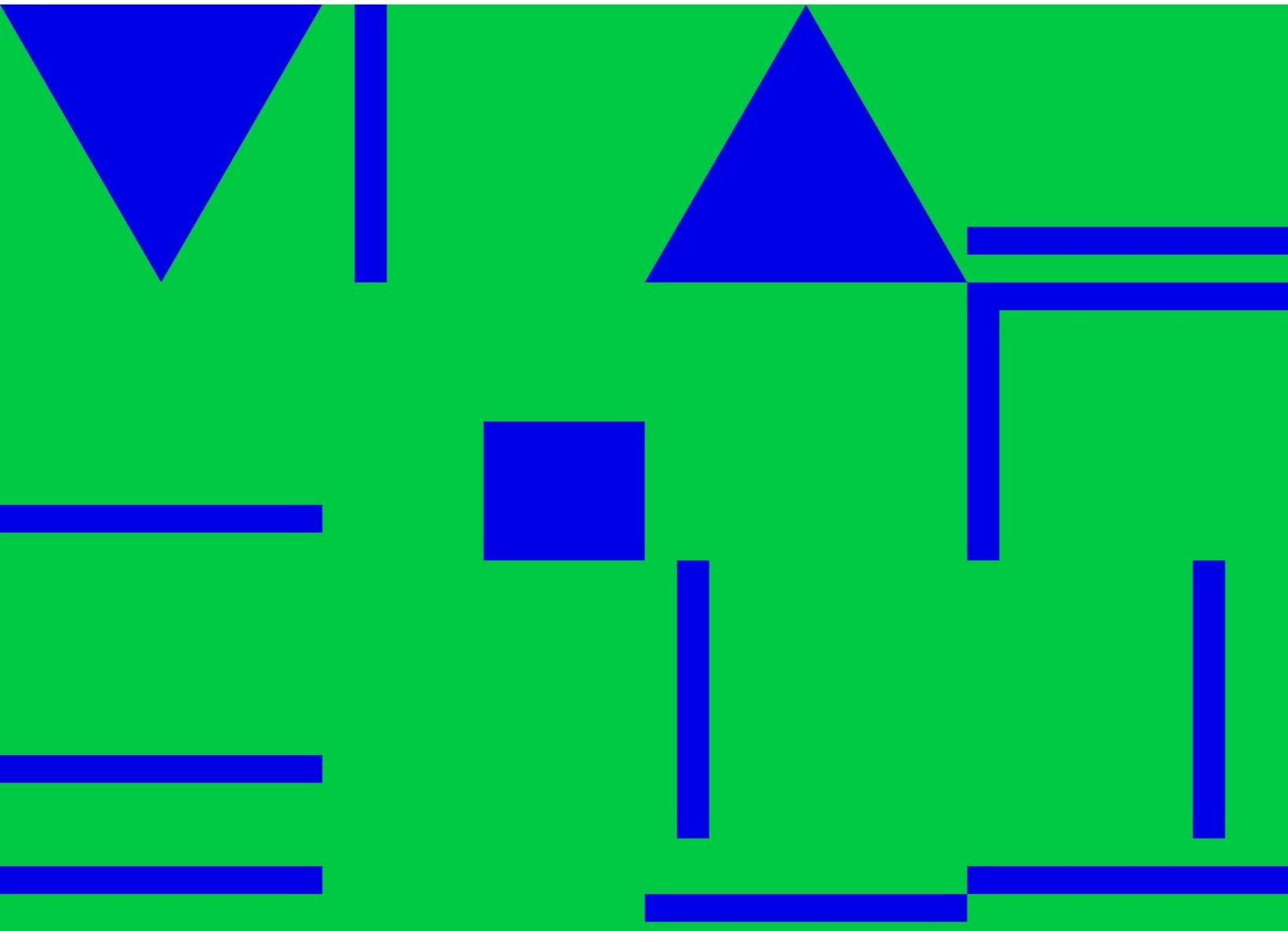
Starr, of the Desert

B. M. Bower



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STARR, OF THE DESERT

BY B.M. BOWER

AUTHOR OF CHIP OF THE FLYING U, ETC.

1917

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STARR, OF THE DESERT

CHAPTER ONE

A COMMONPLACE MAN WAS PETER

Daffodils were selling at two bits a dozen in the flower stand beside the New Era Drug Store. Therefore Peter Stevenson knew that winter was over, and that the weather would probably "settle." There would be the spring fogs, of course—and fog did not agree with Helen May since that last spell of grippe. Peter decided that he would stop and see the doctor again, and ask him what he thought of a bungalow out against the hills behind Hollywood; something cheap, of course—and within the five-cent limit on the street cars; something with a sleeping porch that opened upon a pleasanter outlook than your neighbor's back yard. If Helen May would then form the habit of riding to and from town on the open end of the cars, that would help considerably; in fact, the longer the ride the better it would be for Helen May. The air was sweet and clean out there toward the hills. It would be better for Vic, too. It would break up that daily habit of going out to see "the boys" as soon as he had swallowed his dinner.

Peter finished refilling the prescription on which he was working, and went out to see if he were needed in front. He sold a lip-stick to a pert miss who from sheer instinct made eyes at him, and he wished that Helen May had such plump cheeks—though he thanked God she had not the girl's sophisticated eyes. (Yes, a bungalow out there against the hills ought to do a lot for Helen May.) He glanced up at the great clock and unconsciously compared his cheap watch with it, saw that in ten minutes he would be free for the day, and bethought him to telephone the doctor and make sure of the appointment. He knew that Helen May had seen the doctor at noon, since she had given Peter her word that she would go, and since she never broke a promise. He would find out just what the doctor thought.

When he returned from the 'phone, a fat woman wanted peroxide, and she was quite sure the bottle he offered was smaller than the last two-bit bottle she had bought. Peter very kindly and patiently discussed the matter with her, and smiled

and bowed politely when she finally decided to try another place. His kidneys were hurting him again. He wondered if Helen May would remember that he must not eat heavy meats, and would get something else for their dinner.

He glanced again at the clock. He had four minutes yet to serve. He wondered why the doctor had seemed so eager to see him. He had a vague feeling of uneasiness, though the doctor had not spoken more than a dozen words. At six he went behind the mirrored partition and got his topcoat and hat; said good night to such clerks as came in his way, and went out and bought a dozen daffodils from the Greek flower-vendor. All day he had been arguing with himself because of this small extravagance which tempted him, but now that it was settled and the flowers were in his hand, he was glad that he had bought them. Helen May loved all growing things. He set off briskly in spite of his aching back, thinking how Helen May would hover over the flowers rapturously even while she scolded him for his extravagance.

Half an hour later, when he turned to leave the doctor's office, he left the daffodils lying forgotten on a chair until the doctor called him back and gave them to him with a keen glance that had in it a good deal of sympathy.

"You're almost as bad off yourself, old man," he said bluntly. "I want to watch those kidneys of yours. Come in to-morrow or next day and let me look you over. Or Sunday will do, if you aren't working then. I don't like your color. Here, wait a minute. I'll give you a prescription. You'd better stop and fill it before you go home. Take the first dose before you eat—and come in Sunday. Man, you don't want to neglect yourself. You—"

"Then you don't think Hollywood—?" Peter took the daffodils and began absently crumpling the waxed paper around them. His eyes, when he looked into the doctor's face, were very wistful and very, very tired.

"Hollywood!" The doctor snorted. "One lung's already badly affected, I tell you. What she's got to have is high, dry air—like Arizona or New Mexico or Colorado. And right out in the open—live like an Injun for a year or two. Radical change of climate—change of living. Another year of office work will kill her." He stopped and eyed Peter pityingly. "Predisposition—and then the grippe—her mother went that way, didn't she?"

"Yes," Peter replied, flat-toned and patient. "Yes, she went—that way."

"Well, you know what it means. Get her out of here just as quick as possible, and you'll probably save her. Helen May's a girl worth saving."

"Yes," Peter replied flatly, as before. "Yes—she's worth saving."

"You bet! Well, you do that. And don't put off coming here Sunday. And don't forget to fill that prescription and take it till I see you again."

Peter smiled politely, and went down the hall to the elevator, and laid his finger on the bell, and waited until the steel cage paused to let him in. He walked out and up Third Street and waited on the corner of Hill until the car he wanted stopped on the corner to let a few more passengers squeeze on. Peter found a foothold on the back platform and something to hang to, and adapted himself to the press of people around him, protecting as best he could the daffodils with the fine, green stuff that went with them and that straggled out and away from the paper. Whenever human eyes met his with a light of recognition, Peter would smile and bow, and the eyes would smile back. But he never knew who owned the eyes, or even that he was performing one of the little courtesies of life.

All he knew was that Helen May was going the way her mother had gone, and that the only way to prevent her going that way was to take her to New Mexico or Colorado or Arizona; and she was worth saving—even the doctor had been struck with her worth; and a bungalow out against the hills wouldn't do at all, not even with a sleeping porch and the open-air ride back and forth every day. Radical change she must have. Arizona or New Mexico or—the moon, which seemed not much more remote or inaccessible.

When his street was called he edged out to the steps and climbed down, wondering how the doctor expected a man with Peter's salary to act upon his advice. "You do that!" said the doctor, and left Peter to discover, if he could, how it was to be done without money; in other words, had blandly required Peter to perform a modern miracle.

Helen May was listlessly setting the table when he arrived. He went up to her for the customary little peck on the cheek which passes for a kiss among relatives, and Helen May waved him off with a half smile that was unlike her customary cheerfulness.

"I've quit kissing," she said. "It's unsanitary."

"What did the doctor tell you, Babe? You went to see him, didn't you?" Peter managed a smile—business policy had made smiling a habit—while he unwound the paper from around the daffodils.

"Dad, I've told you and *told* you not to buy flowers! Oh, golly, aren't they beautiful! But you mustn't. I'm going to get my salary cut, on the first. They say business doesn't warrant my present plutocratic income. Five a week less, Bob said it would be. That'll pull the company back to a profit-sharing basis, of course!"

"Lots of folks are losing their jobs altogether," Peter reminded her apathetically. "What did the doctor say about your cough, Babe?"

"Oh, he told me to quit working. Why is it doctors never have any brains about such things? Charge a person two dollars or so for telling him to do what's impossible. What does he think I am—a movie queen?"

She turned away from his faded, anxious eyes that hurt her with their realization of his helplessness. There was a red spot on either cheek—the rose of dread which her father had watched heart-sinkingly. "I know what he *thinks* is the matter," she added defiantly. "But that doesn't make it so. It's just the grippe hanging on. I've felt a lot better since the weather cleared up. It's those raw winds—and half the time they haven't had the steam on at all in the mornings, and the office is like an ice-box till the sun warms it."

"Vic home yet?" Peter abandoned the subject for one not much more cheerful. Vic, fifteen and fully absorbed in his own activities, was more and more becoming a sore subject between the two.

"No. I called up Ed's mother just before you came, but he hadn't been there. She thought Ed was over here with Vic. I don't know where else to ask."

"Did you try the gym?"

"No. He won't go there any more. They got after him for something he did—broke a window somehow. There's no use fussing, dad. He'll come when he's hungry enough. He's broke, so he can't eat down town."

Peter sighed and went away to brush his thin, graying hair carefully over his bald spot, while Helen May brewed the tea and made final preparations for dinner.

The daffodils she arranged with little caressing pulls and pats in a tall, slim vase of plain glass, and placed the vase in the center of the table, just as Peter knew she would do.

"Oh, but you're sweet!" she said, and stooped with her face close above them. "I wish I could lie down in a whole big patch of you and just look at the sky and at you nodding and perking all around me—and not do a living thing all day but just lie there and soak in blue and gold and sweet smells and silence."

Peter, coming to the open doorway, turned and tiptoed back as though he had intruded upon some secret, and stood irresolutely smoothing his hair down with the flat of his hand until she called him to come and eat. She was cheerful as ever while she served him scrupulously. She smiled at him now and then, tilting her head because the daffodils stood between them. She said no more about the doctor's advice, or the problem of poverty. She did not cough, and the movements of her thin, well-shaped hands were sure and swift. More than once she made a pause while she pulled a daffodil toward her and gazed adoringly into its yellow cup.

Peter might have been reassured, were it not for the telltale flush on her cheeks and the unnatural shine in her eyes. As it was, every fascinating little whimsy of hers stabbed him afresh with the pain of her need and of his helplessness. Arizona or New Mexico or Colorado, the doctor had said; and Peter knew that it must be so. And he with his druggist's salary and his pitiful two hundred dollars in the savings bank! And with the druggist's salary stopping automatically the moment he stopped reporting for duty! Peter was neither an atheist nor a socialist, yet he was close to cursing his God and his country whenever Helen May smiled at him around the dozen daffodils.

"Your insurance is due the tenth, dad," she remarked irrelevantly when they had reached the dessert stage of cream puffs from the delicatessen nearest Helen May's work. "Why don't you cut it down? It's sinful, the amount of money we've paid out for insurance. You need a new suit this spring. And the difference—"

"I don't see what's wrong with this suit," Peter objected, throwing out his scrawny chest and glancing down his front with a prejudiced eye, refusing to see any shabbiness. "A little cleaning and pressing, maybe—"

"A little suit of that new gray everybody's wearing these days, you mean," she

amended relentlessly. "Don't argue, dad. You've *got* to have a suit. And that old insurance—"

"Jitneys are getting thicker every day," Peter contended in feeble jest. "A man needs to be well insured in this town. There's Vic—if anything happened, he's got to be educated just the same. And by the endowment plan, in twelve years more I'll have a nice little lump. It's—on account of the endowment, Babe. I don't want to sell drugs all my life."

"Just the same, you're going to have a new suit." Helen May retrenched herself behind the declaration. "And it's going to be gray. And a gray hat with a dove-colored band and the bow in the back. And tan shoes," she added implacably, daintily lifting the roof off her cream puff to see how generous had been the filling.

"Who? Me?" Vic launched himself in among them and slid spinelessly into his chair as only a lanky boy can slide. "Happy thought! Only I'll have bottle green for mine. A fellow stepped on my roof this afternoon, so—"

"You'll wear a cap then—or go bareheaded and claim it's to make your hair grow." Helen May regarded him coldly. "Lots of fellows do. You don't get a single new dud before the fourth, Vic Stevenson."

"Oh, don't I?" Vic drawled with much sarcasm, and pulled two dollars from his trousers pocket, displaying them with lofty triumph. "I get a new hat to-morrow, Miss Stingy."

"Vic, where did you get that money?" Helen May's eyes flamed to the battle. "Have you been staying out of school and hanging around those picture studios?"

"Yup—at two dollars per hang," Vic mouthed, spearing a stuffed green pepper dexterously. "Fifty rehearsals for two one-minute scenes of honorable college gangs honorably hailing the hee-ro. Waugh! Where'd you get these things—or did the cat bring it in? Stuffed with laundry soap, if you ask me. Why don't you try that new place on Spring?"

"Vic Stevenson!" Helen May began in true sisterly disapprobation. "Is that getting you anywhere in your studies? A few more days out of school, and—"

Peter's thoughts turned inward. He did not even hear the half playful, half angry dispute between these two. Vic was a heady youth, much given to rebelling against the authority of Helen May who bullied or wheedled as her mood and the emergency might impel, as sisters do the world over. Peter was thinking of his two hundred dollars saved against disaster; and a third of that to go for life insurance on the tenth, which was just one row down on the calendar; and Helen May going the way her mother had gone—unless she lived out of doors "like an Indian" in Arizona or—Peter's mind refused to name again the remote, inaccessible places where Helen May might evade the penalty of being the child of her mother and of poverty.

Gray hat for Peter or bottle-green hat for Vic—what did it matter if neither of them ever again owned a hat, if Helen May must stay here in the city and face the doom that had been pronounced upon her? What did anything matter, if Babe died and left him plodding along alone? Vic did not occur to him consolingly. Vic was a responsibility; a comfort he was not. Like many men, Peter could not seem to understand his son half as well as he understood his daughter. He could not see why Vic should frivol away his time; why he should have all those funny little conceits and airs of youth; why he should lord it over Helen May who was every day proving her efficiency and her strength of character anew. If Helen May went the way her mother had gone, Peter felt that he would be alone, and that life would be quite bare and bleak and empty of every incentive toward bearing the little daily burdens of existence.

He got up with his hand going instinctively to his back to ease the ache there, and went out upon the porch and stood looking drearily down upon the asphalted street, where the white paths of speeding automobiles slashed the dusk like runaway sunbeams on a frolic. Then the street lights winked and sputtered and began to glow with white brilliance.

Arizona or New Mexico or Colorado! Peter knew what the doctor had in mind. Vast plains, unpeopled, pure, immutable in their calm; stars that came down at night and hung just over your head, making the darkness alive with their bright presence; a little cottage hunched against a hill, a candle winking cheerily through the window at the stars; the cries of night birds, the drone of insects, the distant howling of a coyote; far away on the boundary of your possessions, a fence of barbed wire stretching through a hollow and up over a hill; distance and quiet and calm, be it day or night. And Helen May coming through the sunlight, riding a gentle-eyed pony; Helen May with her deep-gold hair tousled in the

wind, and with health dancing in her eyes that were the color of a ripe chestnut, odd contrast to her hair; Helen May with the little red spots gone from her cheek bones, and with tanned skin and freckles on her nose and a laugh on her lips, coming up at a gallop with the sun behind her, and something more; with sickness behind her and the drudgery of eight hours in an office, and poverty and unhappiness. And Vic—yes, Vic in overalls and a straw hat, growing up to be the strong man he never would be in the city.

Like many another commonplace man of the towns, for all his colorless ways and his thinning hair and his struggle against poverty, Peter was something of a dreamer. And like all the rest of us who build our dreams out of wishes and hopes and maybes, Peter had not a single fact to use in his foundation. Arizona, New Mexico or Colorado—to Peter they were but symbols of all those dear unattainable things he longed for. And that he longed for them, not for himself but for another who was very dear to him, only made the longing keener and more tragic.

CHAPTER TWO

IN WHICH PETER DISCOVERS A WAY OUT

We are always exclaiming over the strange way in which events link themselves together in chains; and when the chains bind us to a certain condition or environment, we are in the habit of blandly declaring ourselves victims of the force of circumstances. By that rule, Peter found himself being swept into a certain channel of thought about which events began at once to link themselves into a chain which drew him perforce into a certain path that he must follow. Or it may have been his peculiar single-mindedness that forced him to follow the path; however that may be, circumstances made it easy.

If Helen May worried about her cough and her failing energy, she did not mention the fact again; but that was Helen May's way, and Peter was not comforted by her apparent dismissal of the subject. So far as he could see she was a great deal more inclined to worry over Vic, who refused to stay in school when he could now and then earn a dollar or two acting in "mob scenes" for some photoplay company out in Hollywood. He did not spend the money wisely; Helen May declared that he was better off with empty pockets.

Ordinarily Peter would have taken Vic's rebellion seriously enough to put a stop to it. He did half promise Helen May that he would notify all the directors he could get hold of not to employ Vic in any capacity; even to "chase him off the studio grounds", as Helen May put it. But he did not, because chance threw him a bit of solid material on which to rebuild his air castle for Helen May.

He was edging his way down the long food counter, collecting his lunch of rice pudding, milk and whole-wheat bread in a cafeteria on Hill Street. He was late, and there was no unoccupied table to be had, so he finally set his tray down where a haggard-featured woman clerk had just eaten hastily her salad and pie. A brown-skinned young fellow with country manners and a range-fostered

disposition to talk with any one who tarried within talking distance, was just unloading his tray load of provender on the opposite side of the table. He looked across at Peter's tray, grinned at the meager luncheon, and then looked up into Peter's face with friendliness chasing the amusement from his eyes.

"Golly gee! There's a heap of difference in our appetites, from the looks of our layouts," he began amiably. "I'm hungry as a she-wolf, myself. Hope they don't make me wash the dishes when I'm through; I'm always kinda scared of these grab-it-and-go joints. I always feel like making a sneak when nobody's looking, for fear I'll be called back to clean up."

Peter smiled and handed his tray to a waiter. "I wish I could eat a meal like that," he confessed politely.

"Well, you could if you lived out more in the open. Town kinda gits a person's appetite. Why, first time I come in here and went down the chute past the feed troughs, why it took two trays to pack away the grub I seen and wanted. Lookout lady on the high stool, she give me two tickets—thought there was two of, me, I reckon. But I ain't eatin' the way I was then. Town's kinda gittin' me like it's got the rest of you. Last night I come pretty near makin' up my mind to go back. Little old shack back there in the greasewood didn't look so bad, after all. Only I do hate like sin to bach, and a fellow couldn't take a woman out there in the desert to live, unless he had money to make her comfortable. So I'm going to give up my homestead—if I can find some easy mark to buy out my relinquishment. Don't want to let it slide, yuh see, 'cause the improvements is worth a little something, and the money'd come handy right now, helpin' me into something here. There's a chance to buy into a nice little service station, fellow calls it—where automobiles stop to git pumped up with air and gasoline and stuff. If I can sell my improvements, I'll buy in there. Looks foolish to go back, once I made up my mind to quit."

He ate while he talked, and he talked because he had the simple mind of a child and must think out loud in order to be perfectly at ease. He had that hunger for speech which comes sometimes to men who have lived far from their kind. Peter listened to him vaguely at first; then avidly, with an inner excitement which his mild, expressionless face hid like a mask.

"I was getting kinda discouraged when my horse up 'n died," the eater went on. "And then when some durn greaser went 'n stole my burro, I jest up 'n sold my

saddle and a few head uh sheep I had, and pulled out. New Mexico ranching is all right for them that likes it, but excuse me! I want to live where I can see a movie once in a while, anyhow." He stopped for the simple, primitive reason that he had filled his mouth to overflowing with food, so that speech was for the moment a physical impossibility.

Peter sipped his glass of milk, and his thoughts raced back and forth between the door of opportunity that stood ajar, and the mountain of difficulty which he must somehow move by his mental strength alone before he and his might pass through that door.

"Ah—how much do you value your improvements at?" he asked. His emotion was so great that his voice refused to carry it, and so was flat and as expressionless as his commonplace face.

"Well," gurgled the young man, sluicing down his food with coffee, "it's pretty hard to figure exactly. I've got a good little shack, you see, and there's a spring right close handy by. Springs is sure worth money in that country, water being scurse as it is. There's a plenty for the house and a few head of stock; well, in a good wet year a person could raise a little garden, maybe; few radishes and beans, and things like that. But uh course, that can't hardly be called an improvement, 'cause it was there when I took the place. A greaser, he had the land fenced and was usin' the spring 'n' range like it was his own, and most folks, they was scared to file on it. But she's sure filed on now, and I've got six weeks yet before it can be jumped.

"Well, there's a shed for stock, and a pretty fair brush corral, and I built me a pretty fair road in to the place—about a mile off the main road, it is. I done that odd times the year I was on the place. The sheep I sold; sheep's a good price now. I only had seventeen—coyotes and greasers, they kep' stealin' 'em on me, or I'd 'n' had more. I'd 'a' lost 'em all, I guess, if it hadn't been for Loma—dog I got with me. Them—"

Peter looked at his watch in that furtive way which polite persons employ when time presses and a companion is garrulous. He had finished his rice pudding and his milk, and in five minutes he would be expected to hang up his hat behind the mirrored partition of the New Era Drug Store and walk out smilingly to serve the New Era customers, patrons, the New Era called them. In five minutes he must be on duty, yet Peter felt that his very life depended upon bringing this wordy

young man to a point in his monologue.

"If you will come to the New Era Drug Store, at six o'clock," said Peter, "I shall be glad to talk with you further about this homestead of yours. I—ah—have a friend who has an idea of—ah—locating somewhere in Arizona or New Mexico or Colorado—" Peter could name them now without that sick feeling of despair "—and he might be interested. But," he added hastily, "he could not afford to pay very much for a place. Still, if your price is low enough—"

"Oh, I reckon we can git together on the price," the young man said cheerfully, as Peter rose and picked up his check. "I'll be there at six, sure as shootin' cats in a bag. I know where the New Era's at. I went in there last night and got something to stop my tooth achin'. Ached like the very devil for a while, but that stuff sure fixed her."

Peter smiled and bowed and went his way hurriedly, his pale lips working nervously with the excitement that filled him. The mountain of difficulty was there, implacably blocking the way. But beyond was the door of opportunity, and the door was ajar. There must, thought Peter, be some way to pass the mountain and reach the door.

Helen May telephoned that she meant to pick out that gray suit for him that evening. Since it was Saturday, the stores would be open, and there was a sale on at Hecheimer's. She had seen some stunning grays in the window, one-third off. And would he….

Peter's voice was almost irritable when he told her that he had a business engagement and could not meet her. And he added the information that he would probably eat down town, as he did not know how long he would be detained. Helen May was positively forbidden to do anything at all about the suit until he had a chance to talk with her. After which unprecedented firmness Peter left the 'phone hurriedly, lest Helen May should laugh at his authority and lay down a law of her own, which she was perfectly capable of doing.

At five minutes to six the young man presented himself at the New Era, and waited for Peter at the soda fountain, with a lemon soda and a pretty girl to smile at his naïve remarks. Peter's heart had given a jump and a flutter when the young man walked in, fearing some one else might snap at the chance to buy a relinquishment of a homestead in New Mexico. And yet, how did Peter expect to

buy anything of the sort? If Peter knew, he kept the knowledge in the back of his mind, telling himself that there would be some way out.

He went with the young man, whose name he learned was Johnny Calvert, and had dinner with him at the cafeteria where they had met at noon. Johnny talked a great deal, ate a great deal, and unconsciously convinced Peter that he was an honest young man who was exactly what he represented himself to be. He had papers which proved his claim upon three hundred and twenty acres of land in Dona Ana County, New Mexico. He also had a map upon which the location of his claim was marked with a pencil. Malpais, he said, was the nearest railroad point; not much of a point, but you could ride there and back in a day, if you got up early enough in the morning.

Peter asked about the climate and the altitude. Johnny was a bit hazy about the latter, but it was close to mountains, he said, and it was as high as El Paso, anyway, maybe higher. The climate was like all the rest of the country, coming in streaks of good and bad. Peter, gaining confidence as Johnny talked, spoke of his daughter and her impending doom, and Johnny, instantly grasping the situation, waxed eloquent. Why, that would be just the place, he declared. Dry as a bone, the weather was most of the year; hot—the lungers liked it hot and dry, he knew. And when it was cold, it was sure bracing, too. Why, the country was alive with health-seekers. At that, most of 'em got well—them that didn't come too late.

That last sentence threw Peter into a panic. What if he dawdled along and kept Helen May waiting until it was too late? By that time I think Peter had pretty clearly decided how he was to remove the mountain of difficulty. He must have, or he would not have had the courage to drive the bargain to a conclusion in so short a time.

Drive it he did, for at nine o'clock he let himself into the place he called home and startled Helen May with the announcement that he had bought her a claim in New Mexico, where she was to live out of doors like an Indian and get over that cough, and grow strong as any peasant woman; and where Vic was going to keep out of mischief and learn to amount to something. He did not say what the effect would be upon himself; Peter was not accustomed to considering himself except as a provider of comfort for others.

Helen May did not notice the omission. "*Bought* a claim?" she repeated and added grimly: "What with?"

"With two hundred dollars cash," Peter replied, smiling queerly. "It's all settled, Babe, and the claim is to stand in your name. Everything is attended to but the legal signatures before a notary. I was glad my money was in the all-night bank, because I was not compelled to wait until Monday to get it for young Calvert. You will have the relinquishment of his right to the claim, Babe, and a small adobe house with sheds and yards and a good spring of living water. In building up the place into a profitable investment you will be building up your health, which is the first and greatest consideration. I—you must not go the way your mother went. You will not, because you will live in the open and throw off the—ah—incipient—"

"Dad—*Stevenson*!" Helen May was sitting with her arms lying loose in her lap, palms upward. Her lips had been loose and parted a little with the slackness of blank amazement. In those first awful minutes she really believed that her father had suddenly lost his mind; that he was joking never occurred to her. Peter was not gifted with any sense of humor whatsoever, and Helen May knew it as she knew the color of his hair.

"You will no longer be a wage slave, doomed to spend eight hours of every day before a typewriter in that insurance office. You will be independent—a property owner who can see that property grow under your thought and labor. You will see Vic growing up among clean, healthful surroundings. He will be able to bear much of the burden—the brunt of the work. The boy is in a fair way to be ruined if he stays here any longer. There will be six weeks of grace before the claim can be seized—ah—jumped, the young man called it. In that time you must be located upon the place. But you should make all possible haste in any case, on account of your health. Monday morning we will go together with young Calvert and attend to the legal papers, and then I should advise you to devote your time to making preparations—"

"Dad—*Stevenson*!" Helen May's voice ended in an exasperated, frightened kind of wail. "I and Vic! Are you crazy?"

"Not at all. It is sudden, of course. But you will find, when you stop to think it over, that many of the wisest things we ever do are done without dawdling,—suddenly, one may say. No, Babe, I—"

"But two hundred dollars just for the rights to the claim! Dad, look at it calmly! To build up a ranch takes money. I don't know a thing about ranching, and

neither do you; but we both know that much. One has to eat, even on a ranch. I wouldn't have my ten a week, remember, and you wouldn't have your salary, unless you mean to stay here and keep on at the New Era. And that wouldn't work, dad. You know it wouldn't work. Your salary would barely keep you, let alone sending money to us. You can't expect to keep yourself and furnish us money; and you've paid out all you had in the bank. The thing's impossible on the face of it!"

"Yes, planning from that basis, it would be impossible." Peter's eyes were wistful. "I tried to plan that way at first; but I saw it wouldn't do. The expense of getting there, even, would be quite an item in itself. No, it couldn't be done that way, Babe."

"Then will you tell me how else it is to be done?" Helen May's voice was tired and exasperated. "You say you have paid the two hundred. That leaves us just the furniture in this flat; and it wouldn't bring enough to take us to the place, let alone having anything to live on when we got there. And my wages would stop, and so would yours. Dad, do you realize what you've done?" She tilted her head forward and stared at him intently through her lashes, which was a trick she had.

"Yes, Babe, I realize perfectly. I'm—not counting on just the furniture. I—think it would pay to ship the stuff on to the claim."

"For heaven's sake, dad! What are you counting on?" Helen May gave a hysterical laugh that set her coughing in a way to make the veins stand out on forehead and throat. (Peter's hands blenched into fighting fists while he waited for the spasm to wear itself out. She should not go the way her mother had gone, he was thinking fiercely.) "What—are—you counting on?" she repeated, when she could speak again.

"Well, I'm counting on—a source that is sure," Peter replied vaguely. "The way will be provided, when the time comes. I—I have thought it all out calmly, Babe. The money will be ready when you need it."

"Dad, don't borrow money! It would be a load that would keep us staggering for years. We are going along all right, better than hundreds of people all around us. I'm feeling better than I was; now the weather is settled, I feel lots better. You can sell whatever you bought; maybe you can make a profit on the sale. Try and do that, dad. Get enough profit to pay for that gray suit I saw in the window!"

She was smiling at him now, the whimsical smile that was perhaps her greatest charm.

"Never mind about the gray suit." Peter spoke sharply. "I won't need it." He got up irritably and began pacing back and forth across the little sitting room. "You're not better," he declared petulantly. "That's the way your mother used to talk—even up to the very last. A year in that office would kill you. I know. The doctor said so. Your only chance is to get into a high, dry place where you can live out of doors. He told me so. This young man with the homestead claim was a godsend—a godsend, I tell you! It would be a crime—it would be murder to let the chance slip by for lack of money. I'd steal the money, if I knew of any way to get by with it, and if there was no other way open. But there is a way. I'm taking it.

"I don't want to hear any more argument," he exclaimed, facing her quite suddenly. His eyes had a light she had never seen in them before. "Monday you will go with me and attend to the necessary legal papers. After that, I'll attend to the means of getting there."

He stood looking down at her where she sat with her hands clasped in her lap, staring up at him steadfastly from under her eyebrows. His face softened, quivered until she thought he was going to cry like a woman. But he only came and laid a shaking hand on her head and smoothed her hair as one caresses a child.

"Don't oppose me in this, Babe," he said wearily. "I've thought it all out, and it's best for all of us. I can't see you dying here by inches—in the harness. And think of Vic, if that happened. He's just at the age where he needs you. I couldn't do anything much with him alone. It's the best thing to do, the only thing to do. Don't say anything more against it, don't argue. When the time comes, you'll do your part bravely, as I shall do mine. And if you feel that it isn't worth while for yourself, think of Vic."

Peter turned abruptly and went into his room, and Helen May dropped her head down upon her arms and cried awhile, though she did not clearly understand why, except that life seemed very cruel, like some formless monster that caught and squeezed the very soul out of one. Soon she heard Vic coming, and pulled herself together for the lecture he had earned by going out without permission and staying later than he should. On one point dad was right, she told herself

wearily, while she was locking up for the night. Town certainly was no place for Vic.

The next day, urged by her father, Helen May met Johnny Calvert, and cooked him a nice dinner, and heard a great deal about her new claim. And Monday, furthermore, the three attended to certain legal details. She had many moments of panic when she believed her father was out of his mind, and when she feared that he would do some desperate thing like stealing money to carry out this strange plan. But she did as he wished. There was a certain inflexible quality in Peter's mild voice, a certain determination in his insignificant face that required obedience to his wishes. Even Vic noticed it, and eyed Peter curiously, and asked Helen May what ailed the old man.

An old man Peter was when he went to his room that night, leaving Helen May dazed and exhausted after another evening spent in absorbing queer bits of information from the garrulous Johnny Calvert. She would be able to manage all right, now, Peter told her relievedly when Johnny left. She knew as much about the place as she could possibly know without having been there.

He said good night and left her wondering bewilderedly what strange thing her dad would do next. In the morning she knew.

Peter did not answer when Helen May rapped on his door and said that breakfast would be ready in five minutes. Never before had he failed to call out: "All right, Babe!" more or less cheerfully. She waited a minute, listening, and then rapped again and repeated her customary announcement. Another wait, and she turned the knob and looked in.

She did not scream at what she found there. Vic, sleeping on the couch behind a screen in the living room, yawned himself awake and proceeded reluctantly to set his feet upon the floor and grope, sleepy-eyed, for his clothes, absolutely unconscious that in the night sometime Peter had passed a certain mountain of difficulty and had reached out unafraid and pulled wide open the door of opportunity for his children.

Beyond the door, Helen May was standing rigidly beside the bed where Peter lay, and was reading for the second time the letter which Peter had held in his hand. At first her mind had refused to grasp its meaning. Now, reading slowly, she knew …

Dear Babe, (said the letter).

Don't be horrified at what I have done. I have thought the whole matter over calmly, and I am satisfied that this is the best way. My life could not go on very long, anyway. The doctor made that plain enough to me Sunday. I saw him. I was in a bad way with kidney trouble, he said. I knew it before he told me. I knew I was only good for a few months more at the most, and I would soon be a helpless burden. Besides, I have heart trouble that will account for this sudden taking off, so you can escape any unpleasant gossip.

