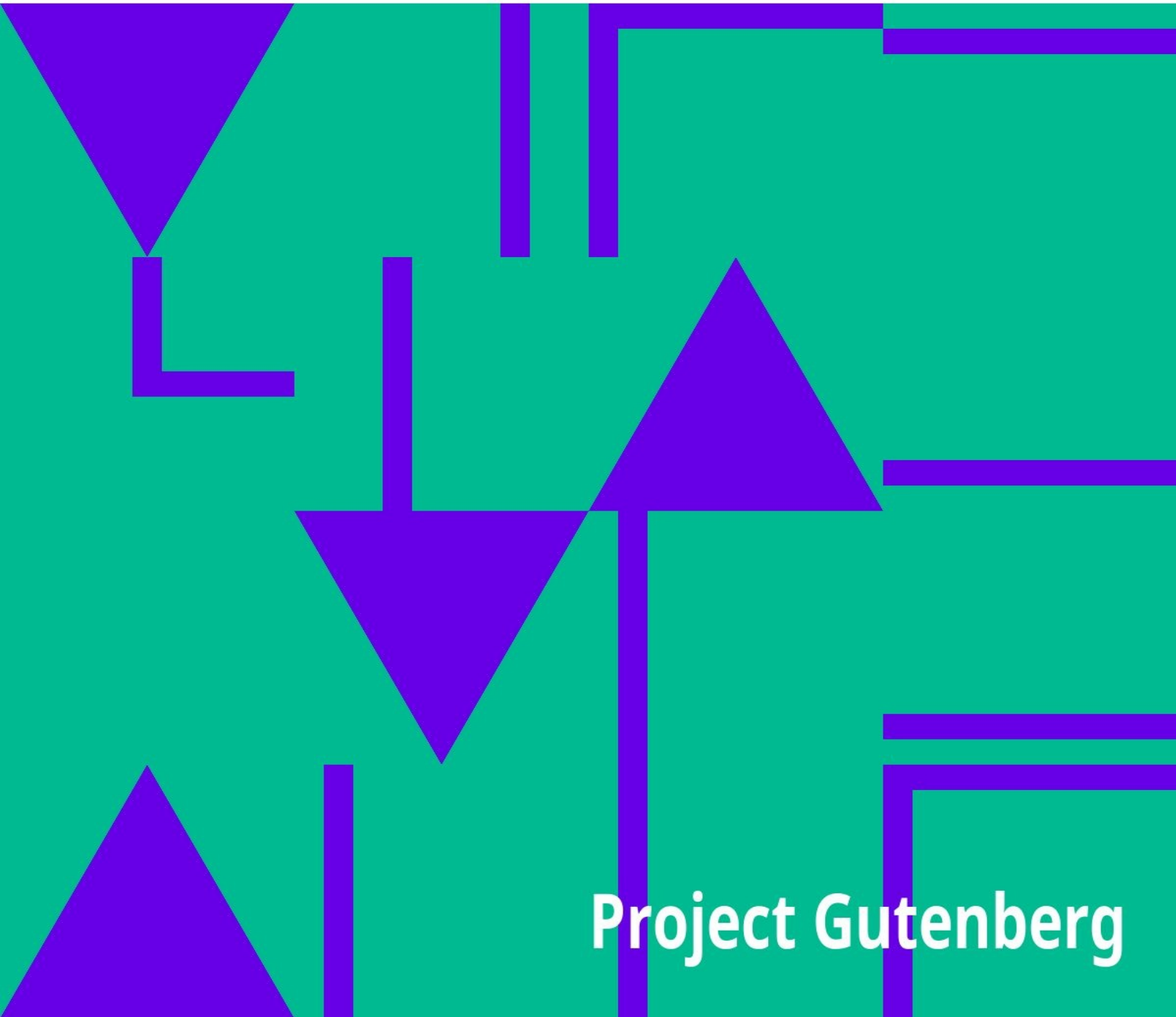


Shoe-Bar Stratton

Joseph Bushnell Ames



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STRATTON***

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“I can stand here till I get tired,” retorted Lynch.

Shoe-Bar Stratton

BY JOSEPH B. AMES

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To
BILL McBRIDE

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SHOE-BAR STRATTON

CHAPTER I

BACK FROM THE DEAD

Westward the little three-car train chugged its way fussily across the brown prairie toward distant mountains which, in that clear atmosphere, loomed so deceptively near. Standing motionless beside the weather-beaten station shed, the solitary passenger watched it absently, brows drawn into a single dark line above the bridge of his straight nose. Tall, lean, with legs spread apart a bit and shoulders slightly bent, he made a striking figure against that background of brilliant sky and drenching, golden sunlight. For a brief space he did not stir. Then of a sudden, when the train had dwindled to the size of a child's toy, he turned abruptly and drew a long, deep breath.

It was a curious transformation. A moment before his face—lined, brooding, somber, oddly pale for that country of universal tan—looked almost old. At least one would have felt it the face of a man who had recently endured a great deal of mental or physical suffering. Now, as he turned with an unconscious straightening of broad shoulders and a characteristic uptilt of square, cleft chin, the lines smoothed away miraculously, a touch of red crept into his lean cheeks, an eager, boyish gleam of expectation flashed into the clear gray eyes that rested caressingly on the humdrum, sleepy picture before him.

Humdrum it was, in all conscience. A single street, wide enough, almost, for a plaza, paralleled the railroad tracks, the buildings, such as they were, all strung along the further side in an irregular line. One of these, ramshackle, weather-worn, labeled laconically "The Store," stood directly opposite the station. The architecture of the "Paloma Springs Hotel," next door, was very similar. On either side of these two structures a dozen or more discouraged-looking adobe houses were set down at uneven intervals. To the eastward the street ended in the corrals and shipping-pens; in the other direction it merged into a narrow dusty trail that curved northward from the twin steel rails and quickly lost itself in the encompassing prairie.

That was all. Paloma Springs in its entirety lay there in full view, drowsing in the torrid heat of mid-September. Not a human being was in sight. Only a brindled dog slept in a small patch of shade beside the store; and fastened to the hotel hitching-rack, two burros, motionless save for twitching tails and ears, were almost hidden beneath stupendous loads of firewood.

But to Buck Stratton the charm lay deeper than mere externals. As a matter of fact he had seen Paloma Springs only twice in his life, and then very briefly. But it was a typical little cow-town of the Southwest, and to the homesick cattleman the sight of it was like a refreshing draft of water in the desert. Pushing back his hat, Stratton drew another full breath, the beginnings of a smile curving the corners of his mouth.

“It sure is good to get back,” he murmured, picking up his bag. “Someway the very air tastes different. Gosh almighty. It don’t seem like two years, though.”

Abruptly the light went out of his eyes and his face clouded. No wonder the time seemed short when one of those years had vanished from his life as utterly and completely as if it had never been. Whenever Stratton thought of it, which was no oftener than he could help, he cringed mentally. There was something uncanny and even horrible in the realization that for the better part of a twelve-month he had been eating, sleeping, walking about, making friends, even, like any normal person, without retaining a single atom of recollection of the entire period.

Frowning, Buck put up one hand and absently touched a freshly healed scar half-hidden by his thick hair. Even now there were moments when he felt the whole thing must be some wild nightmare. Vividly he remembered the sudden winking out of consciousness in the midst of that panting, uphill dash through Belleau Wood. He could recall perfectly the most trifling event leading up to it—the breaking down of his motor-cycle in a strange sector just before the charge, his sudden determination to take part in it by hook or crook, even the thrill and tingle of that advance against heavy machine-gun fire.

The details of his awakening were equally clear. It was like closing his eyes one minute and opening them the next. He lay on a hospital bed, his head swathed in bandages. That seemed all right. He had been wounded in the charge against the Boche, and they had carried him to a field-hospital. He was darned lucky to have come out of it alive.

But little by little the conviction was forced upon him that it wasn’t as simple as that. At length, when he was well on the way to recovery, he learned to his

horror that the interval of mental blankness, instead of being a few hours, or at the most a day or two, had lasted for over a year!

Without fully understanding certain technical portions of the doctor's explanation, Stratton gathered that the bullet which had laid him low had produced a bone-pressure on the portion of his brain which was the seat of memory. The wound healing, he had recovered perfect physical health, but with a mind blank of anything previous to his awakening in the French hospital over a year ago. The recent operation, which was pronounced entirely successful, had been performed to relieve that pressure, and Stratton was informed that all he needed was a few weeks of convalescence to make him as good a man as he had ever been.

It took Buck all of that time to adjust himself to the situation. He was in America instead of France, without the slightest recollection of getting there. The war was over long ago. A thousand things had happened of which he had not the remotest knowledge. And because he was a very normal, ordinary young man with a horror of anything queer and eccentric, the thought of that mysterious year filled him with dismay and roused in him a passionate longing to escape at once from everything which would remind him of his uncanny lapse of memory. If he were only back where he belonged in the land of wide spaces, of clean, crisp air and blue, blue sky, he felt he would quickly forget this nightmare which haunted so many waking moments.

Unfortunately there were complications. To begin with he found himself in the extraordinary position of a man without identity. The record sent over from the hospital in France stated that he had been brought in from the field minus his tag and every other mark of identification. Buck was not surprised at this, nor at the failure of anyone in the strange sector to recognize him. Only a few hours before the battle the tape of his identification-disk had parted and he had thrust the thing carelessly into his pocket. He had seen too many wounded men brought into field-hospitals not to realize how easy it is to lose a blouse.

Recovering from the bullet-wound and unable to tell anything about himself, he had apparently passed under the name of Robert Green. Stratton wondered with a touch of grim amusement whether this christening was not the result of doughboy humor. He must have been green enough, in all conscience.

He was not even grimly amused by the ultimate discovery that the name of Roth Stratton had appeared months and months ago on one of the official lists of "killed or missing." It increased his discomfort over the whole hateful business

and made him thankful for the first time that he was alone in the world. At least no mother or sister had been tortured by this strange prank of fate.

But at last the miles of red tape had been untied or cut, and the moment his discharge came Stratton took the first possible train out of New York. He did not even wire Bloss, his ranch-foreman, that he was coming. As a matter of fact he felt that doing so would only further complicate an already sufficiently difficult situation.

The Shoe-Bar outfit, in western Arizona, had been his property barely a week before he left it for the recruiting-office. Born and bred in the Texas Panhandle, he inherited his father's ranch when barely twenty-one. Even then many of the big outfits were being cut up into farms, public range-land had virtually ceased to exist, and one by one the cattlemen were driven westward before the slowly encroaching wave of civilization.

Two years later Stratton decided to give up the fight and follow them. During the winter before the war he sold out for a handsome figure, spent several months looking over new ground, and finally located and bought the Shoe-Bar outfit.

The deal was hurried through because of his determination to enlist. Indeed, he would probably not have purchased at all had not the new outfit, even to his hasty inspection, seemed to be so unusual a bargain and so exactly what he wanted. But buy he did, placed Joe Bloss, a reliable and experienced cattleman who had been with him for years, in charge, and departed.

From that moment he had never once set eyes on the Shoe-Bar. Bloss wrote frequent and painstaking reports which seemed to indicate that everything was going well. But all through the long and tedious journey ending at the little Arizona way-station, Stratton fumed and fretted and wondered. Even if Joe had failed to see his name amongst the missing, what must he have thought of his interminable silence? All through Buck's brief training and the longer interval overseas, the foreman's letters had come with fair regularity and been answered promptly and in detail. What had Bloss done when the break came? What had he been doing ever since?

A fresh wave of troubled curiosity sent Stratton swinging briskly across the street. Keeping inside the long hitching-rack, he crossed the sagging porch and stepped through the open door into the store. For a moment he thought it empty. Then a chair scraped, and over in one corner a short, stout, grizzled man dropped his feet from the window-sill and shuffled forward, yawning.

"Wal! Wal!" he mumbled, his faded, sleep-dazed eyes taking in Buck's bag.

“Train come in? Reckon I must of been dozin’ a mite.”

“Looks to me like the whole place was taking an afternoon nap,” smiled Stratton. “Not much doing this time of day, I expect.”

“You said it,” yawned the stout man, supporting himself against the rough pine counter. “Things is liable to brisk up in a hour or two, though, when the boys begin to drift in. Stranger around these parts, ain’t yuh?” he added curiously.

For a tiny space Buck hesitated. Then, moved by an involuntary impulse he did not even pause to analyze, he shrugged his shoulders slightly.

“I was out at the Shoe-Bar a couple of times about two years ago,” he answered. “Haven’t been around here since.”

“The Shoe-Bar? Huh?” Pop Daggett looked interested. “You don’t say so! Funny I don’t recollect yore face.”

“Not so very. I only passed through here to take the train.”

“That was it, eh? Two years ago must of been about the time the outfit was bought by that Stratton feller from Texas. Yuh know him well?”

“Joe Bloss, the foreman, was a friend of mine,” evaded Stratton. “He’s the one I stopped off now to see.”

Pop Daggett’s jaw sagged, betraying a cavernous expanse of sparsely-toothed gums. “Joe Bloss!” he ejaculated. “My land! I hope you ain’t traveled far fur that. If so, yuh sure got yore trouble for yore pains. Why, man alive! Joe Bloss ain’t been nigh the Shoe-Bar for close on to a year.”

Stratton’s eyes narrowed. “A year?” he repeated curtly. “Where’s he gone?”

“You got me. I did hear he’d signed up with the Flying-V’s over to New Mexico, but that might have been jest talk.” He sniffed disapprovingly. “There ain’t no doubt about it; the old Shoe-Bar’s changed powerful these two years. I dunno what we’re comin’ to with wimmin buttin’ into the cattle business.”

Buck stared at him in frank amazement. “Women?” he repeated. “What the dickens are you talking about, anyway?”

“I sh’d think I was plain enough,” retorted Pop Daggett with some asperity. “Mebbe female ranchers ain’t no novelty to yuh, but this is the first time I ever run up ag’in one m’self, an’ I ain’t much in love with the idear.”

Stratton’s teeth dug into his under lip, and one hand gripped the edge of the counter with a force that brought out a row of white dots across the knuckles.

“You mean to tell me there’s a—a—woman at the Shoe-Bar?” he asked incredulously.

“At it?” snorted the old man. “Why, by cripes, she *owns* it! Not only that, but folks say she’s goin’ to run the outfit herself like as if she was a man.” He paused to spit accurately and with volume into the empty stove. “Her name’s Thorne,” he added curtly. “Mary Thorne.”

CHAPTER II

CROOKED WORK

Stratton suddenly turned his back and stared blankly through the open door. With the same unconscious instinct which had moved him to conceal his face from the old man, he fumbled in one pocket and drew forth papers and tobacco sack. It spoke well for his self-control that his fingers were almost steady as he deliberately fashioned a cigarette and thrust it between his lips. When he had lighted it and inhaled a puff or two, he turned slowly to Pop Daggett again.

“You sure know how to shoot a surprise into a fellow, old-timer,” he drawled. “A woman rancher, eh? That’s going some around this country, I’ll say. How long has she—er—owned the Shoe-Bar?”

“Only since her pa died about four months back.” Pop Daggett assumed an easier pose; his tone had softened to one of garrulous satisfaction at having a new listener to a tale he had worn threadbare. “It’s consid’able of a story, but if yuh ain’t pressed for time—”

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“Go to it,” invited Buck, leaning back against the counter. “I’ve got all the time there is.”

Daggett’s small, faded blue eyes regarded him curiously.

“Did yuh ever meet up with this here Stratton?” he asked abruptly.

“I—a—know what he looks like.”

“It’s more’n I do,” grumbled Pop regretfully. “The only two times he was here I was laid up with a mean attack of rheumatiz, an’ never sot eyes on him. Still an’ all, there ain’t hardly anybody else around Paloma that more ’n glimpsed him passin’ through. He bought the outfit in a terrible hurry, an’ I thinks to m’self at the time he must be awful trustin’, or else a mighty right smart jedge uh land an’ cattle. He couldn’t of hardly rid over it even once real thorough before he plunks down his money, gets him a proper title, an’ hikes off to the war, leavin’ Joe Bloss in charge.”

He paused, fished in his pocket, and, producing a plug, carefully bit off one corner. Stratton watched him impatiently, a faint flush staining his clear, curiously white skin.

“Well?” he prodded presently. “What happened then? From what I know of Joe, I’ll say he made good all right.”

“Sure he did.” Pop spoke with emphasis, though somewhat thickly. “There ain’t nobody can tell Joe Bloss much about cattle. He whirled in right capable and got things runnin’ good. For a while he was so danged busy he’d hardly ever get to town, but come winter the work eased up an’ I used to see him right frequent. He’d set there alongside the stove evenings an’ tell me what he was doin’, or how he’d jest had a letter from Stratton, who was by now in France, an’ all the rest of it. Wal, to make a long story short, a year last month the letters stopped comin’. Joe begun to get worried, but I told him likely Stratton was too busy fightin’ to write, or he might even of got wounded. Yuh could have knocked me down with a wisp uh bunch-grass when one uh the boys come in one night with a Phoenix paper, an’ showed me Stratton’s name on a list uh killed or missin’!”

“When was that?” asked Buck briefly, seeing that Daggett evidently expected some comment. If only the man would get on!

“’Round the middle of September. Joe was jest naturally shot to pieces, him knowin’ young Stratton from a kid an’ likin’ him fine, besides bein’ consid’able worried about what was goin’ to happen to the ranch an’ him. Still an’ all, there wasn’t nothin’ he could do but go on holdin’ down his job, which he done until the big bust along the end of October.”

He paused again expectantly. Buck ground the butt of his cigarette under one heel and reached for the makings. He had an almost irresistible desire to take the garrulous old man by the shoulders and shake him till his teeth rattled.

“It was this here Thorne from Chicago,” resumed Daggett, a trifle disappointed. Usually at this point of the story, his listener broke in with exclamation or interested question. “He showed up one morning with the sheriff an’ claimed the ranch was his. Said Stratton had sold it to him an’ produced the deed, signed, sealed, an’ witnessed all right an’ proper.”

Match in one hand and cigarette in the other, Buck stared at him, the picture of arrested motion. For a moment or two his brain whirled. Could he possibly have done such a thing and not remember? With a ghastly sinking of his heart he realized that anything might have been possible during that hateful vanished year. Mechanically he lit his cigarette and of a sudden he grew calmer.

According to the hospital records he had not left France until well into November of the preceding year. Tossing the match into the stove, he met Pop Daggett's glance.

"How could that be?" he asked briefly. "Didn't you say this Stratton was in France for months before he was killed?"

Pop nodded hearty agreement. "That's jest what I said, an' so did Bloss. But according to Thorne this here transfer was made a couple uh weeks before Stratton went over to France."

"But that's impossible!" exclaimed Buck hotly. "How could he have——"

He ceased abruptly and bit his lip. Daggett chuckled.

"Gettin' kinda interested, ain't yuh?" he remarked in a satisfied tone. "I thought you would 'fore I was done. I don't say as it's impossible, but it shore looked queer to me. As Joe says, why would he go an' sell the outfit jest after buyin' it without a word to him. Not only that but he kept on writin' about how Joe was to do this an' that an' the other thing like he was mighty interested in havin' it run good. Joe, he even got suspicions uh somethin' crooked an' hired a lawyer to look into it, Stratton not havin' any folks. But that's all the good it done him. He couldn't pick no flaw in it at all. Seems Stratton was in Chicago on one of these here furloughs jest before he took ship. One uh the witnesses had gone to war, but they hunted out the other one an' he swore he'd seen the deed signed."

"Did this Thorne— What did you say his name was?"

"I don't recolleck sayin', but it was Andrew J."

Buck's lids narrowed; a curious gleam flashed for an instant in his gray eyes and was gone.

"Well, did Thorne explain why he let it go so long before making his claim?"

"Oh, shore! He was right there when it come to explainin'. Seems he had some important war business on his hands an' wanted to get shed uh that before he took up ranchin'. Knowed it was in good hands, 'count uh Bloss bein' on the job, an' Stratton havin' promised to write frequent an' keep Joe toin' the mark. Stratton, it seems, had sold out because he didn't know what might happen to him across the water. Oh, Andrew J. was a right smooth talker, believe me, but still an' all he didn't make no great hit with folks around the country even after he settled down on the Shoe-Bar and brung his daughter there to live. There weren't no tears shed, neither, when an ornery paint horse throwed him last May

an' broke his neck."

"What about Bloss?" Stratton asked briefly.

"Oh, he got his time along with all the other cow-men. There shore was a clean sweep when Thorne whirled in an' took hold. Joe hung around here a week or two an' then drifted down to Phoenix. Last I heard he was goin' to try the Flyin'-V's, but that was six months or more ago."

Buck's shoulders straightened and his chin went up with a sudden touch of swift decision.

"Got a horse I can hire?" he asked abruptly.

Pop hesitated, his shrewd gaze traveling swiftly over Stratton's straight, tall figure to rest reflectively on the lean, square-jawed, level-eyed young face.

"I dunno but I have," he answered slowly. "Uh course I don't know yore name even, an' a man's got to be careful how he—"

"Oh, that'll be all right," interrupted Stratton, his white teeth showing briefly in a smile. "I'll leave you a deposit. My name's Bob Green, though folks mostly call me Buck. I've got a notion to ride over to the Shoe-Bar and see if they know anything about—Joe."

"T ain't likely they will," shrugged Daggett. "Still, it won't do no harm to try. Yuh can't ride in them things, though," he added, surveying Stratton's well-cut suit of gray.

"I don't specially want to, but they're all I've got," smiled Buck. "When I quit ranching to show 'em how to run the war, I left my outfit behind, and I haven't been back yet to get it."

"Cow-man eh?" Pop nodded approvingly. "I thought so; yuh got the look, someway. Wal, yore welcome to some duds I bought off 'n Dick Sanders about a month ago. He quit the Rockin'-R to go railroadin' or somethin', an' sold his outfit, saddle an' all. I reckon they'll suit."

Stepping behind the counter, he poked around amongst a mass of miscellaneous merchandise and finally drew forth a pair of much-worn leather chaps, high-heeled boots almost new, and a cartridge-belt from which dangled an empty holster.

"There yuh are," he said triumphantly, spreading them out on the counter. "Gun's the only thing missin'. He kep' that, but likely yuh got one of yore own. Saddle's

hangin' out in the stable."

Without delay Stratton took off his coat and vest and sat down on an empty box to try the boots, which proved a trifle large but still wearable. He already had on a dark flannel shirt and a new Stetson, which he had bought in New York; and when he pulled on the chaps and buckled the cartridge-belt around his slim waist Pop Daggett surveyed him with distinct approval.

"All yuh need is a good coat uh tan to look like the genuine article," he remarked. "How come yuh to be so white?"

"Haven't been out of the hospital long enough to get browned up." Buck opened his bag and, fumbling for a moment, produced a forty-five army automatic. "This don't go very well with the outfit," he shrugged. "Happen to have a regular six-gun around the place you'll sell me?"

Pop had, this being part of his stock in trade. Buck looked the lot over carefully, finally picking out a thirty-eight Colt with a good heft. When he had paid for this and a supply of ammunition, Pop led the way out to a shed back of the store and pointed out a Fraser saddle, worn but in excellent condition, hanging from a hook.

"It's a wonder to me any cow-man is ever fool enough to sell his saddle," commented Stratton as he took it down. "They never get much for 'em, and new ones are so darn ornery to break in."

"Yuh said it," agreed Daggett. "I'd ruther buy one second-hand than new any day. There's the bridle. Yuh take that roan in the near stall. He ain't much to look at, but he'll travel all day."

Fifteen minutes later the roan, saddled and bridled, pawed the dust beside the hitching rack in front of the store, while Buck Stratton made a small bundle of his coat, vest, and a few necessaries from his bag and fastened it behind the saddle. The remainder of his belongings had been left with Pop Daggett, who lounged in the doorway fingering a roll of bills in his trousers pocket and watching his new acquaintance with smiling amiability.

"Well, I'll be going," said Stratton, tying the last knot securely. "I'll bring your cayuse back to-morrow or the day after at the latest."

Pop looked surprised. "The day after?" he repeated. "What's goin' to keep yuh that long?"

"Will you be needing the horse sooner?"

“No, I dunno’s I will. But seems like yuh ought to be back by noon to-morrow. It ain’t more ’n eighteen miles.” He straightened abruptly and his blue eyes widened. “Say, young feller! Yuh ain’t thinkin’ of gettin a job out there, are yuh?”

Stratton hesitated for an instant. “Well, I don’t know,” he shrugged presently. “I’ve got to get to work right soon at something.”

Daggett took a swift step or two across the sagging porch, his face grown oddly serious. “Wal, I wouldn’t try the Shoe-Bar, nohow. There’s the Rockin’-R. They’re short a man or two. Yuh go see Jim Tenny an’ tell him—”

“What’s the matter with the Shoe-Bar?” persisted Buck.

Pop’s glance avoided Stratton’s. “Yuh—wouldn’t like it,” he mumbled, glancing down the trail. “It—it ain’t like it was in Joe’s time. That there Tex Lynch—he—he don’t get on with the boys.”

“Who’s he? The foreman?”

“Yeah. Beauty Lynch, some calls him ’count uh his looks. I ain’t denyin’ he’s han’some, with them black eyes an’ red cheeks uh his, but somethin’ queer—Like I said, there ain’t nobody stays long at the Shoe-Bar. Yuh take my advice, Buck, an’ try the Rockin’-R. They’s a nice bunch there.”

Buck swung himself easily into the saddle; “I’ll think about it,” he smiled, gathering up the reins. “Well, so-long; see you in a day or so, anyway. Thanks for helping me out, old-timer.”

He loosened the reins, and the roan took the trail at a canter. Well beyond the last adobe house, Stratton glanced back to see old Pop Daggett still standing on the store porch and staring after him. Buck flung up one arm in a careless gesture of farewell; then a gentle downward slope in the prairie carried him out of sight of the little settlement.

“Acts to me like he was holding back something,” he thought as he rode briskly on through the wide, rolling solitudes. “Now, I wonder what sort of a guy is this Tex Lynch, and what’s going on at the Shoe-Bar that an old he-gossip like Pop Daggett is afraid to talk about?”

CHAPTER III

MISTRESS MARY—QUITE CONTRARY

But Stratton's mind was too full of the amazing information he had gleaned from the old storekeeper to leave much room for minor reflections. He had been stunned at first—so completely floored that anyone save the garrulous old man intent on making the most of his shop-worn story could not have helped seeing that something was seriously wrong. Then anger came—a hot, raging fury against the authors of this barefaced, impudent attempt at swindle. From motives of policy he had done his best to conceal that, too, from Pop Daggett; but now that he was alone it surged up again within him, dyeing his face a deep crimson and etching hard lines on his forehead and about his straight-lipped mouth.

“Thought they'd put it over easy,” he growled behind set teeth, one clenched, gloved hand thumping the saddle-horn. “Saw the notice in the papers, of course, and decided it would be a cinch to rob a dead man. Well, there's a surprise coming to somebody that'll make mine look like thirty cents.”

His lips relaxed in a grim smile, which presently merged into an expression¹³⁵ of puzzled wonder. Thorne, of all people, to try and put across a crooked deal like this! Stratton had never known the man really intimately, but during the several years of their business relationship the Chicago lawyer struck him as being scrupulously honest and upright. Indeed, when Buck came to enlist, it seemed a perfectly safe and natural thing to leave his deeds and other important papers in Andrew Thorne's keeping.

“Shows how you can be fooled in a man,” murmured Stratton, as he followed the trail down into a shallow draw. “I sure played into his hands nice. He had the deeds and everything, and it would be simple enough to fake a transfer when he thought I was dead and knew I hadn't any kin to make trouble. I wonder what the daughter's like. A holy terror, I'll bet, and tarred with the same brush. Well, she'll get hers in about two hours' time, and get it good.”

The grim smile flickered again on his lips for a moment, to vanish as he saw the

head and shoulders of a horseman appear over the further edge of the draw. An instant later the bulk of a big sorrel flashed into view and thudded toward him.

On the open range men usually stop for a word or two when they meet, but this one did not. As he approached Stratton at a rapid speed there was a brief, involuntary movement as if he meant to pull up and then changed his mind. The next moment he had whirled past with a careless, negligent gesture of one hand and a keen, penetrating, questioning stare from a pair of hard black eyes.

Buck glanced over one shoulder at the flying dust-cloud and pursed his lips.

“Wonder if that’s the mysterious Tex?” he pondered, urging his horse forward. “Black eyes and red cheeks, all right. He’s a good looking scoundrel—too darn good looking for a man. All the same, I can’t say it was a case of love at first sight.”

Unconsciously his right hand dropped to the holster at his side, the fingers caressing for an instant the butt of his Colt. He had set out on his errand of exposure with an angry impulsiveness which gave no thought to details or possibilities. But in some subtle fashion that searching glance from the passing stranger brought him up with a little mental jerk. For the first time he remembered that he was playing a lone hand, that the very nature of his business was likely to rouse the most desperate and unscrupulous opposition. Considering the value of the stake and the penalties involved, the present occupant of the Shoe-Bar was likely to use every means in her power to prevent his accusations from becoming public. If the fellow who had just passed really was Tex Lynch, Buck had a strong intuition that he was the sort of a man who could be counted on to take a prominent hand in the game, and also that he wouldn’t be any too particular as to how he played it.

A mile beyond the draw the trail forked, and Stratton took the left-hand branch. The grazing hereabouts was poor, and at this time of year particularly the Shoe-Bar cattle were more likely to be confined to the richer fenced-in pastures belonging to the ranch. The scenery thus presenting no points of interest, Buck’s thoughts turned to the interview ahead of him. Marshaling his facts, he planned briefly how he would make use of them, and finally began to draw scrappy mental pen-pictures of the usurping Mary Thorne.

She would be tall, probably, and raw-boned—that domineering, “bossy” type he always associated with women who assumed men’s jobs—harsh-voiced and more than a trifle hard. He dwelt particularly on her hardness, for surely no other sort of woman could possibly have helped to engineer the crooked deal which

Andrew Thorne and his daughter had so successfully put across. She would be painfully plain, of course, and doubtless also would wear knickerbockers like a certain woman farmer he had once met in Texas, smoke cigarettes constantly, and pack a gun. Having endowed the lady with a few other disagreeable qualities which pleased him mightily, Buck awoke to the realization that he was approaching the eastern extremity of the Shoe-Bar ranch. His eyes brightened, and, dismissing all thoughts of Miss Thorne, he began to cast interested, appraising glances to right and left as he rode.

There is little that escapes the eye of the professional ranchman, especially when he has been absent from his property for more than two years. Buck Stratton observed quite as much as the average man, and it presently became evident that what he saw did not please him. His keen eyes sought out sagging fence-wire where staples, drawn or fallen out, had never been replaced. Here and there a rotting post leaned at a precarious angle, or gates between pastures needed repairing badly. What cattle were in sight seemed in good condition but their number was much less than he expected. Only once did he observe any signs of human activity, and then the loafing attitude of the two punchers riding leisurely through a field half a mile away was but too apparent. By the time he came within sight of the ranch-house, nestling pleasantly in a little grove of cottonwoods beyond the creek, his face was set in a hard scowl.

“Looks to me like they were letting the whole outfit go to pot,” he muttered angrily. “It sure is time I whirled in and took a hand.”

Urging the roan forward, he rode splashing through the shallow stream, up the gentle slope, and swung out of his saddle close to the kitchen door. This stood open, and striding up to it Buck met the languid gaze of a swarthy middle-aged Mexican who lounged just within the portal.

“Miss Thorne around?” he asked curtly.

“Sure,” shrugged the Mexican. “I t’ink she in fron’ house. Yoh try aroun’ other door, mebbe fin’ her.”

In the old days the kitchen entrance had been the one most used, but Buck remembered that there was another at the opposite end of the building which opened directly into the ranch living-room. He sought it now, observing with preoccupied surprise that a small covered veranda had been built out from the house, found it ajar like the other, and knocked.

“Come in,” said a voice.

Stratton crossed the threshold, instinctively removing his hat. As he remembered it, the room, though of good size and comfortable enough, had been a clutter of purely masculine belongings. He was quite unprepared for the colorful gleam of Navajo rugs, the curtained windows, the general air of swept and garnished tidiness which seemed almost luxury. Briefly his sweeping glance took in a bowl of flowers on the center-table and then came to rest abruptly on a slight, girlish figure just risen from a chair beside it.

“I’d like to see Miss Thorne, please,” he said, stifling his momentary surprise.

The girl took a step forward, her slim, tanned, ringless fingers clasped loosely about a book she held.

“I’m Miss Thorne,” she answered in a low, pleasant voice.

Buck gasped and his eyes widened. Then he recovered himself swiftly.

“I mean Miss Mary Thorne,” he explained; “the—er—owner of this outfit.”

The girl smiled faintly, a touch of veiled wistfulness in her eyes.

“I’m Mary Thorne,” she said quietly. “There’s only one, you know.”

CHAPTER IV

THE BRANDING-IRON

Stratton was never sure just how long he stood staring at her in dumb, dazed bewilderment. After those mental pictures of the Mary Thorne he had expected to find, it was small wonder that the sight of this slip of a black-frosted girl, with her soft voice, her tawny-golden hair and wistful eyes, should stun him into temporary speechlessness. Even when he finally pulled himself together to feel a hot flush flaming in his face and find one gloved hand recklessly crumpling his new Stetson, he could not quite credit the evidence of his hearing.

“I—I beg pardon,” he said stiffly. “But it doesn’t seem possible that—”

He hesitated. The girl’s smile deepened whimsically.

“I know,” she said ruefully. “It never does. Nobody seems to think a girl can seriously attempt to run a cattle-ranch—even the way I’m trying to run it, with a capable foreman to look after things. Sometimes I wonder if—”

She paused, her glance falling on the book she held. Stratton saw that it was a shabby account-book, a stubby pencil thrust between the leaves.

“Yes?” he prompted, scarcely aware what made him ask the question.

She looked up at him, her eyes a little wider than before. They were a warm hazel, and for an instant in their depths Stratton glimpsed a troubled expression, so veiled and swiftly passing that a moment later he could not be sure he had read aright.

“It’s nothing,” she shrugged. “You probably know what a lot of nagging little worries a ranchman has, and sometimes it seems to me they all have to come at once. I suppose even a man gets a bit discouraged, now and then.”

“He sure does,” agreed Buck. “What—er—particular sort of worry do you mean?”

He asked the question impulsively without realizing how it might sound, coming

from a total stranger. The girl's slim figure stiffened and her chin went up. Then—perhaps something in his expression told her he had not meant to be impertinent—her face cleared.

“The principal one is lack of help,” she explained readily enough, and yet Stratton got a curious impression, somehow, that this wasn't really the worst of her troubles. “We're awfully short-handed.” She hesitated an instant and then went on frankly, “To tell the truth, when you first came in I was hoping you might be looking for a job.”

For an instant Buck had all he could do to conceal his amazement at this extraordinary turn of events.

“You mean I'd stand a chance of being taken on?” he countered, sparring for time.

“Of course! That is—You are a cow-puncher, aren't you?”

Stratton's lips twitched slightly.

“I've worked around cattle all my life.”

“Then naturally it would be all right. I should be very glad to hire you. Tex Lynch usually looks after all that, but he's away this afternoon and there's no reason why I shouldn't—” Her quaint air of dignity was marred by a sudden, amused twitch of the lips. “I'm really awfully pleased you did come to me,” she smiled. “He's been telling me for over two weeks that he couldn't hire a man for love or money; it'll be amusing to show him what I've done, sitting quietly here at home.”

“That's all settled, then?” Stratton had been doing some rapid thinking. “You'd like me to start in right away, I suppose? That'll suit me fine. My name's Bob Green. If you'll just explain to Lynch that I'm hired, I'll go down to the bunk-house and he can put me to work when he comes back.”

With a slight bow, he was moving away when Miss Thorne stopped him.

“Wait!” she cried. “Why, you haven't said a word about wages.”

Buck turned back, biting his lip and inwardly cursing himself for his carelessness.

“I s'posed it would be the usual forty dollars,” he explained.

“We pay that for new hands,” the girl informed him in some surprise. She sat down beside the table and opened her book. “I can put you down for forty, I

suppose, and then Tex will tell me what it ought to be after he's seen you work. Green, did you say?"

"Robert Green."

"And the address?"

Buck scratched his head.

"I don't guess I've got any," he returned. "I used to punch cows in Texas, but I've been away two years and a half, and the last outfit I was with has sold out to farmers."

"Oh!" She looked up swiftly and her gaze leaped unerringly to the scar which showed below his tumbled hair. "Oh! I see. You—you've been through the war."

Her voice broke a little, and to Buck's astonishment she turned quite white as her eyes sought the book again. A sudden fear smote him that she had guessed his real identity, but he dismissed the notion quickly. Such a thing was next to impossible when she had never set eyes upon him before to-day.

"That's all, I think," she said presently in a low voice. "You'll find the bunk-house, at the foot of the slope beside the creek. I'll speak to Tex as soon as he comes back."

Outside the ranch house, Buck paused for a moment or two, ostensibly to stare admiringly at a carefully tended flower-bed, but in reality to adjust his mind to the new and extraordinary situation. During the last two hours he had speculated a good deal on this interview, but not even his wildest imaginings had pictured the turn it had actually taken.

"Hired as a puncher on my own ranch by the girl whose father stole it from me!" he murmured under his breath. "It's a scream! Darned if it wouldn't make a good vaudeville turn."

But as he walked slowly back to where he had left his horse, Stratton's face grew thoughtful. He was trying to analyze the motives which had prompted him to accept such a position and found them a trifle mixed. Undeniably the girl's unexpected personality influenced him considerably. She did not strike him, even remotely, as the sort who would deliberately do anything dishonest. And though Buck knew there were women who might be able to assume that air of almost childlike innocence, he did not believe, somehow, that in her case it was assumed. At any rate a little delay would do no harm. By accepting the proffered job he would be able to study the lady and the situation at his leisure. Also—and

this he told himself was even more important—he would have a chance of quietly investigating conditions on the ranch. Pop Daggett’s vague hints, his own observations, and the intuition he had that Miss Thorne was worrying about something much more vital than the mere lack of hands, all combined to make him feel that things were not going right at the Shoe-Bar. Of course it might be simply a case of rotten management. But in the back of Buck’s mind there lurked a curious notion that something deeper and more far-reaching was going on beneath the surface, though of what nature he could not even guess.

Leading the roan into a corral which ranged beyond the kitchen, Stratton unsaddled him and turned him loose. Having hung the saddle and bridle in the adjacent shed, he tucked his bundle under one arm and headed for the bunk-house. He was within a few yards of the entrance to the long, adobe structure when the door was suddenly flung open and a slim, slight figure, hatless and stripped to the waist, plunged out, closely pursued by three other men.

He ran blindly with head down, and Buck had just time to drop his bundle and extend both arms to prevent a collision. An instant later his tense muscles quivered under the impact of some hundred and thirty pounds of solid bone and muscle; the runner staggered and flung up his head, a gasp of terror jolted from his lips.

“Oh!” he said more quietly, his tone an equal blend of astonishment and relief. “I thought—Don’t let ’em—”

He broke off, flushing. He was a pleasant-faced youngster of not more than eighteen or nineteen, with a tangled mop of blonde hair and blue eyes, the pupils of which were curiously dilated. Stratton, whose extended arms had caught the boy just under the armpits, could feel his heart pounding furiously.

“What’s the matter, kid?” he asked briefly.

“They were going to brand me—on the back,” the boy muttered.

Over the fellow’s bare, muscular shoulders Buck’s glance swept the trio who had pulled up just outside the bunk-house door. They seemed typical cow-punchers in dress and manner. Two of them were tall and well set up; the third was short and stocky and held a branding iron in one hand. Meeting Stratton’s gaze, he laughed loudly.

“By cripes, Bud! Yuh shore are easy. I thought yuh had more guts than to be scared of an iron that’s hardly had the chill took off.”

He guffawed again, the other two joining in. A flush crept up into the boy’s face,

but his lips were firm now, and as he turned to face the others his eyes narrowed slightly.

“If it’s so cold as that mebbe you’d like me to try it on yuh,” he suggested significantly.

The short man haw-hawed again, but not quite so boisterously. Buck noticed that he held the branding iron carefully away from his leg.

“I shore wouldn’t hollar like you done ’fore I was touched,” he retorted. “Wal, we got his goat good that time, didn’t we, Butch? Better come in an’ git yore shirt on ’fore the boss sees yuh half naked.”

He turned and disappeared into the bunk-house, followed by the two other punchers. Buck picked up his bundle and glanced at the boy.

“Seems like you’ve got a right sociable, amusing bunch around here,” he drawled.

The youngster’s lips parted impulsively, to close as swiftly over his white teeth.

“Oh, they’re a great lot of jokers,” he returned non-committally, moving toward the door. “Coming in?”

The room they entered was long and rather narrow, with built-in bunks occupying most of the wall space, while the usual assemblage of bridles, ropes, old hats, and garments, hanging from pegs, crowded the remainder. Opposite the door stood a rusty, pot-bellied stove which gave forth a heat that seemed rather superfluous on such a warm evening. The stocky fellow, having leaned his branding-iron against the adobe chimney, was occupied in closing the drafts. His two companions, both rolling cigarettes, stood beside him, while lounging at a rough table to the left of the door sat two other men, one of them idly shuffling a pack of dirty cards. As he entered, Stratton was conscious of the intent scrutiny of all five, and an easy, careless smile curved his lips.

“Reckon this is the bunk-house, all right,” he drawled. “The lady told me it was down this way. My name’s Bob Green—Buck for short. I’ve just been hired to show you guys how to punch cows proper.”

There was a barely perceptible silence, broken by one of the men at the table.

“Hired?” he repeated curtly. “Why, I thought Tex went to town.”

“Tex?” queried Stratton. “Oh, you mean the foreman. The lady did say something about that when she signed me up. Said she’d tell him about it when

he came back.”

He was aware of a swift exchange of glances between several of the men. The stocky fellow suddenly abandoned his manipulation of the stove-dampers and came forward.

“Oh, that’s it?” he remarked with an amiable grin. “Tex most always does the hirin’, yuh see. Glad to know yuh. My name’s McCabe—Slim, they calls me, ’count uh my sylph-like figger. These here guys is Bill Joyce an’ his side-kick, Butch Siegrist; likewise Flint Kreeger an’ Doc Peters over to the table. Bud Jessup yuh already met.”

He chuckled, and Buck glancing toward the corner where the youngster was tucking in the tails of his flannel shirt, smiled slightly.

“Got acquainted kinda sudden, didn’t we?” he grinned. “Glad to meet you gents. Whereabouts is a bunk I can stake my claim to?”

“This here’s vacant,” spoke up Bud Jessup quickly, indicating one next to his own.

Buck stepped over and tossed his bundle into it. As he did so the raucous clanging of a bell sounded from the direction of the ranch-house, accompanied by a stentorian shout: “Grub-pile!” which galvanized the punchers into action.

Stratton and the boy were the last to leave the room, and as he reached the door Buck noticed a tiny wisp of smoke curling up from the floor to one side of the stove. Looking closer he saw that it was caused by the branding-iron, one corner of which rested on the end of a board where the rough flooring came in contact with the square of hard-packed earth beneath the stove. Bud Jessup saw it, too, and without comment he stepped over and moved the iron to a safer position.

Still without words, the two left the bunk-house. But as they headed for the kitchen Buck’s eyes narrowed slightly and he flashed a momentary glance at his companion which was full of curiosity and thoughtful speculation.

CHAPTER V

TEX LYNCH

Supper, which was served in the ranch-house kitchen by Pedro, the Mexican cook, was not enlivened by much conversation. The food was plentiful and of good quality, and the punchers addressed themselves to its consumption with the single-hearted purpose of hungry men whose appetites have been sharpened by a long day in the saddle. Now and then someone mumbled a request to "pass the sugar," or desired more steak or coffee from the shuffling Pedro; but for the most part the serious business of eating occupied them exclusively.

There was no sign of Miss Thorne. Buck decided that she took her meals elsewhere and approved the isolation. It must be pretty hard, he thought, for a girl like that to be living her young life in this out-of-the-way corner of the world with no women companions to keep her company. Then he remembered that for all he knew she might not be the only one of her sex on the Shoe-Bar, and when the meal was over and the men were straggling back toward the bunk-house,⁴ he put the question to Bud Jessup, who walked beside him.

"Huh?" grunted the youngster, with a sharp, inquiring glance at his face. "What d'yuh want to know that for?"

Stratton shrugged his shoulders. "No particular reason," he smiled. "I only thought she'd find it mighty dull alone on the ranch with a bunch of punchers."

