughtful, and had moods of intense abstraction. Ruth rode to the cabin one morning, to find her sitting on the edge of the porch, hugging Nig tightly and whispering to him. Her eyes were moist when Ruth rode up to the porch and looked down at her, but they filled with delight when they rested upon her visitor.

She did not get up, though, and still held Nig, despite the dog's attempts to release himself.

“Have you been crying, Hagar?” Ruth inquired as she dismounted and sat on the edge of the porch close to the girl.

Hagar smiled wanly and rubbed her eyes vigorously with the back of her free hand, meanwhile looking sidelong at Ruth.

“Why, I reckon not,” she answered hesitatingly, “that is, not cryin’ regular. But I was just tellin’ Nig, here, that he’s the only sure enough friend I’ve got—that can be depended on not to fool anybody.”

“Why, Hagar!” Ruth was astonished and perhaps a little hurt by this pessimistic view. “What an odd idea for you to have! Who has fooled you, Hagar?”

“Nobody,” said the girl almost sullenly. She dug her bare toe into the deep sand at the edge of the porch and looked down at the miniature hill she was making, her lips set queerly. Ruth had already noticed that she was dressed almost as she had been at their first meeting—a slipover apron that Ruth had given her being the only new garment. It was the lonesomeness, of course, Ruth reflected, and perhaps a vision of the dreary future, prospectless, hopeless, to be filled with the monotony of the past. Her arm stole out and was placed on Hagar’s shoulder.

“I haven’t fooled you, Hagar,” she said; “have I?”

“No, ma’am.” Her lips quivered. She glanced furtively at Ruth, and a half frightened, half dreading look came into her eyes. “Nobody’s fooled me,” she added with a nervous laugh. “I was just feelin’ sorta dumpish, I reckon.”

“You mustn’t brood, you know,” consoled Ruth. “It ruins character.”

“What’s character?”

“Why—why,” hesitated Ruth, “the thing that makes you yourself—apart from every other person; your reputation; the good that is in you—the good you feel.”

“I ain’t got any,” said the girl, morosely, grimly.

“Why, Hagar, you have! Everybody has—either good or bad.”

“Mine’s bad, I reckon—if I’ve got any.” She suddenly buried her face on Ruth’s shoulder and sobbed.

Perplexed, astonished, almost dismayed, Ruth held her off and tried to look at her face. But the girl only buried it deeper and continued to cry.

“Why, Hagar; whatever is the matter?”

There was no answer, and after holding her for a time, Ruth succeeded in getting

a look at her face. It was tear-stained, but dogged in expression, and had Ruth been experienced in reading the human emotions, she could have seen the guilt in the girl's eyes, lurking far back. She also might have seen the determination in them—a determination not to tell her secret. And a sorrow, also, was there—aroused through the thought that she had deceived Ruth, and could not tell her.

Hagar realized now that she had permitted her emotions to carry her too far, that she had aroused Ruth's curiosity. Ruth must never know! She made an effort and sat up, laughing grimly through her tears, shaking her hair back from her eyes, brushing it away fiercely.

"Dad says there's times when I'm half loco," she said. "I reckon he's right." She recovered her composure rapidly, and in a few minutes there were no traces of tears or of mental distress. But Ruth was puzzled, and after she left the cabin she tried in vain to provide an explanation for the girl's strange conduct.

On her next visit to the cabin, Ruth was astonished when Hagar asked her bluntly:

"Ain't there no punishment for men who deceive girls?"

"Very little, Hagar, I fear—unless it is God's punishment."

"Shucks!" The girl's eyes flashed vindictively. "There ought to be. Durn 'em, anyway!"

"Hagar, what has brought such a subject into your mind?" said Ruth wonderingly.

The girl reddened, but met Ruth's eyes determinedly. "I've got a book in here, that dad got with some other traps from ol' man Cullen's girls, back in Red Rock—they thought we was poorly, an' they helped us that-a-way. It's 'Millie's Lovers,' an' it tells how a man deceived a girl, an' run away an' left her—the sneakin' coyote!"

"Girls shouldn't read such books, Hagar."

"Yes, they ought to. But it ought to tell in 'em how to get even with the men who do things like that!" She frowned as she looked at Ruth. "What would you think of a man that done that in real life?"

"I should think that he wouldn't be much of a man," said Ruth.

As before, Ruth departed from this visit, puzzled and wondering.

On another morning, a few days following Ruth's discovery of the shooting of

Kelso, she found Hagar standing on the porch. The dog had apprised Hagar of the coming of her visitor. Hagar's first words were:

"Did you hear? Rex Randerson killed Kelso."

"I heard about it some days ago," said Ruth. "It's horrible!"

"What do you reckon is horrible about it?" questioned Hagar, with a queer look at her friend.

"Why," returned Ruth, surprised; "the deed itself! The very thought of one human being taking the life of another!"

"There's worse things than killin' a man that's tryin' to make you shuffle off," declared Hagar evenly. "Rex Randerson wouldn't kill nobody unless they made him do it. An' accordin' to what dad says, Kelso pulled first. Rex ain't lettin' nobody perforate *him*, you bet!"

"He is too ready with his pistol."

The girl caught the repugnance in Ruth's voice. "I thought you kind of liked Randerson," she said.

Ruth blushed. "What made you think that?" she demanded.

"I've heard that you've gone ridin' with him a lot. I just reckoned it."

"You are mistaken, Hagar. I do not like Randerson at all. He is my range boss—that is all. A murderer could never be a friend to me."

A shadow came over Hagar's face. "Rex Randerson has got a clean heart," she said slowly. She stood looking at Ruth, disappointment plain in her eyes. The disappointment was quickly succeeded by suspicion; she caught her breath, and the hands that were under her apron gripped each other hard.

"I reckon you'll take up with Masten again," she said, trying to control her voice.

Ruth looked intently at her, but she did not notice the girl's emotion through her interest in her words.

"What do you mean by 'again'?"

"I heard that you'd broke your engagement."

"Who told you that?" Ruth's voice was sharp, for she thought Randerson perhaps had been talking.

Hagar blushed crimson and resorted to a lie. “My dad told me. He said he’d heard it.”

“Well, it isn’t true,” Ruth told her firmly; “I have never broken with Mr. Masten. And we are to be married soon.”

She turned, for she was slightly indignant at this evidence that the people in the country near her had been meddling with her affairs, and she did not see the ashen pallor that quickly spread over Hagar’s face. Had Ruth been looking she must have suspected the girl’s secret. But it took her some time to mount her pony, and then looking back she waved her hand at Hagar, who was smiling, though with pale and drawn face.

Hagar stood rigid on the porch until she could no longer see Ruth. Then she sank to the edge of the porch, gathered the dog Nig into her arms, and buried her face in his unkempt shoulder. Rocking back and forth in a paroxysm of impotent passion, she spoke to the dog:

“I can’t kill him now, Nig, he’s goin’ to marry *her*! Oh Nig, Nig, what am I goin’ to do now?” And then she looked up scornfully, her eyes flashing. “She won’t let Rex be a friend of hers, because he’s killed two men that God had ought to have killed a long while ago! But she’ll marry Masten—who ain’t fit to be Rex’s dog. She won’t, Nig! Why—?”

She got up and started for the door. But nearing it, she sank upon the threshold, crying and moaning, while Nig, perplexed at this conduct on the part of his mistress, stood off a little and barked loudly at her.

CHAPTER XX

THE BUBBLE—DREAMS

Loping his pony through the golden haze of the afternoon, Randerson came over the plains toward the Flying W ranchhouse, tingling with anticipation. The still small voice to which he had listened in the days before Ruth's coming had not lied to him; Fate, or whatever power ruled the destinies of lovers, had made her for him. Man's interference might delay the time of possession, his thoughts were of Masten for a brief instant, and his lips straightened, but in the end there could be no other outcome.

But though he was as certain of her as he was that the sun would continue to rule the days, he kept his confidence from betraying his thoughts, and when at last he rode slowly down along the corral fence, past the bunkhouse and the other buildings, to the edge of the porch, sitting quietly in the saddle and looking down at Ruth, who was sitting in a rocker, sewing, his face was grave and his manner that of unconscious reverence.

Ruth had been on the porch for more than an hour. And as on the day when he had come riding in in obedience to her orders to teach her the mysteries of the six-shooter, she watched him today—with anticipation, but with anticipation of a different sort, in which was mingled a little regret, but burdened largely with an eagerness to show him, unmistakably, that he was not the sort of man that she could look upon seriously. And so when she saw him ride up to the porch and bring his pony to a halt, she laid her sewing in her lap, folded her hands over it, and watched him with outward calmness, though with a vague sorrow gripping her. For in spite of what he had done, she still felt the man's strong personality, his virility—the compelling lure of him. She experienced a quick, involuntary tightening of the muscles when she heard his voice—for it intensified the regret in her—low, drawling, gentle:

"I have come in to report to you, ma'am."

“Very well,” she said calmly. She leaned back in her chair, looking at him, feeling a quick pulse of pity for him, for as she sat there and waited, saying nothing further, she saw a faint red steal into his cheeks. She knew that he had expected an invitation to join her on the porch; he was entitled to that courtesy because of her treatment of him on the occasion of his previous visit; and that when the invitation did not come he could not but feel deeply the embarrassment of the situation.

The faint glow died out of his face, and the lines of his lips grew a trifle more firm. This reception was not the one he had anticipated, but then there were moods into which people fell. She was subject to moods, too, for he remembered the night she had hurt her ankle—how she had “roasted” him. And his face grew long with an inward mirth. She would ask him to get off his horse, presently, and then he was going to tell her of his feelings on that night.

But she did not invite him to alight. On the contrary, she maintained a silence that was nearly severe. He divined that this mood was to continue and instead of getting off his pony he swung crossways in the saddle.

“We’ve got the cattle all out of the hills an’ the timber, an’ we’re workin’ down the crick toward here,” he told her. “There ain’t nothin’ unusual happened, except”—and here he paused for a brief instant—“that I had to shoot a man. It was Watt Kelso, from over Lazette way. I hired him two weeks before.”

“I heard of it,” she returned steadily, her voice expressionless.

“I hated like poison to do it. But I had no choice. He brought it on himself.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” she said flatly. She looked at him now with the first flash of emotion that she had allowed him to see. “If killing people is your trade, and you choose to persist in it, I don’t see how we are to stop you.”

He looked sharply at her, but his voice was low and even. “I don’t shoot folks for the fun of it, ma’am.”

“No?”—with scornful disbelief. “Well, I presume it doesn’t make much difference. Dead people wouldn’t appreciate the joke, anyway.”

His face was serious now, for he could see that she was deeply disturbed over the shooting.

“I reckon you wouldn’t believe me, no matter how hard I talked,” he said. “You’d have your own opinion. It sure does look bad for me—havin’ to plug two guys in one season. An’ I don’t blame you for feelin’ like you do about it. But

I’ve got this to say,” he went on earnestly. “Kelso come to the outfit, lookin’ for trouble. I’d had a run-in with him a few years ago. An’ I shot him—in the arm. I thought it was all over. But along comes Kelso, with his mustache shaved off so’s I wouldn’t know him—which I did. He asked me for a job, an’ I give it to him—hopin’. But hopes—”

“If you knew him, why did you give him a job?” she interrupted. “It might have saved you shooting him.”