Take the life insurance and use it on that claim, for you and Vic. Live out in the open and get well, and make a man of Vic. Three thousand dollars ought to be ample to put the ranch on a paying basis. And don't blame your dad for collecting it now, when it will do the most good. I could see no benefit in waiting and suffering, and letting you get farther downhill all the while, making it that much harder to climb back. Go at once to your claim, and do your best—that is what will make your dad happiest. You will get well, and you will make a home for you and Vic, and be independent and happy. In doing this you will fulfill the last, loving wish of your father.

PETER STEVENSON.

P.S. Better stock the place with goats. Johnny Calvert thinks they would be better than sheep.

CHAPTER THREE

VIC SHOULD WORRY

Wise man or fool, Peter had taken the one way to impress obedience upon Helen May. Had he urged and argued and kept on living, Helen May could have brought forth reasons and arguments, eloquence even, to combat him. But Peter had taken the simple, unanswerable way of stating his wishes, opening the way to their accomplishment, and then quietly lying back upon his pillow and letting death take him beyond reach of protest.

For days Helen May was numb with the sudden dropping of Life's big responsibilities upon her shoulders. She could not even summon energy enough to call Vic to an accounting of his absences from the house. Until after the funeral Vic had been subdued, going around on his toes and looking at Helen May with wide, solemn eyes and lips prone to trembling. But fifteen years is the resilient age, and two days after Peter was buried, Vic asked her embarrassedly if she thought it would look right for him to go to the ball game. He had to do *something*, he added defensively.

"Oh, I guess so; run along," Helen May had told him absently, without in the least realizing what it was he had wanted to do. After that Vic went his way without going through the ceremony of asking her consent, secure in the knowledge of her indifference.

The insurance company for which she had worked set in motion the wheels that would eventually place in her hands the three thousand dollars for which Peter had calmly given his life. She hated the money. She wanted to tell her dad how impossible it was for her to use a cent of it. Yet she must use it. She must use it as he had directed, because he had died to open the way for her obedience. She must take Vic, against his violent young will, she suspected, and she must go to that claim away off there somewhere in the desert, and she must live in the open

—and raise goats! For there was a certain strain of Peter's simplicity in the nature of his daughter. His last scrawled advice was to her a command which she must obey as soon as she could muster the physical energy for obedience.

"What do I know about goats!" she impatiently asked her empty room one morning after a night of fantastic dreams. "They eat tin cans and paper, and Masonic candidates ride them, and they stand on high banks and look silly, and have long chin whiskers and horns worn back from their foreheads. But as to *raising* them—what are they good for, for heaven's sake?"

"Huh? Say, what are you mumbling about?" Vic, it happened, was awake, and Helen May's door was ajar.

"Oh, nothing." Then the impulse of speech being strong in her, Helen May pulled on a kimono and went out to where Vic lay curled up in the blankets on the couch. "We've got to go to New Mexico, Vic, and, live on that land dad bought the rights to, and raise goats!"

"Yes, we have—not!"

"We have. Dad said so. We've got to do it, Vic. I expect we'd better start as soon as the insurance is paid, and that ought to be next week. Malpais is the name of the darned place. Inez Garcia says Malpais means bad country. I asked her when she was here yesterday. I expect it does, though you can't tell about Inez. She's tricky about translating stuff; she thinks it's funny to fake the meaning of things. But I expect it's true; it sounds like that."

"I should worry," Vic yawned, with the bland triteness of a boy who speaks mostly in current catch phrases. "I've got a good chance for a juvenile part in that big five-reeler Walt's going to put on. Fat chance anybody's got putting *me* to herding goats! That New Mexico dope got my number the first time dad sprung it. Not for mine!"

Helen May sat down on the arm of a Mission chair, wrapped her kimono around her thin figure, and looked at Vic from under her lashes. Besides raising goats and living out in the open, she was to make a man of Vic. She did not know which duty appalled her most, or which animal seemed to her the more intractable.

"We've got to do it," she said simply. "I don't like it either, but that doesn't

matter. Dad planned that way for us."

Vic sat up crossly, groping for the top button of his pajama coat. His long hair was tousled in front and stood straight up at the back, and his lids were heavy yet with sleep. He looked very young and very unruly, and as though several years of grace were still left to Helen May before she need trouble herself about his manhood.

"Not for mine," he repeated stubbornly. "You can go if you want to, but I'm going to stay in pictures." No film star in the city could have surpassed Vic's tone of careless assurance. "Listen! Dad was queer along towards the last. You know that yourself. And just because he had a nutty idea of a ranch somewhere, is no reason why we should drop everything—"

"We've got to do it, and you needn't fuss, because you've got to go along. I expect we can study up—on goats." Her voice shook a little, for she was close to tears.

"Well, I'm darned if you ain't as nutty as dad was! Of course, he was old and sick, and there was plenty of excuse for him to slop down along towards the last. Now, listen! My idea is to get a nifty bungalow out there handy to the studios, and both of us to go into pictures. We can get a car; what I want is a speedy, sassy little boat that can *travel*. Well, and listen. We'll have plenty to live on till we both land in stock. I've got a good chance right now to work into a comedy company; they say my grin screens like a million dollars, and when it comes to making a comedy getaway I'm just geared right, somehow, to pull a laugh. That college picture we made got me a lot of notice in the projection room, and I was only doing mob stuff, at that. But I stood out. And Walt's promised me a fat little bit in this five-reeler. I'll land in stock before the summer's half over!

"And you can land with some good company if you just make a stab at it. Your eyes and that trick of looking up under your eyebrows are just the type for these sob leads, and you've got a good photographic face: a *good* face for it," he emphasized generously. "And your figure couldn't be beat. Believe me, I know. You ought to see some of them Janes—and at that, they manage to get by with their stuff. A little camera experience, under a good director that would bring out your good points—I was going to spring the idea before, but I knew dad wouldn't stand for it."

"But we've got to go and live on that claim. We've *got* to."

Vic's face purpled. "Say, are you plumb *bugs*? Why—" Vic gulped and stuttered. "Say, where do you get that stuff? You better tie a can to it, sis; it don't get over with me. I'm for screen fame, and I'm going to get it too. Why, by the time I'm twenty, I'll betcha I can pull down a salary that'll make Charlie Chaplin look like an extra! Why, my grin—"

"Your grin you can use on the goats," Helen May quelled unfeelingly. "I only hope it won't scare the poor things to death. You needn't argue about it—as if I was crazy to go! Do you think I want to leave Los Angeles, and everybody I know, and everything I care about, and go to New Mexico and live like a savage, and raise goats? I'd rather go to jail, if you ask me. I hate the very thought of a ranch, Vic Stevenson, and you know I do. But that doesn't matter a particle. Dad —"

"I told you dad was crazy!" Vic's tone was too violent for grief. His young ambitions were in jeopardy, and even his dad's death must look unimportant alongside the greater catastrophe that threatened. "Do you think, for gosh sake, the whole family's got to be nutty just because he was sick and got a queer streak?"

"You've no right to say that. Dad—knew what he was doing."

"Aw, where do you get that dope?" Vic eyed her disgustedly, and with a good deal of condescension. "If you had any sense, you'd knew he was queer for days before it happened. *I* noticed it, all right, and if you didn't—"

Helen May did not say anything at all. She got up and went to her room and came back with Peter's last, pitiful letter. She gave it to Vic and sat down again on the arm of the Mission chair and waited, looking at him from, under her lashes, her head tilted forward.

Vic was impressed, impressed to a round-eyed silence. He knew his dad's handwriting, and he unfolded the sheet and read what Peter had written.

"I found that letter in—his hand—that morning." Helen May tried to keep her voice steady. "You mustn't tell any one about it, Vic. They mustn't know. But you see, he—after doing that to get the money for me, why—you see, Vic, we've *got* to go there. And we've got to make good. We've got to."

There must have been a little of Peter's disposition in Vic, too. He lay for several minutes staring hard at a patch of sunlight on the farther wall. I suppose when one is fifteen the ambition to be a movie star dies just as hard as does later the ambition to be president of the United States.

"You see, don't you, Vic?" Helen May watched him nervously.

"Well, what do you think I am?" Vic turned upon her with a scowl. "You might have said it was for your health. You wasn't playing fair. You—you kept saying it was to raise goats!"

CHAPTER FOUR

STARR WOULD LIKE TO KNOW

Properly speaking Starr did not belong to New Mexico. He was a Texas man, and, until a certain high official asked him to perform a certain mission for the Secret Service, he had been a ranger. Puns were made upon his name when he was Ranger Starr, but he was a ranger no longer, and the puns had ceased to trouble him. His given name was Chauncy DeWitt; perhaps that is why even his closest friends called him Starr, it was so much easier to say, and it seemed to fit him so much better.

Ostensibly, and for a buffer to public curiosity, Starr was acting in the modest capacity of cattle buyer for a big El Paso meat company. Incidentally he bought young sheep in season, and chickens from the Mexican ranchers, and even a bear that had been shot up in the mountains very early in the spring, before the fat had given place to leanness. Whatever else Starr did he kept carefully to himself, but his meat buying was perfectly authentic and satisfactory. And if those who knew his past record wondered at his occupation, Starr had plenty of reasons for the change, and plenty of time in which to explain those reasons.

As to his personal appearance, there is not a great deal to say. I'm afraid Starr would not have attracted any notice in a crowd. He was a trifle above average height, perhaps, and he had nice eyes whose color might be a matter of dispute; because they were a bit too dark for gray, a bit too light for real hazel, with tiny flecks of green in certain lights. His lashes were almost heavy enough to be called a mark of beauty, and when he took off his hat, which was not often except at mealtime and when he slept in a real bed, there was something very attractive about his forehead and the way his hair grew on his temples. His mouth was pleasant when his mood was pleasant, but that was not always. One front tooth had been gold-crowned, which made his smile a trifle conspicuous, but could not be called a disfigurement. For the rest, he was tanned to a real

desert copper, and riding kept him healthily lean. But as I said before, you would never pick him out of a crowd as the hero of this story or of any other.

Like most of us, Starr did not dazzle at the first sight. One must come into close contact with him to find him different from any other passably attractive, intelligent man of the open. Oh, if you must have his age, I think he gave it at thirty-one, the last time he was asked, but he might have said twenty-five and been believed. He was bashful, and he got on better with men than he did with women; but if you will stop to think, most decent men do if they have lived under their hats since they grew to the long-trouser age. And if they have spent their working days astride a stock saddle, you may be sure they are bashful unless they are overbold and impossible. Well, Starr was of the bashful, easily stampeded type. As to his morals, he smoked and he swore a good deal upon occasion, and he drank, and he played pool, and now and then a little poker, and he would lie for a friend any time it was necessary and think nothing of it. Also, he would fight whenever the occasion seemed to warrant it. He had not been to church since he wore square collars starched and spread across his shoulders, and the shine of soap on his cheeks. And a pretty girl would better not make eyes too boldly if she objected to being kissed, although Starr had never in his life asked a girl to marry him.

It doesn't sound very promising for a hero. He really was just a human being and no saint. Saint? You wouldn't think so if you had heard what he said to his horse, Rabbit, just about an hour before you were introduced to him.

Rabbit, it seems had been pacing along, half asleep in the blistering heat of midday, among the cactus and the greasewood and those depressing, yellowish weeds that pretend to be clothing the desert with verdure, when they are merely emphasizing its barrenness. Starr had been half asleep too, riding with one leg over the saddle horn to rest his muscles, and with his hat brim pulled down over his eyebrows to shade his eyes from the pitiless glare of New Mexico sunlight. Rabbit might be depended upon to dodge the prairie dog holes and rocks and dirt hummocks, day or night, waking or sleeping; and since they were riding cross-country anyway, miles from a trail, and since they were headed for water, and Rabbit knew as well as Starr just where it was to be found, Starr held the reins slack in his thumb and finger and let the horse alone.

That was all right, up to a certain point. Rabbit was a perfectly dependable little range horse, and sensible beyond most horses. He was ambling along at his easy

little fox-trot that would carry Starr many a mile in a day, and he had his eyes half shut against the sun glare, and his nose almost at a level with his knees. I suppose he was dreaming of cool pastures or something like that, when a rattlesnake, coiled in the scant shade of a weed, lifted his tail and buzzed as stridently, as abruptly as thirteen rattles and a button can buzz.

Rabbit had been bitten once when he was a colt and had gone around with his head swollen up like a barrel for days. He gave a great, horrified snort, heaved himself straight up in the air, whirled on his hind feet and went bucking across the scenery like a rodeo outlaw.

Starr did not accompany him any part of the distance. Starr had gone off backward and lit on his neck, which I assure you is painful and disturbing to one's whole physical and moral framework. I'll say this much for Starr: The first thing he did when he got up was to shoot the head off the snake, whose tail continued to buzz in a dreary, aimless way when there was absolutely nothing to buzz about. Snakes are like that.

Starr was a little like that, also. He continued to cuss in a fretful, objectless way, even after Rabbit had stopped and waited for him with apology written in the very droop of his ears. When he had remounted, and the horse had settled again to his straight-backed, shuffling fox-trot, Starr would frequently think of something else to say upon the subject of fool horses and snakes and long, dry miles and the interminable desert; but since none of the things would bear repeating, we will let it go at that. The point is that Starr was no saint.

He knew of a spring where the water was sweet and cold, and where a lonesome young fellow lived by himself and was always glad to see some one ride up to his door. The young fellow was what is called a good feeder, and might be depended upon to have a pot of frijoles cooked, and sourdough bread, and stewed fruit of some kind even in his leanest times, and call himself next door to starvation. And if he happened to be in funds, there was no telling; Starr, for instance, had eaten canned plum pudding and potted chicken and maraschino cherries and ginger snaps, all at one sitting, when he happened to strike the fellow just after selling a few sheep. Thinking of these things, Starr clucked to Rabbit and told him for gosh sake to pick his feet off the ground and not to take root and grow there in the desert like a several-kinds of a so-and-so cactus.

Rabbit twitched back his ears to catch the drift of Starr's remarks, rattled his

teeth in a bored yawn, and shuffled on. Starr laughed.

"Durn it, why is it you never take me serious?" he complained. "I can name over all the mean things you are, and you just waggle one ear, much as to say, 'Aw, hell! Same ole tune, and nothing to it but noise.' Some of these days you're going to get your pedigree read to you—and read right!" He leaned forward and lovingly lifted Rabbit's mane, holding it for a minute or two away from the sweaty neck. "Sure's hot out here to-day, ain't it, pardner?" he murmured, and let the mane fall again into place. "Kinda fries out the grease, don't it? If young Calvert's got any hoss-feed in camp, I'm going to beg some off him. Get along, the faster you go, the quicker you'll get there."

The desert gave place to scattered, brown cobblestones of granite. Rabbit picked his way carefully among these, setting his feet down daintily in the interstices of the rocks. He climbed a long slope that proved itself to be a considerable hill when one looked back at the desert below. The farther side was more abrupt, and he took it in patient zigzags where the footing promised some measure of security. At the bottom he turned short off to the right and made his way briskly along a rough wagon trail that hugged the hillside.

"Fresh tracks going in—and then out again," Starr announced musingly to Rabbit. "Maybe young Calvert hired a load of grub brought out; that, or he's had a visitor in the last day or two—maybe a week back, though; this dry ground holds tracks a long while. Go on, it's only a mile or so now."

The trail took a sudden turn toward the bottom of the wide depression as though it wearied of dodging rocks and preferred the loose sand below. Of his own accord Rabbit broke into a steady lope, flinging his head sidewise now and then to discourage the pestiferous gnats that swarmed about his ears. Starr, also driven to action of some kind, began to fling his hands in long sweeping gestures past his face. He hoped that the cabin, being on a higher bit of ground, would be free from the pests.

Bounding a sharp turn, Starr glimpsed the cabin and frowned as something unfamiliar in its appearance caught his attention. For just a minute he could not name the change, and then "Curtains at the windows!" he snorted. "Now, has the dub gone and got married, wonder?" He hoped not, and his hope was born not so much from sympathy with any woman who must live in such a place, but from a very humanly, selfish regard for his own passing comfort. With a woman in the

cabin, Starr would not feel so free to break his journey there with a rest and a meal or two.

He went on, however, sitting passively in the saddle while Rabbit headed straight for the spring. The bit of white curtain at the one small, square window facing that way troubled Starr, though it could not turn him back thirsty into the desert.

It was Rabbit who, ignorant of the significance of that flapping bit of white, was taken unawares and ducked sidewise when Helen May, standing precariously on a rock beside the spring, cupped her hands around her sun-cracked lips and shouted "Vic!" at the top of her voice. She nearly fell off the rock when she saw the horse and rider so close. They had come on her from behind, round another sharp nose of the rock-strewn hillside, so that she did not see them until they had discovered her.

"Oh!" said Helen May quite flatly, dropping her hands from her sunburned face and looking Starr over with the self-possessed, inquiring eyes of one who is accustomed to gazing upon strange faces by the thousands.

"How do you do?" said Starr, lifting his hat and foregoing instinctively the easy "Howdy" of the plains. "Is—Mr. Calvert at home?"

"That depends," said Helen May, "on where he calls home. He isn't here, however."

Rabbit, not in the least confused by the presence of a girl in this out-of-the-way place, pushed forward and thrust his nose deep into the lower pool of the spring where the water was warmed a little by the sun on the rocks. Starr could not think of anything much to say, so he sat leaning forward with a hand on Rabbit's mane, and watched the muscles working along the neck, when the horse swallowed.

"Oh—would you mind killing that beast down there in that little hollow?" Helen May had decided that it would be silly to keep on shouting for Vic when this man was here. "It's what they call a young Gila Monster, I think. And the bite is said to be fatal. I don't like the way he keeps looking at me. I believe he's getting ready to jump at me."

Starr glanced quickly at her face, which was perfectly serious and even a trifle anxious, and then down in the direction indicated by a broken-nailed, pointing

finger. He did not smile, though he felt like it. He looked again at Helen May.

"It's a horned toad," he informed her gravely. "The one Johnny Calvert kept around for a pet, I reckon. He won't bite—but I'll kill it if you say so." He dismounted and picked up a stone, and then looked at her again inquiringly.

Helen May eyed the toad askance. "Of course, if it's accustomed to being a pet—but it looks perfectly diabolical. It—came after me."

"It thought you would feed it, maybe."

"Well, I won't. It can think again," said Helen May positively. "You needn't kill it, but if you'd chase it off somewhere out of sight—it gives me shivers. I don't like the way it stares at a person and blinks."

Starr went over and picked up the toad, holding it cupped between his palms. He carried it a hundred feet away, set it down gently on the farther side of a rock, and came back. "Lots of folks keep them for pets," he said. "They're harmless, innocent things."

He washed his hands in the pool where Rabbit had drunk, took the tin can that had stood on a ledge in the shade when Starr first came to the spring a year ago, and dipped it full from the inner pool that was always cool under the rocks. He turned his back to Helen May and drank satisfyingly. The can was rusted and it leaked a swift succession of drops that was almost a stream. Helen May decided that she would bring a white granite cup to the spring and throw the can away. It was unsanitary, and it leaked frightfully, and it was a disgrace to civilized thirst.

"Pretty hot, to-day," Starr observed, when he had emptied the can and put it back. He turned and pulled the reins up along Rabbit's neck and took the stirrup in his hand.

"Oh, won't you stop—for lunch? It's a long way to town." Helen May flushed behind her sunburn, but she felt that the law of the desert demanded some show of hospitality.

"Thanks, I must be getting on," said Starr, touched his hat brim and rode away. He had a couple of fried-ham sandwiches in his pocket, and he ought to make the Medina ranch by two o'clock, he reminded himself philosophically. A woman on Johnny Calvert's claim was disconcerting. What was she there for,

anyway? From the way she spoke about Johnny, she couldn't be his wife, or if she were, she had a grudge against him. She didn't look like the kind of a girl that would marry the Johnny Calvert kind of a man. Maybe she was just stopping there for a day or so, with her folks. Still, that white curtain at the window looked permanent, somehow.

Starr studied the puzzle from all angles. He might have stayed and had his curiosity satisfied, but it was second nature with Starr to hide any curiosity he might feel; his riding matter-of-factly away, as though the girl were a logical part of the place, was not all bashfulness. Partly it was habit. He wondered who Vic was—man, woman or child? Man, he guessed, since she was probably calling for help with the horned toad, Starr grinned when he thought of her naming it a Gila Monster. If she had ever seen one of those babies! She must certainly be new to the country, if she didn't even know a horned toad when she saw one! What was she doing there, anyway? Starr meant to find out. It was his business to find out, and besides, he wanted to know.

CHAPTER FIVE

A GREASE SPOT IN THE SAND

Starr, took his cigarette from his lips, sent an oblique glance of mental measurement towards his host, and shifted his saddle-weary person to a more comfortable position on the rawhide covered couch. He had eaten his fill of frijoles and tortillas and a chili stew hot enough to crisp the tongue. He had discussed the price of sheep and had with much dickering bought fifty dry ewes at so much on foot delivered at the nearest shipping point. He had given what news was public talk, of the great war and the supposedly present whereabouts of Villa, and what was guessed would happen if Mexican money went any lower.

On his own part, Estancio Medina, called Estan for short, had talked very freely of these things. Villa, he was a bad one, sure. He would yet make trouble if some_body_ didn't catch him, yes. For himself, Estan Medina, he was glad to be on this side the border, yes. The American government would let a poor man alone, yes. He could have his little home and his few sheep, and no_body_ would take them away. Villa, he was a bad one! All Mexicans must sure hate Villa—even the men who did his fighting for him, yes. Burros, that's what they are. Burros, that have no mind for thinking, only to do what is tol'. And if troubles come, all Mexicans in these country should fight for their homes, you bet. All these Mexicans ought to know what's good for them. They got no business to fight gainst these American gov'ment, not much, they don't. They come here because they don't like it no more in Mexico where no poor man can have a home like here. You bet.

Estan Medina was willing to talk a long while on that subject. His mother, sitting just inside the doorway, nodded her head now and then and smiled just as though she knew what her son was saying; proud of his high learning, she was. He could talk with the Americanos, and they listened with respect. Their language he could speak, better than they could speak it themselves. Did she not know? She

herself could now and then understand what he was talking about, he spoke so plainly.

"You've got new neighbors, I see," Starr observed irrelevantly, when Estan paused to relight his cigarette. "Over at Johnny Calvert's," he added, when Estan looked at him inquiringly.

"Oh-h, yes! That poor boy and girl! You seen them?"

"I just came from there," Starr informed him easily. "What brought them away out here?"

"They not tell, then? That man Calvert, he's a bad one, sure! He don' stay no more—too lazy, I think, to watch his sheeps from the coyotes, and says they're stole. He comes here telling me I got his sheeps—yes. We quarrel a little bit, maybe. I don' like to be called thief, you bet. He's big mouth, that feller—no brains, aitre. Then he goes some_where_, and he tells what fine rancho he's got in Sunlight Basin. These boy and girl, they buy. That's too bad. They don' belong on these desert, sure. W'at they know about hard life? Pretty soon they get tired, I think, and go back where comes from. That boy—what for help he be to that girl? Jus' boy—not so old my brother Luis. Can't ride horse; goes up and down, up an' down like he's back goes through he's hat. What that girl do? Jus' slim, big-eye girl with soft hand and sickness of lungs. Babes, them boy and girl. Whan Calvert he should be shot dead for let such inocentes be fool like that."

"Where is Johnny Calvert?"

"Him? He's gone, sure! Not come back, I bet you! He's got money—them babes got rancho—" Estan lifted his shoulders eloquently.

"What are they going to do, now they're here?" Starr abstractedly wiped off the ash collar of his cigarette against the edge of the couch.

"*Quien sabe*?" countered Estan, and lifted his shoulders again. "I think pretty quick they go."

Starr looked at his watch, yawned, and rose with much evident reluctance. "Same here," he said. "I've got to make San Bonito in time for that Eastbound. You have the sheep in the stockyards by Saturday, will you? If I'm not there myself, I'll leave the money with Johnson at the express office. Soon as the

sheep's inspected, you can go there and get it. *Addios. Mucho gracias, Señora*."

"She likes you fine—my mother," Estan observed, as the two sauntered to the corral where Rabbit was stowing away as much *secate* as he could against future hunger. "Sometimes you come and stay longer. We not see so many peoples here. Nobody likes to cross desert when she's hot like this. Too bad you must go now."

Starr agreed with him and talked the usual small talk of the desert Places while he placed the saddle on Rabbit's still sweaty back. He went away down the rocky trail with the sun shining full on his right cheek, and was presently swallowed up by the blank immensity of the land that looked level as a floor from a distance, but which was a network of small ridges and shallow draws and "dry washes" when one came to ride over it.

The trail was narrow and had many inconsequential twists and turns in it, as though the first man to travel that way had gone blind or dizzy and could not hold a straight line across the level. When an automobile, for instance, traveled that road, it was with many skiddings in the sand on the turns, which it must take circumspectly if the driver did not care for the rocky, uneven floor of the desert itself.

Just lately some one had actually preferred to make his own trail, if tracks told anything. Within half a mile of the Medina rancho Starr saw where an automobile had swerved sharply off the trail and had taken to the hard-packed sand of a dry arroyo that meandered barrenly off to the southeast. He turned and examined the trail over which he had traveled, saw that it offered no more discouragement to an automobile than any other bit of trail in that part of the country, and with another glance at the yellow ribbon of road before him, he also swerved to the southeast.

For a mile the machine had labored, twisting this way and that to avoid rocky patches or deep cuts where the spring freshets had dug out the looser soil. So far as Starr could discover there was nothing to bring a machine up here. The arroyo was as thousands of other arroyos in that country. The sides sloped up steeply, or were worn into perpendicular banks. It led nowhere in particular; it was not a short cut to any place that he knew of. The trail to Medina's ranch was shorter and smoother, supposing Medina's ranch were the objective point of the trip.

Starr could not see any sense in it, and that is why he followed the tortuous track to where the machine had stopped. That it had stood there for some time he knew by the amount of oil that had leaked down into the sand. He did not know for certain, since he did not know the oil-leaking habits of that particular car, but he guessed that it had stood there for a couple of hours at least before the driver had backed and turned around to retrace his way to the trail.

In these days of gasoline travel one need not be greatly surprised to meet a car, or see the traces of one, in almost any out-of-the-way spot where four wheels can possibly be made to travel. On the other hand, the man at the wheel is not likely to send his machine over rocks and through sand where the traction is poor, and across dry ditches and among greasewood, just for the fun of driving. There is sport with rod or gun to lure, or there is necessity to impel, or the driver is lost and wants to reach some point that looks familiar, or he is trying to dodge something or somebody.

Starr sat beside that grease spot in the sand and smoked a cigarette and studied the surrounding hills and tried to decide what had brought the car up here. Not sport, unless it was hunting of jack rabbits; and there were more jack rabbits out on the flat than here. There was no trout stream near, at least, none that was not more accessible from another point. To be sure, some tenderfoot tourist might have been told some yarn that brought him up here on a wild-goose chase. You can, thought Starr, expect any fool thing of a tourist. He remembered running across one that was trying between trains to walk across the mesa from Albuquerque to the Sandia mountains. It had been hard to convince that particular specimen that he was not within a mile or so of his goal, and that he would do well to reach the mountains in another three hours or so of steady walking. Compared with that, driving a car up this arroyo did not look so foolish.

But tourists did not invade this particular locality with their overconfident inexperience, and Starr did not give that explanation much serious thought. Instead he followed on up the narrowed gulch to higher ground, to see where men would be most likely to go from there. At the top he looked out upon further knobs and hollows and aimless depressions, just as he had expected. Half a mile or so away there drifted a thin spiral of smoke, from the kitchen stove of the Señora Medina, he guessed. But there was no other sign of human life anywhere within the radius of many miles, or, to be explicit, within the field of Starr's vision.

He looked for footprints, but in a few minutes he gave up in disgust. The ridge he stood on stretched for miles, up beyond Medina's home ranch and down past the Sommers' ranch, five or six miles nearer town, and on to the railroad. And it was a rocky ridge if ever there was one; granite outcroppings, cobblestones, boulders, anything but good loose soil where tracks might be followed. A dog might have followed a trail there before the scent was baked out by blistering heat; but Starr certainly could not.

He stood looking across to where the smoke curled up into the intense Blue of the sky. If a man wanted to reach the Medina ranch by the most obscure route, he thought, this would be one way to get there. He went back to where the automobile had stood and searched there for some sign of those who had ridden this far. But if any man left that machine, he had stepped from the running board upon rock, and so had left no telltale print of his foot.

"And that looks mighty darn queer," said Starr, "if it was just accidental. But if a fellow *wanted* to take to the rocks to cover his trail, why, he couldn't pick a better place than this. She's a dandy ridge and a dandy way to get up on her, if that's what's wanted." Starr looked at his watch and gave up all hope of catching the next eastbound train, if that had really been his purpose. He lifted his hat and drew his fingers across his forehead where the perspiration stood in beads, resettled the hat at an angle to shade his face from the glare of the sun, ran two fingers cursorily between the cinch and Rabbit's sweaty body, picked up the stirrup, thrust in his toe and eased himself up into the saddle; and his mind had not consciously directed a single movement.

"Well, they've left one mark behind 'em that fair hollers," he stated, in so satisfied a tone that Rabbit turned his head and looked back at him inquiringly. Starr, you must know, was not given to satisfied tones when he and Rabbit were enduring the burden of heat and long miles. "And you needn't give me that kinda look, neither. Take a look at them tire tracks, you ole knot-head. Them's Silvertown cords, and they ain't equipping jitneys with cord tires—not yet. Why, yo're whole carcass ain't worth the price uh one tire, let alone four, you old sheep. You show me the car in this country that's sportin' Silvertowns all around, and I'll show you—"

Just what he would show, Starr did not say, because he did not know. But there was something there which might be called a mystery, and where there was mystery there was Starr, working tirelessly on the solution. This might be a

trivial thing; but until he knew beyond all doubt that it was trivial, Starr pushed other matters, such as a young woman afraid of a horned toad, out of his mind that he might study the puzzle from all possible angles.

CHAPTER SIX

"DARN SUCH A COUNTRY!"

Helen May stood on the knobby, brown rock pinnacle that formed the head of Sunlight Basin and stared resentfully out over the baked desert and the forbidding hills and the occasional grassy hollows that stretched away and away to the skyline. So clear was the air that every slope, every hollow, every acarpous hilltop lay pitilessly revealed to her unfriendly eyes, until the sheer immensity of distance veiled its barrenness in a haze of tender violet. The sky was blue; deeply, intensely blue, with little clouds like flakes of bleached cotton floating aimlessly here and there. In a big, wild, unearthly way it was beautiful beyond any words which human beings have coined.

Helen May felt its bigness, its wildness, perhaps also its beauty, though the beauties of the desert land do not always appeal to alien eyes. She felt its bigness and its wildness; and she who had lived the cramped life of the town resented both, because she had no previous experience by which to measure any part of it. Also, she summed up all her resentment and her complete sense of bafflement at its bigness in one vehement sentence that lacked only one word of being a curse.

"Darn such a country!" is what she said, gritting the words between her teeth.

"See anything of 'em?" bellowed Vic from the spring below, where he was engaged in dipping up water with a tomato can and pouring it over his head, shivering ecstatically as the cold trickles ran down his neck.

Helen May glanced down at him with no softening of her eyes. Vic had lost nine goats out of the flock he had been set to herd, and he failed to manifest any great concern over the loss. On the contrary, he had told Helen May that he wished he could lose the whole bunch, and that he hoped coyotes had eaten them up, if they didn't have sense enough to stay with the rest. There had been a heated

argument, and Helen May had not felt sure of coming out of it a victor.

"No, I didn't, and you'd better get back to work or the rest will be gone, too," she called down to him petulantly. "It's bad enough to lose nine, without letting the rest go."

"Aw, 's matter with yuh, anyway?" Vic retorted in a tone he thought would not reach her ears. "By gosh, you don't want a feller to cool off, even! By gosh, you'd make a feller *sleep* with them darned goats if you could get away with it! Bu-lieve *me*, anybody can have my job that wants it. 'S hot enough to fry eggs in the shade, and she thinks, by hen, that I oughta stay out there—"

"Yes, I do. And if you want anything to eat to-night, Vic Stevenson, you get right back there with those goats! They're going over the hill this minute. Hurry, Vic! For heaven's sake, are you trying to take a *bath* in that can? Climb up that ridge and cut across and head them off! That old Billy's headed for town again—hurry!"

"Aw for gosh sake!" grumbled Vic, stooping reluctantly to pick up the old hoe-handle he used for a staff. "What ridge?" He paused to thunder up at her, his voice unexpectedly changing to a shrill falsetto on the last word, as frequently happens to rob a mancub of his dignity just when he needs it most.

"That ridge before your face, chump," Helen May informed him crossly. "If it comes to choosing between goats and a boy, I'll take the goats! And if there's any spot on the face of the earth worse than this, I'd like to know where it is. The idea of expecting people to live in such a country! It looks for all the world like magnified pictures of the moon's surface. And," she added with a dreary kind of vindictiveness, "it's here, and I'm here. I can't get away from it—that's the dickens of it." Then, because Helen May had a certain impish sense of humor, she sat down and laughed at the incongruity of it all. "Me—me, here in the desert trying to raise goats! Can you beat that?"

She watched Vic toiling up the ridge, using the hoe-handle with a slavish dependence upon its support that tickled Helen May again. "You'd think," she told the scenery for want of other companionship, "you'd think Vic was seventy-nine years old at the very least. Makes a difference whether he's after a bunch of tame goats or hiking with a bunch of boy scouts to the top of Mount Wilson! I don't believe that kid ever did wear his legs out having fun, and it's a sure thing

he'll never wear them out working! Say goats to him and he actually gets round-shouldered and limps."

Vic disappeared over the ridge beyond the spring. Lower down, where the ridge merged into the Basin itself, the big curly-horned Billy that had cost Helen May more than any half dozen of his followers stepped out briskly at the head of the band. Helen May wondered what new depravity was in his mind, and whether Vic would cross the gully he was in and confront Billy in time to change the one idea that seemed always to possess that animal.

Helen May did not know how vitally important it is to have a good dog at such work. She did not know that Billy and his band felt exactly like boys who have successfully eluded a too lax teacher, and that they would have yielded without argument to the bark of a trained sheep dog. She had set Vic a harder task than she realized; a task from which any experienced herder would have shrunk. In her ignorance she blamed Vic, and called him lazy and careless and a few other sisterly epithets which he did not altogether deserve.

She watched now, impatient because he was so long in crossing the gully; telling herself that he was trying to see how slow he could be, and that he did it just to be disagreeable and to irritate her—as if she were there of her own desire, and had bought those two hundred miserable goats to spite him. Harmony, as you must see, did not always dwell in Sunlight Basin.