Bud continued to eye him intently. "Well, she ain't alone," he said briefly. "Mrs. Archer lives with her; an' uh course there's Pedro's Maria."

"Who's Mrs. Archer?"

"Her aunt. Kinda nice old lady, but she ain't got much pep. Maria's jest the other way. When she's got a grouch on she's some cat, believe me!"

For some reason the subject appeared to be distasteful to Jessup, and Buck asked no more questions. Instead of following the others into the bunk-house they strolled on along the bank of the creek, which was lined with fair-sized

cottonwoods. The sun had set, but the glow of it still lingered in the west. Glinting like a flame on the windows of the ranch-house, it even dappled the placid waters of the little stream with red-gold splotches, which mingled effectively with the mirrored reflections of the overhanging trees. From the kitchen chimney a wisp of smoke rose straight into the still clear air. In a corner of the corral half a dozen horses were bunched, lazily switching their tails at intervals. Through one of the pastures across the stream some cattle drifted, idly feeding their way to water.

It was a peaceful picture, yet Stratton could not rid his mind of the curious feeling that the peacefulness was all on the surface. He had not missed that swift exchange of glances that heralded his first appearance in the bunk-house; and though Slim McCabe particularly had been almost effusively affable, Buck was none the less convinced that his presence here was unwelcome. That business of the branding-iron, too, was puzzling. Was it merely a bit of rough but harmless horse-play or had it a deeper meaning? Bud did not look like a fellow to lose his nerve easily, and the iron had certainly been hot enough to brand even the tough hide of a three-year-old steer.

Buck glanced sidewise at his companion to find the blue eyes studying his face with a keen, questioning scrutiny. They were hastily withdrawn, and a faint color crept up, darkening the youngster's tan.

"Trying to size me up," thought Stratton interestedly. "He's got something on his chest, too."

But he gave no sign of what was in his mind. A moment or two later he paused and, leaning indolently against a tree, let his gaze sweep idly over the cattle in the near-by pasture.

"Looks to me like a pretty good bunch of steers," he commented, and then added carelessly: "What sort of a guy is this Tex Lynch, anyhow?"

Bud hesitated briefly, sending a swift, momentary glance toward the bunk-house.

"Oh, he's all right, I guess," he answered slowly.

Stratton grinned. "If you don't look out you'll be overpraising him, kid," he chuckled.

Jessup shrugged his shoulders. "I didn't say I liked him," he defended. "He knows his business all right."

"Oh, sure. Otherwise, I s'pose he wouldn't hold down his job. But what I want to

know is the kind of boss he is. Does he treat the fellows white, or is he a sneak?"

Bud's face darkened. "He treats some of 'em white enough," he snapped.

"That so? Favorites, eh? I've met up with that kind before. Is he hard to get on the right side of?"

"Dunno," growled the youngster. "I never tried."

Buck chuckled again. "Well, kid, so long as you don't seem to think it's worth while, I dunno why I should take the trouble. Who else is on the outs with him?"

Jessup flashed a startled glance at him. "How in blazes do you know—"

"Oh, gosh! That's easy. That open-faced countenance of yours would give you away even if your tongue didn't. I'd say you weren't a bit in love with Lynch, or any of the rest of the bunch, either. Likely you got a good reason, an' of course it ain't any of my business; but if that stunt with the red-hot branding-iron is a sample of their playfulness, I should think you'd drift. There must be plenty of peaceful jobs open in the neighborhood."

"But that's just what they want me to do," snapped Jessup hotly. "They're doin' their best to drive me——"

His jaws clamped shut and a sudden suspicion flashed into his eyes, which caused Buck promptly to relinquish all hope of getting any further information from the boy. Evidently he had said the wrong thing and got the fellow's back up, though he could not imagine how. And so, when Jessup curtly proposed that they return to the bunk-house, Stratton readily acquiesced.

They found the five punchers gathered around the table playing draw-poker under the light of a flaring oil lamp. McCabe extended a breezy invitation to Buck to join them, which he accepted promptly, drawing up an empty box to a space made for him between Slim and Butch Siegrist. With scarcely a glance at the group, Jessup selected a tattered magazine from a pile in one corner and sprawled out on his bunk, first lighting a small hand lamp and placing it on the floor beside him.

Stratton liked poker and played a good game, but he soon discovered that he was up against a pretty stiff proposition. The limit was the sky, and Kreeger and McCabe especially seemed to have a run of phenomenal luck. Buck didn't believe there was anything crooked about their playing; at least he could detect no sign of it, though he kept a sharp lookout as he always did when sitting in with strangers. But he was rather uncomfortably in a hole and was just beginning

to realize rather whimsically that for a while at least he had only a cow-man's pay to depend on for spending-money, when the door was suddenly jerked open and a tall, broad-shouldered figure loomed in the opening.

"Well, it's all right, fellows," said the new-comer, blinking a little at the light. "I saw—"

He caught himself up abruptly and glowered at Stratton.

"Who the devil are yuh?" he inquired harshly, stepping into the room.

Buck met his hard glance with smiling amiability.

"Name of Buck Green," he drawled. "Passed you on the trail this afternoon, didn't I? You must be Tex Lynch."

With a scarcely perceptible movement he shifted his cards to his left hand. His right, the palm half open, rested on the edge of the table just above his thigh. He didn't really believe the foreman would start anything, but one never knew, especially with a man of such evidently uncertain temper.

"Huh!" grunted Lynch. "Why didn't yuh stop me then? Yuh might have saved yourself a ride." He continued to stare at Stratton, a veiled speculation in his smoldering eyes. "Well?" he went on impatiently. "What can I do for yuh now I'm here?"

Buck raised his eyebrows. "Do for me? Why, I don't know as there's anything right this minute. I s'pose you'll be wanting to put me to work in the morning."

"You've sure got nerve a-plenty," rasped the foreman. "I ain't hirin' anybody that comes along just because he wears chaps."

"That so?" drawled Buck. "Funny the lady didn't mention that when she signed me up this afternoon."

Lynch's face darkened. "Yuh mean to say—"

He paused abruptly, his angry eyes sweeping past Stratton, to rest for an instant on Flint Kreeger, who sat just beyond McCabe. What he saw there Buck did not know, but it must have been something of warning or information. When his eyes returned to Stratton their expression was veiled under drooping lids; his lithe figure relaxed into an easier position against the door-casing, both hands resting lightly on slim hips.

"Miss Thorne hired yuh, then?" he remarked in a non-committal voice which yet held no touch of friendliness. "Well, that's different. Where've yuh worked?"

“The last outfit was the Three-Circles in Texas.” Buck named at random an outfit in the southern part of the state with which he was slightly acquainted. “Been in the army over two years, and just got my discharge.”

“Texas?” repeated Lynch curtly. “How the devil do yuh happen to be lookin’ for work here?”

“I’d heard Joe Bloss was foreman,” explained Buck calmly. “We used to work together on the Three-Circles, and I knew he’d give me a job. When I found out in Paloma he’d gone, I took a chance an’ rode out anyhow.”

He bore the foreman’s searching scrutiny very well, without a change of color or the quiver of an eyelash. Nevertheless he was not a little relieved when Lynch, with a brief comment about trying him out in the morning, moved around the table and sat down on a bunk to pull off his chaps. That sudden and complete bottling up of emotion had shown Buck how much more dangerous the man was than he had supposed, and he was pleased enough to come out of their first encounter so well.

With a barely perceptible sense of relaxing tension, the poker game was resumed, for which Buck was devoutly thankful. Throughout the interruption he had not forgotten his hand, which was by far the best he had held that evening. He played it and the succeeding ones so well that when the game ended he had managed to break even.

Ten minutes later the lights were out, and the silence of the bunk-house was broken only by the regular breathing of eight men, or the occasional creak of some one shifting his position in the narrow bunk. Having no blankets—a deficiency he meant to remedy if he could get off long enough to-morrow to ride to Paloma Springs—Buck removed merely chaps and boots and stretched his long form on the corn-husk tick with a little sigh of weariness. Until this moment he had not realized how tired he was. But he had slept poorly on the train, and this, coupled with the heady air and the somewhat stirring events of the last few hours, dragged his eyelids shut almost as soon as his head struck the improvised pillow.

It seemed as if scarcely a moment had passed before he opened them again. But he knew that it must be several hours later, for it had been pitch-dark when he went to sleep, and now a square of moonlight lay across the floor under the southern window, bringing into faint relief the outlines of the long room.

Just what had roused him he did not know; some noise, no doubt, either inside the bunk-house or without. Nerves attuned to battle-front conditions are likely to

become sharp as razor-edges, and Buck, starting from deep slumber to complete wakefulness, was almost instantly aware of a sense of strangeness in his surroundings.

In a moment he knew what it was. Even though they may not snore, the breathing of seven sleeping men is unmistakable. Buck did not have to strain his ears to realize that not a sound came from any of the other bunks, and swiftly the utter, unnatural stillness became oppressive.

Quietly he swung his stockinged feet to the floor and was reaching for the holster and cartridge-belt he had laid beside him, when, from the adjoining bunk, Bud Jessup's voice came in a cautious whisper.

“They're gone. The whole bunch of 'em just rode off.”

CHAPTER VI

THE BLOOD-STAINED SADDLE

“Hello, kid!” said Stratton quietly. “You awake? What’s up, anyhow?”

There was a rustle in the adjoining bunk, the thud of bare feet on the floor, and Jessup’s face loomed, wedge-shaped and oddly white, through the shadows.

“They’re gone,” he repeated, with a curious, nervous hesitancy of manner.

“I know. You said that before. What the devil are they doing out this time of night?”

In drawing his weapon to him, Buck’s eyes had fallen on his wrist-watch, the radiolite hands of which indicated twenty minutes after twelve. He awaited Jessup’s reply with interest, and it struck him as unnaturally long in coming.

“I don’t rightly know,” the youngster said at length. “I s’pose they must have gone out after—the rustlers.”

Buck straightened abruptly. “What!” he exclaimed. “You mean to say there’s been rustling on the Shoe-Bar?”

Again Jessup hesitated, but more briefly. “I don’t know why I shouldn’t tell yuh. Everybody’s wise to it, or suspects somethin’. They’ve got away with quite a bunch—mostly from the pastures around Las Vegas, over near the hills. Tex says they’re greasers, but I think—” He broke off to add a moment later in a troubled tone, “I wish to thunder he hadn’t gone an’ left Rick out there all alone.”

Stratton remembered Las Vegas as the name of a camp down at the southwesterly extremity of the ranch. It consisted of a one-room adobe shack, which was occupied at certain seasons of the year by one or two punchers, who from there could more easily look after the near-by cattle, or ride fence, than by going back and forth every day from the ranch headquarters.

“Who’s Rick?” he asked briefly.

“Rick Bemis. He—he’s one dandy fellow. We’ve worked together over two years.”

“H’m. How long’s this rustling been going on?”

“Three or four months.”

“Lost many head, have they?”

“Quite a bunch, I’d say, but I don’t know. They never tell me or Rick anythin’.”

Bud’s tone was bitter, and Stratton noticed it in spite of his preoccupation. Rustling! That would account for several of the things that had puzzled him. Rustling was possible, too, with the border-line comparatively near, and that stretch of rough, hilly country which touched the lower extremity of the ranch. But for the stealing to go on for three or four months, without something drastic being done to stop it, seemed peculiar, to say the least.

“What’s been done about it?” Buck asked briefly.

“Oh, they’ve gone out at night a few times, but they never caught anybody that I heard. Seems like the thieves were too slick, or else—”

He paused; Buck regarded him curiously through the faintly luminous shadows.

“Well?” he prodded

Bud moved uneasily. “It ain’t anythin’ special,” he returned evasively. “All this time they never left anybody down to Las Vegas till Rick was sent day before yesterday. I up an’ told Tex straight out there’d oughta be another fellow with him, but all he done was to bawl me out an’ tell me to mind my own business. It ain’t safe, an’ now they’ve gone out—”

Again he broke off, his voice a trifle husky with emotion. He was evidently growing more and more worked up and alarmed for the safety of his friend. It was plain, too, that the recent departure of the punchers for the scene of action, instead of reassuring Bud, had greatly increased his anxiety. Buck decided that the situation wasn’t as simple as it looked, and promptly determined on a little action.

“Would it ease your mind any if we saddled up an’ followed the bunch?” he asked.

Jessup drew a quick breath and half rose from the bunk. “By cripes, yes!” he exclaimed. “Yuh mean you’d—”

“Sure,” said Stratton, reaching for his boots. “Why not? If there’s going to be

any excitement I'd like to be on hand. Pile into your clothes, kid, and let's go."

Jessup began to dress rapidly. "I don't s'pose Tex'll be awful pleased," he murmured, dragging on his shirt.

"I don't see he'll have any kick coming," returned Buck easily. "If he's laying for rustlers, seems like he'd ought to have routed out the two of us in the beginning to have as big a crowd as possible. You never know what you're up against with those slippery cusses."

Bud made no further comment, and a few minutes later they left the bunk-house and went up to the corral. The bright moonlight illumined everything clearly and made it easy to rope and saddle two of the three horses remaining in the enclosure. Then, swinging into the saddle, they rode down the slope, splashed through the creek, and entering the further pasture by a gate, headed south at a brisk lope.

The land comprising the Shoe-Bar ranch was a roughly rectangular strip, much longer than it was wide, which skirted the foothills of the Escalante Mountains. As the crow flies it was roughly seven miles from the ranch-house to Las Vegas camp, and for the better part of that distance there was little conversation between the two riders. Buck would have liked to question his companion about a number of things that puzzled him, but having sized up Jessup and come to the conclusion that the youngster was the sort whose confidence must be given uninvited or not at all, he held his peace. Apparently Bud had not yet made up his mind whether to class Stratton as an enemy or a friend, and Buck felt he could not do better than endeavor unobtrusively to impress the latter fact upon him. That done, he was sure the boy would open up freely.

The wisdom of this policy became evident sooner than he expected. From time to time as they rode, Stratton commented casually, as a new hand would be likely to do, on some feature or other connected with the ranch or their fellow-punchers. To these remarks Jessup replied readily enough, but in a preoccupied manner, until all at once, moved either by something Buck had said, or possibly by a mind burdened to the point where self-restraint was no longer possible, he burst into sudden surprising speech.

"That wasn't no foolin' with that iron this afternoon. If yuh hadn't come along jest then they'd of branded me on the back."

Astonished, Buck glanced at him sharply. They had traveled more than two-thirds of the distance to Las Vegas camp, and he had quite given up hope of Jessup's opening up during the ride.

“Oh, say!” he protested. “Are you trying to throw a load into me? Why would they want to do that?”

Jessup gave a short brittle laugh.

“They want me to quit,” he retorted curtly.

“Quit?” repeated Stratton, his eyes widening. “But—”

“Tex don’t want me here,” broke in the youngster. “For the last three months he’s tried all kinds of ways to make me an’ Rick take our time; but it won’t work.” His lips pressed together firmly. “I promised Miss—”

His words clipped off abruptly, as a single shot, sharp and distinct, shattered the still serenity of the night. It came from the south, from the direction of Las Vegas. Buck flung up his head and pulled instinctively on the reins. Jessup caught his breath with an odd, whistling intake.

“There!” he gasped unevenly.

For a moment or two they sat motionless, listening intently, Buck’s face a curious mixture of alertness and surprise. Up to this moment he had taken the whole business rather casually, with small expectation that anything would come of it, but the sound of that shot changed everything. Something was happening, then, after all—something sinister, perhaps, and certainly not far away. His eyes narrowed, and when no other sound followed that single report, he loosed his reins and urged the roan to a gallop.

For perhaps half a mile the two plunged forward amidst a silence that was broken only by the dull thudding of their horses’ hoofs and their own rapid breathing. Then all at once Buck jerked his roan to a standstill.

“Some one’s coming,” he warned briefly.

Straight ahead of them the moonlight lay across the flat, rolling prairie almost like a pathway of molten silver. On either side of the brilliant stretch the light merged gradually and imperceptibly into shadows—shadows which yet held a curious, half-luminous quality, giving a sense of shifting horizons and lending a touch of mystery to the vague distances which seemed to be revealed.

From somewhere in that illusive shadow land came the faint beat of a horse’s hoofs, growing steadily louder. Eyes narrowed to mere slits, Stratton stared ahead intently until of a sudden his gaze focused on a faintly visible moving shape.

He straightened, his right hand falling to the butt of his Colt. But presently his grip relaxed and he reached out slowly for his rope.

“There’s no one on him,” he murmured in surprise.

Without turning his head, Jessup made an odd, throaty sound of acquiescence.

“He’s saddled, though,” he muttered a moment later, and also began taking down his rope.

Straight toward them along that moonlit pathway came the flying horse, head down, stirrups of the empty saddle flapping. Buck held his rope ready, and when the animal was about a hundred feet away he spurred suddenly to the right, whirling the widening loop above his head. As it fell accurately about the horse’s neck the animal stopped short with the mechanical abruptness of the well-trained range mount and stood still, panting.

Slipping to the ground, Bud ran toward him, with Stratton close behind. The strange cayuse, a sorrel of medium size, was covered with foam and lather, and as Jessup came close to him he rolled his eyes in a frightened manner.

“It’s Rick’s saddle,” said Bud in an agitated tone, after he had made a hasty examination. “I’d know it anywhere from—that—cut—in—”

His voice trailed off into silence and he gazed with wide-eyed, growing horror at the hand that had rested on the saddle-skirt. It was stained bright crimson, and Buck, staring over his shoulder, noticed that the leather surface glistened darkly ominous in the bright moonlight.

Slowly the boy turned his head and looked at Stratton. His face was lint-white, and the pupils of his eyes were curiously dilated.

“It’s Rick’s saddle,” he repeated dully, and shuddered as he stared again at his blood-stained hand.

Buck’s own fingers caught the youngster’s shoulder in a reassuring grip, and his lips parted. But before he had time to speak a sudden volley of shots rang out ahead of them, so crisp and distinct and clear that instinctively he stiffened, his ears attuned for the familiar, vibrant hum of flying bullets.

CHAPTER VII

RUSTLERS

Swiftly the echoes of the shots died away, leaving the still serenity of the night again unruffled. For a moment or two Stratton waited expectantly; then his shoulders squared decisively.

“I reckon it’s up to us to find out what’s going on down there,” he said, turning toward his horse.

Jessup nodded curt agreement. “Better take the sorrel along, hadn’t we?” he asked.

“Sure.” Buck swung himself lightly into the saddle, shortening the lead rope and fastening it to the horn. “I was thinking of that.”

Five minutes later they pulled up in front of a small adobe shack nestling against a background of cottonwoods that told of the near presence of the creek. The door stood open, framing a black rectangle which proclaimed the emptiness of the hut, and with scarcely a pause the two rode slowly on, searching the moonlit vistas with keen alertness.

On their right the country had grown noticeably rougher. Here and there low spurs from the near-by western hills thrust out into the flat prairie, and deep shadows which marked the opening of draw or gully loomed up frequently. It was from one of these, about half a mile south of the hut, that a voice issued suddenly, halting the two riders abruptly by the curtness of its snarling menace.

“Hands up!”

Buck obeyed promptly, having learned from experience the futility of trying to draw on a person whose very outlines are invisible. Jessup’s hands went up, too, and then dropped quickly to his sides again.

“Why, it’s Slim!” he cried, and spurred swiftly toward the mouth of the gully. “What the deuce is the matter?” he asked anxiously. “What’s happened to Rick?”

There was a momentary pause, and then McCabe stepped out of the shadows, six-gun in one hand.

“What the devil are yuh doin’ here?” he demanded with a harshness which struck Buck in curious contrast to his usual air of good humor. “Who’s that with yuh?”

“Only Green. We—we got worried, an’ saddled up an’—followed yuh. When we heard the shots—What *did* happen to Rick, Slim? We caught his horse out there, the saddle all—”

“Since yuh gotta know,” snapped the puncher, “he got a hole drilled through one leg. He’s right here behind me.”

As Bud flung himself out of the saddle and hurried over to the man lying just inside the gully, McCabe stepped swiftly to the side of Stratton’s horse. There was a mingling of doubt and sharp suspicion in the upturned face.

“Yuh sure are up an’ doin’ for a new hand,” he commented swiftly. “Was it yuh put it into his head to come out here?”

“I reckon maybe it was,” returned Buck easily. “When we woke up an’ found you all gone, the kid got fretting considerable about his friend here, and I didn’t see why we shouldn’t ride out and join you. According to my mind, when you’re out after rustlers, the more the merrier.”

“Huh! He told yuh we was after rustlers?”

“Sure. Why not? It ain’t any secret, is it? Leastwise, I didn’t gather that from Bud.”

McCabe’s face relaxed. “Wal, I dunno as ’t is,” he shrugged. “Tex likes to run things his own way, though. Still, I dunno as there’s any harm done. Truth is, we didn’t get started soon enough. We was half a mile off when we heard the shot, an’ rid up to find Rick drilled through the leg an’ the thieves beatin’ it for the mountains. The rest of the bunch lit out after ’em while I stayed with Rick. I dunno as they caught any of ’em, but I reckon they didn’t have time to run off no cattle.”

Stratton slid out of the saddle and threw the reins over the roan’s head. He had not failed to notice the slight discrepancy in McCabe’s statement as to the length of time it took the punchers to ride from the bunk-house to this spot, but he made no comment.

“Bemis hurt bad?” he asked.

“Not serious. It’s a clean wound in his thigh. I got it tied up with his neckerchief.”

Buck nodded and walked over to where Bud was squatting beside the wounded cow-puncher. By this time his eyes were accustomed to the half-darkness, and he could easily distinguish the long length of the fellow, and even noted that the dark eyes were regarding him questioningly out of a white, rather strained face.

“Want me to look you over?” he asked, bending down. “I’ve had considerable experience with this sort of thing, and maybe I can make you easier.”

“Go to it,” nodded the young chap briefly. “It ain’t bleedin’ like it was, but it could be a whole lot more comfortable.”

With the aid of Jessup and McCabe, Bemis was moved out into the moonlight, where Stratton made a careful examination of his wound. He found that the bullet had plowed through the fleshy part of the thigh, just missing the bone, and, barring chances of infection, it was not likely to be dangerous. He was readjusting Slim’s crude bandaging when he heard the beat of hoofs and out of the corner of one eye saw McCabe walk swiftly out to meet the returning punchers.

These halted about fifty feet away, and there was a brief exchange of words of which Buck could distinguish nothing. Presently two of the men dashed off in the direction of the ranch-house, while Lynch rode slowly forward and dismounted.

“How yuh feelin’?” he asked Bemis, adding with a touch of sarcasm in his voice, “I hear yuh got a reg’lar professional sawbones to look after yuh.”

“He acts like he knew what he was about,” returned Bemis briefly. “How yuh goin’ to get me home?”

“I’ve sent Butch an’ Flint after the wagon,” explained Lynch. “They’ll hustle all they can.”

“Did you catch sight of the rustlers?” asked Stratton suddenly.

The foreman flashed him a sudden not overfriendly glance.

“No,” he returned curtly, and turning on his heel led his horse over to where the others had gathered in the shadow of a rocky butte.

It was nearly an hour before the lumbering farm-wagon appeared. During the interval Buck sat beside the wounded man, smoking and exchanging occasional

brief comments with Bud, who stayed close by. One or two of the others strolled up to ask about Bemis, but for the most part they remained in their little group, the intermittent glow of their cigarettes flickering in the darkness and the constant low murmur of their conversation wafted indistinguishably across the intervening space.

Their behavior piqued Buck's curiosity tremendously. What were they talking about so continually? Where had the outlaws gone, and why hadn't they been pursued further? Had the whole pursuit been merely in the nature of a bluff? And if so, whom had it been intended to deceive? These and a score of other questions passed through his mind as he sat there waiting, but when the dull rumble of the wagon started them all into activity, he had not succeeded in finding any really plausible answers.

The return trip was necessarily slow, and dawn was just breaking as they forded the creek and drove up to the bunk-house. They had barely come to a standstill when, to Buck's surprise, the slim figure of Mary Thorne, bare-headed and clad in riding-clothes, appeared suddenly around the corner of the ranch-house and came swiftly toward them.

"Pedro told me," she said briefly, pausing beside the wagon. "How is he?"

"Doin' fine," responded Lynch promptly. "It's a clean wound an' ought to heal in no time. Our new hand Green tied him up like a regular professional."

His manner was almost fulsomely pleasant; Miss Thorne's expression of anxiety relaxed.

"I'm so glad. You'd better bring him right up to the house; he'll be more comfortable there."

"That ain't hardly necessary," objected Lynch. "He'll do all right here. We don't want him to be a bother to yuh."

"He won't be," retorted Miss Thorne with unexpected decision. "We've plenty of room, and Maria has a bed all ready. The bunk-house is no place for a sick man."

During the brief colloquy Bemis, though perfectly conscious, made no comment whatever. But Buck, glancing toward him as he lay on the husk mattress behind the driver, surprised a fleeting but unmistakable expression of relief in his tanned face.

"He don't want to stay in the bunk-house," thought Stratton. "I don't know as I

blame him, neither. I wonder, though, if it's because he figures on being more comfortable up there, or—"

The unvoiced question ended with a shrug as Lynch, somewhat curt of manner, gave the order to move.

"Yuh don't all of yuh have to come, neither," he added quickly. "Butch an' Slim an' me can carry him in."

Miss Thorne, who had already started toward the house, glanced over one shoulder. "If Green knows something about first aid, as you say, he'd better come too, I think."

Buck glanced questioningly at the foreman, received a surly nod and dismounted, smiling inwardly. It amused him exceedingly to see the dictatorial Tex forced to take orders from this slip of a girl. Evidently she was not quite so pathetically helpless as he had supposed the afternoon before. He began to wonder how she did it, for Lynch struck him as a far from easy person to manage. He was still turning the question over in his mind when he received a shock which for the moment banished every other thought.

The wagon was backed up to the porch, and the four punchers, each taking a corner of the mattress, lifted Bemis out and carried him across the living-room and through a door on the further side which Miss Thorne held open. The room was light and airy, and Buck was conscious of a vague sense of familiarity, which he set down to his rather brief acquaintance with the place two years ago. But when Bemis had been undressed and put to bed and his wound thoroughly cleansed with antiseptic and freshly bandaged, Stratton, really looking about him for the first time, made an odd discovery.

It was his own room! He remembered perfectly choosing it and moving in his belongings the day before he left; and as he stared curiously around he could not see that a single one of them had been touched. There were his trunks just as they had come from Texas. His bureau stood between the windows, and on it lay a pair of brushes and the few odds and ends he had left there when he enlisted. A pair of chaps and a well-worn Stetson hung near the door, and he had just stepped over to make sure they were actually the ones he had left behind when Miss Thorne, who had been talking in the living-room with Lynch, appeared suddenly on the threshold.

As their glances met she drew herself up a little, and a curious expression came into her eyes. Her lips parted impulsively, but when, after a momentary hesitation, she spoke, Buck had an impression that something quite different had

been on the tip of her tongue an instant before.

“He’d better have the doctor at once, don’t you think?” she said briefly.

Buck nodded. “Yes, ma’am, he ought. I’ve done the best I could, and the chances are he’ll get along all right; but a regular doctor ought to look him over as soon as possible.”

“I thought so. I’ve just told Tex to send a man to town at once and wire Dr. Blanchard, who lives about twelve miles up the line. It’ll take him three or four hours to ride over, but there’s no one nearer.”

“I wish you’d let me go,” said Stratton impulsively. “I’ve got to return the horse I borrowed and get blankets and some things I left at the store. There’s really nothing more I can do for Bemis by hanging around.”

Her brows crinkled doubtfully. “Well, if you’re sure—I suppose there’s no reason why you shouldn’t. Tell Tex I said you were to go. He’ll give you the directions. Only you’ll have to hurry.”

With a murmured word of thanks, Buck snatched up his hat and hastened into the living-room. As he passed the big table he was aware of a door at the farther end opening, but he did not turn his head. An instant later, as he was in the act of springing off the porch, he heard a woman’s voice behind him, soft, low, and a little shaken.

“What is it, Mary? What’s happened? You don’t mean to tell me that—that another man’s been shot.”

Buck’s eyes widened, but he did not pause. “That’s the aunt, I reckon,” he muttered, as he sped down the slope. His lips straightened. “Another! Holy cats! What the devil am I up against, anyhow? A murder syndicate?”

CHAPTER VIII

THE HOODOO OUTFIT

Pop Daggett hesitated and glanced uneasily toward the door.

“I warned yuh, didn’t I, the Shoe-Bar was a hoodoo outfit?” he evaded.

Stratton shook some tobacco into a cigarette-paper and jerked the draw-string with his teeth.

“Sure you did, but that’s not the question,” he persisted. “I asked you if any other punchers had met up with—accidents out there lately.”

The old man continued to cock an eye on the store entrance.

“Since yuh gotta know,” he answered in a lowered tone, “there was two. About three months ago Jed Terry was scoutin’ around back in the mountains, Lord knows what fur, an’ fell into a cañon an’ broke his skull. Four or five weeks arter that Sam Bennett was plugged through the chest down below Las Vegas.”

“Did Lynch happen to be with either of them?”

“No, sir-ee,” returned Daggett hastily. “An’ don’t yuh go blattin’ around I told yuh anythin’ about it. I ain’t one to gossip about my neighbors, more especially Tex Lynch. Them two deaths— Say, Tex ain’t in town with yuh, is he?”

“Not that I know of. He certainly didn’t come with me.”

“Huh! Wal, yuh never c’n tell with him. As I was sayin’, Terry’s death was pernounced a accident, an’ they allowed Bennett was plugged by one of them greaser rustlers I hear tell of. I ain’t sayin’ nothing to the contrary. All I’m tellin’ yuh is the Shoe-Bar ain’t a healthy outfit to work for, an’ this business about Rick Bemis proves it. I wouldn’t sign on with ’em, not for a hundred a month.”

Buck thrust the cigarette between his lips and felt for a match. “Still I’ve got a mind to stick it out a while,” he drawled. “Accidents come in threes, they say, so there won’t likely be another right soon. Well, I reckon I’d better be traveling.

How long will it take that doctor man to get over?"

"Not much longer than 't will yuh, if he was home when yuh telephoned," answered Daggett. "The railroad takes a bend, an' Harpswell ain't more than a mile or two further from the Shoe-Bar than Paloma."

Evidently Dr. Blanchard must have been at home, for Buck had just finished unsaddling and was coming away from the corral when he rode up. Stratton took his horse and answered his brief questions as to the accident, and then walked down to the bunk-house with his blankets, tarp, and other belongings. The place was empty, for it was after one o'clock and evidently the men had gone off somewhere directly after dinner. Indeed, Buck learned as much from Pedro when he went back to forage for something to eat.

"They go to move herd some place," shrugged the Mexican. "W'ere, I don' know."

Stratton ate his meal of beef, bread, and warmed-over coffee in silence and then returned to the bunk-house, vaguely dissatisfied at the idle afternoon which stretched before him. Of course, Lynch had no way of knowing when he would get back from town, but it seemed to Buck that an up-and-doing foreman would have left word for him to join them when he did return.

"Unless, of course, he don't want me around," murmured Stratton. "Though for the life of me I can't see what he gains by keeping me idle."

Presently it occurred to him that this might be a good chance of pursuing some of the investigations he had planned. Since noticing the disreputable condition of the fence the afternoon of his arrival, he had kept his eyes open, and a number of other little signs had confirmed his suspicion that the ranch had very much gone to seed. Of course this might be merely the result of careless, slovenly methods on the part of the foreman, and possibly it did not extend to anything really radical. It would need a much wider, more general inspection to justify a definite conclusion, and Stratton decided he might as well do some of it this afternoon. On the plea of seeking Lynch and the other men, he could ride almost anywhere without exciting suspicion, and he at once left the bunk-house to carry out his plan. Just outside the door he met Dr. Blanchard.

"You made a good job of that dressing," remarked the older man briefly. He was tall with a slight stoop, bearded, a little slovenly in dress, but with clear, level eyes and a capable manner. "Where'd you learn how?"

Stratton smiled. "Overseas. I was in the Transportation, and we had to know a

little of everything, including first aid.”

“Hum,” grunted the doctor. “Well, the kid’s doing all right. I won’t have to come over again unless fever develops.”

As they walked back to the hitching-rack, he gave Buck a few directions about the care of the invalid. There followed a slight pause.

“You’re new here,” commented the doctor, untying his bridle-reins.

“Just came yesterday,” answered Stratton.

“Friend of Lynch?”

Buck’s lips twitched. “Not exactly,” he shrugged. “Miss Thorne hired me while he was in Paloma. I got a notion he was rather peevish about it. Reckon he prefers to pick his own hands.”

As the doctor swung into the saddle, his face momentarily lightened.

“Don’t let that worry you,” he said, a faint little twinkle in his eyes. “It isn’t good for anybody to have their own way all the time. Well, you know what to do about Bemis. If he shows any signs of fever, get hold of me right away.”

With a wave of his hand he rode off. Stratton’s glance followed him curiously. Had he really been pleased to find that the new hand was not a friend of Tex Lynch, or was the idea merely a product of Buck’s imagination?

Still pondering, he turned abruptly to find Pedro regarding him intently from the kitchen door. As their glances met, the Mexican’s lids drooped and his face smoothed swiftly into its usual indolent indifference; but he was not quite quick enough to hide entirely that first look of searching speculation mingled with not a little venom.

Stratton’s own expression was the perfection of studied self-control. He half smiled, and yawned in a realistically bored manner.

“You sure you don’t know where the bunch went?” he asked. “I’m getting dead sick of hanging around doing nothing.”

“They don’ say,” shrugged the Mexican. “I wash dishes an’ don’ see ’em go. Mebbe back soon.”

“Not if they’re moving a herd—I don’t think!” retorted Buck. “Guess I’ll ask Miss Thorne,” he added, struck by a sudden inspiration.

Without waiting for a reply, he walked briskly along the front of the house

toward the further entrance. As he turned the corner he met the girl, booted, spurred, her face shaded becomingly by a wide-brimmed Stetson.

“I was just going to find you,” she said. “Rick wants to see you a minute.”

Stratton followed her into the living-room, where she paused and glanced back at him.

“You haven’t met my aunt, Mrs. Archer,” she said in her low, pleasant voice. “Auntie, this is Buck Green, our new hand.”

From a chair beside one of the west windows, there rose a little old lady at the sight of whom Buck’s eyes widened in astonishment. Just what he had expected Mrs. Archer to be he hardly knew, but certainly it wasn’t this dainty, delicate, Dresden-China person who came forward to greet him. Tiny she was, from her old-fashioned lace cap to the tips of her small, trim shoes. Her gown, of some soft gray stuff, with touches of old lace here and there, was modishly cut yet without any traces of exaggeration. Her abundant white hair was beautifully arranged, and her cheeks, amazingly soft and smooth, with scarcely a line in them, were faintly pink. A more utterly incongruous figure to find on an outlying Arizona ranch would be impossible to imagine, and Buck was hard put to refrain from showing his surprise.

“How do you do, Mr. Green?” she said in a soft agreeable voice, which Stratton recognized at once as the one he had overheard that morning. “My niece has told me how helpful you’ve been already.”

Buck took her outstretched hand gingerly, and looked down into her upturned face. Her eyes were blue, and very bright and eager, with scarcely a hint of age in them. For a brief moment they gazed steadily into his, searching, appraising, an underlying touch of wistful anxiety in their clear depths. Then a twinkle flashed into them and of a sudden Stratton felt that he liked her very much indeed.

“I’m mighty glad to meet you,” he said impulsively.

The smile spread from eyes to lips. “Thank you,” she replied. “I think I may say the same thing. I hope you’ll like it here well enough to stay.”

There was a faint accent on the last word. Buck noticed it, and after she had left them, saying she was going to rest a little, he wondered. Did she want him to remain merely because of the short-handed condition of the ranch, or was there a deeper reason? He glanced at Miss Thorne to find her regarding him with something of the same anxious scrutiny he had noticed in her aunt. Her gaze was

instantly averted, and a faint flush tinged her cheeks, to be reflected an instant later in Stratton's face.

"By the way," he said hurriedly, annoyed at his embarrassment, "do you happen to know where the men are? I thought I'd hunt them up. There's no sense in my hanging around all afternoon doing nothing."

"They're down at the south pasture," she answered readily. "Tex thinks it will be better to move the cattle to where it won't be so easy for those rustlers to get at them. I'm just going down there and we can ride together, if you like." She turned toward the door. "When you're through with Rick you'll find me out at the corral."

"Don't you want me to saddle up for you?"

"Pedro will do that, thank you. Tell Rick if he wants anything while I'm gone all he has to do is to ring the bell beside his bed and Maria will answer it."

She departed, and Buck walked briskly into the bedroom. Bemis lay in bed propped up with pillows and looking much better physically than he had done that morning. But his face was still strained, with that harassed, worried expression about the eyes which Stratton had noted before.

"Yuh saw Doc Blanchard, didn't yuh?" he asked, as Buck sat down on the side of his bed. "What'd he say?"

"Why, that you were doing fine. Not a chance in a hundred, he said, of your having any trouble with the wound."

"Oh, I know that. But when'd he say I'd be on my feet?"

Buck shrugged his shoulders. "He didn't mention any particular time for that. I should think it would be two or three weeks, at least."

"Hell!" The young fellow's fingers twisted the coverlet nervously. "Don't yuh believe I could—er—ride before that?" he added, almost pleadingly.

Stratton's eyes widened. "Ride!" he repeated. "Where the deuce do you want to ride to?"

Bemis hesitated, a slow flush creeping into his tanned face. The glance he bent on Stratton was somewhat shamefaced.

"Anywhere," he answered curtly, a touch of defiance in his tone. "You'll say I've lost my nerve, an' maybe I have. But after what's happened around this joint

lately, and especially last night—”

He paused, glancing nervously toward the door. Buck’s expression had grown suddenly keen and eager.

“Well?” he urged. “What did happen, anyhow? I had my suspicions there was something queer about that business, but—You can trust me, old man.”

Bemis nodded, his dark eyes searching Stratton’s face. “I’ll take a chance,” he answered. “I got to. There ain’t nobody else. They’ve kept Bud away, and Miss Mary—Well, she’s all right, uh course, but Tex has got her buffaloes. She won’t believe nothin’ ag’in him. I told Bud I’d stay as long as he did, but—A man’s got to look after himself some. They ain’t likely to miss twice runnin’.”

“You mean to say—”

Bemis stopped him with a cautious gesture. “Where’s that sneaking greaser?” he asked in a low tone, his eyes shifting nervously to the open door.

“Out saddling her horse.”

“Oh! Well, listen.” The young puncher’s voice sank almost to a whisper. “That sendin’ me down to Las Vegas was a plant; I’m shore of it. My orders was to sleep days an’ patrol around nights to get a line on who was after the cattle. I wasn’t awful keen about it, but still an’ all, I didn’t think they’d dare do what they tried to.”

“You mean there weren’t any rustlers at all?” put in Stratton impulsively.

“Shore there was, but they didn’t fire that shot that winged me. I’d just got sight of ’em four or five hundred yards away an’ was ridin’ along in the shadow tryin’ to edge close enough to size ’em up an’ mebbe pick off a couple. My cayuse was headin’ south, with the rustlers pretty near dead ahead, when I come to a patch of moonlight I had to cross. I pulled out considerable to ride around a spur just beyond, so when that shot came I was facin’ pretty near due east. The bullet hit me in the left leg, yuh recollect.”

Stratton’s eyes narrowed. “Then it must have been fired from the north—from the direction of the—”

He broke off abruptly as Rick’s fingers gripped his wrist.

“Look!” breathed Bemis, in a voice that was scarcely audible.

He was staring over the low foot-board of the bed straight at the open door, and Buck swiftly followed the direction of his glance. For an instant he saw nothing.

The doorway was quite empty, and he could not hear a sound. Then, of a sudden, his gaze swept on across the living-room and he caught his breath.

On the further wall, directly opposite the bedroom door, hung a long mirror in a tarnished gilded frame. It reflected not only the other side of the doorway but a portion of the wall on either side of it—reflected clearly, among other things, the stooping figure of a woman, her limp calico skirts dragged cautiously back in one skinny hand, her sharp, swarthy face bent slightly forward in an unmistakable attitude of listening.

CHAPTER IX

REVELATIONS

It was the Mexican woman, Maria. As Buck recognized her he rose quietly and moved swiftly toward the door. But if he had hoped to catch her unawares, he was disappointed. He had scarcely taken a step when, through the telltale mirror, he saw her straighten like a flash and move back with catlike swiftness toward the passage leading to the kitchen. When he reached the living-room she stood there calm and casual, with quite the air of one entering for the first time.

“Mees T’orne, she ask me see if Reek, he wan’ somet’ing,” she explained, with a flash of her white teeth.

“He doesn’t,” returned Buck shortly, eyeing the woman intently. “If he does, he’ll ring the bell.”

“Ver’ good,” she nodded. “I leave the door open to ’ear.”

With a nod and another smile she departed, and Buck heard her moving away along the passage. For a moment he was tempted to close and lock the door. Then he realized that even if she dared return to her eavesdropping, he would have ample warning by keeping an eye on the mirror, and so returned to Bemis.

“I hate that woman,” said Rick, when informed of her departure. “She’s always snoopin’ around, an’ so is her greaser husband. Down at the bunk-house it’s the same way, with Slim, an’ Flint Kreeger an’ the rest. I tell yuh, I’m dead sick of being spied on, an’ plotted against, an’ never knowin’ when yuh may get a knife in the back, or stop a bullet. I hate to leave Bud, but he’s so plumb set on—”

“But what’s it all about?” put in Buck impatiently. “Can’t you tell a fellow, or don’t you know?”

Bemis flushed slightly at his tone. “I can tell yuh this much,” he retorted. “Tex don’t want them rustlers caught. He throws a clever bluff, an’ he’s pulled the wool over Miss Mary’s eyes, but for all that, he’s workin’ on their side. What kind of a foreman is it who’ll lose over a thousand head without stoppin’ the

stealin'? It ain't lack of brains, neither; Tex has got them a-plenty."

"But Miss Thorne—" protested Stratton, half-incredulously.

"I tell yuh, he's got her buffaloed. She won't believe a word against him. He was here in her dad's time, an' he's played his cards mighty slick since then. She's told yuh he can't get men, mebbe? All rot, of course. He could get plenty of hands, but he don't want 'em. What's more, he's done his best to get rid of me an' Bud, an' would of long ago, only Miss Mary won't let him fire us."

"But what in thunder's his object?"

"So's to have the place to himself, I reckon. He an' those greasers in the kitchen, and the rest of the bunch, are as thick as thieves."

"You mean he'd find it easier to get away with cattle if there wasn't anybody around to keep tabs on him?"

Bemis hesitated. "I—I'm not sure," he replied slowly. "Partly that, mebbe, but there's somethin' else. I've overheard things now an' then I couldn't make head or tail of, but they're up to somethin'—Yuh ain't goin', are yuh?"

Buck had risen. "Got to," he shrugged. "Miss Thorne's waiting for me to go down to the south pasture."

Bemis raised up on his pillows. "Well, listen; keep what I said under yore hat, will yuh?"

"Sure," nodded Stratton reassuringly. "You needn't worry about that. Anything else you want before I go?"

"Yes. Jest reach me my six-gun outer the holster there in the chair. If I'm goin' to be left alone with that greaser, Pedro, I'd feel more comfortable, someway, with that under my pillow."

Buck did as he requested and then departed. Something else! That was the very feeling which had assailed him vaguely at times, that some deviltry which he couldn't understand was going on beneath the surface. As he made for the corral, a sudden possibility flashed into his mind. With her title so precarious, might not Mary Thorne be at the bottom of a systematic attempt to loot the Shoe-Bar of its movable value against the time of discovery? But when he met her face to face the idea vanished and he even felt ashamed of having considered it for a moment. Whatever crookedness was going on, this sweet-faced, clear-eyed girl was much more likely to be a victim than one of the perpetrators. The feeling was vastly strengthened when he had saddled up and they rode off together.

“There’s something I’ve been meaning to—to tell you,” the girl said suddenly, breaking a brief silence.

Buck glanced at her to find her eyes fixed on the ears of her horse and a faint flush staining her cheeks.

“That room—” she went on determinedly, but with an evident effort. “A man’s room— You must have thought it strange. Indeed, I saw you thought it strange —”

Again she paused, and in his turn Buck felt a sudden rush of embarrassment.

“I didn’t mean to—” he began awkwardly. “It just seemed funny to find a regular man’s room in a household of women. I suppose it was your—your father’s,” he added.