“If he was wantin’ to force trouble he’d have done it sooner or later, ma’am.”

“Well?” she said, interested in spite of herself.

“He waited two weeks for a chance. I didn’t give him any chance. An’ then, one night, after Red Owen had been cuttin’ up some monkey shines, he talked fresh an’ pulled his gun. He was a regular gunfighter, ma’am; he’d been hired to put me out of business.”

There was an appeal in his eyes that did not show in his voice; and it would be all the appeal that he would make. Looking fixedly at him, she became certain of that.

“Do you know who hired him?”

There was that in her tone which told him that he might now make his case strong—might even convince her, and thus be restored to that grace from which he, plainly, had fallen. But he was a claimant for her hand, he had told her that he would not press that claim until she broke her engagement with Masten, and if he now told her that it had been the Easterner who had hired Kelso to kill him, he would have felt that she would think he had taken advantage of the situation, selfishly. And he preferred to take his chance, slender though it seemed to be.

“He didn’t tell me.”

“Then you only suspected it?”

He was silent for an instant. Then: “A man told me he was hired.”

“Who told you?”

“I ain’t mentionin’, ma’am.” He could not tell her that Blair had told him, after he had told Blair not to mention it.

She smiled with cold incredulity, and he knew his chance had gone.

But he was not prepared for her next words. In her horror for his deed, she had ceased to respect him; she had ceased to believe him; his earnest protestations of

innocence of wantonness she thought were hypocritical—an impression strengthened by his statement that Kelso had been hired to kill him, and by his inability to show evidence to prove it. A shiver of repulsion, for him and his killings, ran over her.

“I believe you are lying, Randerson,” she said, coldly.

He started, stiffened, and then stared, at her, his face slowly whitening. She had said words that, spoken by a man, would have brought about another of those killings that horrified her. She watched him, sensing for the first time something of the terrible emotions that sometimes beset men in tense situations but entirely unconscious of the fact that she had hurt him far more than any bullet could have hurt him.

Yet, aside from the whiteness of his face, he took the fatal thrust without a sign. His dreams, that had seemed to be so real to him while riding over the plains toward the ranchhouse, had been bubbles that she had burst with a breath. He saw the wrecks of them go sailing into the dust at his feet.

He had gazed downward, and he did not look up at once. When he did, his gaze rested, as though by prearrangement, on her. Her eyes were still cold, still disbelieving, and he drew himself slowly erect.

“I reckon you’ve said enough, ma’am,” he told her quietly, though his voice was a trifle hoarse. “A man couldn’t help but understand that.” He wheeled Patches and took off his hat to her. “I’ll send Red Owen to see you, ma’am,” he added. “I can recommend Red.”

She was on her feet, ready to turn to go into the house, for his manner of receiving her insult had made her feel infinitely small and mean. But at his words she halted and looked at him.

“Why should you send Red Owen to see me? What do you mean?” she demanded.

“Why, you’ve made it pretty plain, ma’am,” he answered with a low laugh, turning his head to look back at her. “I reckon you wouldn’t expect me to go on workin’ for you, after you’ve got so you don’t trust me any more. Red will make you a good range boss.”

He urged Patches on. But she called to him, a strange regret filling her, whitening her cheeks, and Patches came again to a halt.

“I—I don’t want Red Owen for a range boss,” she declared with a gulp. “If you

are determined to quit, I—I suppose I cannot prevent it. But you can stay a week or two, can't you—until I can get somebody I like?"

He smiled gravely. "Why, I reckon I can, ma'am," he answered respectfully. "There won't be no awful hurry about it. I wouldn't want to disconvenience you."

And then he was off into the deepening haze of the coming evening, riding tall and rigid, with never a look behind to show her that he cared.

Standing in the doorway of the house, the girl watched him, both hands at her breast, her eyes wide, her lips parted, her cheeks flushed, until the somber shadows of twilight came down and swallowed him. Then, oppressed with a sudden sense of the emptiness of the world, she went into the house.

CHAPTER XXI

ONE TOO MANY

To no man in the outfit did Randerson whisper a word concerning the result of his visit to the ranchhouse—that he would cease to be the Flying W range boss just as soon as Ruth Harkness could find a man to replace him. He went his way, thoughtful, silent, grave, filled with somber thoughts and dark passions that sometimes flashed in his eyes, but taking no man into his confidence. And yet they knew that all was not well with him. For in other days his dry humor, his love of wholesome fun, had shortened many an hour for them, and his serenity, in ordinary difficulties, had become a byword to them. And so they knew that the thing which was troubling him now was not ordinary.

They thought they knew what was troubling him. Kelso had been hired to take his life. Kelso had lost his own in the effort. That might have seemed to end it. But it had become known that Kelso had been a mere tool in the hands of an unscrupulous plotter, and until the plotter had been sent on the way that Kelso had gone there could be no end. Already there were whispers over the country because of Randerson's delay.

Of course, they would wait a reasonable time; they would give him his "chance." But they did not know what was holding him back—that deep in his heart lurked a hope that one day he might still make his dreams come true, and that if he killed Masten, Ruth's abhorrence of him and his deeds, already strong, could never be driven from her. If he lost this hope, Masten was doomed.

And during the second week following his latest talk with Ruth, the girl unconsciously killed it. He met her in the open, miles from the ranchhouse, and he rode toward her, deeply repentant, resolved to brave public scorn by allowing Masten to live.

He smiled gravely at her when he came close—she waiting for him, looking at him, unmoved. For she had determined to show him that she had meant what she

had said to him.

“Have you found a new range boss, ma’am?” he said gently. He had hoped that she might answer lightly, and then he would have known that she would forgive him, in time.

But her chin went up and she looked coldly at him. “You will be able to leave the Flying W shortly, Randerson,” she said. “I am going to leave such matters for Mr. Masten to look after.”

She urged her pony away and left him, staring somberly after her.

Two hours later he was riding down the declivity toward Chavis’ shack, in the basin. He had ridden first to the outfit, and had talked with Owen. And his appearance had been such that when he left the foreman the latter sought out Blair.

“If I don’t miss my reckonin’, Masten’s goin’ to get his’n today.”

Randerson rode, straight as Patches could carry him, to the door of Chavis’ shack. No one appeared to greet him, but he had seen horses, saddled, hitched to the corral fence, and he knew that some one was about. Chavis, Kester, and Hilton were inside the shack, and when they heard him ride up, they came to the door, curious. And when they saw him they stiffened and stood rigid, with not a finger moving, for they had seen men, before, meditating violence, and they saw the signs in Randerson’s chilled and narrowed eyes, and in the grim set of his lips.

His lips moved; his teeth hardly parted to allow the words to come through them. They writhed through:

“Where’s Masten?”

Three pairs of lungs sighed audibly in process of deflation.

It was Chavis who answered; the other two looked at him when the question came, silently. Chavis would have lied, but the light in Randerson’s eyes warned him not to trifle, and the truth came from his lips:

“Masten’s gone to the Flyin’ W ranchhouse.”

“I reckon that’s all,” said Randerson shortly. “I’m thankin’ you.”

He rode away, grinning coldly back at them, still watchful, for he knew Chavis, guiding his pony toward the declivity on the other side of the basin. The three men watched him until the pony had climbed to the mesa. Then Chavis turned to

the others.

“I reckon he’s goin’ to see Masten about that Kelso deal,” he said. “Somebody ought to put Masten wise.”

Kester grinned. “It’s bound to come,” he commented. “Let’s finish our game; it is your deal.”

On the mesa, Randerson urged Patches along the edge, over the trail that Ruth had taken when, months before, she had come upon Chavis and Kester at the declivity.

“Nothin’ would have happened, if it hadn’t been for Masten,” he told himself as he rode away. “Pickett wouldn’t have got fresh, an’ Kelso would have kept himself mighty shady. We’d have fought it out, square—me an’ Masten. I reckon I didn’t kill Pickett and Kelso; it was Masten that done it.”

He came, after a while, to the rock upon whick he had found Ruth lying on the night of the accident. And he sat and looked long at the grass plot where he had laid her when she had fainted.

“She looked like an angel, layin’ there,” he reminded himself, his eyes eloquent. “She’s too blamed good for that sneakin’ dude.”

He came upon the ruined boot, and memories grimmed his lips. “It’s busted—like my dreams,” he said, surveying it, ripped and rotting. “I reckon this is as good a place as any,” he added, looking around him.

And he dismounted, led Patches out of sight behind some high bushes that grew far back from the rocks; came back, stretched himself out on the grass plot, pulled his hat over his eyes and yielded to his gloomy thoughts. But after he had lain there a while, he spoke aloud:

“He’ll come this way, if he comes at all.”

With the memory of Randerson’s threat always before him, “if I ever lay eyes on you ag’in, I’ll go gunnin’ for you,” Masten rode slowly and watchfully. For he had felt that the words had not been idle ones, and it had been because of them that he had hired Kelso. And he went toward the ranchhouse warily, much relieved when he passed the bunkhouse, to find that Randerson was apparently absent. He intended to make this one trip, present to Ruth his excuses for staying away, and then go back to Chavis’ shack, there to remain out of Randerson’s sight, until he could devise another plan that, he hoped, would put an end to the cowpuncher who was forever tormenting him.

His excuses had been accepted by Ruth, for she was in the mood to restore him to that spot in her heart that Randerson had come very near to occupy. She listened to him calmly, and agreed, without conscious emotion, to his proposal that they ride, on the Monday following, to Lazette, to marry. She had reopened the subject a little wearily, for now that Randerson was hopeless she wanted to have the marriage over with as soon as possible. She saw now, that it had been the vision of Randerson, always prominent in her mind, that had caused her to put off the date of her marriage to Masten when he had mentioned it before. That vision had vanished now, and she did not care how soon she became Masten's wife.

On the porch of the ranchhouse they had reached the agreement, and triumphantly Masten rode away into the darkness, foreseeing the defeat of the man whom he had feared as a possible rival, seeing, too—if he could not remove him entirely—his dismissal from the Flying W and his own ascent to power.

"On Monday, then," he said softly to Ruth, as ready to leave, he had looked down at her from his horse. "I shall come early, remember, for I have waited long."

"Yes, Monday," she had answered. And then, dully: "I have waited, too."

Masten was thinking of this exchange of words as he rode past the ford where the Lazette trail crossed into the broken country beyond it. He had not liked the tone of her voice when she had answered him; she had not seemed enthusiastic enough to suit him. But he did not feel very greatly disturbed over her manner, for Monday would end it, and then he would do as he pleased.

He was passing a huge boulder, when from out of the shadow surrounding it a somber figure stepped, the star-shot sky shedding sufficient light for Masten to distinguish its face. He recognized Randerson, and he voluntarily brought his pony to a halt and stiffened in the saddle, fear, cold and paralyzing, gripping him. He did not speak; he made no sound beyond a quick gasp as his surprised lungs sought air, and he was incapable of action.