Eventually Vic toiled up the far side of the gully, which was deep and as hot as an oven, and followed it down within rock-throwing distance of the goats. A well-aimed pebble struck Billy on the curve of one horn and halted him, the band huddling vacant-eyed behind him. Vic aimed and threw another, and Billy, turning his whiskered face upward, stared with resentful head-tossings and a defiant blat or two before he swerved back into the Basin, his band and Vic plodding after.

"Well, for a wonder!" Helen May ejaculated ungraciously, grudging Vic the small tribute of praise that was due him. But she was immediately ashamed of that, and told herself that it was pretty hard on the poor kid, and that after all he must hate the country worse than she did, even, which would certainly mean a good deal; and that she supposed he missed his boy chums just as much as she missed her friends, and found it just as hard to fit himself comfortably into a life for which he had no liking. Besides, it wasn't his health that had shunted them

both out here into the desert, and she ought to be ashamed of herself for treating him the way she did.

After that she decided that it was her business to find the nine goats that were lost. Vic certainly could not do both at once; and deep down in her heart Helen May knew that she was terribly afraid of Billy and would rather trudge the desert for hours under the hot sun than stay in the Basin watching the main flock. She wished that she could afford to hire a herder, but she shrunk from the expense. It seemed to her that she and Vic should be able to herd that one band, especially since there was nothing else for them to do out there except cook food and eat it.

Speaking of food, it seemed to take an enormous quantity to satisfy the hunger of two persons. Helen May was appalled at the insatiable appetite of Vic, who seemed never to have enough in his stomach. As for herself—well, she recalled the meal she had just eaten, and wondered how it could be possible for hunger to seize upon her so soon again. But even so, food could not occupy all of their time, and a two-room cabin does not take much keeping in order. They would simply be throwing away money if they hired a herder, and yet, how they both did loathe those goats!

She climbed back down the pinnacle, watching nervously for snakes and lizards and horned toads and such denizens of the desert. With a certain instinct for preparing against the worst, she took a two-quart canteen, such as soldiers carry, to the spring, and filled it and slung it over her shoulder. She went to the cabin and made a couple of sandwiches, and because she was not altogether inhuman she cut two thick slices of bread, spread them lavishly with jam, and carried them to Vic as a peace offering.

"I'm going to hunt those nasty brutes, Vic," she cried from a safe distance. "Come here and get this jam sandwich, and lend me that stick you've got. And if I don't get back by five, you start a fire."

"Where you going to look? If you couldn't see 'em from up there, I don't see the use of hunting." Vic was taking long steps towards the sandwich, and he stretched his sunburned face in that grin which might have made him famous in comedy had fate not set him down before his present ignoble task. "Yuh don't want to go far," he advised her perfunctorily. "We ought to have a couple of saddle horses. Why don't yuh—"

"What would we feed them on? Besides we've got to save what money we've got, Vic. We can walk till these insects grow wool enough to pay for something to ride on."

"Hair, you mean. I can get a gentle horse from that Mexican kid, Luis. He good as offered us the one—that I borrowed—" Vic was giving too much attention to the jam sandwich to argue very coherently.

"There's that old Billy starting off again; you watch him, Vic. Don't let him get a start, or goodness knows where he'll head for next. We can't keep a horse, I tell you. We need all this grass for the goats."

"Oh, darn the goats!"

In her heart Helen May quite agreed with the sentiment, but she could not consistently betray that fact to Vic. She therefore turned her back upon him, walking down the trail that led out of the Basin to the main trail a mile away, the trail which was the link connecting them with civilization of a sort.

Here passed the depressed, dust-covered stage three times a week. Here, in a macaroni box mounted on a post, they received and posted their mail. Helen May had indulged herself in a subscription to the Los Angeles daily paper that had always been left at their door every morning, the paper which Peter had read hastily over his morning mush. Every paper brought a pang of homesickness for the flower-decked city of her birth, but she felt as though she could not have kept her sanity without it. The full-page bargain ads she read hungrily. The weekly announcements of the movie shows, the news, the want columns—these were at once her solace and her torment; and if you have ever been exiled, you know what that means.

Here, too, she left her shopping list and money for the stage driver, who bought what she needed and left the goods at the foot of the post, and what money remained in a buckskin bag in the macaroni box.

An obliging stage driver was he, a tobacco chewing, red-faced, red-whiskered stage driver who nagged at his four horses incessantly and never was known to beat one of them; a garrulous, soft-hearted stage driver who understood very well how lonely these two young folks must be, and who therefore had some moth-eaten joke ready for whoever might be waiting for him at the macaroni box. Whenever Helen May apologized for the favor she must ask of him—which

was every time she handed him a list—the stage driver invariably a nasal kind of snort, spat far out over the wheel, and declared pettishly:

"It ain't a mite uh trouble in the world. That's what I'm *fur*—to help folks out along my rowt. Don't you worry a mite about that." Often as he said it, he yet gave it the tone of sincerity and of convincing freshness, as though he had never before given the matter a thought. Helen May did not know what she would have done without that stage driver to bridge the gulf between Sunlight Basin and the world.

But this was not stage day. That is to say, the stage had passed to the far side of its orbit, and would not return until to-morrow. From San Bonito it swung in a day-long journey across the desert to Malpais, thence by a different route to San Bonito again, so that Helen May never saw it returning whence it had come.

A cloud of desert dust always heralded its approach from the east. Sometimes after the first dust signal, it took him nearly an hour to top the low ridge which was really one rim of the Basin. Then Helen May would know that he carried passengers or freight that straightened the backs of the straining four horses in the long stretch of sand beyond the ridge and made their progress slow.

But to-day there was no dust signal, and the macaroni box was but a dismal reminder of her exile. The world was very far away, behind the violet rim of mountains, and she was just a speck in the desert. Her high laced boots were heavy, and the dust settled in the creases around her slim ankles, that could be perfectly fascinating in silken hose and dainty slippers. Her khaki skirt, of the divided kind much affected by tourists, had lost two big, pearl buttons, and she had no others to replace them. Her shirt-waist had its collar turned inside for coolness, and the hollow of her neck was sun-blistered and beginning to peel. Also her nose and her neck at the sides were showing a disposition to grow new skin for old. So much had the desert sun done for her.

But there was something else which the desert had done, something which Helen May did not fully realize. It had put a clear, steady look into her eyes in place of the glassy shine of fever. It was beginning to fill out that hollow in her neck, so that it no longer showed the angular ends of her collar bones. It had put a resilient quality into her walk, firmness into the poise of her head. It had made it physically possible, for instance, for Helen May to trudge out into the wild to hunt nine goats that had strayed from the main band.

Though she did not know it, a certain dream of Peter's had very nearly come true. For here were the vast plains, unpeopled, pure, immutable in their magnificent calm. At night the stars seemed to come down and hang just over Helen May's head. There was the little cottage of which Peter had dreamed—only Helen May called it a miserable little shack—hunched against a hill; sometimes a light winked through the window at the stars; sometimes Helen May was startled at the nearness and the shrill insistence of the coyotes. Here as Peter had dreamed so longingly and so hopelessly, were distance and quiet and calm. And here was Helen May coming through the sunlight—Peter never dreamed how hot it would be!—with her deep-gold hair tousled in the wind and with the little red spots gone from her cheeks and with health in her eyes that were the color of ripe chestnuts. When her skin had adjusted itself to the rigors of the climate, she would no doubt have freckles on her nose, just as Peter had dreamed she might have. And if she were walking, instead of riding the gentle-eyed pony which Peter had pictured, that was not Peter's fault, nor the fault of the dream. There was no laugh on her lips, however. Dreams are always pulling a veil of idealism over the face of reality, and so Helen May's face was not happy, as Peter had dreamed it might be, but petulant and grimly determined; her ripe-red lips were moving in anathemas directed at nine detested goats.

Peter could never have dreamed just that, but all the same it is a pity that, in order to make the dream a reality, Peter had been forced to deny himself the joy of seeing Helen May growing strong in "Arizona, New Mexico, or Colorado." It would have made the price he paid seem less terrible, less tragic.

CHAPTER SEVEN

MOONLIGHT, A MAN AND A SONG

Just out from the entrance to a deep, broad-bottomed arroyo where an automobile had been, Starr came upon something that surprised him very much, and it was not at all easy to surprise Starr. Here, in the first glory of a flaming sunset that turned the desert to a sea of unearthly, opal-tinted beauty, he came upon Helen May, trudging painfully along with an old hoe-handle for a staff, and driving nine reluctant nanny goats that alternately trotted and stood still to stare at the girl with foolish, amber-colored eyes.

Starr was trained to long desert distances, but his training had made it second nature to consider a horse the logical means of covering those distances. To find Helen May away out here, eight miles and more from Sunlight Basin, and to find her walking, shocked Starr unspeakably; shocked him out of his shyness and into free speech with her, as though he had known her a long while.

"Y' *lost*?" was his first greeting, while he instinctively swung Rabbit to head off a goat that suddenly "broke back" from the others.

Helen May looked up at him with relief struggling through the apathy of utter weariness. "No, but I might as well be. I'll never be able to get home alive, anyhow." She shook the hoe-handle menacingly at a hesitating goat and quite suddenly collapsed upon the nearest rock, and began to cry; not sentimentally or weakly or in any other feminine manner known to Starr, but with an angry recklessness that was like opening a safety valve. Helen May herself did not understand why she should go along for half a day calmly enough, and then, the minute this man rode up and spoke to her sympathetically, she should want to sit down and cry.

"I just—I've been walking since one o'clock! If I had a gun, I'd shoot every one

of them. I just—I think goats are simply *damnable* things!"

Starr turned and looked at the animals disapprovingly. "They sure are," he assented comfortingly. "Where you trying to take 'em—or ain't you?" he asked, with the confidence-inviting tone that made him so valuable to those who paid for his services.

"Home, if you can call it that!" Helen May found her handkerchief and proceeded to wipe the tears and the dust off her cheeks. She looked at Starr more attentively than at first when he had been just a human being who seemed friendly. "Oh, you're the man that stopped at the spring. Well, you know where I live, then. I was hunting these; they wandered off and Vic couldn't find them yesterday, so I—it was just accident that I came across them. I followed some tracks, and it looked to me as if they'd been driven off. There were horse tracks. That's what made me keep going—I was so mad. And now they won't go home or anywhere else. They just want to run around every which way."

Starr looked up the arroyo, hesitating. On the edge of San Bonito he had picked up the track of Silvertown cord tires, and he had followed it to the mouth of this arroyo. From certain signs easy for an experienced man to read, he had known the track was fairly fresh, fresh enough to make it worth his while to follow. And now here was a girl all tired out and a long way from home.

"Here, you climb onto Rabbit. He's gentle when he knows it's all right, and I won't stand for him acting up." Starr swung off beside her. "I'll help get the goats home. Where's your dog?"

"I haven't any dog. The man we bought the goats from wanted to sell me one, to help herd them, he said. But he asked twenty-five dollars for it—I suppose he thought because I looked green I'd stand for that!—and I wouldn't be held up that way. Vic and I have nothing to do but watch them. You—you mustn't bother," she added half-heartedly. "I can get them home all right. I'm rested now, and there's a moon, you know. Really, I can't let you bother about it. I know the way."

"Put your foot in the stirrup and climb on. You, Rabbit, you stand still, or I'll beat the—"

"Really, you mustn't think, because I cried a little bit—"

"Pile on to him now, while I hold him still. Or shall I pick you up and *put* you on?" Starr smiled while he said it, but there was a look in his eyes and around his mouth that made Helen May yield suddenly.

By her awkwardness Starr and Rabbit both knew that she had probably never before attempted to mount a horse. By the set of her lips Starr knew that she was afraid, but that she would break her neck before she would confess her fear. He liked her for that, and he was glad to see that Rabbit understood the case and drew upon his reserve of patience and good nature, standing like a rock until Helen May was settled in the saddle and Starr had turned the stirrups on their sides in the leather so that they would come nearer being the right length for her. Starr's hand sliding affectionately up Rabbit's neck and resting a moment on his jaw was all the assurance Rabbit needed that everything was all right.

"Now, just leave the reins loose, and let Rabbit come along to please himself," Starr instructed her quietly. "He'll follow me, and he'll pick his own trail. You don't have to do a thing but sit there and take it easy. He'll do the rest."

Helen May looked at him doubtfully, but she did not say anything. She braced herself in the stirrups, took a firm grip of the saddlehorn with one hand, and waited for what might befall. She had no fear of Starr, no further uneasiness over the coming night, the loneliness, the goats, or anything else. She felt as irresponsible, as safe, as any sheltered woman in her own home. I did not say she felt serene; she did not know yet how the horse would perform; but she seemed to lay that responsibility also on Starr's capable shoulders.

They moved off quietly enough, Starr afoot and driving the goats, Rabbit picking his way after him in leisurely fashion. So they crossed the arroyo mouth and climbed the ragged lip of its western side and traveled straight toward the flaming eye of the sun that seemed now to have winked itself nearly shut. The goats for some inexplicable reason showed no further disposition to go in nine different directions at once. Helen May relaxed from her stiff-muscled posture and began to experiment a little with the reins.

"Why, he steers easier than an automobile!" she exclaimed suddenly. "You just think which way you want to go, almost, and he does it. And you don't have to pull the lines the least bit, do you?"

Starr delayed his answer until he had made sure that she was not irritating Rabbit

with a too-officious guidance. When he saw that she was holding the reins loosely as he had told her to do, and was merely laying the weight of a rein on one side of the neck and then on the other, he smiled.

"I guess you've rode before," he hazarded. "The way you neck-rein—"

"No, honest. But my chum's brother had a big six, and Sundays he used to let me fuss with it, away out where the road was clear. It steered just like this horse; just as easy, I mean. I—why, see! I just *wondered* if he'd go to the right of that bush, and he turned that way just as if I'd told him to. Can you beat that?"

Starr did not say. Naturally, since she was a girl, and pretty, and since he was human, he was busy wondering what her chum's brother was like. He picked up a small rock and shied it at a goat that was not doing a thing that it shouldn't do, and felt better. He remembered then that at any rate her chum's brother was a long way off, and that he himself had nothing much to complain of right now. Then Helen May spoke again and shifted his thoughts to another subject.

"I believe I'd rather have a horse like this," she said, "than own that big, lovely take-me-to-glory car that was pathfinding around like a million dollars, a little while ago. I'll own up now that I was weeping partly because four great big porky men could ride around on cushions a foot thick, while a perfectly nice girl had to plough through the sand afoot. The way they skidded past me and buried me in a cloud of dust made me mad enough to throw rocks after them. Pigs! They never even stopped to ask if I wanted a ride or anything. They all glared at me through their goggles as if I hadn't any business walking on their desert."

"Did you know them?" Starr came and walked beside her, glancing frequently at her face.

"No, of course I didn't. I don't know anybody but the stage driver. I wouldn't have ridden with them, anyway. From what I saw of them they looked like Mexicans. But you'd think they might have shown some interest, wouldn't you?"

"I sure would," Starr stated with emphasis. "What kinda car was it, did you notice? Maybe I know who they are."

"Oh, it was a great big black car. They went by so fast and I was so tired and hot and—and pretty near swearing mad, I didn't notice the number at all. And they were glaring at me, and I was glaring at them, and then the driver stepped on the

accelerator just at a little crook in the road, and the hind wheels skidded about a ton of sand into my face and they were gone, like they were running from a speed cop. I'd much rather have a nice little automatic pony like this one," she added feelingly. "You don't have to bundle yourself up in dusters and goggles and things when you take a ride, do you? It—it makes the bigness of the country, and the barrenness of it, somehow fit together and take you into the pattern, when you ride a horse over it, don't you think?"

"I guess so," Starr assented, with an odd little slurring accent on the last word which gave the trite sentence an individual touch that appealed to Helen May. "It don't seem natural, somehow, to walk in a country like this."

"Oh, and you've got to, while I ride your horse! Or, have you got to? Is it just movie stuff, where a man rides behind on a horse, and lets the girl ride in front? I mean, is it feasible, or just a stunt for pictures?"

"Depends on the horse," Starr evaded. "It's got the say-so, mostly, whether it'll pack one person or two. Rabbit will, and when I get tired walking, I'll ride."

"Oh, that makes it better. I wasn't feeling comfortable riding, but men are so queer about thinking they must give a woman all the choice bits of comfort, and a woman has to give in or row about it. If you'll climb up and ride when you feel like it, I'll just settle down and enjoy myself."

Settling down and enjoying herself seemed to consist of gazing out over the desert and the hills and up at the sky that was showing the deep purple of dusk. It was what Starr wanted most of all, just then, for it left him free to study what she had told him of the big black automobile with four coated and goggled men who had looked like Mexicans; four men who had glared at her and then had speeded up to get away from her possible scrutiny.

For the first time since she had seen it from the spring seat of a jolting wagon from the one livery stable in Malpais, Helen May discovered that this wild, strange land was beautiful. For the first time she gloried in its bigness and its wildness, and did not resent its barrenness. The little brown birds that fluttered close to the ground and cheeped wistfully to one another in the dusk gave her an odd, sweet thrill of companionship. Jack rabbits sitting up on their hind legs for a brief scrutiny before they scurried away made her laugh to herself. The reddened clouds that rimmed the purple were the radiant shores of a wonderful, bottomless

sea, where the stars were the mast lights on ships hull down in the distance. She lifted her chest and drew in long breaths of clean, sweet air that is like no other air, and she remembered all at once that she had not coughed since daylight. She breathed again, deep and long, and felt that she was drawing some wonderful, healing ether into her lungs.

She looked at Starr, walking steadily along before her, swinging the hoe-handle lightly in his right hand, setting his feet down in the smoothest spots always and leaving nearly always a clear imprint of his foot in the sandy soil. There was a certain fascination in watching the lines of footprints he left behind him. She would know those footprints anywhere, she told herself. Small for a man, they were, and well-shaped, with the toes pointing out the least little bit, and with no blurring drag when he lifted his feet. She did not know that Starr wore riding boots made to his measure and costing close to twenty dollars a pair; if she had she would not have wondered at the fine shape of them, or at the individuality of the imprint they made. She conceived the belief that Rabbit knew those footprints also. She amused herself by watching how carefully the horse followed wherever they led. If Starr stepped to the right to avoid a rock, Rabbit stepped to the right to avoid that rock; never to the left, though the way might be as smooth and open. If Starr crossed a gully at a certain place, Rabbit followed scrupulously the tracks he made. Helen May considered that this little gray horse showed really human intelligence.

She realized the deepening dusk only when Starr's form grew vague and she could no longer see the prints his boots made. They were nearing the brown, lumpy ridge which hid Sunlight Basin from the plain, but Helen May was not particularly eager to reach it. For the first time she forgot the gnawing heart-hunger of homesickness, and was content with her present surroundings; content even with the goats that trotted submisively ahead of Starr.

When a soft radiance drifted into the darkness and made it a luminous, thin veil, Helen May gave a little cry and looked back. Since her hands moved with the swing of her shoulders, Rabbit turned sharply and faced the way she was looking, startled, displeased, but obedient. Starr stopped abruptly and turned back, coming close up beside her.

"What's wrong?" he asked in an undertone. "See anything?"

"The moon," Helen May gave a hushed little laugh. "I'd forgotten—forgotten I

was alive, almost. I was just soaking in the beauty of it through every pore. And then it got dark so I couldn't see your footprints any more, and then such a queer, beautiful look came on everything. I turned to look, and this little automatic pony turned to look, too. But—isn't it wonderful? Everything, I mean. Just everything—the whole world and the stars and the sky—"

Starr lifted an arm and laid it over Rabbit's neck, fingering the silver-white mane absently. It brought him quite close to Helen May, so that she could have put her hand on his shoulder.

"Yes. It's wonderful—when it ain't terrible," he said, his voice low.

After a silent minute she answered him, in the hushed tone that seemed most in harmony with the tremendous sweep of sky and that great stretch of plain and bare mountain. "I see what you mean. It is terrible even when it's most wonderful. But one little human alone with it would be—"

"Sh-sh." he whispered. "Listen a minute. Did you ever *hear* a big silence like this?"

"No," she breathed eagerly. "Sh-sh—"

At first there was nothing save the whisper of a breeze that stirred the greasewood and then was still. Full in their faces the moon swung clear of the mountains behind San Bonito and hung there, a luminous yellow ball in the deep, star-sprinkled purple. Across the desert it flung a faint, straight pathway in the sand. Rabbit gave a long sigh, turned his head to look back at his master, and then stood motionless again. Far on a hilltop a coyote pointed his nose to the moon and yap-yap-yapped, with a shrill, long-drawn tremolo wail that made the girl catch her breath. Behind them the nine goats moved closer together and huddled afraid beside a clump of bushes. The little breeze whispered again. A night bird called in a hurried, frightened way, and upon the last notes came the eerie cry of a little night owl.

The girl's face was uplifted, delicately lighted by the moon. Her eyes shone dark with those fluttering, sweet wraiths of thoughts which we may not prison in speech, which words only deaden and crush into vapid sentimentalism. Life, held in a great unutterable calm, seemed to lie out there in the radiant, vague distance, asleep and smiling cryptically while it slept.

Her eyes turned to Starr, whose name she did not know; who had twice come riding out of the distance to do her some slight service before he rode on into the distance that seemed so vast. Who was he? What petty round of duties and pleasures made up his daily, intimate life? She did not know. She did not feel the need of knowing.

Standing there with his thin face turned to the moon so that she saw, clean-cut against the night, his strong profile; with one arm thrown across the neck of his horse and his big hat tilted back so that she could see the heavy, brown hair that framed his fine forehead; with the look of a dreamer in his eyes and the wistfulness of the lonely on his lips, all at once he seemed to be a part of the desert and its mysteries.

She could picture him living alone somewhere in its wild fastness, aloof from the little things of life. He seemed to epitomize vividly the meaning of a song she had often sung unmeaningly:

"From the desert I come to thee,
On my Arab shod with fire;
And the winds are left behind
In the speed of my desire."

While she looked—while the words of that old *Bedouin Love Song* thrummed through her memory, quite suddenly Starr began to sing, taking up the song where her memory had brought her:

"Till the sun grows cold,
And the stars are old,
And the leaves of the Judgment Book unfold!"

Softly he sang, as though he had forgotten that she was there. Softly, but with a resonant, vibrating quality that made the words alive and quivering with meaning.

Helen May caught her breath. How did he know she was thinking that song? How did he chance to take it up just at the point where her memory had carried it? Had he read her mind? She stared at him, her lips parted; wondering, a little awed, but listening and thrilling to the human sweetness of his tones. And when he had sung the last yearning note of primitive desire, Starr turned his head and looked into her eyes.

Helen May felt as though he had taken her in his arms and kissed her lingeringly. Yet he had not moved except to turn his face toward her. She could not look away, could not even try to pull her eyes from his. It was as though she yielded. She felt suffocated, though her breath came quickly, a little unevenly.

Starr looked away, across the desert where the moon lighted it whitely. It was as though he had released her. She felt flustered, disconcerted. She could not understand herself or him, or the primary forces that had moved them both. And why had he sung that *Bedouin Love Song* just as she was thinking it as something that explained him and identified him? It was mysterious as the desert itself lying there so quiet under the moon. It was weird as the cry of the coyote. It was uncanny as spirit rappings. But she could not feel any resentment; only a thrill that was part pleasure and part pain. She wondered if he had felt the same; if he knew. But she could not bring herself to face even the thought of asking him. It was like the night silence around them: speech would dwarf and cheapen and distort.

Rabbit lifted his head again, perking his ears forward toward a new sound that had nothing weird or mysterious about it; a sound that was essentially earthly, material, modern, the distant purr of a high-powered automobile on the trail away to their right. Starr turned his face that way, listening as the horse listened. It seemed to Helen May as though he had become again earthy and material and modern, with the desert love song but the fading memory of a dream. He listened, and she received the impression that something more than idle curiosity held him intent upon the sound.

The purring persisted, lessened, grew louder again. Starr still looked that way, listening intently. The machine swept nearer, so that the clear night air carried the sounds distinctly to where they stood. Starr even caught the humming of the rear gears and knew that only now and then does a machine have that peculiar, droning hum; Starr studied it, tried to impress the sound upon his memory.

The trail looped around the head of a sandy draw and wound over the crest of a low ridge before it straightened out for a three-mile level run in the direction of San Bonito, miles away. In walking, Starr had cut straight across that gully and the loop, so that they had crossed the trail twice in their journey thus far, and were still within half a mile of the head of the loop. They should have been able to see the lights, or at least the reflection of them on the ridge when they came to the draw. But there was no bright path on sky or earth.

They heard the car ease down the hill, heard the grind of the gears as the driver shifted to the intermediate for the climb that came after. They heard the chug of the engine taking the steep grade. Then they should have caught the white glare of the headlights as the car topped the ridge. Starr knew that nothing obstructed the view, that in daylight they could have seen the yellow-brown ribbon of trail where it curved over the ridge. The machine was coming directly toward them for a short distance, but there was no light whatever. Starr knew then that whoever they were, they were running without lights.

"Well, I guess we'd better be ambling along," he said casually, when the automobile had purred its way beyond hearing. "It's three or four miles yet, and you're tired."

"Not so much." Helen May's voice was a little lower than usual, but that was the only sign she gave of any recent deep emotion. "I'd as soon walk awhile and let you ride." She shrank now from the thought of both riding.

"When you've ridden as far as I have," said Starr, "you'll know it's a rest to get down and travel afoot for a few miles." He might have added that it would have been a rest had he not been hampered by those high-heeled riding boots, but consideration for her mental ease did not permit him to mention it. He said no more, but started the goats ahead of him and kept them moving in a straight line for Sunlight Basin. As before, Rabbit followed slavishly in his footsteps, nose dropped to the angle of placid acceptance, ears twitching forward and back so that he would lose no slightest sound.

Helen May fell again under the spell of the desert and the moon. Starr, walking steadily through the white-lighted barrenness with his shadow always moving like a ghost before him, fitted once more into the desert. Again she repeated mentally the words of the song:

Let the night-winds touch thy brow
With the breath of my burning sigh,
And melt thee to hear the vow
Of a love that shall not die!

Till the sun grows cold,
And the stars are old,
And the leaves of the Judgment Book unfold!

And now the lines sung themselves through her brain with the memory of Starr's voice. But Starr did not sing again, though Helen May, curious to know if her thoughts held any power over him, gazed intently at his back and willed him to sing. He did not look back at her, even when she finally descended weakly to the more direct influence of humming the air softly—but not too softly for him to hear.

Starr paid no attention whatever. He seemed to be thinking deeply—but he did not seem to be thinking of Helen May, nor of desert love songs. Helen May continued to watch him, but she was piqued at his calm indifference. Why, she told herself petulantly, he paid more attention to those goats than he did to her—and one would think, after that song and that look…. But there she stopped, precipitately retreating from the thought of that look.

He was a queer fellow, she told herself with careful tolerance and a little condescension. A true product of the desert; as changeable and as sphynxlike and as impossible from any personal, human standpoint. Look how beautiful the desert could be, how terribly uplifting and calm and—and big. Yet to-morrow it might be either a burning waste of heat and sand and bare rock, or it might be a howling waste of wind and sand (if one of those sand storms came up). To herself she called him the Man of the Desert, and she added the word mysterious, and she also added two lines of the song because they fitted exactly her conception of him as she knew him. The lines were these:

From the desert I come to thee,
On my Arab shod with fire.

This, in spite of the fact that Rabbit had none of the fiery traits of an Arabian steed; nor could he by any stretch of the imagination be accused of being shod with fire, he who planted his hoofs so sedately! Shod with velvet would have come nearer describing him.

So Helen May, who was something of a dreamer when Life let her alone long enough, rode home through the moonlight and wove cloth-of-gold from the magic of the night, and with the fairy fabric she clothed Starr—who was, as we know, just an ordinary human being—so that he walked before her, not as a plain, ungrammatical, sometimes profane young man who was helping her home with her goats, but a mysterious, romantic figure evolved somehow out of the vastness in which she lived; who would presently recede again into the

mysterious wild whence he had come.

It was foolish. She knew that it was foolish. But she had been living rather harshly and rather materially for some time, and she hungered for the romance of youth. Starr was the only person who had come to her untagged by the sordid, everyday petty details of life. It did not hurt him to be idealized, but it might have hurt Helen May a little to know that he was pondering so earthly a subject as a big, black automobile careering without lights across the desert and carrying four men who looked like Mexicans.

CHAPTER EIGHT

HOLMAN SOMMEKS, SCIENTIST

Helen May, under a last year's parasol of pink silk from which the sun had drawn much of its pinkness and the wind and dust its freshness, sat beside the road with her back against the post that held the macaroni box, and waited for the stage. Her face did not need the pink light of the parasol, for it was red enough after that broiling walk of yesterday. The desert did not look so romantic by the garish light of midday, but she stared out over it and saw, as with eyes newly opened to appreciation, that there was a certain charm even in its garishness. She had lost a good deal of moodiness and a good deal of discontent, somewhere along the moonlight trail of last night, and she hummed a tune while she waited. No need to tell you that it was: "*Till the sun grows cold, till the stars are old—*" No need to tell you, either, of whom she was thinking while she sang.

But part of the time she was wondering what mail she would get. Her chum would write, of course; being a good, faithful chum, she would probably continue to write two or three letters a week for the next three months. After that she would drop to one long letter a month for awhile; and after that—well, she was a faithful chum, but life persists in bearing one past the eddy that holds friendship circling round and round in a pool of memories. The chum's brother had written twice, however; exuberant letters full of current comedy and full-blooded cheerfulness and safely vague sentiment which he had partly felt at the time he wrote. He had "joshed" Helen May a good deal about the goats, even to the extent of addressing her as "Dear Goat-Lady" in the last letter, with the word "Lady" underscored and scrawled the whole width of the page. Helen May had puzzled over the obscure meaning of that, and had decided that it would have sounded funny, perhaps, if he had said it that way, but that it "didn't get over" on paper.

She wondered if he would write again, or if his correspondence would prove as

spasmodic, as easily interrupted as his attentions had been when they were both in the same town. Chum's brother was a nice, big, comfy kind of young man; the trouble was that he was too popular to give all his interest to one girl. You know how it is when a man stands six feet tall and has wavy hair and a misleading smile and a great, big, deep-cushioned roadster built for two. Helen May appreciated his writing two letters to her, he who hated so to write letters, but her faith in the future was small. Still, he might write. It seemed worth while to wait for the stage.

Just when she was telling herself that the stage was late, far over the ridge rose the dust signal. Her pulse quickened expectantly; so much had loneliness done for her. She watched it, and she tried not to admit to herself that it did not look like the cloud kicked up by the four trotting stage horses. She tried not to believe that the cloud was much too small to have been made by their clattering progress. It must be the stage. It was past time for it to arrive at the post. And it had not gone by, for she had sent for a can of baking powder and a dozen lemons and fifty cents worth of canned milk (the delicatessen habit of buying in small quantities still hampered her) and, even if the stage had passed earlier than usual, the stuff would have been left at the post for her, even though there was no mail. But it could not have passed. She would have seen the dust, that always hung low over the trail like the drooping tail of a comet, and when the day was still took half an hour at least to settle again for the next passer-by. And besides, she had come to know the tracks the stage left in the trail. It *could not* have passed. And it had to come; it carried the government mail. And yet, that dust did not look like the stage dust. (Trivial worries, you say? Then try living forty miles from a post office, ten from the nearest neighbor, and fifteen hundred from your dearly beloved Home Town. Try living there, not because you want to but because you must; hating it, hungering for human companionship. Try it with heat and wind and sand and great, arid stretches of a land that is strange to you. Honestly, I think you would have been out there just after sunrise to wait for that stage, and if it were late you would have walked down the trail to meet it!)

Helen May remained by the post, but she got up and stood on a rock that protruded six inches or so above the sand. Of course she could not see over the ridge—she could not have done that if she had climbed a telegraph pole; only there was no pole to climb—but she felt a little closer to seeing. That dust did not look like stage dust!

You would be surprised to know how much Helen May had learned about dust

clouds. She could tell an automobile ten miles away, just by the swift gathering of the gray cloud. She could tell where bands of sheep or herds of cattle were being driven across the plain. She even knew when a saddle horse was coming, or a freight team or—the stage.

She suddenly owned to herself that she was disappointed and rather worried. For behind this cloud that troubled her there was no second one building up over the skyline and growing more dense as the disturber approached. She could not imagine what had happened to that red-whiskered, tobacco-chewing stage driver. She looked at her wrist watch and saw that he was exactly twenty minutes later than his very latest arrival, and she felt personally slighted and aggrieved.

For that reason she sat under her pink silk parasol and stared crossly under her eyebrows at the horse and man and the dust-grimed rattle-wheeled buggy that eventually emerged from the gray cloud. The horse was a pudgy bay that set his feet stolidly down in the trail, and dragged his toes through it as though he delighted in kicking up all the dust he could. By that trick he had puzzled Helen May a little, just at first, though he had not been able to simulate the passing of four horses. The buggy was such as improvident farmers used to drive (before they bought Fords) near harvest time; scaly as to paint, warped and loose-spoked as to wheels, making more noise than progress along the country roads.

The man held the lines so loosely that they sagged under the wire-mended traces of sunburned leather. He leaned a little forward, as though it was not worth while sitting straight on so hot a day. He wore an old Panama hat that had cost him a good deal when it was new and had saved him a good deal since in straw hats which he had not been compelled to buy so long as this one held together. It was pulled down in front so that it shaded his face—a face lean and lined and dark, with thin lips that could be tender and humorous in certain moods. His eyes were hazel, like the eyes of Starr, yet one never thought of them as being at all like Starr's eyes. They burned always with some inner fire of life; they laughed at life, and yet they did not seem to express mirth. They seemed to say that life was a joke, a damnable joke on mankind; that they saw the joke and resented it even while they laughed at it. For the rest, the man was more than fifty years old, but his hair was thick and black as a crow, and his eyebrows were inclined to bushiness, inclined also to slant upward. A strong face; an unusual face, but a likeable one, it was. And that is a fair description of Holman Sommers as Helen May first saw him.

He drove up to where she sat, and she tilted her pink silk parasol between them as though to keep the dust from settling thick upon her stained khaki skirt and her desert-dingy high-laced boots. She was not interested in him, and her manner of expressing indifference could not have misled a horned toad. She was too fresh from city life to have fallen into the habit of speaking to strangers easily and as a matter of country courtesy. Even when the buggy stopped beside her, she did not show any eagerness to move the pink screen so that they might look at each other.

"How do you do?" said he, quite as though he were greeting her in her own home. "You are Miss Stevenson, I feel sure. I am Holman Sommers, at your service. I am under the impression that I have with me a few articles which may be of some interest to you, Miss Stevenson. I chanced to come upon the stage several miles farther down the road. A wheel had given away, and there was every indication that the delay would prove serious, so when the driver mentioned the fact that he had mail and merchandise for you, I volunteered to act as his substitute and deliver them safely into your hands. I hope therefore that the service will in some slight measure atone for my presumption in forcing my acquaintance upon you."