“No, it wasn’t,” she returned briefly. She glanced at him for an instant and then looked away again. “You probably don’t know the history of the Shoe-Bar,” she went on more firmly. “Two years ago it was bought by a young man named Stratton. I never met him, but he was a business acquaintance of my father’s and naturally I heard a good deal of him from time to time. He was a ranchman all his life and very keen about it, and the moment he saw the Shoe-Bar he fell in love with it. But the war came, and he had scarcely taken title to the place before he went off and enlisted. Just before he sailed for France he sold the ranch to my father, with the understanding that if he came back safely, Dad would turn it over to him again. He felt, I suppose, how uncertain it all was and that money in the bank would be easier for his—his heirs, than property.”

She paused for an instant, her lips pressed tightly together. “He never came back,” she went on in a lower, slightly unsteady voice. “He—gave up his life for those of us who stayed behind. After a little we left Chicago and came here. I loved the place at once, and I’ve gone on caring for it increasingly ever since. But back of everything there’s always been a sense of the tragedy, the injustice of it all. They never even found his body. He was just—missing. And yet, when I came into that room, with his things about just as he had left them when he went away, he seemed so *real*,—I—I couldn’t touch it. Somehow, it was all that was left of him. And even though I’d never seen him, I felt as if I wanted to keep it that way always in memory of a—a brave soldier, and a—man.”

Her low voice ceased. With face averted, she stared in silence across the brown, scorched prairie. Stratton, his eyes fixed straight ahead, and his cheeks tinged with unwonted color, found it quite impossible to speak, and for a space the stillness was broken only by the creak of saddle-leather and the dull thud of

horses' hoofs.

"It's mighty fine of you to feel like that," he said at length. "I'm sorry if I gave you the idea I—I was—curious."

"But you would be, naturally. You see, the other boys all know." She turned her head and looked at him. "I think we're all curious at times about things which really don't concern us. I've even wondered once or twice about you. You know you don't talk like the regulation cow-puncher—quite."

Stratton laughed. "Oh, but I am," he assured her. "I suppose the war rubbed off some of the accents, and of course I had a pretty good education to start with. But I'm too keen about the country and the life to ever want to do anything else."

Her face glowed. "It is wonderful," she agreed. "When I think of the years I've wasted in cities! I couldn't ever go back. Even with all the worries, this is a thousand times better. Ah! There they are ahead. They're turning the herd into this pasture, you see."

Half a mile or more to the southward a spreading dust-cloud hugged the earth, through which, indistinctly, Stratton could make out the moving figures of men and cattle. The two spurred forward, reaching the wide opening in the fence ahead of the vanguard of steers. Passing through, they circled to the right to avoid turning back any of the cattle, and joined the sweating, hard-worked cow-punchers.

As they rode up together, Buck found Lynch's eyes fixed on him with an expression of angry surprise, which was suppressed with evident difficulty.

"How'd yuh get back so quick?" he inquired curtly.

"Nothing more to keep me," shrugged Stratton. "I waited for the doctor to look Rick over, and then thought I'd come out and see if you needed me."

"Huh! Well, since you're here, yuh might as well whirl in. Get over on the far side of the herd an' help Flint. Don't let any of 'em break away, but don't crowd 'em too much."

As Buck rode off he heard Miss Thorne ask if there wasn't something she could do. Lynch's reply was indistinct, but the tone of his voice, deferential, yet with a faint undercurrent of honey-sweetness, irritated him inexplicably. With a scowl, he spurred forward, exchanged a brief greeting with Bud Jessup as he passed, and finally joined Kreeger, who was having considerable difficulty in keeping

the herd together at that point.

During the succeeding two hours or so, Buck forgot his irritation in the interest and excitement of the work. Strenuous as it was, he found a distinct pleasure in the discovery that two years' absence from the range had not lessened his ability to hold his own. His horse was well trained, and he thoroughly enjoyed the frequent sharp dashes after some refractory steer, who stubbornly opposed being driven. Before the last animal had passed through the fence-gap into the further pasture, he was drenched from head to foot with perspiration and his muscles ached from the unaccustomed labor, but all that was discounted by the satisfaction of doing his chosen work again, and doing it well.

Then, in the lull which followed, his thoughts returned to Miss Thorne and he wondered whether there would be any chance for further conversation with her on the way back to the ranch-house? The question was quickly answered in a manner he did not in the least enjoy. After giving instructions about nailing up the fence, Tex Lynch joined the girl, who sat her horse at a little distance, and the two rode off together.

For a moment or two Stratton's frowning glance followed them. Then of a sudden he realized that Slim McCabe's shrewd eyes were fixed curiously on him, and the discovery brought him abruptly to his senses. For a space he had forgotten what his position was at the Shoe-Bar. He must keep a better guard over himself, or he would certainly arouse suspicion. Averting his eyes, but still continuing to frown a little as if lack of tobacco was responsible for his annoyance, he searched through his pockets.

"Got the makin's?" he asked McCabe. "Darned if I haven't left mine in the bunk-house."

Slim readily produced a sack, and when Buck had rolled a cigarette, he returned it with a jesting remark, and swung himself rather stiffly out of his saddle.

"Haven't any hammer, but I can help tighten wires," he commented.

He had intended joining Bud Jessup and trying while helping him to get a chance to discuss some of the things he had learned from Bemis. But somehow he found himself working beside McCabe, and when the fence had been put up again and they started home, it was Slim who rode beside him, chatting volubly and amusingly, but sticking like a leach.

It "gave one to think," Stratton decided grimly, remembering the expressive French phrase he had heard so often overseas. He could not quite make up his

mind whether the action was deliberate or the result of accident, but after supper he had no doubt whatever.

During the meal Lynch showed himself in quite a new light. He chatted and joked with a careless good humor which was a revelation to Stratton, whom he treated with special favor. Afterward he asked Buck if he didn't want to look his patient over, and accompanied him into Bemis's room, remaining while the wound was inspected and freshly dressed. Later, in the bunk-house, he announced that they would start a round-up next morning to pick out some three-year-olds for shipment.

"Got a rush order for twelve hundred head," he explained. "We'll all have to get busy early except Bud, who'll stay here to look after things. If any of yuh have saddles or anythin' else to look after, yuh'd better do it to-night, so's we can get goin' by daybreak."

Like a flash Stratton realized the other's game, and his eyes narrowed ever so little. So that was it! By this most simple of expedients, he was to be kept away from the ranch-house and incidentally from any communication with Bemis or Bud, or Mary Thorne, unless accompanied by Lynch or one of his satellites. And the worst of it was he was quite helpless. He was merely a common, ordinary hand, and at the first sign of disobedience, or even evasion of orders, Lynch would have a perfectly good excuse to discharge him—an excuse he was doubtless itching to create.

CHAPTER X

BUCK FINDS OUT SOMETHING

When the fact is chronicled that no less than three times in the succeeding eight days Buck Stratton was strongly tempted to put an end to the whole puzzling business by the simple expedient of declaring his identity and taking possession of the Shoe-Bar as his own, something may be guessed of the ingenuity of Tex Lynch in making life unpleasant for the new hand.

Buck told himself more than once that if he had really been a new hand and nothing more, he wouldn't have lasted forty-eight hours. Any self-respecting cow-man would have promptly demanded his time and betaken himself to another outfit, and Stratton sometimes wondered whether his mere acceptance of the persecution might not rouse the foreman's suspicion that he had motives for staying which did not appear on the surface.

He had to admit that Lynch's whole course of action was rather cleverly worked out. It consisted mainly in giving Stratton the most difficult and arduous work to do, and keeping him at it longer than anyone else, not only on the round-up, but while driving the herd to Paloma Springs and right up to the point where the steers were loaded on cattle-cars and the job was over.

That, broadly speaking, was the scheme; but there were delicate touches of refinement and ingenuity in the process which wrung from Stratton, in rare intervals when he was not too furious to judge calmly, a grudging measure of admiration for the wily foreman. Frequently, for instance, Stratton would be assigned to night-herd duty with promise of relief at a certain hour. Almost always that relief failed to materialize, and Buck, unable to leave the herd, reeling with fatigue and cursing impotently, had to keep at it till daybreak. The erring puncher generally had an excellent excuse, which might have passed muster once, but which grew threadbare with repetition.

Then, after an hour or two of sleep, the victim was more likely than not to be dragged out of bed and ordered to take the place of Peters, Kreeger, or one of the

others, who had been sent to the ranch or elsewhere on so-called necessary business. More than once the others got started on a meal ahead of him, and what food remained was cold, unappetizing, and scant in quantity. There were other little things Lynch thought of from time to time to make Buck's life miserable, and he quite succeeded, though it must be said that Stratton's hard-won self-control prevented the foreman from enjoying the full measure of his triumph.

What chiefly influenced Buck in holding back his big card and scoring against them all was the feeling that Mary Thorne would be the one to suffer most. He would be putting an abrupt finish to Lynch's game, whatever that was, but his action would also involve the girl in deep and bitter humiliation, if not something worse. Moreover, he was not quite ready to stop Lynch's scheming. He wanted to find out first what it was all about, and he felt he had a better chance of success by continuing to play his present part, hedged in and handicapped though he was, than by coming out suddenly in his own proper person.

So he stuck it out to the end, successfully suppressing all evidence of the smouldering rage that grew steadily within him against the whole crowd. Returning to the ranch for the first time in more than a week, he went to bed directly after supper and slept like a log until breakfast. Rising, refreshed and fit, he decided that the time had come to abandon his former haphazard methods of getting information, and to launch a campaign of active detective work without further delay.

Since the night of Bemis's accident, Buck had scarcely had a word with Bud Jessup, who he felt could give him some information, though he was not counting much on the importance of what the youngster was likely to know. Through the day there was no chance of getting the fellow apart. But Buck kept his eyes and ears open, and at supper-time Bud's casual remark to Lynch that he "s'posed he'd have to fix that busted saddle-girth before he hit the hay" did not escape him.

The meal over, Stratton left the kitchen and headed for the bunk-house with a purposeful air, soon leaving the others well in the rear. Presently one of them snickered.

"Looks like the poor rube's goin' to tear off some more sleep," commented Kreeger in a suppressed tone, evidently not thinking Stratton was near enough to hear.

But Buck's ears were sharp, and his lips twitched in a grim smile as he moved steadily on, shoulders purposely sagging. When he had passed through the doorway his head went up abruptly and his whole manner changed. Darting to his bunk, he snatched the blankets out and unrolled them with a jerk. Scrambling his clothes and other belongings into a rough mound, he swiftly spread the blankets over them, patted down a place or two to increase the likeness to a human body, dropped his hat on the floor beside the bunk, and then made a lightning exit through a window at the rear.

It was all accomplished with such celerity that before the dawdling punchers had entered the bunk-house, Buck was out of sight among the bushes which thickly lined the creek. From here he had no difficulty in making his way unseen around to the back of the barns and other out-buildings, one of which he entered through a rear door. A moment or two later he found Jessup, as he expected, squatting on the floor of the harness-room, busily mending his broken saddle-girth.

"Hello, Bud," he grinned, as the youngster looked up in surprise. "Thought I'd come up and have a chin with you."

"But how the deuce—I thought they—yuh—"

"You thought right," replied Stratton, as Jessup hesitated. "Tex and his friends have been sticking around pretty close for the past week or so, but I gave 'em the slip just now."

Briefly he explained what he had done, and then paused, eying the young fellow speculatively.

"There's something queer going on here, old man," he began presently. "You'll say it's none of my business, maybe, and I reckon it isn't. But unless I've sized 'em up wrong, Lynch and his gang are a bunch of crooks, and I'm not the sort to sit back quietly and leave a lady like Miss Thorne to their mercy."

Jessup's eyes widened. "What do yuh know?" he demanded. "What have yuh found out?"

Buck shrugged his shoulders. "Found out? Why, nothing, really. But I've seen enough to know that bunch is up to some deviltry, and naturally the owner of the outfit is the one who'll suffer, in pocket, if not something worse. It's a dirty deal, taking advantage of a girl's ignorance and inexperience, as that gang sure is doing some way—specially a girl who's as decent and white as she is. I thought maybe you and me might get together and work out something. You don't act like you were for 'em any more than I am."

“I’ll tell a man I ain’t!” declared Jessup emphatically. “They’re a rotten bunch. Yuh can go as far’s you like, an’ I’ll stick with yuh. Have yuh got anything on ’em?”

“Not exactly, but we may have if we put our heads together and talk it over.” He glanced questioningly around the dusty room. “They’ll likely find out the trick I played on ’em, and come snooping around here before long. Suppose we slip out and go down by the creek where we can talk without being interrupted.”

Jessup agreed readily and followed Buck into the barn and out through the back door, where they sought a secluded spot down by the stream, well shielded by bushes.

“You’ve been here longer than I have and noticed a lot more,” Stratton remarked when they were settled. “I wish you’d tell me what you think that bunch is up to. They haven’t let me out of their sight for over a week. What’s the idea, anyhow?”

“They don’t want yuh should find out anythin’,” returned Bud promptly.

“That’s what I s’posed, but what’s there to find out? That’s what I can’t seem to get at. Bemis says they’re in with the rustlers, but even he seems to think there’s something else in the wind besides that.”

Jessup snorted contemptuously. “Bemis—huh! I’m through with him. He’s a quitter. I was in chinnin’ with him last night an’ he’s lost his nerve. Says he’s through, an’ is goin’ to take his time the minute he’s fit to back a horse. Still an’ all,” he added, forehead wrinkling thoughtfully, “he’s right in a way. There is somethin’ doin’ beside rustling, but I’m hanged if I can find out what. The only thing I’m dead sure of is that it’s crooked. Look at the way they’re tryin’ to get rid of us—Rick an’ me an’ you. Whatever they’re up to they want the ranch to themselves before they go any further. Now Rick’s out of the way, I s’pose I’ll be next. They’re tryin’ their best to make me quit, but when they find out that won’t work, I reckon they’ll try somethin’—worse.”

“Why don’t Lynch just up an’ fire you?” Buck asked curiously. “He’s foreman.”

Bud’s young jaw tightened stubbornly. “He can’t get nothin’ on me,” he stated. “It’s this way. When help begun to get shy a couple of months ago—that’s when he started his business of gittin’ rid of the men one way or another—Tex must of hinted around to Miss Mary that I was goin’ to quit, for she up an’ asked me one day if it was true, an’ said she hoped me an’ Rick wasn’t goin’ to leave like the rest of ’em.”

He paused, a faint flush darkening his tan. "I dunno as you've noticed it," he went on, plucking a long spear of grass and twisting it between his brown fingers, "but Miss Mary's got a way about her that—that sort of gets a man. She's so awful young, an'—an'—earnest, an' though she don't know one thing hardly about ranchin', she's dead crazy about this place, an' mighty anxious to make it pay. When she asks yuh to do somethin', yuh jest natu'ally feel like yuh wanted to oblige. I felt like that, anyhow, an' I was hot under the collar at Tex for lyin' about me like he must of done. So I tells her straight off I wasn't thinkin' of anythin' of the sort. 'Fu'thermore,' I says, 'I'll stick to the job as long as yuh like if you'll do one thing.' She asks what's that, an' I told her that some folks, namin' no names, was tryin' to make out to her I wasn't doin' my work good, an' doin' their best to get me in bad.

"'Oh, but I think you're mistaken,' she says, catchin' on right away who I meant. 'Tex wouldn't do anythin' like that. He needs help too bad, for one thing.'

"'Well,' I says, 'let it go at that. Only, if yuh hear anythin' against me, I'd like for yuh not to take anybody else's word for it. It's got to be proved I ain't capable, or I've done somethin' I oughta be fired for. An' if things gets so I got to go, I'll come to yuh an' ask for my time myself. Fu'thermore, I'll get Rick to promise the same thing.'

"'Well, to make a long story short, she said she'd do it, though I could see she was still thinkin' me mistaken about Tex doin' anythin' out of the way. He's a rotten skunk, but you'd better believe he don't let her see it. He's got her so she believes every darn word he says is gospel.'"

He finished in an angry key. Stratton's face was thoughtful.

"How long has he been here?" he asked.

"Who? Tex? Oh, long before I come. The old man made him foreman pretty near a year ago in place of Bloss, who run the outfit for Stratton, that fellow who was killed in the war that old Thorne bought the ranch off from."

"What sort of a man was this Thorne?" Buck presently inquired.

"Pretty decent, though kinda stand-offish with us fellows. He was awful thick with Tex, though, an' mebbe that's the reason Miss Mary thinks so much of him. She took his death mighty hard, believe me!"

With a mind groping after hidden clues, Stratton subconsciously disentangled the various "hes" and "hims" of Jessup's slightly involved remark.

“Pop Daggett told me about his being thrown and breaking his neck,” he said presently. “You were here then, weren’t you? Was there anything queer about it? I mean, like the two punchers who were killed later on?”

Jessup’s eyes widened. “Queer?” he repeated. “Why, I—I never thought about it that way. I wasn’t around when it happened. Nobody was with him but—but—Tex.” He stared at Buck. “Yuh don’t mean to say—”

“I don’t say anything,” returned Stratton, as he paused. “How can I, without knowing the facts? Was the horse a bad one?”

“He was new—jest been put in the *remuda*. I never saw him rid except by Doc Peters, who’s a shark. I did notice, afterward, he was sorta mean, though I’ve seen worse. We was on the spring round-up, jest startin’ to brand over in the middle pasture.” Bud spoke slowly with thoughtfully wrinkled brows. “It was right after dinner when the old man rode up on Socks, the horse he gen’ally used. He seemed pretty excited for him. He got hold of Tex right away, an’ the two of them went off to one side an’ chinned consid’able. Then they changed the saddle onto this here paint horse, Socks bein’ sorta tuckered out, an’ rode off together. It was near three hours before Tex came gallopin’ back alone with word that the old man’s horse had stepped in a hole an’ throwed him, breakin’ his neck.”

“Was that part of it true?” asked Buck, who had been listening intently.

“About his neck? Sure. They had Doc Blanchard over right away. He’d been throwed, all right, too, from the scratches on his face.”

“Where did it happen?”

“Yuh got me. I wasn’t one of the bunch that brought him in. I never thought to ask afterwards, neither. It must of been somewhere up to the north end of the ranch, though, if they kep’ on goin’ the way they started.”

For a moment or two Stratton sat silent, staring absently at the sloping bank below him. Was there anything back of the ranch-owner’s tragic death save simple accident? The story was plausible enough. Holes were plentiful, and it wouldn’t be the first time a horse’s stumble had resulted fatally to the rider. On the other hand, it is quite possible, by an abrupt though seemingly accidental thrust or collision, to stir a horse of uncertain temper into sudden, vehement action. At length Buck sighed and abandoned his cogitations as fruitless. Short of a miracle, that phase of the problem was never likely to be answered.

“I wonder what took him off like that?” he pondered aloud. “Have you any

notion? Is there anything particular up that way?"

"Why, no. Nobody hardly ever goes there. They call it the north pasture, but it's never used. There's nothin' there but sand an' cactus an' all that; a goat couldn't hardly keep body an' soul together. Except once lookin' for strays that got through the fence, I never set foot in it myself."

Down in the shallow gully where they sat, the shadows were gathering, showing that dusk was rapidly approaching. With a shake of his head and a movement of his wide shoulders, Buck mentally dismissed that subject.

"It's getting dark," he said briskly. "We'll have to hustle, or there'll be a searching party out after us. Have you noticed anything else particularly—about Lynch, I mean, or any of the others?"

"Nothin' I can make sense of," returned Jessup. "Tex has been off the ranch a lot. Two or three times he's stayed away over night. It might of been reg'lar business, I s'pose, but once Bill Harris, over to the Rockin'-R, said he'd seen him in Tucson with some guys in a big automobile. That rustlin', of course, yuh know about. On the evidence, I dunno as yuh could swear he was in it, but it's a sure thing that any foreman worth his salt would of stopped the business before now, or else get the sheriff on the job if he couldn't handle it himself."

"That's one thing I've wondered," commented Buck. "Why doesn't he? What's his excuse for holding off?"

Bud gave a short, brittle laugh. "I'll tell yuh. He says the sheriff's a crook! What do you know about that? I heard him tellin' it to Miss Mary the other day when he come in from Paloma about dinner-time. She was askin' him the same question, an' he up an' tells her it wouldn't be worth while; tells her the man is a half-breed an' always plays in with the greasers, so he wouldn't be no use. I never met up with Jim Hardenberg, but he sure ain't a breed, an' he's got a darn good rep as sheriff." He groaned. "Wimmin sure is queer. Think of anybody believin' that sort of rot."

"Did Lynch know you were listening?"

Jessup reddened a little. "No. They were talkin' in the big room, an' I was standin' to one side of the open window. I don't call it sneakin' to try an' get the drop on a coyote like him."

"I don't either," smiled Stratton, getting on his feet. The swift, southern darkness had fallen so quickly that they could barely see each other's faces. "It's one of their own little tricks, and turn about is fair play. Our job, I reckon, is to keep our

eyes open every minute and not let anything slip. We'll find a way to get together again if anything should turn up. I'll be going back."

He turned away and took a few steps along the bank. Then all at once he stopped and walked back.

"Say, Bud, how big is that north pasture place you were telling about?" he asked. "I don't seem to remember going over it when I was—"

He broke off abruptly, and a sudden flush burned into his cheeks at the realization that he had almost betrayed himself. Fortunately Jessup did not seem to notice the slip.

"I don't know exactly," replied the youngster. "About two miles square, maybe. Why?"

"Oh, I just wondered," shrugged Stratton. "Well, so-long."

Again they parted, Bud returning to the harness-room, where he would have to finish his work by lantern-light.

"Gee, but that was close!" murmured Bud, feeling his way through the darkness. "Just about one more word and I'd have given away the show completely."

He paused under a cottonwood as a gleam of light from the open bunk-house door showed through the leaves.

"I wonder?" he mused thoughtfully.

A waste of sand, cactus, and scanty desert growth! In Arizona nothing is more ordinary or commonplace, more utterly lacking in interest and significance. Yet Stratton's mind returned to it persistently as he considered one by one the scanty details of Jessup's brief narrative.

What was there about a spot like that to rouse excitement in the breast of the usually phlegmatic Andrew Thorne? Why had he been in such haste to drag Lynch thither, and what had passed between the two before the older man came to his sudden and tragic end? Was it possible that somewhere within that four square miles of desolate wilderness might lie the key to the puzzling mystery Buck had set himself to solve?

"I wonder?" he murmured again, and leaving the margin of the creek, he moved slowly toward the open bunk-house door.

CHAPTER XI

DANGER

As Buck appeared in the doorway, blinking a little at the lamp-light, the five card-players stared at him in astonishment.

“Where the devil have you been?” inquired Kreeger, surprised out of his accustomed taciturnity.

“I thought yuh was asleep,” added Peters, casting a bewildered glance at the shadowy bunk.

Buck, who had scarcely hoped his little stratagem would succeed so well, refrained with difficulty from showing the pleasure he felt.

“So I have,” he drawled.

“But I thought yuh was in yore bunk,” commented McCabe, his light-blue eyes narrowing slightly.

“No, I was outside,” explained Stratton carelessly. “It was too hot in here, so I went out and sat down by the creek. I must have dropped off pretty soon, and when I came to it was dark.”

As he spoke he glanced casually at Tex Lynch, and despite himself a little shiver flickered on his spine. The foreman, who had not spoken, sat motionless on the further side of the table regarding Stratton steadily. His lids drooped slightly and his face was almost expressionless. But in spite of that Buck got a momentary impression of baffled fury and a deadly, murderous hate, the more startling because of its very repression. Coupling it with what he knew or suspected of the man, Stratton felt there was some excuse for that momentary mental shrinking.

“He’d as soon put me out of the way as shoot a coyote,” he said to himself, as he walked over to his bunk. “All he wants is a chance to do it without getting caught.”

But with ordinary care and caution he did not see just how Tex was going to get

the chance. Buck never went anywhere without his gun, and he flattered himself he was as quick on the draw as the average. Besides, he knew better now than to trust himself alone with Lynch or any of the others on some outlying part of the range where a fatal accident could plausibly be laid to marauding greasers, or to some similar agency.

“I’m not saying any one of ’em couldn’t pick me off a dozen times a day and make an easy get-away across the border,” he thought, stretching himself out on the husk mattress. “But Lynch don’t want to have to make a get-away. There’s something right here on the Shoe-Bar that interests him a whole lot too much.”

Presently Bud came in, parried with some success the half-questioning comments of the men, and went to bed. Buck lay awake a while longer, trying to patch together into some semblance of pattern the isolated scraps of information he had gained, but without any measure of success.

There followed four surprising days of calm, during which the Shoe-Bar, to every outward seeming, might have been the most ordinary and humdrum of outfits, with not a hint of anything sinister or mysterious beneath the surface.

Each morning the men sallied forth to work, returned for noon dinner, and rode off again soon afterward. Lynch was neither grouchy nor over-jovial. He seemed the typical ranch-boss, whose chief thought is to get the work done, and his berating was entirely impartial. Bud had spent most of his time around the ranch, but once or twice he rode out with the others, and there was no attempt on their part to keep him and Buck from talking together as privately as they pleased. Only where Miss Thorne was concerned was Stratton conscious of the old unobtrusive surveillance. He saw her several times during his brief visits to Bemis, who was improving daily and fretting to be gone, but always Lynch, McCabe, or some one just “happened” to be along.

The effect of this unexpected peace and quiet on Stratton, however, was precisely opposite from the one he presumed was intended. He had a feeling that it was a calm before the storm, and became more alert than ever. The unnatural placidity weighed on him, and as day followed day serenely his nerves grew edgy.

After supper on the fourth day Lynch went up to the ranch-house and was closeted for more than an hour with Miss Thorne. On his return to the bunk-house, Stratton, who had now come to speculate on his every move, studied him covertly but found his manner quite as usual.

In the morning they started off for the middle pasture, where they were engaged

in repairing a fence which had all but fallen flat. Quite by accident, and without any inkling of what was to come of his carelessness, Buck left his hammer and pliers beside the corral gate instead of sticking them into his saddle-pockets. Before they had gone a quarter of a mile he discovered the omission and pulled up, explaining what had happened.

“It won’t take me five minutes to go back for them,” he added, gathering up his reins.

“I’ll go with yuh,” said McCabe promptly. “With a little hustlin’, we can easy catch up with the gang before they get to the pasture.”

“Well, speed up, both of yuh,” admonished Lynch. “We want to finish that job to-day.”

Slightly amused and wondering whether they thought for an instant he was too blind to see through their game, Stratton put spurs to his horse and the two rode back together, McCabe apparently making a special effort to be amusing. The tools were found where Buck had left them, and the latter was on the point of remounting, when Mary Thorne came suddenly around the corner of the house.

“Good morning,” she greeted them both pleasantly, but with a slight undercurrent of preoccupation in her manner. “I was afraid you’d gone.” Her eyes met Stratton’s. “Could I speak to you a moment?” she asked.

“Certainly, ma’am.”

Buck dropped his bridle-reins and moved forward. For an instant McCabe sat motionless; then he swung himself out of the saddle.

“If it’s anythin’ I can help about—” he began, awkwardly, yet ingratiatingly.

“Thank you very much, Slim, but it isn’t,” the girl answered quietly.

“We ain’t got much time,” protested McCabe uneasily. “We jest came back to get them tools Buck forgot. Tex is in a hurry to finish up the job.”

“I don’t believe five minutes’ delay will matter very much,” returned Miss Thorne, with a touch of that unexpected decision Stratton had noticed once or twice before. “I sha’n’t be any longer.”

She moved away from the corral and Buck, walking beside her, was conscious of a curious tension in the air. For a moment he thought McCabe meant to persist and force his presence on them. But evidently the stocky cow-puncher found the situation too difficult for him to cope with, for he remained standing beside his

horse, though his glance followed them intently, and throughout the brief interview his eyes searched their faces, as if he strove to read from their expression or the movement of their lips some inkling of what it was all about.

“I won’t keep you but a moment,” the girl began, her color slightly heightened. “I only thought that perhaps I might persuade you to—to change your mind, and—and stay. If the work’s too hard, we might be able to—”

She paused. Buck stared at her in astonishment. “I don’t understand,” he said briefly.

Her flush deepened. “I meant about your going. I understood you weren’t satisfied, and wanted to—to leave.”

“Who told you that?”

“Why—Tex. Isn’t it—”

Buck frowned, and then, conscious of the watching McCabe, his face cleared and he laughed.

“He must have got me wrong, Miss Ma—er—Thorne,” he returned lightly. “Perhaps he’s heard me grumbling a bit; cow-men do that from force of habit sometimes, you know. But I’ve nothing to complain of about the work, and certainly I had no idea of quitting.”

Her face cleared amazingly. “I’m so glad,” she said in a relieved tone. “I suppose I seem fussy, but now and then the problem of help gets to be a regular nightmare. Once or twice lately I’ve been afraid I was making a terrible mess of things, and might, after all, have to accept one of the offers I’ve had for the ranch. I should hate dreadfully to leave here, but if I can’t make it pay—”

She finished with a shrug. Stratton regarded her thoughtfully. “You’ve had several offers?” he asked hesitatingly, wondering whether she would think the question an impertinence.

Apparently she didn’t. “Two; really most awfully good ones. Indeed, Tex strongly advised me to sell out and buy another outfit if I still wanted to ranch. But I don’t want another one. It’s the Shoe-Bar I’m so keen about because of— But I really mustn’t keep you. Thank you so much for relieving my mind. When Tex comes in I’ll tell him he was mistaken.”

Buck hesitated for an instant. “It might be better not to say anything about it,” he suggested. “Some foremen don’t like the least bit of interference, you know. Suppose we just let it go, and if he brings up the subject to me, I’ll tell him he

got me wrong.”

“Very well. It doesn’t make any difference so long as you’re staying. Good-by.”

With a little gesture of farewell, she walked away toward the ranch-house, leaving Stratton to return to where McCabe fidgeted beside the horses. There was no time for deliberate reasoning or planning. Buck only felt sure that Lynch was up to something underhand, and when Slim, with almost too great a casualness, inquired what it was all about, he obeyed a strong impulse and lied.

“Oh, it’s Bemis,” he shrugged, as they rode off together. “He’s fretting to get away. Lost his nerve, I reckon, and wants to pull out. She wanted to know how long I thought it would be before he could back a horse. I s’pose he might chance it in about a week, but I’m hanged if I can see why he’s in such a rush. He’s sure got it soft enough here.”

While he talked he was busy rolling a cigarette, but this did not prevent him from being aware of Slim’s intent, sidelong scrutiny. He could not be quite certain whether or not he succeeded in deceiving the fellow, but from the character of McCabe’s comments, he rather thought he had. Certainly he hoped so. Slim was sure to tell Lynch about the incident, but if he himself believed it harmless, the foreman was likely to take the same point of view, and continue to carry out the scheme he had in mind. Whatever this was, Stratton, in his present frame of mind, preferred that it should be brought to a head rather than continue any longer in suspense.

Throughout the day he could get no hint of what was going on. Once the thought occurred to him that it might be a variation of the trick Lynch had tried to play on Bud. By preparing Miss Thorne beforehand for the departure of the new hand, he could discharge Stratton and then represent to the girl that he had quit of his own accord. But somehow this didn’t altogether fit. It assumed that Buck would take his dismissal quietly without attempting a personal appeal to the ranch-owner; also it took no account of Bud Jessup. By this time Tex must realize that there had been more or less intimate communication between the two, and Bud was not the sort to stand by quietly and see his friend turned out without stirring vehemently in his behalf.

Considering all this, Buck could not see that there was much to fear in Lynch’s present manœuvering; and it was something of a shock to find Bud absent from the supper-table.

“Gone to Paloma to fetch those wagon-bolts,” explained Tex, who had come in about an hour ahead of the others, in answer to Peters’ query. “They’d ought to

of come in by mail yesterday or the day before, an' we need 'em bad. He'll get supper in town an' be back before dark."

Somewhat thoughtful, Buck accompanied the others to the bunk-house, where he was cordially invited to join the evening game of draw, but declined on the plea of having a couple of letters to write. It was a subterfuge, of course; he had nobody to write to. But in his mind had risen a strong preference for being in a position where he could overlook the whole group, rather than be seated in their very midst.

There had come to him a sudden, vivid conviction that he had underestimated the foreman's resources and his own possible danger. As he sat there mechanically scribbling random sentences, it was brought home to him for the first time how unpleasantly alone he was. Save for a helpless girl and an even more helpless old woman, there wasn't a soul within a dozen miles on whom he could count for help in an emergency. Of course when Bud returned—

But Bud didn't return. Nine o'clock brought no sign of him. Another hour passed and still he failed to show up. It began to look very much as if the youngster had met with some accident or was being purposely kept out of the way.

When the men finished their game and began to turn in, Stratton reluctantly followed their example. As long as there was any light he felt perfectly able to take care of himself. It was the darkness he feared—that inky, suffocating darkness which masks everything like a pall. He dreaded, too, the increased chances bed would bring of yielding for a single fatal instant to treacherous sleep; but he couldn't well sit up all night, so he undressed leisurely with the rest and stretched his long length between the blankets.

When the lamp was out, he cautiously flung aside his coverings, drew himself into a reclining position, and with gun in one hand and some matches close beside the other, began his vigil.

For a long time—it must have been an hour at least—there was no need to fight off sleep. His mind was far too active. But his thoughts were not altogether cheering, for he began to see clearly how Lynch might hope to accomplish the impossible.

So far there had been reassurance in the feeling that the foreman would not dare proceed to open violence because of the almost certain consequences to himself. Buck realized now that, under the conditions of the moment, those consequences might become almost negligible. Suppose, for instance, that by next morning Stratton had disappeared. Lynch and his confederates would tell a plausible story

of his having demanded his time the night before and ridden off early in the morning. It was a story Tex had carefully prepared Miss Thorne to hear, and whether or not, after Buck's talk with her during the morning, she might be suspicious, that would make no difference in the foreman's actions now. He would see that a horse was gone, and attend to all the other necessary details. He had the better part of the night and miles of desert waste in which to dispose of every trace of Stratton and his belongings. Bud would be suspicious, but between suspicion and proof there is a great gulf fixed. And though Lynch might not know it, one of his strongest cards was the fact that if Stratton should vanish off the earth, there was not a soul who would ever come around asking awkward questions.

"But I'm not going to be bumped off just now, thank you," Buck said to himself with a grim straightening of the lips. "They won't dare fire a gun, and they don't know I'm ready for them and waiting."

Another hour passed, a tortured, harrowing hour in which he fought sleep desperately with all the limited resources at his command. In spite of his determination to keep his eyes open at any cost, his lids drooped and lifted, drooped and lifted, drooped and were dragged open by sheer will-power. Each time it was more difficult. Just as the water laps inexorably at length over the face of an exhausted swimmer, so these waves of sleep, smothering, clutching, dulled his senses and strove to wrap him in their soft, treacherous embrace.

There came at last a complete wiping out of consciousness, how long or short he never knew, from which he was jarred into sudden wakefulness by a sound. He had no idea what it was nor whence it came. He merely found himself abruptly in full possession of his senses, nerves tingling, moisture dewing his forehead, his whole being concentrated in the one act of—listening!

For what seemed an eternity he could hear nothing save the heavy breathing of sleeping men. Then it came again, a slow, faint, dragging sound that ceased almost as soon as it began.

Some one was creeping stealthily toward him across the cabin floor!

CHAPTER XII

THWARTED

Instantly a sense of elation, tingling as an electric shock, surged over Stratton, and his grip on the Colt tightened. At last he was face to face with something definite and concrete, and in a moment all the little doubts and nagging nervous qualms which had assailed him from time to time during his long vigil were swept away. Cautiously drawing his gun into position, he felt for a match with the other hand and prepared to scratch it against the side of the bunk.

Slowly, stealthily, with many a cautious pause, the crawling body drew steadily nearer. Though the intense darkness prevented him from seeing anything, Buck felt at last that he had correctly gaged the position of the unknown plotter. Trying to continue that easy, steady breathing, which had been no easy matter, he slightly raised his weapon and then, with a sudden, lightning movement, he drew the match firmly across the rough board.

To his anger and chagrin the head broke off. Before he could snatch up another and strike it viciously, there came from close at hand a sudden rustle, a creak, the clatter of something on the floor, followed by dead silence. When the light flared up, illumining dimly almost the whole length of the room, there was nothing in the least suspicious to be seen.

Nevertheless, with inward cursing, Stratton sprang up and lit the lamp he had used early in the evening and which he had purposely left within reach. With this added illumination he made a discovery that brought his lips together in a grim line.

Someone lay stretched out in the bunk next to his own—Jessup's bunk, which had been empty when he went to bed.

For a fleeting instant Buck wondered whether Bud could possibly have returned and crawled in there unheard. Then, as the wick flared up, he not only realized that this couldn't have happened, but recognized lying on the youngster's rolled-up blankets the stout figure and round, unshaven face of—Slim McCabe.

As he stood staring at the fellow, there was a stir from further down the room and a sleepy voice growled:

“What’s the matter? It ain’t time to get up yet, is it?”

Buck, who had just caught a glint of steel on the floor at the edge of the bunk, pulled himself together.

“No; I—I must have had a—nightmare,” he returned in a realistically dazed tone. “I was dreaming about—rustlers, and thought I heard somebody walking around.”

Still watching McCabe surreptitiously, he saw the fellow’s lids lift sleepily.

“W’ a’s matter?” murmured Slim, blinking at the lamp.

“Nothing. I was dreaming. What the devil are you doing in that bunk?”

McCabe appeared to rouse himself with an effort and partly sat up, yawning prodigiously.

“It was hot in my own, so I come over here to get the air from the window,” he mumbled. “What’s the idea of waking a guy up in the middle of the night?”

Buck did not answer for a moment but, stepping back, trod as if by accident on the end of his trailing blanket. As he intended, the movement sent his holster and belt tumbling to the floor, and with perfect naturalness he stooped to pick them up. When he straightened, his face betrayed nothing of the grim satisfaction he felt at having proved his point. The bit of steel was a hunting-knife with a seven-inch blade, sharp as a razor, and with a distinctive stag-horn handle, which Tex Lynch had used only a few evenings before to remove the skin from a coyote he had brought down.

“Sorry, but I was dreaming,” drawled Stratton. “No harm done, though, is there? You ain’t likely to stay awake long.”

Without further comment he blew out the light and crawled into bed again. He found no difficulty now in keeping awake for the remainder of the night; there was too much to think about and decide. Now that he had measured the lengths to which Lynch seemed willing to go, he realized that a continuance of present conditions was impossible. An exact repetition of this particular attempt was unlikely, but there were plenty of variations against which no single individual could hope to guard. He must bring things to a head at once, either by quitting the ranch, by playing the important card of his own identity he had so far held back, or else by finding some other way of tying Lynch’s hands effectually. He

was equally reluctant to take either of the two former steps, and so it pleased him greatly when at last he began to see his way toward working things out in another fashion.

“I’m blessed if that won’t put a spoke in his wheel,” he thought jubilantly, considering details. “He won’t dare to touch me.”

When dawn came filtering through the windows, and one thing after another slowly emerged from the obscurity, Buck’s eyes swiftly sought the floor below Bud’s bunk. But though McCabe lay there snoring loudly, the knife had disappeared.

Though outwardly everything seemed normal, Buck noticed a slight restlessness and laxing tension about the men that morning. There was delay in getting to work, which might have been accounted for by the cessation of one job and the starting of another. But knowing what he did, Stratton felt that the flat failure of their plot had much to do with it.

He himself took advantage of the lull to slip away to the harness-room on the plea of mending a rip in the stitching of his chaps. Pulling a box over by the window where he could see anyone approaching, he produced pencil and paper and proceeded to write out a rather voluminous document, which he afterward read over and corrected carefully. He sealed it up in an envelope, wrote a much briefer note, and enclosed both in a second envelope which he addressed to Sheriff J. Hardenberg. Finally he felt around in his pocket and pulled forth the scrawl he had composed the night before.

“They look about the same,” he murmured, comparing them. “Nobody will notice the difference.”

Buck was on the point of sealing the envelope containing the scrawl when it occurred to him to read the contents over and see what he had written.

The letter was headed “Dear Friend,” and proved to be a curious composition. With a mind intent on other things, Stratton had written almost mechanically, intending merely to give an air of reality to his occupation. In the beginning the scrawl read very much as if the “friend” were masculine. Bits of ranch happenings and descriptions were jotted down as one would in writing to a cowboy friend located on a distant outfit. But gradually, imperceptibly almost, the tone shifted. Buck himself had been totally unaware of any change until he read over the last few pages. And then, as he took in the subtle undercurrent of meaning which lay beneath the penciled lines, a slow flush crept up into his face, and he frowned.

It was all rot, of course! He had merely written for the sake of writing something—anything. She was a nice little thing, of course, with an attractive feminine manner and an unexpected lot of nerve. He was sorry for her, naturally, and would like to help her out of what he felt to be a most disagreeable, if not hazardous situation. But as for anything further—

Still frowning, he thrust the sheets back into the envelope and licked the flap. He was on the point of stubbornly scrawling a man's name on the outside when he realized how foolish he would be not to carry out his first and much more sensible intention.

He wanted an excuse for asking permission to ride to town to post a letter. This, in itself, was an extremely nervy request and under ordinary conditions almost certain to be profanely refused. But Buck had a shrewd notion that after the failure of Lynch's plans, the foreman might welcome the chance of talking things over with his confederates without danger of being observed or overheard. On the other hand, if there should be the least suspicion that his letter was not of the most innocent and harmless sort, he would never in the world be allowed to get away with it.

The result was that when he strolled out of the harness-room a little later the envelope bearing the name of Sheriff Hardenberg reposed within his shirt, while the other, addressed now to a mythical "Miss Florence Denby," at an equally mythical street number in Dallas, Texas, protruded from a pocket of his chaps.

"I don't s'pose you've got a stamp you'll sell me," he inquired of Lynch, whom he found in the bunk-house with McCabe. "I'd like to get this letter off as soon as I can."

Balancing the envelope in his hand, he held it so that the foreman could easily read the address.

"I might have," returned Lynch briefly. "Looks like that letter was heavy enough to need two."

Buck allowed him to weigh it in his hand for an instant, and then, in simulated confusion, he snatched it back.

"Must be writin' to yore girl," grinned McCabe, who had also been regarding the address curiously.

Stratton retorted in a convincingly embarrassed fashion, received his stamps and then proffered his request, which was finally granted with an air of reluctance and much grumbling.

“I wouldn’t let yuh go, only I don’t know what the devil’s keepin’ that fool Bud,” growled Lynch. “Yuh tell the son-of-a-gun I ain’t expectin’ him to stop in town the rest of his natural life. If them wagon-bolts ain’t come, we’ll have to do without ’em. Yuh bring him back with yuh, an’ see yuh both get here by dinner time without fail.”

Buck gave the desired promise and, hastily saddling up, departed. About three miles from the ranch, he rode off to the side of the trail and dismounted beside a stunted mesquite. Under its twisting branches, he dug a hole with the toe of his boot and interred therein Miss Florence Denby’s letter, torn into small fragments.

This done he swung himself into the saddle and headed again for Paloma Springs, and as he rode he began to whistle blithely.

CHAPTER XIII

COUNTERPLOT

“The low-down, ornery liar!” sputtered Bud Jessup, face flushed and eyes snapping. “He told me to wait for them bolts if I had to stay here all day. I thought it was kinda funny he’d let me waste all this time, but I didn’t have no idea at all he’d got me out of the way a-purpose to put across that dirty deal. Why, the rotten son-of-a—”

“Easy, kid,” cautioned Buck, glancing at the open door of the store. “You’ll have Pop comin’ out to see what all the excitement’s about, and that isn’t our game—yet.”

He had found Bud alone on the rickety porch, kicking his heels against the railing and fretting at his enforced idleness; and having hitched his horse, he lost no time in giving the youngster a brief account of the happenings of the night before.

“Not him,” shrugged Jessup, though he did lower his voice a trifle. “The up train’s due in less than half an hour, an’ Pop’s gettin’ the mail-bag ready. That means readin’ all the post-cards twice at least, an’ makin’ out all he can through the envelopes, if the paper’s thin enough. I often wondered why he didn’t go the whole hog an’ have a kettle ready to steam the flaps open, he seems to get so much pleasure out of other people’s business.”

Stratton chuckled. This suited him perfectly up to a certain point. He pulled the letter out of his shirt and was pleased to see that none of the writing was visible. Then he displayed the face of the envelope to his companion.

Bud’s eyes widened. “Whew!” he whistled. “That sure looks like business. What’s up, Buck? Can’t yuh tell a man?”

“I will on the way back; no time just now. Let’s go in.”

He led the way into the store and walked down to where Daggett was slowly sorting a small pile of letters and post-cards.