Randerson, though, did not make a hostile movement and did not present a foreboding figure. His arms were folded over his chest, and if it had not been for Masten's recollection of those grim words, "I'll go gunnin' for you," Masten would have felt reasonably secure. But he remembered the words, and his voice caught in his throat and would not come, when he essayed to bluster and ask Randerson the cause for this strange and dramatic appearance.

But there was no thought of the dramatic in Randerson's mind as he stood there

—nothing but cold hatred and determination—nothing except a bitter wish that the man on the pony would reach for his gun and thus make his task easier for him.

The hoped-for movement did not come, and Randerson spoke shortly:

“Get off your cayuse!”

Masten obeyed silently, his knees shaking under him. Was it to be another fist fight? Randerson’s voice broke in on this thought:

“I promised to kill you. You’re a thing that sneaks around at night on its belly, an’ you ought to be killed. But I’m goin’ to give you a chance—like you give me when you set Kelso on me. That’ll let you die like a man—which you ain’t!” He tapped the gun at his right hip. “I’ll use this one. We’ll stand close—where we are—to make your chance better. When I count three you draw your gun. Show your man now, if there’s any in you!”

He dropped his hands from his chest and held the right, the fingers bent like the talons of a bird of prey, about to seize a victim. He waited, his eyes gleaming in the starlight, with cold alertness for Masten’s expected move toward his gun. But after a long, breathless silence, during which Masten’s knees threatened to give way, he leaned forward.

“Flash it! Quick! Or you go out anyway!”

“I’m unarmed!” Masten’s voice would not come before. It burst forth now, hysterically, gaspingly, sounding more like a moan than the cry of a man pleading for his life.

But it stung the stern-faced man before him to action, rapid and tense. He sprang forward with a low, savage exclamation, drawing one of his big weapons and jamming its muzzle deep into Masten’s stomach. Then, holding it there, that the Easterner might not trick him, he ran his other hand over the frightened man’s clothing, and found no weapon. Then he stepped back with a laugh, low, scornful, and bitter. The discovery that Masten was not armed seemed to drive his cold rage from him, and when he spoke again his voice was steely and contemptuous:

“You can hit the breeze, I reckon—I ain’t murderin’ anybody. You’re safe right now. But I’m tellin’ you this: I’m lookin’ for you, an’ you don’t run no blazer in on me no more! After this, you go heeled—or you hit the breeze out of the country. One of us has got to go. This country is too crowded with both of us!”

Masten got on his pony, trembling so that he had trouble in getting his feet into the stirrups. He rode on, hundreds of yards, before he dared to turn, so great was his dread that to do so would be to bring upon him the wrath of the man who had spared him. But finally he looked around. He saw Randerson riding out into the darkness of the vast stretch of grass-land that lay to the south.

CHAPTER XXII

INTO WHICH A GIRL'S TROUBLE COMES

Uncle Jepson and Aunt Martha had not seen Masten when he had visited Ruth, for they had gone in the buckboard to Red Rock. And Masten had departed when they reached home. Nor did they see Ruth after they arrived, for she had gone to bed. But at the breakfast table Ruth told them of the visit of Masten and of her plan to advance the date of the marriage.

Uncle Jepson and Aunt Martha received the news in silence. Aunt Martha did manage to proffer a half-hearted congratulation, but Uncle Jepson wrinkled his nose, as he did always when displeased, and said nothing; and he ate lightly. Ruth did not notice that she had spoiled his appetite, nor did she note with more than casual interest that he left the table long before she or Aunt Martha. She did not see him, standing at the corral fence, scowling, and she could not hear the old-fashioned profanity that gushed from his lips.

"Aren't you glad?" Ruth asked Aunt Martha when they were alone, for she had noted her relative's lack of enthusiasm.

"Why, yes, honey," Aunt Martha smiled at her, though it seemed forced. "Only —" She hesitated eloquently.

"Only what, Aunt Martha?" Ruth's voice was a little sharp, as with all persons who act in opposition to her better judgment and who resent anyone understanding them.

"Only I was hoping it would be Randerson, my dear," said Aunt Martha gently.

"Randerson!" Ruth's voice was scornful. But it sounded insincere to her, and she would trust it no further.

"Honey!" Aunt Martha's arm was around her, and Aunt Martha's sympathetic and knowing eyes were compelling hers; and her voice was ineffably gentle.

“Are you sure, honey, that you don’t wish it were Randerson? It is a great event in your life, dear, and once it is done, it can’t be undone. Don’t be hasty.”

“It can never be Randerson,” Ruth said firmly—not, however, as firmly as she had intended. “Randerson is a murderer—a reckless taker of human life!”

“He *had* to shoot, they say,” defended Aunt Martha. “I don’t believe he would harm a living thing except in defense of his own life. Defending themselves is their way out here, girl—they know no other way. And he is a man, dear. I don’t know when I have met a man who has impressed me more!”

“Please don’t talk about it any more.” Ruth’s face was pale, her brows contracted, for Aunt Martha’s reference to Randerson had brought back haunting sensations that, she thought, she had succeeded in putting out of her life. She was ready to cry, and when she thought of Randerson—how calmly he had accepted his dismissal, with what manliness he had borne her insults, a chill of sympathy ran over her. She believed she would never forget him as he had looked on the night he had ridden away after telling her that he would leave the Flying W—riding into the darkness of the plains, with his hopes blasted, bravely making no complaint.

She got her pony, after a while, and rode far and long, coming in to the ranchhouse about noon. After she had turned the pony into the corral and was coming toward the house, she saw Uncle Jepson sitting on the porch, puffing furiously at his pipe. She spoke to him in greeting, and was about to pass him to go into the house, when he called to her:

“I want to talk to you a minute, Ruth.” He spoke rapidly, his voice dry and light, and she could see his facial muscles twitching. Wonderingly, she sank into a chair near him.

“You’re sure thinkin’ of marryin’ Masten, girl?” he said.

“Yes,” she declared firmly.

“Well, then I’ve got to tell you,” said Uncle Jepson decisively. “I’ve been puttin’ it off, hopin’ that you’d get shet of that imp of Satan, an’ I wouldn’t have to say anything.”

“Uncle Jep!” she protested indignantly.

“That’s just what he is, Ruth—a durned imp of the devil. I’ve knowed it from the first day I saw him. Since he’s come out here, he’s proved it.” He swung his chair around and faced her, and forgetting his pipe in his excitement, he told her

the story he had told Randerson: how he had gone into the messhouse on the day of the killing of Pickett, for a rest and a smoke, and how, while in there he had overheard Chavis and Pickett plotting against Randerson, planning Pickett's attack on her, mentioning Masten's connection with the scheme. She did not open her lips until Uncle Jepson had concluded, and then she murmured a low "Oh!" and sat rigid, gripping the arms of her chair.

"An' that ain't all, it ain't half of it!" pursued Uncle Jepson vindictively. "Do you know that Masten set that Watt Kelso, the gunfighter, on Randerson?" He looked at Ruth, saw her start and draw a long breath, and he grinned triumphantly. "Course you don't know; I cal'late Randerson would never make a peep about it. He's all man—that feller. But it's a fact. Blair told me. There'd been bad blood between Randerson an' Kelso, an' Masten took advantage of it. He paid Kelso five hundred dollars in cold cash to kill Randerson!"

"Oh, it can't be!" moaned the girl, covering her face with her hands and shrinking into her chair.

"Shucks!" said Uncle Jepson derisively, but more gently now, for he saw that the girl was badly hurt. "The whole country is talkin' about it, Ruth, an' wonderin' why Randerson don't salivate that durned dude! An' the country expects him to do it, girl! They'll fun him out of here, if he don't! Why, girl," he went on, "you don't know how much of a sneak a man can be when he's got it in him!"

She was shuddering as though he had struck her, and he was on the edge of his chair, looking at her pityingly, when Aunt Martha came to the door and saw them. She was out on the porch instantly, flushing with indignation.

"Jep Coakley, you're up to your tricks again, ain't you? You quit devilin' that girl, now, an' go on about your business!"

"I've got some things to say, an' I cal'late to say them!" declared Uncle Jepson determinedly. "I've kept still about it long enough. I ain't wantin' to hurt her," he added apologetically, as Aunt Martha slipped to her knees beside Ruth and put an arm around her, "but that durned Masten has been doin' some things that she's got to know about, right now. An' then, if she's set on marryin' him, why, I cal'late it's her business. It was Masten who was behind Pickett kissin' her—he tellin' Pickett to do it. An' he hired Kelso to kill Randerson."

"Oh, Ruth!" said Aunt Martha, her voice shaky, as she nestled her head close to the girl's. But her eyes shone with satisfaction.

"There's another thing," went on Uncle Jepson to Ruth. "Did you notice

Randerson's face, the night he come to hunt you, when you hurt your ankle? Marked up, kind of, it was, wasn't it? An' do you know what Masten went to Las Vegas for? Business, shucks! He went there to get his face nursed up, Ruth—because Randerson had smashed it for him! They'd had a fight; I saw them, both comin' from the same direction, that night. I reckon Randerson had pretty nigh killed him. What for?" he asked as Ruth turned wide, questioning eyes on him. "Well, I don't rightly know. But I've got suspicions. I've seen Masten goin' day after day through that break in the canyon over there. A hundred times, I cal'late. An' I've seen him here, when you wasn't lookin', kissin' that Catherson girl. I cal'late, if you was to ask her, she'd be able to tell you a heap more about Masten, Ruth."

Ruth got up, pale and terribly calm, disengaging herself from Aunt Martha and standing before Uncle Jepson. He too got to his feet.

Ruth's voice quavered. "You wouldn't, oh, you couldn't lie to me, Uncle, because you like Rex Randerson? Is it true?" She put her hands on his shoulders and shook him, excitedly.

"True? Why, Ruth, girl; it's as true as there's a Supreme Bein' above us. Why ____"

But she waited to hear no more, turning from him and putting out her hands to keep Aunt Martha away as she passed her. She went out to the corral, got her pony, saddled it, mounted, and rode over the plains toward the break in the canyon wall. Uncle Jepson had one quick glimpse of her eyes as she turned from him, and he knew there would be no Monday for Willard Masten.

Ruth had no feelings as she rode. The news had stunned her. She had only one thought—to see Hagar Catherson, to confirm or disprove Uncle Jepson's story. She could not have told whether the sun was shining, or whether it was afternoon or morning. But she must see Hagar Catherson at once, no matter what the time or the difficulties. She came to the break in the canyon after an age, and rode through it, down across the bed of the river, over the narrow bridle path that led to the Catherson cabin.

The dog Nig did not greet her this time; he was stretched out on his belly, his hind legs gathered under him, his forelegs stuck out in front, his long muzzle extending along them, while he watched in apparent anxiety the face of his master, Abe Catherson, who was sitting on the edge of the porch, his elbows on his knees, his chin in his hands, in an attitude of deep dejection. The dog's concern was for Catherson's future actions, for just a few minutes before he had

witnessed a scene that had made his hair bristle, had brought ugly growls out of him, had plunged him into such a state of fury that he had, for one wild instant, meditated a leap at his master's throat. He had seen his master leap upon his mistress and raise his hand to strike her. If the blow had been struck—Nig would have leaped, then, no matter what the consequences.