At the second sentence the pink parasol became violently agitated. At the third Helen May was staring at him, mentally if not actually open-mouthed. At the last she was standing up and reaching for her mail, and she had not yet decided in her mind whether he was joking or whether he expected to be taken seriously. Even when he laughed, with that odd, dancing light in his eyes, she could not be sure. But because his voice was warm with human sympathy and the cordiality of a man who is very sure of himself and can afford to be cordial, she smiled back at him.

"That's awfully good of you, Mr. Sommers," she said, shuffling her handful of letters eagerly to see who had written them; more particularly to see if Chum's brother had written one of them. "I hope you didn't drive out of your way to bring them" (there *was* one; a big, fat one that had taken two stamps! And one from Chum herself, and—but she went back gloatingly to the thick, heavy envelope with the bold, black handwriting that needed the whole face of the envelope for her name and address), "because I know that miles are awfully long in this country."

"Yes? You have discovered that incontrovertible fact, have you? Then I hope you

will permit me to drive you home, especially since these packages are much too numerous and too weighty for you to carry in your arms. As a matter of fact, I have been hoping for an opportunity to meet our new neighbors. Neighbors are precious in our sight, I assure you, Miss Stevenson, and only the misfortune of illness in the household has prevented my sister from looking you up long ago. How long have you been here? Three weeks, or four?" His tone added: "You poor child," or something equally sympathetic, and he smiled while he cramped the old buggy so that she could get into it without rubbing her skirt against the dustladen wheel.

Helen May certainly had never seen any one just like Holman Sommers, though she had met hundreds of men in a business way. She had met men who ran to polysyllables and pompousness, but she had never known the polysyllables to accompany so simple a manner. She had seen men slouching around in old straw hats-and shoddy gray trousers and negligée shirts with the tie askew, and the clothes had spelled poverty or shiftlessness. Whereas they made Holman Sommers look like a great man indulging himself in the luxury of old clothes on a holiday.

He seemed absolutely unconscious that he and his rattly buggy and the harness on the horse were all very shabby, and that the horse was fat and pudgy and scrawny of mane; and for that she admired him.

Before they reached the low adobe cabin, she felt that she was much better acquainted with Holman Sommers than with Starr, whose name she still did not know, although he had stayed an hour talking to Vic and praising her cooking the night before. She did not, for all the time she had spent with him, know anything definite about Starr, whereas she presently knew a great deal about Holman Sommers, and approved of all she knew.

He had a past which, she sensed vaguely, had been rather brilliant. He must have been a war correspondent, because he compared the present great war with the Japanese-Russian War and with the South African War, and he seemed to have been right in the middle of both, or he could not have spoken so intimately of them. He seemed to know all about the real, underlying causes of them and knew just where it would all end, and what nations would be drawn into it before they were through. He did not say that he knew all about the war, but after he had spoken a few casual sentences upon the subject Helen May felt that he knew a great deal more than he said.

He also knew all about raising goats. He slid very easily, too, from the war to goat-raising. He had about four hundred, and he gave her a lot of valuable advice about the most profitable way in which to handle them.

When he saw Vic legging it along the slope behind the Basin to head off Billy and his slavish nannies, he shook his head commiseratingly. "There is not a scintilla of doubt in my mind," he told her gently, "that a trained dog would be of immeasurable benefit to you. I fear you made a grave mistake, Miss Stevenson, when you failed to possess yourself of a good dog. I might go so far as to say that a dog is absolutely indispensable to the successful handling of goats, or, for that matter, of sheep, either." (He pronounced the last word eyether.)

"That's what my desert man told me," said Helen May demurely, "only he didn't tell me that way, exactly."

"Yes? Then I have no hesitation whatever in assuring you that your desert man was unqualifiedly accurate in his statement of your need."

Helen May bit her lip. "Then I'll tell him," she said, still more demurely.

Secretly she hoped that he would rise to the bait, but he apparently accepted her words in good faith and went on telling her just how to range goats far afield in good weather so that the grazing in the Basin itself would be held in reserve for storms. It was a very grave error, said Holman Sommers, to exhaust the pasturage immediately contiguous to the home corral. It might almost be defined as downright improvidence. Then he forestalled any resentment she might feel by apologizing for his seeming presumption. But he apprehended the fact that she and her brother were both inexperienced, and he would be sorry indeed to see them suffer any loss because of that inexperience. His practical knowledge of the business was at her service, he said, and he should feel that he was culpably negligent of his duty as a neighbor if he failed to point out to her any glaring fault in their method.

Helen May had felt just a little resentful of the words downright improvidence. Had she not walked rather than spend money and grass on a horse? Had she not daily denied herself things which she considered necessities, that she might husband the precious balance of Peter's insurance money? But she swallowed her resentment and thanked him quite humbly for his kindness in telling her how to manage. She owned to her inexperience, and she said that she would greatly

appreciate any advice which he might care to give.

Her Man of the Desert, she remembered, had not given her advice, though he must have seen how badly she needed it. He had asked her where her dog was, taking it for granted, apparently, that she would have one. But when she had told him about not buying the dog, he had not said another word about it. And he had not said anything about their letting the goats eat up all the grass in the Basin, first thing, instead of saving it for bad weather. This Holman Sommers, she decided, was awfully kind, even if he did talk like a professor or something; kinder than her desert man. No, not kinder, but perhaps more truly helpful.

At the house he told her just how to fix a "coolereupboard" under the lone mesquite tree which stood at one end of the adobe cabin. It was really very simple, as he explained it, and he assured her, in his scientific terminology, that it would be cool. He went to the spring and showed her where she could have Vic dig out the bank and fit in a rock shelf for butter. He assured her that she was fortunate in having a living spring so near the house. It was, he said, of incalculable importance in that country to have cold, pure water always at hand.

When he discovered that she was a stenographer, and that she had her typewriter with her, he was immensely pleased, so pleased that his eyes shone with delight.

"Ah! now I see why the fates drove me forth upon the highway this morning," said he. "Do you know that I have a large volume of work for an expert typist, and that I have thus far felt that my present isolation in the desert wastes was an almost unsurmountable obstacle to having the work done in a satisfactory manner? I have been engaged upon a certain work on sociological problems and how they have developed with the growth of civilization. You will readily apprehend that great care must be exercised in making the copy practically letter perfect. Furthermore, I find myself constantly revising the manuscript. I should want to supervise the work rather closely, and for that reason I have not as yet arranged for the final typing.

"Now if you care to assume the task, I can assure you that I shall feel tremendously grateful, besides making adequate remuneration for the labor involved."

That is the way he put it, and that is how it happened that Helen May let herself in for the hardest piece of work she had ever attempted since she sold gloves at

Bullocks' all day and attended night school all the evening, learning shorthand and typewriting and bookkeeping, and permitting the white plague to fasten itself upon her while she bent to her studies.

She let herself in for it because she believed she had plenty of time, and because Holman Sommers was in no hurry for the manuscript, which he did not expect to see completed for a year or so, since a work so erudite required much time and thought, being altogether different from current fiction, which requires none at all.

Helen May was secretly aghast at the pile of scrawled writing interlined and crossed out, with marginal notes and footnotes and references and what not; but she let herself in for the job of typing his book for him—which is enough for the present.

CHAPTER NINE

PAT, A NICE DOGGUMS

'"The human polyp incessantly builds upon a coral reef. They become lithified as it were and constitute the strata of the psychozoic stage'—I told you the butter's at the spring. Will you leave me alone? That's the third page I've spoiled over psycho-what-you-call-it. Go on back and herd your goats, and for gracious sake, can that tulip-and-rose song! I hate it." Helen May ripped a page with two carbon copies out of the machine, pulled out the carbons and crumpled three sheets of paper into a ball which she threw into a far corner.

"Gee, but you're pecky to-day! You act like an extra slammed into a sob lead and gettin' up stage about it. I wish that long-worded hide had never showed up with his soiled package of nut science. A feller can't *live* with you, by gosh, since you —"

"Well, listen to this, Vic! 'There is a radical difference between organic and social evolution, the formula most easily expressing this distinction being that environment transforms the animal, while man transforms the environment. This transformation—'"

"Hel-up! Hel-up!" Vic went staggering out of the door with his palm pressed against his forehead in the gesture meant to register great mental agony, while his face was split with that nearly famous comedy grin of his. "Serves you right," he flung hack at her in his normal tone of brotherly condescension. "The way you fell for that nut, like you was a starved squirrel shut up in a peanut wagon, by gosh! Hope you're bogged down in jawbreakers the rest of the summer. Serves yuh right, but you needn't think you can take it out on me. And," he draped himself around the door jamb to add pointedly, "you should worry about the tulip song. If I'm willing to stand for you yawping day and night about the sun growin' co-old, and all that bunk—"

"Oh, beat it, and shut up!" Helen May looked up from evening the edges of fresh paper and carbon to say sharply: "You better take a look and see where Billy is. And I'll tell you one thing: If you go and lose any more goats, you needn't think for a minute that I'll walk my head off getting them for you."

"Aw, where do you get that line—walk your head off? I seem to remember a close-up of you riding home on horseback with moonlight atmosphere and a fellow to drive your goats. And you giving him the baby-eyed stare like he was a screen idol and you was an extra that was strong for him. Bu-lieve me, Helen Blazes, I'm wise. You're wishing a goat would get lost—now, while the moon's workin' steady!"

"Oh, beat it, Vic! I've got work to do, if you haven't." And to prove it, Helen May began to type at her best speed.

Vic languidly removed himself from the door jamb and with a parting "I should bibble," started back to his goats, which he had refused to graze outside the Basin as Holman Sommers advised. Helen May began valiantly to struggle with the fine, symmetrical, but almost unreadable chirography of the man of many words. She succeeded in transcribing the human polyp properly lithified and correctly constituting the strata of the psychozoic age, when Vic stuck his head in at the door again.

"From the des-urt he comes to thee-ee-ee,
And he's got a dog for thee to see-ee."

He paraphrased mockingly, going down to that terrifically deep-sea bass note of a boy whose voice is changing.

Helen May threw her eraser at him and missed. It went hurtling out into the yard and struck Starr on the point of the jaw, as he was riding up to the cabin.

Whereat Vic gave a brazenly exultant whoop and rushed off to his goats, bellowing raucously:

"When you wore a too-lup, a sweet yellow too-lup
'N I wore a big red ro-o-ose—"

and looking back frequently in a half curious, half wistful way. Vic, if you will stop to think of it, had been transplanted rather suddenly from the midst of many

happy-go-lucky companions to an isolation lightened only by a mere sister's vicarious comradeship. If he yearned secretly for a share of Starr's interest, surely no one can blame him; but that he should voluntarily remove himself from Starr's presence in the belief that he had come to see Helen May exclusively, proves that Vic had the makings of a hero.

Starr dismounted and picked up the eraser from under the investigative nose of a coarse-haired, ugly, brown and black dog that had been following Rabbit's heels. He took the eraser to Helen May, standing embarrassed in the doorway, and the dog followed and sniffed first her slipper toes and then her hands, which she held out to it ingratiatingly; after which appraisement the dog waggled its stub of a tail in token of his friendliness.

"If you was a Mexican he'd a showed you his teeth," Starr observed pridefully. "How are you, after your jaunt the other night?"

"Just fine," Helen May testified graciously. It just happened (or had it just happened?) that she was dressed that day in a white crêpe de chine blouse and a white corduroy skirt, and had on white slippers and white stockings. At the top button of her blouse (she could not have touched that button with her chin if she had tried) was a brown velvet bow the exact shade of her eyes. Her hair was done low and loose with a negligent wave where it turned back from her left eyebrow. Peter had worshipped dumbly his Babe in that particular dress, and had considered her beautiful. One cannot wonder then that Starr's eyes paid tribute with a second long glance.

Starr had ridden a good many miles out of his way and had argued for a good while, and had finally paid a good many dollars to get the dog that sniffed and wagged at Helen May. The dog was a thoroughbred Airedale and had been taught from its puppyhood to herd goats and fight all intruders upon his flock and to hate Mexicans wherever he met them. He had learned to do both very thoroughly, hence the argument and the dollars necessary before Starr could gain possession of him.

Starr did not need a dog; certainly not that dog. He had no goats to herd, and he could hate Mexicana without any help or encouragement when they needed hating. But he had not grudged the trouble and expense, because Helen May needed it. He might have earned more gratitude had he told her the truth instead of hiding it like guilt. This was his way of going at the subject, and he waited,

mind you, until he had announced nonchalantly that he must be getting along, and that he had just stopped to get a drink and to see how they were making out!

"Blame dog's taken a notion to you. Followed me out from town. I throwed rocks at him till my arm ached—"

"Why, you mean thing! You might have hit him and hurt him, and he's a nice dog. Poor old purp! Did he throw rocks, honest? He *did*? Well, just for that, I've got a nice ham bone that you can have to gnaw on, and he can't have a snippy bit of it. All he can do is eat a piece of lemon pie that will probably make him sick. We hope so, don't we? Throwing rocks at a nice, ugly, stubby dog that wanted to follow!"

Starr accepted the pie gratefully and looked properly ashamed of himself. The dog accepted the ham bone and immediately stretched himself out with his nose and front paws hugging it close, and growling threats at imaginary vandals. Now and then he glanced up gratefully at Helen May, who continued to speak of him in a commiserating tone.

"He sure has taken a notion to you," Starr persisted between mouthfuls. "You can have him, for all of me. I don't want the blame cur tagging me around. I'm liable to take a shot at him if I get peeved over something—"

"You dare!" Helen May regarded him sternly from under her lashes, her chin tilted downward. "Do you always take a shot at something when you get peeved?"

"Well, I'm liable to," Starr admitted darkly. "A dog especially. You better keep him if you don't want him hurt or anything." He took a bite of pie. (It was not very good pie. The crust was soggy because Johnny Calvert's cook stove was not a good baker, and the frosting had gone watery, because the eggs were stale, and Helen May had made a mistake and used too much sugar in the filling; but Starr liked it, anyway, just because she had made it.) "Maybe you can learn him to herd goats," he suggested, as though the idea had just occurred to him.

"Oh, I wonder if he would! Would you, doggums?"

"We'll try him a whirl and see," Starr offered cheerfully. He finished the pie in one more swallow, handed back the plate, and wiped his fingers, man-fashion, on his trousers.

"Come on, Pat. He likes Pat for a name," he explained carefully to Helen May. "I called him about every name I could think of, and that's the one he seems to sabe most."

"I should say he does! Why, he left his bone when you called Pat. Now that's a shame, doggums!"

"Oh, well, we'll let him polish off his bone first." Starr made the offer with praiseworthy cheerfulness, and sat down on his heels with his back against the adobe wall to wait the dog's pleasure.

"Well, that makes up for some of the rocks," Helen May approved generously, "and for some of the names you say you called him. And that reminds me, Man of the Desert, I suppose you have a name of some sort. I never heard what it was. Is it—Smith, perhaps?"

"My name's Starr," he told her, with a little glow under the tan of his cheeks. "S, t, a, double r, Starr. I forgot I never told you. I've got a couple of given names, but I'd want to shoot a man that called me by 'em. Folks always call me just Starr, and maybe a few other things behind my back."

Helen May dropped her chin and looked at him steadily from under her eyebrows. "If there's anything that drives me perfectly wild," she said finally, "it's a mystery. I've just simply got to know what those names are. I'll never mention them, honest. But—"

"Chauncy DeWitt," Starr confessed. "Forget 'em. They was wished onto me when I wasn't able to defend myself."

"Given names are horrid things, aren't they?" Helen May sympathized. "I think mine is perfectly imbecile. Fathers and mothers shouldn't be allowed to choose names for their children. They ought to wait till the kids are big enough to choose for themselves. If I ever have any, I'll call them It. When they grow up they can name themselves anything they like."

"You've got no right to kick," Starr declared bluntly. "Your name suits you fine."

His eyes said more than that, so that Helen May gave her attention to the dog. "There, now, you've licked it and polished it and left teeth marks all over it," she said, meaning the bone. "Come on, Pat, and let's see if you're a trained

doggums." She looked up at Starr and smiled. "Suppose he starts running after them; he might chase them clear off the ranch, and then what?"

"I guess the supply of rocks'll hold out," Starr hinted, and snapped his fingers at the dog, which went to heel as a matter of course.

"If you throw rocks at that dog, I'll throw rocks at you," Helen May threatened viciously.

"And I'll hit, and you'll miss," Starr added placidly. "Come on, let's get busy and see if you deserved that bone."

Helen May had learned from uncomfortable experience that high-heeled slippers are not made for tramping over rocks and sand. She said that she would come as soon as she put on some shoes; but Starr chose to wait for her, though he pretended, to himself as much as to her, that he must take the bridle off Rabbit and let him pick a few mouthfuls of grass while he had the chance. Also he loosened the cinch and killed a fly or two on Rabbit's neck, and so managed to put in the time until Helen May appeared in her khaki skirt and her high boots.

"That's the sensible outfit for this work," Starr plucked up courage to comment as they started off. "That kid brother of yours must get pretty lonesome too, out here," he added. "If you had some one to stay with you, I'd take him out on a trip with me once in a while and show him the country and let him learn to handle himself with a horse and gun. A fellow's got to learn, in this country. So have you. How about it? Ever shoot a gun, either of you?"

"Vic used to keep me broke, begging money for the shooting gallery down near our place," said Helen May. "I used to shoot there a little."

"Popgun stuff, but good practice," said Starr succinctly. "Got a gun on the ranch?"

"No, only Vic's little single-shot twenty-two. That's good enough for jack rabbits. What would we want a gun for?"

Starr laughed. "Season's always open for coyotes, and you could pick up a little money in bounties now and then, if you had a gun," he said. "That would keep you out in the open, too. I dunno but what I've got a rifle I could let you have. I did have one, a little too light a calibre for me, but it would be just about right

for you. It's a 25-35 carbine. I'm right sure I've got that gun on hand yet. I'll bring it over to you. You sure ought to have a gun."

They were nearing the goats scattered over the slope that was shadiest, chosen for Vic's comfort and not because of any thought for his charges. Vic himself was sprawled in the shade of a huge rock, and for pastime he was throwing rocks at every ground squirrel that poked its nose out of a hole. The two hundred goats were scattered far and wide, but as long as Billy was nibbling a bush within sight, Vic did not worry about the rest. He lifted himself to a sitting posture and grinned when the two came up.

"Didn't think to bring any pie, I s'pose?" he hinted broadly, and grinned companionably at Starr.

"You've had two handouts since lunch. I guess you'll last another hour," Helen May retorted unfeelingly. "See the dog that followed Mr. Starr out from town, Vic! We're going to see if he can herd goats."

"Well, if he can, he's got my permission, that's a cinch."

"I do believe he can; see him look at them! His name's Pat, and he likes me awfully well."

"Now, where does he get that idea?" taunted Vic, and winked openly at Starr, who was good enough to smile over what he considered a very poor joke.

"Well, let's see you bunch 'em, Pat." Starr made a wide, sweeping gesture with his left arm, his eyes darting a quick look at the girl.

Pat looked up at him, waggled his stub of a tail, and darted down the slope to the left, now and then uttering a yelp. Scattered goats lifted heads to look, their jaws working comically sidewise as though they felt they must dispose of that particular mouthful before something happened to prevent. As Pat neared them, they scrambled away from him, running to the right, which was toward the bulk of the band.

Down into the Basin itself the dog ran, after a couple of goats that had strayed out into the level. These he drove back in a panic of haste, dodging this way and that, nipping, yelping now and then, until they had joined the others. Then he went on to the further fringes of the hand, which evened like the edge of a pie

crust under the practised fingers of a good cook.

"Well, would you look at that!" Helen May never having watched a good sheep-dog at work, spoke in an awed tone. "Vic, please write!"

Vic, watching open-mouthed, actually forgot to resent the implication that Pat had left him hopelessly behind in the art of handling goats.

"Seems to have the savvy, all right," Starr observed, just as though he had not paid all those dollars for the "savvy" that made Pat one of the best goat dogs in the State.

"Savvy? Why, that dog's human. Now, I suppose he's stopping over there to see what he must do next, is he?"

"Wants to know whether I want 'em all rounded up, or just edged up outa the Basin. G' round 'em, Pat," he called, and made a wide, circular sweep with his right arm.

Pat gave a yelp, dropped his head, and scurried up the ridge, driving all stragglers back toward the center of the flock. He went to every crest and sniffed into the wind to satisfy himself that none had strayed beyond his sight; returned and evened up the ragged edges of the hand, and then came trotting back to Starr with six inches of pink tongue draped over his lower jaw and a smile in his eyes and a waggle of satisfaction at loved work well done. The goats, with a meek Billy in the foreground, huddled in a compact mass on the slope and eyed the dog as they had never eyed Vic, for all his hoe-handle and his accuracy with rocks.

Helen May dropped her hand on Pat's head and looked soberly into his upturned eyes. "You're a perfect miracle of a dog, so you can't be my dog, after all," she said. "Your owner will be riding day and night to find you. I know I should, if you got lost from me." Then she looked at Starr. "Don't you think you really ought to take him back with you? It—somehow it doesn't seem quite right to keep a dog that knows so much. Why, the man I bought the goats from had a dog that could herd them, and he wanted twenty-five dollars for it, and at that, he claimed he was putting the price awfully low for me, just because I was a lady, you know."

Starr, was (as he put it) kicking himself for having lied himself into this

dilemma. Also he was wondering how best he might lie himself out of it.

"You want to look out for these marks that say they're giving you the big end of a bargain just because you're a lady," he said. "Chances are they're figuring right then on doing you. If that fellow had got twenty-five dollars for his dog, take it from me, he wouldn't have lost anything."

"Well, but do you think it would he right to keep this dog?"

Since she put it that way, Starr felt better. "I sure do. Keep him anyway till he's called for. When I go back, I'll find out where he comes from; and when I've located the owner, maybe I'll be able to fix it up with him somehow. You sure ought to have a dog. So let it stand that way. I'll tell yuh when to give him up."

Helen May opened her lips, and Starr, to forestall argument and to save his soul from further sin, turned toward the dog. "Bring 'em home, Pat," he said, and then started toward the corral, which was down below the spring. "Watch him drive," he said to Helen May and so managed to distract her attention from the ethics of the case.

Without any assistance, Pat drove the goats to the corral. More than that, at Starr's command, he split the band and held half of them aloof while the rest went in. He sent these straight down the Basin until Starr recalled him, when he swung back and corralled them with the others. He came then toward the three for further orders, whereupon Vic, who had been silent from sheer amazement, gave a sudden whoop.

"Hey, Pat! You forgot something. Go back and put up the bars!" he yelled. Then he heaved his hoe-handle far from him and stretched his arms high over his head like one released from an onerous task. "I'll walk out and let Pat have my job," he said. "Herding goats is dog's work anyhow, and I told you so the first day, Helen Blazes. Hadn't herded 'em five minutes before I knew I wasn't cut out for a farmer."

"Go on, Pat; you stay with your goats," Starr commanded gently. And Pat, because he had suckled a nanny goat when he was a pup, and had grown up with her kid, and had lived with goats all his life, trotted into the corral, found himself a likeable spot near the gate, snuffed it all over, turned around twice, and curled himself down upon it in perfect content.

"He'll stay there all night," Starr told them, laying the bars in their sockets. "It's a little early to corral 'em, sundown is about the regular time, but it's a good scheme to give him plenty of time to get acquainted with the layout. You get up early, Vic, and let 'em out on the far side of the ridge. Pat'll do the rest. I'll have to jog along now."

"Well, say," Vic objected, rubbing his tousled blond hair into a distracted, upstanding condition, "I wish you'd show me just how you shift his gears. How the dickens do you do it? He don't know what you say."

Before he left, Starr showed him the gestures, and Vic that evening practised them so enthusiastically that he nearly drove Helen May wild. Perhaps that is why, when she was copying a sentence where Holman Sommers had mentioned the stars of the universe, Helen May spelled stars, "Starr's" and did not notice the mistake at all.

CHAPTER TEN

THE TRAIL OF SILVERTOWN CORDS

Having wasted a couple of hours more than he intended to spend in delivering the dog, Starr called upon Rabbit to make up those two hours for him. And, being an extremely misleading little gray horse, with a surprising amount of speed and endurance stored away under his hide, Rabbit did not fall far short of doing so.

Starr had planned an unexpected visit to the Medina ranch. In the guise of stock-buyer his unexpectedness would be perfectly plausible, and he would be well pleased to arrive there late, so long as he did not arrive after dark. Just before sundown would do very well, he decided. He would catch Estan Medina off his guard, and he would have the evening before him, in case he wanted to scout amongst the arroyos on the way home.

Starr very much wanted to know who drove an automobile without lights into isolated arroyos and over the desert trails at night. He had not, strange to say, seen any machine with Silvertown cord tires in San Bonito or in Malpais, though he had given every car he saw the second glance to make sure. He knew that such tires were something new and expensive, so much so that they were not in general use in that locality. Even in El Paso they were rarely seen at that time, and only the fact that the great man who gave him his orders had happened to be using them on his machine, and had mentioned the fact to Starr, who was honored with his friendship, had caused Starr to be familiar with them and to recognize instantly the impress they left in soft soil. It was a clue, and that was the best he could say for it. It was just a little better than nothing, he decided. What he wanted most was to see the machine itself at close range, and to see the men who rode in it—and I am going to tell you why.

There was a secret political movement afoot in the Southwest; a movement

hidden so far underground as to be practically unnoticed on the surface; but a movement, nevertheless, that had been felt and recorded by that political seismograph, the Secret Service of our Government. It had been learned, no mere citizen may know just how, that the movement was called the Mexican Alliance. It was suspected that the object was the restoration of three of our States to Mexico, their original owner. Suspected, mind you; and when even the Secret Service can do no more than suspect, you will see how well hidden was the plot. Its extent and its ramifications they could only guess at. Its leaders no man could name, nor even those who might be suspected more than others.

But a general uprising in three States, in conjunction with, and under the control of, a concerted, far-sweeping revolution across the border, would not be a thing to laugh over. Uncle Sam smiled tolerantly when some would have had him chastise. Uncle Sam smiled, and watched, and waited and drummed his fingers while he read secret reports from men away out somewhere in Arizona, and New Mexico, and Texas, and urged them to burrow deeper and deeper underground, and to follow at any cost the molelike twistings and blind turnings of this plot to steal away three whole States in a lump.

Now you see, perhaps, why Starr was so curious about that automobile, and why he was interested in Estancio Medina, Mexican-American rancher who owned much land and many herds, and who was counted a power among his countrymen; who spoke English with what passed for fluency, and who had very decided and intelligent opinions upon political matters, and who boldly proclaimed his enthusiasm for the advancement of his own race.

But he did not go to the Medina ranch that evening, for the very good reason that he met his man fair in the trail as it looped around the head of the draw where he had heard the automobile running without lights. As on that other evening, Starr had cut straight across the loop, going east instead of west. And where the trail forked on the farther side he met Estan Medina driving a big, lathery bay horse hitched to a shiny, new covered buggy. He seemed in a hurry, but he pulled up nevertheless to have a word with Starr. And Starr, always observant of details, saw that he had three or four packages in the bottom of the buggy, which seemed to bear out Estan's statement that he had been to town, meaning San Bonito.

Starr rolled a cigarette, and smoked it while he gossiped with Estan of politics, pretty girls, and the price of mutton. He had been eyeing the new buggy speculatively, and at last he spoke of it in that admiring tone which warms the

heart of the listener.

"Some turnout, Estan," he summed up. "But you ought to be driving an automobile. All your friends are getting them."

Estan lifted his shoulders in true Spanish fashion and smiled. "No, amigo. Me, I can take pleasure yet from horses. And the madre, she's so 'fraid of them automobiles. She cries yet when she knows I ride in one a little bit. Now she's so proud, when I drive the new buggy home! She folds so pretty her best mantilla over her head and rides with me to church, and she bows so polite—to all the señoras from the new buggy! And her face shines with the happiness in her heart. Oh, no, not me for the big automobile!" He smiled and shrugged and threw out his hands. "I like best to see my money walking around with wool on the back! Excuse, señor. I go now to bring the new buggy home and to see the smile of my mother." Then he bethought him of the tradition of his house. "You come and have a soft bed and the comfort of my house," he urged. "It is far to San Bonito, and it is not so far to my house."

Starr explained plausibly his haste, sent a friendly message to the mother and Luis, and rode on thoughtfully. Now and then he turned to glance behind him at the dust cloud rolling rapidly around the head of the draw.

Since Estan had been to town himself that day, Starr reasoned that there would not be much gained by scouting through the arroyos that led near the Medina ranch. Estan would have seen in town the men he wanted to see. He could do so easily enough and without exciting the least suspicion; for San Bonito had plenty of saloons that were popular, and yet unobtrusive, meeting places. No need for the mysterious automobile to make the long journey through the sand to-day, if Estan Medina were the object of the visit, and Starr knew of no other Mexican out that way who would be important enough to have a hand in the mixing of political intrigue.

He rode on, letting Rabbit drop into his poco-poco trail trot. He carried his head bent forward a little, and his eyebrows were pulled into a scowl of concentrated thought. It was all very well to suspect Estan Medina and to keep an eye upon him, but there were others who came nearer to the heart of the plot. He wanted to know who these were, and he believed that if he could once identify the four Mexicans whom Helen May had seen, he would be a long step ahead. He considered the simple expedient of asking her to describe them as closely as she

could. But since secrecy was the keynote of his quest, he did not want to rouse her curiosity, and for purely personal reasons he did want to shield her as far as possible from any uneasiness or any entanglement in the affair.

Thinking of Helen May in that light forced him to consider what would be her plight if he and his co-workers failed, if the plan went on to actual fulfillment, and the Mexican element actually did revolt. Babes, they were, those two alone there in Sunlight Basin, with a single-shot "twenty-two" for defense, when every American rancher in three States considered high-power rifles and plenty of ammunition as necessary in his home as flour and bacon!

Starr shivered a little and tried to pull his mind away from Helen May and her helplessness. At any rate, he comforted himself, they had the dog for protection, the dog who had been trained to jump the corral fence at any hour of the night if a stranger, and especially a Mexican came prowling near.

But he and his co-workers must not fail. If intrigue burrowed deep, then they must burrow deeper.

So thinking, he came just after sundown to where the trail branched in three directions. One was the direct road to San Bonito, another took a roundabout way through a Mexican settlement on the river and so came to the town from another angle, and the third branch wound over the granite ridge to Malpais. Studying the problem as a whole, picturing the havoc which an uprising would wreak upon those vast grazing grounds of the southwest, and how two nations would be embroiled in spite of themselves, he was hoping that his collaborators, scattered here and there through the country, men whose names even he did not know, were making more headway than he seemed to be making here.

He would not know, of course, unless he were needed to assist or to supplement their work in some way. But he hoped they had found out something definite, something which the War Department could take hold of; a lever, as it were, to pry up the whole scheme. He was thinking of these things, but his mind was nevertheless alert to the little trail signs which it had become second nature to read. So he saw, there in the dust of the trail, where a buggy had turned around and gone back whence it had come. He saw that it had been traveling toward town but had turned and come back. And looking more closely, he saw that one horse had pulled the buggy.

He stopped to make sure of that and to search for footprints. But those he found were indistinct, blurred partly by the looseness of the sand and partly by the sparse grass that grew along the trail there, because the buggy had turned in a hollow. He went on a couple of rods, and he saw where an automobile had also come to this point and had turned and gone back toward town, or rather, it had swung sharply around and taken the trail which led through the Mexican settlement; but he guessed that it had gone back to town, for all that. And the tire marks were made by Silvertown cords.

Starr stopped and looked back to where the buggy tracks were faintly outlined in the dust of the hollow, and he spoke aloud his thought: "You'd think, just to see him and talk to him, that Estan Medina assays one hundred per cent, satisfied farmer. He's sure some fox—that same greaser!" After that he shook Rabbit into a long, distance-eating lope for town.

Night came with its flaring forerunners of purple and crimson and all the gorgeous blendings of the two. By the time he reached San Bonito, the stars were out, and the electric lights were sputtering on certain street corners. Starr had rented a small adobe cabin and a corral with a shed on the outskirts of town where his movements might be unobserved. He did not always use these, but stopped frequently at a hotel with a garrulous landlord, and stabled his horse at a certain livery which he knew to be a hotbed of the town's gossip. In both places he was a privileged patron and was the recipient of many choice bits of scandal whispered behind a prudent palm, with a wink now and then to supply the finer shades of meaning. But to-night he chose the cabin and the corral sandwiched between a transfer company's warehouse and a steam laundry that had been closed by the sheriff. The cabin fronted on a street that was seldom used, and the corral ran back to a dry arroyo that was used mainly as a dump for the town's tin cans and dead cats and such; not a particularly attractive place but secluded.

He turned Rabbit into the corral and fed him, went in and cooked himself some supper, and afterwards, in a different suit and shoes and a hat that spoke loudly of the latest El Paso fad in men's headgear, he strolled down to the corner and up the next street to the nearest garage. Ostensibly he was looking for one Pedro Miera, who had a large sheep ranch out east of San Bonito, and who always had fat sheep for sale. Starr considered it safe to look for Miera, whom he had seen two or three days before in El Paso just nicely started on a ten-day spree that never stopped short of the city jail.

Since it was the dull hour between the day's business and the evening's pleasure, Starr strolled the full length of the garage and back again before any man spoke to him. He made sure that no car there had the kind of tires he sought, so he asked if Miera and his machine had showed up there that day, and left as soon as the man said no.

San Bonito was no city and it did not take long to make the round of the garages. No one had seen Miera that day, and Starr's disappointment was quite noticeable, though misunderstood. Not a car in any of the four garages sported Silvertown cords.

At the last garage an arc light flared over the wide doorway. Starr, feeling pretty well disgusted, was leaving when he saw a tire track alongside the red, gasoline filling-pump. He stopped and, under cover of lighting his cigarette, he studied the tread. Beyond all doubt the car he wanted had stopped there for gas. But the garage man was a Mexican, so Starr dared not risk a question or show any interest whatever in the car whose tires left those long-lined imprints to tell of its passing. He puffed at his cigarette until he had studied the angle of the front-wheel track and decided that the car must have been headed south, and that it had made a rather short turn away from the pump.

This was puzzling for a while. The driver might have been turning around to go back the way he had come. But it was more likely that he had driven into the cross street to the west. He strolled over that way, but the light was too dim to trace automobile tracks in the dust of the street so he went back to the adobe cabin and put in the next hour oiling and cleaning and polishing a 25-35 carbine which he meant to give Helen May, and in filling a cartridge belt with shells.

He sat for some time turning two six-shooters over in his hands, trying to decide which would please her most. One was lighter than the other, with an easier trigger action; almost too easy for a novice, he told himself. But it had a pearl handle with a bulldog carved on the side that would show when the gun was in its holster. She'd like that fancy stuff, he supposed. Also he could teach her to shoot straighter with that light "pull." But the other was what Starr called a sure-enough go-getter.