“Hello, Pop!” he greeted. “Looks like I was just in time.”

The old man peered over the tops of his spectacles. “Yuh be, if yuh want to catch the up-mail,” he nodded. “Where’s it to?”

He took the letter from Stratton’s extended hand and studied it with frank interest.

“Jim Hardenberg!” he commented. “Wal! Wal! Friend of yores, eh?”

“Oh, I don’t know as you’d hardly call him that,” evaded Stratton. “Haven’t seen him in over two years, I reckon.”

Pop waited expectantly, but no further information was forthcoming. He eyed the letter curiously, manœuvring as if by accident to hold it up against the light. He even tried, by obvious methods, to get rid of the two punchers, but they persisted in hanging around until at length the near approach of the train-hour forced the old man to drop the letter into the mail-bag with the others and snap the lock. On the plea of seeing whether their package had come, both Stratton and Jessup escorted him over to the station platform and did not quit his side until the train had departed, carrying the mail-sack with it.

There were a few odds and ends of mail for the Shoe-Bar, but no parcel. When this became certain, Bud got his horse and the two mounted in front of the store.

“By gee!” exclaimed Pop suddenly as they were on the point of riding off. “I clean forgot to tell yuh. They got blackleg over to the T-T’s.”

Both men turned abruptly in their saddles and stared at him in dismay. To the bred-in-the-bone rancher the mention of blackleg, that deadly contagious and most fatal of cattle diseases, is almost as startling as bubonic plague would be to the average human.

“Hell!” ejaculated Bud forcefully. “Yuh sure about that, Pop?”

“Sartain sure,” nodded the old man. “One of their men, Bronc Tippets, was over here last night an’ told me. Said their yearlings is dyin’ off like flies.”

“That sure is mighty hard luck,” remarked Jessup as they rode out of town. “I’m glad this outfit ain’t any nearer.”

“Somewhere off to the west of the Shoe-Bar, isn’t it?” asked Stratton.

“Yeah. ’Way the other side of the mountains. There’s a short cut through the hills that comes out around the north end of middle pasture, but there ain’t one steer in a thousand could find his way through. Well, let’s hear what you’re up to, old

man. I'm plumb interested."

Buck's serious expression relaxed and he promptly launched into a detailed explanation of his scheme. When he had made everything clear Bud's face lit up and he regarded his friend admiringly.

"By cripes, Buck!" he exclaimed delightedly. "That sure oughta work. When are yuh goin' to spring it on 'em?"

"First good chance I get," returned Buck. "The sooner the better, so they won't have time to try any more dirty work."

The opportunity was not long in coming. They reached the ranch just before dinner and when the meal was over learned that the afternoon was to be devoted to repairing the telephone leading from the ranch-house to Las Vegas camp, which had been out of order for several weeks. As certain fence wires were utilized for line purposes, this meant considerable work, if Stratton could judge by the ruinous condition of most of those he had seen. He wondered not a little at the meaning of the move, but did not allow his curiosity to interfere with the project he had in mind.

They had left the ranch in a bunch, Kreeger and Siegrist alone remaining behind for some other purpose. They had not gone more than two miles when a remark of McCabe's on mining claims gave Buck his cue.

"A fellow who goes into that game with a bunch takes a lot of chances," he commented. "I knew a chap once who came mighty near being croaked, to say nothing of losing a valuable claim, by being too confiding with a gang he thought could be trusted."

"How was that?" inquired Slim amiably, as Stratton paused.

"They wanted the whole hog instead of being contented with their share, and tried two or three times to get this fellow—er—Brown. When Brown wised up to what was going on he thought at first he'd have to pull out to save his hide. But just in time he doped out a scheme to stop their dirty work, and it sure was a slick one, all right."

Buck chuckled retrospectively. Though the pause was unbroken by any questions, he saw that he had the complete and undivided attention of his audience.

"What he did," resumed Stratton, "was to write out a detailed account of all the things they'd tried to put across, one of which was an attempt to—a—shoot him

in his bunk while he was asleep. He sealed that up in an envelope and sent it to the sheriff with a note asking him to keep it safe, but not to open it unless the writer, Brown, got bumped off in some violent way or disappeared, in which case the sheriff was to act on the information in it and nab the crooks. After he'd got word of its receipt, he up and told the others what he'd done. Pretty cute, wasn't it?"

The brief pause that followed was tense and fraught with suppressed emotion.

"Did it work?" McCabe at length inquired, with elaborate casualness.

"Sure. The gang didn't dare raise a finger to him. They might have put a bullet through him any time, or a knife, and made a safe get-away, but then they'd have had to desert the claims, which wasn't their game at all. Darn good stunt to remember, ain't it, if a person ever got up against that sort of thing?"

There was no direct reply to the half-question, and Buck shot a glance at his companions. Lynch rode slightly behind him and was out of the line of vision. McCabe, with face averted, bent over fussing with his saddle-strings. The sight of Doc Peters's face, however, pale, strained, with wide, frightened eyes and sagging jaw, told Stratton that his thrust had penetrated as deeply as he could have hoped.

"We'll start here."

It was Lynch's voice, curt and harsh, that broke the odd silence as he jerked his horse up and dismounted. "Get yore tools out an' don't waste any time."

There was no mistaking his mood, and in the hours that followed he was a far from agreeable taskmaster. He snapped and growled and swore at them impartially, acting generally like a bear with a sore ear whom nothing can please. If he could be said to be less disagreeable to anyone, it was, curiously enough, Bud Jessup, whom he kept down at one end of the line most of the afternoon. Later Stratton discovered the reason.

"It worked fine," Bud whispered to him jubilantly, when they were alone together for a few minutes after supper. "Did yuh see him hangin' around me this afternoon? He was grouchin' around and pretendin' to be mad because he'd let yuh go to town this mornin' just to mail a letter to some fool girl."

"Of course I pulled the baby stare an' told him I didn't see no letter to no girl. Yuh sure didn't mail one while I was with yuh, I says.

"'Didn't mail no letter at all?' he wants to know, scowlin'."

“‘Sure,’ I says. ‘Only it went to Jim Hardenberg over to Perilla. I seen him hand it to old Pop Daggett, who was peevisish as a wet hen ’cause he couldn’t find out nothin’ about what was in it, ’count of Buck hangin’ around till it got on the train. That’s the only letter I seen.’

“He didn’t have no more to say, but walked off, scowlin’ fierce. I’ll bet yuh my new Stetson to a two-bit piece, Buck, he rides in to town mighty quick to find out what Pop knows about it.”

Stratton did not take him up, for it had already occurred to him that such a move on Lynch’s part was almost certain. As a matter of fact the foreman did leave the ranch early the next morning, driving a pair of blacks harnessed to the buckboard. Buck and Jessup were both surprised at this unwonted method of locomotion, which usually indicated a passenger to be brought back, or, more rarely, a piece of freight or express, too large or heavy to be carried on horseback, yet not bulky enough for the lumbering freight-wagon.

“An’ if it was freight, he’d have sent one of us,” commented Bud, as they saddled up preparatory to resuming operations on the fences. “Still an’ all, I reckon he wants to see Pop himself and get a line on what that old he-gossip knows. He’ll have his ear full, all right,” he finished in a tone of vindictive satisfaction.

To make up for the day before, the whole gang took life very easily, and knocked off work rather earlier than usual. They had loafed ten or fifteen minutes in the bunk-house and were straggling up the slope in answer to Pedro’s summons to dinner when, with a clatter of hoofs, the blacks whirled through the further gate and galloped toward the house.

Buck, among the others, glanced curiously in that direction and observed with much interest that a woman occupied the front seat of the buckboard with Tex, while a young man and two small trunks more than filled the rear.

“Some dame!” he heard Bud mutter under his breath.

A moment later Lynch pulled up the snorting team and called Jessup to hold them. Buck was just turning away from a lightning appraisal of the new-comers, when, to his amazement, the young woman smiled at him from her seat.

“Why, Mr. Green!” she called out in surprise. “To think of finding you here!”

Buck stared at her, wide-eyed and bewildered. With her crisp, dark hair, fresh color, and regular features, she was very good to look at. But he had never consciously set eyes on her before in all his life!

CHAPTER XIV

THE LADY FROM THE PAST

Stratton's first feeling was that the girl must have made a mistake. In a dazed fashion he stepped forward and helped her out of the buckboard, but this was a more or less mechanical action and because she so evidently expected it. As he took her hand she pressed it warmly and did not at once relinquish it after she had reached the ground.

"I'm awfully glad to see you again," she said, her color heightened a little. "But how on earth do you come to be away off here?"

With an effort Buck pulled himself together. He could see that the men were regarding him curiously, and felt that he must say something.

"That's simple enough," he answered briefly. "I've got a job on this ranch."

She looked slightly puzzled. "Really? But I thought—I had no idea you knew—Mary."

"I didn't. I needed a job and drifted in here thinking I'd find a friend of mine who used to work on the same outfit in Texas. He was gone, but Miss Thorne took me on."

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"You mean you're a regular cow-boy?" the girl asked in surprise. "Why, you never told me that aboard ship?"

A sudden chill swept over Stratton, and for a moment he was stricken speechless. Aboard ship! Was it possible that this girl had been part of that uncanny, vanished year, the very thought of which troubled and oppressed him. His glance desperately evaded her charming, questioning eyes and rested suddenly with a curious cool sense of relief on the face of Mary Thorne, who had come up unperceived from behind.

But as their eyes met Buck was conscious of an odd veiled expression in their clear depths which vaguely troubled him. It vanished quickly as Miss Thorne

moved quickly forward to embrace her friend.

“Stella!” she cried. “I’m so awfully glad to see you.”

There were kisses and renewed embracings; the young man was greeted more decorously but with almost equal warmth, and then suddenly Miss Thorne turned to Stratton, who stood back a little, struggling between a longing to escape and an equally strong desire to find out a little more about this attractive but startling reminder of his unknown past.

“I had no idea you knew Miss Manning,” she said, with the faintest hint of stiffness in her manner.

Buck swallowed hard but was saved from further embarrassment by the girl.

“Oh, yes!” she said brightly. “We came home on the same ship. Mr. Green had been wounded, you know, and was under my care. We got to be—great friends.”

Was there a touch of meaning in the last two words? Stratton preferred to lay it to his imagination, and was glad of the diversion caused by the introduction of the young man, who proved to be Miss Manning’s brother. Buck was not at all impressed by the fellow’s handsome face, athletic figure, and immaculate clothes. The clothes especially seemed ridiculously out of place for even a visitor on a ranch, and he had always detested those dinky half-shaved mustaches.

Meanwhile the trunks had been carried in and the team led away, and Pedro was peevishly complaining from the kitchen door that dinner was getting cold. Buck learned that the visitors were from Chicago, where they had been close friends of the Thorne family for years, and then he managed to break away and join the fellows in the kitchen.

During the meal there was a lot of more or less quiet joking on the subject of Stratton’s acquaintance with the lady, which he managed to parry rather cleverly. As a matter of fact the acute horror he felt at the very thought of the truth about himself getting out, quickened his wits and kept him constantly on his guard. He kept his temper and his head, explaining calmly that Miss Manning had been one of the nurses detailed to look after the batch of wounded men of whom he had been one. Naturally he had seen considerable of her during the long and tedious voyage, but there were one or two others he liked equally well.

His careless manner seemed to convince the men that there was no particular amusement to be extracted from the situation, and to Buck’s relief they passed on to a general discussion of strangers on a ranch, the bother they were, and the

extra amount of work they made.

“Always wantin’ to ride around with yuh an’ see what’s goin’ on,” declared Butch Siegrist sourly. “If they’re wimmin, yuh can’t even give a cuss without lookin’ first to see if they’re near enough to hear.”

Stratton made a mental resolution that if anything of that sort came up, he would do his best to duck the job of playing cicerone to Miss Stella Manning, attractive as she was. So far his bluff seemed to have worked, but with a mind so entirely blank of the slightest detail of their acquaintance, he knew that at any moment the most casual remark might serve to rouse her suspicion.

Fortunately, his desire to remain in the background was abetted by Tex Lynch. Whether or not the foreman wanted to keep him away from the ranch-owner’s friends as well as from Miss Thorne herself, Buck could not quite determine. But while the fence-repairing progressed, Stratton was never by any chance detailed to other duties which might keep him in the neighborhood of the ranch-house, and on the one occasion when Miss Thorne and her guests rode out to where the men were working, Lynch saw to it that there was no opportunity for anything like private conversation between them and the object of his solicitude.

Buck watched his manœuvering with secret amusement.

“Wouldn’t he be wild if he knew he was playing right into my hands?” he thought.

His face darkened as he glanced thoughtfully at the departing figure of Miss Manning. She had greeted him warmly and betrayed a very evident inclination to linger in his vicinity. There had been a slight touch of pique in her treatment of Lynch, who hung around so persistently.

“I wish to thunder I had an idea of how much she knows,” he muttered. “Did I act like a brainless idiot when I was—was that way, or not?”

He had asked the same question of the hospital surgeon and got an unsatisfactory answer. It all depended, the doctor told him non-committally. He might easily have shown evidences of lost memory; on the other hand, it was quite possible, especially with chance acquaintances, that his manner had been entirely normal.

There was nothing to be gained, however, by racking his brain for something that wasn’t there, and Buck soon gave up the attempt. He could only trust to luck and his own inventiveness, and hope that Lynch’s delightfully unconscious easing of the situation would continue.

The work was finished toward noon on the third day after the arrival of the Mannings, and all the connections hooked up. There remained nothing to do but test the line, and Tex, after making sure everything was in order, glanced over his men, who lounged in front of the Las Vegas shack.

“Yuh may as well stay down at this end,” he remarked, looking at Buck, “while the rest of us go back. Stick around where yuh can hear the bell, an’ if it don’t ring in, say, an hour, try to get the house yourself. If that don’t work, come along in an’ report. I reckon everything’s all right, though.”

Stratton was conscious of a sudden sense of alertness. He had grown so used to suspecting and analyzing everything the foreman said or did that for a moment he forgot the precautions he had taken and wondered whether Lynch was up to some new crooked work. Then he remembered and relaxed mentally. Considering the consequences, Tex would hardly dare try any fresh violence against him, especially quite so soon. Besides, in broad daylight and in this open country, Buck couldn’t imagine any form of danger he wouldn’t be able to meet successfully alone.

So he acquiesced indifferently, and from the open doorway of the hut watched the others mount and ride away. There were only four of them, for Kreeger and Butch Siegrist had been dispatched early that morning to ride fence on the other side of the ranch-house. When they were well on their way, Buck untied his lunch from the saddle and went into the shack to eat it.

In spite of the feeling that he had nothing to fear, he took a position which gave him a good outlook from both door and window, and saw that his gun was loose in the holster. After he had eaten, he went down and got a drink from the creek. He had not been back in the shack a great while before the telephone bell jangled, and taking down the receiver he heard Lynch’s voice at the other end.

Owing to the rather crude nature of the contrivance there was a good deal of buzzing on the line. But this was to be expected, and when Tex had talked a few minutes and decided that the system was working as well as could be hoped, he told Stratton to come in to the ranch, and hung up.

Buck had not ridden more than a quarter of a mile across the prairie, when all at once he pulled his horse to a standstill. The thought had suddenly come to him that this was the chance he had wanted so long to take a look at that mysterious stretch of desert known as the north pasture. He would be delayed, of course, but explanations were easy and that did not disturb him. It was too good an opportunity to miss, and without delay he turned his horse and spurred forward.

An instinct of caution made him keep as close as possible to the rough, broken country that edged the western extremity of the ranch, where he would run less chance of being seen than on the flat, open plain. He pushed his horse as much as was wise, and presently observed with satisfaction—though it was still a good way off—the line of fence that marked the northern boundary of middle pasture.

A few hundred yards ahead lay a shallow draw, and beyond it a weather-worn ridge thrust its blunt nose out into the plain considerably further than any Buck had yet passed. He turned the horse out, intending to ride around it, but a couple of minutes later jerked him to a standstill and sat motionless in the saddle, eyes narrowing with a sudden, keen surprise.

He had reached a point where, for the first time, he could make out, over the obstruction ahead, the extreme northwest corner of the pasture. Almost at the spot where the two lines of fence made a right angle were two horsemen in the typical cow-man attire. At first they stood close together, but as Stratton stared intently, rising a little in his stirrups to get a clearer view through the scanty fringe of vegetation that topped the ridge, one of them rode forward and, dismounting, began to manipulate the fence wires with quick, jerky movements of his hands.

CHAPTER XV

“BLACKLEG”

More than once during the next ten minutes Buck cursed himself inwardly for not having brought along the small but powerful pair of field-glasses that were tucked away in his bag. He had picked them up at the Divisional Headquarters only a week or two before the Belleau Woods business, and how they had stuck to him until his arrival in America remained one of the minor mysteries of that vanished year. He would have given anything for them now, for though he could make out fairly well the movements of the two men, he was too far away to distinguish their faces.

Watching closely, he saw that the first fellow was taking down a short section of the fence, either by cutting or by pulling out the staples. When this lay flat he remounted and, joining his companion, the two proceeded to drive through the gap nothing more significant than a solitary steer.

It was a yearling, Buck could easily see even at that distance, and he almost laughed aloud at the sudden let-down of suspense. By this time a little individual trick of carriage made him suspect that the foremost puncher was Butch Siegrist, and when the men came into clearer view, he recognized scarcely without question the big sorrel with white trimmings on which Kreeger had ridden off that morning. The two men had found a Shoe-Bar stray; that was all. And yet, on second thought, how did they come to be here when they were supposed to be working at the very opposite extremity of the ranch?

It was this query which made Stratton refrain from showing himself. With considerable annoyance, for time was passing, he waited where he was until the two men had gone back through the gap in the fence and restored the wires. He watched them turn northward and ride rapidly across the sandy waste until at length their diminishing figures disappeared into the distance. Even then it was ten or fifteen minutes before he emerged from his seclusion, and when he finally did he headed straight for the young steer, who had been the cause of so much

exertion on the part of the two men who ordinarily shirked work whenever they could.

Under the lash of a rope, the animal had lumbered across the pasture for several hundred yards, where he paused languidly to crunch some bunch-grass. There was an air of lassitude and weakness about the creature which made Buck, as he approached, eye it with anxious intentness. A dozen feet or so away he jerked his horse to a standstill and caught his breath with an odd whistling sound.

“Great Godfrey!” he breathed.

Bending slightly forward in the saddle, he stared at the creature’s badly-swollen off hind leg, but there was no need whatever for a prolonged inspection. Having been through one blackleg epidemic back in Texas, he knew the signs only too well.

“That’s it, sure enough,” he muttered, straightening up.

His gaze swept across the prairie to where, half a mile away, a bunch of Shoe-Bar cattle grazed peacefully. If this sick beast should get amongst them, the yearlings at least, to whom the disease is fatal, would be dying like flies in twenty-four hours. Buck glanced back at the steer again, and as he noted the T-T brand, his face hardened and he began taking down his rope.

“The hellions!” he grated, an angry flush darkening his tan. “They ought to be strung up.”

The animal started to move away, and Buck lost no time in roping him. Then he turned his horse and urged him toward the fence, dragging the reluctant brute behind. Fortunately he had his pliers in the saddle-pocket, and, taking down the wires, he forced the creature through and headed for a deep gully the mouth of which lay a few hundred yards to the left. Penetrating into this as far as he was able, he took out his Colt and deliberately shot the steer through the head. And if Kreeger or Siegrist had been present at that moment, he was furious enough to treat either of them in the same way without a particle of compunction.

“Hanging would be too good for them, the dirty beasts!” he grated.

The thing had been so fiendishly cold-blooded and calculating that it made his blood boil, for it was perfectly evident now to Buck that he had thwarted a deliberate plot to introduce the blackleg scourge among the Shoe-Bar cattle. Instead of riding fence, the two punchers must have made their roundabout way immediately to the stricken T-T ranch, secured in some manner an infected yearling and brought it back through the twisting mountain trail Bud had spoken

of a few days before.

Lynch's was the directing spirit, of course; for none of the others would dare act save under his orders. But what was his object? What could he possibly hope to gain by such a thing? Buck could understand a man allowing rustlers to loot a ranch, if the same individual were in with them secretly and shared the plunder. But there was no profit in this for anyone—only an infinite amount of trouble and worry and extra work for them all, to say nothing of great financial loss to—Mary Thorne.

When Stratton had secured his rope and rode back to the Shoe-Bar pasture, his face was thoughtful. He was thinking of those excellent offers for the outfit Miss Thorne had lately spoken of, which Lynch was so anxious for her to accept. Could the foreman's plotting be for the purpose of forcing her to sell? From something she had let fall, Buck guessed that she was more or less dependent on the income from the ranch, and if this failed she might no longer be able to hold the property.

But even supposing this was true, it all still failed to make sense. The land itself was good enough, as Stratton knew from his former careful inspections, but it would be of little use for any purpose save ranching; and since the value of a cattle-ranch consists largely in the cattle themselves, it followed logically that by reducing the number, by theft, by disease, or any other means, the value would be very much less to a prospective purchaser.

Unable to make head or tail of the problem, Buck finally gave it up for the time being. He put back the fence with care and then headed straight for the ranch. There was no time left for the desired inspection of the north pasture. To undertake it now would mean a much longer delay than he could plausibly explain, and he was particularly anxious to avoid the need of any explanation which might arouse suspicion that the criminal action of the two men had been overseen.

"If they guessed, they'd be likely to try it again," he thought, "and another time they might succeed."

Stratton managed his route so that for the last two miles it took exactly the course he would have followed in returning directly from Las Vegas camp. His plan was further favored by the discovery that none of the men save Bud were anywhere about the ranch-house.

"Gone off to ride fence along with Flint an' Butch," Jessup informed him, when Buck located him in the wagon-shed. "Wonder why he's so awful interested in

fences all of a sudden,” he went on thoughtfully. “They’ve been let go all over the ranch till they’re plumb fallin’ to pieces.”

“You’ve got me,” shrugged Stratton. He had been cogitating whether or not to confide in Bud, and finally decided in the negative. It would do no particular good, and the youngster might impulsively let out something to the others. “Why didn’t they take you along, too?”

“I sure wish they had,” Bud answered shortly. “Then I wouldn’t of had to be lookin’ at that all afternoon.”

He straightened from the wagon-body he was tinkering and waved a wrench toward the window behind Stratton. Turning quickly, the latter saw that it looked out on the rear of the ranch-house, where there were a few stunted trees and a not altogether successful attempt at a small flower-garden. On a rough, rustic bench under one of the trees sat young Manning and Mary Thorne, in earnest conversation.

“Sickening, ain’t it?” commented Bud, taking encouragement from Stratton’s involuntary frown. “I been expectin’ ’em to hold hands any minute.”

Buck laughed, mainly because he was annoyed with himself for feeling any emotion whatever. “You don’t seem to like Mr. Alfred Manning,” he remarked.

“Who would?” snorted Jessup. “He sure gets my goat, with them dude clothes, an’ that misplaced piece of eyebrow on his lip, an’ his superior airs. I wouldn’t of thought Miss Mary was the kind to—”

“Where’s—er—Miss Manning?” broke in Buck, reluctant to continue the discussion.

“Gone in with Mrs. Archer,” Bud explained, “They was both out there a while ago, but I reckon they got tired hangin’ around.”

Stratton turned his back on the dingy window and fell to work on the wagon with Bud.

“Seen Bemis lately?” he asked presently, realizing of a sudden that he had not visited the invalid for several days.

Bud sniffed. “Sure. I was in there this mornin’. He’s outa bed now moochin’ around the room an’ countin’ the hours till he can back a horse.”

“Still got that notion the outfit isn’t safe?”

“I’ll tell the world! He says life’s too short to take any more chances of bein’

bumped off. Tried to make me believe my turn'll come next."

Stratton shrugged his shoulders. "I reckon there isn't much chance of that. They're not keen to get the sheriff down on their trail. Well, if he feels like that he wouldn't be much use here even if we could persuade him to stick."

About half-past five they decided to call it a day and went down to the bunk-house, through the open door of which Buck presently observed the arrival of the remainder of the outfit. They came from the east, and Kreeger and Siegrist were with them. As Buck expected, the former rode the sorrel with distinctive white markings, while the latter bestrode a nondescript bay. The second of the two riders he had watched that afternoon had been mounted on just such a bay, and if there had been a lingering touch of doubt in Stratton's mind as to the identity of the two criminals, it remained no longer.

CHAPTER XVI

THE UNEXPECTED

More than once during the following few days, Stratton was forced to a grudging admiration, of Tex Lynch's cleverness. Even knowing what he did, he failed to detect the slightest sign in either the foreman or his men that they were waiting expectantly for something to happen. The only significant feature was their marked avoidance of the middle pasture. This might readily be accounted for by the fact that the work now lay on the other side of the outfit, but Buck was convinced that their real purpose was to allow the blackleg scourge to gain as great a hold as possible on Shoe-Bar cattle before its discovery.

The cold-blooded brutality of that quiescence made Stratton furious, but it also brought home more effectually than ever the nature of the men he had to deal with. They were evidently the sort to stop at nothing, and Buck had moments of wondering whether or not he was proceeding in the right way to uncover the mystery of their motive.

So far he had really accomplished very little. The unabated watchfulness of the crowd so hedged in and hampered him that it was quite impossible to do any extended investigating. He still had the power of ending the whole affair at any moment and clearing the ranch of the entire gang. But aside from his unwillingness to humiliate Mary Thorne, he realized that this would not necessarily accomplish what he wanted.

"It would stop their deviltry all right," he thought "but I might never find out what they're after. About the only way is to give 'em enough rope to hang themselves, and I'm blowed if I don't believe I could do that better by leaving the outfit and doing a little sleuthing on my own."

Yet somehow that did not altogether appeal to him, either. The presence of handsome Alf Manning may have had something to do with Buck's reluctance to quit the ranch just now, but he would never have admitted it, even to himself. He simply made up his mind to wait a while, at least until he could see what

happened when Lynch discovered the failure of his latest plot, and then be governed by circumstances.

In the meantime the situation, so far as Miss Manning, was concerned, grew daily more complicated. She showed a decided inclination for Stratton's society, and when he came to know her better he found her frank, breezy, and delightfully companionable. He knew perfectly well that unless he wanted to take a chance of making some tremendous blunder he ought to avoid any prolonged conversation with the lady. But she was so charming that every now and then he flung prudence to the winds—and usually regretted it.

It was not that she said anything definitely disconcerting, but there were occasional hints and innuendoes, and now and then a question which seemed innocent enough but which Stratton found difficult to parry. He couldn't quite make up his mind whether or not she suspected the truth about his former mental condition, but he had an uncomfortable notion that she sensed a difference and was trying to find out just where it lay.

Time and again he told himself that at the worst there was nothing disgraceful in that vanished past. But he had the ordinary healthy man's horror for the abnormal, and the very fact that it had vanished so utterly beyond recall made him willing, in order to avoid having it dragged back into the light and made public property, to do almost anything, even to being almost rude to a pretty girl.

Thus between escaping Miss Manning and trying to keep an eye on Lynch, Stratton had his work cut out for him. He knew that sooner or later some one would be sent out to take a look through the middle pasture, and he wanted very much to be on hand when the report came back to Lynch that his plot had miscarried. It was consequently with very bad grace that Buck received an order to ride in to Paloma one morning for the long-delayed wagon-bolts and a few necessary supplies from the store.

He felt at once that it was a put-up job to get him out of the way. Only yesterday Rick Bemis, able at length to ride that distance, had quit the ranch escorted by Slim McCabe. If anything was really needed the latter could have brought it back and saved the expense of sending another man twenty-four hours later.

But there was no reasonable excuse for Buck's protesting, and he held his tongue. He wished that he had taken Jessup into his confidence about the blackleg plot, but there was no time for that now. He did manage, on his way to the corral, to whisper a word or two in passing, urging the youngster to take particular note of anything that went on during his absence, but he would have

much preferred giving Bud some definite idea of what to look for, and his humor, as he saddled up and left the ranch, was far from amiable.

But gradually, as he rode rapidly along the trail, the crisp, clean air brushing his face and the early morning sun caressing him with a pleasant warmth, his mood changed. After all, it was really of very little moment whether or not he was present when Lynch first learned that things had failed to go his way. At best he might have had a momentary vindictive thrill at glimpsing the fellow's thwarted rage; perhaps not even that, for Tex was uncommonly good at hiding his emotions. It was much more important for him to decide definitely and soon about his own future plans, and this solitary ride over an easy, familiar trail gave him as good a chance as he was ever likely to have.

A little straight thinking made him realize—with a half-guilty feeling of having deliberately shut his eyes to it before—that he could not hope to get much further under present conditions. Tied down as he was, a dozen promising clues might pop up, which he would have no chance whatever of investigating. Indeed, looking at the situation in this light, he felt a wonder that Lynch should ever have tried to oust him from the ranch, where he could be kept under constant observation and followed up in every move. Working from the outside, with freedom to come and go as he liked, he could accomplish a vast deal more than in this present hampered fashion. There still remained traces of his vague, underlying reluctance to leave the place at this particular time, but Buck crushed it down firmly, even a little angrily.

“It's up to me to quit,” he muttered. “I'd be a blooming jackass to waste any more time here. I'll have to work it naturally, though, or Lynch will smell a rat.”

At that moment the trail dipped down into a gully—the very one, in fact, where he had passed Tex that first day he had ridden out to the ranch. Thinking of the encounter, Buck recalled his own emotions with a curious feeling of remoteness. The grotesque mental picture he had formed of Mary Thorne contrasted so amusingly with the reality that he grinned and might have broken into a laugh had he not caught sight at that moment of a figure riding toward him from the other end of the gully.

The high-crowned sombrero, abnormally broad of brim, the gaudy saddle-trappings and touches of bright color about the stranger's equipment, brought a slight frown to Stratton's face. Apart even from his recent unpleasant associations with them, he had never had any great fondness for Mexicans, whom he considered slick and slippery beyond the average. He watched this one's

approach warily, and when the fellow pulled up with a glistening smile and a polite "*Buenas tardes*," Stratton responded with some curtness.

"Fine day, señor," remarked the stranger pleasantly.

"You've said it," returned Buck drily. "We haven't had rain in as much as three weeks."

"Tha's right," agreed the other. His glance strayed to the brand on Buck's cayuse, and his swarthy face took on an expression of pleased surprise. "You come from Shoe-Bar?" he questioned.

"You're some mind-reader," commented Stratton briefly. "What of it?"

"Mebbe yo' do me favor," pursued the Mexican eagerly. "Save me plenty hot ride." He pulled an envelope from the pocket of his elaborately silver-conchoed chaps. "Rocking-R boss, he tell me take thees to Mister Leench at Shoe-Bar. Eef yo' take heem, I am save mooch trouble, eh?"

Buck eyed the extended envelope doubtfully. Then, ashamed of his momentary hesitation to perform this simple service, he took it and tucked it away in one pocket.

"All right," he agreed. "I'll take it over for you. I've got to go in to town first, though."

"No matter," shrugged the Mexican. "There is no hurry."

With reiterated and profuse thanks, he pulled his horse around and rode back with Stratton as far as the Rocking-R trail, where he turned off.

"He'll find some corner where he can curl up and snooze for the couple of hours he's saved," thought Buck, watching the departing figure. "Those fellows, are so dog-gone lazy they'd sit and let grasshoppers, eat holes in their breeches."

As he rode on he wondered a little what Jim Tenny, the Rocking-R foreman, could have to do with Lynch, who seemed to be on the outs with everybody, but Presently he dismissed the subject with a shrug.

"I'll be getting as bad as Pop if I'm not careful" he thought. "Likely it's some perfectly ordinary range business."

He found Daggett in a garrulous mood but was in no humor to waste time listening to his flood of talk and questions. The bolts had come at last, and when he had secured them and the other things from the store, Buck promptly mounted and set out on his return.

Tex met him just outside the corral and received the letter without comment, thrusting it into his pocket unread. He seemed much more interested in the arrival of the bolts, and after dinner set Stratton and McCabe to work in the wagon-shed replacing the broken ones. It was not until late in the afternoon that Buck managed a few words in private with Jessup, and was surprised to learn that the gang had been working all day to the southeast of the ranch. Tex himself had been absent from the party for an hour or two in the morning, but when he joined them he came from the direction of the Paloma trail, and Stratton did not believe he could have had time thoroughly to inspect the middle pasture and return so soon by so roundabout a course.

“He’ll do it to-morrow, sure,” decided Buck. “It isn’t human nature to hold off much longer.”

He was right. After breakfast Stratton and McCabe were ordered to resume work on the wagons, while the others sallied forth with Lynch, ostensibly to ride fence along the southern side of middle pasture. Buck awaited their return with interest and curiosity. He thought he might possibly detect some signs of glumness in the faces of the foreman and his confederates, but he was quite unprepared for the open anger and excitement which stamped every face, Bud Jessup’s included.

“Rustlers were out again last night,” Bud explained, the moment he had a chance.

Buck stared at him in amazement, the totally unexpected nature of the thing taking him completely by surprise.

“Why I thought—”

“So did I,” interrupted Bud curtly. “I didn’t believe they’d dare break into middle pasture, but they have. There’s a gap a hundred yards wide in the fence, and they’ve got away with a couple of hundred head at least.”

“You’re sure it happened last night?”

“Dead certain. The tracks are too fresh. Buck, if Tex Lynch don’t get Hardenberg on the job now, we’ll *know* he’s crooked.”

“We’d pretty near decided that anyhow, hadn’t we?” returned Stratton absently.

He was wondering how this new move had been managed and what it meant. If it had been merely part of a scheme to loot the Shoe-Bar for his own benefit, Tex would never have allowed his rustler accomplices to touch a steer from that middle pasture herd, which he must feel by this time to be thoroughly and

completely infected. Even if he had managed during his brief absence yesterday to make a hurried inspection, and suspected that the blackleg' plot had failed, he couldn't be certain enough to take a chance like this.

The foreman's manner gave Buck no clue. At dinner he was unusually silent and morose, taking no part in the discussion of this latest outrage, which the others kept up with such a convincing semblance of indignation. To Stratton he acted like a man who has come to some new and not altogether agreeable decision, which in any other person would probably mean that he had at last made up his mind to call in the sheriff. But Buck was convinced that this was the last thing Lynch intended to do, and gradually there grew up in his mind, fostered by one or two trifling particulars in Tex's manner toward himself, a curious, instinctive feeling of premonitory caution.

This increased during the afternoon, when the men were sent out to repair the broken fence, while Lynch remained behind. It fed on little details, such as a chance side glance from one of the men, or the sight of two of them in low-voiced conversation when he was not supposed to be looking—details he would scarcely have noticed ordinarily. Toward the end of the day Buck had grown almost certain that some fresh move was being directed against himself, and when the blow fell only its nature came as a surprise.

The foreman was standing near the corral when they returned, and as soon as Stratton had unsaddled and turned his horse loose, Lynch drew him to one side.

"Here's your time up to to-night," he said curtly, holding out a handful of crumpled bills and silver. "Miss Thorne's decided she don't want yuh on the outfit any longer."

For a moment Stratton regarded the foreman in silence, observing the glint of veiled triumph in his eyes and the malicious curve of the full red lips. The thought flashed through his mind that Lynch would hardly be quite so pleased if he knew how much time Buck himself had given lately to thinking up some scheme of plausibly bringing about this very situation.

"*Is that so?*" he drawled presently. "How did you work it?" he added, in the casual tone of one seeking to gratify a trifling curiosity.

Lynch scowled. "Work it?" he snapped. "I didn't have to work it. Yuh know damn well why you're sacked. Why should I waste time tellin' yuh?"

Stratton smiled blandly. "In that case I reckon I'll have to ask Miss Thorne," he remarked, standing with legs slightly apart and thumbs hooked loosely in his

chap-belt. "I'm rather curious, you know."

"Like hell yuh will!" rasped Lynch, as Buck took a step or two toward the house.

Impulsively Lynch's right hand dropped to his gun but as his fingers touched the stock he found himself staring at the uptilted end of Stratton's holster frayed a little at the end so that the glint of a blued steel barrel showed through the leather.

"Just move your hand a mite," Buck suggested in a quiet, level tone, which was nevertheless obeyed promptly. "Now, listen here. I want you to get this. I ain't longing to stick around any outfit when the boss don't want me. If the lady says I'm to go, I'll get out *pronto*; but I don't trust you, and she's got to tell me that face to face before I move a step. *Sabe?*"

His eyes narrowed slightly, and Lynch, crumpling the unheeded money in his hand, stepped aside with an expression of baffled fury and watched him stride along the side of the house and disappear around the corner.

He was far from lacking nerve, but he had suddenly remembered that letter to Sheriff Hardenberg, regarding which he had long ago obtained confirmation from Pop Daggett. If he could rely on the meaning of Stratton's little anecdote—and he had an uncomfortable conviction that he could—the letter would be opened in case Buck met his death by violence. And once it was opened by the sheriff, only Tex Lynch how very much the fat would be in the fire.

So, though his fingers twitched, he held his hand, and presently, hearing voices in the living-room, he crept over to an open window and, standing close to one side of it, bent his head to listen.

CHAPTER XVII

THE PRIMEVAL INSTINCT

On the other side of the house Buck found the mistress of the ranch and her two guests standing in a little group beside one of the dusty, discouraged-looking flower-beds. As he appeared they all glanced toward him, and a troubled, almost frightened expression flashed across Mary Thorne's face.

"Could I speak to you a moment, ma'am?" asked Stratton, doffing his Stetson.

That expression, and her marked hesitation in coming forward, were both significant, and Buck felt a sudden little stab of anger. Was she afraid of him? he wondered; and tried to imagine what beastly lies Lynch must have told her to bring about such an extraordinary state of mind.

But as she moved slowly toward him, the anger ebbed as swiftly as it had come. She looked so slight and frail and girlish, and he observed that her lips were pressed almost as tightly together as the fingers of those small, brown hands hanging straight at her sides. At the edge of the porch she paused and looked up at him, and though the startled look had gone, he could see that she was still nervous and apprehensive.

"Should you rather go inside?" she murmured.

Buck flashed a glance at the two Mannings, still within hearing. "If you don't mind," he answered briefly.

In the living-room she turned and faced him, her back against the table, on which she rested the tips of her outspread fingers. She was so evidently nerving herself for an interview she dreaded that Buck almost regretted having forced it.

"I won't keep you a minute," he began hurriedly. "Tex tells me you have no more use for me here."

"I'm—sorry," fell almost mechanically from her set lips.

"But he didn't tell me why."

Her eyes, which from the first had scarcely left his face, widened, and a puzzled look came into them.

“But you must know,” she returned a trifle stiffly.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t,” he assured her.

“Oh—duties!” She spoke with a touch of soft impatience. “It’s what you’ve done, not what you haven’t done that—. But surely this is a waste of time? It’s not particularly—pleasant; and I don’t see what will be gained by going into all the—the details.”

Something in her tone stung him. “Still, it doesn’t seem quite fair to condemn even a common cow-puncher unheard,” he retorted with a touch of sarcasm.

She stiffened, and a faint flush crept into her face. Then her chin went up determinedly.

“You rode to Paloma yesterday morning.” It was more of a statement than a question.

“Yes.”

“In the gully this side of the Rocking-R trail you met a Mexican on a sorrel horse?”

Again Buck acquiesced, but inwardly he wondered. So far as he knew there had been no witness to that meeting.

“He handed you a letter?”

Buck nodded, a sudden feeling of puzzled wariness surging over him. For an instant the girl hesitated. Then she went on in a soft rush of indignation:

“And so last night those Mexican thieves, warned that the middle pasture would be unguarded, broke in there and carried off nearly two hundred head of cattle!”

As he caught her meaning, which he did almost instantly, Buck flushed crimson and his eyes flashed. For a moment or so he was too furious to speak; and though most of his rage was directed against the man who, with such brazen effrontery, had sought to shift the blame of his own criminal plotting, he could not help feeling resentment that the girl should so readily believe the worst against him. A vehement denial trembled on his lips, but in time he remembered that he could not utter it without giving away more than he was willing to at the present moment. With an effort he got a grip on himself, but though his voice was quiet enough, his eyes still smoldered and his lips were hard.

“I see,” he commented briefly. “You believe it all, of course?”

She had been watching him closely, and now a touch of troubled uncertainty crept into her face.

“What else can I do?” she countered. “You admit getting the letter from that Mexican, and I saw Tex take it out of your bag.”

This information brought Buck’s lips tightly together and he frowned. “Could I see it—the letter, I mean?” he asked.

She hesitated a moment, and then, reaching across the table, took up the shabby account-book he had seen before and drew from it a single sheet of paper. The note was short and written in Spanish. It was headed, “*Amigo Green,*” and as Buck swiftly translated the few lines in which the writer gave thanks for information purported to have been given about the middle pasture and stated that the raid would take place that night according to arrangement, his lips curled. From his point of view it seemed incredible that anyone could be deceived by such a clumsy fraud. But he was forced to admit that up to a few weeks ago the girl had never set eyes on him, and knew nothing of his antecedents, whereas she trusted Lynch implicitly. So he refrained from any comment as he handed back the letter.

“You don’t—deny it?” asked the girl, an undertone of disappointment in her voice.

“What’s the use?” shrugged Stratton. “You evidently believe Lynch.”

She did not answer at once, but stood silent, searching his face with a troubled, wistful scrutiny.

“I don’t know quite what to believe,” she told him presently. “You—you don’t seem like a person who would—who would— And yet some one must have given information.” Her chin suddenly tilted and her lips grew firm. “If you’ll tell me straight out that you’re nothing but an ordinary cow-puncher, that you have no special object in being here on the ranch, that you’re exactly what you seem and nothing more, then I—I’ll believe you.”

Her words banished the last part of resentment lingering in Stratton’s mind. She was a good sort, after all. He found himself of a sudden regarding her with a feeling that was almost tenderness, and wishing very much that he might tell her everything. But that, of course, was impossible.

“I can’t quite do that,” he answered slowly.

The hopeful gleam died out of her eyes, and she made an eloquent, discouraged gesture with both hands.

“You see? What else can I do but let you go? Unless I take every possible precaution I’ll be ruined by these dreadful thieves.”

Buck moved his shoulders slightly. “I understand. I’m not kicking. Well, I won’t keep you any longer. Thank you very much for telling me what you have.”

Abruptly he turned away and in the doorway came face to face with Alfred Manning, who seemed to expect the cow-puncher to step obsequiously aside and let him pass. But Buck was in no humor to step aside for any one, and for a silent instant their glances clashed. In the end it was Manning, flushed and looking daggers, who gave way, and as Stratton passed the open window a moment later he heard the other’s voice raised in an angry pitch.

“Perfectly intolerable! I tell you, Mary, you ought to have that fellow arrested.”

“I don’t mean to do anything of the sort,” retorted Miss Thorne.

“But it’s your duty. He’ll get clean away, and go right on stealing—”

“Please, Alf!” There was a tired break in the girl’s voice. “I don’t want to talk any more about it. I’ve had enough—”

Stratton’s lips tightened and he passed on out of hearing. The encounter with Manning had irritated him, and a glimpse of Lynch he caught through the kitchen door fanned into a fresh glow his smoldering anger against the foreman. It was not that he minded in the least the result of the fellow’s plotting. But the method of it, the effrontery of that cowardly, insolent attempt to blacken and besmirch him with Mary Thorne, made him more furious each time he thought of it. When he reached the bunk-house his rage was white hot.

He found Jessup the sole occupant. It was still rather early for quitting, and Tex must have set the other men to doing odd jobs around the barns and near-by places.

“What’s happened?” demanded Bud, as Buck appeared. “Tex put me to work oiling harness, but I sneaked off as soon as he was out of sight. I heard Slim say yuh were fired.”

Flinging his belongings together as he talked, Stratton briefly retailed the essentials of the situation.

“I’m going to saddle up and start for town right away,” he concluded. “If I hang

around here much longer I don't know as I can keep my hands off that double-faced crook."

He added some more man-sized adjectives, to which Bud listened with complete approval.

"Yuh ain't said half enough," he growled, from where he stood to the left of the closed door. "I wish yuh would stay an' give him one almighty good beating up. He thinks there ain't a man on the range can stand up against him."

Buck's eyes narrowed. "I'd sure like to try," he said regretfully. "I don't say I could knock him out, but I'd guarantee to give him something to think about. Trouble is, there's nothing gained by starting a mess like that except letting off steam, and there might be a whole lot—"

He broke off abruptly as the door swung open to admit Lynch and McCabe. The foreman, pausing just inside the room, eyed Stratton's preparations for departure with curling lips. As a matter of fact, what he had overheard of the interview between Buck and Mary Thorne had given him the impression that Stratton was an easy mark, whose courage and ability had been greatly overestimated. A more sagacious person would have been content to let well enough alone. But Tex had a disposition which impelled him to rub things in.