Catherson had not struck. But one great, dominating passion was in his mind at this moment—the yearning to slay! The dog had seen him, twice during the last half hour, draw out his heavy six-shooter and examine it, and each time the dog had growled his disapproval of the action. And on both occasions Catherson had muttered thickly: "I wish I knowed, for sure. A man can't do nothin' if he don't know. But I reckon it was him!"

He looked up to see Ruth coming toward him. The girl had seen him twice—had spoken to him. He was a bearded giant, grizzled, unkempt, with hairy arms, massive and muscled superbly, and great hands, burned brown by the sun, that were just now clenched, forming two big fists. There had been a humorous, tolerant twinkle in his eyes on the other occasions that Ruth had seen him; it was as though he secretly sympathized with her efforts to do something for his girl, though he would not openly approve. But now she saw that his eyes were blazing with an insane frenzy, that his lips were working, and that the muscles of his neck stood out like great cords, strained to the bursting point.

He got up when he saw Ruth, and stood on the sand at the edge of the porch, swaying back and forth, and Ruth's first thought was that he had been drinking. But his first words to her revealed her mistake. It was the light, dry voice of a violent passion that greeted her, a passion that was almost too great for words. He ran to her pony and seized it by the bridle:

"You know, ma'am. Tell me who treated my li'l gal like that?" His great hands writhed in the reins. "I'll twist his buzzard's head off his shoulders."

"What do you mean?" Ruth's own voice startled her, for the spirit of a lie had issued from her mouth; she knew what he meant; she realized that Uncle Jepson had told the truth.

"Don't you know, ma'am?" There was wild derision in his voice, insane mirth. "You've been comin' here; she's been goin' to your place! An' you don't know! You're blinder than me—an' I couldn't see at all!" He went off into a gale of frenzied laughter, at which the dog began to bark. Then Catherson's eyes glared cunningly. "But you've seen who's been comin' here; you know the man's name, ma'am; an' you're goin' to tell me, ain't you? So's I c'n talk to him—eh?"

“I don’t know, Mr. Catherson.” Ruth got a firm grip on herself before she answered, and it was to save a life that she lied again, for she saw murder in Catherson’s eyes. “Where is Hagar?” she asked.

At his jerk of the head toward the cabin door Ruth got down from her pony. She was trembling all over, but at Catherson’s words all thought of self had been banished. The effect of Masten’s deed on her own life, his duplicity, his crimes —all were forgotten. Here was her friend who had been sinned against, needing the comfort of her presence. And in an instant she was inside the cabin, leaning over the little figure that was curled up in a bunk in a corner, speaking low words of cheer and forgiveness.

Outside, Catherson paced back and forth, his lips forming soundless words, his big hands working as though the fingers were at the throat of the thief that had stolen into his home. His mind was going over certain words that Hagar had answered to his questions, just before Ruth’s coming. He dwelt upon every slight circumstance that had occurred during the past few months. There were the tracks of horse’s hoofs about the cabin, in the paths and trails leading to it. Hagar had refused to tell him. But he figured it all out for himself, as he walked. When had this thing started? At about the time that Randerson had taken Vickers’ place at the Flying W! Why had not there been trouble between him and the Flying W, as under previous range bosses? What had Randerson given him money for, many times? Ah, he knew now!

“The black-hearted hound!” he gritted.

He reeled, and held to a corner of the cabin to steady himself, for this last access of rage came near to paralyzing him. When he recovered he drew back out of sight, and leaning against the wall of the cabin, with a pencil and a small piece of paper taken from a note book in a pocket, he wrote. He laid the piece of paper on the edge of the porch, ran to the corral and caught his pony, mounted, and rode drunkenly down the narrow path toward the break in the canyon.

CHAPTER XXIII

BANISHING A SHADOW

Randerson could not adjust his principles to his purpose to do Masten to death while working for Ruth, and so, in the morning following his meeting with the Easterner on the trail leading to Chavis' shack, he announced to the men of the outfit that he was going to quit. He told Red Owen to take charge until Ruth could see him.

Glum looks followed his announcement. They tried to dissuade him, for they did not know his thoughts, and perhaps would not have given him credit for them if they had.

"Don't the outfit suit you?" asked one gently. "If it don't, we'll try to do better!"

"Your conduct has been amazin' good—considerin'," grinned Randerson, light-hearted for the time; for this mark of affection was not lost upon him.

"If there's anybody in the outfit that's disagreeable to you, why, say the word an' we'll make him look mighty scarce!" declared another, glancing belligerently around him.

"Shucks, this outfit'll be a blamed funeral!" said Blair. "We'll be gettin' to think that we don't grade up, nohow. First Vickers packs his little war-bag an' goes hittin' the breeze out; an' now you've got some fool notion that you ought to pull *your* freight. If it's anything botherin' you, why, open your yap, an' we'll sure salivate that thing!"

"I ain't mentionin'," said Randerson. "But it ain't you boys. You've suited me mighty well. I'm sure disturbed in my mind over leavin' you."

"Then why leave at all?" said Owen, his face long.

But Randerson evaded this direct question. "An' you standin' in line for my job?" he said in pretended astonishment. "Why, I reckon you ought to be the

most tickled because I'm goin'!"

"Well, if it's a go, I reckon we'll have to stand for it," said Blair a little later, as Randerson mounted his pony. Their parting words were short, but eloquent in the sentiment left unsaid.

"So long," Randerson told them as he rode away. And "so long" came the chorus behind him, not a man omitting the courtesy.

They stood in a group, watching him as he faded into the distance toward the ranchhouse.

"Somethin' is botherin' him mighty bad," said Owen, frowning.

"He's made the outfit feel like a lost doggie," grumbled Blair. "The blamed cuss is grievin' over somethin'." And they went disconsolately to their work.

Randerson rode on his way. He felt a little relieved. No longer was he bound by his job; he was now a free agent and could do as he pleased. And it would please him to settle his differences with Masten. He would "go gunnin' for him" with a vengeance.

It was about noon when he rode in to the ranchhouse. He did not turn his pony into the corral, but hitched it to one of the columns of the porch, for he intended to go on to the Diamond H as soon as he could get his belongings packed. If his old job was still open (he had heard that it was) he would take it, or another in case the old one had been filled. In any event, he would leave the Flying W.

Dejection was heavy in his heart when he crossed the porch to go to his room, for he had liked it here; it had been more like the home of his ideals than any he had yet seen. For his imagination and affection had been at work, and in Aunt Martha he had seen a mother—such a mother as he could have wished his own to be, had she lived. And Uncle Jepson! The direct-talking old gentleman had captivated him; between them was respect, understanding, and admiration that could hardly have been deeper between father and son.

But he felt reluctant to tell them of his decision to go, he wanted to delay it—if possible, he did not want to let them know at all, for he could come here, sometimes, to see them, when Ruth had gone. And so he was much pleased when, entering the house, he did not see them. But he looked for them, to be certain, going into all the rooms. And finally from a kitchen window he saw them out in the cottonwood back of the house, walking arm in arm, away, deeper into the wood. He turned with a gentle smile, and went upstairs to his room.

Shortly after Abe Catherson's departure from the cabin, Ruth came to the door and looked out. Her face was whiter than it had been when she had reached the cabin, she was more composed, and her eyes were alight with mingled resignation and thankfulness. For Hagar had yielded her secret, and Ruth had realized how near she had come to linking her life with that of the despicable creature who had preyed on her friend. The son of this great waste of world loomed big in her thoughts as she stood in the doorway; she saw now that those outward graces which had charmed her, in Masten, had been made to seem mockeries in contrast to the inward cleanness and manliness of the man that she had condemned for merely defending himself when attacked.

She went back into the cabin and sat beside Hagar, a queer sensation of joy possessing her, despite her pity for Hagar and her disgust for Masten, for she knew in this instant that she would never allow Randerson to quit the Flying W. Her joy was infectious; it brought a fugitive smile to the face of the nester's daughter, and as Ruth led her out upon the porch, her arms around her, Hagar looked at her worshipfully.

Out at the edge of the porch, Hagar shot a dreading glance around. She started, and her eyes filled with anxiety as her gaze rested on the corral. She seized Ruth's arm tightly.

"Dad's gone!" she said gulpingly.

"Well, perhaps it is all for the best, Hagar," consoled Ruth. "He will ride for a while, and he will come back to forgive you."

But the girl's eyes grew wide with fear. "Oh, I'm afraid he'll do somethin' terrible!" she faltered. "Before you came, he asked me if—if it had been Randerson. I told him no, but he didn't seem satisfied, an' when I wouldn't tell him who it was, he went out, cursin' Rex. I'm afraid, Ruth—I'm afraid!" She glanced wildly around, and her gaze rested on the piece of paper that Catherson had left on the edge of the porch. In an instant she had pounced upon it.

"He's gone to kill Randerson!" she screamed shrilly. She did not seem to see Ruth; the madness of hysterical fear was upon her; her eyes were brilliant, wide and glaring. She was in her bare feet, but she darted past Ruth, disregarding the rocks and miscellaneous litter that stretched before her, reached Ruth's pony and flung herself into the saddle, her lips moving soundlessly as she set the animal's head toward the path.

"You stay here!" she shouted to Ruth as the Flying W girl, stunned to inaction by the other's manner, watched her. "I'm goin' to ketch dad. Oh, durn him, the

mis’able hot head!”

She hit the pony a vicious slap with a bare hand. It lunged, as the reins loosened, reaching its best speed within a hundred yards, but urged to increasing effort by voice and hand and heel, the girl leaning far over its mane, riding as she had never ridden before. But up at the Flying W ranchhouse, a tall, grim, bearded giant of a horseman was just dismounting, his pony trembling because of heart-breaking effort.

Randerson had not seen Ruth, of course. But he had wondered much over her whereabouts when he had been looking through the house for Uncle Jepson and Aunt Martha. And when he had seen them out in the cottonwoods, back of the house, he had supposed her to be with them. He was glad she was not here, to make these last moments embarrassing. He would not disturb her.

He found pencil and paper and wrote his resignation, sitting long over it, but making it brief. It read:

“I’m going, ma’am. I’ve left Red Owen in charge. I’m wishing you luck.”

“There, that’s settled,” he said, rising. “But I was hopin’ it would be different. Dreams are silly things—when they don’t come true. I’ll be soured on girls, hereafter,” he told himself, morosely.

He packed his war-bag. While engaged in this work he heard the sound of hoofbeats, but he paid no attention, though he colored uncomfortably, for he thought he had been wrong in thinking that Ruth had been in the cottonwood grove, and that she had been away and was just returning. And when he heard a soft tread downstairs he was certain that it was she, and he reddened again. He stopped his work and sat silent, then he caught the sound of footsteps on the stairs, for now he would have to face her. When he saw the door of his room begin to swing slowly back, he got up, his face grave, ready to deliver his resignation in person. And when the door swung almost open, and he saw Abe Catherson standing in the opening, his heavy pistol in hand, cocked, a finger on the trigger, he stiffened, standing silent, looking at the intruder.