He finally decided, of course, to give her the fancy one. For Vic he would have to buy a gun; an automatic, maybe. He'd have to talk coyotes pretty strong, in order to impress it upon them that they must never go away anywhere without a

gun. Good thing there was a bounty on coyotes; the money would look big to the kid, anyway. It occurred to him further that he could tell them there was danger of running into a rabid coyote. Rabies had caused a good deal of trouble in the State, so he could make the danger plausible enough.

He did not worry much over frightening the girl. She had nerve enough. Think of her tackling that ranch proposition, with just that cub brother to help! When Starr thought of that slim, big-eyed, smiling girl in white fighting poverty and the white plague together out there on the rim of the desert, a lump came up in his throat. She had nerve enough—that plucky little lady with the dull-gold hair, and the brown velvet eyes!—more nerve than he had where she was concerned.

He went to bed and lay for a long time thinking of Helen May out there in that two-roomed adobe cabin, with a fifteen-year-old boy for protection and miles of wilderness between her and any other human habitation. It was small comfort then to Starr that she had the dog. One bullet can settle a dog, and then—Starr could not look calmly at the possibility of what might happen then.

"They've no business out there like that, alone!" he muttered, rising to an elbow and thumping his hard pillow viciously. "Good Lord! Haven't they got any folks?"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE WIND BLOWS MANY STRAWS

Soon after daylight, Rabbit snorted and ran a little way down the corral toward the cabin. Starr, trained to light sleeping and instant waking, was up and standing back from the little window with his six-shooter in his hand before Rabbit had stopped to whirl and look for what had scared him. So Starr was in time to see a "big four" Stetson hat with a horsehair hatband sink from sight behind the high board fence at the rear of the corral.

Starr waited. Rabbit shook his head as though he were disgusted with himself, and began nosing the ground for the wisps of hay which a high wind had blown there. Starr retreated to a point in the room where he could see without risk of being seen, and watched. In a few minutes, when the horse had forgotten all about the incident and was feeding again, the Stetson hat very cautiously rose once more. Under its gray brim Starr saw a pair of black eyes peer over the fence. He watched them glancing here and there, coming finally to rest upon the cabin itself. They watched Rabbit, and Starr knew that they watched for some sign of alarm rather than from any great interest in the horse: Rabbit lifted his head and looked that way boredly for a moment before he went back to his feeding, and the eyes lifted a little, so that the upper part of the owner's face came into view. A young Mexican, Starr judged him, because of his smooth skin around the eyes. He waited. The fellow rose now so that the fence came just below his lips, which were full and curved in the pleasant lines of youth. His eyes kept moving this way and that, so that the whites showed with each turn of the eyeball. Starr studied what he could see of the face. Thick eyebrows well formed except that the left one took a whimsical turn upward; heavy lashes, the high, thin nose of the Mexican who is part Indian—as are practically all of the lower, or peon class—that much he had plenty of time to note. Then there was the mouth, which Starr knew might be utterly changed in appearance when one saw the chin that went with it.

A hundred young fellows in San Bonito might answer equally well a description of those features. And the full-crowned gray Stetson may be seen by the thousand in at least four States; and horsehair hatbands may be bought in any saddlery for two or three dollars—perhaps for less, if one does not demand too long a pair of tassels—and are loved by Indians and those who think they are thus living up to the picturesque Old West. So far as he could see, there was nothing much to identify the fellow, unless he could get a better look at him.

The Mexican gave another long look at the cabin, studying every point, even to the roof. Then he tried to see into the shed where Starr kept his saddle and where Rabbit could shelter himself from the cold winds. There was no door, no front, even, on the side toward the house. But the end of the shed was built out into the corral so that the fellow could not see around its corner.

He moved along the fence, which gave Starr a very good idea of his height, and down to the very corner of the vacant laundry building. There he stopped and looked again. He was eyeing Starr's saddle, apparently taking in every detail of its workmanship. He looked again at Rabbit, who was turned then so that his brand, the double Turkey-track, stood out plainly on both thighs. Then, with another slant-eyed inspection of the cabin, he ducked down behind the fence and disappeared, his going betrayed by his hat crown which was taller than he imagined and showed a good four inches above the fence.

Starr had edged along the dark wall of the room so that he had kept the man in sight. Now, when the hat crown moved away down the trail that skirted the garbage-filled arroyo, he snorted, threw his gun down on the bed, and began to dress himself, rummaging in his "warbag" for a gray checked cap and taking down from the wall a gray suit that he had never liked and had never worn since the day it came from the mail, looking altogether different from the four-inch square he had chosen from a tailor agent's sample book. He snorted again when he had the suit on, and surveyed it with a dissatisfied, downward glance. In his opinion he looked like a preacher trying to disguise himself as a sport, but to complete the combination he unearthed a pair of tan shoes and put them on. After that he stood for a minute staring down the fresh-creased gray trousers to his toes.

"Looks like the very devil!" he snorted again. "But anyway, it's different." He dusted the cap by the simple expedient of slapping it several times against his leg. When he had hung it on the back of his head and pulled it well down in front

—as nine out of ten men always put on a cap—he did indeed look different, though he did not look at all like the demon he named. Helen May, for instance, would have needed a second close glance before she recognized him, but that glance would probably have carried with it a smile for his improved appearance.

He surveyed as much of the neighborhood as he could see through the windows, looked at his watch, and saw that it was late enough for him to appear down town without exciting comment from the early birds, and went out into the corral and fed Rabbit. He looked over the fence where the Mexican had stood, but the faint imprints of the man's boots were not definite enough to tell him anything. He surveyed the neighborhood from different angles and could see no trace of any one watching the place, so he felt fairly satisfied that the fellow had gone for the present, though he believed it very likely that he might return later.

As he saw the incident, he was not yet considered worth shadowing, but had in some way excited a certain degree of curiosity about himself. Starr did not like that at all. He had hoped to impress every one with his perfect harmlessness, and to pass for a stock buyer and nothing else.

He could not imagine how he had possibly excited suspicion, and he wanted to lull it immediately and permanently. The obvious way to do that would be to rise late, saddle Rabbit and ride around town a little—to the post office and a saloon, for instance—get his breakfast at the best-patronized place in town, and then go about his legitimate business. On the other hand, he wanted to try and trace those cord tires down the cross street, if he could, and he could not well do that on horseback without betraying himself.

The shed was built out flush with the arroyo edge, so that at the rear of the corral one could only go as far as the gate, which closed against the end of the shed. It occurred to Starr that if the young Mexican had been looking for something to steal, he would probably have come in at the gate, which was fastened only with a stout hook on the inside. The arroyo bank had caved under the farther corner of the shed, so that a hole the size of a large barrel showed at that end of the manger. Cats and dogs, and perhaps boys, had gone in and out there until a crude kind of trail was worn down the bank to the arroyo bottom. At some risk to his tan shoes and his new gray suit, Starr climbed into the manger and let himself down that hole. The trail was firm and dry and so steep he had to dig his heels in to keep from tobogganing to the bottom, but once down he had only to follow the arroyo bottom to a place where he could climb out. Before he found such a

place he came to a deep, dry gully that angled back toward the business part of town. A footpath in the bottom of it encouraged him to follow it, and a couple of hundred yards farther along he emerged upon the level end of a street given over to secondhand stores, junk shops and a plumber's establishment. From there to the main street was easy enough.

As he had expected, only a few citizens were abroad and Starr strolled over to the cross street he wanted to inspect. He found the long-lined tread of the tires he sought plainly marked where they had turned into this street. After that he lost them where they had been blotted out by the broad tires of a truck. When he was sure that he could trace them no farther, he turned back, meaning to have breakfast at his favorite restaurant. And as he turned, he met face to face a tall young Mexican in a full-crowned Stetson banded with horsehair.

Now, as I have said before, San Bonito was full of young Mexicans who wore Stetson hats and favored horsehair bands around them. Starr glanced at the fellow sharply, got the uninterested, impersonal look of the perfect stranger who neither knows nor cares who you are, and who has troubles of his own to occupy his mind; the look which nineteen persons out of twenty give to a stranger on the street. Starr went on unconcernedly whistling under his breath, but at the corner he turned sharply to the left, and in turning he flicked a glance back at the fellow. The Mexican was not giving him any attention whatever, as far as he could see; on the contrary, he was staring down at the ground as though he, too, were looking for something. Starr gave him another stealthy look, gained nothing from it, and shrugged his shoulders and went on.

He ate his breakfast while he turned the matter over in his mind. What had he done to rouse suspicion against himself? He could not remember anything, for he had not yet found anything much to work on; nothing, in fact, except that slight clue of the automobile, and he did not even know who had been in it. He suspected that they had gone to meet Estan Medina, but as long as that suspicion was tucked away in the back of his mind, how was any one going to know that he suspected Estan? He had not been near the chief of police or the sheriff or any other officer. He had not talked with any man about the Mexican Alliance, nor had he asked any man about it. Instead, he had bought sheep and cattle and goats and hogs from the ranchers, and he had paid a fair price for them and had shipped them openly, under the eye of the stock inspector, to the El Paso Meat Company. So far he had kept his eyes open and his mouth shut, and had waited until some ripple on the surface betrayed the disturbance underneath.

He was not sure that the young man he met on the street was the one who had been spying over the fence, but he did not mean to take it for granted that he was not the same, and perhaps be sorry afterwards for his carelessness. He strolled around town, bought an automatic gun and a lot of cartridges for Vic, went into a barber shop on a corner and had a shave and a haircut, and kept his eyes open for a tall young Mexican who might be unduly interested in his movements.

He met various acquaintances who expressed surprise at not having seen him around the hotel. To these he explained that he had rented a corral for his horse, where he could be sure of the feed Rabbit was getting, and to save the expense of a livery stable. Rabbit had been kinda off his feed, he said, and he wanted to look after him himself. So he had been sleeping in the cabin that went with the corral.

His friends thought that was a sensible move, and praised his judgment, and Starr felt better. He did not, however, tell them just where the corral was located. He had some notion of moving to another place, so he considered that it would be just as well not to go into details.

So thinking, he took his packages and started across to the gully which led into the arroyo that let him into his place by the back way. He meant to return as he had come; and if any one happened to be spying, he would think Starr had chosen that route as a short cut to town, which it was.

A block away from the little side street that opened to the gully, Starr stopped short, shocked into a keener attention to his surroundings. He had just stepped over an automobile track on the walk, where a machine had crossed it to enter a gateway which was now closed. And the track had been made by a cord tire. He looked up at the gate of unpainted planks, heavy-hinged and set into a high adobe wall such as one sees so often in New Mexico. The gate was locked, as he speedily discovered; locked on the inside, he guessed, with bars or great hooks or something.

He went on to the building that seemed to belong to the place; a long two-story adobe building with the conventional two-story gallery running along the entire front, and with the deep-set, barred windows that are also typically Mexican. Every town in the adobe section of the southwest has a dozen or so buildings almost exactly like this one. The door was blue-painted, with the paint scaling off. Over it was a plain lettered sign: LAS NUEVAS.

Starr had seen copies of that paper at the Mexican ranches he visited, and as far as he knew, it was an ordinary newspaper of the country-town style, printed in Mexican for the benefit of a large percentage of Mexican-Americans whose knowledge of English print is extremely hazy.

He walked on slowly to the corner, puzzling over this new twist in the faint clue he followed. It had not occurred to him that so innocuous a sheet as *Las Nuevas* should be implicated, and yet, why not? He turned at the corner and went back to the nearest newstand, where he bought an El Paso paper for a blind and laid it down on a pile of *Las Nuevas* while he lighted his cigarette. He talked with the little, pock-marked Mexican who kept the shop, and when the fellow's back was turned toward him for a minute, he stole a copy of *Las Nuevas* off the pile and strolled out of the shop with it wrapped in his El Paso paper.

He stole it because he knew that not many Americans ever bought the paper, and he feared that the hombre in charge might wonder why an American should pay a nickel for a copy of *Las Nuevas*. As it happened, the hombre in charge was looking into a mirror cunningly placed for the guarding of stock from pilferers, and he saw Starr steal the paper. Also he saw Starr slip a dime under a stack of magazines where it would be found later on. So he wondered a great deal more than he would have done if Starr had bought the paper, but Starr did not know that.

Starr went back to his cabin by way of the arroyo and the hole in the manger. When he unlocked the door and went in, he had an odd feeling that some one had been there in his absence. He stood still just inside the door and inspected everything, trying to remember just where his clothes had been scattered, where he had left his hat, just how his blankets had been flung back on the bed when he jumped up to see what had startled Rabbit; every detail, in fact, that helps to make up the general look of a room left in disorder.

He did remember, for his memory had been well trained for details. He knew that his hat had been on the table with the front toward the wall. It was there now, just as he had flung it down. He knew that his pillow had been dented with the shape of his head, and that it had lain askew on the bed; it was just as it had been. Everything—his boots, his dark coat spread over the back of the chair, his trousers across the foot of the bed—everything was the same, yet the feeling persisted.

Starr was no more imaginative than he needed to be for the work he had to do. He was not in the least degree nervous over that work. Yet he was sure some one had been in the room during his absence, and he could not tell why he was sure. At least, for ten minutes and more he could not tell why. Then his eyes lighted upon a cigarette stub lying on the hearth of the little cookstove in one corner of the room. Starr always used "wheat straw" papers, which were brown. This cigarette had been rolled in white paper. He picked it up and discovered that one end was still moist from the lips of the smoker, and the other end was still warm from the fire that had half consumed it. Starr gave an enlightened sniff and knew it was his olfactory nerves that had warned him of an alien presence there; for the tobacco in this cigarette was not the brand he smoked.

He stood thinking it over; puzzling again over the mystery of their suspicion of him. He tried to recall some careless act, some imprudent question, an ill-considered remark. He was giving up the riddle again when that trained memory of his flashed before him a picture that, trivial as it was in itself, yet was as enlightening as the white paper of the cigarette on the stove hearth.

Two days before, just after his last arrival in San Bonito, he had sent a wire to a certain man in El Paso. The message itself had not been of very great importance, but the man to whom he had sent it had no connection whatever with the Meat Company. He was, in fact, the go-between in the investigation of the Secret Service. Through him the War Department issued commands to Starr and his fellows, and through him it kept in touch with the situation. Starr had used two code words and a number in that message.

And, he now distinctly remembered, the girl who had waited upon him was dark, with a Spanish cast of features. When she had counted the words and checked the charge and pushed his change across to him, she had given him a keen, appraising look from under her lashes, though the smile she sent with it had given the glance a feminine and wholly flattering interpretation. Starr remembered that look now and saw in it something more than coquetry. He remembered, too, that he had glanced back from the doorway and caught her still looking after him; and that he had smiled, and she had smiled swiftly in return and had then turned away abruptly to her work. To her work? Starr remembered now that she had turned and spoken to a sulky-faced messenger boy who was sitting slumped down on the curve of his back with his tightly buttoned tunic folded up to his armpits so that his hands could burrow to the very bottom of his pockets. He had looked up, muttered something, reluctantly removed himself

from the chair, and started away. The boy, too, had the Mexican look.

Well, at any rate, he knew now how the thing had started. He heaved a sigh of relief and threw himself down on the bed, wadding the pillow into a hard ball under the nape of his neck and unfolding the Mexican newspaper. He had intended to move camp; but now that they had begun to trail him, he decided to stay where he was and give them a run for their money, as he put it.

Starr could read Spanish well enough for ordinary purposes. He went carefully through *Las Nuevas*, from war news to the local advertisements. There was nothing that could even be twisted into a message of hidden meaning to the initiated. *Las Nuevas* was what it called itself: *The News*. It was exactly as innocuous as he had believed it to be. Its editorial page, even, was absolutely banal in its servility to the city, county, state and national policy.

"That's a hell of a thing to steal!" grumbled Starr, and threw the paper disgustedly from him.

CHAPTER TWELVE

STARR FINDS SOMETHING IN A SECRET ROOM

That day Starr rode out into the country and looked at a few head of cows and steers that a sickly American wanted to sell so he could go East for his health (there being in most of us some peculiar psychological leaning toward seeking health afar). Starr went back to town afterwards and made Rabbit comfortable in the corral, reasoning that if he were going to be watched, he would be watched no matter where he went; but he ate his supper in the dining room of the Plaza Hotel, and sat in the lobby talking with a couple of facetious drummers until the mechanical piano in the movie show across the street began to play.

He went to the show, sat through it patiently, strolled out when it was over, and visited a saloon or two. Then, when he thought his evening might be considered well rounded out with harmless diversions, he went out to his cabin, following the main street but keeping well in the shadow as though he wished to avoid observation.

He had reason to believe that some one followed him out there, which did not displease him much. He lighted his lamp and fussed around for half an hour or so before he blew out the light and went to bed.

At three o'clock in the morning, with a wind howling in from the mountains, Starr got up and dressed in the dark, fumbling for a pair of "sneakers" he had placed beside his bed. He let himself out into the corral, being careful to keep close to the wall of the house until he reached the high board fence. Here, too, he had to feel his way because of the pitchy blackness of the night; and if the rattling wind prevented him from hearing any footsteps that might be behind him, it also covered the slight sound of his own progress down the fence to the shed. But he did not think he would be seen or followed, for he had been careful to oil the latch and hinges of his door before he went to bed; and he would be a faithful spy indeed who shivered through the whole night, watching a man who

apparently slept unsuspectingly and at peace.

Down the hole from the manger Starr slid, and into the arroyo bottom. He stumbled over a can of some sort, but the wind was rattling everything movable, so he merely swore under his breath and went on. He was not a range man for nothing, and he found his way easily to the adobe house with LAS NUEVAS over the door, and the adobe wall with the plank gate that had been closed.

It was closed now, and the house itself was black and silent. Starr stooped and gave a jump, caught the top of the wall with his hooked fingers, went up and straddled the top where it was pitch black against the building. For that matter, it was nearly pitch black whichever way one looked, that night. He sat there for five minutes, listening and straining his eyes into the enclosure. Somewhere a piece of corrugated iron banged against a board. Once he heard a cat meow, away back at the rear of the lot. He waited through a comparative lull, and when the wind whooped again and struck the building with a fresh blast, Starr jumped to the ground within the yard.

He crouched for a minute, a shot-loaded quirt held butt forward in his hand. He did not want to use a gun unless he had to, and the loaded end of a good quirt makes a very efficient substitute for a blackjack. But there was no movement save the wind, so presently he followed the wall of the house down to the corner, stood there listening for awhile and went on, feeling his way rapidly around the entire yard as a blind man feels out a room that is strange to him.

He found the garage, with a door that kept swinging to and fro in the wind, banging shut with a slam and then squealing the hinges as it opened again with the suction. He drew a breath of relief when he came to that door, for he knew that any man who happened to be on guard would have fastened it for the sake of his nerves if for nothing else.

When he was sure that the place was deserted for the night, Starr went back to the garage and went inside. He fastened the door shut behind him and switched on his pocket searchlight to examine the place. If he had expected to see the mysterious black car there he was disappointed, for the garage was empty—which perhaps explained the swinging door, that had been left open in the evening when there was no wind. Small comfort in that for Starr, for it immediately occurred to him that the car would probably return before daylight if it had gone after dark.

He turned his hand slowly, painting the walls with a brush of brilliant light. "Huh!" he grunted under his breath. For there in a far corner were four Silvertown cord tires with the dust of the desert still clinging to the creases of the lined tread. Near-by, where they had been torn off in haste and flung aside, were the paper wrappings of four other tires, supposedly new.

So they—he had no more definite term by which to call them—they had sensed the risk of those unusual tires, and had changed for others of a more commonly-used brand! Starr wondered if some one had seen him looking at tire-tracks, the young Mexican he had met on the side street, perhaps. Or the Mexican garage man may have caught him studying that track by the filling-pump.

"Well," Starr summed up the significance of the discovery, "the game's open; now we'll get action."

He glanced down to make sure that he had not left any tracks on the floor and was glad he had not worn his boots. Then he snapped off the light, went out, and left the door swinging and banging as it had been before. If he learned no more, at least he was paid for the trip.

He went straight to the rear door of the building, taking no pains to conceal his footsteps. The wind, he knew, would brush them out completely with the sand and dust it sent swirling around the yard with every gust. As he had hoped, the door was not bolted but locked with a key, so he let himself in with one of the pass keys he carried for just such work as this. He felt at the windows and saw that the blinds were down, and turned on his light.

The place had all the greasy dinginess of the ordinary print shop. The presses were here, and the motor that operated them. Being a bi-weekly and not having much job printing to do, it was evident that *Las Nuevas* did not work overtime. Things were cleaned up for the night and ready for the next day's work. It all looked very commonplace and as innocent as the paper it produced.

Starr went on slowly, examining the forms, the imperfect first proofs of circulars and placards that had been placed on hook files. AVISO! stared up at him in big, black type from the top of many small sheets, with the following notices of sales, penalties attached for violations of certain ordinances, and what not. But there was nothing that should not be there, nothing that could be construed as seditionary in any sense of the word.

Still, some person or persons connected with this place had found it expedient to change four perfectly good and quite expensive tires for four new and perfectly commonplace ones, and the only explanation possible was that the distinctive tread of the expensive ones had been observed. There must, Starr reasoned, be something else in this place which it would be worth his while to discover. He therefore went carefully up the grimy stairway to the rooms above.

These were offices of the comfortless type to be found in small towns. Bare floors, stained with tobacco juice and the dust of the street. Bare desks and tables, some of them unpainted, homemade affairs, all of them cheap and old. A stove in the larger office, a few wooden-seated armchairs. Starr took in the details with a flick here and there of his flashlight that he kept carefully turned away from the green-shaded windows.

News items, used and unused, he found impaled on desk files. Bills paid and unpaid he found also. But in the first search he found nothing else, nothing that might not be found in any third-rate newspaper establishment. He stood in the middle room—there were three in a row, with an empty, loft-like room behind—and considered where else he could search.

He went again to a closet that had been built in with boards behind the chimney. At first glance this held nothing but decrepit brooms, a battered spittoon, and a small pile of greasewood cut to fit the heater in the larger room; but Starr went in and flashed his light around the wall. He found a door at the farther end, and he knew it for a door only when he passed his hands over the wall and felt it yield. He pushed it open and went into another room evidently built across one end of the loft, a room cunningly concealed and therefore a room likely to hold secrets.

He hitched his gun forward a little, pushed the door shut behind him, and began to search that room. Here, as in the outer offices, the first superficial examination revealed nothing out of the way. But Starr did not go at things superficially. First the desk came under close scrutiny. There were no letters; they were too cautious for that, evidently. He looked in the little stove that stood near the wall where the chimney went up in the closet, and saw that the ashes consisted mostly of charred paper. But the last ones deposited therein had not yet been lighted, or, more exactly, they had been lighted hastily and had not burned except around the edges. He lifted out the one on top and the one beneath it. They were two sheets of copy paper scribbled closely in pencil. The first was entitled, with heavy underscoring that signified capitals, "Souls in Bondage." This sounded

interesting, and Starr put the papers in his pocket. The others were envelopes addressed to *Las Nuevas*; there was no more than a handful of papers in all.

In a drawer of the desk, which he opened with a skeleton key, he found many small leaflets printed in Mexican. Since they were headed ALMAS DE CAUTIVERO, he took one and hoped that it would not be missed. There were other piles of leaflets in other drawers, and he helped himself to a sample of each, and relocked the drawers carefully. But search as he might, he could find nothing that identified any individual, or even pointed to any individual as being concerned in this propaganda work; nor could he find any mention of the Mexican Alliance.

He went out finally, let the door swing behind him as it seemed accustomed to do, climbed through a window to the veranda that bordered all these rooms like a jutting eyebrow, and slid down a corner post to the street. It was close to dawn, and Starr had no wish to be found near the place; indeed, he had no wish to be found away from his cabin if any one came there with the breaking of day to watch him.

As he had left the cabin, so he returned to it. He went back to bed and lay there until sunrise, piecing together the scraps of information he had gleaned. So far, he felt that he was ahead of the game; that he had learned more about the Alliance than the Alliance had learned about him.

As soon as the light was strong enough for him to read without a lamp, he took from his pocket the papers he had gleaned from the stove, spread out the first and began to decipher the handwriting. And this is what he finally made out:

"Souls in Bondage:

"The plundering plutocrats who suck the very life blood of your mother country under the guise of the development of her resources, are working in harmony with the rich brigands north of the border to plunder you further, and to despoil the fair land you have helped to win from the wilderness.

"Shall strong men be content in their slavery to the greed of others? Rise up and help us show the plunderers that we are men, not slaves. Let this shameless persecution of your mother country cease!

"American bandits would subjugate and annex the richest portion of Mexico.

Why should not Mexico therefore reclaim her own? Why not turn the tables and annex a part of the vast territory stolen from her by the octopus arms of our capitalist class?

"We are a proud people and we never forget. Are we a cowardly people who would cringe and yield when submission means infamy?

"Awake! Strike one swift, successful blow for freedom and your bleeding mother land.

"Texas, New Mexico, California and Arizona were stolen from Mexico, just as the riches of her mines are being stolen from her to-day. Sons of Mexico, you can help her reclaim her own. Will you stand by and see her further despoiled? Let your voices rise in a mighty cry for justice! Let your arms be strong to strike a blow for the right!

"Souls in bondage, wake up and strike off your shackles! Be not slaves but free men!

"Texas, New Mexico and Arizona for Mexico, to whom they rightfully belong!"

"They sure do make it strong enough," Starr commented, feeling for a match with which to relight his cigarette that had gone out. He laid down the written pages and took up the leaflet entitled, "ALMAS DE CAUTIVERO." The text that followed was like the heading, simply a translation into Spanish of the exhortation he had just read in English. But he read it through and noted the places where the Spanish version was even more inflammatory than the English —which, in Starr's opinion, was going some. The other pamphlets were much the same, citing well-known instances of the revolution across the border which seemed to prove conclusively that justice was no more than a jest, and that the proletariat of Mexico was getting the worst of the bargain, no matter who happened to be in power.

Starr frowned thoughtfully over the reading. To him the thing was treason, and it was his business to help stamp it out. For the powers that be cannot afford to tolerate the planting of such seeds of dissatisfaction amongst the untrained minds of the masses.

But, and Starr admitted it to himself with his mouth pulled down at the corners, the worst of it was that under the bombast, under the vituperative utterances, the

catch phrases of radicalism, there remained the grains of truth. Starr knew that the masses of Mexico *were* suffering, broken under the tramplings of revolution and counter-revolution that swept back and forth from gulf to gulf. Still, it was not his business to sift out the plump grains of truth and justice, but to keep the chaff from lighting and spreading a wildfire of sedition through three States.

"'Souls in bondage' is right," he said, setting his feet to the floor and reaching for his boots. "In bondage to their own helplessness, and helpless because they're so damned ignorant. But," he added grimly while he stamped his right foot into its boot, "they ain't going at it the right way. They're tryin' to tear down, when they ain't ready to build anything on the wreck. They're right about the wrong; but they're wrong as the devil about the way to mend it. Them pamphlets will sure raise hell amongst the Mexicans, if the thing ain't stopped pronto."

He dressed for riding, and went out and fed Rabbit before he went thoughtfully up to the hotel for his breakfast.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

HELEN MAY SIGHS FOR ROMANCE

Helen May was toiling over the ridgy upland which in New Mexico is called a mesa, when it is not a desert—and sometimes when it is one—taking her turn with the goats while Vic nursed a strained ankle and a grouch under the mesquite tree by the house. With Pat to help, the herding resolved itself into the exercise of human intelligence over the dog's skill. Pat, for instance, would not of his own accord choose the best grazing for his band, but he could drive them to good grazing once it was chosen for him. So, theoretically, Helen May was exercising her human intelligence; actually she was exercising her muscles mostly. And having an abundance of brain energy that refused to lie dormant, she had plenty of time to think her own thoughts while Pat carried out her occasional orders.

For one thing, Helen May was undergoing the transition from a mild satisfaction with her education and mentality, to a shamed consciousness of an appalling ignorance and mental crudity. Holman Sommers was unwittingly the cause of that. There was nothing patronizing or condescending in the attitude of Holman Sommers, even if he did run to long words and scientifically accurate descriptions of the smallest subjects. It was the work he placed before her that held Helen May abashed before his vast knowledge. She could not understand half of what she deciphered and typed for him, and because she could not understand she realized the depth of her benightedness.

She was awed by the breadth and the scope which she sensed more or less vaguely in *The Evolution of Sociology*. Holman Sommers quoted freely, and discussed boldly and frankly, such abstruse authors as Descartes, Spinoza, Schopenhauer, Comte, Gumplowicz, some of them names she had never heard of and could not even spell without following her copy letter by letter. Holman Sommers seemed to have read all of them and to have weighed all of them and to be able to quote all of them offhand; whereas Schopenhauer was the only

name in the lot that sounded in the least familiar to Helen May, and she had a guilty feeling that she had always connected the name with music instead of the sort of things Holman Sommers quoted him as having said or written, she could not make out which.

Helen May, therefore, was suffering from mental growing pains. She struggled with new ideas which she had swallowed whole, without any previous elementary knowledge of the subject. Her brain was hungry, her life was stagnant, and she seized upon these sociological problems which Holman Sommers had placed before her, and worried over them, and wondered where Holman Sommers had learned so much about things she had never heard of. Save his vocabulary, which wearied her, he was the simplest, the kindest of men, though not kind as her Man of the Desert was kind.

Just here in her thoughts Holman Sommers faded, and Starr's lean, whimsical face came out sharply defined before her mental vision. Starr certainly was different! Ordinary, and not educated much beyond the three Rs, she suspected. Just a desert man with a nice voice and a gift for provocative little silences. Two men could not well be farther apart in personality, she thought, and she amused herself by comparing them.

For instance, take the case of Pat. Sommers had told her just why and just how desperately she needed a dog for the goats, and had urged her by all means to get one at the first opportunity. Starr had not said anything about it; he had simply brought the dog. Helen May appreciated the different quality of the kindness that does things.

Privately, she suspected that Starr had stolen that dog, he had seemed so embarrassed while he explained how he came by Pat; especially, she remembered, when she had urged him to take the dog back. She would not, of course, dare hint it even to Vic; and theoretically she was of course shocked at the possibility. But, oh, she was human! That a nice man should swipe a dog for her secretly touched a little, responsive tenderness in Helen May. (She used the word "swipe," which somehow made the suspected deed sound less a crime and more an amusing peccadillo than the word "steal" would have done. Have you ever noticed how adroitly we tone down or magnify certain misdeeds simply by using slang or dictionary words as the case may be?)

Oh, she saw it quite plainly, as she trudged over to the shady side of a rock ridge

and sat down where she could keep an eye on Pat and the goats. She told herself that she would ask her Man of the Desert, the next time he happened along, whether he had found out who the dog belonged to. If he acted confused and dodged the issue, then she would know for sure. Just what she would do when she knew for sure, Helen May had not decided.

The goats were browsing docilely upon the slope, eating stuff which only a goat would attempt to eat. Helen May was not afraid of Billy since Pat had taken charge. Pat had a way of keeping Billy cowed and as harmless as the nannies themselves. Just now Pat was standing at a little distance with his tongue slavering down over his white teeth, gazing over the band as a general looks at his army drawn up in review.

He turned his head and glanced at Helen May inquiringly, then trotted over to where she sat in the shade. His tongue still drooped quiveringly over his lower jaw; and now and then he drew it back and licked his lips as though they were dry. Helen May found a rock that was hollowed like a crude saucer, and poured water into the hollow from her canteen. Pat lapped it up thirstily, gave his stubby tail a wag of gratitude, lay down with his front paws on the edge of her skirt with his head dropped down upon them, and took a nap—with one eye opening now and then to see that the goats were all right, and with his ears lifting to catch the meaning of every stray bleat from a garrulous nanny.

Helen May had changed a good deal in the past two or three weeks. Now when she stared away and away over the desert and barren slope and ridges and mountain, she did not feel that she hated them. Instead, she saw that the yellow of the desert, the brown of the slopes, and the black of the distant granite ledges basseting from bleak hills were more beautiful than the tidy little plots of tilled ground she used to think so lovely. There was something hypnotic in these bald distances. She could not read, when she was out like this; she could only look and think and dream.

She wished that she might ride out over it sometime, away over to the mountains, perhaps, as far as she could see. She fell to dreaming of the old days when this was Spanish territory, and the king gave royal grants of land to his favorites: for instance, all the country lying between two mountain ranges, to where a river cut across and formed a natural boundary. Holman Sommers had told her about the old Spanish grants, and how many of the vast estates of Mexican "cattle kings" and "sheep kings" were still preserved almost intact, just

as they had been when this was a part of Mexico.

She wished that she might have lived here then, when the dons held sway and when señoritas were all beautiful and when señoras were every one of them imposing in many jewels and in rich mantillas, and when vaqueros wore red sashes and beautiful serapes and big, gold-laced sombreros, and rode prancing steeds that curveted away from jingling, silver-rowelled spurs. Helen May, you must remember, knew her moving-picture romance. She could easily vision these things exactly as they had been presented to her on the screen. That is why she peopled this empty land so gorgeously.

It was different now, of course. All the Mexicans she had seen were like the Mexicans around the old Plaza in Los Angeles. All the señoritas she had met—they had not been many—powdered and painted abominably to the point of their jaws and left their necks dirty. And their petticoats were draggled and their hats looked as though they had been trimmed from the ten-cent counter of a cheap store. All the señoras were smoky looking with snakish eyes, and the dresses under their heavy-fringed black mantillas were more frowsy than those of their daughters. They certainly were not imposing; and if they wore jewelry at all it looked brassy and cheap.

There was no romance, nothing like adventure here nowadays, said Helen May to herself, while she watched the little geysers of dust go dancing like whirling dervishes across the sand. A person lived on canned stuff and kept goats and was abjectly pleased to see any kind of human being. There certainly was no romance left in the country, though it had seemed almost as though there might be, when her Man of the Desert sang and all the little night-sounds hushed to listen, and the moon-trail across the sand of the desert lay like a ribbon of silver. It had seemed then as though there might be romance yet alive in the wide spaces.

So she had swung back again to Starr, just as she was always doing lately. She began to wonder when he would come again, and what he would have to say next time, and whether he had really annexed some poor sheep man's perfectly good dog, just because he knew she needed one. It would never do to let on that she guessed; but all the same, it was mighty nice of him to think of her, even if he did go about it in a queer way. And when Pat, who had seemed to be asleep, lifted his head and looked up into her eyes adoringly, Helen May laid her hand upon his smooth skull and smiled oddly.