"There's yore dough," he said sneeringly, flinging the little handful of money on the table with such force that several coins fell to the floor and rolled into remote corners. "Yuh better put it away safe, 'cause after this there ain't nobody around these parts'll hire yuh, I'll tell a man!"

His tone was indescribably taunting, and of a sudden Buck saw red. Dominated by the single-minded impulse of primeval man to use the weapons nature gave him, he forgot momentarily that he carried a gun. When the two men entered, he had been bending over, rolling his blankets. Since then, save to raise his head, he had scarcely altered his position, and yet, as he poised there motionless, fists clenched, muscles tense, eyes narrowed to mere slits, Lynch suddenly realized that he had blundered, and reached swiftly for his Colt.

But another hand was ahead of his. Standing just behind him, Bud Jessup had sized up the situation a fraction of a second before Tex, and like a flash he bent forward and snatched the foreman's weapon from its holster.

"Cut that out, Slim!" he shrilled, forestalling a sudden downward jerk of McCabe's right hand. "No horning in, now. Give it here."

An instant later he had slammed the door and shot the bolt, and stood with back

against it, a Colt in each hand. His freckled face was flushed and his eyes gleamed with excitement.

“Go to it, Buck!” he yelled jubilantly. “My money’s up on yuh, old man. Give him hell!”

Lynch darted out into the middle of the room, thrusting aside the table with a single powerful sweep of one arm. There was no hint of reluctance in his manner, nor lack of efficiency in the lowering droop of his big shoulders or the way his fists fell automatically into position. His face had hardened into a fierce mask, out of which savage eyes blazed fearlessly.

An instant later, like the spring of a panther, Stratton’s lean, lithe body launched forward.

CHAPTER XVIII

A CHANGE OF BASE

Stratton staggered back against the wall and leaned there, panting. All his strength had gone out in that last terrific blow, and for a space he seemed incapable of movement. At length, conscious of a warm, moist trickle on his chin, he raised one hand mechanically to his face and brought it away, dabbled with bright crimson. For a moment or two he regarded the stiff, crooked fingers and bruised knuckles in a dazed, impersonal fashion as if the hand belonged to some one else. Then he became aware that Bud was speaking.

“Sure,” he mumbled, when the meaning of the reiterated question penetrated to his consciousness. “I’m—all—right.”

Then his head began to clear, and, slowly straightening his sagging shoulders, he glanced down at the hulking figure sprawling motionless amidst the debris of the wrecked table.

“Is—he—” he began slowly.

“He’s out, that’s all,” stated Jessup crisply. “Golly, Buck! That was some punch.” He paused, regarding his friend eagerly. “What are yuh goin’ to do now?” he asked.

A tiny trickle of blood from Stratton’s cut lip ran down his chin and splashed on the front of his torn, disordered shirt.

“Wash, I reckon,” he answered, with a twisted twitch of his stiff lips that was meant to be a smile. “I sure need it bad.”

“But I mean after that,” explained Bud. “Don’t yuh want me to saddle up while you’re gettin’ ready? There ain’t no point in hangin’ around till he comes to.”

Buck took a step or two away from the wall and regarded the prostrate Lynch briefly, his glance also taking in McCabe, who bent over him.

“I reckon not,” he agreed briefly. “Likewise, if I don’t get astride a cayuse

mighty soon, I won't be able to climb onto him at all. Go ahead and saddle up, kid, and I'll be with you *pronto*. You'd better ride to town with me and bring back the horse."

Bud nodded and, breaking the Colts one after another, pocketed the shells and dropped the weapons into a near-by bunk.

"Yuh needn't bother to do that," commented McCabe sourly. "Nobody ain't goin' to drill no holes in yuh; we're only too tickled to see yuh get out. If you're wise, kid, you'll stay away, likewise. I wouldn't be in yore shoes for no money when Tex comes around an' remembers what yuh done?"

"I reckon I can take care of m'self," retorted Jessup. "It ain't Tex's game to be took up for no murder yet awhile."

Without further comment he gathered up most of Stratton's belongings and departed for the corral. Buck took his hand-bag and, leaving the cabin, limped slowly down to the creek. He was surprised to note that the encounter seemed to have attracted no attention up at the ranch-house. Then he realized that with the door and windows closed, what little noise there had been might well have passed unnoticed, especially as the men were at work back in the barns.

At the creek he washed the blood from his face and hands, changed his shirt, put a strip of plaster on his cut lip, and decided that any further repairs could wait until he reached Paloma.

When he arrived at the corral Bud had just finished saddling the second horse, and they lost no time making fast Buck's belongings. The animals were then led out, and Stratton was on the point of mounting when the sound of light footsteps made him turn quickly to find Miss Manning almost at his elbow.

"But you're not leaving now, without waiting to say good-by?" she expostulated.

Buck's lips straightened grimly, with a grotesque twisted effect caused by the plaster at the corner.

"After what's happened I hardly supposed anybody'd want any farewell words," he commented with a touch of sarcasm.

Miss Manning stamped her shapely, well-shod foot petulantly. "Rubbish!" she exclaimed. "You don't suppose I believe that nonsense, do you?"

"I reckon you're about the only one who doesn't, then."

"I'm not. Mrs. Archer agrees with me. She says you couldn't be a—a thief if you

tried. And down in her heart even Mary— But whatever has happened to your face?”

Stratton flushed faintly. “Oh, I just—cut myself against something,” he shrugged. “It’s nothing serious.”

“I’m glad of that,” she commented, dimpling a little. “It certainly doesn’t add to your beauty.”

She was bare-headed, and the slanting sunlight, caressing the crisp waves of hair, revealed an unsuspected reddish glint amongst the dark tresses. As he looked down into her clear, friendly eyes, Buck realized, and not the first time, how very attractive she really was. If things had only been different, if only the barrier of that hateful mental lapse of his had not existed, he had a feeling that they might have been very good friends indeed.

His lips had parted for a farewell word or two when suddenly he caught the flutter of skirts over by the corner of the ranch-house. It was Mary Thorne, and Buck wondered with an odd, unexpected little thrill, whether by any chance she too might be coming to say good-by. Whatever may have been her intention, however, it changed abruptly. Catching sight of the group beside the corral fence, she stopped short, hesitated an instant, and then, turning square about, disappeared in the direction she had come. As he glanced back to Stella Manning, Buck’s face was a little clouded.

“We’ll have to be getting started, I reckon,” he said briefly. “Thank you very much for—for seeing me off.”

“But where are you going?”

“Paloma for to-night; after that I’ll be hunting another job.”

The girl put out her hand and Stratton took it, hoping that she wouldn’t notice his raw, bruised knuckles. He might have spared himself the momentary anxiety. She wasn’t looking at his fingers.

“Well, it’s good-by, then,” she said, a note of regret underlying the surface brightness of her tone. “But when you’re settled you must send me a line. We were such good pals aboard ship, and I haven’t enough friends to want to lose even one of them. Send a letter here to the ranch, and if we’re gone, Mary will forward it.”

Buck promised, and swung himself stiffly into the saddle. As he and Bud rode briskly down the slope, he turned and glanced back for an instant. Miss Manning

stood where they had left her, handkerchief fluttering from her upraised hand, but Stratton scarcely saw her. His gaze swept the front of the ranch-house, scrutinizing each gaping, empty window and the deserted porch. Finally, with a faint sigh and a little shrug of his shoulders, he mentally dismissed the past and fell to considering the future.

There was a good deal yet to be talked over and decided, and when he had briefly detailed to Bud the various happenings he was still ignorant of, Buck went on to outline his plans.

“There are several things I want to look into, and to do it I’ve got to be on the loose,” he explained. “At the same time I don’t want Lynch to get the idea I’m snooping around. What sort of a fellow is this Tenny, over at the Rocking-R?”

“He’s white,” returned Bud promptly. “No squarer ranch-boss around the country. I’d of gone there instead of the Shoe-Bar, only they was full up. What was yuh thinkin’ of—bracin’ him for a job?”

“Not exactly, though I’d like Lynch to think I’d been taken on there. Do you suppose, if I put Tenny wise to what I was after, that he’d let me have a cayuse and pack-horse, and stake me to enough grub to keep me a week or two in the mountains back of the Shoe-Bar?”

“He might, especially when he knows you’re buckin’ Tex; he never was much in love with Lynch.” Jessup paused, eyeing his companion curiously. “Say, Buck,” he went on quickly, “What makes yuh so keen about this, anyhow? Yuh ain’t no deputy sheriff, or anythin’ like that, are yuh?”

For a moment Stratton was taken aback by the unexpectedness of the question. He had come to regard Jessup and himself so completely at one in their desire to penetrate the mystery of Lynch’s shady doings that it had never occurred to him that his intense absorption in the situation might strike Bud as peculiar. It was one thing to behave as Bud was doing, especially as he frankly had the interest of Mary Thorne at heart, and quite another to throw up a job and plan to carry on an unproductive investigation from a theoretical desire to bring to justice a crooked foreman whom he had never seen until a few weeks ago.

“Why, of course not,” parried Buck. “What gave you that notion?”

“I dunno exactly. I s’pose mebbe it’s the way you’re plannin’ to give yore time to it without pay or nothin’. There won’t be a darn cent in it for yuh, even if yuh do land Tex in the pen.”

“I know that,” and Buck smiled; “but I’m a stubborn cuss when I get started on

anything. Besides, I love Tex Lynch well enough to want to see him get every mite that's comin' to him. I've got a little money saved up, and I'll get more fun spending it this way than any other I can think of."

"There's somethin' in that," agreed Jessup. "Golly, Buck! I wisht I could go along with yuh. I never was much on savin', but I could manage a couple of weeks without a job."

Stratton hesitated. "I'd sure like it, kid," he answered. "It would be a whole lot pleasanter for me, but I'm wondering if you wouldn't do more good there on the Shoe-Bar. With nobody at all to cross him, there's no tellin' what Lynch might try and pull off. Besides, it seems to me somebody ought to be there to sort of look after Miss—" He broke off, struck by a sudden possibility. "You don't suppose he'll get really nasty about what you—"

"Hell!" broke in Bud sharply. "I wasn't thinking about that. He'll be nasty, of course, but he can't go more than so far. I reckon you're right, Buck. Miss Mary oughtn't to be left there by herself."

"Of course, there's Manning—"

Bud disposed of the aristocratic Alfred with a forceable epithet which ought to have made his ears burn. "Besides, that bird ain't goin' to stay forever, I hope," he added.

This settled, they passed on to other details, and by the time they reached Paloma, everything had been threshed out and decided, including a possible means of communication in case of emergency.

Ravenously hungry, they sought the ramshackle hotel at once, and though it was long after the regular supper hour, they succeeded in getting a fair meal cooked and served. Concluding that it would be pleasanter all around to give Lynch as much time as possible to recover from his spleen, Bud decided to defer his return to the ranch until early morning. So when they had finished eating, they walked down to the store to arrange for hiring one of Daggett's horses again. Here they were forced to spend half an hour listening to old Pop's garrulous comments and the repeated "I told you so," which greeted the news of Stratton's move before they could tear themselves away and turn in.

They were up at dawn, ate a hurried breakfast, and then set out along the trail. Where the Rocking-R track branched off they paused for a few casual words of farewell, and then each went his way. A few hundred yards beyond, Buck turned in his saddle just in time to see Jessup, leading Stratton's old mount, ride briskly

into a shallow draw and disappear.

He had a feeling that he was going to miss the youngster, with his cheerful optimism and dependable ways; but he felt that at the most a few weeks would see them together again. Fortunately for his peace of mind, he had not the least suspicion of the circumstances which were to bring about their next meeting.

CHAPTER XIX

THE MYSTERIOUS MOTOR-CAR

Buck took to Jim Tenny at once. There was something about this long, lean, brown-faced foreman of the Rocking-R, with his clear gray eyes and that half-humorous twist to his thin lips, which inspired not only confidence but liking as well. He listened without comment to Buck's story, which included practically everything save the revelation of his own identity; but once or twice, especially at the brief mention of the fight in the bunk-house, his eyes gleamed with momentary approval. When Buck told about the blackleg incident his face darkened and he spoke for the first time.

"Seems like yuh had him there," he said briefly. "That job alone ought to land him in the pen."

Buck nodded. "I know; but I'm afraid he couldn't be convicted on my evidence alone. Kreeger and Siegrist fixed up a pretty decent alibi, you see, and it would only be my word against theirs. Even the carcass of the beast wouldn't help much. They'd say it wandered through the pass by itself, and I suppose there's one chance in a thousand it could have."

"Damned unlikely, though," shrugged Tenny.

"Sure; but the law's that way. You've got to be dead certain. Besides, if he was pulled in for that we might never find out just what's at the bottom of it all. That's the important thing, and if I can only get a line on what he's up to, we'll land him swift enough, believe me!"

Warned by Bud's unexpected question the evening before that he must have a more plausible motive for following up the case, Buck had coolly appointed himself one of Jim Hardenberg's deputies. He hinted that rumors of the cattle-stealing had reached the sheriff, who, debarred from taking up the matter openly by the absence of any complaint from the owner of the Shoe-Bar, had dispatched Stratton on a secret investigation. The process of that investigation having disclosed evidences of rascality of which the rustling was but a minor feature,

Stratton's desire to probe the mystery to the bottom seemed perfectly natural, and the need for secrecy was also accounted for. The only risk Buck ran was of Tenny's mentioning the matter to Hardenberg himself, and that seemed slight enough. At the worst it would merely mean anticipating a little; for if he did succeed in solving the problem of Tex Lynch's motives, the next and final step would naturally be up to the sheriff.

"I get yuh," said Tenny, nodding. "That's true enough. Well, what do you want me to do?"

Buck told him briefly, and the foreman's eyes twinkled.

"That's some order," he commented.

"I'd pay you for the stock and grub, of course," Stratton assured him; "and at least put up a deposit for the cayuses."

"Oh, that part ain't frettin' me none. I reckon I can trust yuh. I was thinkin' about how I could stall off Lynch in case he comes around askin' questions. Yuh want he should get the idea I hired yuh?"

"I thought it would ease his mind and give him the notion I was safe for a while," smiled Stratton. "Of course you could say I tried for a job but you were full up."

"That would be easier," agreed Tenny. "I could keep my mouth shut, but I couldn't guarantee about the boys. They wouldn't say nothin' a-purpose, but like as not if they should meet up with one of that slick crowd at the Shoe-Bar they'd let somethin' slip without thinkin'. On the other hand, it sure would make him a mite careless if he thought yuh was tied down here on a reg'lar job."

He paused reflectively; then suddenly his eyes brightened.

"I got it," he chuckled. "I'll send you down to help Gabby Smith at Red Butte camp. That's 'way to hell and gone down at the south end of the outfit, where nobody goes from here more'n about once in six months. Gabby's one of these here solitary guys that's sorta soured on the world in gen'al, an' don't hardly open his face except to take in grub, but yuh can trust him. Jest tell him what yuh want and he'll do it, providin' yuh don't hang around the camp too long. Gabby does hate company worse'n a dose of poison."

Tenny lost no time in carrying out his plans. He hunted out a few simple cooking-utensils and enough canned goods and other stores to last two weeks, picked a pack-animal and a riding horse, and by dinner-time had everything

ready for Buck to start immediately afterward.

The six or seven cow-punchers who responded to the gong presented a marked and pleasant contrast to the Shoe-Bar outfit. They greeted Stratton with some brevity, but after the first pangs of hunger had been assuaged and they learned where he was bound for, they expanded, and Buck was the object of much joking commiseration on the prospect before him.

“You’ll sure have one wild time,” grinned a dark-haired, blue-eyed youngster called Broncho. “Gabby’s about as sociable as a rattler. I wouldn’t change places with yuh for no money.”

No one seemed to suspect any ulterior motive beneath the plan, and when Buck rode off about one o’clock, leading his pack-horse, his spirits rose insensibly at the ease with which things seemed to be working out.

He reached Red Butte camp in a little more than three hours and found the adobe shack deserted. It was similar in size and construction to Las Vegas, but there all likeness ceased, for the interior was surprisingly comfortable and as spick-and-span as the Shoe-Bar line camp was cluttered and dirty. Everything was so immaculate, in fact, that Buck had a moment of hesitation about flicking his cigarette ashes on the floor, and banished his scruples mainly because he had never heard of a cow-man dropping them anywhere else.

Gabby appeared about an hour later, a tall, stooping man of uncertain middle age, with a cold eye and a perpetual, sour droop to his lids. At the sight of Buck the sourness became accentuated and increased still more when he observed the ashes on the floor. His only reply to Stratton’s introduction of himself was a grunt and Buck lost no time in easing the fellow’s mind of any fear of a prolonged spell of company.

Even then Gabby’s gloom scarcely lightened. He listened, however, to Stratton’s brief explanation and in a few gruff words agreed that in the unlikely event of any inquiry he would say that the new hand was off riding fence or something of the sort. Then he swept out the offending ashes and proceeded methodically to get supper, declining any assistance from his visitor.

His manner was so dispiriting that Buck was thankful when the silent meal was over, and even more so an hour later to spread his blankets in one of the spare bunks and turn in. His relief at getting away early the next morning was almost as great as Gabby’s could be to see him go.

It was late in the afternoon, after a careful circuit of the southern end of the

Shoe-Bar, that Buck reached the foothills. Bud had told him of a spring to the northwest of Las Vegas camp, but the rough traveling decided him to camp that night on the further side of the creek. In the morning he went on through a wilderness of arroyos, cañons, and gullies that twisted endlessly between the barren hills, and made him realize how simple it would be for any number of men and cattle to evade pursuit in this wild country.

Fortunately Jessup's directions had been explicit, and toward noon Buck found the spring at the bottom of a small cañon and proceeded to unpack and settle down. Bud himself had discovered the place by accident, and as far as Stratton could judge it was not a likely spot to be visited either by the Shoe-Bar hands or their Mexican confederates. A wide, overhanging ledge provided shelter for himself, and there was plenty of forage in sight for the two horses. Taken all in all, it was as snug a retreat as any one could wish, and Buck congratulated himself on having such safe and secluded headquarters from which to carry on his investigations.

These first took him southward, and for five days he rode through the hills, traversing gullies and cañons, and spying out the whole country generally, in a systematic effort to find the route taken by the rustlers in driving off their booty.

Once he found the spot where they had taken to the hills, the rest was comparatively simple. There were a number of signs to guide him, including the bodies of two animals bearing the familiar brand, and he succeeded in tracing the thieves to a point on the edge of a stretch of desert twenty miles or more below the Shoe-Bar land. About twelve miles beyond lay another range of hills, which would give them cover until they were within a short distance of the border.

"A dozen good fellows stationed here," thought Stratton, critically surveying the gully behind him, "would catch them without any trouble. There's no other way I've seen of getting out with a bunch of cattle."

Having settled this point to his satisfaction, Buck's mind veered swiftly—with an odd sense of relief that now at last he could investigate the matter seriously—to the other problem which had stirred his curiosity so long.

When his attention was first attracted to the north pasture by Bud's account of Andrew Thorne's tragic death, its connection with the mystery of the ranch seemed trivial. But for some reason the thing stuck in his mind, returning again and again with a teasing persistence and gaining each time in significance. From much thinking about it, Buck could almost reconstruct the scene, with its familiar, humdrum background of bawling calves, lowing mothers, dust, hot

irons, swearing, sweating men, and all the other accompaniments of the spring branding. That was the picture into which Thorne had suddenly ridden, his face stamped with an excitement in marked contrast to his usual phlegmatic calm. In his mind's eye Stratton could see him clutch Tex Lynch and draw him hastily to one side, could imagine vividly the low-voiced conversation that followed, the hurried saddling of a fresh horse, and the swift departure of the two northward—to what?

Buck had asked himself that question a hundred times. Three hours had passed before the return of Lynch alone, with the shocking news—time enough to ride twice the distance to north pasture and back again. Where had the interval been passed, and how?

Stratton realized that they might easily have changed their direction, once they were out of sight of the men. They might have gone eastward toward the ranch-house—which they had not—or westward into the mountains. Once or twice Buck considered the possibility of the old man's having stumbled on a rich lode of precious metal. But as far as he knew no trace of gold had ever been found in these mountains. Moreover, though Lynch was perfectly capable of murdering his employer for that knowledge, his next logical move would have been an immediate taking up of the claims, instead of which he remained quietly on the ranch to carry on his slow and secret plotting.

Stratton long ago dismissed that possibility. There remained only the north pasture, and the longer he considered it the more he became convinced that Thorne had met his death there, and that the chances were strong that somewhere in those wastes of worthless desert land lay the key to the whole enthralling mystery.

Buck was so eager to start his investigations that it irked him to have to spend the few remaining hours of the afternoon in idleness. But as he knew that the undertaking would take a full day or even longer, he possessed his soul with patience and made arrangements for an early start next morning.

The dawn was just breaking when he left camp mounted on Pete, the Rocking-R horse that he had found so reliable in the rough country. The simplest and most direct way would have been to descend to level ground and ride along the edge of the Shoe-Bar land. But he dared not take any chances of being observed by Lynch or his gang, and was forced to make a long detour through the hills.

The way was difficult and roundabout. Frequently he was turned back by blind cañons or gullies which had no outlet, and there were few places where the horse

could go faster than a walk. To Buck's impatient spirit it was all tiresome and exasperating, and he had moments of wondering whether he was ever going to get anywhere.

Finally, about the middle of the afternoon, he was cheered for the first time by an unexpected glimpse of his goal. For several miles he had been following a rough trail which wound around the side of a steep, irregular hill. Coming out abruptly on a little plateau, with the tumbled rocks rising at his back, there spread out suddenly before him to the east a wide, extended sweep of level country.

At first he could scarcely believe that the sandy stretch below him was the north pasture he was seeking. But swiftly he realized that the threadlike line a little to the south must be the fence dividing the desert from the fertile portions of the Shoe-Bar, and he even thought he recognized the corner where the infected steer had been driven through. With an exclamation of satisfaction he was reaching for his field-glasses when of a sudden a strange, slowly-moving shape out in the desert caught his attention and riveted it instantly.

For a few seconds Buck thought his eyes were playing tricks. Amazed, incredulous, forgetting for an instant the field-glasses in his hand, he stared blankly from under squinting lids at the incredible object that crawled lurchingly through the shimmering, glittering desert atmosphere.

"I'm dotty!" he muttered at length. "It can't be!"

Then, remembering the glasses, he raised them hastily to his eyes and focused them with a twist or two of practised fingers.

He was neither crazy nor mistaken. Drawn suddenly out of its blurred obscurity by the powerful lenses, there sprang up before Buck's eyes, sharp and clear in every detail, a big gray motor-car that moved slowly but steadily, with many a bump and sidewise lurch, diagonally across the cactus-sprinkled desert below him.

CHAPTER XX

CATASTROPHE

The discovery galvanized Stratton into instant, alert attention. Motor-cars were rare in this remote range country and confined almost solely to the sort of “flivver” which is not entirely dependent on roads. The presence in the north pasture of this powerful gray machine, which certainly did not belong in the neighborhood, was more than significant, and Buck tried at once to get a view of the occupants.

In this he was not successful. There were three of them, one in the driver’s seat and two others in the tonneau. But the top prevented more than a glimpse of the latter, while the cap and goggles of the chauffeur left visible only a wedge of brick-red, dust-coated skin, a thin, prominent nose and a wisp of wiry black mustache.

One thing was certain—the fellow knew his job. Under his masterly guidance the big car plowed steadily through the clogging sand, avoiding obstructions or surmounting them with the least possible expenditure of power, never once stalled, and, except for a necessary slight divergence now and then, held closely to its northwesterly course across the desert.

Buck, who had driven under the worst possible battle-front conditions, fully appreciated the coaxing, the general manœuvering, the constant delicate manipulation of brake and throttle necessary to produce this result. But his admiration of the fellow’s skill was swiftly swallowed up in eager curiosity and speculation.

Who were they? What were they doing here? Where were they going? At first he had a momentary fear lest they should see him perched up here on his point of vantage. Then he realized that the backing of rocks prevented his figure from showing against the skyline, which, together with the distance and the clouds of dust stirred up by the car itself, made the danger almost negligible. So he merely dismounted and, leaning against his horse, kept the glasses riveted on the slowly

moving machine.

The car advanced steadily until it reached a point about a quarter of a mile from the rough ground and a little distance north of where Buck stood. Then it stopped, and a capped and goggled head was thrust out of the tonneau. Buck could make out nothing definite about the face save that it was smooth-shaven and rather heavy-jowled. He was hoping that the fellow would alight from the car and show himself more plainly but to his disappointment the head was presently drawn back and the machine crept on, swerving a little so that it headed almost due north.

Ten minutes later it halted again, and this time the two men got out and walked slowly over the sand. Both were clad in long dust-coats, and one seemed stouter and heavier than the other. Unfortunately they were too far beyond the carrying power of the binoculars to get anything more clearly, and Buck swore and fretted and strained his eyes in vain. After a delay of nearly an hour, he saw the car start again, and followed its blurred image until it finally disappeared beyond an out-thrust spur well to the northward.

Stratton lowered his glasses and stood for a moment or two rubbing his cramped arm absently. His face was thoughtful, with a glint of excitement in his eyes. Presently his shoulders straightened resolutely.

“Anyhow, I can follow the tracks of the tires and find out what they’ve been up to,” he muttered.

The difficulty was to descend from his rocky perch, and it proved to be no small one. He might have clambered down the face of the cliff, but that would mean abandoning his horse. In the end he was forced to retrace his steps along the twisting ledge by which he had come.

From his knowledge of the country to the south, Buck had started out with the idea that it would be simple enough to reach the flats through one of the many gullies and cañons that fringed the margin of the hills further down. He had not counted on the fact that as the range widened it split into two distinct ridges, steep and declivitous on the outer edges, with the space between them broken up into a network of water-worn gullies and arroyos.

“I ought to have known from the look of the north pasture that all the water goes the other way,” he grumbled. “Best thing I can do is to head for that trail Bud spoke of that cuts through to the T-T ranch. It can’t be so very far north.”

It wasn’t, as the crow flies, but Buck was no aviator. He was forced to take a

most tortuous, roundabout route, and when he finally emerged on the first passable track heading approximately in the right direction, the sun was low and there seemed little chance of his accomplishing his purpose in the few hours of daylight remaining.

Still, he kept on. At least he was mapping out a route which would be easily and swiftly followed another time. And if darkness threatened, he could return to his little camp through the open Shoe-Bar pastures, where neither Lynch nor his men were at all likely to linger after dusk.

The trail followed a natural break in the hills and, though not especially difficult under foot, was twisting and irregular, full of sharp descents and equally steep upward slopes. Buck had covered about two miles and was growing impatient when he came to the hardest climb he had yet encountered and swung himself out of the saddle.

“No use killing you, Pete, to save a little time,” he commented, giving the horse’s sweaty neck a slap. “I’d like to know how the devil those two ever drove a steer through here.”

It did seem as if this must have been uncommonly difficult. The trail curved steeply around the side of a hill, following a ledge similar to the one Buck had taken earlier in the afternoon with such interesting results. There was width enough for safety, but on one side the rocks rose sharply to the summit of the hill, while on the other there was a sheer drop into a gulch below, which, at the crown of the slope, must have been fifty or sixty feet at least.

Leading the horse, Buck plodded on in a rather discouraged fashion until he had covered about three-quarters of the distance to the top. Then of a sudden his pace quickened, as a bend in the trail revealed hopeful glimpses of open spaces ahead. It was nothing really definite—merely a falling away of the hills on either side and a wide expanse of unobstructed sky beyond, but it made him feel that he was at last coming out of this rocky wilderness. A moment or two later he gained the summit of the slope and his eyes brightened as they rested on the section of sandy, cactus-dotted country spread out below him.

A dozen feet ahead the trail curved sharply around a rocky buttress, which hid the remainder of it from view. In his eagerness to see what lay beyond, Stratton did not mount but led his horse over the short stretch of level rock. But as he turned the corner, he caught his breath and jerked back on Pete’s reins.

By one of those freaks of nature that are often so surprising, the trail led straight down to level ground with almost the regularity of some work of engineering. At

the foot of it stood the gray motor-car—empty!

The sight of it, and especially that unnatural air of complete desertion, instantly aroused in Buck a sense of acute danger. He turned swiftly to retreat, and caught a glimpse of a figure crouching in a little rocky niche almost at his elbow.

There was no time to leap back or forward; no time even to stir. Already the man's arm was lifted, and though Stratton's hand jerked automatically to his gun, he was too late.

An instant later something struck his head with crushing force and crumpled him to the ground.

When Buck began to struggle out of that black, bottomless abyss of complete oblivion, he thought at first—as soon as he could think at all—that he was lying in his bunk back at the Shoe-Bar. What gave him the idea he could not tell. His head throbbed painfully, and his brain seemed to swim in a vague, uncertain mist. A deadly lassitude gripped him, making all movement, even to the lifting of his eyelids, an exertion too great to be considered.

But presently, when his brain had cleared a little, he became aware of voices. One in particular seemed, even in his dreamlike state, to sting into his consciousness with a peculiar, bitter instinct of hatred. When at length he realized that it was the voice of Tex Lynch, the discovery had a curiously reviving effect upon his dazed senses. He could not yet remember what had happened, but intuitively he associated his helplessness with the foreman's presence, and that same instinct caused him to make a desperate attempt to understand what the man was saying. At first the fellow's words seemed blurred and broken, but little by little their meaning grew clearer to the injured man.

"... ain't safe ... suspects somethin' ... snoopin' around ever since ... thought he was up to somethin' ... saw him up on that ledge watchin' yuh ... dead sure. I had a notion he'd ride around to this trail, 'cause it's the only way down to north pasture. I tell yuh, Paul, he's wise, an' he'll spill the beans sure. We got to do it."

"I don't like it, I tell you!" protested a shrill, high-pitched voice querulously. "I can't stand blood."

"Wal, all yuh got to do is go back to the car an' wait," retorted Lynch. "I ain't so partic'lar. Besides," his tone changed subtly, "his head's smashed in an' he's sure to croak, anyhow. It would be an act of kindness, yuh might say."

"I don't like it," came again in the shrill voice. "I'd—hear the shot. I'd know

what you were doing. It would be on my—my conscience. I'd dream— If he's going to—to die, as you say, why not just—leave him here?"

An involuntary shudder passed over Stratton. It had all come back, and with a thrill of horror he realized that they were talking about him. They were discussing his fate as calmly and callously as if he had been a steer with a broken leg. A feeble protest trembled on his lips, but was choked back unuttered. He knew how futile any protest would be with Tex Lynch.

"Yeah!" the latter snarled. "An' have somebody come along an' find him! Like as not he'd hang on long enough to blab all he knows, an' then where would we be? Where would we be even if somebody run acrost his body? I ain't takin' no chances like that, I'll tell the world!"

"But isn't there some other way?" faltered the high-pitched voice.

In the brief pause that followed, Stratton dragged his lids open. He was lying where he had fallen at the curve in the trail. Tex Lynch stood close beside him. A little beyond, leaning against the rocky cliff, was a bulky figure in a long dust-coat. He had pushed up his motor-goggles and was wiping his forehead with a limp handkerchief. His round, fat face, with pursed-up lips and wide-open light-blue eyes, bore the expression of a fretful child. On his left was a lean, thin-faced fellow with a black mustache who looked scared and nervous. There was no sign of the third person who had been in the car, and even at this crucial moment Buck found time to observe the absence of his horse, Pete, and wondered momentarily what had become of him.

"Yuh an' Hurd go back to the car." Lynch broke the silence in a tone of sudden decision. "I'll tend to this business, an' there won't be no shootin' neither. Hustle, now! We ain't got any time to lose."

Again Buck shuddered, and there pulsed through him that tremendous and passionate instinct for self-preservation which comes to every man at such a time. What Tex meant to do he could not guess, but he knew that if he were left alone with the fellow he might as well give up all hope. He was weak as a cat, and felt sure that no appeal from him would move Lynch a particle. His only chance lay with the fat man and his companion, and as the two turned away, Buck tried his best to call out after them.

The only result was an inarticulate croak. Lynch heard it, and instantly dropping on his knees, he clapped one hand over Stratton's mouth. In spite of Buck's futile struggles, he held it there firmly while the two men moved out of sight down the trail. His face, which still bore the fading marks of Buck's fists, was a trifle pale,

but hard and determined, and in his eyes triumph and a curious, nervous shrinking struggled for mastery.

But as the moments dragged on leaden wings, not a word passed his tight lips. Presently he glanced swiftly over one shoulder. An instant later Buck's lips were freed, and he felt the foreman's hands slipping under his body.

"You hellion!" he gasped, as Lynch's purpose flashed on him in all its horror. "You damned cowardly hound!"

As he felt himself thrust helplessly toward the precipice, Buck made a tremendous, despairing effort and managed to catch Lynch by the belt and clung there for a moment. When one hand was torn loose, he even struck Tex wildly in the face. But there was no strength in his arm, and Lynch, with a growl of rage, jerked himself free and sprang to his feet.

For an instant he towered over his helpless enemy, white-faced and hesitating. Then Stratton caught the hard impact of his boot against his side, and felt the edge of the rock slipping horribly beneath him. Powerless to help himself, his clutching fingers slid despairingly across the smooth surface. A blinding ray of sunlight dazzled him for an instant and vanished; the mountain trail flashed out of sight. His heart leaped, then sank, with a tremendous, poignant agony that seemed to tear him into shreds. Then blackness seemed to rush out of the gulch to enfold him in an impenetrable cloud of merciful oblivion.

CHAPTER XXI

WHAT MARY THORNE FOUND

A few hundred yards away from the fence strung along the western side of middle pasture, Mary Thorne pulled her horse down to a walk and straightened her hat mechanically. Her cheeks were flushed becomingly and her eyes shone, but at the end of that sharp little canter much of the brightness faded and her face clouded.

For the last week or more it had grown increasingly difficult to keep up a cheerful front and prevent the doubts and troubles which harassed her from causing comment. This morning she had reached the limit of suppression. Stella got on her nerves more than usual; Alf annoyed her with his superior air and those frequent little intimate mannerisms which, though unnoticed during all the years of their friendship, had lately grown curiously irksome to the girl. Even Mrs. Archer's calm placidity weighed on her spirits, and when that happened Mary knew that it was high time for her to get away by herself for a few hours and make a vigorous effort to recover her wonted serenity of mind. 209

She told herself that she was tired and jaded, and that a solitary ride would soothe her ragged nerves. And so, at the first opportunity after breakfast, she slipped quietly away, saddled her favorite horse, Freckles, and leaving word with Pedro that she would be back by dinner-time, departed hastily.

It was rather curious behavior in a girl usually so frank and open, and free from even a suspicion of guile, but she deliberately gave the Mexican an impression that she was going to join the men down in south pasture, and as long as she remained within sight of the ranch-house she kept her horse headed in that direction. Furthermore, before abruptly changing her course to the northwest, she pulled up and glanced sharply around to make certain she was not observed.

As a matter of fact one of the things which had lately puzzled and troubled her was a growing impression of surveillance. Several times she had surprised Pedro or his wife in attitudes which seemed suspiciously as if they had been spying.

McCabe, too, and some of the other men were inclined to pop up when she least expected them. Indeed, looking back on the last two weeks she realized how very little she had been alone except in the close confines of the ranch-house. If she rode forth to inspect the work or merely to take a little canter, Tex or one of the punchers was almost sure to join her. They always had a good excuse, but equally always they were there; and though Mary Thorne had not the remotest notion of the meaning of it all, she had grown convinced that there must be some hidden motive beneath their actions, and the thought troubled her.

Tex Lynch's altered manner gave her even greater cause for anxiety. It would have been difficult to put into words exactly where the change lay, but she was sure that there was a difference. Up to a short time ago she had regarded him impersonally as merely an efficient foreman whom she had inherited from her father along with the ranch. She did so still, but she could not remain blind to the fact that the man himself was deliberately striving to inject a more intimate note into their intercourse. His methods were subtle enough, but Mary Thorne was far from dull, and the alteration in his manner made her at once indignant and a little frightened.

"I suppose it's silly to feel that way, especially with Alf here," she murmured as she reached the fence and swung herself out of the saddle. "But I do wish I hadn't taken his word about—Buck Green."

She took a small pair of pliers from her saddle-pocket and deftly untwisted the strands of wire from one of the posts, while Freckles looked on with an expression of intelligent interest. When the gap was opened in the fence, he walked through and waited quietly on the other side until the wire had been replaced. It was not the first time he had done this trick, for the trail through the mountains was a favorite retreat of the girl's. She had discovered it long ago, and returned to it frequently, through her own private break in the fence, especially on occasions like this when she wanted to get away from everybody and be quite alone.

Having remounted and headed northward along the edge of the hills, her thoughts flashed back to the discharged cow-puncher, and her brow puckered. The whole subject affected her in a curiously complicated fashion. From the first she had been conscious of having done the young man an injustice. And yet, as often as she went over their final interview in her mind—which was not seldom—she did not see how she could have done otherwise. Her woman's intuition told her over and over again that he could not possibly be a common thief; but if this was so, why had he refused her the simple assurance she asked for?

That was the stumbling-block. If he had only been frank and open, she felt that she would have believed him, even in the face of Lynch's conviction of his guilt, though she was frank enough to admit that the foreman's attitude would probably have influenced her much more strongly a week ago than it did at present. It was this thought which brought her mind around to another of her worries.

Not only did she intensely dislike Lynch's present manner toward herself, but there had lately grown up in her mind a vague distrust of the man generally. She could not put her finger on anything really definite. There were moments, indeed, when she wondered if she was not a silly little fool making bogies out of shadows. But the feeling persisted, growing on unconsidered trifles, that Tex was playing at some subtle, secret game, of the character of which she had not even the most remote conception.

"But if that's so—if he can't be trusted any longer," she said aloud, stung by a sudden, sharp realization of the gravity of such a situation, "what am I to do?"

Of his own accord Freckles had turned aside into the little curved depression in the cliffs and was plodding slowly up the trail. Staring blindly at the rough, ragged cliffs and peaks ahead of her, the girl was suddenly overwhelmed by a feeling of helplessness. If Lynch failed her, what could she do? Whom could she turn to for help or even for counsel? There was Alf Manning, but Alf knew nothing whatever of range conditions, and besides neither he nor Stella expected to stay on indefinitely. Her mind ranged swiftly over other more or less remote possibilities, but save for a few distant cousins with whom they had never been on intimate terms, she could think of no one. She even considered for a moment Jim Tenny of the Rocking-R, whom she had met and liked, or Dr. Blanchard, but a sudden reviving burst of spirit caused her quickly to dismiss the thought.

"They'd think I was a silly, hysterical idiot," she murmured. "Why, I couldn't even tell them what I was afraid of. I wonder if it can possibly be just nerves? It doesn't seem as if—"

She broke off abruptly and tightened on her reins. Freckles had carried her over the summit of the trail and had almost reached the hollow on the other side, formed by the bottom of a gully that crossed the path. Mary had once explored it and knew that to the left it deepened into a gloomy gulch that hugged the cliff for some distance and then curved abruptly to the south. So far as she knew, it led nowhere, and yet, to her astonishment, not a hundred feet away a saddled horse, with bridle-reins trailing, stood cropping the leaves of a stunted mesquite.

“That’s funny,” she said aloud in a low tone.

As she spoke the horse threw up his head and stared at her, ears pointed inquiringly. When Freckles nickered, the strange animal gave an answering whinny, but did not move.

Puzzled and a little nervous, Mary glanced sharply to right and left amongst the scattered rocks. In her experience a saddled horse meant that the owner was not far away; but she could see no signs of any one, and at length, taking courage from the silence, she rode slowly forward.

As she came closer the horse backed away a foot or two and half turned, exposing a brand on his shoulder. The girl stared at it with a puckered frown, wondering what on earth any one from the Rocking-R was doing here. Then her glance strayed to the saddle, flittered indifferently over cantle and skirts, to pause abruptly, with a sudden keen attention, on the flap of the right-hand pocket, which bore the initials “R. S.” cut with some skill on the smooth leather.

With eyes widening, the girl bent forward, studying the flap intently. She was not mistaken; the initials *were* R. S., and in a flash there came back to her a memory of that afternoon, which seemed so long ago, when she and Buck Green rode out together to the south pasture. She had noticed those initials then on his saddle-pocket, and knowing how unusual it was for a cow-man to touch his precious saddle with a knife, she made some casual comment, and learned how it had come into Buck’s possession.

What did it mean? What was *he* doing here on a Rocking-R horse? Above all, where was he?

Suddenly her heart began to beat unevenly and her frightened eyes stared down the gulch to where an out-thrust buttress provokingly hid the greater part of it from view. Her glance shifted again to the horse, who stood motionless, regarding her with liquid, intelligent eyes, and for the first time she noticed that the ends of the trailing reins were scratched and torn and ragged.

How still the place was! She fumbled in her blouse, and drawing forth a handkerchief, passed it mechanically over her damp forehead. Then abruptly her slight figure straightened, and tightening the reins she urged Freckles along the rock-strewn bottom of the gulch.

The distance to the rocky buttress seemed at once interminable and incredibly short. As she reached it she held her breath and her teeth dug into her colorless lips. But when another section of the winding gorge lay before her, silent, empty

save for scattered boulders and a few scanty bits of stunted vegetation, one small, gloved hand fluttered to her breast, then dropped, clenched, against the saddle-horn.

A rounded mass of rock, fallen in ages past from the cliffs above, blocked her path, and mechanically the girl reined Freckles around it. An instant later the horse stopped of his own accord, and the girl found herself staring down with horror-stricken eyes at the body of a man stretched out on the further side of the boulders. Motionless he lay there, a long length of brown chaps and torn, disordered shirt. His face was hidden in his crooked arms; the tumbled mass of brown hair was matted with ominous dark clots. But in that single, stricken second Mary Thorne knew whom she had found.

“Oh!” she choked, fighting desperately against a wave of faintness that threatened to overwhelm her. “O-h!”

Slowly the man’s face lifted, and two bloodshot eyes regarded her dully through a matted lock of hair that lay stiffly plastered against his forehead. With a curious, stealthy movement, one hand twisted back to his side and fumbled there for an instant. Then the man groaned softly.

“I forgot,” he mumbled. “It’s gone. You—you’ve got me this time, I reckon.”

Face drained to paper-white and lips quivering, Mary Thorne slid out of her saddle, steadied herself against the horse for a second, and then dropped on her knees beside him.

“Buck!” she cried in a shaking voice. “You—you’re hurt! What—what is it?”

A puzzled look came into his face, and as he stared into the wide, frightened hazel eyes so close to his, recognition slowly dawned.

“You!” he muttered. “What—How—”

She twined her fingers together to stop their trembling. “I was riding through the pass,” she told him briefly. “I saw your horse and I—I was—afraid—”

A faint gleam came into the bloodshot eyes. “My—my horse? You mean a—a Rocking-R cayuse?”

“Yes.”

He tried to sit up, but the effort turned him so white that the girl cried out protestingly.

“You mustn’t. You’re badly hurt. I—I’ll ride back for help.” She sprang to her

feet. “But first I must get you water.”

He stared at her as one regards a desert mirage. “Water!” he repeated unbelievably. “You know where—If you could—”

A sudden moisture dimmed her eyes, but she winked it resolutely back. “There’s a little spring the other side of the trail,” she explained. “You lie quietly and I’ll be back in just a minute.”

Stumbling in her haste, she turned and ran past the buttress and on toward the trail. Not a hundred feet beyond, a tiny spring bubbled up in the rocks, and dropping down beside it, the girl jerked the pins from her hat and let the cool water trickle into the capacious crown of the Stetson. It seemed to take an eternity to fill, but at length the water ran over the brim, and carefully guarding her precious burden, she hurried back again.

The man was watching for her—eagerly, longingly, with an underlying touch of apprehensive doubt, as if he half feared to find her merely one of those dreamlike phantoms that had haunted him through the long, painful hours. As the girl sank down beside him, there was a look in his eyes that sent a strange thrill through her and caused her hands to tremble, sending a little stream of water trickling over the soggy hat-brim to the ground.

She steadied herself resolutely and bending forward held the hat against Buck’s lips. As he plunged his face into it and began to suck up the water in great, famished gulps, the girl’s lips quivered, and her eyes, resting on the matted tangle of dark hair, filled with sudden tears.

CHAPTER XXII

NERVE

With a deep sigh, Buck lifted his face from the water and regarded her gratefully.

“That just about saved my life,” he murmured.