Abe’s eyes still wore the frenzy that had been in them when he had been speaking with Ruth. If anything, the frenzy was intensified. His legs were trembling, the big finger on the trigger of his weapon was twitching; his lips, almost hidden by the beard, were writhing. He was like a man who had been seized by some terrible illness fighting it, resolved to conquer it through sheer effort. His voice stuck in his throat, issuing spasmodically:

“I’ve got you, Randerson,” he said, “where—I want you! I’m goin’ to kill you, empty my gun in you! You mis’able whelp!” He took two steps into the room and then halted, tearing at the collar of his shirt with his free hand, as though to aid his laboring lungs to get the air they demanded.

Randerson’s face was white and set, now. He was facing death at the hands of a man whom he had befriended many times. He did not know Catherson’s motive in coming here, but he knew that the slightest insincere word; a tone too light or too gruff, the most insignificant hostile movement, would bring about a quick pressure of the trigger of Catherson’s pistol. Diplomacy would not answer; it must be a battle of the spirit; naked courage alone could save him, could keep that big finger on the trigger from movement until he could discover Catherson’s motive in coming to kill him.

He had faced death many times, but never had he faced it at the hands of a friend, with the strong drag of regard to keep his fingers from his own weapons. Had Catherson been an enemy, he would have watched him with different feelings; he would have taken a desperate chance of getting one of his own pistols to work. But he could not kill Catherson, knowing there was no reason for it.

He had no difficulty in getting genuine curiosity into his voice, and he kept it to just the pitch necessary to show his surprise over Catherson’s threat and manner:

“What you reckonin’ to kill me for, Abe?”

“For what you done to my Hagar!” The convulsive play of Catherson’s features betrayed his nearness to action. His gun arm stiffened. He spoke in great gasps, like a man in delirium. “I want you to know—what for. You come—sneakin’—around—givin’ me—money—”

“Steady, there, Abe!”

Randerson’s sharp, cold voice acted with the effect of a dash of water in Catherson’s face. He started, his big hand trembling, for though he had come to kill, he unknowingly wanted to hear some word from Randerson’s lips in proof of his innocence. Had Randerson flinched, he would have taken that as a sign of guilt, as he now took the man’s sternness as an indication of his innocence. He stepped forward until he was no more than a foot from Randerson, and searched his face with wild intentness. And then, suddenly, the weapon in his hand sank down, his legs wavered, he leaned against the wall while his chin dropped to his chest.

“You didn’t do it, Rex, you couldn’t do it!” he muttered hoarsely. “No man who’d done a thing like that could look back at me like you looked. But I’m goin’ to git—” He stopped, for there was a rapid patter of feet on the stairs, and a breathless voice, crying wildly:

“Dad! *Dad! Dad!*”

And while both men stood, their muscles tensed to leap into action in response to the voice, Hagar burst into the room, looked at them both; saw Catherson’s drawn pistol, and then threw herself upon her father, hid her face on his breast and sobbed: “It wasn’t Rex, dad; it was Masten!”

Catherson’s excitement was over. The first terrible rage had expended itself on Randerson, and after a violent start at Hagar’s words he grew cold and deliberate. Also, the confession seemed to make his resentment against his child less poignant, for he rested his hand on her head and spoke gently to her:

“It’s all right, Hagar—it’s all right. Your old dad ain’t goin’ to hold it ag’in you too hard. We all make mistakes. Why, I was just goin’ to make a mighty whopper myself, by killing Rex, here. You leave this to me.” He pushed her toward Randerson. “You take her back to the shack, Rex. I reckon it won’t take me long to do what I’m goin’ to do. I’ll be back afore dark, mebbe.”

The girl clung to him for an instant. “Dad,” she said. “What *are* you goin’ to do?”

“If you was a good guesser—” said Catherson coldly. And then he grinned felinely at Randerson and went out. They could hear him going down the stairs. They followed presently, Hagar shrinking and shuddering under Randerson’s arm on her shoulders, and from the porch they saw Catherson, on his pony, riding the trail that Ruth had taken on the day she had gone to see Chavis’ shack.

Randerson got Hagar into the saddle, recognizing the pony and speaking about it. When she told him that Ruth was at her cabin, his face lighted. He thought about the written resignation lying in his room, and he smiled.

“I come mighty near not havin’ to use it,” he said to himself.

CHAPTER XXIV

REALIZING A PASSION

Ruth stood for a long time on the porch after Hagar's departure, gripped by emotions, that had had no duplicates in all her days. Never before had she thought herself capable of experiencing such emotions. For the man she loved was in danger. She knew at this minute that she loved him, that she had loved him all along. And she was not able to go to him; she could not even learn, until Hagar returned, whether the girl had been in time, or whether he had succumbed to the blind frenzy of the avenger. The impotence of her position did much to aggravate her emotions, and they surged through her, sapping her strength. It was hideous—the dread, the uncertainty, the terrible suspense, the dragging minutes. She walked back and forth on the porch, her hands clenched, her face drawn and white, praying mutely, fervently, passionately, that Hagar might be in time.

Thinking to divert her mind, she at last went into the cabin and began to walk about, looking at various objects, trying to force herself to take an interest in them.

She saw, back of a curtain, a number of the dresses and other garments she had given Hagar, and she could not disperse the thought that perhaps if she had not given the clothing to Hagar, Masten might not have been attracted to her. She drew the curtain over them with something near a shudder, considering herself not entirely blameless.

She endeavored to interest herself in Catherson's pipe and tobacco, on a shelf near the stove; wondering over the many hours that he had smoked in this lonesome place, driving away the monotony of the hours. What a blow this must be to him! She began to understand something of the terrible emotions that must have seized him with the revelation. And *she* had brought Masten here, too! Innocent, she was to blame there! And she unconsciously did something, as she

walked about, that she had never before attempted to do—to put herself into other persons' positions, to try to understand their emotions—the motives that moved them to do things which she had considered vicious and inhuman. She had forced her imagination to work, and she succeeded in getting partial glimpses of the viewpoints of others, in experiencing flashes of the passions that moved them. She wondered what she would do were Hagar *her* daughter, and for an instant she was drunken with the intensity of the passion that gripped her.

Before her trip around the interior of the cabin was completed, she came upon a six-shooter—heavy, cumbersome, like the weapon she had used the day Randerson had taught her to shoot. It reposed on a shelf near the door that led to the porch, and was almost concealed behind a box in which were a number of miscellaneous articles, broken pipes, pieces of hardware, buckles, a file, a wrench. She examined the weapon. It was loaded, in excellent condition. She supposed it was left there for Hagar's protection. She restored it to its place and continued her inspection.

She had grown more composed now, for she had had time to reflect. Catherson had not had much of a start; he would not ride so fast as Hagar; he did not know where, on the range, he might find Randerson. Hagar was sure to catch him; she *would* catch him, because of her deep affection for Randerson. And so, after all, there was nothing to worry about.

She was surprised to discover that she could think of Masten without the slightest regret; to find that her contempt for him did not cause her the slightest wonder. Had she always known, subconsciously, that he was a scoundrel? Had that knowledge exerted its influence in making her reluctant to marry him?

Standing at a rear window she looked out at the corral, and beyond it at a dense wood. She had been there for about five minutes, her thoughts placid, considering the excitement of the day, when at a stroke a change came over her. At first a vague disquiet, which rapidly grew into a dread fear, a conviction, that some danger lurked behind her.

She was afraid to turn. She did not turn, at once, listening instead for any sound that might confirm her premonition. No sound came. The silence that reigned in the cabin was every bit as intense as that which surrounded it. But the dread grew upon her; a cold chill raced up her spine, spreading to her arms and to her hands, making them cold and clammy; to her head, whitening her face, making her temples throb. And then, when it seemed that she must shriek in terror, she turned. In the doorway, leaning against one of the jambs, regarding her with

narrowed, gleaming eyes, a pleased, appraising smile on his face, was Tom Chavis.

Her first sensation was one of relief. She did not know what she had expected to see when she turned; certainly something more dire and terrible than Tom Chavis. But when she thought of his past actions, of his cynical, skeptical, and significant looks at her; of his manner at this minute; and reflected upon the fact that she was alone, she realized that chance could have sent nothing more terrible to her.

He noted her excitement, and his smile broadened. “Scared?” he said. “Oh, don’t be.” His attitude toward her became one of easy assurance. He stepped inside and walked to the rough table that stood near the center of the room, placing his hands on it and looking at her craftily.

“Nobody here,” he said, “but you—eh? Where’s Catherson? Where’s Hagar?”

“They’ve gone to the Flying W,” she answered, trying to make her voice even, but not succeeding. There was a quaver in it. “You must have seen them,” she added, with a hope that some one at the ranchhouse might have seen *him*. She would have felt more secure if she had known that someone *had* seen him.

“Nothin’ doin’,” he said, a queer leap in his voice. “I come straight from the shack, by the Lazette trail. How does it come that you’re here, alone? What did Catherson an’ Hagar go to the Flyin’ W for? How long will they be gone?”

“They will be back right away,” she told him, with a devout hope that they would.

“You’re lyin’, Ruth,” he said familiarly. “You don’t know when they’ll be back.” He grinned, maliciously. “I reckon I c’n tell you why you’re here alone, too. Hagar’s took your cayuse. Hagar’s is in the corral. You see,” he added triumphantly as he saw the start that she could not repress. “I’ve been nosin’ around a little before I come in. I wasn’t figgerin’ on runnin’ into Abe Catherson.” He laughed thickly, as though some sort of passion surged over him. “So you’re all alone here—eh?”

She grew weak at the significance of his words, and leaned against the window-sill for support. And then with the realization that she must not seem to quail before him, she stood erect again and forced her voice to steadiness.

“Yes,” she said, “I am alone. Is there any need to repeat that? And being alone, I am in charge, here, and I don’t want you here for company.”

He laughed, making no move to withdraw.

“I’m here on business.”

“You can’t have any business with me. Come when the Cathersons are here.”

“The waitin’s good,” he grinned. He walked around to the side of the table, and with one hand resting on its top, looked closely at her, suspicion in his eyes. “Say,” he said in a confidential whisper, “it looks peculiar to me. Catherson an’ Hagar both gone. Hagar’s got your cayuse, leavin’ you here alone. Has ol’ Catherson tumbled to Masten bein’ thick with Hagar?”

“I don’t know,” she said, flushing. “It is no affair of mine!”

“It ain’t—eh?” he said with a laugh, low and derisive. “You don’t care what Masten does-eh? An’ you’re goin’ to marry him, Monday. Masten’s lucky,” he went on, giving her a look that made her shudder; “he’s got two girls. An’ one of them don’t care how much he loves the other.” He laughed as though the matter were one of high comedy.

His manner, the half-veiled, vulgar significance of his words and voice, roused her to a cold fury. She took a step toward him and stood rigid, her eyes flashing.

“You get out of this cabin, Tom Chavis!” she commanded. “Get out—instantly!” No longer was she afraid of him; she was resolute, unflinching.