No more romance, said Helen May—and here was Starr, a man of mystery, a man feared and distrusted by the sons of those passionate dons of whom she dreamed! Here was Starr, Secret Service man (there is ever a glamor in the very name of it), the very essence and forefront of such romance and such adventure as she had gasped over, when she had seen it pictured on the screen! She was living right in the middle of intrigue that was stirring the rulers of two nations; she was coming close to real adventure, and there she sat, with Pat lying on the hem of her skirt, and mourned that she was fifty or a hundred years too late for even a glimpse at romance! And fretted because she was helping Pat herd goats, and because life was dull and commonplace.

"Honestly," she told Pat, "I've got to the point where I catch myself, looking forward to the chance visits of a wandering cowboy who is perfectly commonplace. Why, he'd be absolutely lost on the screen; you wouldn't know he was in the picture unless his horse bucked or fell down or something! And I don't suppose he ever has a thought beyond his work and his little five-cent celebrations in San Bonito, maybe. Most likely he flirts with those grimy-necked Mexican girls, too. You can't tell—

"And think of me being so hard up for excitement that I've got to play he's some mysterious creature of the desert! Honest to goodness, Pat, it's got so bad that the mere sight of a real, live man is thrilling. When Holman Sommers comes and lifts that old Panama like a crown prince, and smiles at me and talks about all the different periods of the human race, and gems and tribal laws and all that highbrow dope, I just sit and drink it in and wish he'd keep on for hours! Can you beat that? And if by any chance a common, ordinary specimen of desert man should ride by, I might be desperate enough—"

Her gaze, wandering always out over the tremendous sweep of plateau which from that point looked illimitable as the ocean, settled upon a whirlwind that displayed method and a slow sedateness not at all in keeping with the erratic gyrations of those gone before. Watching it wistfully with a half-formed hope that it might not be just a dry-weather whirlwind, her droning voice trailed off into silence. A faint beating in her throat betrayed what it was she half hoped. She was so desperately lonesome!

Pat tilted his head and looked up at her and licked her hand until she drew it away impatiently.

"Good gracious, Pat! Do you want to plaster me with germs?" she reproved. And Pat dropped his head down upon his paws and eyed her furtively from under his brown lids, waiting for her to repent her harshness and smooth his head caressingly, as was her wont.

But Helen May was watching that slow-moving column of dust, just as she had watched the cloud which had heralded the coming into her life of Holman Sommers. It might be—but it couldn't, for this was away off the road. No one would be cutting straight across that hummocky flat, unless—

From the desert I come to thee,
On my Arab shod with fire—

"Oh, I'm getting absolutely mushy!" she muttered angrily. "If I've reached the point where I can't see a spot of dust without getting heart-failure over it, why it's time I was shut up somewhere. What are you lolling around me for, Pat? Go on and tend to your goats, why don't you? And do get off my skirt!"

Pat sprang up as though she had struck him; gave her an injured glance that was perfectly maddening to Helen May, whose conscience was sufficient punishment, and went slinking off down the slope. Half-way to the band he stopped and sat down on his haunches in the hot sun, as dejected a dog as ever was made to suffer because his mistress was displeased with herself.

Helen May sat there scowling out across the wide spaces, while romance and adventure, and something more, rode steadily nearer, heralded by the small gray cloud. When she was sure that a horseman was coming, she perversely removed herself to another spot where she would not be seen. And there she sat, out of sight from below and thus fancying herself undiscovered, refusing so much as a sly glance around her granite shield.

For if there was anything which Helen May hated more than another it was the possibility of being thought cheaply sentimental, mushy, as the present generation vividly puts it. Also she was trying to break herself of humming that old desert love-song all the while. Vic was beginning to "kid" her unmercifully about it, for one thing. To think that she should sing it without thinking a word about it, just because she happened to see a little dust! She would not look. She would not!

Starr might have passed her by and gone on to the cabin if he had not, through a

pair of powerful binoculars, been observing her when she sent Pat off, and when she got up and went over to the other ledge and sat down. Through the glasses he had seen her feet crossed, toes up, just past the nose of the rock, and he could see the spread of her skirt. Luckily, he could not read her mind. He therefore gave a yank at the lead-rope in his hand and addressed a few biting remarks to a white-lashed, blue-eyed pinto trailing reluctantly behind Rabbit; and rode forward with some eagerness toward the ridge.

"'Sleep?" he greeted cheerfully, when he had forced the two horses to scramble up to the shade of the ledge, and had received no attention whatever from the person just beyond. The tan boots were still crossed, and not so much as a toe of them moved to show that the owner heard him. Starr knew that he had made noise enough, so far as that went.

"Why, no, I'm not asleep. What is it?" came crisply, after a perceptible pause.

"It ain't anything at all," Starr retorted, and swung Rabbit into the shade which Helen May had left. He dismounted, sat himself down with his back against a rock, and proceeded to roll a cigarette. By no means would he intrude upon the privacy of a lady, though the quiet, crossed feet and the placid folds of the khaki skirt told him that she was sitting there quietly—pouting about something, most likely, he diagnosed her silence shrewdly. Well, it was early, and so long as he reached a certain point by full dark, he was not neglecting anything. As a matter of fact, he told himself philosophically, he really wanted to kill half a day in a perfectly plausible manner. There was no hurry, no hurry at all.

Pat looked back at him ingratiatingly, and Starr called. Pat came running in long leaps, nearly wagging himself in two because someone he liked was going to be nice to him. Starr petted him and talked to him and pulled his ears and slapped him on the ribs, and Pat in his joy persisted in trying to lick Starr's cheek.

"Quit it! Lay down and be a doormat, then. You've got welcome wrote all over you. And much as I like welcome, I hate to be licked."

Pat lay down, and Starr eyed the tan boot toes. They moved impatiently, but they did not uncross. Starr smiled to himself and proceeded to carry on a one-sided conversation with Pat, and to smoke his cigarette.

"Sick, over there?" he inquired casually after perhaps five minutes; either of them would have sworn it ten or fifteen.

"Why, no," chirped the crisp voice. "Why?"

"Seemed polite to ask, is all," Starr confessed. "I didn't think you was." He finished his smoke in the silence that followed. Then, because he himself owned a perverse streak, he took his binoculars from their case and began to study the low-lying ridge in the distance, in a pocket of which nestled the Medina ranch buildings. He was glad this ridge commanded all but the "draws" and hollows lying transversely between here and Medina's place. It was Medina whom he had been advised by his chief to watch particularly, when Starr had found a means of laying his clues before that astute gentleman. If he could sit within ten feet of Helen May while he kept an eye on that country over there, all the better.

He saw a horseman ride up out of a hollow and disappear almost immediately into another. The man seemed to be coming over in this direction, though Starr could not be sure. He watched for a reappearance of the rider on high ground, but he saw no more of the fellow. So after a little he took down the glasses to scan the country as a whole.

It was then that he glanced toward the other rock and saw that the tan boots had moved out of sight. He believed that he would have heard her if she moved away, and so he kept his eyes turned upon the corner of the rock where her feet had shown a few minutes before.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A SHOT FROM THE PINNACLE

"Why—did some one come with you, Mr. Starr? I thought you were alone."

Starr turned his head and saw Helen May standing quite close, on the other side of him. She was glancing inquiringly from him to the pinto pony, and she was smiling the least little bit, though her eyes had a shamed, self-conscious look. Starr eyed her keenly, a bit reproachfully, and she blushed.

"I thought maybe you'd come around where I was," she defended herself lamely. "It—seemed cooler there—"

"Yes, I noticed it was pretty cool, from the tone of your voice."

"Well—oh, I was just nursing a grouch, and I couldn't stop all at once," Helen May surrendered suddenly, sitting down beside him and crossing her feet. "I've read in stories how sheepherders go crazy, and I know now just why that is. They see so few people that they don't know how to act when some one does come along. They get so they hate themselves and everybody else. I had just finished abusing poor old Pat till he went off and sulked too."

"I thought probably you and Pat had just had a run-in, the way he acted." Starr went back to scanning that part of the mesa where he had glimpsed the rider. He could not afford to forget business in the pleasure of talking aimless, trivial things with Helen May.

"What are you looking for?"

"Stock," said Starr, falling back on the standard excuse of the range man.

"And *what's* the idea of two saddle-horses and two saddles and two bridles?"

Helen May's voice was as simply curious as a child's.

"The idea is that you're going to ride instead of walk from now on. It's an outfit I got from a fellow that was leaving. He borrowed money from me and left his horse and saddle, for a kind of security. I didn't want it, but he had to leave 'em somewhere. So I thought you might as well keep the horse and use it till he comes back, or something." Starr did very well with this explanation; much better than he had done in explaining Pat. The truth was that he had bought the horse for the express purpose of giving it to Helen May; just as he had bought the dog.

Helen May studied his face while he studied the distant plain. She thought he acted as though he didn't care much whether she kept the horse or not, and for that reason, and because his explanation had sounded like truth, she hesitated over refusing the offer, though she felt that she ought to refuse.

"It ain't right for you to be out here afoot," said Starr, as though he had read her thoughts. "It's bad enough for you to be here at all. What ever possessed you to do such a crazy thing, anyhow?"

"Well, sometimes people can't choose. Dad got the notion first. And then—when he died—Vic and I just went ahead with it."

"Did he know anything about this country? Did he know—what chances you'd be taking?" Starr was trying to choose his words so that they would impress her without alarming her. It angered him to have to worry over the girl's welfare and to keep that worry to himself.

"What chances, for gracious sake? I never saw such a mild, perfectly monotonous life. Why, there are more chances in Los Angeles every time a person goes down town. It's deadly dull here, and it's too lonesome for words, and I hate it. But as for taking chances—" Her voice was frankly contemptuous of the idea.

"Chances of going broke. It takes experience—"

"Oh, as to that, it's partly a matter of health," said Helen May lightly. "I have to live where the climate—"

"You could live in Albuquerque, or some other live town; close to it, anyway.

You don't have to stick away down here, where—"

"I don't see as it matters. So long as it isn't Los Angeles, no place appeals to me. And dad had bought the improvements here, so—"

"I'll pay you for the improvements, if that's all," Starr said shortly.

Helen May laughed. "That sounds exactly as though you want to get me out of the country," she challenged.

Starr did not rise to the bait. He took another long look for the horseman, saw not so much as a flurry of dust, and slid the glasses into their case.

"I brought out that carbine I was speaking about. And the shells that go with it. I'm kind of a gun fiend, I guess. I'm always accumulating a lot of shooting irons I never use. I run across a six-shooter and belt, too. Come here, Rabbit!"

Rabbit came, and Starr untied the weapons, smiling boyishly. "You may as well be using 'em; they'll only rust, kicking around in the shack. Buckle this around you. I punched another hole or two, so the belt would come within a mile or so of fitting. You want to wear that every time you go out on the range. The time you leave it home is the very time when you'll see a coyote or something.

"And if you expect to get rich in the goat business, you never want to pass up a coyote. There's a bounty on 'em, for one thing, because they do lots of damage among sheep and goats. And for another," he added impressively, "the rabies that's been epidemic on the Coast is spreading. You've maybe read about it. A rabid coyote would come right at you, and you know the consequences. Or it would bite Pat, and then Pat would tackle you."

"Oh!" Helen May had turned a sickly shade. Her eyes went anxiously over the slope as though she half expected something of the sort to happen then and there.

"That's why," said Starr solemnly, looking down into her face, "I'm kinda worried about you ranging around afoot and without a gun—"

"But nobody else has even mentioned—"

"Everybody else goes prepared, and they're inclined to take chances as a matter of course. I reckon they think you know all about rabies being in the country.

This has always been a scrappy kinda place, remember, and folks are used to packing guns and using 'em when the case demands it. You wear this six-gun, lady, and keep your eyes open from now on. I've got another one for Vic; an automatic. Now we'll go down here in the shade and practice shooting. I brought plenty of shells, and I want to learn you how to handle a gun."

Silently she followed him down the slope on the side toward the Basin. He stopped beside the pinto, took it by the bridle-reins and, whipping out his gun, fired it once to test the horse. The pinto twitched its ears at the sound and looked at Starr. Starr laughed.

"I'll learn you to shoot from horseback," he called back to Helen May. "He's broke to it, I can see now."

"Oh, I wonder if I could! Don't tell Vic, will you? I'd like to take him by surprise. Boys are so conceited and self-sufficient! You'd think Vic was my grandfather, the way he lords it over me. First of all, what is the right way to get on a horse? I wish you'd teach me about riding, too."

This sort of instruction grew absorbing to both. Before either guessed how the time had flown, the sun stood straight overhead; and Pat, standing in front of her with an expectant look in his eyes and an occasional wag of his stubby tail, reminded Helen May that it was time for lunch. They had used almost a full box of shells, and Helen May had succeeded in shooting from the back of the pinto and in hitting a certain small hummock of pure sand twice in six shots. She was tremendously proud of the feat, and she took no pains to conceal her pride. She wanted to start in on another box of shells, but Pat's eyes were so reproachful, and her sense of hospitality was so urgent that she decided to wait until they had eaten the lunch she had brought with her.

The rocks which had cast a shadow were now baking in the glare, and the sand where Helen May and Starr had sat was radiating heat waves. Starr took another long look down toward Medina's ranch through his field glasses, while Helen May went to find a comfortable bit of shade.

"If you'll come over this way, Mr. Starr," she called abruptly, "I'll give you a sandwich. It's hot everywhere to-day, but this is a little better than out in the sun."

Starr took the glasses down from his eyes and let them dangle by their cord

while he walked over the nose of the ridge to where she was waiting for him.

Half-way there, a streak of fire seemed to sear his arm near his shoulder. Starr knew the feeling well enough. He staggered and went down headlong in a clump of greasewood, and at the same instant the report of a rifle came clearly from the high pinnacle at the head of Sunlight Basin.

Helen May came running, her face white with horror, for she had seen Starr fall just as the sound of the shot came to tell her why. She did not cry out, but she rushed to where he lay half concealed in the bushes. When she came near him, she stopped short. For Starr was lying on his stomach with his head up and elbows in the sand, steadying the glasses to his eyes that he might search that pinnacle.

"W-what made you fall down like that?" Helen May cried exasperatedly. "I—I thought you were shot!"

"I am, to a certain extent," Starr told her unconcernedly. "Kneel down here beside me and act scared, will you? And in a minute I want you to climb on the pinto and ride around behind them rocks and wait for me. Take Rabbit with you. Act like you was going for help, or was scared and running away from a corpse. You get me? I'll crawl over there after a little."

"W-why? Are you hurt so you can't walk?"

Helen May did not have to act; she was scared quite enough for Starr's purpose.

"Oh, I could walk, but walking ain't healthy right now. Jump up now and climb your horse like you was expecting to ride him down to a whisper. Go on—beat it. And when you get outa sight of the pinnacle, stay outa sight. Run!"

There were several questions which Helen May wanted to ask, but she only gave him a hasty, imploring glance which Starr did not see at all, since his eyes were focussed on the pinnacle. She ran to the pinto and scared him so that he jumped away from her. Starr heard and glanced impatiently back at her. He saw that she had managed to get the reins and was mounting with all the haste and all the awkwardness he could possibly expect of her, and he grinned and returned to his scrutiny of the peak.

Whatever he saw he kept to himself; but presently he began to wriggle backward, keeping the greasewood clump, and afterwards certain rocks and little ridges, between himself and a view of the point he had fixed upon as the spot where the shooter had stood.

When he had rounded the first rock ledge he got up and looked for Helen May, and found her standing a couple of rods off, watching him anxiously. He smiled reassuringly at her while he dusted his trousers with the flat of his hands.

"Fine and dandy," he said. "Whoever took a pot-shot at me thinks he got me first crack. See? Now listen, lady. That maybe was some herder out gunning for coyotes, and maybe he was gunning for me. I licked a herder that ranges over that way, and he maybe thought he'd play even. But anyway, don't say anything about it to anybody, will you. I kinda—"

"Why not? If he shot at you, he wanted to kill you. And that's murder; he ought to be—"

"Now, you know you said yourself that herders go crazy. I don't want to get the poor boob into trouble. Let's not say anything about it. I've got to go now; I've stayed longer than I meant to, as it is. Have Vic put that halter that's on the saddle on the pinto, and tie the rope to it and let it drag. He won't go away, and you can catch him without any bother. If Vic don't know how to set the saddle, you take notice just how it's fixed when you take it off. I meant to show you how, but I can't stop now. And don't go anywhere, not even to the mail box, without Pat or your six-gun, or both. Come here, Rabbit, you old scoundrel!

"I wish I could stay," he added, swinging up to the saddle and looking down at her anxiously. "Don't let Vic monkey with that automatic till I come and show him how to use it. I—"

"You said you were shot," said Helen May, staring at him enigmatically from under her lashes. "Are you?"

"Not much; burnt a streak on my arm, nothing to bother about. Now remember and don't leave your gun—"

"I don't believe it was because you licked a herder. What made somebody shoot at you? Was it—on account of Pat?"

"Pat? No, I don't see what the dog would have to do with it. It was some half-baked herder, shooting maybe because he heard us shoot and thought we was using him for a target. You can't," Starr declared firmly, "tell what fool idea they'll get into their heads. It was our shooting, most likely. Now I must go. Adios, I'll see yuh before long."

"Well, but what—"

Helen May found herself speaking to the scenery. Starr was gone with Rabbit at a sliding trot down the slope that kept the ridge between him and the pinnacle. She stood staring after him blankly, her hat askew on the back of her head, and her lips parted in futile astonishment. She did not in the least realize just what Starr's extreme caution had meant. She had no inkling of the real gravity of the situation, for her ignorance of the lawless possibilities of that big, bare country insulated her against understanding.

What struck her most forcibly was the cool manner in which he had ordered her to act a part, and the unhesitating manner in which she had obeyed him. He ordered her about, she thought, as though he had a right; and she obeyed as though she recognized that right.

She watched him as long as he was in sight, and tried to guess where he was going and what he meant to do, and what was his business—what he did for a living. He must be a rancher, since he had said he was looking for stock; but it was queer he had never told her where his ranch lay, or how far off it was, or anything about it.

After a little it occurred to her that Starr would want the man who had shot at him to think she had left that neighborhood, so she called to Pat and had him drive the goats around where they could not be seen from the pinnacle.

Then she sat down and ate her sandwiches thoughtfully, with long, meditative intervals between bites. She regarded the pinto curiously, wondering if Starr had really taken him as security for a debt, and wishing that she had asked him what its name was. It was queer, the way he rode up unexpectedly every few days, always bringing something he thought she needed, and seeming to take it for granted that she would accept everything he offered. It was much queerer that she did accept everything without argument or hesitation. For that matter, everything that concerned Starr was queer, from Helen May's point of view.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

HELEN MAY UNDERSTANDS

Pat, lying at her feet and licking his lips contentedly after his bone and the crusts of her sandwich, raised his head suddenly and rumbled a growl somewhere deep in his chest. His upper lip lifted and showed his teeth wickedly, and the hair on the back of his neck stood out in a ruff that made him look a different dog.

Helen May felt a cold shiver all up and down her spine. She had never seen Pat, nor any other dog for that matter, look like that. It was much more terrifying than that mysterious shot which had effected Starr so strangely. Pat was staring directly behind her, and his eyes had a greenish tinge in the iris, and the white part was all pink and bloodshot. Helen May thought he must have rabies or something; or else a rabid coyote was up on the ridge behind her. She wanted to scream, but she was afraid; she was afraid to look behind her, even.

Pat got up and stood digging his toe nails into the earth in the most horribly suggestive way imaginable. The green light in his eyes terrified her. His ruff bristled bigger on his neck. He looked ready to spring at something. Helen May was too scared to move so much as a finger. She waited, and her heart began beating so hard in her throat that it nearly suffocated her. She never once thought of the six-shooter which Starr had given her. She did not think of anything, except that a rabid coyote was right behind her, and in a minute Pat would jump at it, if it did not first jump at her! And then Pat would be bitten, and would go mad and bite her and Vic, and they'd all die horribly of hydrophobia.

"Ah—is this a modern, dramatic version of Beauty and the Beast? If so, it is a masterpiece in depicting perfect repose on the part of Beauty, while the Beast vivifies the protective instinct of the stronger toward the weaker. Speaking in the common parlance, if you will call off your dog, Miss Stevenson, I might be persuaded to venture within hand-shaking distance." A little laugh, that was

much more humorous than the words, followed the speech.

Helen May felt as though she were going to faint. "Pat!" she tried to say admonishingly; but her voice was a weak whisper that did not carry ten feet. She pulled herself together and tried again. "Pat, lie down!"

Pat turned his bead a trifle and sent her a tolerant glance, but the hair did not lie down on his neck, and the growl did not cease to rumble in his throat.

"Pat!" Helen May began to recover a little from the reaction. "Come here to me! I—don't think he'll bite you, Mr. Sommers. It's—it's only Mexicans that he's supposed to hate. I—I didn't know it was you."

Holman Sommers, being careful to keep a safe distance between himself and Pat, came around to where he could see her face. "As a matter of fact," he began, "it's really my sister who came to visit you. Your brother informed us that you were out here, and I came to tell you. Why, did I frighten you so badly, Miss Stevenson? Your face is absolutely colorless. What did I do to so terrify you? I surely never intended—" His eyes were remorseful as he stood and looked at her.

"It was just the way Pat acted. I—I'd been hearing about rabid coyotes, and I thought one was behind me, Pat acted so queer. Lie down, Pat!"

Holman Sommers spoke to the dog ingratiatingly, but Pat did not exhibit any tail-wagging desire for friendly acquaintance. He slunk over to Helen May and flattened himself on his belly with his nose on his paws, and his eyes, that still showed greenish lights and bloodshot whites, fixed on the man.

"It may be," said Sommers judgmatically, "that he has been taught to resent strangers coming in close proximity to the animals he has in charge. A great many dogs are so trained, and are therefore in no wise to blame for exhibiting a certain degree of ferocity. The canine mind is wholly lacking in the power of deduction, its intelligence consisting rather of a highly developed instinctive faculty for retaining impressions which invariably express themselves in some concrete form such as hate, fear, joy, affection and like primitive emotions. Pat, for instance, has been taught to regard strangers as interlopers. He therefore resents the presence of all strangers, and has no mental faculty for distinguishing between strangers, as such, and actual intruders whose presence is essentially undesirable."

Helen May gave a little, half-hysterical laugh, and Holman Sommers looked at her keenly, as a doctor sometimes looks at a patient.

"I am intensely sorry that my coming frightened you," he said gently. Then he laughed. "I am also deeply humiliated at the idea of being mistaken, in the broad light of midday, for a rabid coyote. May I ask just wherein lies the resemblance?"

Helen May looked at him, saw the dancing light in his eyes and a mirthful quirk of his lips, and blushed while she smiled.

"It's just that I happened to be thinking about them," she said, instinctively belittling her fear. "And then I never saw Pat act the way he's acting now."

Holman Sommers regarded the dog with the same keen, studying look he had given Helen May. Pat did not take it as calmly, however, as Helen May had done. Pat lifted his upper lip again and snarled with an extremely concrete depiction of the primitive emotion, hate.

"There *are* such things as rabid coyotes, aren't there? Just—do you know how they act, and how a person could tell when something has caught the disease from them?"

"I think I may safely assert that there undoubtedly are rabid coyotes in the country. As a matter of fact, and speaking relatively, they have been, and probably still are, somewhat of a menace to stock running abroad without a herder amply provided with the means of protecting his charge. At the same time I may point with pardonable pride to the concerted action of both State and Stock Association to rid the country of these pests. So far we feel highly gratified at the success which has attended our efforts. I gravely doubt whether you would now find, in this whole county, a single case of infection. But on the other hand, I could not, of course, venture to state unqualifiedly that there may not be certain isolated cases—"

"Pat! Do stop that growling! What ails you, anyway? I never saw him act that way before. I wonder if he could possibly be—" She looked at Sommers questioningly.

"Infected?" he finished for her understandingly. "As a matter of fact, that may be possible, though I should not consider it altogether probable. Since the period of

incubation varies from three weeks to six months, as in man, the dog may possibly have been infected before coming into your possession. If that were true, you would have no means of discovering the fact until he exhibits certain premonitory symptoms, which may or may not form in themselves conclusive evidence of the presence of the disease."

Helen May got up from the rock and moved away, eyeing Pat suspiciously. Pat got up and followed her, keeping a watchful eye on Sommers.

"What are the symptoms, for gracious sake?" she demanded fretfully, worried beyond caring how she chose her words for Holman Sommers. "His eyes look queer, don't you think?"

"Since you ask me, and since the subject is not one to be dismissed lightly, I will say that I have been studying the dog's attitude with some slight measure of concern," Holman Sommers admitted guardedly. "The suffused eyeball is sometimes found in the premonitory stage of the disease, after incubation has progressed to a certain degree. Also irritability, nervousness, and depression are apt to be present. Has the dog exhibited any tendency toward sluggishness, Miss Stevenson?"

"Well, he's been lying around most of the time to-day," Helen May confessed, staring at Pat apprehensively. "Of course, there hasn't been anything much for him to do. But he certainly does act queer, just since you came."

Holman Sommers spoke with the prim decision of a teacher instructing a class, but that seemed to be only his way, and Helen May was growing used to it. "His evidencing a tendency toward sluggishness to-day, and his subsequent irritability, may or may not be significant of an abnormality. If, however, the dog progresses to the stage of hyperaesthesia, and the muscles of deglutition become extremely rigid, so that he cannot swallow, convulsions will certainly follow. There will also appear in the mouth and throat a secretion of thick, viscid mucus, with thickened saliva, which will be an undubitable proof of rabies."

Having thus innocently damned poor Pat with the suspicion of a dreadful malady, Sommers made a scientific attempt to soothe Helen May's fears. He advised, with many words and much kind intent, that Pat be muzzled until the "hyperaesthesia" did or did not develop. Helen May thought that the terribly-termed symptoms might develop before they could get a muzzle from town, but

she did not like to say so.

Partly to be hospitable, and partly to get away from Pat, she mounted the pinto, told Pat to watch the goats, and rode down to the house to see Martha Sommers. She did not anticipate any pleasure in the visit, much as she had longed for the sound of a woman's voice. She was really worried half to death over Starr, and the rabies, and Pat, and the nagging consciousness that she had not accomplished as much copying of manuscript as Holman Sommers probably expected.

She did not hear half of what Sommers was saying on the way to the cabin. His very amiability jarred upon her nervous depression. She had always liked him, and respected his vast learning, but to-day she certainly did not get much comfort out of his converse. She wondered why she had been so light-hearted while Starr was with her showing her how to shoot, and lecturing her about the danger of going gunless abroad; and why she was so perfectly dejected when Holman Sommers talked to her about the very same thing. Starr had certainly painted things blacker than Holman had done, but it did not seem to have the same effect.

"I don't see what we're going to do for a muzzle," she launched suddenly into the middle of Holman Sommers' scientific explanation of mirages.

"Vic can undoubtedly construct one out of an old strap," Holman Sommers retorted impatiently, and went on discoursing about refraction and reflection and the like.

Helen May tried to follow him, and gave it up. When they were almost to the spring she again unwittingly jarred Holman Sommers out of his subject.

"Did all those words you used mean that Pat will foam at the mouth like mad dogs you read about?" she asked abruptly.

Holman Sommers, tramping along beside the pinto, looked at her queerly. "If Pat does not, I strongly suspect that I shall," he told her weightily, but with a twinkle in his eyes. "I have been endeavoring, Miss Stevenson, to wean your thoughts away from so unhappy a subject. Why permit yourself to be worried? The thing will happen, or it will not happen. If it does happen, you will be powerless to prevent. If it does not, you will have been anxious over a chimera of the imagination."

"Chimera of the imagination is a good line," laughed Helen May flippantly. "All the same, if Pat is going to gallop all over the scenery, foaming at the mouth and throwing fits at the sight of water—"

"As a matter of fact," Holman Sommers was beginning again in his most instructive tone, when a whoop from the spring interrupted him.

Vic had hobbled obligingly down there to get cool water for the plump lady who was Holman Sommers' sister, and he had nearly stepped on a sleepy rattler stretched out in the sun. Vic was making a collection of rattles. He had one set, so far, of five rattles and a "button." He wanted to get these which were buzzing stridently enough for three snakes, it seemed to Vic. He was hopping around on his good foot and throwing rocks; and the snake, having retreated to a small heap of loose cobblestones, was thrusting his head out in vicious little striking gestures, and keeping the scaly length of him bidden.

"Wait a minute, I'll get him, Vic," called Helen May, suddenly anxious to show off her newly acquired skill with firearms. Starr had told her that lots of people killed rattlesnakes by shooting their heads off. She wanted to try it, anyway, and show Vic a thing or two. So she rode up as close as she dared, though the pinto shied away from the ominous sound; pulled her pearl-handled six-shooter from its holster, aimed, and fired at the snake's head.

You have heard, no doubt, of "fool's luck." Helen May actually tore the whole top off that rattlesnake's head (though I may as well say right here that she never succeeded in shooting another snake) and rode nonchalantly on to the cabin as though she had done nothing at all unusual, but smiling to herself at Vic's slack-jawed amazement at seeing her on horseback, with a gun and such uncanny skill in the use of it.

She felt better after that, and she rather enjoyed the plump sister of Holman Sommers. The plump sister called him Holly, and seemed to be inordinately proud of his learning and inordinately fond of nagging at him over little things. She was what Helen May called a vegetable type of woman. She did not seem to have any great emotions in her make-up. She sat in the one rocking-chair under the mesquite tree and crocheted lace and talked comfortably about Holly and her chickens in the same breath, and frankly admired Helen May's "spunk" in living out alone like that.

"Don't overlook Vic, though," Helen May put in generously. "I honestly don't believe I could stand it without Vic."

The plump sister seemed unimpressed. "In this country," she said with a certain snug positiveness that was the keynote of her personality, "it's the women that have the courage. They wouldn't be here if they didn't have. Think how close we are to the Mexican border, for instance. Anything that is horrible to woman can come out of Mexico. Not that I look down on them over there," she added, with a complacent tolerance in her tone. "They are victims of the System that has kept them degraded and ignorant. But until they are lifted up and educated and raised to our standards they are bad.

"You can't get around it, Holly, those ignorant Mexicans are *bad*!" She had lifted her eyes accusingly to where Holman Sommers sat on the ground with his knees drawn up and his old Panama hat hung upon them. He was smoking a pipe, and he did not remove it from his mouth; but Helen May saw that amused quirk of the lips just the same.

"You can't get around it. You know it as well as I do," she reiterated. "Cannibals are worth saving, but before they are saved they are liable to eat the missionary. And it's the same thing with your Mexicans. You want to educate them and raise them to your standards, and that's all right as far as it goes. But in the meantime they're bad. And if Miss Stevenson wasn't such a good shot, I wouldn't be able to sleep nights, thinking of her living up here alone, with just a boy for protection."

"Why, I never heard of such a thing as any danger from Mexicans!" Helen May looked inquiringly from plump sister to cynical brother.

"Well, you needn't wonder at Holly not telling you," said the plump sister,—her name was Maggie. "Holly's a fool about some things. Holly is trying the Uplift, and he shuts his eyes to things that don't fit in with his theories. If you've copied much of that stuff he's been writing, you ought to know how impractical he is. Holly's got his head in the clouds, and he won't look at what's right under his feet." Again she looked reproof at Holly, and again Holly's lips quirked around the stem end of his pipe.

"You just keep your eyes open, Miss Stevenson," she admonished, in a purring, comfortable voice. "I ain't afraid, myself, because I've got Holly and my cousin Todd, when he's at home. And besides, Holly's always doing missionary stunts,

and the Mexicans like him because he'll let them rob him right and left and come back and take what they forgot the first time, and Holly won't do a thing to them. But you don't want to take any chances, away off here like you are. You lock your door good at night, and you sleep with a gun under your pillow. And don't go off anywhere alone. My, even with a gun you ain't any too safe!"

Helen May gave a gasp. But Holman Sommers laughed outright—an easy, chuckling laugh that partly reassured her. "Danger is Maggie's favorite joke," he said tolerantly. "As a matter of fact, and speaking from a close, personal knowledge of the people hereabouts, I can assure you, Miss Stevenson, that you are in no danger whatever from the source my sister indicates."

"Well, but Holly, I've said it, and I'll say it again; you can't tell *what* may come up out of Mexico." Plump Maggie rolled up her lace and jabbed the ball decisively with the crochet hook, "We'll have to go now, or the chickens will be wondering where their supper is coming from. You do what I say, and lock your doors at night, and have your gun handy, Miss Stevenson. Things may look calm enough on the surface, but they ain't, I can tell you that!"

"Woman, cease!" cried Holly banteringly, while he dusted his baggy trousers with his palms. "Miss Stevenson will be haunted by nightmares if you keep on."

Once they were gone, Helen May surrendered weakly to one fear, to the extent that she let Vic take the carbine and the pinto and ride over to where she had left Pat and the goats, for the simple reason that she dreaded to face alone that much maligned dog. Vic, to be sure, would have quarreled with her if necessary, to get a ride on the pinto, and he was a good deal astonished at Helen May's sweet consideration of a boy's hunger for a horse. But she tempered his joy a bit by urging him to keep an eye on Pat, who had been acting very queer.

"He kept ruining up his back and showing his teeth at Mr. Sommers," she explained nervously. "If he does it when you go, Vic, and if he foams at the mouth, you'd better shoot him before he bites something. If a mad dog bites you, you'll get hydrophobia, and bark and growl like a dog, and have fits and die."

"G-oo-d *night*!" Vic ejaculated fervently, and went loping awkwardly down the trail past the spring.

That left Helen May alone and free to think about the horrors that might come up out of Mexico, and about the ignorant Mexicans who, until they are uplifted, are

bad. It seemed strange that, if this were true, Starr had never mentioned the danger. And yet—

"I'll bet anything that's just what Starr-of-the-Desert did mean!" she exclaimed aloud, her eyes fixed intently on the toes of her scuffed boots. "He just didn't want to scare me too much and make me suspicious of everybody that came along, and so he talked mad coyotes at me. But it was Mexicans he meant; I'll bet anything it was!"

If that was what Starr meant, then the shot from the pinnacle, and Starr's crafty, Indian-like method of getting away unseen, took on a new and sinister meaning. Helen May shivered at the thought of Starr riding away in search of the man who had tried to kill him, and of the risk he must be taking. And what if the fellow came back, sneaking back in the dark, and tried to get in the house, or something? It surely was lucky that Starr-of-the-Desert had just happened to bring those guns.

But had he just *happened* to bring them? Helen May was not stupid, even if she were ignorant of certain things she ought to know, living out alone in the wild. She began to see very clearly just what Starr had meant; just how far he had *happened* to have extra guns in his shack, and had just *happened* to get hold of a horse that she and Vic could use; and the dog, too, that hated Mexicans!

"That's why he hates to have me stay on the claim!" she deduced at last. "Only he just wouldn't tell me right out that it isn't safe. That's what he meant by asking if dad knew the chances I'd have to take. Well, dad didn't know, but after the price dad paid, why—I've got to stay, and make good. There's no sense in being a coward about it. Starr wouldn't want me to be a coward. He's just scheming around to make it as safe as he can, without making me cowardly."