Mary Thorne carefully set down the improvised water-bucket, its contents much depleted, and taking out her handkerchief, soaked it thoroughly.

“I’m awfully stupid about first aid,” she said. “But your head must be badly cut, and—”

“Don’t,” he protested, as the moist bit of cambric touched his hair. “You’ll spoil it.”

“As if that mattered!” she retorted. “Just rest your head on your arms; it’ll be easier.”

With deft, gentle touches, she cleaned away the blood and grime, parting his thick hair now and then with delicate care. Her hands were steady now, and having steeled herself for anything, the sight of a jagged, ugly-looking cut on his scalp did not make her flinch. She even bent forward a little to examine it more closely, and saw that a ridge of clotted blood had temporarily stopped its oozing.

“I think I’d better let it alone,” she said aloud. “I might start it bleeding again. How—how did it happen?”

Buck raised his head and regarded her with a slow, thoughtful stare.

“I fell off the cliff back there,” he replied at length.

Her eyes widened. “You—fell off the cliff!” she gasped. “It’s a wonder— But is this the only place you’re hurt?”

His lips twisted in a grim smile. “Oh, no! I’ve got a sprained ankle and what feels like a broken rib, though it may be only bruises. But as you’re thinking, I’m darned lucky to get off alive. I must have struck a ledge or something part way

down, but how I managed from there I haven't the least idea."

Hands clenched together in her lap, she stared at him in dismay.

"I thought perhaps you might be strong enough in a little while to ride back with me to the ranch. I—I could help you mount, and we could go very slowly. But of course that's impossible. I'd better start at once and bring back some of the men."

She made a move to rise, but he stopped her with a quick, imperative gesture. "No, you mustn't," he said firmly. "That won't do at all. I can't go to the ranch." He paused, his forehead wrinkled thoughtfully. "You may not have guessed it, but Lynch and I don't pull together at all," he finished, with a whimsical intonation.

"But surely that wouldn't make any difference—now!" she protested.

"Only the difference that he'd have me just where he wanted me," he retorted. He was regarding her with a steady, questioning stare, and presently he gave a little sigh. "I'll have to tell you something I didn't mean to," he said. "In my opinion Tex Lynch is pretty much of a scoundrel. He knows I know it, and there isn't anything he wouldn't do to shut my mouth—for good."

To his amazement, instead of showing the indignation he expected, the girl merely stared at him in surprise.

"What!" she cried. "You believe that, too?"

"I'm sure of it. But I thought you trusted—"

"I don't any longer." She was surprised at the immensity of the relief that surged over her at this chance to unburden her soul of the load of perplexity and trouble which harassed her. "For a long time I haven't—There've been a number of things. I still haven't an idea of what it's all about, but—"

"I'm mighty glad you feel that way," Buck said, as she paused. "I'm not quite sure myself just what he's up to, but I believe I'm on the right trail." Very briefly he told her of the steps he had taken since leaving the Shoe-Bar. "You see how impossible it would be to trust myself in his power again," he concluded.

For a moment or two Mary Thorne sat silent, regarding him with a curious expression.

"So that was the reason," she murmured at length.

His eyes questioned her mutely, and a slow flush crept into her face.

“The reason you—you couldn’t say you had no—special object in being on the Shoe-Bar,” she explained haltingly. “I’m—sorry I didn’t understand.”

“I couldn’t very well tell you without running the risk of Lynch’s finding out. As it happened, I was trying my best to think up a reasonable excuse for leaving the outfit to do some investigating from this end, so you really did me a good turn.”

“Investigating what? Haven’t you any idea what he’s up to?”

Buck hesitated. “A very little, but it’s too indefinite to put into words just yet. I’ve a feeling I’ll get at the bottom of it soon, though, and then I’ll tell you. In the meantime, when you go back, don’t breathe a word of having seen me, and on no account let any one persuade you to—sell the outfit.”

She stared at him with crinkled brows. “But what are you going to do now?” she asked suddenly, her mind flashing back to the present difficulty.

He dragged himself into a sitting posture. He was evidently feeling stronger and looked much more like himself.

“Try and get back to that camp of mine I told you of,” he explained. “I reckon I’ll have to lay up there a while, but there’s food a-plenty, and a good spring, so —”

“But I don’t believe you can even stand,” she protested. “And if your ribs are broken—”

“Likely it’s only one and I can strap that good and tight with a piece of my shirt or something. Then if you could catch Pete and bring him over here, I’ll manage to climb into the saddle some way. It’s only three or four miles, and the going’s not so very bad.”

She made no further protest, but her lips straightened firmly and there was a look of decision in her girlish face as she set about helping him with his preparations.

It was she who tore a broad band from his flannel shirt, roughly fringed the ends with Buck’s knife and tied it so tightly about his body that he had hard work to keep from wincing. She insisted on bandaging his head, and while he rested in the shade went back into the gulch to look for his hat and the Colt that had fallen from his holster.

She finally found them both under a narrow ledge that thrust out a dozen feet below the edge of the trail. A stunted bush, rooted deep in some hidden crevice, grew up before it, and, staring upward at it, the girl guessed that to this little bush alone Buck owed his life. He had been able to give her no further details of

his descent, but she saw that it would be possible for a man to crawl along the narrow ledge to where another crossed it at a descending angle, and thence gain the bottom of the gulch.

“I wonder how he ever came to fall,” she murmured, remembering how wide the trail was at the summit.

Returning, however, she asked no questions. In the face of what lay before her, the matter seemed trivial and unimportant. She caught the Rocking-R horse without much trouble and led him back to a broad, flat boulder on which Buck had managed to crawl. Obligated to hold the animal, whose slightest movement might prove disastrous, she could give no further aid, but was forced to stand helpless, watching with troubled, sympathetic eyes the man’s painful struggles to gain the saddle. When at last he succeeded and slumped there, mouth twisted and face bathed in perspiration, her knees were shaking and she felt limp and nerveless.

“We’ll stop at the spring first for more water,” she said, pulling herself together with an effort.

Too exhausted for speech, Buck merely nodded, and the girl, gathering up Freckles’s bridle in her other hand, led the two horses slowly toward the trail. At the spring Buck drank deeply of the water she handed him, and seemed much refreshed.

“That’s good,” he murmured, with an effort to straighten his bent body. “Well, I reckon I’d better be starting. I—I can’t thank you enough for all you’ve done, Miss—Thorne. It was mighty plucky—”

“You mustn’t waste your strength talking,” she interrupted quietly. “Just tell me which way to go, and we’ll start.”

“We?” he repeated sharply. “But you’re not going.”

“Of course I am. Did you think for a moment I’d let you take that ride alone?” She smiled faintly with a brave attempt at lightness. “You’d be falling off and breaking another rib. Please don’t make difficulties. I’m going with you, and that’s an end of it.”

Perhaps the firmness of her manner made Buck realize the futility of further protest, or possibly he was in no condition to argue. At all events he gave in, and when the girl swung herself into the saddle, the slow journey began.

To Mary Thorne the memory of it remained ever afterward in her mind a chaotic

medley of strange emotions and impressions, vague yet vivid. At first, where the width of the trail permitted it, she rode beside him, making an effort to talk casually and lightly, yet not too constantly, but continually keeping a watchful eye on the drooping figure at her right, whose hands presently sought and gripped the saddle-horn.

When they left the trail for rougher ground, she dismounted in spite of Buck's protest, and walked beside him, and it was well she did. Once when the horse slipped or stumbled on a loose stone and the man's body swayed perilously in the saddle, she put up both hands swiftly and held him there.

Before they had gone a mile her boots began to hurt her, but the pain was so trifling in comparison with what Buck must be suffering that she scarcely noticed it. He was putting up a brave front, but there were signs that were difficult to conceal, and toward the end of that toilsome journey it was evident that he could not possibly have kept his seat much longer. Indeed, when they had ridden the short length of the little cañon and stopped before the overhanging shelf of rocks, he toppled suddenly sidewise, and only the girl's frail body prevented him from crashing roughly to the ground.

She brought him water from the spring, and searching through his belongings found a flask of brandy and forced some between his teeth. When he had recovered from his momentary faintness, she managed somehow to get him over to the blankets spread beneath the ledge. Then she built a fire and set some coffee on it to boil, unsaddled Pete, fed and watered the three horses, finally returning with a cup of steaming liquid to where Buck lay exhausted with closed eyes.

His face was drawn and haggard, and his lashes, long and soft and thick, lay against a skin drained of every particle of color. A sudden choking sob rose to the girl's lips, but she managed to force it back, and when the man's lids slowly lifted, she smiled tremulously.

"Here's some coffee," she said, kneeling down and holding the rim of the cup to his lips.

Buck drank obediently in slow gulps.

"You're all nerve," he murmured when the cup was empty. He lay silent for a few moments. "Don't you think you'd better be starting back?" he asked at length.

"How can I go and leave you like this?" she protested. "You're so weak. You

might get fever. Anything might happen.”

“But you certainly can’t stay,” he retorted with unexpected decision. “Let alone a whole lot of other reasons,” he went on, watching her mutinous face, “if you did, Tex would have a posse out hunting for you in no time. Sooner or later they’d find this place, and you know what that would mean. I’m feeling better every minute—honest. By to-morrow I’ll be able to hobble around and look after myself fine.”

His logic was irresistible, and for a time she sat silent, torn by a conflict of emotions. Then all at once her face brightened.

“I’ve got it!” she cried. “Why can’t I send Bud out? He’s to be trusted surely?”

Buck’s eyes lit up in a way that brought to the girl a curious, jealous pang.

“Bud? Sure, he’s all right. That’s one fine idea. You’ll have to be careful Lynch doesn’t know where he’s going, though.”

“I’ll manage that all right.”

Reluctant to go, yet feeling that she ought to make haste, the girl got out some crackers and placed them, with a pail of water, within his reach. Then she listened while Stratton told her of a short cut out to the middle pasture.

“I understand,” she nodded. “You’ll promise to be careful, won’t you? Bud ought to be here in a couple of hours, though he may be delayed a little longer. You’d better not try and move until he comes.”

“I won’t,” Buck answered. “I’m too darn comfortable.”

“Well, good-by, then,” she said briefly, moving over to her horse.

“Good-by; and—thank you a thousand times!”

She made no answer, but a faint, enigmatic smile quivered for an instant on her lips as she turned the stirrup and swung herself into the saddle. When Freckles had reached a little distance, she glanced back and waved her hand. From where he lay Stratton could see almost the whole length of the little cañon, and as long as the slight figure on the big gray horse remained in sight, his eyes followed her intently, a sort of wistful hunger in their depths. But when she disappeared, the man’s head fell back limply on the blankets and his eyes closed.

CHAPTER XXIII

WHERE THE WHEEL TRACKS LED

Bud Jessup removed a battered stew-pan from the fire and set it aside to cool a little.

“Well, by this time I reckon friend Tex is all worked up over what’s become of me,” he remarked in a tone of satisfaction, deftly shifting the coffee-pot to a bed of deeper coals. “He’s sure tried often enough to get rid of me, but I don’t guess he quite relishes my droppin’ out of sight like this.”

Buck Stratton, his back resting comfortably against a rock a little way from the fire, nodded absently.

“You’re sure you didn’t leave any trace they could pick up?” he asked with a touch of anxiety.

“Certain sure,” returned Jessup confidently. “When Miss Mary came in around four, I was in the wagon-shed, the rest of the crowd bein’ down in south pasture. Like I told yuh before, she had a good-sized package all done up nice in her hand, an’ it didn’t take her long to tell me what was up. Then we walks out together an’ stops by the kitchen door.

“‘Yuh better get yore supper at the hotel,’ she says, an’ ride back afterwards. ‘I meant to send in right after dinner to mail the package, but I got held up out on the range.’”

“Then she seems to catch sight of the greaser for the first time jest inside the door, though I noticed him snoopin’ there when we first come up.

“‘I hope yuh got somethin’ left from dinner, Pedro,’ she says, with one of them careless natural smiles of hers, like as if she hadn’t a care on her mind except food. ‘I’m half starved.’”

Bud sighed and finished with a note of admiration. “Some girl, all right!”

“You’ve said it,” agreed Buck fervently.

His appearance had improved surprisingly in the ten days that had passed since his accident. The head-bandage was gone, and his swollen ankle, though still tender at times, had been reduced to almost normal size by constant applications of cold water. His body was still tightly strapped up with yards and yards of bandage, which Mary Thorne had thoughtfully packed, with a number of other first-aid necessities, in the parcel which was Bud's excuse for making a trip to town.

Stratton was not certain that a rib had been broken after all. When Jessup came to examine him he found the flesh terribly bruised and refrained from any unnecessary prodding. It was still somewhat painful to the touch, but from the ease with which he could get about, Buck had a notion that at the worst the bone was merely cracked.

"They wouldn't be likely to notice where you left the Paloma trail, would they?" Buck asked, after a brief retrospective silence.

"Not unless they're a whole lot better trackers than I think for," Jessup assured him. "I picked a rocky place this side of the gully, an' cut around the north end of middle pasture, where the land slopes down a bit, an' yuh can't be seen from the south more 'n a quarter of a mile. I kept my eyes peeled, believe me! an' didn't glimpse a soul all the way. I wouldn't fret none about their followin' me here."

"I reckon it is foolish," admitted Stratton. "But lying around not able to do anything makes a fellow think up all kinds of trouble. Lynch isn't a fool, and there's no doubt when you didn't come back that night he'd begin to smell a rat right off."

"Sure. An' next day he likely sent in to town, where he'd find out from old Pop that I never showed up there at all. After that, accordin' to my figgerin', he'd be up against it hard. Yuh can bank on Miss Mary playin' the game, an' registerin' surprise an' worry an' all the rest of it. There ain't a chance in the world of his thinkin' to look for me here."

"I reckon that's true. Of course we've got to remember that so far as he knows I'm out of the way for good."

Bud took up coffee-pot and stew-pan and set them down beside Stratton, where the rest of the meal was spread.

"Sure," he chuckled, dropping down against the ledge. "Officially, you're a corpse. That's yore strong point, old-timer. By golly!" he added, with a sudden, fierce revulsion of spirit. "I only hope I'll be on hand when he gets what's

comin' to him, the damn', cowardly skunk!"

"Maybe you will," commented Buck grimly. "Well, let's eat. Seems like I do nothing but eat and sleep and loaf around. I've a good notion to bust up the monotony," he added, after a few minutes had passed in the silent consumption of food, "and take that trip to north pasture to-morrow."

"Don't be loco," Bud told him hastily. "Yuh ain't fit for nothin' like that yet."

"I did it a few days ago," Stratton reminded him, "and I'm feeling a hundred per cent. better now."

"Mebbe so; but what's the use in takin' chances? We got plenty of time."

"I'm not so sure of that," Buck said seriously. "You say that Lynch thinks I'm dead and out of the way. Well, maybe he does; but unless he's a lot bigger fool than I think for, he's not going to leave a body around in plain sight for anybody to find. He'll be slipping down into that gulch one of these days to get rid of it, and when he finds there ain't any body—then what?"

"He'll begin to see he's got into one hell of a mess, I reckon," commented Jessup.

"Right. And he'll be willing to do anything on earth to crawl out safe. Like enough he'll connect your disappearance with the business, and that would worry him more than ever. He might even get scared enough to throw up the whole game and beat it; and believe me, that wouldn't suit me at all."

"Yuh said a mouthful!" snarled Jessup. "If that hellion should get away—Say, Buck, why couldn't yuh get him for attempted murder?"

"I might, but the witnesses are all on his side, and there'd be a good chance of his slipping out. Besides, I'm set on finding out first what his game is. I'm dead certain now it's connected somehow with the north pasture, and I've an idea it's something big. That car I told you about, and everything—Well, there's no sense guessing any longer when we can make a stab at finding out. We'll start the first thing to-morrow."

Bud made no further protest, and at dawn next morning they left camp and set out northward through the hills. It was a slow journey, and toward the end of it Buck felt rather seedy. But this was only natural, he told himself, after lying around and doing nothing; and he even wished he had made the move sooner.

Both he and Jessup were conscious of a growing excitement as they neared the goal from which circumstances had held them back so long. Were they going to

find out something definite at last? Or would fate thrust another unexpected obstacle in their way? Above all, if fortune proved kind, what would be the character of their discovery?

Immensely intrigued and curious, Bud chattered constantly throughout the ride, suggesting all sorts of solutions of the problem, some of which were rather far-fetched. Gold was his favorite—as it has been the favorite lure for adventurers all down the ages—and he drew an entrancing picture of desert sands sprinkled with the yellow dust. He thought of other precious metals, too, and even gave a passing consideration to a deposit of diamonds or some other precious or semi-precious stones. Once he switched off oddly on the subject of prehistoric remains, and Stratton's surprised inquiry revealed the fact that three years ago he had worked for a party of scientific excavators in Montana.

“Them bones and skeletons as big as houses bring a pile of money, believe me!” he assured his companion. “The country up there ain't a mite different from this, neither.”

Buck himself was unusually silent and abstracted. During the last ten days of enforced idleness he had considered the subject for hours at a time and from every conceivable angle, with the result that a certain possibility occurred to him and persisted in lingering in his mind, in spite of its seeming improbability. It was so vague and unlikely that he said nothing about it to Bud; but now, mounting the steep trail, the thought of it came back with gathering strength, and he wondered whether it could possibly be true.

Advancing with every possible precaution, they gained the summit and passed on down the other side. Before them lay the desert, glittering and glowing in the morning sun, without a sign of alien presence. Keeping a sharp lookout, they reached the little, half-circular recess in the cliffs that formed the end of the trail, and paused.

No rain had fallen in the last ten days and the print of motor-tires was almost as clear and unmistakable as the day it had been made. They could make out easily where the car had been driven in, the footprints about it, and the marks left by its turning; and with equal lack of difficulty they picked out the track made as it departed.

The latter headed north, but Stratton was not interested in it. Without hesitation he selected the incoming trail, and the two followed it out into the desert. For a few hundred yards they rode almost due east. Then the wheel-marks turned abruptly to the south, and a little further on Buck noted the prints of a galloping

horse beside them.

“Lynch, I reckon,” he commented, pointing them out to his companion. “When he saw me up on the cliffs down yonder, he must have hustled to catch up with the car.”

Neither of them spoke again until they reached the spot where Buck had seen the car stop and the men get out and walk about. Here they dismounted and followed the footprints with careful scrutiny. Bud saw nothing significant, and when they had covered the ground thoroughly, he expressed his disappointment freely. Stratton merely shrugged his shoulders.

“We’ll follow the back track and see where else they stopped,” he said curtly.

His voice was a little hoarse, and there was an odd gleam in his eyes. When they were in the saddle again, he urged his horse forward at a speed which presently brought a protest from Jessup.

“Yuh better take it easy, old man,” he cautioned. “If that cayuse steps in a hole, you’re apt to get a jolt that’ll put you out of business.”

“I don’t guess it’ll hurt me,” returned Stratton with preoccupied brevity.

Bud gave a resigned shrug, and for ten minutes the silence remained unbroken. Then all at once Buck gave a muttered exclamation and pulled his horse up with a jerk.

They were on the rim of a wide, shallow depression in the sand. There was nothing remarkable about it at first sight, save, perhaps, the total absence of desert vegetation for some distance all around. But Stratton slid hastily out of his saddle, flung the reins over Pete’s head, and walked swiftly forward. Thrilled with a sudden excitement and suspense, Bud followed.

“What is it?” he questioned eagerly, as Buck bent down to scoop up a handful of the trampled sand. “What have yuh—”

He broke off abruptly as Stratton turned suddenly on him, eyes dilated and a spot of vivid color glowing on each cheek-bone.

“Don’t you see?” he demanded, thrusting his hand toward the boy. “Don’t you understand?”

Staring at the open palm, Jessup’s eyes widened and his jaw dropped.

“Good Lord!” he gasped. “You don’t mean that it—it’s—”

He paused incredulously, and Buck nodded.

“I’m sure of it,” he stated crisply.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SECRET OF NORTH PASTURE

Jessup swallowed hard. “But—but—” he faltered, “there ain’t never been any found around here. The nearest fields are hundreds of miles away, ain’t they?”

Stratton dropped the lump of sand. A number of particles still clung to his palm, and over the skin there spread an oily, slightly iridescent film. His manner had suddenly grown composed, though his eyes still shone with suppressed excitement.

“Just the same, it’s—oil!” he returned quietly. “There’s no doubt at all about it. Look at the ground there.”

Mechanically Bud’s glance shifted to the wide, shallow depression in the desert. The sand was noticeably darker, and here and there under the sun’s rays, it held that faintly iridescent glint that was unmistakable. At a distance he would have said there was a spring somewhere beneath the surface. But no water ever had that look, and now that he was prepared for it he even noticed a faint, distinctive odor in the air.

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“By golly!” he cried excitedly. “You mean to say the whole pasture’s full of it?”

“Not likely, but it looks to me as if there was a-plenty. There were traces back there where we stopped, and there’s no telling how many more—”

“But I didn’t see nothin’,” interrupted Bud in surprise.

“You weren’t looking for it, that’s why,” shrugged Stratton. “I was. Thinking it all over this past week, I got to wondering if oil might not just possibly be what we ought to look for. I was so doubtful I didn’t say anything about it. Like you said, nobody’s ever struck it anywhere around these parts, but I reckon you never can tell.”

“Wough!” Bud suddenly exploded in a tremendous exhalation of breath. “I can’t seem to get it through my nut. Why, it means a fortune for Miss Mary! No

wonder that skunk tried his best to do her out of it.”

Buck stared at him oddly. A fortune for Mary Thorne! Somehow, until this moment he had not realized that this must seem to every one to be the object of his efforts—to rid Mary Thorne of all her cares and troubles and bring her measureless prosperity. Ignorant of Stratton’s identity and of all the circumstances of her father’s treachery and double-dealing, she must hold that view herself. The thought disturbed Buck, and he wondered uncomfortably what her feelings would be when she learned the truth.

“What’s the matter?” inquired Bud suddenly. “What yuh scowlin’ that way for?”

“Nothing special,” evaded Buck. “I was just thinking.” After all, there was no use crossing bridges until one came to them. “We’d better get started,” he added briskly. “We’ve found out all we want here, and there’s no sense in taking chances of running up against the gang.”

“What’s the next move?” asked Bud, when they had mounted and started back over their trail.

“Look up Hardenberg and put him wise to what we know,” answered Stratton promptly. “We’ve done about all we can; the rest of it’s up to him.”

“I reckon so,” agreed Jessup. “I never met up with him, but they say he’s a good skate. Perilla’s some little jaunt from here, though. Yuh thinkin’ of riding all the way?”

“Why not? It’ll be quicker in the end than going to Harpswell and taking the train. We’ll likely need the cayuses, too, when we get there. I’ve done forty miles at a stretch plenty of times.”

“So’ve I, but not with a bad ankle and a bunged-up side,” returned Bud dryly. “How yuh feelin’?”

“Fine! I’ve hardly had a twinge all day. That bandage stuff is great dope for keeping a fellow strapped up comfortable.”

“Well, if you’re up to it, I reckon that would be better than the train,” Bud admitted. “For one thing, if we take the trail around south of the Rocking-R we ain’t likely to meet up with anybody who’ll put Lynch wise, an’ I take it that’s important.”

“I’ll say so!” agreed Buck emphatically. “The chances are that even if he got wind of you and me being together, he’d realize the game was up, and probably beat it for the border. As long as we can manage to keep out of the spot-light, he

may suspect a lot of things, but considering the size of the stake, he's likely to take a chance and hang on."

"Let's hope he don't take it into his head to ride up here this morning," remarked Jessup, glancing apprehensively across the desert wastes toward the south. "That would spill the beans for fair."

The very possibility made them urge the horses to an even greater speed, and neither of them really breathed freely until they had gained the little sheltered depression in the cliffs, from which the trail led over the shoulder of the mountain.

"I reckon we're safe enough now," commented Stratton, drawing rein. "I didn't see a sign of anybody as we came along."

Halting for ten minutes to rest the horses, they started up the trail in single file, Bud going first. For a greater part of the distance the rocky spurs shielded them from any save a very limited field of observation. But at the summit there was an almost level stretch of twenty feet or more from which an extended view could be had, not only of a wide sweep of desert country, but of a section of the northern end of middle pasture as well. Reaching this point, Buck glanced back searchingly. An instant later he was out of the saddle and crouching against the rocky wall.

"Lead Pete around the corner," he urged Jessup sharply. "Get out of sight as quick as you can."

Bud obeyed without question, and Stratton hastily took out his field-glasses and focused them on the three figures he had glimpsed riding along the northern extremity of the Shoe-Bar pasture. He recognized them instantly, pausing only long enough to make out that they did not seem to be in haste, and that so far as he could tell they were not looking in the direction of the trail. Then he thrust the glasses back into the case, and slipping around the buttress rejoined his companion.

"Lynch, with McCabe and Kreeger," he explained curtly, gathering up the reins and swinging himself into the saddle.

"Did they see yuh?"

"I don't think so. They seemed to be taking things easy, and weren't looking this way at all. I wonder what they're up to?"

"Couldn't we stick around here for a while and watch them?" Bud asked eagerly.

Buck hesitated an instant. "I guess we'd better not take a chance," he replied at length. "Such a whale of a lot depends on his not knowing that I'm alive and kicking; I'd hate like the devil to spoil everything now by his getting a glimpse of me. Besides, for all we know they may be coming through here to meet somebody—the rest of the gang, perhaps, or—"

"That's right," interrupted Bud hastily. "Let's go. Sooner we're off this here trail the better."

Without further delay they rode on down the slope, paused for a moment or two at the spring in the hollow to water the horses, and then pushed on again. Passing the entrance to the gulch, Jessup glanced that way curiously.

"Mebbe they're on their way to dispose of yore corpse, Buck," he chuckled.

Stratton grinned. "I thought of that, and I rather hope it's so. They'd be puzzled and suspicious, maybe, but they couldn't be really sure of anything. It would be a whole lot better than to have them run across our tracks in the sand back there. That would give away the show completely."

Twenty minutes or so later they reached the gully through which they had come out on the trail. Though there had been no further signs of the Shoe-Bar men, their vigilance did not relax. Pushing on with all possible speed, they covered the distance to the little camp in very much less time than it had taken in the morning.

Here the horses had a brief rest while the two men collected their few belongings and loaded them on the pack-horse, for they had decided to go on at once. Both felt that no time should be lost in finding the sheriff and setting the machinery of the law in motion. Moreover, they were down to the last scrap of food and unless they stirred themselves they were likely to go hungry that night.

An hour later found them riding southward, following the route through the mountains used by the cattle-rustlers. Making the same cautious circuit Buck had taken around the southern end of the Shoe-Bar, they reached Rocking-R land without adventure and pulled up before the door of Red Butte camp about six o'clock.

Gabby Smith was cooking supper and greeted them with his customary lack of enthusiasm. Bud, who had never seen him before, was much diverted by his manner, and during the meal kept up a constant chatter of comment and question for the purpose, as he afterward confessed, of making the taciturn puncher go the limit in the matter of loquacity. His effort, though it could scarcely be termed

successful, evidently got on Gabby's nerves, for afterward he turned both men out of the cabin while he cleared up, a process lasting until nearly bedtime.

It was not until then that Stratton, by a chance remark, learned that three or four days after his departure from the camp two weeks earlier, a stranger had been there making inquiries about him. Gabby's stenographic brevity made it difficult to extract details, but apparently the fellow had passed himself off as an old friend of Buck's from Texas, desirous of looking him up. He was a stranger to Gabby, slight, dark, with eyes set rather closely together, and he rode a Shoe-Bar horse. Apparently he had hung around camp until nearly dusk, and then departed only when Gabby got rid of him by suggesting that his man had probably ridden in to spend the night at the Rocking-R ranch-house.

Stratton and Jessup discussed the incident while making brief preparation for bed. So far as Bud knew there had been no stranger on the Shoe-Bar at that time; but it seemed certain that the fellow must have been sent by Lynch to spy around and find out where Buck was.

"I s'pose he went to the ranch-house first and Tenny sent him down here, knowing he wouldn't get much out of Gabby," remarked Stratton. "Well, as far as I can see he had his trouble for his pains. Unless he hung around for two or three days he couldn't very well be certain I wasn't somewhere on the ranch."

Save as a matter of curiosity, however, the whole affair lay too far in the past to be of the least importance now, and it was soon dismissed. Having removed boots and outer clothing, and spread their blankets in one of the pair of double-decked bunks, the two men lost no time crawling between them, and fell almost instantly asleep.

CHAPTER XXV

THE TRAP

“Yuh out last night?” brusquely inquired Gabby, as they were dressing next morning.

A direct question from the eccentric individual was so novel that Buck paused in buckling on his cartridge-belt, and stared at him in frank surprise.

“Why, no,” he returned promptly. “Were you, Bud?”

“I sure wasn’t. I didn’t budge after my head hit the mattress. What gave yuh the notion, old-timer?”

“Door unlatched,” growled Gabby, continuing his preparations for breakfast.

“Is that all?” shrugged Bud. “Likely nobody thought to close it tight.”

Gabby made no answer, but his expression, as he went silently about his work, failed to show conviction.

“Ain’t he a scream?” inquired Bud an hour later, when they had saddled up and were on their way. “I don’t wonder Tenny can’t get nobody to stay in camp with him. It would be about as cheerful as a morgue.” 249

“Must have got soured in his youth,” remarked Stratton. “I had to put up a regular fight to get him to look after the pack-horse till somebody can take it back to the ranch-house. Where do we hit this trail you were telling me about?”

“About a mile and a half further on. It ain’t much to boast of, but chances are we won’t meet up with a soul till we run into the main road a mile or so this side of Perilla.”

Bud’s prediction proved accurate. They encountered no one throughout the entire length of the twisting, narrow, little-used trail, and even when they reached the main road early in the afternoon there was very little passing.

“Reckon they’re all taking their siesta,” commented. Bud. “Perilla’s a great place

for greasers, yuh know, bein' so near the border. There's a heap sight more of 'em than whites."

Presently they began to pass small, detached adobe huts, some of them the merest hovels. A few dark-faced children were in sight here and there, but the older persons were all evidently comfortably indoors, slumbering through the noonday heat.

Further on the houses were closer together, and at length Bud announced that they were nearing the main street, one end of which crossed the road they were on at right angles.

"That rickety old shack there is just on the corner," he explained. "It's a Mexican eating-house, as I remember. Most of the stores an' decent places are up further."

"Wonder where Hardenberg hangs out?" remarked Stratton.

"Yuh got me. I never had no professional use for him before. Reckon most anybody can tell us, though. That looks like a cow-man over there. Let's ask him."

A moment or two later they stopped before the dingy, weather-beaten building on the corner. Two horses fretted at the hitching-rack, and on the steps lounged a man in regulation cow-boy garb. A cigarette dangled from one corner of his mouth, and as the two halted he glanced up from the newspaper he was reading.

"Hardenberg?" he repeated in answer to the question. "Yuh mean the sheriff? Why, he's inside there."

Bud looked surprised and somewhat incredulous. "What the devil's he doin' in that greaser eatin'-house?"

The stranger squinted one eye as the cigarette smoke curled up into his face. "Oh, he ain't patronizin' the joint," he explained with a touch of dry amusement. "He's after old José Maria for sellin' licker, I reckon. Him an' one of his deputies rode up about five minutes ago."

After a momentary hesitation Stratton and Jessup dismounted and tied their horses to the rack. Buck realized that the sheriff might not care to be interrupted while on business of this sort, but their own case was so urgent that he decided to take a chance. At least he could find out when Hardenberg would be at leisure.

Pushing through the swinging door, they found themselves in a single, long room, excessively dingy and rather dark, the only light coming from two unshuttered windows on the north side. To Buck's surprise at least a score of

Mexicans were seated around five or six bare wooden tables eating and drinking. Certainly if a raid was on they were taking it very calmly. The next moment he was struck by two things; the sudden hush which greeted their appearance, and the absence of any one who could possibly be the man they sought.

“Looks like that fellow must have given us the wrong tip,” he said, glancing at Jessup. “I don’t see any one here who—”

He paused as a wizened, middle-aged Mexican got up from the other end of the room and came toward them.

“Yo’ wish zee table, señors?” he inquired. “P’raps like zee *chile con carne*, or zee—”

“We don’t want anything to eat,” interrupted Stratton. “I understand Sheriff Hardenberg is here. Could I see him a minute?”

“Oh, zee shereef!” shrugged the Mexican, with a characteristic gesture of his hands. “He in zee back room with José Maria. Yo’ please come zis way.”

He turned and walked toward a door at the further end of the long room, the two men following him between the tables. But Buck had not taken more than half a dozen steps before he stopped abruptly. That curious silence seemed to him too long continued to be natural; there was a hint of tension, of suspense in it. And something about the attitude of the seated Mexicans—a vague sense of watchful, stealthy scrutiny, of tense, quivering muscles—confirmed his sudden suspicion.

“Hold up, Bud!” he warned impulsively. “There’s something wrong here.”

As if the words were a signal, the crowd about them surged up suddenly, with the harsh scrape of many chair-legs and an odd, sibilant sound, caused by a multitude of quick-drawn breaths. Like a flash Buck pulled his gun and leveled it on the nearest greaser.

“Get out of the way,” he ordered, taking a step toward the outer door.

The fellow shrank back instinctively, but to Buck’s surprise—the average Mexican is not noted for daredevil bravery—several others behind pushed themselves forward. Suddenly Jessup’s voice rose in shrill warning.

“Look out, Buck! Behind yuh—quick! That guy’s got a knife.”

Stratton whirled swiftly to catch a flashing vision of a tall Mexican creeping toward him, a long, slim knife glittering in his upraised hand. The fellow was so close that another step would bring him within striking distance, and without

hesitation Buck's finger pressed the trigger.

The hammer fell with an ominous, metallic click. Amazed, Buck hastily pulled the trigger twice again without results. As he realized that in some mysterious manner the weapon had been tampered with, his teeth grated, but with no perceptible pause in the swiftness of his action he drew back his arm and hurled the pistol straight into the greaser's face.

His aim was deadly. The heavy Colt struck the fellow square on the mouth, and with a smothered cry he dropped the knife and staggered back, flinging up both hands to his face. But others leaped forward to take his place, a dozen knives flashing in as many hands. The ring closed swiftly, and from behind him Stratton heard Bud cry out with an oath that his gun was useless.

There was no time for conscious planning. It was instinct alone—that primitive instinct of every man sore pressed to get his back against something solid—that made Buck lunge forward suddenly, seize a Mexican around the waist, and hurl him bodily at one side of the closing circle.

This parted abruptly and two men went sprawling. One of them Buck kicked out of the way, feeling a savage satisfaction at the impact of his boot against soft flesh and at the yell of pain that followed. Catching Jessup by an arm he swept him toward one of the tables, snatched up a chair, and with his back against the heavy piece of furniture he faced the mob. His hat was gone, and as he stood there, big body braced, mouth set, and hair crested above his smoldering eyes, he made a splendid picture of force and strength which seemed for an instant to awe the Mexicans into inactivity.

But the pause was momentary. Urged on by a voice in the rear, they surged forward again, two of the foremost hurling their knives with deadly aim. One Stratton avoided by a swift duck of his head; the other he caught dexterously on the chair-bottom. Then, over the heads of the crowd, another chair came hurtling with unexpected force and precision. It struck Buck's crude weapon squarely, splintering the legs and leaving him only the back and precariously wobbling seat.

He flung this at one of the advancing men and floored him. But another, slipping agilely in from the side, rushed at him with upraised knife. He was the same greaser who, weeks before, had played that trick about the letter; and Buck's lips twitched grimly as he recognized him.

As the knife flashed downward, Stratton squirmed his body sidewise so that the blade merely grazed one shoulder. Grasping the slim wrist, he twisted it with

brutal force, and the weapon clattered to the floor. An instant later he had gripped the fellow about the body and, exerting all his strength, hurled him across the table and straight through the near-by window.

The sound of a shrill scream and the crash of shattered glass came simultaneously. In the momentary, dead silence that followed, one could have almost heard a pin drop.

CHAPTER XXVI

SHERIFF HARDENBERG INTERVENES

During that brief lull Buck found time to wonder why no one had sense enough to use a gun to bring them down. But almost as swiftly the answer came to him; they dared not risk the sound of a shot bringing interference from without. He flashed a glance at Bud, who sagged panting against the table, the fragments of a chair in his hands and a trickle of blood running down his face. Somehow the sight of that blood turned Buck into a raging savage.

“Come on, you damned coyotes!” he snarled. “Come and get yours.”

For a brief space it looked as if no one had nerve enough to accept his challenge, and Buck shot a sudden appraising glance toward the outer door, between which and them their assailants crowded thickest. But before he could plan a way to rush the throng, that same sharp voice sounded from the rear which before had stirred the greasers into action, and six or seven of them began to creep warily forward. Their movements were plainly reluctant, however, and of a sudden Stratton gave a spring which carried him within reaching distance of the two foremost. Gripping each by a collar, he cracked their heads together thrice in swift succession, hurled their limp bodies from him, grabbed another chair from the floor, and was back beside Jessup before any of their startled companions had time to stir.

“Now’s the time to rush ’em, kid,” he panted in Jessup’s ear. “When I give the word—”

He broke off abruptly as the front door was flung suddenly open and a sharp, incisive, dominant voice rang through the room.

“What in hell ’s doing here?”

For a fraction of a second the silence was intense. Then like a flash a man leaped up and flung himself through the window, while three others plunged out of the rear door and disappeared. Others were crowding after them when there came a

sudden spurt of flame, the sharp sound of a pistol-shot, and a bullet buried itself in the casing of the rear door.

“Stand still, every damn’ one of you,” ordered the new-comer.

He strode down the room through the light powder-haze and paused before Stratton, tall, wide-shouldered, and lean of flank, with a thin, hawklike face and penetrating gray eyes.

“Well?” he questioned curtly. “What’s it all about? That scoundrel been selling licker again?”

“Not to us,” snapped Buck. “Are you Hardenberg?” he added, with sudden inspiration.

“I am.”

“Well, you’re the cause of our being in here.”

The gray eyes studied him narrowly. “How come?”

“I came to town to see you specially and was told by a man outside that you were making a raid on this joint. We hadn’t been inside three minutes before we found it was a plant to get us here and knife us.”

“I don’t get you,” remarked the sheriff in a slightly puzzled tone.

By this time Buck’s momentary irritation at the hint that it was all merely a drunken quarrel was dying away.

“I don’t wonder,” he returned in a more amiable tone. “It’s a long story—too long to tell just now. I can only say that we were attacked without cause by the whole gang here, and if you hadn’t shown up just now, it’s a question whether we’d have gotten away alive.”

The sheriff’s glance swept over the disordered room, taking in the shattered window, the bodies on the floor, the Mexican who crouched moaning in a corner, and returned to Stratton’s face.

“I’m not so sure about that last,” he commented, with a momentary grim smile. “What’s your name?”

“Buck Green.”

“Oh! You wrote me a letter—”

“Sure. I’ll explain about that later. Meanwhile—”

He broke off and, bending swiftly, pulled his Colt from under the table. Breaking the weapon, he ejected a little shower of empty brass shells, at the sight of which his lips tightened. Still without comment, he rapidly filled it from his belt, Hardenberg watching him intently the while.

“Meanwhile, you’d like a little action, eh?” drawled the sheriff. “You’re right. Either of you hurt?”

He glanced inquiringly at Jessup, who was just wiping the blood from his cut face.

“Not me,” snapped Bud. “This don’t amount to nothin’. Say, was there a guy hangin’ around outside when yuh came in—short, with black hair an’ eyes set close together?”

Buck gave a slight start; the sheriff shook his head.

“I might have known he’d beat it,” snorted Bud. “But I’ll get the lyin’ son-of-a-gun yet; it was him told us yuh were in here.”

Hardenberg’s gray eyes narrowed slightly. “That’ll come later. We’ll round up this bunch first. If you two will ride around to Main Street and get hold of half a dozen of my deputies, I’ll stay here and hold this bunch.”

Rapidly he mentioned the names of the men he wanted and where they could be found, and Stratton and Jessup hastily departed. Outside they found three horses, their own, tied to the hitching-rack as they had left them, and a big, powerful black, who stood squarely facing the door, reins merely trailing and ears pricked forward. The two that had been there when they first rode up were gone.

“Just like I thought,” said Jessup, as they mounted and swung around the corner. “That guy was planted there a-purpose to get us into the eatin’-house. What’s more, I’ll bet my saddle he was the same one who came snoopin’ around Red Butte camp two weeks ago. Recollect, Gabby said he was small, with black hair an’ eyes close together?”

Buck nodded. “It’s a mighty sure thing he was there again last night and pulled our loads,” he added in a tone of chagrin. “We’re a pretty dumb pair, kid. Next time we’ll believe Gabby when he says his door was opened in the night.”

“I’ll say so. But I thought the old bird was just fussing. Never even looked at my gun. But why the devil should we have suspected anythin’? Why, Lynch don’t even know yore alive!”

“He must have found out someway,” shrugged Stratton, “though I can’t imagine

how. No use shedding tears over it, though. What we've got to do is get Hardenberg moving double-quick. Here's George Harley; I'll take him, and you go on to the next one."

Rapidly the deputies were gathered together and hurried back to the eating-house to find Hardenberg holding the Mexicans without difficulty. Half an hour later these were safely lodged in the jail, and the sheriff began a rigorous examination, which lasted until late in the afternoon.

The boldness of the affair angered him and made him determined to get at the bottom of it; but this proved no easy matter. To begin with, José Maria, the proprietor of the restaurant, was missing. Either he had merely rented his place to the instigator of the plot, and was prudently absenting himself for a while, or else he was one of those who had escaped through the rear door. Most of the Mexicans were natives of Perilla, and one and all swore that they were as innocent of evil intent as unborn children. They had merely happened to be there getting a meal when the fracas started. The miscreants who had drawn knives on the two whites were quite unknown to them, and must be the ones who had escaped.

Hardenberg knew perfectly well that they were lying, but for the moment he let it pass. He had an idea that Stratton could throw some light on the situation, and leaving the prisoners to digest a few pithy truths, he took the cow-puncher into his private room to hear his story.

Though Buck tried to make this as brief as possible, it took some time, especially as the sheriff showed an absorbing interest from the start and persisted in asking frequent questions and requesting fuller details. When he had finally heard everything, he leaned back in his chair, regarding Stratton thoughtfully.

"Mighty interesting dope," he remarked, lighting a cigarette. "I've had my eyes on Tex Lynch for some time, but I had no idea he was up to anything like this. You're dead sure about that oil?"

Buck nodded. "Of course, you can't ever be certain about the quantity until you bore, but I went over some of the Oklahoma fields a few years ago, and this sure looks like something big."

"Pretty soft for the lady," commented Hardenberg. He paused, regarding Stratton curiously. "Just whereabouts do you come off?" he asked frankly. "I've been wondering about that all along, and you can see I've got to be dead sure of my facts before I get busy on this seriously."

Though Buck had been expecting the question, he hesitated for an instant before replying.

“I’ll tell you,” he replied slowly at length, “but for the present I’d like to have you keep it under your hat. My name isn’t Green at all, but—Stratton.”

“Stratton?” repeated the sheriff in a puzzled tone. “Stratton?” A sudden look of incredulity flashed into his eyes. “You’re not trying to make out that you’re the Buck Stratton who owned the Shoe-Bar?”

Buck flushed a little. “I was afraid you’d find it hard to swallow, but it’s true,” he said quietly. “You see, the papers got it wrong. I wasn’t killed at all, but only wounded in the head. For—for over a year I hadn’t any memory.”

Briefly he narrated the circumstances of the unusual case, and Hardenberg listened with absorbed attention, watching him closely, weighing every word, and noting critically the most trifling gesture or change of expression. For a while his natural skepticism struggled with a growing conviction that the man before him was telling the truth. It was an extraordinary experience, to be sure, but he quickly realized that Stratton had nothing to gain by a deliberate imposture.

“You can prove all that, of course?” he asked when Buck had finished.

“Of course. I haven’t any close relatives, but there are plenty of men who’ll swear to my identity.”

The sheriff sat silent for a moment. “Some experience,” he mused presently. “Rotten hard luck, too, I’ll say. Of course you never had a suspicion of oil when you sold the outfit to old man Thorne.”

Again Buck hesitated. Somehow he found this part of the affair extraordinarily hard to put into words. But he knew that it must be done.

“I didn’t sell it,” he said curtly at length. “That transfer of Thorne’s was a forgery. He was a man I’d had a number of business dealings with, and when I went to France I left all my papers in his charge. I suppose when he saw my name on the list of missing, he thought he could take a chance. But his daughter knew nothing whatever about it. She’s white all through and thinks the ranch is honestly hers. That’s the reason why I want you to keep quiet about this for a while. You can see how she’d feel if this came out.”