But Chavis merely smiled—seemingly in huge enjoyment. And then, while he looked at her, his expression changed to wonder. “Holy smoke!” he said. “Where’s Masten’s eyes? He said you didn’t have any spirit, Ruth, that you was too cold an’ distant. I reckon Masten don’t know how to size up a girl—a girl, that is, which is thoroughbred. Seems as though his kind is more like Hagar!” He grinned cunningly and reached into a pocket, drawing out a paper. He chuckled over it, reading it. Then, as though she were certain to appreciate the joke, he held it out to her. “Read it, Ruth,” he invited, “it’s from Masten, askin’ Hagar to meet him, tomorrow, down the crick a ways. He’s dead scared to come here any more, since Randerson’s aimin’ to perforate him!”

Only one conscious emotion afflicted her at this minute: rage over Chavis’ inability to understand that she was not of the type of woman who could discuss such matters with a man. Evidently, in his eyes, all women were alike. She knew that such was his opinion when, refusing to take the paper, she stepped back, coldly, and he looked at her in surprise, a sneer following instantly.

“Don’t want to read it—eh? Not interested? Jealous, mebbe—eh?” He grinned.

“Sure—that’s it, you’re jealous.” He laughed gleefully. “You women are sure jokes. Masten can’t wake you up—eh? Well, mebbe Masten—” He paused and licked his lips. “I reckon I don’t blame you, Ruth. Masten ain’t the sort of man. He’s too cold-blooded, hisself to make a woman sort of fan up to him. But there’s other guys in this country, Ruth, an’—”

She had seized the first thing that came to her hands, a glass jar that had set on the window sill behind her, and she hurled it furiously and accurately. It struck him fairly on the forehead and broke into many pieces, which clattered and rang on the bare board floor. The sound they made, the smashing, dull impact as the jar had struck Chavis, caused her heart to leap in wild applause—twanging a cord of latent savagery in her that set her nerves singing to its music. It was the first belligerent act of her life. It awakened in her the knowledge that she could defend herself, that the courage for which she had prayed that night when on the rock where Randerson had found her, was lurking deep, ready to answer her summons. She laughed at Chavis, and when she saw him wipe the blood from his face and look at her in bewilderment, she challenged him peremptorily:

“Go—now, you beast!”

His answer was a leering grin that made his face hideous. He looked like a wounded animal, with nothing but concentrated passion in his eyes. Her act had maddened him.

“I’ll fix you, you hussy!” he sneered cursing.

She saw now that he was aroused past all restraint, and when he came toward her, crouching, she knew that other missiles would not suffice, that to be absolutely safe she must get possession of the big pistol that reposed on the shelf near the door. So when he came toward her she slipped behind the table. He grasped it by its edge and tried to swing it out of the way, and when she held it he suddenly swooped down, seizing it by the legs and overturning it. As it fell he made a lunge at her, but she eluded him and bounded to the door. The box holding the miscellaneous articles she knocked out of its place, so that it fell with a tinkling crash, throwing its contents in all directions. Her fingers closed on the stock of the pistol, and she faced Chavis, who was a few feet away, leveling the big weapon at him. Her voice came firmly; she was surprised at her own calmness:

“Don’t move, Chavis, don’t dare to take a step, or I’ll kill you!”

Chavis halted, his face a dirty, chalkish white. Twice his lips opened, in astonishment or fear, she could not tell which, but no sound came from them. He

stood silent, watching her, furtive-eyed, crouching.

In this interval her thoughts rioted in chaos, like dust before a hurricane. But a question dominated all: could she carry out her threat to kill Chavis, if he took the step?

She knew she would. For in this crisis she had discovered one of nature's first laws. She had never understood, before, but in the last few minutes knowledge had come to her like a burst of light in the darkness. And a voice came to her also—Randerson's; she mentally repeated the words he had spoken on the day he had told her about the rustlers: "I reckon you'd fight like a tiger, ma'am, if the time ever come when you had to."

Yes, she would fight. Not as a tiger would fight, but as Randerson himself had fought—not with a lust to do murder, but in self-protection. And in this instant the spirit of Randerson seemed to stand beside her, applauding her, seeming to whisper words of encouragement to her. And she caught something of his manner when danger threatened; his cold deliberation, his steadiness of hand and eye, his grim alertness. For she had unconsciously studied him in the few minutes preceding the death of Pickett, and she was as unconsciously imitating him now.

Her thoughts ceased, however, when she saw Chavis grin at her, mockingly.

"It's a bluff!" he said. "You couldn't hit the ground, if you had a-hold of the gun with both hands!" He moved slightly, measuring the distance between them.

Plainly, she saw from his actions, from his tensed muscles, her threat would not stop him. She was very pale, and her breast heaved as though from a hard run; Chavis could hear the sound of her breathing as he set himself for a leap; but her lips were pressed tightly together, her eyes glowed and widened as she followed the man's movements. She was going to kill; she had steeled her mind to that. And when she saw the man's muscles contract for the rush that he hoped would disconcert her, she fired, coolly and deliberately.

With the deafening roar of the weapon in her ears, a revulsion, swift, sickening, overcame her. The report reverberated hideously; she seemed to hear a thousand of them. And the smoke billowed around her, strong, pungent. Through it she saw Chavis stagger, clap one hand to his chest and tumble headlong, face down, at her feet. The interior of the cabin whirled in mad circles; the floor seemed to be rising to meet her, and she sank to it, the six-shooter striking the bare boards with a thud that sounded to her like a peal of thunder. And then oblivion, deep and welcome, descended.

Coming down through the break in the canyon, riding slightly in advance of Hagar, Randerson heard the report of a pistol, distant and muffled. He turned in the saddle and looked at Hagar questioningly.

“That come from your shack!” he said shortly; “Ruth there alone?”

He caught the girl’s quick affirmative, and Patches leaped high in the air from pain and astonishment as the spurs pressed his flanks. When he came down it was to plunge forward with furious bounds that sent him through the water of the river, driving the spume high over his head. He scrambled up the sloping further bank like a cat, gained the level and straightened to his work. Twice that day had riders clattered the narrow trail with remarkable speed, but Patches would have led them.

He was going his best when within fifty feet of the shack he heard Randerson’s voice and slowed down. Even then, so great was his impetus, he slid a dozen feet when he felt the reins, rose to keep from turning a somersault, and came down with a grunt.

In an instant Randerson was inside the cabin. Ruth lay prone, where she had fallen. Randerson, pale, grim-lipped, leaned over her.

“Fainted!” he decided. He stepped to the man and turned him over roughly.

“Chavis,” he ejaculated, his lips hardening. “Bored a-plenty!” he added, with vindictive satisfaction. He saw Ruth’s weapon, noted the gash in Chavis’ forehead, and smiled. “I reckon she fit like a tiger, all right!” he commented admiringly. And now he stood erect and looked down at Ruth compassionately. “She’s killed him, but she’ll die a-mournin’ over it!” Swift resolution made his eyes flash. He looked again at Ruth, saw that she was still in a state of deep unconsciousness. Running out of the cabin, he drew one of his six-shooters. When he had gone about twenty-five feet from the edge of the porch, he wheeled, threw the gun to a quick level, and aimed at the interior of the cabin. At the report he ran toward the cabin again, to meet Hagar, just riding up, wide-eyed and wondering.

“What is goin’ on?” she demanded. “What you doin’?”

“Killin’ a man,” he told her grimly. He seized her by the shoulders. “Understand,” he said sternly; “*I* killed him, no matter what happens. I’d just got here.”

With Hagar at his heels he entered the cabin again. While the girl worked with Ruth, he went to the rear wall of the cabin and examined it. When shooting from

the outside he had aimed at the wall near a small mirror that was affixed there, and his eyes gleamed with satisfaction when, embedded in one of the logs that formed the wall, he found the bullet.

Five minutes later he and Hagar led Ruth out on the porch. The girl was shaking and cringing, but trying hard to bear up under the recollection of her terrible experience. She had looked, once, at Chavis, on the floor of the cabin, when she had recovered, and her knees had sagged. But Randerson had gone to her assistance. She had looked at him, too, in mute agony of spirit, filled with a dull wonder over his presence, but gaining nothing from his face, sternly sympathetic. Outside, in the brilliant sunshine, a sense of time, place, and events came back to her, and for the first time since her recovery she thought of Abe Catherson's note, which Hagar had read.

"Oh," she said, looking at Randerson with luminous eyes, joy flashing in them, "he didn't shoot you!"

"I reckon not, ma'am," he grinned. "I'm still able to keep on range bossin' for the Flyin' W."

"Yes, yes!" she affirmed with a gulp of delight. And she leaned her head a little toward him, so that it almost touched his arm. And he noted, with a pulse of pleasure, that the grip of her hand on the arm tightened.

But her joy was brief; she had only put the tragedy out of her mind for an instant. It returned, and her lips quavered.

"I killed Chavis, Randerson," she said, looking up at him with a pitiful smile. "I have learned what it means to—to take—human life. I killed him, Rex! I shot him down just as he was about to spring upon me! But I had to do it—didn't I?" she pleaded. "I—I couldn't help it. I kept him off as long as I could—and nobody came—and he looked so terrible—"

"I reckon you've got things mixed, ma'am." Randerson met her puzzled look at him with a grave smile. "It was me, ma'am, killed him."

She drew a sharp breath, her cheeks suddenly flooded with color; she shook Hagar's arm from around her waist, seized Randerson's shoulders, gripping the sleeves of his shirt hard and staring at him, searching his eyes with eager, anxious intensity.

"Don't lie to me, Randerson," she pleaded. "Oh," she went on, reddening as she thought of another occasion when she had accused him, "I know you wouldn't—I know you *never* did! But I killed him; I know I did! For I shot him, Randerson,

just as he started to leap at me. And I shall never forget the look of awful surprise and horror in his eyes! I shall never get over it—I will never forgive myself!”

“Shucks, ma’am, you’re plumb excited. An’ I reckon you was more excited then, or you’d know better than to say you did it. Me an’ Hagar was just gettin’ off our horses here at the door—after comin’ from the Flyin’ W. An’ I saw Tom Chavis in the cabin. He was facin’ the door, ma’am,” he said at a venture, and his eyes gleamed when he saw her start, “an’ I saw what he was up to. An’ I perforated him, ma’am. From outside, here. Your gun went off at the same time. But you ain’t learned to shoot extra good yet, an’ your bullet didn’t hit him. I’ll show you where it’s stuck, in the wall.”

He led her inside and showed her the bullet. And for a short space she leaned her head against the wall and cried softly. And then, her eyes filled with dread and doubt, she looked up at him.

“Are you sure that is my bullet?” she asked, slowly. She held her breath while awaiting his answer.

It was accompanied by a short laugh, rich in grave humor:

“I reckon you wouldn’t compare your shootin’ with *mine*, ma’am. Me havin’ so much experience, an’ you not bein’ able to hit a soap-box proper?”

She bowed her head and murmured a fervent:

“Thank God!”

Randerson caught Hagar’s gaze and looked significantly from Ruth to the door. The girl accepted the hint, and coaxed Ruth to accompany her to the door and thence across the porch to the clearing. Randerson watched them until, still walking, they vanished among the trees. Then he took Chavis’ body out. Later, when Ruth and Hagar returned, he was sitting on the edge of the porch, smoking a cigarette.