A slow, half-tender smile lit her chestnut-tinted eyes, and tilted her lips at the corners. "Oh, you desert man o' mine, I see through you now!" she said under her breath, and kept on smiling afterwards, since there was not a soul near to guess her thoughts. "Desert man o' mine" was going pretty strong, if you stop to think of it; but Helen May would have died—would have lied—would have gone to any lengths to keep Starr from guessing she had ever thought such a thing about him. That was the woman of her.

The woman of her it was too that kept her dwelling pleasedly on Starr's shy,

protective regard for her, instead of watching the peaks in fear and trembling lest another bad, un-uplifted Mexican should be watching a chance to send another bullet zipping down into the Basin on its mission of wanton wickedness.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

STARR SEES TOO LITTLE OR TOO MUCH

Carefully skirting the ridge where Helen May had her goats; keeping always in the gulches and never once showing himself on high ground, Starr came after a while to a point where he could look up to the pinnacle behind Sunlight Basin, from the side opposite the point where he had wriggled away behind a bush. He left Rabbit hidden in a brush-choked arroyo that meandered away to the southwest, and began cautiously to climb.

Starr did not expect to come upon his man on the peak; indeed he would have been surprised to find the fellow still there. But that peak was as good as any for reconnoitering the surrounding country, was higher than any other within several miles, in fact. What he did hope was to pick up with his glasses the man's line of retreat after a deed he must believe successfully accomplished. And there might be some betraying sign there that would give him a clue.

There was always the possibility, however, that the fellow had lingered to see what took place after the supposed killing. He must believe that the girl who had been with Starr would take some action, and he might want to know to a certainty what that action was. So Starr went carefully, keeping behind boulders and rugged outcroppings and in the bottom of deep, water-worn washes when nothing else served. He did not think the fellow, even if he stayed on the peak, would be watching behind him, but Starr did not take any chances, and climbed rather slowly.

He reached the summit at the left of where the man had stood when he shot; very close to the spot where Helen May had stood and looked upon Vic and the goats and the country she abhorred. Starr saw her tracks there in a sheltered place beside a rock and knew that she had been up there, though in that dry soil he could not, of course, tell when. When that baked soil takes an imprint, it is apt to

hold it for a long while unless rain or a real sand-storm blots it out.

He hid there for a few minutes, craning as much as he dared to see if there were any sign of the man he wanted. In a little he left that spot and crept, foot by foot, over to the cairn, the "sheepherder's monument," behind which the fellow had stood. There again he found the prints of Helen May's small, mountain boots, prints which he had come to know very well. And close to them, looking as though the two had stood together, were the larger, deeper tracks of a man.

Starr dared not rise and stand upright. He must keep always under cover from any chance spying from below. He could not, therefore, trace the footprints down the peak. But he got some idea of the man's direction when he left, and he knew, of course, where to find Helen May. He did not connect the two in his mind, beyond registering clearly in his memory the two sets of tracks.

He crept closer to the Basin side of the peak and looked down, following an impulse he did not try to analyze. Certainly he did not expect to see any one, unless it were Vic, so he had a little shock of surprise when he saw Helen May riding the pinto up past the spring, with a man walking beside her and glancing up frequently into her face. Starr was human; I have reminded you several times how perfectly human he was. He immediately disliked that man. When he heard faintly the tones of Helen May's laugh, he disliked the man more.

He got down, with his head and his arms—the left one was lame in the biceps—above a rock. He made sure that the sun had swung around so it would not shine on the lenses and betray him by any heliographic reflection, and focussed his glasses upon the two. He saw as well as heard Helen May laugh, and he scowled over it. But mostly he studied the man.

"All right for you, old boy," he muttered. "I don't know who the devil you are, but I don't like your looks." Which shows how human jealousy will prejudice a man.

He saw Vic throwing rocks at something which he judged was a snake, and he saw Helen May rein the pinto awkwardly around, "square herself for action," as Starr would have styled it, and fire. By her elation; artfully suppressed, by the very carelessness with which she shoved the gun in its holster, he knew that she had hit whatever she shot at. He caught the tones of Holman Sommers' voice praising her, and he hated the tones. He watched them come on up to the little

house, where they disappeared at the end where the mesquite tree grew. Sitting in the shade there, talking, he guessed they were doing, and for some reason he resented it. He saw Vic lift a rattlesnake up by its tail, and heard him yell that it had six rattles, and the button was missing.

After that Starr turned his hack on the Basin and began to search scowlingly the plain. He tried to pull his mind away from Helen May and her visitor and to fix it upon the would-be assassin. He believed that the horseman he had seen earlier in the day might be the one, and he looked for him painstakingly, picking out all the draws, all the dry washes and arroyos of that vicinity. The man would keep under cover, of course, in making his getaway. He would not ride across a ridge if he could help it, any more than would Starr.

Even so, from that height Starr could look down into many of the deep places. In one of them he caught sight of a horseman picking his way carefully along the boulder-strewn bottom. The man's back was toward him, but the general look of him was Mexican. The horse was bay with a rusty black tail, but there were in New Mexico thousands of bay horses with black tails, so there was nothing gained there. The rider seemed to be making toward Medina's ranch, though that was only a guess, since the arroyo he was following led in that direction at that particular place. Later it took a sharp turn to the south, and the rider went out of sight before Starr got so much as a glimpse at his features.

He watched for a few minutes longer, sweeping his glasses slowly to right and left. He took another look down into the Basin and saw no one stirring, that being about the time when the plump sister was rolling up her fancy work and tapering off her conversation to the point of making her adieu. Starr did not watch long enough for his own peace of mind. Five more minutes would have brought the plump one into plain view with her brother and Helen May, and would have identified Holman Sommers as the escort of a lady caller. But those five minutes Starr spent in crawling back down the peak on the side farthest from the Basin, leaving Holman Sommers sticking in his mind with the unpleasant flavor of mystery.

He mounted Rabbit again and made a detour of several miles so that he might come up on the ridge behind Medina's without running any risk of crossing the trail of the men he wanted to watch. About two o'clock he stopped at a shallow, brackish stream and let Rabbit rest and feed for an hour while Starr himself climbed another rocky pinnacle and scanned the country between there and

Medina's.

The gate that let one off the main road and into the winding trail which led to the house stood out in plain view at the mouth of a shallow draw. This was not the trail which led out from the home ranch toward San Bonito, where Starr had been going when he saw the track of the mysterious automobile, but the trail one would take in going from Medina's to Malpais. The ranch house itself stood back where the draw narrowed, but the yellow-brown trail ribboned back from the gate in plain view.

Here again Starr was fated to get a glimpse and no more. He focussed his glasses on the main road first; picked up the Medina branch to the gate, followed the trail on up the draw, and again he picked up a man riding a bay horse. And just as he was adjusting his lenses for a sharper clarity of vision, the horse trotted around a bend and disappeared from sight.

Starr swore, but that did not bring the man back down the trail. Starr was not at all sure that this was the same man he had seen in the draw, and he was not sure that either was the man who had shot at him. But roosting on that heat-blistered pinnacle swearing about the things he didn't know struck him as a profitless performance, so he climbed down, got into the saddle again, and rode on.

He reached the granite ridge back of Medina's about four o'clock in the afternoon. He was tired, for he had been going since daylight, and for a part of the time at least he had been going on foot, climbing the steep, rocky sides of peaks for the sake of what he might see from the top, and then climbing down again for sake of what some one else might see if he stayed too long. His high-heeled riding boots that Helen May so greatly admired were very good-looking and very comfortable when he had them stuck into stirrups to the heel. But they had never been built for walking. Therefore his feet ached abominably. And there was the heat, the searing, dry heat of midsummer in the desert country. He was dog tired, and he was depressed because he had not seemed able to accomplish anything with all his riding and all his scanning of the country.

He climbed slowly the last, brown granite ridge, the ridge behind Estan Medina's house. He would watch the place and see what was going on there. Then, he supposed he should go back and watch *Las Nuevas*, though his chief seemed to think that he had discovered enough there for their purposes. He had sent on the pamphlets, and he knew that when the time was right, *Las Nuevas* would be

muzzled with a postal law and, he hazarded, a seizure of their mail.

What he had to do now was to find the men who were working in conjunction with *Las Nuevas*; who were taking the active part in organizing and in controlling the Mexican Alliance. So far he had not hit upon the real leaders, and he knew it, and in his weariness was oppressed with a sense of failure. They might better have left him in Texas, he told himself glumly. They sure had drawn a blank when they drew him into the Secret Service, because he had accomplished about as much as a pup trying to run down a coyote.

A lizard scuttled out of his way, when he crawled between two boulders that would shield him from sight unless a man walked right up on him where he lay —and Starr did not fear that, because there were too many loose cobbles to roll and rattle; he knew, because he had been twice as long as he liked in getting to this point quietly. He took off his hat, telling himself morosely that you couldn't tell his head from a lump of granite anyway, when he had his hat off, and lifted his glasses to his aching eyes.

The Medina ranch was just showing signs of awakening after a siesta. Estan himself was pottering about the corral, and Luis, a boy about eighteen years old, was fooling with a colt in a small enclosure that had evidently been intended for a garden and had been permitted to grow up in weeds and grass instead.

After a while a peona came out and fed the chickens, and hunted through the sheds for eggs, which she carried in her apron. She stopped to watch Luis and the colt, and Luis coaxed her to give him an egg, which he was feeding to the colt when his mother saw and called to him shrilly from the house. The peona ducked guiltily and ran, stooping, beside a stone wall that hid her from sight until she had slipped into the kitchen. The señora searched for her, scolding volubly in high-keyed Mexican, so that Estan came lounging up to see what was the matter.

Afterwards they all went to the house, and Starr knew that there would be real, Mexican tortillas crisp and hot from the baking, and chili con carne and beans, and perhaps another savory dish or two which the señora herself had prepared for her sons.

Starr was hungry. He imagined that he could smell those tortillas from where he lay. He could have gone down, and the Medinas would have greeted him with

lavish welcome and would have urged him to eat his fill. They would not question him, he knew. If they suspected his mission, they would cover their suspicion with much amiable talk, and their protestations of welcome would be the greater because of their insincerity. But he did not go down. He made himself more comfortable between the boulders and settled himself to wait and see what the night would bring.

First it brought the gorgeous sunset, that made him think of Helen May just because it was beautiful and because she would probably be gazing up at the crimson and gold and all the other elusive, swift-changing shades that go to make a barbaric sunset. Sure, she would be looking at it, unless she was still talking to that man, he thought jealously. It fretted him that he did not know who the fellow was. So he turned his thoughts away from the two of them.

Next came the dusk, and after that the stars. There was no moon to taunt him with memories, or more practically, to light for him the near country. With the stars came voices from the porch of the adobe house below him. Estan's voice he made out easily, calling out to Luis inside, to ask if he had shut the colt in the corral. The señora's high voice spoke swiftly, admonishing Luis. And presently Luis could be seen dimly as he moved down toward the corrals.

Starr hated this spying upon a home, but he held himself doggedly to the task. Too many homes were involved, too many sons were in danger, too many mothers would mourn if he did not play the spy to some purpose now. This very home he was watching would be the happier when he and his fellows had completed their work and the snake of intrigue was beheaded just as Helen May had beheaded the rattler that afternoon. This home was happy now, under the very conditions that were being deplored so bombastically in the circulars he had read. Why, then, should its peace be despoiled because of political agitators?

Luis put the colt up for the night and returned, whistling, to the house. The tune he whistled was one he had learned at some movie show, and in a minute he broke into singing, "Hearts seem light, and life seems bright in dreamy Chinatown." Starr, brooding up there above the boy, wished that Luis might never be heavier of heart than now, when he went singing up the path to the thick-walled adobe. He liked Luis.

The murmur of voices continued, and after awhile there came plaintively up to Starr the sound of a guitar, and mingling with it the voice of Luis singing a

Spanish song. *La Golondrina*, it was, that melancholy song of exile which Mexicans so love. Starr listened gloomily, following the words easily enough in that still night air.

Away to the northwest there gleamed a brighter, more intimate star than the constellation above. While Luis sang, the watcher in the rocks fixed his eyes wistfully on that gleaming pin point of light, and wondered what Helen May was doing. Her lighted window it was; her window that looked down through the mouth of the Basin and out over the broken mesa land that was half desert. Until then he had not known that her window saw so far; though it was not strange that he could see her light, since he was on the crest of a ridge higher than any other until one reached the bluff that held Sunlight Basin like a pocket within its folds.

Luis finished the song, strummed a while, sang a popular rag-time, strummed again and, so Starr explained his silence, went to bed. Estan began again to talk, now and then lifting his voice, speaking earnestly, as though he was arguing or protesting, or perhaps expounding a theory of some sort. Starr could not catch the words, though he knew in a general way the meaning of the tones Estan was using.

A new sound brought him to his knees, listening: the sound of a high-powered engine being thrown into low gear and buzzing like angry hornets because the wheels did not at once grip and thrust the car forward. Sand would do that. While Starr listened, he heard the chuckle of the car getting under way, and a subdued purring so faint that, had there not been a slow, quiet breeze from that direction, the sound would never have reached his ears at all. Even so, he had no more than identified it when the silence flowed in and covered it as a lazy tide covers a pebble in the moist sand.

Starr glanced down at the house, heard Estan still talking, and got carefully to his feet. He thought he knew where the car had slipped in the sand, and he made toward the place as quickly as he could go in the dark and still keep his movements quiet. It was back in that arroyo where he had first discovered traces of the car he now felt sure had come from the yard of *Las Nuevas*.

He remembered that on the side next him the arroyo had deep-cut banks that might get him a nasty fall if he attempted them in the dark, so he took a little more time for the trip and kept to the rougher, yet safer, granite-covered ridge. Once, just once, he caught the glow of dimmed headlights falling on the slope farthest from him. He hurried faster, after that, and so he climbed down into the arroyo at last, near the point where he had climbed out of it that other day.

He went, as straight as he could go in the dark, to the place where he had first seen the tracks of the Silvertown cords. He listened, straining his ears to catch the smallest sound. A cricket fiddled stridently, but there was nothing else.

Starr took a chance and searched the ground with a pocket flashlight. He did not find any fresh tracks, however. And while he was standing in the dark considering how the hills might have carried the sound deceptively to his ear, and how he may have been mistaken, from somewhere on the other side of the ridge came the abrupt report of a gun. The sound was muffled by the distance, yet it was unmistakable. Starr listened, heard no second shot, and ran back up the rocky gulch that led to the ridge he had just left, behind Medina's house.

He was puffing when he reached the place where he had lain between the two boulders, and he stopped there to listen again. It came,—the sound he instinctively expected, yet dreaded to hear; the sound of a woman's high-keyed wailing.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"IS HE THEN DEAD—MY SON?"

Starr hurried down the bluff, slipping, sliding, running where the way was clear of rocks. So presently he came to the stone wall, vaulted over it, and stopped beside the tragic little group dimly outlined in the house yard just off the porch.

"My son—my son!" the old woman was wailing, on her knees beside a long, inert figure lying on its back on the hard-packed earth. Back of her the peona hovered, hysterical, useless. Luis, half dressed and a good deal dazed yet from sleep and the suddenness of his waking, knelt beside his mother, patting her shoulder in futile affection, staring down bewilderedly at Estan.

So Starr found them. Scenes like this were not so unusual in his life, which had been lived largely among unruly passions. He spoke quietly to Luis and knelt to see if the man lived. The señora took comfort from his calm presence and with dumb misery watched his deft movements while he felt for heartbeats and for the wound.

"But is he then dead, my son?" she wailed in Spanish, when Starr gently laid down upon Estan's breast the hand he had been holding. "But so little while ago he lived and to me he talked. Ah, my son!"

Starr looked at her quietingly. "How, then, did it happen? Tell me, señora, that I may assist," he said, speaking easily the Spanish which she spoke.

"Ah, the good friend that thou art! Ah, my son that I loved! How can I tell what is mystery? Who would harm my son—my little Estan that was so good? Yet a voice called softly from the dark—and me, I heard, though to my bed I had but gone. 'Estan!' called the voice, so low. And my son—ah, my son!—to the door he went swiftly, the *lampara* in his hand, holding it high—so—that the light may

shine into the dark.

"'Who calls?' Me, I heard my son ask—ah, never again will I hear his voice! Out of the door he went—to see the man who called. To the porch-end he came—I heard his steps. Ah, my son! Never again thy dear footsteps will I hear!" And she fell to weeping over him.

"And then? Tell me, señora. What happened next?"

"Ah—the shot that took from me my son! Then feet running away—then I came out—Ah, *querido mio*, that thou shouldst be torn from thy mother thus!"

"And you don't know—?"

"No, no—no—ah, that my heart should break with sorrow—"

"Hush, mother! 'Twas Apodaca! He is powerful—and Estan would not come into the Alliance. I told him it would be—" Luis, kneeling there, beating his hands together in the dark, spoke with the heedless passion of youth.

"Which Apodaca? Juan?" Starr's voice was low, with the sympathetic tone that pulls open the floodgates of speech when one is stricken hard.

"Not Juan; Juan is a fool. Elfigo Apodaca it was—or some one obeying his order. Estan they feared—Estan would not come in, and the time was coming so close—and Estan held out and talked against it. I told him his life would pay for his holding out. I *told* him! And now I shall kill Apodaca—and my life also will pay—"

"What is this thou sayest?" The mother, roused from her lamentations by the boy's vehemence, plucked at his sleeve. "But thou must not kill, my little son. Thou art—"

"Why not? They'll all be killing in a month!" flashed Luis unguardedly.

Starr, kneeling on one knee, looked at the boy across Estan's chilling body. A guarded glance it was, but a searching glance that questioned and weighed and sat in judgment upon the truth of the startling assertion. Yet younger boys than Luis are commanding troops in Mexico, for the warlike spirit develops early in a land where war is the chief business of the populace. It was not strange then that

eighteen-year-old Luis should be actively interested in the building of a revolution on this side the border. It was less strange because of his youth; for Luis would have all the fiery attributes of the warrior, unhindered by the cool judgment of maturity. He would see the excitement, the glory of it. Estan would see the terrible cost of it, in lives and in patrimony. Luis loved action. Estan loved his big flocks and his acres upon acres of land, and his quiet home; had loved too his foster country, if he had spoken his true sentiments. So Starr took his cue and thanked his good fortune that he had come upon this tragedy while it was fresh, and while the shock of it was loosening the tongue of Luis.

"A month from now is another time, Luis," he said quietly. "This is murder, and the man who did it can be punished."

"You can't puneesh Apodaca," Luis retorted, speaking English, since Starr had used the language, which put their talk beyond the mother's understanding. "He is too—too high up—But I can kill," he added vindictively.

"The law can get him better than you can," Starr pointed out cannily. "Can you think of anybody else that might be in on the deal?"

"N-o—" Luis was plainly getting a hold on himself, and would not tell all he knew. "I don't know notheeng about it."

"Well, what you'd better do now is saddle a horse and ride in to town and tell the coroner—and the sheriff. If you don't," he added, when he caught a stiffening of opposition in the attitude of Luis, "if you don't, you will find yourself in all kinds of trouble. It will look bad. You have to notify the coroner, anyway, you know. That's the law. And the coroner will see right away that Estan was shot. So the sheriff will be bound to get on the job, and it will be a heap better for you, Luis, if you tell him yourself. And if you try to kill Apodaca, that will rob your mother of both her sons. You must think of her. Estan would never bring trouble to her that way. You stand in his place now. So you ride in and tell the sheriff and tell the coroner. Say that you suspect Elfigo Apodaca. The sheriff will do the rest."

"What does the señor advise, my son?" murmured the mother, plucking at the sleeve of Luis. "The good friend he was to my poor Estan—my son! Do thou what he tells thee, for he is wise and good, and he would not guide thee wrong."

Luis hesitated, staring down at the dead body of Estan. "I will go," he said, breaking in upon the sound of the peona's reasonless weeping. "I will do that.

The sheriff is not Mexican, or—" He checked himself abruptly and peered across at Starr. "I go," he repeated hastily.

He stood up, and Starr rose also and assisted the old lady to her feet. She seemed inclined to cling to him. Her Estan had liked Starr, and for that her faith in him never faltered now. He laid his arm protectively around her shaking shoulders.

"Señora, go you in and rest," he commanded gently, in Spanish. "Have the girl bring a blanket to cover Estan—for here he must remain until he is viewed by the coroner—you understand? Your son would be grieved if you do not rest. You still have Luis, your little son. You must be brave and help Luis to be a man. Then will Estan be proud of you both." So he suited his speech to the gentle ways of the old señora, and led her back to the shelter of the porch as tenderly as Estan could have done.

He sent the peona for a lamp to replace the one that had broken when Estan fell with it in his hand. He settled the señora upon the cowhide-covered couch where her frail body could be comfortable and she still could feel that she was watching beside her son. He placed a pillow under her head, and spread a gay-striped serape over her, and tucked it carefully around her slippered feet. The señora wept more quietly, and called him the son of her heart, and brokenly thanked God for the tenderness of all good men.

He explained to her briefly that he had been riding to town by a short-cut over the ridge when he heard the shot and hurried down; and that, having left his horse up there, he must go up after it and bring it around to the corral. He would not be gone longer than was absolutely necessary, he told her, and he promised to come back and stay with her while the officers were there. Then he hurried away, the señora's broken thanks lingering painfully in his memory.

At the top of the bluff, where he had climbed as fast as he could, he stood for a minute to get his breath back. He heard the muffled pluckety-pluck of a horse galloping down the sandy trail, and he knew that there went Luis on his bitter mission to San Bonito. His eyes turned involuntarily toward Sunlight Basin. There twinkled still the light from Helen May's window, though it was well past midnight. Starr wondered at that, and hoped she was not sick. Then immediately his face grew lowering. For between him and the clear, twinkling light of her window he saw a faint glow that moved swiftly across the darkness; an automobile running that way with dimmed headlights.

"Now what in thunder does that mean?" he asked himself uneasily. He had not in the least expected that move. He had believed that the automobile he had heard, which very likely had carried the murderer, would hurry straight to town, or at least in that direction. But those dimmed lights, and in that the machine surely betrayed a furtiveness in its flight, seemed to be heading for Sunlight Basin, though it might merely be making the big loop on its way to Malpais or beyond. He stared again at the twinkling light of Helen May's lamp. What in the world was she doing up at that hour of the night? "Oh, well, maybe she sleeps with a light burning." He dismissed the unusual incident, and went on about his more urgent business.

Rabbit greeted him with a subdued nicker of relief, telling plainly as a horse can speak that he had been seriously considering foraging for his supper and not waiting any longer for Starr. There he had stood for six or seven hours, just where Starr had dismounted and dropped the reins. He was a patient little horse, and he knew his business, but there is a limit to patience, and Rabbit had almost reached it.

Starr led him up over the rocky ridge into the arroyo where the automobile had been, and from there he rode down to the trail and back to the Medina ranch. He watered Rabbit at the ditch, pulled off the saddle, and turned him into the corral, throwing him an armful of secate from a half-used stack. Then he went up to the house and sat on the edge of the porch beside the señora, who was still weeping and murmuring yearning endearments to the ears that could not hear.

He did not know how long he would have to wait, but he knew that Luis would not spare his horse. He smoked, and studied the things which Luis had let drop; every word of immense value to him now. Elfigo Apodaca he knew slightly, and he wondered a little that he would be the Alliance leader in this section of the State.

Elfigo Apodaca seemed so thoroughly Americanized that only his swarthy skin and black hair and eyes reminded one that he was after all a son of the south. He did a desultory business in real estate, and owned an immense tract of land, the remnant of an old Spanish grant, and went in for fancy cattle and horses. He seemed more a sportsman than a politician—a broadminded, easy-going man of much money. Starr had still a surprised sensation that the trail should lead to Elfigo. Juan, the brother of Elfigo, he could find it much easier to see in the role of conspirator. But horror does not stop to weigh words, and Starr knew that Luis

had spoken the truth in that unguarded moment.

He pondered that other bit of information that had slipped out: "In a month they'll all be killing." That was a point which he and his colleagues had not been able to settle in their own minds, the proposed date of the uprising. In a month! The time was indeed short, but now that they had something definite to work on, a good deal might be done in a month; so on the whole Starr felt surprisingly cheerful. And if Elfigo found himself involved in a murder trial, it would help to hamper his activities with the Alliance. Starr regretted the death of Estan, but he kept thinking of the good that would come of it. He kept telling himself that the shooting of Estan Medina would surely put a crimp in the revolution. Also it would mark Luis for a mate to the bullet that reached Estan, if that hotheaded youth did not hold his tongue.

He was considering the feasibility of sending Luis and his mother out of the country for awhile, when the sheriff and coroner and Luis came rocking down the narrow trail in a roadster built for speed where speed was no pleasure but a necessity.

The sheriff was an ex-cattleman, with a desert-baked face and hard eyes and a disconcerting habit of chewing gum and listening and saying nothing himself. For the sake of secrecy, Starr had avoided any acquaintance with him and his brother officers, so the sheriff gave him several sharp glances while he was viewing the body and the immediate surroundings. Luis had told him, coming out, the meager details of the murder, and he had again accused Elfigo Apodaca, though he had done some real thinking on the way to town, and had cooled to the point where he chose his words more carefully. The sheriff's name was O'Malley, which is reason enough why Luis was chary of confiding Mexican secrets to his keeping.

Elfigo Apodaca had quarreled with Estan, said Luis. He had come to the ranch, and Luis had heard them quarreling over water rights. Elfigo had threatened to "get" Estan, and to "fix" him, and Luis had been afraid that Estan would be shot before the quarrel was over. He had heard the voice that called Estan out of the house that night, and he told the sheriff that he had recognized Elfigo's voice. Luis surely did all he could to settle any doubt in the mind of the sheriff, and he felt that he had been very smart to say they quarreled over water rights; a lawsuit two years ago over that very water-right business lent convincingness to the statement.

The sheriff had not said anything at all after Luis had finished his story of the shooting. He had chewed gum with the slow, deliberate jaw of a cow meditating over her cud, and he had juggled the wheel of his machine and shifted his gears on hills and in sandy stretches with the same matter-of-fact deliberation. Sheriff O'Malley might be called one of the old school of rail-roosting, stick-whittling thinkers. He took his time, and he did not commit himself too impulsively to any cause. But he could act with surprising suddenness, and that made him always an uncertain factor, so that lawbreakers feared him as they feared nightmares.

The sheriff, then, stood around with his hands in his pockets and his feet planted squarely under him, squeezing a generous quid of gum between his teeth and very slightly teetering on heels and toes, while the coroner made a cursory examination and observed, since it was coming gray daylight, how the lamp lay shattered just where it had fallen with Estan. He asked, in bad Spanish, a few questions of the grief-worn señora, who answered him dully as she had answered Starr. She had heard the call, yes.

"You know Elfigo Apodaca?" the sheriff asked suddenly, and watched how the eyes of the señora went questioningly, uneasily, to Luis; watched how she hesitated before she admitted that she knew him.

"You know his voice?"

But the señora closed her thin lips and shook her head, and in a minute she laid her head back on the pillow and closed her eyes also, and would talk no more.

The sheriff chewed and teetered meditatively, his eyes on the ground. From the tail of his eye Starr watched him, secretly willing to bet that he knew what the sheriff was thinking. When O'Malley turned and strolled back to the porch, his hands still in his pockets and his eyes still on the ground as though he were weighing the matter carefully, Starr stood where he was, apparently unaware that the sheriff had moved. Starr seemed to be watching the coroner curiously, but he knew just when the sheriff passed cat-footedly behind him, and he grinned to himself.

The sheriff made one of his sudden moves, and jerked the six-shooter from its holster at Starr's hip, pulled out the cylinder pin and released the cylinder with its customary five loaded chambers and an empty one under the hammer. He tilted the gun, muzzle to him, toward the rising sun and squinted into its barrel that

shone with the care it got, save where particles of dust had lodged in the bore. He held the gun close under his red nose and sniffed for the smell of oil that would betray a fresh cleaning. And Starr watched him interestedly, smiling approval.

"All right, far as you've gone," he said casually, when the sheriff was replacing the cylinder in the gun. "If you want to go a step farther, I reckon maybe I can show you where I come down off the bluff when I heard the shot, and where I went back again after my horse. And you'll see, maybe, that I couldn't shoot from the bluff and get a man around on the far side of the house. Won't take but a minute to show yuh." He gave the slight head tilt and the slight wink of one eye which, the world over, asks for a secret conference, and started off around the corner of the house.

The sheriff followed noncommittally but he kept close at Starr's heels as though he suspected that Starr meant to disappear somehow. So they reached the bluff, which Starr knew would be out of hearing from the house so long as they did not speak loudly. He pointed down at the prints of his boots where he had left the rocks of the steep hillside for the sand of the level; and he even made a print beside the clearest track to show the sheriff that he had really come down there as he climbed. But it was plain that Starr's mind was not on the matter of footprints.

"Keep on looking around here, like you was tracing up my trail," he said in a low voice, pointing downward. "I've got something I want to tell yuh, and I want you to listen close and get what I say, because I ain't apt to repeat it. And I don't want that coroner to get the notion we're talking anything over. That little play you made with my gun showed that you've got hoss sense and ain't overlooking any bets, and it may be that I'll have use for yuh before long. Now listen."

The sheriff listened, chewing industriously and wandering about while Starr talked. His hard eyes changed a little, and twice he nodded his head in assent.

"Now you do that," said Starr at last, with an air of one giving orders. "And see to it that you get a hearing as soon as possible. I can't appear except as a witness, of course, but I want a chance to size up the fellows that take the biggest interest in the trial. And keep it all on the basis of a straight quarrel, if you can. You'll have to fix that up with the prosecuting attorney, if you can trust him that far."

"I can, Mr. Starr. He's my brother-in-law, and he's the best man we could pick in the county for what you want. I get you, all right. There won't be anything drop about what you just told me."

"There better hadn't be anything drop!" Starr told him dryly. "You're into something deeper than county work now, ole-timer. This is Federal business, remember. Come on back and stall around some more, and let me go on about my own business. You can get word to me at the Palacia if you want me at the inquest, but don't get friendly. I'm just a stock-buyer that happened along. Keep it that way."

"I sure will, Mr. Starr. I'll do my part." The sheriff relapsed into his ruminative manner as he led the way back to the house. One may guess that Starr had given him something worth ruminating about.

In a few minutes, he told Starr curtly that he could go if he wanted to; and he bettered that by muttering to the coroner that he had a notion to hold the fellow, but that he seemed to have a pretty clear alibi, and they could get him later if they wanted him. To which the coroner agreed in neighborly fashion.

Starr was saddling Rabbit for another long ride, and he was scowling thoughtfully while he did it.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A PAGE OF WRITING

Wind came with the sun and went shrieking across the high levels, taking with it clouds of sand and bouncing tumbleweeds that rolled and lodged for a minute against some rock or bush and then went whirling on again in a fresh gust. Starr had not ridden two miles before his face began to feel the sting of gravel in the sand clouds. His eyes, already aching with a day's hard usage and a night of no sleep, smarted with the impact of the wind. He fumbled at the band of his big, Texas hat and pulled down a pair of motor goggles and put them on distastefully. Like blinders on a horse they were, but he could not afford to face that wind with unprotected eyes—not when so very much depended upon his eyes and his ears and the keenest, coolest faculties of his mind.

Still worry nagged at him. He wanted to know who was the man that had visited Helen May so soon after he had left, and he wanted to know why a light had shone from her window at one o'clock last night; and whether the automobile had been going to Sunlight Basin, or merely in that direction.

He hurried, for he had no patience with worries that concerned Helen May. Besides, he meant to beg a breakfast from her, and he was afraid that if he waited too late she might be out with Pat and the goats, and he would have to waste time on the kid (Vic would have resented that term as applied to himself) who might be still laid up with his sprained ankle.

He was not thinking so much this morning about the knowledge he had gained in the night. He had given several quiet hours to thought upon that subject, and he had his course pretty clearly defined in his mind. He also had Sheriff O'Malley thoroughly coached and prepared to do his part. The matter of Elfigo Apodaca, then, he laid aside for the present, and concerned himself chiefly with what on the surface were trifles, but which, taken together, formed a chain of disquieting

incidents. Rabbit felt his master's desire for haste, and loped steadily along the trail, dropping now and then into his smooth fox-trot, that was almost as fast a gait; so it was still early morning when he dropped reins outside and rapped on the closed door.

Helen May opened the door cautiously, it seemed to him; a scant six inches until she saw who he was, when she cried "Oh!" in a surprised, slightly confused tone, and let him in. Starr noticed two things at the first glance he gave her. The first was the blue crocheted cap which she wore; he did not know that it was called a breakfast-cap and that it was very stylish, for Starr, you must remember, lived apart from any intimate home life that would familiarize him with such fripperies. The cap surprised him, but he liked the look of it even though he kept that liking to himself.

The second thing he noticed was that Helen May was hiding something in her right hand which was dropped to her side. When she had let him in and turned away to offer him a chair, he saw that she had the pearl-handled six-shooter.

She disappeared behind a screen, and came out with her right hand empty, evidently believing he had not seen how she had prepared herself for an emergency. She had only yesterday told him emphatically how harmless she considered the country; and he had been careful to warn her only about rabid coyotes, so that without being alarmed, she would not go unarmed away from home. It seemed queer to Starr that she should act as though she expected rabid coyotes to come a-knocking at her door in broad daylight. Had she, he thought swiftly, been only pretending that she considered the country perfectly safe?

He could not help it; that six-shooter hidden in the folds of her skirt stuck in his mind. It was just a trifle, like her lighted window at one o'clock in the morning; like that strange man who had called on her just after Starr had left her, and with whom she had seemed to be on such friendly terms. He had warned her of coyotes. She was not supposed to know that it was wise to arm herself before she opened her door to a daylight caller. At night, yes. But at seven o'clock in the morning? Starr did not suspect Helen May of anything, but he had been trained to suspect mysterious trifles. In spite of himself, this trifle nagged at him unpleasantly.

He fancied that Helen May was just a shade flustered in her welcome; just a shade nervous in her movements, in her laughter, in the very tones of her voice.

"You're out early," she said. "Vic isn't up yet; I suppose the goats ought to be let out, too. You couldn't have had your breakfast—or have you? One can expect almost anything of a man who just rides out of nowhere at all hours, and disappears into nowhere."

"I shore wish that was so," Starr retorted banteringly. "I wish I had to ride nowhere to-day."

"Oh, I meant the mystery of the unknown," she hurried to correct herself. "You come out of the desert just any old time. And you go off into the desert just as unexpectedly; by the way, did you—"

"Nope. I did not." She might forget that Vic was in the house, but Starr never forgot things of that sort, and he wilfully forestalled her intention to ask about the shooting. "I didn't have any supper, either, beyond a sandwich or two that was mostly sand after I'd packed 'em around all day. I just naturally had to turn tramp and come ask for a handout, when I found out at daylight how close I was to breakfast."