A faint, fleeting smile curved the corners of Jim Hardenberg’s straight mouth. Accustomed by his profession to think the worst of people, and to probe deeply

and callously for hidden evil motives, it amused and rather pleased him to meet a man whose extraordinary story roused not the faintest doubt in his critical mind.

“Some dirty business,” he commented at length. “Still, it’s come out all right, and at that you’re ahead of the game. That oil might have laid there for years without your getting wise to it. Well, let’s get down to cases. It’s going to take some planning to get that scoundrel Lynch, to say nothing of the men higher up. Tell me about those fellows in the car again.”

Buck readily went over that part of his story, describing the fat man and his driver as accurately as he was able. The sheriff’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully as he listened.

“Think you know him?” Buck asked curiously.

“I’m not sure. Description sounds a bit familiar, but descriptions are apt to fool you. I wish you’d managed to get the number of the car.”

“That would likely be a fake one,” Stratton reminded him.

“Maybe. Well, I’ll make a few inquiries.” He stood up stretching. “I’d like mighty well to start for the Shoe-Bar to-night, but I’m afraid I can’t get a posse together soon enough. We’ll need some bunch to round up that gang. You’ll be at the United States Hotel, I suppose? Well, I’ll get busy now, and after supper I’ll drop around to let you know how things are going. With what you’ve told me I’ll see if I can’t squeeze some information out of those greasers. It may help.”

They left the room together, the sheriff pausing outside to give some instructions to his assistant. Buck gathered in Jessup, who had been waiting, and the two left the building and walked toward the hotel, where they had left their horses.

Perilla was a town of some size, and at this hour the main street was fairly well crowded with a picturesque throng of cowboys, Mexicans, and Indians from the near-by reservation, with the usual mingling of more prosaic-looking business men. Not a few motor-cars mingled with horsemen and wagons of various sorts in the roadway, but as Buck’s glance fell on a big, shiny, black touring-car standing at the curb, he was struck by a sudden feeling of familiarity.

Mechanically he noted the license-number. Then his eyes narrowed as he saw the pudgy, heavily-built figure in the tan dust-coat on the point of descending from the tonneau.

An instant later they were face to face. For a second the fat man glanced at him indifferently with that same pouting droop to the small lips which Stratton knew

he never could forget. Then, like a flash, the round eyes widened and filled with horror, the jaw dropped, the fat face turned to a pale, sickly green. A choking gurgle burst from the man's lips, and he seemed on the point of collapse when a hand reached out and dragged him back into the car, which, at a hasty word from the occupant of the back seat, shot from the curb and hummed rapidly away.

Thinking to stop them by shooting up the tires. Buck's hand dropped instinctively to his gun. But he realized in time that such drastic methods were neither expedient nor necessary. Instead, he turned and halted a man of about forty who was passing.

"Any idea who that fellow is?" he asked, motioning toward the car, just whirling around the next corner. "He's short and fat, in a big black Hammond car."

"Short and fat in a Hammond car?" repeated the man, staring down the street. "Hum! Must be Paul Draper from Amarillo. He's the only one I know around these parts who owns a Hammond. Come to think, though, his car is gray."

"He's probably had it painted lately," suggested Stratton quietly. "Much obliged. I thought I'd seen him before some place."

CHAPTER XXVII

AN HOUR TOO LATE

“I had an idea that’s who it was when you described him,” said Sheriff Hardenberg, to whom Stratton returned at once with the news. “There’s only one ‘Paul’ around here who fits the bill, and he sure does to perfection.”

“Who is he?” asked Buck curiously.

Hardenberg’s eyes narrowed. “The slickest piece of goods in the State of Arizona, I’d say. He’s been mixed up in more crooked deals than any man I ever ran up against; but he’s so gol-darn cute nobody’s ever been able to catch him with the goods.”

“He sure don’t look it,” commented Stratton. “With that baby stare of his and—”

“I know,” interrupted the sheriff. “That’s part of his stock in trade; it’s pulled many a sucker. He’s got a mighty convincing way about him, believe me! He can tell the damnedest bunch of lies, looking you straight in the eyes all the time, till you’d swear everything he said was gospel. But his big specialty is egging somebody else on to do the dirty work, and when the dangerous part is over, he steps in and hogs most of the profits. He’s organized fake mining companies and stock companies. Last year he got up a big cattle-raising combine, persuaded three or four men over in the next county to pool their outfits, and issued stock for about three times what it was worth. It busted up, of course, but not before he’d sold a big block to some Eastern suckers and got away with the proceeds.”

“I’d think that would have been enough to land him.”

“You would, wouldn’t you?” returned Hardenberg with a shrug. “But the law’s a tricky business sometimes, and he managed to shave the line just close enough to be safe. Well, it looks as if we had a chance of bagging him at last,” he added in a tone of heartfelt satisfaction.

“Going to arrest him before we start for the Shoe-Bar?” asked Buck.

Hardenberg laughed shortly. "Hell, no! You don't know Paul Draper if you think he could be convicted on your statement, unsupported by witnesses. Believe me, by this time he's doped out an iron-clad alibi, or something, and we wouldn't have a chance. But if one of the Shoe-Bar gang should turn State's evidence, that's another matter."

"Aren't you afraid he may beat it if you let him go that long?"

"I'll see to that. One of my men will start for Amarillo right away and keep him in sight till we come back. By the way, we've got José Maria, and that guy you fired through the window. Caught the old fox sneaking back of those shacks along the north road."

"Going to warn Lynch, I reckon," suggested Buck crisply.

"That's what I thought, so I strung some men along at likely points to pick up any more that may try the same trick. I haven't got anything out of José yet, but a little thumbscrewing may produce results. I'll tell you about it to-night."

It was late when he finally appeared at the hotel lobby, and he had no very favorable news to impart. José Maria, it appeared, had stuck to the story of being engaged by an alleged Federal official to apprehend two outlaws, whose descriptions fitted Buck and his companion perfectly. He admitted having engaged the other Mexicans to help him, but swore that he had never intended any harm to the two men. Their instructions were merely to capture and hold them until the arrival of the supposed official.

"All rot, of course," Hardenberg stated in conclusion. "But it hangs together a bit too well for any greaser to have thought out by himself. I reckon that cow-man who got you into the joint was responsible for the yarn and told José to give it out in case things should go wrong. Well, I won't waste any more time on the bunch. You two be around about seven to-morrow. I'd like to start sooner, but some of the boys have to come in from a distance."

Buck and Jessup were there ahead of time, but it was more than an hour later when the posse left Perilla. There were about twenty men in all, for Hardenberg planned to send a portion of them across country to guard the outlet of that secret trail through the mountains of which Buck had told him. If Lynch and his men had any warning of their coming, or happened to be out on the range, the chances were all in favor of their making for the mountains and trying to escape by the cattle rustlers' route.

During the ride the thought of Mary Thorne was often in Buck's mind. He did

not fear for her personal safety. Alf Manning was there, and though Stratton did not like him he had never doubted the fellow's courage or his ability to act as a protector to the three women, should the need arise. But that such a need would arise seemed most unlikely, for Lynch had nothing to gain by treating the girl save with respect and consideration. He had no compunction about robbing her, but she could scarcely be expected to enter further into his schemes and calculations, especially at a time when his whole mind must be a turmoil of doubt and fear and uncertainty as to the future.

Nevertheless, Buck wished more than once that he had been able to get in touch with her since that memorable afternoon when he had watched her ride out of sight down the little cañon, if only to prepare her for what was going on. It must have been very hard for her to go about day after day, knowing nothing, suspecting a thousand things, fretting, worrying, with not a soul to confide in, yet forced continually to present an untroubled countenance to those about her.

"Thank the Lord it'll soon be over and she'll be relieved," he thought, when they finally came in sight of the ranch-house.

As the posse swept through the lower gate and up the slope, Buck's eyes searched the building keenly. Not a soul was in sight, either there or about the corrals. He had seen it thus apparently deserted more than once before, and told himself now that his uneasiness was absurd. But when the girl suddenly appeared on the veranda and stood staring at the approaching horsemen, Buck's heart leaped with a sudden spasm of intense relief, and unconsciously he spurred his horse ahead of the others.

As he swung himself out of the saddle, she came swiftly forward, her face glowing with surprise and pleasure.

"Oh, I'm so glad you've come," she said in a low, quick voice, clasping his outstretched hand. "We've been worrying—You—you're quite all right now?"

"Fine and dandy," Buck assured her. "Thanks to you, and Bud, I'm perfectly whole again."

She greeted Jessup, who came up smiling, and then Sheriff Hardenberg was presented.

"Very glad to meet you, Miss Thorne," he said. There was a faint twinkle in his eyes as he glanced toward Stratton for an instant, his belief confirmed as to the principal reason for Buck's desire to keep the secret of the Shoe-Bar ownership. Then he became businesslike.

“Where’s Lynch and the rest of ’em?” he asked briskly.

The girl’s face grew suddenly serious. “I don’t know,” she answered quickly. “They were all working about the barns until a strange cow-boy rode in about two hours ago. I saw him pass the window but didn’t think much about it. About half an hour or so later I went out to give some orders to Pedro; he’s the cook, you know. But he wasn’t there and neither was Maria, and when I went out to the barns the men were gone. Of course something urgent might easily have taken them out on the range, but neither Maria nor Pedro has been off the place for weeks. Besides, when I peeped into the bunk-house everything was tossed about in confusion, as if—Well, I was afraid something—had happened.”

“Something has,” stated the sheriff grimly. “The truth is, that scoundrel Lynch has got to the end of his rope, and we’re after him.”

The girl’s face paled, then flushed deeply. “What—what is it?” she asked in a low, troubled voice. “What has he—”

“It’s rather a long story, and I’m afraid there isn’t time to stop and tell you now,” explained the sheriff as she paused. “We’ve got to make every minute count. You have no idea which way they went?”

“It must have been west or south,” the girl answered promptly. “If they’d gone any other way I should have seen them.”

“Fine,” said Hardenberg, wheeling his horse. “Don’t you worry about anything,” he added over one shoulder. “We’ll be back in a jiffy.”

As he and his men spurred down the slope toward the entrance to middle pasture, the girl’s eyes sought Stratton’s.

“You—”

“I must.” He quickly answered her unspoken question. “They’ll need us to show them the way. We’ll be back, though, as soon as we possibly can. You’re not nervous, are you? You’re perfectly safe, of course, with—”

“Of course,” she assured him promptly. “Lynch has gone. There’ll be nothing for us to worry about here. Good-by, then, for a while. And do be careful—both of you.”

Her face was a trifle pale, and about her mouth and chin were traced a few faint lines which hinted vaguely of forced composure. As Buck hastened to overtake the posse, he recalled her expression, and wondered with a troubled qualm whether she wasn’t really more nervous than she let herself appear. Perhaps she

might have been more comfortable if he or Bud had remained at the ranch-house.

“Probably it’s all my imagination,” he decided at length. “With Manning there, she’s perfectly safe, especially as we’ve got the whole gang on the run. The ranch-house would be the very last place they’d head for.”

CHAPTER XXVIII

FOREBODINGS

Almost at once they struck a fresh trail, made by a number of horsemen riding in a bunch, which led diagonally across middle pasture. It was easy to follow, and Hardenberg pushed his men hard to make up for delays which were likely to come later on. For a time Buck rode beside the sheriff, discussing their plans and explaining the lay of the land. Then he fell back a little to chat with Jessup.

"I'm sure glad of one thing," Bud said emphatically, after a few desultory remarks. "Miss Mary won't be bothered no more now with that son-of-a-gun hangin' around an' makin' eyes."

Stratton turned on him suddenly. "Who the devil do you mean?" he demanded sharply.

"Why, Tex, of course," shrugged Jessup. "He used to put in considerable time soft-soapin' around her. A hell of a nerve, I'll say, makin' up to such as her."

Buck scowled. "I never saw anything like that," he said brusquely, "except maybe once," he added. With a sudden recollection of that afternoon they moved the herd out of south pasture.

"Likely not," returned Bud. "He wasn't so bad till after yuh went. I got the notion he took to courtin' her, yuh might say, as a kind of last hope. If he could figger on gettin' her to marry him, he'd have the ranch an' everythin' on it without no more trouble at all. You'd think even a scoundrel like him would see she wouldn't look at him."

"Did he— Was he—"

"Oh, no! Nothin' raw a-tall," returned Bud, divining the thought in Stratton's mind. "He just hung around the ranch-house a lot, an' was awful sweet, an' used them black eyes of his consid'able. Sorta preparing the way, I reckon. But he didn't get far." He chuckled reminiscently. "I'll tell the world, she didn't waste no time sendin' him about his business."

For a time Buck rode on in frowning silence. The very thought enraged him and added deeply to the score that was piling up so rapidly against the scoundrel.

Presently Bud's voice broke in upon his savage reverie.

"Funny we didn't see nothin' of the Mannings back there," he commented. "The lady couldn't of known yuh was around." He glanced slyly at Buck. "Besides," he added, seeing that his friend's expression did not lighten, "with somethin' like this doin', you'd think his lordship would want to strut around in them baggy pants an' yellow boots, an' air his views on how to go about to catch the gang."

Stratton turned his head abruptly. "But they must be there!" he said sharply. "They surely can't have gone away."

"There wasn't no talk of it when I left," shrugged Bud. "Still, an' all, me an' his nibs wasn't on exactly confidential terms, an' he might have forgot to tell me about his plans. Yuh got to remember, too, I've been gone over a week."

A worried wrinkle dodged into Buck's forehead. All along he had taken the presence of the Mannings so entirely for granted that the possibility of their having left the ranch never once occurred to him. But now, in a flash, he realized that by this time, for all he knew, they might be back in Chicago. As Bud said, it certainly seemed odd that neither of them had appeared when the posse rode up to the ranch-house. What a fool he had been not to make sure about it. Why hadn't he asked the question outright?

"But I did mention it while we were talking," he thought, trying to reconstruct that brief interview with Mary Thorne. "Hang it all! No, I didn't. I was going to, but she interrupted. But she must have known what I referred to."

Suddenly there came back the vivid recollection of the girl's face as she said good-by. Outwardly cheerful and composed, that faint pallor and the few lines of strain etched about her mouth and chin struck him now with a tremendous significance. She had known what was in his mind, but purposely refrained from revealing the truth for fear of becoming a drag and hamper to him. She was game through and through.

The realization brought a wave of tenderness surging over the man, followed swiftly by a deepening sense of trouble and uneasiness.

"I don't like it at all, Bud," he burst out abruptly. "I wish to thunder we'd found out for sure about those Mannings. If they have gone, one of us at least ought to have stayed."

“Well, of course I’m only guessin’. Quite likely they’re there yet, only it just seemed funny not to see them. But even if she is left alone with only Mrs. Archer, yuh ain’t worryin’ about anythin’ really happenin’ to her, are yuh? It’ll be darn lonesome, an’ all that, but Lynch an’ the whole gang has beat it—”

“How do we know where they have gone?” cut in Stratton curtly. “They had a good hour’s start, and more. It’ll be getting dusk pretty quick. What’s to prevent one or more of ’em circling back by the southeast? Lynch is capable of anything, and after what you’ve just told me—”

Bud’s eyes widened. “But what would he have to gain—”

“Gain?” repeated Buck irritably. “How the devil do I know what’s in that polecat’s mind? He’s quite capable of hiding behind a woman’s skirts. He’s even capable of carrying her off and trying to force her to marry him, or something like that. I’ve half a mind to—”

He broke off, frowning. Bud, now thoroughly alarmed, stared at him uneasily. “You’d better let me go back,” he said quickly. “They’ll need yuh more.”

“I don’t give a damn whether they need me or not,” retorted Buck swiftly. “I’ve got a better idea, though. We’ll hit Las Vegas inside of ten minutes. The ’phone’s still working, isn’t it?”

“It was the last I knew.”

“I’ll take a chance. There’s been nothing to put it out of business. By calling up we’ll know how things stand a whole lot quicker. If she and Mrs. Archer are alone, I’ll chase back at once and you can show Hardenberg the way into the mountains.”

Though Bud’s face showed no particular pleasure in the plan, he made no comment, and they rode on in silence. Presently the sheriff turned and called to Stratton. The trail was spreading out, he said, and growing more and more difficult to follow in the waning light.

“I don’t understand why they rode so far apart,” he said, “unless it was to make it hard for any one to track them. Looks to me, though, as if they were heading straight for that cut into the mountains you told me about. Is it much further off?”

“About a quarter of a mile below the little ’dobe shack we’re coming to,” Stratton answered. “The creek takes a sharp turn to the southeast, and right at the bend you cross and ride straight west into a narrow draw that doesn’t look like it

went anywhere. Further on it twists around and leads into a short cañon that brings you through to a sort of valley lying between the hills. After that everything's plain sailing. It's almost as plain as a regular trail."

"Good," nodded Hardenberg. "Anything to mark the draw?"

Buck thought a minute. "As I remember, there's a low ridge on the north side, and a big clump of mesquite on the right just before you leave the flats."

"Well, you'll be with us to act as guide. I wish we'd had an hour's earlier start, though. It won't be any cinch traveling through these mountains in the dark. Still, at the worst, we can count on Dick Jordan's bunch to nab them as they come out."

Buck nodded. "I'm not sure I can stick along with you much longer," he added briefly. "But Jessup can show you the way quite as well. There seems to be some doubt now about those people I spoke of being still at the ranch."

"Humph! That would mean that Miss Thorne would be there alone?"

"Yes, except for her aunt. I may be worrying unnecessarily, but with a scoundrel like Lynch—"

"You never can tell," finished the sheriff as he hesitated. "That's true enough. We mustn't take any chances. But how—"

"Telephone. There's a line from the ranch-house to Las Vegas camp just ahead." Buck pointed where, through the gathering dusk, the outlines of the adobe shack showed dimly. "If I find there's no one with her, I'll ride back."

"Go to it," nodded the sheriff. "If you don't show up I'll understand. At a pinch I reckon we could find the trail ourselves from your directions."

As Stratton pulled off to the right, he waved his hand and swept onward with the posse. Buck reached the door and swung out of the saddle, flinging the reins over Pete's head. Then he found that Bud had followed him.

"I'm goin' to wait an' hear what yuh find out," the youngster stated resolutely. "I can catch up with 'em easy enough."

"All right."

Buck hastily entered the shack, which was almost pitch-dark. A faint glint of metal came from the telephone, hanging beside one window; and as he swiftly crossed the room and fumbled for the bell, there stirred within him a sudden sense of apprehension that was almost dread.

CHAPTER XXIX

CREEPING SHADOWS

With her back against the veranda pillar, Mary Thorne watched the group of mounted men canter down the slope, splash across the creek, and file briskly through the gate leading to middle pasture. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that, for the most part, her glance followed one of them, and when the erect, jaunty, broad-shouldered figure on the big roan had disappeared, she gave a little sigh.

“He looks better—much better,” she murmured.

Her eyes grew dreamy, and in her mind she saw again that little hidden cañon with its overhanging ledge beneath which the man lay stretched out on his blankets. Somehow, the anxiety and suspense, the heart-breaking worry and weariness of that strange experience had faded utterly. There remained only a very vivid recollection of the touch of her hand against his damp forehead, the feeling of his crisp, dark hair as she pushed it gently back, the look of those long, thick lashes lying so still against his pallid face.

Not seldom she had wished those fleeting moments might have been prolonged. Once or twice she was even a little jealous of Bud Jessup’s ministrations; just as, thinking of him now, she was jealous of his constant nearness to Buck and the manner in which he seemed so intently to share all the other’s plans and projects, and even thoughts.

“Well, anyway,” she said suddenly aloud, “I’m glad Stella’s not here.”

Then, realizing that she had spoken aloud, she blushed and looked hastily around. No one was in sight, but a moment or two later Mrs. Archer appeared on the veranda.

“I thought I heard voices a little while ago,” she said, glancing around. “Have the men come back?”

Mary turned to meet her. “No, dear. That was the—the sheriff and some of his

men.”

“The sheriff!” An expression of anxiety came into Mrs. Archer’s pretty, faded face. “But what has happened? What—?”

“I’m not quite sure; they had no time to explain.” The girl put an arm reassuringly around the older woman’s shoulder. “But they’re after Tex and the other hands. They’ve done something—”

“Ha!” In any other person the sound would have seemed suspiciously like a crow of undisguised satisfaction. “Well, I’m thankful that at last somebody’s shown some common sense.”

“Why, auntie!” Astonished, the girl held her off at arm’s length and stared into her face. “You don’t mean to say you’ve suspected—?”

Mrs. Archer sniffed. “Suspected! Why, for weeks and weeks I’ve been perfectly certain the creature was up to no good. You know I never trusted him.”

“Yes; but—”

“The last straw was his bringing that ridiculous charge against Buck Green,” Mrs. Archer interrupted with unexpected spirit. “That stamped him for what he was; because a nicer, cleaner, better-mannered young man I’ve seldom seen. He could no more have stolen cattle than—than I could.”

A mental picture of her tiny, delicate, fragile-looking aunt engaged in that strenuous and illicit operation brought a momentary smile to Mary Thorne’s lips. Then her face grew serious.

“But you know I didn’t believe it—really,” she protested. “I offered to keep him on if he’d only assure me he wasn’t here for any—any secret reason. But he wouldn’t, and at the time there seemed nothing to do but let him go.”

“I suppose he might have had some other private reason than stealing cattle,” commented Mrs. Archer.

“He had,” returned Mary, suppressing a momentary sense of annoyance that her aunt had shown the greater faith. “As nearly as I can make out, he was here to shadow Tex. As a matter of fact he really wanted to leave the ranch and work from a different direction, so it turned out all right in the end. He thinks it was Tex himself who secretly instigated the cattle-stealing.”

“The villain!” ejaculated Mrs. Archer energetically. “But where has—er—Buck been all this time? Where is he now?”

The girl smiled faintly. "He was here a little while ago. He and Bud are both with the sheriff's posse. They believe the men are heading for the mountains and have gone after them."

Mrs. Archer glanced sharply at her niece, noted a faint flush on the girl's face, and pursed her lips.

"When are they coming back?" she asked, after a little pause.

Mary shrugged her shoulders. "Not until they catch them, I suppose."

"Which certainly won't be to-night. I'm rather surprised at Buck. It seems to me that he ought to have stayed here to look after things, instead of rushing off to chase outlaws."

"It wasn't his fault," defended Mary quickly. "He thought Alf and Stella were here."

"Alf and Stella! Good gracious, child! How could he, when they left four days ago?"

"He didn't know that. He took it for granted they were still here, and I let him think so. They needed him to guide the posse, and I knew if I told him, he'd insist on staying behind. After all, dear, there's nothing for us to worry about. It'll be a bit lonesome to-night, but—"

"Worry! I'm not worrying—about myself." Mrs. Archer regarded her niece with a curiously keen expression that seemed oddly incongruous in that delicate fragile-looking face. "I'm not blind," she went on quickly. "I've noticed what's been going on—the wretch! You're afraid of him, too, I can see, and no wonder. I wish somebody had stayed—Still, we must make the best of it. What are you going to do about the stock?"

"Feed them," said Mary laconically, quelling a little shiver that went over her. "Let's go and do it now."

Together they walked around to the corral, where Mary forked down some hay for the three horses, and filled the sunken water-barrel from the tank. Already shadows were creeping up from the hollows, and the place seemed very still and deserted.

In the kitchen the sense of silent emptiness was even greater, accustomed as they were to the constant presence of Pedro and his wife. The two women did not linger longer than was necessary to fill a tray with supper, which they carried into the living-room. Here Mary closed the door, lit two lamps, and touched a

match to the wood piled up in the big fireplace.

“It’ll make things more cheerful,” she remarked with an attempt at casualness which was not altogether successful. “I don’t see why we shouldn’t heat some water here and make tea,” she added with sudden inspiration.

Mrs. Archer, who liked her cup of tea, made no objections, and Mary sprang up and went back to the kitchen. Filling a saucepan from the pump, she got the tea-caddy out of a cupboard, and then paused in the middle of the room, staring out into the gathering dusk.

Neither doors nor windows in the ranch-house were ever locked, and, save on really cold nights, they were rarely even closed. But now, of a sudden, the girl felt she would be much more comfortable if everything were shut up tight, and setting down the pan and caddy on the table, she went over to the nearest window.

It looked out on the various barns and sheds clustered at the back of the ranch-house. The harness-room occupied the ground floor of the nearest shed, with a low, seldom-entered loft above, containing a single, narrow window without glass or shutters.

As Mary approached the open kitchen window, herself invisible in the shadows of the room, a slight sense of movement in that little square under the eaves of the shed roof drew her glance swiftly upward. To her horror she caught a momentary glimpse of a face framed in the narrow opening. It vanished swiftly—far too swiftly to be recognized. But recognition was not necessary. The mere knowledge that some one was hidden in the loft—had probably been hidden there all along—turned the girl cold and instantly awakened her worst fears.

CHAPTER XXX

LYNCH SCORES

How long she stood there staring fearfully at the empty window of the shed, Mary Thorne had no idea. She seemed frozen and incapable of movement. But at last, with a shiver, she came to herself, and bending out, drew in the heavy wooden shutters and fumbled with the catch. The bolt was stiff from disuse, and her hands shook so that she was scarcely able to thrust it into the socket. Still trembling, she closed and bolted the door and made fast the other windows. Then she paused in the middle of the room, slim fingers clenched tightly together, and heart beating loudly and unevenly.

“What shall I do?” she said aloud in a strained whisper. “What shall I do?”

Her glance sought the short passage, and, through it, the cozy brightness of the living-room.

“I mustn’t let her know,” she murmured.

After a moment more of indecision she stepped into the small room opening off the kitchen, which had been occupied by Pedro and his wife. Having bolted the shutters of the single window, she came back into the kitchen and stood beside the table, making a determined effort for self-control. Suddenly the sound of her aunt’s voice came from the living-room.

“What are you doing, Mary? Can I help you?”

For a second the girl hesitated, nails digging painfully into her palms. Then she managed to find her voice.

“No thanks, dear. I’ll be there in just a minute.” Resolutely she took up the saucepan and caddy and walked slowly toward the lighted doorway. She felt that a glance at her face would probably tell Mrs. Archer that something was wrong, and so, entering the living-room, she went straight over to the fireplace. Kneeling on the hearth, she took the poker and made a little hollow amongst the burning sticks in which she placed the covered saucepan. When she stood up the

heat had burned a convincingly rosy flush into her cheeks.

“I was closing the shutters,” she explained in a natural tone. “While the water’s boiling I think I’ll do the same in the other rooms. Then we’ll feel quite safe and snug.”

Mrs. Archer, who was arranging their supper on one end of the big table, agreed briefly but made no other comment. When Mary had secured the living-room door and windows, she took the four bedrooms in turn, ending in the one whose incongruously masculine appointments had once aroused the curiosity of Buck Green.

How long ago that seemed! She set her candle on the dresser and stared around the room. If only she wasn’t such a helpless little ninny!

“And I’m such a fool I wouldn’t know how to use a revolver if I had it,” thought the girl forlornly. “I don’t even know what I did with Dad’s.”

Then, of a sudden, her glance fell upon the cartridge-belt hanging on the wall, from whose pendant holster protruded the butt of an efficient-looking six-shooter—Stratton’s weapon, which, like everything else in the room, she had left religiously as she found it.

Stepping forward, she took hold of it gingerly and managed to draw it forth—a heavy, thirty-eight Colt, the barrel rust-pitted in a few places, but otherwise in excellent condition. She had no idea how to load it, but presently discovered by peering into the magazine that the shells seemed to be already in place. Then all at once her eyes filled and a choking little sob rose in her throat.

“Oh, if you were only here!” she whispered unevenly.

It would be hard to determine whether she was thinking of Stratton, that dreamlike hero of hers, whose tragic death she had felt so keenly, or of another man who was very much alive indeed. Perhaps she scarcely knew herself. At all events it was only a momentary little breakdown. Pulling herself together, she returned to the living-room, carrying the big six-shooter half hidden by her skirts, and managed to slip it, apparently unseen, on a little stand above which hung the telephone to Las Vegas camp. By this time the water was boiling, and having made tea, she carried the pot back to the big table and sat down opposite Mrs. Archer.

For a minute or two she was busy with the cups and had no occasion to observe her aunt’s expression. Then, chancing to glance across the table, she was dismayed to find the older woman regarding her with searching scrutiny.

“Well?” questioned Mrs. Archer briefly. “What is it?”

Mary stared at her guiltily. “What’s—what?” she managed to parry.

“Why beat about the bush?” retorted her aunt. “Something’s happened to frighten you. I can see that perfectly well. You know how I detest being kept in the dark, so you may as well tell me at once.”

Mary hesitated. “But it—it may not—come to anything,” she stammered. “I didn’t want to—to frighten you—”

“Rubbish!” An odd, delicately grim expression came into the little old lady’s face. “I’d rather be frightened unnecessarily than have something drop on me out of a clear sky. Out with it!”

Then Mary gave in and was conscious of a distinct relief in having a confident.

“It’s only this,” she said briefly. “When I went to close the back kitchen window a little while ago, I saw a—a face looking out of that little window above the harness-room. Some one’s—hiding there.”

For an instant Mrs. Archer’s delicately pretty, faded face turned quite pale. Then she rallied bravely.

“Who—who was it?” she asked in a voice not altogether steady.

“I—don’t know. It disappeared at once. But I’m sure it wasn’t imagination.”

For a moment or two her aunt sat thinking. Then she glanced quickly across the room. “Is that gun loaded?” she asked.

The girl nodded; she had ceased to be surprised at anything. For a space Mrs. Archer regarded her untouched cup of tea thoughtfully. When she looked up a bright spot of pink was glowing in each wrinkled cheek.

“It’s not pleasant, but we must face it,” she said. “It may be Pedro, or even Maria. Both of them are cowards. On the other hand it may be Lynch. There’s no use shutting one’s eyes to possibilities.”

Abruptly she rose and walked quickly into her bedroom, returning in a moment or two with a little chamois case from which she drew a tiny twenty-two caliber revolver, beautifully etched and silver-mounted, with a mother-of-pearl stock.

“Your uncle gave it to me many years ago and showed me how to use it,” she explained, laying it beside her plate. “I’ve never shot it off, but I see no reason why—”

She broke off with a gasp, and both women started and turned pale, as a harsh, metallic rattle rang through the room.

“What is it?” whispered Mary, half rising.

“The telephone! I can’t get used to that strange rattle. Answer it, quickly!”

Springing up, Mary flew across the room and took down the receiver.

“Hello,” she said tremulously. “Who is—*Oh, Buck!*” Her eyes widened and the blood rushed into her face. “I’m so glad! But where are you?... I see. No, they’re not here.... I know I did, but I thought—I wish now I’d told you. We—we’re frightened.... What?... No, not yet; but—but there’s some one hiding in the loft over the harness-room.... I don’t know, but I saw a face at the window.... Yes, everything’s locked up, but—”

Abruptly she broke off and turned her head a little, the blood draining slowly from her face. A sound had come to her which struck terror to her heart. Yet it was a sound familiar enough on the range-land—merely the beat of a horse’s hoofs, faint and far away, but growing rapidly nearer.

“Wait!” she called into the receiver, “Just a—minute.”

Her frightened eyes sought Mrs. Archer and read confirmation in the elder woman’s strained attitude of listening.

“Some one’s coming,” the girl breathed. Suddenly she flung herself desperately at the telephone. “Buck!” she cried. “There’s some one riding up.... I don’t know, but I’m—afraid.... Yes, do come quickly.... What’s that?”

With a little cry she rattled the hook and repeatedly pressed the round button which operated the bell. “Buck! Buck!” she cried into the receiver.

The thud of hoofs came clearly to her now; it was as if the horse was galloping up the slope from the lower gate.

“What’s the matter?” demanded Mrs. Archer, in a hoarse, dry voice.

With a despairing gesture the girl dropped the receiver and turned a face drained of every particle of color.

“The wire’s—dead,” she said hopelessly.

Mrs. Archer caught her breath sharply, but made no other sound. In the silence that followed they could hear the horse pull up just beyond the veranda, and the sound of a man dropping lightly to the ground. Then came very faintly the murmur of voices.

To the two women, standing motionless, with eyes riveted on the door, the pause that followed lengthened interminably. It seemed as if that low, stealthy, sibilant whispering was going on forever. Mrs. Archer held her little pearl-handled toy with a spasmodic grip which brought out a row of dots across her delicate knuckles, rivaling her face in whiteness. Mary Thorne's gray eyes, dilated with emotion, stood out against her pallor like deep wells of black. One clenched hand hung straight at her side; the other rested on the butt of the Colt, lying on the stand below the useless instrument.

Suddenly the tension snapped as the heavy tread of feet sounded across the porch and a hand rattled the latch.

"Open up!" called a harsh, familiar voice.

There was no answer. Mrs. Archer reached out to steady herself against the table. Mary's grip on the Colt tightened convulsively.

"Open up, I tell yuh," repeated the voice. "I ain't aimin' to—hurt yuh."

Then apparently a heavy shoulder thrust against the door, which shook and creaked ominously. Suddenly the girl's slim figure straightened and she brought her weapon around in front of her, holding it with both hands.

"If—if you try to force that door, I—I'll shoot," she called out.

The only answer was an incredulous laugh, and an instant later the man's shoulder struck the panels with a crash that cracked one of them and partly tore the bolt from its insecure fastenings.

Promptly the girl cocked her weapon, shut both eyes, and pulled the trigger. The recoil jerked the barrel up, and the bullet lodged in the ceiling. Before she could recover from the shock, there came another crash, the shattered door swung inward, and Tex Lynch sprang across the threshold.

Again Mary lifted the heavy weapon and tried to nerve herself to fire. But somehow this was different from shooting through a solid wooden door, and she could not bring herself to do it. Mrs. Archer had no such scruples. Her small, delicately-chiseled face was no longer soft and gentle. It had frozen into a white mask of horror, out of which the once-soft eyes blazed with fierce determination. Bending across the table, she leveled her toylike weapon at the advancing outlaw, and by the merest chance sent a bullet flying so close to his head that he ducked instinctively. An instant later Pedro darted through the passage from the kitchen, snatched the weapon from her hand, and flung her roughly into a chair.

Her aunt's half-stifled cry stung Mary like a lash and roused her from the almost hypnotic state in which, wide-eyed and terrified, she had been watching Lynch's swift advance.

"Oh!" she cried furiously. "You—you beast!"

He was within a few feet of her now, and moved by the double impulse of fear and anger, her finger pressed the trigger. But there was no response, and too late the girl realized that she had failed to cock the weapon. In another moment Lynch had wrenched it from her hand.

CHAPTER XXXI

GONE

Motionless in his saddle, save for an occasional restless stamp of his horse, Bud Jessup waited patiently in front of the adobe shack at Las Vegas camp. His face was serious and thoughtful, and his glance was fixed on the open door through which came the broken, indistinguishable murmur of Buck Stratton's voice. Once, thinking he heard an unusual sound, the youngster turned his head alertly and stared westward through the shadows. But a moment later his eyes flashed back to that narrow, black oblong, and he resumed his uneasy pondering as to what Buck might possibly be finding out.

Suddenly he gave a start as Stratton's voice, harsh, startled, came to him distinctly.

"Mary! Mary! Why don't you answer? What's happened?"

The words were punctuated by a continuous rattle, and ended abruptly with the clatter of metal against metal.

"Hell!" rasped Buck, in a hoarse, furious voice with an undercurrent of keen apprehension that made Bud's nerves tingle. "The wire's been cut!"

An instant later he appeared, running. Snatching the reins, he gained the saddle in a single bound, jerked his horse around, and was off across the pasture.

"Come on!" he shouted back over one shoulder. "There's trouble at the ranch."

Bud dug spurs into his cayuse and followed, but it was some minutes before he managed to catch up with his friend.

"What is it?" he cried anxiously. "What's wrong? Have the Mannings—"

"They've gone, as I thought," snapped Stratton. "The two women are alone. But that isn't the worst." A sudden spasm of uncontrolled fury rose in his throat and choked him momentarily. "There's some one hidden in the loft over the harness-room," he managed to finish hoarsely.

Bud stared at him in dismay. “Who the devil—”

“I don’t know. She just got a glimpse of a—a face in the window while she was closing up the kitchen.”

“Do you suppose it’s—Tex?”

“I don’t know,” retorted Buck through his clenched teeth. “What difference does it make, anyhow? Some one hid there for a—a purpose. By God! What fools we were not to make a search!”

“It seemed so darn sure they’d all beat it,” faltered Bud. “Besides, I don’t guess any of us would of thought to look in that loft.”

“Maybe not. It doesn’t matter. We didn’t.” Stratton’s voice was brittle. “But if anything happens—”

“Have they locked up the whole house?” Jessup asked as Stratton paused.

“Yes, but what good’ll that do with two able-bodied men set on getting in? There isn’t a door or shutter that wouldn’t—”

“Two!” gasped Bud. “You didn’t say—”

“Didn’t I? It was just at the end. She was telling me about seeing the face and locking up the house. Then all at once she broke off.” Buck’s tone was calmer now, but it was the hard-won calm of determined will, and every now and then there quivered through it a faint, momentary note that told eloquently of the mingled dread and fury that were tearing his nerves to pieces. “I asked what was the matter and she said to wait a minute. It seemed like she stopped to listen for something. Then all of a sudden she cried out that some one was riding up.”

“It—it might not have been any of the gang,” murmured Bud, voicing a hope he did not feel.

“Who else would be likely to come at this time of night?” demanded Stratton. “Lynch is on the outs with everybody around Perilla. They don’t go near the ranch unless they have to. It couldn’t have been one of Hardenberg’s men; he’s not expecting any one.”

“Did—did she say anything else?” asked Jessup, after a brief pause.

Buck hesitated. “Only that she—was afraid, and wanted us to—come quickly. Then the wire went dead as if it had been cut.”

Silence fell, broken only by the thud of hoofs and the heavy breathing of the two horses. Bud’s slim, lithe figure had slumped a little in the saddle, and his eyes

were fixed unseeingly on the wide, flat sweep of prairie unfolding before them, dim and mysterious under the brilliant stars.

In his mind anxiety, rage, and apprehension contended with a dull, dead hopelessness which lay upon his heart like lead. For something in Buck's tone made him realize in a flash a situation which, strangely, he had never even suspected. He wondered dully why he hadn't ever thought of it before; perhaps because Buck was a new-comer who had seemed to see so little of Mary Thorne. Probably, also, the very friendly manner of Stella Manning had something to do with Jessup's blindness. But his eyes were opened now, thoroughly and effectually, and for a space, how long or short he never knew, he fought out his silent battle.

It ended in a victory. Down in his heart he knew that he had never really had any hope of winning Mary Thorne himself. He had cherished aspirations, of course, and dreamed wonderful dreams; but when it came down to hard actualities, romance did not blind him to the fact that she looked on him merely as a friend and nothing more. Indeed, though they were virtually of the same age, he had been aware at times of an oddly maternal note in her attitude toward him which was discouraging. Still, it was not easy definitely to relinquish all hope and bring himself to write "finis" to the end of the chapter. Indeed, he did not reach that state of mind until, glancing sidewise at his friend, there came to him a sudden, faintly bitter realization of the wide contrast between them, and of how much more Buck had to offer than himself.

Stratton's erect, broad shoulders, the lean length of him, the way he held his head, gave Jessup a curious, unexpected impression of strength and ability and power. Buck's eyes were set straight ahead and his clean-cut profile, clearly visible in the luminous starlight, had a look of sensitiveness and refinement, despite the strength of his jaw and chin and the somberness of his eyes. Bud turned away with a little sigh.

"I never had no chance at all," he thought. "Someway he don't look like a cow-puncher, nor talk quite like one. I wonder why?"

Half a mile further on Buck suddenly broke the prolonged silence.

"I've been thinking it over," he said briefly. "The man on the horse was probably Lynch. He could easily have started off with the rest and then made a circuit around below the ranch-house. If he picked his ground, we'd never notice where he left the others, especially as we weren't looking for anything of the sort."

"Who do you s'pose hid over the harness-room?"

“It might have been Slim, or Kreeger, or even Pedro. The whole thing was certainly a put-up job—damn them!” His voice shook with sudden passion. “Well, we’ll soon know,” he finished, and his mouth clamped shut.

Already the row of cottonwoods that lined the creek was faintly visible ahead, a low, vague mass, darker a little than the background of blue-black sky. Both spurred their jaded horses and a moment or two later pulled up with a jerk at the gate. Before his mount had come to a standstill, Bud was out of his saddle fumbling with the catch. When he swung it open, Stratton dashed through, swiftly crossed the shallow creek, and galloped up the long, easy slope beyond.

A chill struck him as the ranch-house loomed up, ominously black and desolate as any long-deserted dwelling. He had forgotten for an instant the heavy, wooden shutters, and when, with teeth clenched and heart thudding in his throat, he reached the veranda corner, the sight of that yellow glow streaming from the open door gave him a momentary shock of supreme relief.

An instant later he saw the shattered door, and the color left his face. In two strides he crossed the porch and, with fingers tightening about the butt of his Colt, he stared searchingly around the big, brightly-lighted, strangely empty-looking room.

It held but a single occupant. Huddled in a chair on the further side of the long table was Mrs. Archer. Both hands rested on the polished oak, and clutched in her small, wrinkled hands was a heavy, cumbrous revolver, pointed directly at the door. Her white, strained face, stamped with an expression of hopeless tragedy, looked ten years older than when Buck had last seen it. As she recognized him she dropped the gun and tottered to her feet.

“Oh!” she cried, in a sharp, wailing voice. “You! You!”

In a moment Buck had her in his arms, holding her tight as one holds a hurt or frightened child. Mechanically he soothed her as she clung to him, that amazing self-control, which had upheld her for so long, snapping like a taut rope when the strain becomes too great. But all the while his eyes—wide, smoldering eyes, filled with a mingling of pity, of dread questioning and furious passion—swept the room searchingly.

Over the little lady’s bowed gray head his glance took in swiftly a score of details—the dead fire, the dangling receiver of the useless telephone, a little pearl-handled revolver lying in a far corner as if it had been flung there, an upset chair. Suddenly his gaze halted at the edge of the shattered door and a faint tremor shook his big body. A comb lay on the floor there—a single comb of

tortoise-shell made for a woman's hair. But it was a comb he knew well. And as his eyes met Bud's, staring from the doorway at the strange scene, they were the eyes of a man tortured.

CHAPTER XXXII

BUCK RIDES

Presently Mrs. Archer released her spasmodic grip on Stratton's flannel shirt and fumbled for her handkerchief.

"I'm a fool to—to waste time like this," she faltered, dabbing her eyes with the crumpled square of cambric.

"I think you're rather wonderful," returned Buck gently. He helped her to a chair. "Sit down here, and when you're able, tell us just what—happened."

Her hands dropped suddenly to her lap and she looked up at him with wide, blazing eyes. Bud had approached and stood on the other side of the chair, listening intently.

"It was that creature Lynch," she said in a voice that trembled a little with anger and indignation. "He was the one who rode up on horseback. It was Pedro who was hidden in the loft. Mary told you about that before the telephone went dead."

"The wire was cut," muttered Stratton. "That must have been the greaser's work."

She gave a quick nod. "Very likely. He's equal to anything. They met just outside the door and talked together. It seemed as if they'd never leave off whispering. Mary was over by the telephone and I stood here. She had that revolver, which she'd found in the other room." Her eyes indicated the weapon on the table, and Buck was conscious of a queer thrill as he recognized it as his own. "We waited. At last the—the beast pounded at the door and called to us to open. We didn't stir. Then he threw himself against the door, which cracked. Mary cried out that if he tried to force it, she'd shoot. The creature only laughed, and when she did fire, the bullet went wild."

She paused an instant, her fingers twitching at the handkerchief clasped in her lap.

“And then he broke in?” questioned Buck, in a hard voice.

She nodded. “Yes. I fired once, but it did no good. Before I could shoot again, Pedro came up from behind and snatched the revolver away. He must have forced his way into the kitchen. He threw me into a chair, while Lynch went after Mary.”

Buck’s lips were pressed tightly together; his face was hard as stone. “Didn’t she fire again?”

“No, I don’t know why. I couldn’t see very well. Something may have gone wrong with the revolver; perhaps she had scruples. I should have had none.” Mrs. Archer’s small, delicate face looked almost savage. “I’d have gloried in shooting the brute. At any rate, she didn’t, and he took the weapon away from her and flung it on the table.”