To Ruth’s insistence that Hagar come with her to the house, the girl shook her head firmly.

“Dad will be back, most any time. He’ll feel a heap bad, I reckon. An’ I’ve got to be here.”

A little later, riding back toward the Flying W—when they had reached the timber-fringed level where, on another day, Masten had received his thrashing, Ruth halted her pony and faced her escort.

“Randerson,” she said, “today Uncle Jepson told me some things that I never knew—about Masten’s plots against you. I don’t blame you for killing those men. And I am sorry that I—I spoke to you as I did—that day.” She held out a hand to him.

He took it, smiling gravely. “Why, I reckoned you never meant it,” he said.

“And,” she added, blushing deeply; “you are not going to make it necessary for me to find another range boss, are you?”

“I’d feel mighty bad if you was to ask me to quit now,” he grinned. And now he looked at her fairly, holding her gaze, his eyes glowing. “But as for bein’ range boss—” He paused, and a subtle gleam joined the glow in his eyes. “There’s a better job—that I’m goin’ to ask you for—some day. Don’t you think that I ought to be promoted, ma’am?”

She wheeled her pony, blushing, and began to ride toward the ranchhouse. But he urged Patches beside her, and, reaching out, he captured the hand nearest him. And in this manner they rode on—he holding the hand, a thrilling exultation in his heart, she with averted head and downcast eyes, filled with a deep wonder over the new sensation that had come to her.

Uncle Jepson, in the doorway of the house, eagerly watching for the girl’s return, saw them coming. Stealthily he closed the door and slipped out into the kitchen, where Aunt Martha was at work.

“Women is mighty uncertain critters, ain’t they, Ma?” he said, shaking his head as though puzzled over a feminine trait that had, heretofore, escaped his notice. “I cal’late they never know what they’re goin’ to do next.”

Aunt Martha looked at him over the rims of her spectacles, wonderment in her gaze—perhaps a little belligerence.

“Jep Coakley,” she said severely, “you’re always runnin’ down the women! What on earth do you live with one for? What are the women doin’ now, that you are botherin’ so much about?”

He gravely took her by the arm and pointed out of a window, from which Ruth and Randerson could be seen.

Aunt Martha looked, long and intently. And when she finally turned to Uncle Jepson, her face was radiant, and she opened her arms to him.

“Oh, Jep!” she exclaimed lowly, “ain’t that wonderful!”

“I cal’late I’ve been expectin’ it,” he observed.

CHAPTER XXV

A MAN IS BORN AGAIN

The meeting between Catherson and Randerson had taken the edge off Catherson's frenzy, but it had not shaken his determination. He had been in the grip of an insane wrath when he had gone to see the Flying W range boss. His passions had ruled him, momentarily. He had subdued them, checked them; they were held in the clutch of his will as he rode the Lazette trail. He did not travel fast, but carefully. There was something in the pony's gait that suggested the mood of his rider—a certain doggedness of movement and demeanor which might have meant that the animal knew his rider's thoughts and was in sympathy with them. They traveled the trail that Randerson had taken on the night he had found Ruth on the rock; they negotiated the plain that spread between the ranchhouse and the ford where Randerson had just missed meeting Ruth that day; they went steadily over the hilly country and passed through the section of broken land where Ruth's pony had thrown her. Reaching the hills and ridges beyond, Catherson halted and scrutinized the country around him. When he observed that there was no sign of life within range of his vision, he spoke to the pony and they went forward.

Catherson's lips were set in a heavy, ugly pout. His shaggy brows were contracted; somber, baleful flashes, that betrayed something of those passions that he was subduing, showed in his eyes as the pony skirted the timber where Randerson had tied Ruth's horse. When he reached the declivity where Ruth had overheard Chavis and Kester, he dismounted and led his pony down it, using the utmost care. He was conserving the pony's strength. For he knew nothing of what might be required of the animal, and this thing which he had determined to do must not be bungled.

He was still in no hurry, but he grew cautious now, and secretive. He made a wide circuit of the basin, keeping out of sight as much as possible, behind some

nondescript brush, riding in depressions; going a mile out of his way to follow the sandy bed of a washout. His objective was Chavis' shack, and he wanted to come upon it unnoticed. Or, if that failed, he desired to make his visit appear casual.

But in Chavis' shack was a man who of late had formed the habit of furtive watchfulness. He wore a heavy six-shooter at his waist, but he knew better than to try to place any dependence upon his ability as a marksman. A certain meeting with a grim-faced man on the Lazette trail the night before, a vivid recollection of the grim-faced man's uncanny cleverness with a weapon, demonstrated upon two occasions, worried him, as did also some words that kept running through his mind, asleep or awake, and would not be banished. He could even hear the intonations of the voice that had uttered them: "This country is too crowded for both of us."

Masten was beginning to believe that. He had thought that very morning, of leaving, of escaping, rather. But Chavis had reassured him, had ridiculed him, in fact.

"Randerson's four-flushin'," Chavis had laughed. "He's took a shine to Ruth, an' he's aimin' to scare you out. He'd sooner shoot a foot off than bore you. 'Cause why? 'Cause if he bored you he'd never have no chance to get next to Ruth. She's some opposed to him killin' folks promiscuous. You lay low, that's all. An' I'll rustle up a guy one of these days which will put a crimp in Randerson. If he comes snoopin' around here, why, there's a rifle handy. Let him have it, sudden —before he can git set!"

Since he had sent Chavis with the note to Hagar, Masten had been uneasy. He had not stayed inside the shack for more than a minute or two at a time, standing much in the doorway, scanning the basin and the declivity carefully and fearfully. And he had seen Catherson lead his pony down. He went in and took the rifle from its pegs.

He had had a hope, at first, that it might be Kester or Linton. But when he saw that the rider did not come directly toward the shack a cold sweat broke out on his forehead and he fingered the rifle nervously. When he saw the rider disappear in the washout, he got a chair from inside and, standing on it, concentrated his gaze at the point where the rider must emerge. And when, a little later, he caught a glimpse of the rider's head, appearing for just an instant above the crest of a sand ridge, noting the beard and the shaggy hair, his face turned ashen and the chair rocked under him. For he knew but one man in this country who looked

like that.

He got down from the chair and glared around, his eyes dilated. Catherson's actions seemed innocent enough. But what could he be doing in the basin? And, once here, what could he mean by prowling like that, instead of coming directly to the cabin? What could he be looking for? Why did he not show himself?

Masten slipped outside and crept along the wall of the shack to a corner, from which, screened by some alder, he watched breathlessly, a nameless disquiet oppressing him. Did Catherson know anything?

That question his conscience dinned in his ears. It was answered many times, as he stood there—an insistent affirmative, suggested, proven by Catherson's actions, supported by the fact that he had never seen Catherson in the basin before.

As he watched, he saw Catherson again. He was closer, riding behind a thicket of gnarled brush, which was not high enough entirely to conceal him, and he was bending far over in the saddle as though he did not want to be seen. But Masten could see him, and this last evidence of the man's caution convinced Masten. Obeying a sudden impulse, he threw the rifle to his shoulder. The muzzle wavered, describing wide circles, and before he could steady it enough to be reasonably certain of hitting the target, Catherson had vanished behind a low hill.

Masten wiped the cold moisture from his forehead. For an instant he stood irresolute, trembling. And then, panic-stricken over a picture that his imagination drew for him, he dropped the rifle and ran, crouching, to the corral. With frenzied haste, urged by the horrible conviction that had seized him, he threw saddle and bridle on his pony, and clambered, mumbling incoherently, into the saddle. Twice the reins escaped his wild clutches, but finally he caught them and sat erect looking fearfully for Catherson.

The nester was not visible to him. Gulping hard, Masten sent the pony cautiously forward. He skirted the corral fence, keeping the shack between him and the point at which he divined Catherson was then riding, and loped the pony into some sparse timber near the river.

His panic had grown. He had yielded to it, and it had mastered him. His lips were twitching; he cringed and shivered as, getting deeper into the timber, he drove the spurs into the pony's flanks and raced it away from the shack.

He rode for perhaps a mile at break-neck speed. And then, unable to fight off the

fascination that gripped him, doubting, almost ridiculing himself for yielding to the wild impulse to get away from Catherson, for now that he was away his action seemed senseless, he halted the pony and turned in the saddle, peering back through the trees. He had followed a narrow trail, and its arching green stretched behind him, peaceful, inviting, silent. So calm did it all seem to him now, so distant from that dread danger he had anticipated, that he smiled and sat debating an impulse to return and face Catherson. The man's intentions could not be what he had suspected them to be; clearly, his conscience had played him a trick.

But he did not wheel his pony. For as he sat there in the silence he heard the rapid drumming of hoofs on the path. Distant they were, but unmistakable. For a moment Masten listened to them, the cold damp breaking out on his forehead again. Then he cursed, drove the spurs deep into the pony and leaning forward, rode frantically away.

Coming out of the timber to a sand plain that stretched in seeming endlessness toward a horizon that was dimming in the growing twilight, Masten halted the pony again, but only for an instant. In the next he was urging it on furiously. For looking back fearfully, he saw Catherson bestriding his pony, a dread apparition, big, rigid, grim, just breaking through the timber edge, not more than two or three hundred feet distant. Masten had hoped he had distanced his pursuer, for he had ridden at least five miles at a pace that he had never before attempted. There had been no way for him to judge the pony's speed, of course, but when he had halted momentarily he had noted that the animal was quivering all over, that it caught its breath shrilly in the brief interval of rest, and now as he rode, bending far over its mane, he saw that the billowing foam on its muzzle was flecked with blood. The animal was not equal to the demands he had made upon it.

But he forced it on, with spur and voice and hand, muttering, pleading with it incoherently, his own breath coughing in his throat, the muscles of his back cringing and rippling in momentary expectation of a flying missile that would burn and tear its way through them. But no bullet came. There was no sound behind him except, occasionally, the ring of hoofs. At other times silence engulfed him. For in the deep sand of the level the laboring ponies of pursued and pursuer made no noise. Masten could hear a sodden squish at times, as his own animal whipped its hoofs out of a miniature sand hill.

The grim, relentless figure behind him grew
grotesque and gigantic in his thoughts

He did not look around again for a long time. Long ago had he lost all sense of direction, for twilight had come and gone, and blank darkness, except for the stars, stretched on all sides. He had never seen this sand level; he knew it must be far off the Lazette trail. And he knew, too, before he had ridden far into it, that it was a desert. For as twilight had come on he had scrutinized it hopefully in search of timber, bushes, a gorge, a gully—anything that might afford him an opportunity for concealment, for escape from the big, grim pursuer. He had seen nothing of that character. Barren, level, vast, this waste of world stretched before him, with no verdure save the repulsive cactus, the scraggy yucca, the grease-wood, and occasional splotches of mesquite.

They raced on, the distance between them lessening gradually. Masten could feel his pony failing. It tried bravely, but the times when it spurted grew less frequent; it made increasingly harder work of pulling its hoofs out of the deep sand; it staggered and lurched on the hard stretches.