Again she hesitated briefly, overcome by her emotions. Stratton’s face was stony, save for a momentary ripple of the muscles about his mouth.

“And then?” he questioned.

“I—I tried to go to her, but Pedro held me in the chair.” Mrs. Archer drew a long, quivering breath. “Lynch had her by the wrist; I heard him say something about not hurting her; and then he said, quite plainly, that since she’d got him in this mess, she’d have to get him out. I couldn’t understand, but all at once I realized that if they did—take her away, they’d probably tie me up, or something, to prevent my giving the alarm, and so I pretended to faint.”

She lifted her handkerchief to her lips and let it fall again. “It wasn’t easy to lie still in that chair and see the dear child—being dragged away. But I knew I’d be quite helpless against those two villains. She—she didn’t struggle much; perhaps she hadn’t the strength.” The old lady’s voice shook, and she began again plucking nervously at her handkerchief. “The minute they were out of the door, I got up and followed them. I thought perhaps I might be able to see which way they went. It was pitch-dark, and I crept along beside the house to the corner. I could just see their outlines over by the corral. Pedro was saddling two horses. When he had done, that creature, Lynch, made Mary mount and got on his own horse, which he had been leading. Then the two men began to talk. I couldn’t hear everything, but it sounded as if they were arranging to meet somewhere. They gave the name of a place.”

Her eyes searched Buck’s face with a troubled, anxious scrutiny. “So many Arizona towns have a foreign sound, but somehow I—I’ve never even heard of

Santa Clara.”

“Santa Clara!” burst out Bud. “Why, that’s over in Sonora. If he should get her across the border—”

Mrs. Archer sprang to her feet and caught Stratton by one arm. “Mexico!” she cried hysterically. “Oh, Buck! You must save her from that creature! You mustn’t let him—”

“He sha’n’t. Don’t worry,” interrupted Stratton harshly. “Tell me as quickly as you can what else you heard. Was there anything said about the way he meant to take?”

Mrs. Archer clenched her small hands and fought bravely for self-control. “He said he—he might be delayed. He didn’t dare take the road through Perilla, and the trail through the mountains was probably blocked by the sheriff.” Her forehead wrinkled thoughtfully. “He said the only way was to—to go through the pass and turn south along the edge of the T-T land. That—that was all.”

Buck’s face lighted with somber satisfaction. “It’s a good bit,” he said briefly. “When they started off did you notice which way they went?”

“Pedro rode past the house toward the lower gate. Lynch went straight down the slope toward the bunk-house. He was leading Mary’s horse. I ran a little way after them and saw them cross the creek this side of the middle pasture gate.”

Buck shot a glance at Jessup. “The north pasture!” he muttered. “He knows there’ll be no one around there, and it’ll be the safest way to reach the T-T trail. I’ll saddle a fresh cayuse and be off.” He turned to Mrs. Archer. “Don’t you worry,” he said, with a momentary touch on her shoulder that was at once a caress and an assurance. “I’ll bring her back.”

“You must!” she cried. “They said something—It isn’t possible that he can—force her to—to marry him?”

“A lot of things are possible, but he won’t have the chance,” replied Stratton grimly. “Bud, you stay here with Mrs. Archer, and I’ll—”

“Oh, no!” protested the old lady. “You must both go. I don’t need any one. I’m not afraid of being here alone. No one will come—now.”

“Why couldn’t I go after Hardenberg and get him to take a bunch around the south end of the hills,” suggested Jessup quickly. “They might be able to head him off.”

“All right,” nodded Stratton curtly. “Go to it.”

Inaction had suddenly grown intolerable. He would have agreed to anything save the suggestion that he delay his start even for another sixty seconds. With a hurried good-by to Mrs. Archer, he hastened from the room, swung into his saddle, and rode swiftly around to the corral. A brief search through the darkness showed him that only a single horse remained there. He lost not a moment in roping the animal, and was transferring his saddle from Pete, when Bud appeared.

“You’ll have to catch a horse from the *remuda*,” he said briefly. “I’ve taken the last one. Turn Pete into the corral, will you, and give him a little feed.” Straightening up, he turned the stirrup, mounted swiftly, and spurred his horse forward. “So-long,” he called back over one shoulder.

The thud of hoofs drowned Bud’s reply, and as the night closed about him, Buck gave a faint sigh of relief. There was a brief delay at the gate, and then, heading northwest, he urged the horse to a canter.

He was taking a chance in following this short cut through the middle pasture, but he felt he had no choice. To attempt to trail Lynch would be futile, and if he waited until dawn, the scoundrel would be hopelessly in the lead. He knew of only one pass through the mountains to T-T ground, and for this he headed, convinced that it was also Lynch’s goal, and praying fervently that the scoundrel might not change his mind.

He was under no delusions as to the task which lay before him. Lynch would be somewhat handicapped by the presence of the girl, especially if he continued to lead her horse. But he had a good hour’s start, and once in the mountains the handicap would vanish. The chase was likely to be prolonged, particularly as Lynch knew every foot of the mountain trail and the country beyond, which Stratton had never seen.

But the presence of difficulties only strengthened Buck’s resolution and confidence. As he sped on through the luminous darkness, the cool night wind brushing his face, a seething rage against Tex Lynch dominated him. Now and then the thought of Mary Thorne came to torture him. Vividly he pictured the scene at the ranch-house which Mrs. Archer had described, imagining the girl’s fear and horror and despair, then and afterward, with a realism which made him wince. But always his mind flashed back to the man who was to blame for it all, and with savage curses he pledged himself to a reckoning.

And so, with mind divided between alternating spasms of tenderness and fury, he

came at last to the further side of middle pasture and dismounted to let down the fence. It was characteristic of the born and bred ranchman that instead of riding swiftly on and letting the cut wires dangle, he automatically obeyed one of the hard and fast rules of the range and fastened them behind him. He did not pause again until he reached the little sheltered nook in the face of the high cliffs, out of which led the trail.

Had those two passed yet, or were they still out there somewhere in the sandy wastes of north pasture? He wondered as he reined in his horse. He scarcely dared hope that already he could have forestalled the crafty Lynch, but it was important to make sure. And so, slipping out of the saddle, he flung the reins over the roan's head and, walking forward a few steps, lit a match and searched the ground carefully for any signs.

Three matches had been consumed before he found what he was looking for—the fresh prints of two horses leading toward the trail. Hastily returning to his cayuse, he swung into the saddle and headed the roan toward the grade. They were ahead of him, then; but how far?

It was impossible to make any speed along the rough uncertainties of this rocky trail, but Buck wasted no time. Down in the further hollow he turned aside to the spring, not knowing when he would again find water for his horse. He did not dismount, and as the roan plunged velvet nozzle into the spring, a picture rose in Buck's mind of that other day—how long ago it seemed!—when he himself, sagging painfully in the saddle, had sucked the water with as great an eagerness out of a woman's soggy Stetson, and then, over the limp brim, gazed gratefully into a pair of tender hazel eyes which tried in vain to mask anxiety beneath a surface of lightness.

He bit his lips and struck the saddle-horn fiercely with one clenched fist. When the horse had finished drinking, he turned him swiftly and, regaining the trail, pushed on feverishly at reckless speed.

About an hour later the first pale signs of dawn began to lighten the darkness. Slowly, gradually, almost imperceptibly, a cold gray crept into the sky, blotting out the stars. Little by little the light strengthened, searching out shadowy nooks and corners, revealing this peak or that, widening the horizon, until at length the whole, wide, tumbled mass of peak and precipice, of cañon, valley, and tortuous, twisted mountain trail lay revealed in all its grim, lifeless, forbidding desolation.

From his point of vantage at the summit of a steep grade, Buck halted and stared ahead with a restless, keen eagerness. He could see the trail curving over the

next rise, and farther still he glimpsed a tiny patch of it rounding the shoulder of a hill. But it was empty, lifeless; and as he loosed the reins and touched the roan lightly with a spur, Stratton's face grew blank and hard again.

From somewhere amongst the rocks the long-drawn, quavering howl of a coyote sounded mournfully.

CHAPTER XXXIII

CARRIED AWAY

The same dawn unrolled before the eyes of a man and a girl, riding southward along the ragged margin of the T-T ranch. Westward stretched the wide, rolling range-land, empty at the moment of any signs of life. And somehow, for the very reason that one expected something living there, it seemed even more desolate than the rough, broken country bordering the mountains on the other side.

That, at least, was Mary Thorne's thought. Emerging from the mountain trail just as dawn broke, her eyes brightened as she took in the flat, familiar country, even noting a distant line of wire fence, and for the first time in many hours despair gave place to sudden hope. Where there was range-land there must be cattle and men to tend them, and her experience with Western cow-men had not been confined to those of Lynch's type. Him she knew now, to her regret and sorrow, to be the great exception. The majority were clean-cut, brave, courteous, slow of speech, perhaps, but swift in action; simple of mind and heart—the sort of man, in short, to whom a woman in distress might confidently turn for help.

But presently, as the rising sun, gilding the peaks that towered above her, emphasized the utter emptiness of those sweeping pastures, the light died out of her eyes and she remembered with a sinking heart the blackleg scourge which had so recently afflicted the T-T outfit. There had been much discussion of it at the Shoe-Bar, and now she recalled vaguely hearing that it had first broken out in these very pastures. Doubtless, as a method of prevention, the surviving stock had been moved elsewhere, and her chances for help would be as likely in the midst of a trackless desert as here.

The reaction made her lips quiver and there swept over her with renewed force that wave of despair which had been gaining strength all through those interminable black hours. She had done her best to combat it. Over and over again she told herself that the situation was far from hopeless. Something must happen. Some one—mostly she thought of Buck, though she did not name him

even to herself—would come to her aid. It was incredible that in this day and generation a person could be successfully carried off even by one as crafty, resourceful, and unscrupulous as Tex Lynch. But in spite of all her reasoning there remained in the back of Mary's mind a feeling of cold horror, born of those few sentences she had overheard while Pedro was saddling the horses. Like a poisonous serpent, it reared its ugly head persistently, to demolish in an instant her most specious arguments. The very thought of it now filled her with the same fear and dread that had overwhelmed her when the incredible words first burned into her consciousness, and made her glance with a sudden, sharp terror at the man beside her. She met a stare from his bold, heavy-lidded eyes that sent the blood flaming into her cheeks.

“Well?” queried Lynch, smiling. “Feelin’ better, now it’s mornin’?”

The girl made no answer. Hastily averting her eyes, she rode on in silence, lips pressed together and chin a little tilted.

“Sulking, eh?” drawled Lynch. “What’s the good? Yuh can’t keep that sort of thing up forever. After we’re—married—”

He paused significantly. The girl’s lip quivered but she set her teeth into it determinedly. Presently, with an effort, she forced herself to speak.

“Aren’t you rather wasting time trying to—to frighten me with that sort of rubbish?” she asked coldly. “In these days marriage isn’t something that can be forced.”

The man’s laugh was not agreeable. “Oh, is that so?” he inquired. “You’re likely to learn a thing or two before long, I’ll say.”

His tone was so carelessly confident, so entirely assured, that in an instant her pitiful little pretense of courage was swept away.

“It isn’t so!” she cried, turning on him with wide eyes and quivering lips. “You couldn’t— There isn’t a—real clergyman who’d do—do such a thing. No one could force me to—to— Why, I’d rather die than—”

She paused, choking. Lynch shrugged his shoulders.

“Oh, no, yuh wouldn’t,” he drawled. “Dyin’ is mighty easy to talk about, but when yuh get right down to it, I reckon you’d change yore mind. I don’t see why yore so dead set against me,” he added. “I ain’t so hard to look at, am I? An’ with me as yore husband, things will—will be mighty different on the ranch. You’ll never have to pinch an’ worry like yuh do now.”

Tears blinded her, and, turning away quickly, she stared unseeing through a blurring haze, fighting desperately for at least a semblance of self-control. He was so confident, so terribly sure of himself! What if he could do the thing he said? She did not see how such a ghastly horror could be possible; but then, what did she know of conditions in the place to which he was taking her?

Suddenly, as she struggled against that overpowering weight of misery and despair, her thoughts flew longingly to another man, and for an instant she seemed to look into his eyes—whimsical, a little tender, with a faint touch of suppressed longing in their clear gray depths.

“Buck! Oh, Buck!” she yearned under her breath.

Then of a sudden she felt a hand on her bridle and became aware that Lynch was speaking.

“We’ll stop here for a bit,” he informed her briefly. “You’d better get down and stretch yoreself.”

She looked at him, a little puzzled. “I’m quite comfortable as I am,” she returned stiffly.

“I expect yuh are,” he said meaningly. “But I ain’t takin’ any chances.” With a wave of his hand he indicated a steepish knoll that rose up on their left. “I’m goin’ up there to look around an’ see what the country looks like ahead,” he explained. “I’ll take both cayuses along, jest in case yuh should take the notion to go for a little canter. Sabe?”

Without a word she slipped out of the saddle and, moving to one side, listlessly watched him gather up the reins of her horse and ride toward the foot of the hill. Its lower levels sloped easily, and in spite of the handicap of the led horse, who pulled back and seemed reluctant to follow, Lynch took it with scarcely a pause.

There came a point, however, about half way to the summit, from which he would have to proceed on foot. Lynch dismounted briskly enough and tied both horses to a low bush. Then, instead of starting directly on the brief upward climb, he turned and glanced back to where Mary stood.

That glance, indicating doubt and suspicion, set the girl suddenly to wondering. Ever so little her slim figure straightened, losing its discouraged droop. Was it possible? He seemed to think so, or why had he looked back so searchingly? Guardedly her glance swept to right and left. A hundred feet or so to the south a spur of the little hill thrust out, hiding what lay beyond. If she could reach it, might there not possibly be some spot in all that jumble of rocks and gullies

where she at least might hide?

Filled with a new wild hope; realizing that nothing she might do could make her situation worse, Mary's eyes returned to the climbing man, and she watched him narrowly. Little by little, when his back was toward her, she edged toward the spur. She told herself that when he reached the top she would make a dash, but in the end her tense, raw nerves played her false. Quivering with eagerness, she held herself together until he was within twenty feet or more of the summit, and then her self-control snapped abruptly.

She had covered scarcely a dozen yards over the rough ground when a hoarse shout of surprise came from Lynch, followed by the clatter of rolling stones as he plunged back down the hill. But she did not turn her head; there was no time or need. Running as she had never run before, she rounded the spur and with a gasp of dismay saw that the cliffs curved back abruptly, forming an intervening open space that seemed to extend for miles, but which, in reality, was only a few hundred yards across.

Still she did not halt, but sped on gamely, heading for the mouth of the nearest gully. Presently the thud of hoofs terrified her, but stung her to even greater effort. Nearer the hoofs-beats came, and nearer still. Breathless, panting, she knew now she could never reach the gully. The realization sent her heart sinking like a lead plummet, but fear drove her blindly on. Suddenly the bulk of a horse loomed beside her and a man's easy, sneering laugh bit into her soul like vitriol. An instant later Lynch leaped from his saddle and caught her around the waist.

"Yuh would, would yuh?" he cried, gazing down into her flushed, frightened face. "Tried to shake me, eh?"

For a moment he held her thus, devouring her with his eyes, holding the bridles of both horses in his free hand. Then all at once he laughed again, hatefully, and crushing her to him, he kissed her, roughly, savagely—kissed her repeatedly on the lips and cheeks and throat.

Mary cried out once and tried to struggle. Then of a sudden her muscles relaxed and she lay limply in his arms, eyes closed, wishing that she might die, or, better yet, that some supreme force would suddenly strike the creature dead.

How long she lay there shuddering with disgust and loathing, she did not know. It seemed an eternity before she realized that his lips no longer touched her, and opening her eyes she was startled at the sight of his face.

It was partly turned away from her as he stared southward across the flats. His

eyes were wide, incredulous, and filled with a mingling of anger and dismay. In another moment he jerked her roughly to her feet, dragged her around to the side of her horse, and fairly flung her into the saddle. Vaulting into his own, he spurred the beast savagely and rode back toward the out-thrust spur at a gallop, dragging the unwilling Freckles with him.

Gripping the saddle-horn to keep her precarious seat, Mary yet found time for a hurried backward glance before she was whisked out of sight of that wide stretch of open country to the south. But that glance was enough to make her heart leap. Dots—moving dots which she had no difficulty in recognizing as horsemen—were sweeping northward along the edge of the breaks. Who they were she neither knew nor cared. It was enough that they were men. Her eyes sparkled, and a wild new hope flamed up within her, even though she was being carried swiftly away from them.

Once in the shelter of the spur, Lynch did not halt but rode on at full speed, heading northward. For half a mile or so the thudding hoof-beats of the two horses alone broke the silence. Then, as their advance opened up a fresh sweep of country, Lynch jerked his mount to a standstill with a suddenness that raised a cloud of dust about them.

“Hell!” he rasped, staring from under narrowing lids.

For full half a minute he sat motionless, his face distorted with baffled fury and swiftly growing fear. Then his eyes flashed toward the hills on the right and swept them searchingly. A second later he had turned his cayuse and was speeding towards a narrow break between two spurs, keeping a tight hold on the girl’s bridle.

“You try any monkey tricks,” he flung back over one shoulder, “and I’ll—kill yuh.”

Mary made no answer, but the savage ferocity of his tone made her shiver, and she instantly abandoned the plan she had formed of trying, by little touches of hand and heel, to make Freckles still further hamper Lynch’s actions. Through the settling dust-haze she had seen the cause of his perturbation—a single horseman less than a mile away galloping straight toward them—and felt that her enemy was cornered. But the very strength of her exultation gave her a passionate longing for life and happiness, and she realized vividly the truth of Lynch’s callous, sneering words, that when one actually got down to it, it was not an easy thing to die. She must take no chances. Surely it could be only a question of a little time now before she would be free.

But presently her high confidence began to fade. With the manner of one on perfectly familiar ground, Lynch rode straight into the break between the rocks, which proved to be the entrance to a gully that widened and then turned sharply to the right. Here he stopped and ordered Mary to ride in front of him.

“You go ahead,” he growled, flinging her the reins. “Don’t lose any time, neither.”

Without question she obeyed, choosing the way from his occasional, tersely flung directions. This led them upward, slowly, steadily with many a twist and turn, until at length, passing through a narrow opening in the rocks, Mary came out suddenly on a ledge scarcely a dozen feet in width. On one side the cliffs rose in irregular, cluttered masses, too steep to climb. On the other was a precipitous drop into a cañon of unknown depth.

“Get down,” ordered Lynch, swinging out of his saddle.

As she slid to the ground he handed her his bridle-reins.

“Take the horses a ways back an’ hold ’em,” he told her curtly. “An’ remember this: Not a peep out of yuh, or it’ll be yore last. Nobody yet’s double-crossed me an’ got away with it, an’ nobody ain’t goin’ to—not even a woman. That cañon’s pretty deep, an’ there’s sharp stones a-plenty at the bottom.”

White-faced and tight-lipped, she turned away from him without a word and led the two horses back to the point he indicated. The ledge, which sloped sharply upward, was cluttered with loose stones, and she moved slowly, avoiding these with instinctive caution and trying not to glance toward the precipice. A dozen feet away she paused, holding the horses tightly by their bridles and pressing herself against the lathered neck of Freckles, who she knew was steady. Then she glanced back and caught her breath with a swift, sudden intake.

Kneeling close to the opening, but a little to one side, Lynch was whirling the cylinder of his Colt. Watching him with fascinated horror, Mary saw him break the weapon, closely inspect the shells, close it again, and test the trigger. Then, revolver gripped in right hand, he settled himself into a slightly easier position, eyes fixed on the opening and head thrust a little forward in an attitude of listening.

Only too well she guessed his purpose. He was waiting in ambush to “get” that solitary horseman they had seen riding from the north. Whether or not he had come here for the sole purpose of luring the other to his death, Mary had no notion. But she could see clearly that once this stranger was out of the way,

Lynch would at least have a chance to penetrate into the mountains before the others from the south arrived to halt him.

Slowly, interminably the minutes ticked away as the girl stood motionless, striving desperately to think of something she might do to prevent the catastrophe. If only she had some way of knowing when the stranger was near she might cry out a warning, even at the risk of Lynch's violence. But thrust here in the background as she was, the unknown was likely to come within range of Lynch's gun before she even knew of his approach.

Suddenly, out of the dead silence, the clatter of a pebble struck on the girl's raw nerves and made her wince. She saw the muscles of Lynch's back stiffen and the barrel of his Colt flash up to cover the narrow entrance to the ledge. For an instant she hesitated, choked by the beating of her heart. Should she cry out? Was it the man really coming? Her dry lips parted, and then all at once a curious, slowly moving object barely visible above the rocky shoulder that sheltered Lynch, startled her and kept her silent.

In that first flash she had no idea what it was. Then abruptly the truth came to her. It was the top of a man's Stetson. The ledge sloped upward, and where she stood it was a good two feet higher than at the entrance. A man was riding up the outer slope and, remembering the steepness of it, Mary knew that, in a moment, more of him would come into view before he became visible to Lynch.

White-faced, dry-lipped, she waited breathlessly. Now she could see the entire hat. A second later she glimpsed the top of an ear, a bit of forehead, a sweeping look of dark-brown hair—and her heart died suddenly within her.

The man was Buck Green!

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE FIGHT ON THE LEDGE

In that instant of supreme horror, Mary Thorne found time to be thankful that terror struck her momentarily dumb. For now, with lips parted and a cry of warning trembling there, she saw that it was too late. Like a pointer freezing to the scent, Lynch's whole body had stiffened; one hand gripped the leveled Colt, a finger caressed the trigger. At this juncture a cry would almost surely bring that tiny, muscular contraction which might be fatal.

From behind the ledge Buck's hat had disappeared, and a faint creak of saddle-leather told the girl that he had dismounted and by so doing must have moved a trifle out of range.

Sick with horror and desperation, the girl's eye fell upon a stone lying at her feet—a jagged piece of granite perhaps twice the size of a baseball. In a flash she dropped the bridle-reins and, bending, caught it up stealthily. Freckles pricked his ears forward, but with a fleeting, imploring touch of one hand against his sweaty neck, Mary steadied herself for a moment, slowly drew back her arm, and, with a fervent, silent prayer for strength, she hurled the stone.

It grazed Lynch's face and struck his wrist with a force that jerked up the barrel of the revolver. The spurt of flame, the sharp crack of the shot, the clatter of the Colt striking the edge of the precipice, all seemed to the girl to come simultaneously. A belated second afterward Lynch's furious curses came to her. With dilated eyes she saw him snatch frantically at the sliding weapon, and as it toppled out of sight into the cañon barely an inch ahead of his clutching, striving fingers, she thrilled with sudden fierce joy.

"Curse you!" he frothed, springing up and rushing at her. "You—"

"Buck!" she screamed. "Quick! His gun's gone! He—"

A blow from his fist struck her mouth and flung her backward against the horse. Half fainting, she saw Freckles lunge over her shoulder and heard the vicious

click of his teeth snapping together. But Lynch, ducking out of reach of the angry horse, caught Mary about the waist and dragged her toward the precipice.

Involuntarily she closed her eyes. When she opened them again, stirred by the curious silence and the sudden cessation of all movement, she found herself staring dazedly into the face of Buck Green.

He stood very quietly just inside the narrow entrance to the ledge, not more than ten feet from her. In one hand was a six-shooter; the other hung straight at his side, the fingers tightly clenched. As he met her bewildered glance, his eyes softened tenderly and the corners of his lips curved in a momentary, reassuring smile. Then abruptly his face froze again.

“Yuh take another step an’ down she’ll go,” said a hoarse voice close to the girl’s ear.

It was Lynch; and Mary, her senses clearing, knew whose hands gripped her so tightly that she could scarcely breathe. Glancing sidewise, she hastily averted her eyes. She was standing within six inches of the edge of the precipice. For the first time she could look down into those sheer depths, and even that hurried glimpse made her shiver.

“Well, I admit you’ve got the bulge on me, as it were.” Buck’s voice suddenly broke the silence. “Still, I don’t see how you’re going to get out of this hole. You can’t stand like this forever.”

Mary stared at him, amazed at his cool, drawling, matter-of-fact tone. She was still more puzzled to note that he seemed to be juggling with his revolver in a manner which seemed, to say the least, extraordinarily careless.

“I can stand here till I get tired,” retorted Lynch. “After that— Well, I’d as soon end up down there as get a bullet through my ribs. One thing, I wouldn’t go alone.”

“Suppose I offered to let you go free if you give up Miss Thorne?” Stratton asked with sudden earnestness.

“Offer? Hell! Yuh can’t fool me with that kind of talk. Not unless yuh hand over yore gun, that is. Do that, an’ I might consider the proposition—not otherwise.”

Buck hesitated, his eyes flashing from the weapon he whirled so carelessly between his fingers to Lynch, whose eyes regarded him intently over the girl’s shoulder.

“That would be putting an awful lot of trust in you,” he commented. “Once you

had the gun, what's to prevent you from drilling me—Oh, damn!”

He made a sudden, ineffectual grab at the gun, which had slipped from his fingers, and missed. As the weapon clattered against the rocks, Lynch's covetous glance followed it involuntarily. What happened next was a bewildering whirl of violent, unexpected action.

To Mary it seemed as if Buck cleared the space between them in a single amazing leap. He landed with one foot slipping on the ragged edge of the precipice, and apparently threw his whole weight sidewise against Lynch and the girl he held. Just how it happened she did not know, but in another moment Mary found herself freed from those hateful, gripping hands and flung back against her horse, while at her feet the two men grappled savagely.

Over and over on the narrow confines of the sloping ledge they struggled fiercely, heaving, panting, with muscles cracking, each seemingly possessed with a grim determination to thrust the other into the abyss. Now Buck was uppermost; again Lynch, by some clever trick, tore himself from Stratton's hold to gain a momentary advantage.

Like one meshed in the thralls of some hateful nightmare, the girl crouched against her horse, her face so still and white and ghastly that it might well have been some clever sculptor's bizarre conception of "Horror" done in marble. Only her eyes seemed to live. Wide, dilated, glittering with an unnatural light, they shifted constantly, following the progress of those two writhing bodies.

Once, when Lynch's horse snorted and moved uneasily, she caught his bridle and quieted him with a soothing word, her voice so choked and hoarse that she scarcely knew it. Again, as the men rolled toward the outer side of the ledge and seemed for a moment almost to overhang the precipice, she gave a smothered cry and darted forward, moved by some wild impulse to fling her puny strength into the scale against the outlaw.

But with a heave of his big body, Buck saved himself as he had done more than once before, and the struggle was resumed. Back and forth they fought, over and over around that narrow space, until Mary was filled with the dazed feeling that it had been going on for ever, that it would never end.

But not for an instant did she cease to follow every tiny variation of the fray, and of a sudden she gave another cry. Gripped in a fierce embrace, the two men rolled toward the entrance to the ledge, and all at once Mary saw one of Lynch's hands close over and instantly seize the revolver Buck had dropped there.

Instantly she darted forward and tried to wrest it from his grasp. Finding his strength too great, she straightened swiftly and lifting one foot, brought her riding boot down fiercely with all her strength on Lynch's hand. With a smothered grunt his fingers laxed, and she caught up the weapon and stepped quickly back, wondering, if Lynch came uppermost, whether she would dare to try to shoot him.

No scruples now deterred her. These had vanished utterly, and with them fear, nervousness, fatigue, and every thought of self. For the moment she was like the primitive savage, willing to do anything on earth to save—her man! But so closely were the two men entwined that she was afraid if she shot at Lynch the bullet might injure Buck.

Once more the fight veered close to the precipice. Lynch was again uppermost; and, whether by his greater strength, or from some injury Buck had sustained against the rocks, the girl was seized by a horrible conviction that he had the upper hand. Knees gripping Stratton about the body, hands circling his throat, Lynch, apparently oblivious to the blows rained on his chest and neck, was slowly but surely forcing his opponent over the ragged margin of the ledge. It was at this instant that the frantic girl discovered that her weapon had suffered some damage when it fell and was quite useless.

Already Buck's head overhung the precipice, his face a dark, strangled red. Flinging the revolver from her, Mary rushed forward and began to beat Lynch wildly with her small, clenched fists.

But she might as effectually have tried to move a rooted tree, and with a strangled cry, she wound her fingers in his coarse black hair and strove with all her strength to drag Lynch back.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE DEAD HEART

Vaguely, as of a sound coming from far distances, the crack of a revolver-shot penetrated to the girl's numbed brain. It did not surprise her. Indeed, it roused only a feeling of the mildest curiosity in one whose nerves had been strained almost to the breaking-point. When Lynch, with a hoarse cry, toppled back against her, she merely stepped quickly to one side, and an instant later she was on her knees beside Stratton.

"Buck!" she sobbed. "Oh, Buck!" clutching at him as if from some wild fear that he would topple into the abyss.

Hands suddenly put her gently to one side, and some one dragged Stratton from his dangerous position and supported him against an upraised knee. It was Bud Jessup, and behind him loomed the figures of Sheriff Hardenberg and several of his men.

Mary's glance noted them briefly, incuriously, returning anxiously to the man beside her. His eyes were open now, and he was sucking in the air in deep, panting gulps.

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"How yuh feelin'?" asked Bud briefly.

"All right—get my breath," mumbled Buck.

"Yuh hurt any place?" Jessup continued, after a brief pause.

"Not to speak of," returned Stratton in a stronger tone. "When I first jumped for the cuss, I hit my head the devil of a crack, and—pretty near went out. But that don't matter—now."

His eyes sought the girl's and dwelt there, longingly, caressingly. There was tribute in their depths, appreciation, and something stronger, more abiding which brought a faint flush into her tired face and made her heart beat faster. Presently, when he staggered to his feet and took a step or two toward her, she felt no

shame in meeting him half way. Quite as naturally as his arm slipped around her shoulders, her lifted hands rested against the front of his flannel shirt, torn into ribbons and stained with grime.

“For a little one,” he murmured, looking down into her eyes, “you’re some spunky fighter, believe me!”

She flushed deeper and her lids drooped. Of a sudden Sheriff Hardenberg spoke up briskly:

“That was a right nice shot, kid. You got him good.”

He was standing beside the body sprawling on the ground, and the words had scarcely left his lips when Lynch’s eyes opened slowly.

“Yes—yuh got me,” he mumbled.

Slowly his glance swept the circle of faces until it rested finally on the man and girl standing close together. For a long moment he stared at them silently, his pale lips twitching. Then all at once a look of cunning satisfaction swept the baffled fury from his smoldering eyes.

“Yuh got me,” he repeated in a stronger voice. “Looks like yuh got her, too. Maybe yuh think you’ve gobbled up the ranch, likewise, an’—an’ everything. That’s where yuh get stung.”

He fell to coughing suddenly, and for a few minutes his great body was racked with violent paroxysms that brought a bright crimson stain to the sleeve he flung across his mouth. But all the while his eyes, full of strange venomous triumph, never once left Stratton’s face.

“Yuh see,” he choked out finally, “the ranch—ain’t—hers.”

He paused, speechless; and Mary, looking down on him, felt merely that his brain was wandering and found room in her heart to be a little sorry.

“Why ain’t it hers?” demanded Bud with youthful impetuosity. “Her father left it to her, an’—”

“It wasn’t his to—to leave. He stole it.” Lynch’s voice was weaker, but his eyes still glowed with hateful triumph. “He forged the deed—from—from papers—Stratton left with him—when he went—to war.” He moistened his dry lips with his tongue. “When Stratton was—killed—he didn’t leave—no kin—to make trouble, an’ Thorne—took a chance.”

His voice faltered, ceased. Mary stared at him dumbly, a slow, oppressive dread

creeping into her heart. Little forgotten things flashed back into her mind. Her father's financial reverses, his reticence about the acquisition of the Shoe-Bar, the strange hold Lynch had seemed to have on him, rose up to torment her. Suddenly she glanced quickly at Buck for reassurance.

"It isn't so!" she cried. "It can't be. My father—"

Slowly the words died on her lips. There was love, tenderness, pity in the man's eyes, but no—denial!

"Ain't it, though?" Lynch spoke in a labored whisper; his eyes were glazing. "Yuh thinks—I'm—loco. I—ain't. It's—gospel truth. Yuh find Quinlan, the—the witness. No, Quinlan's dead. It's—it's—Kaylor. Kaylor got—got— What was I sayin'." He plucked feebly at his chap-belt. "I know. Kaylor got—a clean thousand for—for swearin'—the signature—was—Stratton's. Yuh find Kaylor. Hardenberg ... thumbscrew ... the truth...."

The low, uneven whisper merged into a murmur; then silence fell, broken only by the labored breathing of the dying man. Dazed, bewildered, conscious of a horrible conviction that he spoke the truth, Mary stood frozen, struggling against a wave of utter weariness and despair that surged over her. She felt the arm about her tighten, but for some strange reason the realization brought her little comfort.

Suddenly Hardenberg broke the silence. He had been watching the girl, and could no longer bear the misery in her white, strained face.

"You think you've turned a smart trick, don't you?" he snapped with angry impulsiveness. "As a matter of fact the ranch belongs to him already. The man you've known as Green is Buck Stratton himself."

Lynch's lids flashed up. "Yuh—lie!" he murmured. "Stratton's—dead!"

"Nothing like it," retorted the sheriff. "The papers got it wrong. He was only badly wounded. This fellow here is Buck Stratton, and he can prove it."

A spasm quivered over Lynch's face. He tried to speak, but only a faint gurgle came from his blood-flecked lips. Too late Hardenberg, catching an angry glance from Buck, realized and regretted his impulsive indiscretion. For Mary Thorne, turning slowly like a person in a dream, stared into the face of the man beside her, lips quivering and eyes full of a great horror.

"You!" she faltered, in a pitiful, small voice. "You—"

Stratton held her closer, a troubled tenderness sweeping the anger from his eyes.

“But—but, Mary—” he stammered—“what difference does—”

Suddenly her nerves snapped under the culminating strain of the past few hours.

“Difference!” she cried hysterically. “Difference!” Her heart lay like a cold, dead thing within her; she felt utterly miserable and alone. “You—My father! Oh, God!”

She made a weak effort to escape from his embrace. Then, abruptly, her slim, girlish figure grew limp, her head fell back against Stratton’s shoulder, her eyes closed.

CHAPTER XXXVI

TWO TRAILS CONVERGE

Mrs. Archer sat alone in the ranch-house living-room, doing absolutely nothing. As a matter of fact, she had little use for those minor solaces of knitting or crocheting which soothe the waking hours of so many elderly women. More than once, indeed, she had been heard to state with mild emphasis that when she was no longer able to entertain herself with human nature, or, at the worst, with an interesting book, it would be high time to retire into a nunnery, or its modern equivalent.

Sitting there beside one of the sunny southern windows, her small, faintly wrinkled hands lying reposefully in her lap, she made a dainty, attractive picture of age which was yet not old. Her hair was frankly gray, but luxuriant and crisply waving. No one would have mistaken the soft, faded pink of her complexion, well preserved though it was, for that of a young woman. But her eyes, bright, eager, humorous, changing with every mood, were full of the fire of eternal youth.

Just now there was a thoughtful retrospection in their clear depths. Occasionally she glanced interestedly out of the window, or turned her head questioningly toward the closed door of her niece's bedroom. But for the most part she sat quietly thinking, and the tolerant, humorous curve of her lips showed that her thoughts were far from disagreeable.

"Astonishing!" she murmured presently. "Really quite amazing! And yet things could scarcely have turned out more—" She paused, a faint wrinkle marring the smoothness of her forehead. "Really, I must guard against this habit of talking to myself," she went on with mild vexation. "They say it's one of the surest signs of age. Come in!"

The outer door opened and Buck Stratton entered. Pausing for an instant on the threshold, he glanced eagerly about the room, his face falling a little as he walked over to where Mrs. Archer sat.

She looked up at him for a moment in silence, surveying with frank approval his long length, his wide chest and lean flanks, the clean-cut face which showed such few signs of fatigue or strain. Then her glance grew quizzical.

“You give yourself away too quickly,” she smiled. “Even an old woman scarcely feels complimented when a man looks downcast at the sight of her.”

“Rubbish!” retorted Buck. “You know it wasn’t that.” Bending swiftly, he put an arm about her shoulders and kissed her. “You brought it on yourself,” he told her, grinning, as he straightened up. “You’ve no business to look so—pretty.”

The pink in Mrs. Archer’s cheeks deepened faintly. “Aren’t you rather lavish this morning?” she murmured teasingly. “Hadn’t you better save those for—” Suddenly her face grew serious. “I do understand, of course. She hasn’t come out yet, but she’s dressing. I made her eat her breakfast in bed.”

“Good business,” approved Buck. “How is she?”

“Very much better, physically. Her nerves are practically all right again; but of course she’s very much depressed.”

Stratton’s face clouded. “She still persists—”

Mrs. Archer nodded. “Oh, dear me, yes! That is, she thinks she does. But there’s no need to look as if all hope were lost. Indeed, I’m quite certain that a little pressure at the right moment—” She broke off, glancing at the bedroom door. “I’ve an idea it would be better for me to do a little missionary work first. Suppose you go now and come back later. Come back,” she finished briskly, “when you see my handkerchief lying here on the window-ledge.”

He nodded and was half way across the room when she called to him guardedly:

“Oh, Buck! There’s a phrase I noticed in that rather lurid magazine Bud brought me two or three weeks ago.” Her eyes twinkled. “‘Cave-man stuff,’ I think it was.” Coming from her lips the words had an oddly bizarre sound. “It seemed descriptive. Of course one would want to use refinements.”

“I get you!” Stratton grinned as he departed.

His head had scarcely passed the window before the inner door opened and Mary Thorne appeared.

Her face was pale, with deep shadows under the eyes, and her slim, girlish figure drooped listlessly. She walked slowly over to the table, took up a book, fluttered the pages, and laid it down again. Then a pile of mail caught her eyes, and

picking up the topmost letter, she tore it open and glanced through it indifferently.

“From Stella,” she commented aloud, dropping it on the table. “They got home all right. She says she had a wonderful time, and asks after—”

“After me, I suppose,” said Mrs. Archer, as Mary paused. “Give her my love when you write.” She hesitated, glancing shrewdly at the girl. “Don’t you want to hear the news, dear?” she asked.

Mary turned abruptly, her eyes widening with sudden interest. “News? What news?”

“Why, about everything that’s happened. They caught all of the men except that wretch, Pedro. The sheriff’s taken them to Perilla for trial. He says they’ll surely be convicted. Better yet, one of them has turned State’s evidence and implicated a swindler named Draper, who was at the bottom of everything.”

“Everything?” repeated the girl in a slightly puzzled tone, as she dropped listlessly into a chair beside her aunt. “What do you mean, dear, by—everything?”

“How dull I am!” exclaimed Mrs. Archer. “I hope that isn’t another sign of encroaching age. I quite forgot you hadn’t heard what it was all about. It seems there’s oil in the north pasture. Lynch found it and told this man Draper, and ever since then they’ve been trying to force you to sell the ranch so they could gobble it up themselves.”

“Oil?” questioned Mary. “You mean oil wells, and that sort of thing?”

“There’ll be wells in time, I presume; just now it’s merely in the ground. I understand it’s quite valuable.”

She went on to explain in detail all she knew. Mary listened silently, head bent and hands absently plucking at the plaiting of her gown. When Mrs. Archer finally ceased speaking, the girl made no comment for a time, but sat quite motionless, with drooping face and nervously moving fingers.

“Did you hear about—about—” she began in an uncertain voice, and then stopped, unable to go on.

“Yes, dear,” returned Mrs. Archer simply. “Bud told me. It’s a—a terrible thing, of course, but I think—” She paused, choosing her words. “You mustn’t spoil your life, my dear, by taking it—too seriously.”

Mary turned suddenly and stared at her, surprise battling with the misery in her face.

“Too seriously!” she cried. “How can I possibly help taking it seriously? It’s too dreadful and—and horrible, almost, to think of.”

“It’s dreadful, I admit,” returned the old lady composedly. “But after all, it’s your father’s doings. You are not to blame.”

The girl made a swift, dissenting gesture with both hands. “Perhaps not, in the way you mean. I didn’t do the—stealing.” Her voice was bitter. “I didn’t even know about it. But I—profited. Oh, how could Dad ever have done such an awful thing? When I think of his—his deliberately robbing this man who—who had given his life bravely for his country, I could die of shame!”

Her lips quivered and she buried her face in her hands. Mrs. Archer reached out and patted her shoulder consolingly.

“But he didn’t die for his country,” she reminded her niece practically. “He’s very much alive, and here. He’s got his ranch back, with the addition of valuable oil deposits, or whatever you call them, which, Bud tells me, might not have been discovered for years but for this.” She paused, her eyes fixed intently on the girl. “Do you—love him, Mary?” she asked abruptly.

The girl looked up at her, a slow flush creeping into her face. “What difference does that make?” she protested. “I could never make up to him for—for what—father did.”

“It makes every difference in the world,” retorted Mrs. Archer positively. “As for making up— Why, don’t you know that you’re more to him than ranches, or oil wells, or—anything on earth? You must realize that in your heart.”

Placing her handkerchief on the window-ledge, she rose briskly.

“I really must go and change my shoes,” she said in quite a different tone. “These slippers seem to—er—pinch a bit.”

If they really did pinch, there was no sign of it as she crossed the room and disappeared through a door at the farther end. Mary stared after her, puzzled and a little hurt at the apparent lack of sympathy in one to whom she had always turned for comfort and understanding. Then her mind flashed back to her aunt’s farewell words, and her brow wrinkled thoughtfully.

A knock at the door made her start nervously, and for a long moment she hesitated before replying. At the sight of Buck Stratton standing on the

threshold, she flushed painfully and sprang to her feet.

“Good morning,” he said gently, as he came quickly over to her. “I hope you’re feeling a lot better.”

“Oh, yes,” she answered briefly. “I’m really quite all right now.”

He had taken her hand and still held it, and somehow the mere pressure of his fingers embarrassed her oddly and seemed to weaken her resolution.

“You don’t quite look it,” he commented. “I reckon it’ll take some time to get rid of those—those shadows and hollows and all.”

He was looking down at her with that same tender, whimsical smile that quirked the corners of his mouth unevenly, and the expression in his eyes set Mary’s heart to fluttering. She could not bear it, somehow! To give him up was even harder than she had expected, and suddenly her lids drooped defensively to hide the bright glitter that smarted in her eyes.

Suddenly he broke the brief silence. “When are you going to marry me, dear?” he asked quietly.

Her lids flew up and she stared at him through a blurring haze of tears. “Oh!” she cried unsteadily. “I can’t! I—can’t. You—you don’t know how I feel. It’s all too—dreadful! It doesn’t seem as if I could ever—look you in the face again.”

Swiftly his arms slid about her, and she was drawn gently but irresistibly to him.

“Don’t try just now, dear, if you’d rather not,” he murmured, smiling down into her tear-streaked face. “You’ll have a long time to get used to it, you know.”

Instinctively she tried to struggle. Then all at once a wave of incredible happiness swept over her. Abruptly nothing seemed to matter—nothing on earth save this one thing. With a little sigh like that of a tired child, her arm stole up about his neck, her head fell gently back against his shoulder.

“Oh!” Mary said abruptly, struck by a sudden recollection. It was an hour later, and they sat together on the sofa. “I had a letter from Stella to-day.” A faintly mischievous light sparkled in her eyes. “She sent her love—to you.”

Buck flushed a little under his tan. “Some little kidder, isn’t she, on short acquaintance?” he commented.

“Short!” Mary’s eyes widened. “Why, she knew you before I did!”

“Maybe so, but I didn’t know her.”

Buck had rather dreaded the moment when he would have to tell her of that beastly, vanished year, but somehow he did not find it hard.

“As long as you don’t ever let it happen again, I sha’n’t mind,” she smiled, when he had finished. “I simply couldn’t bear it, though, if you should lose your memory—now.”

“No danger,” he assured her, with a look that deepened the color in her radiant face.

For a moment she did not speak. Then all at once her smile faded and she turned quickly to him.

“The—the ranch, dear,” she said abruptly. “There’s something, isn’t there, I should do about—about turning it over—to you?”

He drew her head down against his shoulder. “No use bothering about that now,” he shrugged. “We’re going to be made one so soon that— How about riding to Perilla to-morrow and—”

“Oh, Buck!” she protested. “I—I couldn’t.”

His arm tightened about her. “Well, say the day after,” he suggested. “I’m afraid we’ll have to spend our honeymoon right here getting things to rights, so you won’t have to get a lot of new clothes and all that. There’s nothing unlucky about Thursday, is there?”

She hid her face against his coat. “No-o; but I don’t see how—I can—so soon. Well, maybe—perhaps—”

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