Masten looked back frequently now. The grim, relentless figure behind him grew grotesque and gigantic in his thoughts, and once, when he felt the pony beneath him go to its knees, he screamed hysterically. But the pony clambered to its feet again and staggered on, to fall again a minute later. Catherson's pony, its strength conserved for this ordeal, came on steadily, its rider carefully avoiding the soft sand, profiting by Masten's experiences with it. It was not until he saw Catherson within fifty feet of him that Masten divined that he was not to be shot. For at that distance he made a fair target, and Catherson made no movement toward his gun. The nester was still silent; he had spoken no word. He spoke none now, as he hung relentlessly to his prey, seeming, to Masten's distorted mind and vision, a hideous, unnatural and ghastly figure of death.

Catherson had drawn nearer. He was not more than thirty feet away when Masten's pony went down again. It fell with a looseness and finality that told Masten of the end. And Masten slipped his feet out of the stirrups, throwing himself free and alighting on his hands and knees in front of the exhausted animal. He got up, and started to run, desperately, sobbing, his lips slavering from terror. But he turned, after running a few feet, to see Catherson coming

after him. The nester was uncoiling a rope from his saddle horn, and at this sight Masten shrieked and went to his knees. He heard an answering laugh from Catherson, short, malevolent. And then the rope swished out, its loop widening and writhing. Masten shrieked again, and threw up his hands impotently.

Later, Catherson brought his pony to a halt, far from where the rope had been cast, and looked grimly down at his fellow being, prone and motionless in the deep sand at his feet.

Unmoved, remorseless, Catherson had cut short the pleadings, the screaming, the promises. He had not bungled his work, and it had been done. But as he looked down now, the muscles of his face quivered. And now he spoke the first word that had passed his lips since he had left the Flying W ranchhouse:

“I reckon you’ve got what’s been comin’ to you!”

He got down, unfastened the rope, deliberately re-coiled it and looped it around the saddle horn. Then he mounted and rode away. Grim, indistinct, fading into the blackness of the desert night, he went, half a mile, perhaps. And then, halting the pony, he turned in the saddle and looked back, his head bent in a listening attitude. To his ears came the sharp bark of a coyote, very near. It was answered, faintly, from the vast, yawning distance, by another. Catherson stiffened, and lines of remorse came into his face.

“Hell!” he exclaimed gruffly.

He wheeled the pony and sent it scampering back. A little later he was kneeling at Masten’s side, and still later he helped Masten to the saddle in front of him and set out again into the desert blackness toward the timber from which they both had burst some time before.

Many hours afterward they came to the river, at the point where the Lazette trail intersected. There, in the shallow water of the ford, Masten washed from his body the signs of his experience, Catherson helping him. Outwardly, when they had finished, there were few marks on Masten. But inwardly his experience had left an ineffaceable impression.

After washing, he staggered to a rock and sat on it, his head in his hands, shivers running over him. For a time Catherson paid no attention to him, busying himself with his pony, jaded from the night’s work. But after half an hour, just as the first faint shafts of dawn began to steal up over the horizon, Catherson walked close, and stood looking down at his victim.

“Well,” he said, slowly and passionlessly, “I’ve got you this far. I’m quittin’ you. I reckon I’ve deviled you enough. I was goin’ to kill you. But killin’ you wouldn’t have made things right. I expect you’ve learned somethin’, anyway. You’ll know enough to play square, after this. An’ wherever you go—”

Masten looked up at him, his face haggard, his eyes brimming, but flashing earnestly.

“I’m going back to Hagar,” he said. He shivered again. “You’re right, Catherson,” he added, his voice quavering; “I learned a lot tonight. I’ve learned —” His voice broke, and he sat there grim and white, shuddering as a child shudders when awakened from a nightmare. He almost collapsed when Catherson’s huge hands fell to his shoulders, but the hands held him, the fingers gripping deeply into the flesh. There was a leap in Catherson’s voice:

“You’re almost a man, after all!” he said.

They got on the pony after a while, riding as before, Masten in front, Catherson behind him, steadying him. And in this manner they rode on toward Catherson’s shack, miles down the river.

It was late in the morning when they came in sight of the shack, and seeing them from afar Hagar ran to them. She stopped when she saw Masten, her eyes wide with wonder and astonishment that changed quickly to joy as she saw a smile gathering on Catherson’s face.

“I’ve brought you your husband, Hagar,” he told her.

Hagar did not move. Her hands were pressing her breast; her eyes were eloquent with doubt and hope. They sought Masten’s, searchingly, defiantly. And she spoke directly to him, proudly, her head erect:

“If you’ve come ag’in your will—If dad had to bring you—” She paused, her lips trembling.

“Shucks,” said Catherson gently; “he’s come on his own hook, Hagar. Why, he asked me to bring him—didn’t you, Masten?”

And then he dismounted and helped Masten down, leading his pony forward toward the shack, but turning when he reached the porch, to look back at Masten and Hagar, standing together in the shade of the trees, the girl’s head resting on the man’s shoulder.

Catherson pulled the saddle and bridle from the pony, turned him into the corral, and then went into the house. A little later he came out again, smoking a pipe.

Masten and Hagar were sitting close together on a fallen tree near where he had left them. Catherson smiled mildly at them and peacefully pulled at his pipe.

CHAPTER XXVI

A DREAM COMES TRUE

On the edge of the mesa, from which, on the day of her adventure with the injured ankle, Ruth had viewed the beautiful virgin wilderness that stretched far on the opposite side of the river, she was riding, the afternoon of a day a week later, with Randerson. She had expressed a wish to come here, and Randerson had agreed joyfully.

Seated on a rock in the shade of some trees that formed the edge of that timber grove in which he had tied Ruth's pony on a night that held many memories for both, they had watched, for a long time, in silence, the vast country before them. Something of the solemn calmness of the scene was reflected in Ruth's eyes. But there was a different expression in Randerson's eyes. It was as though he possessed a secret which, he felt, she ought to know, but was deliberately delaying the telling of it. But at last he decided, though he began obliquely:

"I reckon there's a set plan for the way things turn out—for folks," he said, gravely. "Things turn out to show it. Everything is fixed." He smiled as she looked at him. "Take me," he went on. "I saw your picture. If I'd only seen it once, mebbe I wouldn't have fell in love with it. But—"

"Why, Rex!" she reproved with an injured air, "how can you say that? Why, I believe I loved you from the minute I saw you!"

"You didn't have anything on me there!" he told her. "For I was a gone coon the first time I set eyes on *you!* But is it the same with pictures? A picture, now, has to be studied; it ain't like the real article," he apologized. "Anyway, if I hadn't kept lookin' at your picture, mebbe things would have been different. But I got it, an' I looked at it a lot. That shows that it was all fixed for you an' me."

She looked mirthfully at him. "Was it all fixed for you to take the picture from Vickers, by force—as you told me you did?" she demanded.

He grinned brazenly. “I reckon that was part of the plan,” he contended. “Anyway, I got it. Vickers wouldn’t speak to me for a month, but I reckon I didn’t lose any sleep over that. What sleep I lost was lost lookin’ at the picture.” The confession did not embarrass him, for he continued quietly:

“An’ there’s Masten.” He watched the smile go out of her face with regret in his eyes. But he went on. “I intended to kill him, one night. But he had no gun, an’ I couldn’t. That would have spoiled the plan that’s fixed for all of us. I let him live, an’ the plan works out.” He took hold of the hand nearest him and pressed it tightly.

“Have you seen Hagar since?” he asked.

“No,” she told him, looking quickly at him, for she caught an odd note in his voice. “I just couldn’t bear to think of going back there.”

“Well,” he said, “Hagar’s happy. I was over there this mornin’. Masten’s there.” He felt her hand grip his suddenly, and he smiled. He had talked with Catherson; the nester had told him the story, but it had been agreed between them the real story was not to be told. “They’re married—Hagar an’ Masten. Masten come to Catherson’s shack the day after I—after I brought you home from there. An’ they rode over to Lazette an’ got hooked up. An’ Catherson had been lookin’ for Masten, figurin’ to kill him. I reckon it was planned for Masten to have a change of heart. Or mebbe it was gettin’ married changed him. For he’s a lot different, since. He’s quiet, an’ a heap considerate of other folks’ feelin’s. He’s got some money, an’ he’s goin’ to help Abe to fix up his place. He asked my pardon, for settin’ Pickett an’ Kelso on me. I shook his hand, Ruth, an’ wished him luck an’ happiness. Don’t you wish him the same, Ruth—both of them?”

“Yes,” she said earnestly; “I do!” And now she was looking at him with luminous eyes. “But it was very manly of you to forgive him so fully!”

“I reckon it wasn’t so awful manly,” he returned, blushing. “There wasn’t nothin’ else to do, I expect. Would you have me hold a grudge against him? An’ spoil everything—nature’s plan included? It was to happen that way, an’ I ain’t interferin’. Why, I reckon if I wasn’t to forgive him, there’d be another plan spoiled—yours an’ mine. An’ I’m sure helpin’ to work that out. I’ve thought of the first of the month,” he said, looking at her, expectantly, and speaking lowly. “The justice of the peace will be back in Lazette then.”

“So you’ve been inquiring?” she said, her face suffused with color.

“Why, sure! Somebody’s got to do it. It’s my job.”

A little later they mounted their ponies and rode along the edge of the timber. When they reached the tree to which he had tied her pony on the night she had hurt her ankle, he called her attention to it.

“That’s where I lost the bandanna,” he told her. “It fell off my neck an’ got tangled in the knot.”

“Then you know!” she exclaimed.

“Sure,” he said, grinning; “Uncle Jepson told me.”

“I think Uncle Jep has been your right hand man all through this,” she charged.

“Why shouldn’t he be?” he retorted. And she could give him no reason why it should have been otherwise.

“It was a rather mean trick to play on me,” she charged pretending indignation.

“If you’d have thought it mean, you’d have told me about it before now,” he answered. “Patches was reliable.”

“Kester an’ Linton have sloped,” he told her as they rode away from the trees. “This climate was gettin’ unhealthy for them.”

“What makes folks act so foolish?” he questioned, later. “There ain’t no way to escape what’s got to be. Why can’t folks take their medicine without makin’ faces?”

She knew he referred to Masten, Chavis and Pickett, and she knew that this would be all the reference Randerson would ever make to them. But no answer formed in her mind and she kept silent.

When they came to the rock upon which he had found her, he halted and regarded it gravely.

“You had me scared that night,” he said. “Patches had most run his head off. I was mighty relieved to see you.”

“I treated you miserably that night,” she confessed.

“Did you hear me complainin’?” he asked with a gentle smile at her. “I expect, some day, when we’re together more, an’ you get to lovin’ me less than you do now, you’ll get peevish ag’in. Married folks always do. But I won’t notice it. I’ll get on Patches—if he’s alive, you wantin’ to put off the marriage so long—”

“Until the first!” she laughed, in gentle derision.

“Well,” he said, with pretended gravity, “when a man has waited, as long as I’ve

waited, he gets sort of impatient." He grinned again, and gave her this last shot: "An' mighty *patient* after!"

And they rode on again, through the white sunlight, close together, dreaming of days to come.

THE END

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