"Why, of course. You know you won't have to beg very hard. I was just going to put on the coffee. So you make yourself at home, and I'll have breakfast in a few minutes. Vic, for gracious sake, get up! Here's company already. And you'll have to let out the goats. Pat can keep them together awhile, but he can't open the gate, and I'm busy."

Starr heard the prodigious yawn of the awakening Vic, who slept behind a screen in the kitchen, bedrooms being a superfluous luxury in which Johnny Calvert had not indulged himself. Starr followed her to the doorway.

"I'll go let out the goats," he offered. "I want to take off the bridle anyway, so Rabbit can feed around a little." He let himself out into the whooping wind, feeling, for some inexplicable reason, depressed when he had expected to feel only relief.

"Lord! I'm getting to the point where anything that ain't accompanied by a chart and diagrams looks suspicious to me. She's got more hawse sense than I gave her credit for, that's all. She musta seen through my yarnin' about them mad coyotes. She's pretty cute, coming to the door with her six-gun just like a real one! And never letting on to me that she had it right handy. I must be getting off my feed or something, the way I take things wrong. Now her being up late—I'm just

going to mention how far off I saw her light burning—and how late it was. I'll see what she says about it."

But he did nothing of the kind, and for what he considered a very good reason. The wind was blowing in eddying gusts, of the kind that seizes and whirls things; such a gust swooped into the room when he opened the door, seized upon some papers which lay on her writing desk, and sent them clear across the room.

Starr hastily closed the door and rescued the papers where they had flattened against the wall; and he wished he had gone blind before he saw what they were. A glance was all he gave, at first—the involuntary glance which one gives to a bit of writing picked up in an odd place—but that was enough to chill his blood with the shock of damning enlightenment. A page of writing, it was, fine, symmetrical, hard to decipher—a page of Holly Sommers' manuscript; you know that, of course.

But Starr did not know. He only knew the writing matched the pages of revolutionary stuff he had found in the office of *Las Nuevas.* There was no need of comparing the two; the writing was unmistakable. And he believed that Helen May was the writer. He believed it when he glanced up and saw her coming in from the kitchen, and saw her eyes go to what he had in his hand, and saw the start she gave before she hurried to take the paper away.

"My gracious! My work—" she said agitatedly, when she had the papers in her hand. She went to her desk, looking perturbed, and gave a quick, seeking glance at the scattered papers there; then at Starr.

"Did any more—?"

"That's all," Starr said gravely. "It was the wind when I opened the door, caught them."

"My own carelessness. I don't know why I left my desk open," she said. And while he stood looking at her, she pulled down the roll-top with a slam, still visibly perturbed.

It was strange, he thought, that she should have a roll-top desk out here, anyway. He had seen it the other time he was at the house, and it had struck him then as queer, though he had not given it more than a passing thought.

As a matter of fact, it was not queer. Johnny Calvert had dilated on the destructiveness of rats, "pack rats" he called them. They would chew paper all to bits, he said. So Helen May, being finicky about having her papers chewed, had brought along this mouse-proof desk with her other furniture from Los Angeles.

Her perturbed manner, too, was the result of a finicky distaste for having any disorder in her papers, especially when it was work intrusted to her professionally. She never talked about the work she did for people, and she always kept it away from the eyes of those not concerned in it. That, she considered, was professional etiquette. She had strained a point when she had read a little of the manuscript to Vic. Vic was just a kid, and he was her brother, and he wouldn't understand what she read any more than would the horned toad down by the spring. But Starr was different, and she felt that she had been terribly careless and unprofessional, leaving the manuscript where pages could blow around the room. What if a page had blown outside and got lost!

Starr had turned his back and was staring out of the window. He might have been staring at a blank wall, for all he saw through the glass. He was as pale as though he had just received some great physical shock, and he had his hands doubled up into fists, so that his knuckles were white. His eyes were almost gray instead of hazel, and they were hard and hurt-looking.

Something in the set of his head and in the way his shoulders had stiffened told Helen May that things had gone wrong just in the last few minutes. She gave him a second questioning glance, felt her heart go heavy while her brain seemed suddenly blank, and retreated to the kitchen.

Helen May, influenced it may be by Starr's anxious thoughts of her, had dreamed of him; one of those vivid, intimate dreams that color our moods and our thoughts long after we awaken. She had dreamed of being with him in the moonlight again; and Starr had sung again the love song of the desert, and had afterwards taken her in his arms and held her close, and kissed her twice lingeringly, looking deep into her eyes afterwards.

She had awakened with the thrill of those kisses still tingling her lips, so that she had covered her face with both hands in a sort of shamed joy that dreams could be so terribly real—so terribly sweet, too. And then, not fifteen minutes after she awoke, and while the dream yet clogged her reason, Starr himself had confronted her when she opened the door. She would have been a remarkable young woman

if she had not been flustered and nervous and inclined toward incoherent speech.

And now, it was perfectly idiotic to judge a man's temper by the back of his neck, she told herself fiercely in the kitchen; perfectly idiotic, yet she did it. She was impressed with his displeasure, his bitterness, with some change in him which she could not define to herself. She wanted to cry, and she did not in the least know what there could possibly be to cry about.

Vic appeared, tousled and yawning and stupid as an owl in the sun. He growled because the water bucket was empty and he must go to the spring, and he irritated Helen May to the point of wanting to shake him, when he went limping down the path. She even called out sharply that he was limping with the wrong foot, and that he ought to tie a string around his lame ankle so he could remember which one it was. Which made her feel more disagreeable than ever, because Vic really did have a bad ankle, as the swelling had proven when he went to bed last night.

Nothing seemed to go right, after that. She scorched the bacon, and she caught her sleeve on the handle of the coffee pot and spilled about half the coffee, besides burning her wrist to a blister. She broke a cup, but that had been cracked when she came, and at any other time she would not have been surprised at all, or jarred out of her calm. She took out the muffins she had hurried to make for Starr, and they stuck to the tins and came out in ragged pieces, which is enough to drive any woman desperate, I suppose. Vic slopped water on the floor when he came back with the bucket full, and the wind swooped a lot of sand into the kitchen, and she was certain the bacon would be gritty as well as burned.

Of Starr she had not heard a sound, and she went to the door nervously to call him when breakfast was at last on the table. He was standing exactly as he had stood when she left the room. So far as she could see, he had not moved a muscle or turned his head or winked an eyelid. His stoniness chilled her so that it was an effort to form words to tell him that breakfast was ready.

There was an instant's pause before he turned, and Helen May felt that he had almost decided not to eat. But he followed her to the kitchen and spoke to Vic quite humanly, as he took the chair she offered, and unfolded the napkin that struck an odd note of refinement among its makeshift surroundings; for the stove had only two real legs, the other two corners being propped up on rocks; the dish cupboard was of boxes, and everything in the way of food supplies stood

scantily hidden behind thin curtains of white dotted swiss that Helen May had brought with her.

An hour ago Starr would have dwelt gloatingly upon these graceful evidences of Helen May's brave fight against the crudities of her surroundings. Now they gave him a keener thrust of pain. So did the tremble of her hand when Helen May poured his coffee; it betrayed to Starr her guilty fear that he had seen what was on those two papers. He glanced up at her face, and caught her own troubled glance just flicking away from him. She was scared, then! he told himself. She was watching to see if he had read anything that seemed suspicious. Well, he'd have to calm her down a little, just as a matter of policy. He couldn't let her tip him off to the bunch, whatever happened.

Starr smiled. "I sure feel like I'm imposing on good nature," he said, looking at her again with careful friendliness. "Coming here begging for breakfast, and now when you've gone to the trouble of cooking it, I've got one of my pet headaches that won't let me enjoy anything. Hits me that way sometimes when I've had an extra long ride. But I sure wish it had waited awhile."

Helen May gave him a quick, hopeful smile. "I have some awfully good tablets," she said. "Wait till I give you one, before you eat. My doctor gave me a supply before I left home, because I have headache so much—or did have. I'm getting much better, out here! I've hardly felt like the same person, the last two or three weeks."

"You have got to show me where you're any better *acting*," Vic pointed out, with the merciless candor of beauty's young brother. "It sure ain't your disposition that's improved, I can tell you those."

"And with those few remarks you can close," Helen May retorted gleefully, hurrying off to get the headache tablet. It was just a headache, poor fellow! He wasn't peeved at all, and nothing was wrong!

It was astonishing how her mood had lightened in the past two minutes. She got him a glass of water to help the tablet down his throat, and stood close beside him while he swallowed it and thanked her, and began to make some show of eating his breakfast. She was, in fact, the same whimsically charming Helen May he had come to care a great deal for.

That made things harder than ever for Starr. If the tablet had been prescribed for

heartache rather than headache, Starr would have swallowed thankfully the dose. The murder, over against the other line of hills, had not seemed to him so terrible as those sheets of scribbled paper locked away inside Helen May's desk. The grief of Estan's mother over her dead son was no more bitter than was Starr's grief at what he believed was true of Helen May. Indeed, Starr's trouble was greater, because he must mask it with a smile.

All through breakfast he talked with her, looked into her eyes, smiled at her across the table. But he was white under his tan. She thought that was from his headache, and was kinder than she meant to be because of it; perhaps because of her dream too, though she was not conscious of any change in her manner.

Starr could have cursed her for that change, which he believed was a sly attempt to win him over and make him forget anything he may have read on those pages. He would not think of it then; time enough when he was away and need not pretend or set a guard over his features and his tongue. The hurt was there, the great, incredible, soul-searing hurt; but he would not dwell upon what had caused that hurt. He forced himself to talk and to laugh now and then, but afterwards he could not remember what they had talked about.

As soon as he decently could, he went away again into the howling wind that had done him so ill a turn. He did not know what he should do; this discovery that Helen May was implicated had set him all at sea, but he felt that he must get away somewhere and think the whole thing out before he went crazy.

He left the Basin, rode around behind it and, leaving Rabbit in the thicket where he had left him the day before, he toiled up the pinnacle and sat down in the shelter of a boulder pile where he would be out of the wind as well as out of sight, and where he could still stare somberly down at the cabin.

And there he faced his trouble bravely, and at the same time he fulfilled his duty toward his government by keeping a watch over the place that seemed to him then the most suspicious place in the country. The office of *Las Nuevas*, even, was not more so, as Starr saw things then. For if *Las Nuevas* were the distributing point for the propaganda literature, this cabin of Helen May's seemed to be the fountain head.

First of all, and going back to the beginning, how did he really *know* that her story was true? How, for instance, did he know that her father had not been one

of the heads of the conspiracy? How did he know that her father—it might even be her husband!—was dead? He had simply accepted her word, as a matter of course, because she was a young woman, and more attractive than the average young woman. Starr was terribly bitter, at that point in his reasoning, and even felt certain that he hated all women. Well, then, her reason for being in the neighborhood would bear a lot of looking into.

Then there was that automobile that had passed where he had found her and her goats, that evening. Was it plausible, he asked himself, that she had actually walked over there? The machine had returned along the same trail, running by moonlight with its lights out. Might it not have been coming to pick her up? Only he had happened along, and she had let him walk home with her, probably to keep him where she could watch him!

There was that shot at him from the pinnacle behind her cabin. There was her evident familiarity with firearms, though she professed not to own a gun. There was the man who had been down there with her, not more than an hour after he had left her with a bullet burn across his arm. Starr saw now how that close conversation might easily have been a conference between her and the man who had shot at him.

There was the light in her window at one o'clock in the morning, and the machine with dimmed headlights making toward her place. There was her evident caution against undesirable callers, her coming to the door with a six-shooter hidden against her skirt. There was that handwriting, to which Starr would unhesitatingly have sworn as being the same as on the pages he had found in the office of *Las Nuevas*. The writing was unmistakable: fine, even, symmetrical as print, yet hard to decipher; slanting a little to the left instead of the right. He had studied too often the pages in his pocket not to recognize it at a glance.

Most damning evidence of all the evidence against her were two or three words which his eyes had picked from the context on the page uppermost in his hand. He had become familiar with those words, written in that peculiar chirography. "Justice… submission … ruling …" He had caught them at a glance, though he did not know how they were connected, or what relation they bore to the general theme. Political bunk, his mind tagged it therefore, and had no doubt whatever that he was right.

"She's got brown eyes and blond hair, and that looks like mixed blood," he reminded himself suddenly, after he had sat for a long while staring down at the house. "How do I know her folks aren't Spanish or something? How do I know anything about her? I just swallowed what she handed out—like a damn' fool!"

Just after noon, when the wind had shown some sign of dying down to a more reasonable blow, Helen May came forth in her riding skirt and a Tam o' Shanter cap and a sweater, with a package under her arm—a package of manuscript which she had worked late to finish and was now going to deliver.

She got the pinto pony which Vic had just ridden sulkily down to the corral and left for her, and she rode away down the trail, jolting a good deal in the saddle when the pinto trotted a few steps, but apparently well pleased with herself.

Starr watched until she turned into the main trail that led toward San Bonito. Then, when he was reasonably sure of the direction she meant to take, he hurried down to where Rabbit waited, mounted that long-suffering animal and followed, using short cuts and deep washes that would hide him from sight, but keeping Helen May in view most of the time for all that.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

HOLMAN SOMMERS TURNS PROPHET

Holman Sommers, clad outwardly in old wool trousers of a dingy gray, a faded brown smoking jacket that had shrunk in many washings until it was three inches too short in the sleeves, and old brown slippers, sat tilted back in a kitchen chair against the wall of his house and smoked a beautifully colored meerschaum with solid gold bands and a fine amber mouthpiece, while he conferred comfortably with one Elfigo Apodaca.

There was no quizzical twinkle in the eyes of Holman Sommers, vividly alive though they were always. With his low slipper heels hooked over the rung of his chair and his right hand nursing the bowl of his pipe and his black hair rumpled in the wind, he was staring at the granite ridge somberly.

"I am indeed sorry to hear that Estan Medina was shot," he said after a pause. "Even in the interests of the Cause it was absolutely unjustifiable. The man could do no harm; indeed, he served to divert suspicion from others. Only crass stupidity would resort to brute violence in the effort to further propaganda. Laying aside the human—"

"Of course," Elfigo interrupted sarcastically, "there's nothing violent in a revolution! Where do you get your argument for gentleness, Holly? That's what bothers me. You can stir up a bunch of Mexicans quicker than a barrel of mezcal with your revolution talks."

"Ah, but you do not take into account the great, fundamental truth that cooperative effort, on the part of the proletariat, is wholly justifiable, in that it furthers the good of all humanity. Whereas violence on the part of the individual merely retards the final result for which we are striving. The murder of Estan Medina, for instance, may be the one display of individual violence which will

nullify all our efforts toward a common good.

"For myself, I am bending every energy toward the formation of a cooperative colony which will demonstrate the feasibility of a cooperative form of government for the whole nation—the whole world, in fact. Your Junta has pledged itself to the assistance of this colony, the incalculable benefits of which will, I verily believe, be the very salvation of Mexico as a nation. Mexico, now in the throes of national parturition, is logically the pioneer in the true socialistic form of government. From Mexico the seed will be carried overseas to drop upon soil made fertile by the bones of those sacrificed to the blood-lust of the war mad lords of Europe.

"Here, in this little corner of the world, is where the first tiny plant must be grown. Can you not grasp, then, the tremendous significance of what, on the face of it, is the pitifully small attempt of a pitifully weak people to strike a feeble blow for the freedom of labor? To frustrate that feeble blow now, by the irresponsible, lawless murder of a good citizen, merely because he failed at first to grasp the meaning of the lesson placed before him to learn, is, to my way of thinking, not only unjustifiable but damnably weak and reprehensible."

Elfigo Apodaca, in another kitchen chair tilted back against an angle of the wall so that he half faced Holman Sommers, stretched out his legs and smiled tolerantly. A big, good-looking, thoroughly Americanized Mexican was Elfigo; the type of man who may be found at sunrise whipping the best stream in the State, the first morning of the trout season; the type of man whose machine noses in the closest to the judge's stand when a big race is on; the type of man who dances most, collects the most picture postals of pretty girls, laughs most at after-dinner speeches; the type of man who either does not marry at all, or attains much notoriety when the question of alimony is being fought out to the last cipher; the last man you would point out as a possible conspirator against anything save the peace and dignity of some other man's home. But it takes money to be all of these things, and Elfigo could see a million or two ahead of him along the revolution trail. That is why he smiled tolerantly upon his colleague who talked of humanity instead of dollars.

Then Elfigo harked back frowningly to what Holman Sommers had said about feebleness. He rolled his cigar from the right corner of his mouth to the left corner and spoke his thought.

"Speaking of feeble blow, and all that bunk," he said irreverently, "how do we stand, Holly? Just between you and me as men—cut out any interest we may have in the game—what's your honest opinion? Do we win?"

Holman Sommers raised one hand and hid the amused twitching of his lips. He could have put that question far more clearly, he believed, and he could have expressed much better the thought that was in Elfigo's mind. He had deliberately baited Elfigo, and it amused him to see how blindly the bait had been taken. He regarded Elfigo through half closed lids.

"As a matter of fact, and speaking relatively, every concerted revolt on the part of the proletariat is a victory. Though every leader in the movement be placed with his back against a stone wall, there to stand until he falls to the earth riddled with bullets, yet have the people won; a step nearer the goal, one more page writ in the glowing history of the advancement of the human race toward a true brotherhood of man. There can be no end save ultimate victory. That the victory may not be apparent for fifty years, or a hundred, cannot in any sense alter the immutable law of evolution. Posterity will point back to this present uprising as the first real blow struck for the freedom of the laboring classes of Mexico, and, indirectly, of the whole world."

Elfigo, his thumbs hooked in the armholes of his vest, mark of the dominant note in the human male since clothes were invented to furnish armholes for egotistic thumbs, contemplated his polished tan shoes dissatisfiedly.

"Oh, to hell with posterity!" he blurted impatiently. "What about us poor devils that's furnishing the time and money and brains to put it over? Do we get lined up against a wall?"

Holly Sommers chuckled. "Not if your car can put you across the line soon enough. Then, even though Mexico might be called upon to execute one Elfigo Apodaca as an example to the souls in bondage, some other bullet-riddled cadaver with your name and physical likeness would do as well as your own carcass." He chuckled again.

"Cheerful prospect," grinned Elfigo ruefully. "But I like a sporting chance, myself. The real point I'm trying to get at is, what chance do you think the Alliance has got of winning? Come down outa the clouds, Holly, and never mind about humanity for a minute. You've helped organize the Alliance, you've talked

to the hombres, you've been the god in the machine in this part of the country, and all that. Now be a prophet in words of one syllable and tell me what you think of the outlook."

With his fingers Holly Sommers packed the tobacco down into the bowl of his pipe. His whole expression changed from the philosopher to the cunning leader of what might well be called a forlorn hope.

"Speaking in words of one syllable, we have a damn better chance than you may think," he said, in a tone as changed as his looks. "This country lies wide open to any attack that is sudden and unexpected. Labor is in a state of ferment. I predict that within a year we shall find ourselves upon the brink of a civil war, with labor and capital lined up against each other. Unless the government takes some definite step toward placating organized labor, the whole standing army will not be sufficient to keep the peace. That is the present internal condition, and that condition will grow worse until we face the real crisis of a national strike of some sort—I believe of the railroad employees, since that is the most far-reaching and would prove the most disastrous—therefore the most terrifying to the ruling class.

"On the other hand, and turning our faces outward, we are not much better prepared for an emergency. We are a conceited nation, but insufferable national conceit never yet won a battle. We are given to shouting rather than shooting. Americanism to-day consists chiefly of standing up while the Star Spangled Banner is being played by a brass band, and of shooting off rockets on our national holiday. Were I of the capitalist class, I should consider the situation desperate. But being allied with the workers, I can laugh.

"Speaking still in words of one syllable, Elfigo, I can safely prophesy what will happen first when the Alliance begins its active campaign. Scarehead news in extra editions will be printed. The uprising will be greatly exaggerated, I have no doubt. Women and children will be reported massacred, whereas the Alliance has no intention of being more barbarous than any warfare necessitates. Then there will be a buzzing of leagues and clubs; and the citizens will march up and down the business section of every town, bearing banners and shouting for the 'dear old flag.' Women will rise up and sell sofa pillows and doilies to raise money to buy chewing gum for our soldier boys. That, Elfigo, will sufficiently occupy the masses for a week or two.

"Going higher, red tape will begin to unroll and entwine the heads of departments, and every man who has any authority whatever will wait for orders from some one higher up. Therefore, while the whole nation cheers the street parades and the flags and the soldier boys and everything else in sight, the Alliance will be getting under way—"

"We'll throw her into high and step on her!" Elfigo contributed, being a motor enthusiast.

"Something like that, yes. When you consider that the transportation of troops to quell the uprising will require anywhere from three days to three weeks, I am counting red tape and all, you will readily apprehend how much may be accomplished before they are in a position to handle the situation.

"On the other hand, Mexico is filled with fighters. So much has oppression done for the peon; it has taught him the business of fighting. Now, I grant you, she is a nation composed of warring factions topped by a lamentably weak provisional government. *But* with practically every Spanish-American over here actually participating in a movement for Mexico, all those various factions will coalesce, as tiny brooklets flow together to form the mighty torrent."

"Still, she's a big country to lick," Elfigo pointed out, chiefly to see what Holly would say.

"Ah, but Mexico does not comprehend that fact! And, in the same breath, neither does this country, as a whole, comprehend how big a country is Mexico to lick! Give a Mexican soldado a handful of beans a day and something to shout *Viva* for, and he can and will fight indefinitely. If I mistake not, it will shortly behoove this country to temporize, to make certain concessions. Whether those concessions extend so far as to cede these three States back to Mexico, I cannot hazard a prediction. I can see, however, where it is not at all improbable that New Mexico and Arizona may be considered too costly to hold. Texas," he smiled, "Texas remembers too vividly her Alamo. Mexico, if she is wise, does not want Texas."

"I heard yesterday there's some talk amongst the Americans about organizing home guards. We can't stand another postponement, Holly; it might give them time to pull off something like that. Little Luis Medina told me he heard a target marker for the San Bonito rifle club say something about it. He heard the

members talking. You know they're using government rifles and ammunition. It would be a hell of a note to put things off till every town had a home guard organized."

"I can see no necessity for putting things off," said Holly calmly. "So far as I can learn, we are practically ready, over here. Ah! Here comes our charming neighbor from Sunlight Basin. Perhaps, Elfigo, it would be as well for you to disappear from the premises."

"Oh, I want to meet her," Elfigo smiled easily. "It'll be all right; I just came after water for my radiator, anyway. She's dry as a bone. I opened the drain cock and let her drain off and stood a fine chance of freezing my engine too, before I got on past the puddle far enough to be safe!"

"It was, as a matter of fact, a very grave mistake to come here at all," Holly told him with a courteous kind of severity. "I fear you greatly underestimate the absolute necessity for extreme caution. The mere fact that we have thus far elicited nothing more than a vague curiosity on the part of the government, does not excuse any imprudence now. Rather, it intensifies the need for caution. For myself—"

"Oh, anybody is liable to run dry, out here on the desert, Holly. If all the Secret Service men in the country, and I know of one or two that's been nosing around, were to come and find me here, they couldn't say I hadn't a good, legitimate reason for coming. I had to come. I didn't want to run on to any one from that inquest, and I had to see you. I wanted to put you wise to the stand we're taking on the Estan Medina affair. We can't help if that somebody bumped him off, but —"

"You can fill your water bag at the well, since that is what you came for; and I should strongly advise you to terminate your visit as soon as it is consistent with your errand to do so."

"Oh, don't crab my meeting a pretty girl, Holly! Introduce me, and I'll take the water and go. Be a sport!" Elfigo had picked up his five-gallon desert bag, but he was obviously waiting for Helen May to ride up to the house.

To Starr, crouched behind on a rock on the ridge that divided the Sommers place from the hidden arroyo where he had first seen trace of the automobile, Elfigo's attitude of waiting for Helen May was too obvious to question. A little, weakling

offspring of Hope died then in his heart. He had tried so hard to find some excuse for Helen May, and he had almost succeeded. But his glasses were too strong; they identified Elfigo Apodaca too clearly for any doubt. They were too merciless in showing Starr that beside Elfigo stood the man who had visited Helen May the day before.

Recognition of the man came with something of a shock to Starr. He had heard of Holman Sommers often enough, though he had never seen him. He had heard him described as a "highbrow" who wrote scientific articles, sometimes published in obscure magazines, read by few and understood by none. A recluse student, he had been described to Starr, who knew Todd Sommers by sight, and who had tagged the family as being too American for any suspicion to point their way.

As often happens, Starr had formed a mental picture of Holman Sommers which was really the picture of a type made familiar to us mostly by our humorists. He had imagined that Holman Sommers, being a "highbrow," was a little, dried-up man with a bald head and weak eyes that made spectacles a part of his face; an insignificant little man well past middle life, with a gray beard, Starr saw him mentally. He should have known better than to let his imagination paint him a portrait of any man, in those ticklish times. But they were Americans, which was disarming in itself. And the plump sister, who had talked for ten minutes with Starr when he called at the ranch one day to see if they had any stock they wanted to sell, had further helped to ward off any suspicion.

Now that he knew, by the smoking jacket and the slippers and the uncovered thatch of jet-black hair, that this man must be Holman Sommers; when he saw Elfigo Apodaca there, seated and talking earnestly with him, as he could tell by the gestures with which they elaborated their speech; when he saw Helen May riding in to the ranch, he had before him all the outward, visible evidence of a conference. The only false note, to Starr's way of thinking, was the brazenness of it. They must, he told himself, be so sure of themselves that they could snap their fingers at risk, or else they were so desperately in need of conferring together that they overlooked the risk. And that second explanation might easily be the true one, in view of Estan Medina's death and the possible consequence to the Alliance.

Starr was hampered by not hearing anything that was being said down there at that homey-looking ranch house, where everything was clearly visible to him

through his field glasses. But even so it did not require speech to tell him that Elfigo Apodaca had never before met Helen May Stevenson, and that Holman Sommers was not overeager to introduce him to her. Starr, watching every movement of the three when they came together, frowned with puzzlement. Why had they been strangers until just now?

He saw the three stand and talk for perhaps two minutes; commonplace, early-acquaintance nothings, he judged from their faces and actions. He saw Helen May offer Holman Sommers the package she carried; saw Holman take it negligently and tuck it under his arm while he went on talking. He saw Helen May turn then and go around to the door, which was opened effusively by the plump sister whom he knew. He saw the two men go to the well, and watched Elfigo fill the water bag and go away down the uneven trail to where his automobile stood, perhaps a quarter of a mile nearer the main road. When he turned his glasses from Elfigo to the house, Holman had gone inside, and the two women were out beyond the house admiring a flock of chickens which Maggie called to her with a few handfuls of grain.

There seemed no further profit in watching the Sommers house, and Starr was about to leave his post when he saw the dingy, high-powered roadster of the sheriff come careening up the trail. He came near upsetting his machine in getting around Apodaca's big car, but he negotiated the passing with some skill and came on to where he met Elfigo himself sweating down the trail with his full five-gallon water bag.

Here again Starr wished that he could hear as well as he could see. That the sheriff had seized the opportunity to place Elfigo under arrest, he knew well enough, by faces and gestures, just as he had known of Elfigo's introduction to Helen May. But here were no polite nothings being mouthed. Elfigo was talking angrily, and Starr would have given a great deal to hear what he was saying; calling it an outrage, he supposed, and heaping maledictions on the stupidity of the law.

The sheriff did not seem to pay much attention to what Elfigo was saying beyond pulling a pair of handcuffs from his coat pocket, and tossing them to his prisoner—with the invitation to put them on, Starr knew very well, having himself done the same thing more than once. Still talking furiously, Elfigo obeyed, and then was invited to climb in beside the sheriff, who stooped and did something with one of Elfigo's stylishly trousered legs; manacled him to

something in the machine, Starr guessed. From which he also gathered that Elfigo's remarks must have been pretty strong.

The sheriff started on, ran to where he could turn without upsetting, and backed the car around as though his errand were done. Quick work it had been. Evidently Sheriff O'Malley had attended the inquest with a blank warrant in his pocket, for fear Elfigo might take alarm and give them the slip. He must have been on the way back when he had either seen Elfigo's car on the Sommers trail, or else had noted where it had turned off and had come up the trail in a purely investigative spirit. However that might be, he had not let the chance slip. Which was characteristic of Sheriff O'Malley, essentially a man of action.

Starr should have been glad. Perhaps he was, though he did not look it as he went back to where Rabbit was browsing on whatever he could get while he waited for his master. Elfigo in jail even for a few days would be an advantage, Starr believed. It would set the rest to buzzing, so that he could locate them with less delay. But at the same time—

"If it came to a showdown right now, I'd have to take her along with the rest," he came up squarely against his real problem. "She's got it coming; but it's hell, all the same!"

CHAPTER TWENTY

STARR DISCOVERS THINGS

Starr was sitting on the side of his bed with one boot off and dangling in his hand, and with his thoughts gone journeying out over the mesa and the desert and the granite ridge beyond, to a squatty, two-room adobe shack at the head of Sunlight Basin. During the days he had been too fully occupied with the work he had to do to dwell much on the miserable fact of Helen May's duplicity, her guilt of the crime of treason against her native country. But at night the thought of her haunted him like the fevered ache of a wound too deep to heal quickly.

He swore an abrupt oath as a concrete expression of his mood, and dropped the boot with a thump to the floor. The word and the action served to swing his thoughts into another channel not much more pleasant, but a great deal more impersonal.

"He's shore foxy—that hombre!" he said, thinking of Elfigo Apodaca.

As matters stood that evening, Starr felt that Elfigo had the right to laugh at him and the whole Secret Service. Elfigo was in jail, yes. Only that day he had been given his preliminary hearing on the charge of murdering Estan Medina, and he had been remanded without bail to await trial.

On the face of it, that looked as though Starr had gained a point. In reality he felt that he had in some manner played into Elfigo's hands. Certainly he had not gained anything in the way of producing any buzzing of the Alliance leaders. Not a Mexican had shown his face at the hearing, save Luis Medina and his mother, who had been called as witnesses.

Luis had been badly scared but stubborn, insisting that he had heard Elfigo call Estan from the house just before the shot was fired. The mother also had been

badly frightened, but not at all stubborn. Indeed, she was not even certain of anything beyond the drear fact that her son was dead, and that he had fallen with the lamp in his hand, unarmed and unsuspecting. She was frightened at the unknown, terrible Law that had brought her there before the judge, and not at anything tangible.

But Luis knew exactly what it was he feared. Starr read that in his eyes whenever they turned toward the calm, inscrutably smiling Elfigo. Hate was in the eyes of Luis, but the hate was almost submerged by the terror that filled him. He shook when he stood up to take the oath. His voice trembled in spite of him when he spoke; but he spoke boldly for all that—falsely, too. He had lied when he told of the quarrel over the old water right. It was not a water right which the two had discussed, and Starr knew it.

But it was Elfigo that puzzled Starr most. Elfigo had smiled, as though the whole thing amused him even though it annoyed him to be under arrest. He denied, of course, that he had known anything at all about the murder until it was common news about town. He had been somewhere else at the time Estan was shot, and he could and would prove, when the time came, that it would have been physically impossible for him to have shot Estan Medina. He preferred not to produce any witnesses now, however. Let it go to a jury trial, and then he would clear himself of the charge. All through his lawyer, of course, while Elfigo sat back with his hands in his pockets and his feet thrust out before him, whimsically contemplating his tan shoes.

He had seemed confident that bail would be accepted, and he was unmistakably crestfallen when the judge, who acted under certain instructions from those above him, refused to accept bail. But Elfigo had scored, nevertheless; he had not permitted any of his friends to become identified in any manner whatsoever with his movements, and he had withheld his side of the case altogether.

So Starr was left in the dark where he had expected to find the light he needed to direct him. He had also permitted Luis to mark himself for another murder in the Medina family. Well, Luis was a conspirator, for that matter; but he was a boy, and his judgment had not ripened. It seemed a shame that a youngster like that should be drawn into such a mess. Starr, determined to do what he could to protect Luis, had seen to it that Luis was locked up, for the purely technical reason that he was an important witness and they wanted to be sure of him; but really to protect him from the wrath of Elfigo.

"And now," Starr's thoughts ran on, "I stand just where I stood before, except that I know a whole heap more than I wish I knew. And if the thing breaks loose before the trial, Elfigo will be in jail where he's got a cast-iron alibi. The rest of the bunch must be strong enough to go on without him, but I shore did hope they'd be stirred up some over this shooting. They'll likely get together right away, hold a meeting and make arrangements to do without Elfigo. If I knew where…"

He lifted the other foot to remove its boot, hesitated, and set it down again. Surely the Alliance would have to adjust itself to the loss of Elfigo. They would get together, and what buzzing they did would be behind barred doors, since they had been too cunning to show themselves at the hearing; that night, probably, since they knew now that Elfigo had been bound over to the grand jury, and that he was held without bail. Where would they meet? That was what Starr wished he knew.

He sat there rumpling his hair and studying the question. He could not fix upon any particular place, unless it was the Sommers ranch; and that was too far from town for any urgent business, and travelers to and from the place would be taking too great a risk. For he was sure there would be a dozen or more who would make up the Junta, and for so many men to be traveling in one direction would excite curiosity from any one who saw them leave town or return.

There was another possible meeting place—the office of *Las Nuevas*. Starr thought of that rather hopelessly. Just as a common precaution, they would guard the doors if the Junta met there, or they would have men stationed on the stairs; that he would not be able to get up without giving the alarm he knew as well as though he had tried and failed.

His thoughts went to that hidden, inner office where he had found the pamphlets and the writing that pointed to Helen May as one of the band. There, where there were no outside windows to betray a midnight conference by any showing of light within; where eavesdropping was absolutely impossible; where the men who met there might gain the yard by various means, since it faced on three streets, and be practically safe from observation, he became convinced would be the logical meeting place.

To be sure, he was only guessing. He had no evidence whatever save his own reason that there would be a meeting, much less that it would be held in the

secret office room of *Las Nuevas*. But he put on the boot he had taken off and reached for his coat. A half hour or so ought to prove him right or wrong in his deductions, and Starr would not have grudged a full night to satisfy himself on that point.

It was late, nearly midnight, to be exact, when he slipped out to the shed, and watched from its shadow until he was sure that no one had seen him, before he let himself down through the hole in the manger to the arroyo bottom. He went hurriedly, but he was very careful not to show himself without first making sure that the way was clear.

For that reason he escaped being seen by a tall young Mexican whom he caught sight of lounging at the corner opposite the building that held *Las Nuevas*. Ostensibly the fellow had merely stopped to light a cigarette, but while Starr watched him he struck three matches in succession, and immediately afterwards a shadow glided from the shelter of a plumber's shop opposite, slipped down to the gate that was always barred, and disappeared.

Starr circled warily to the rear of the yard to see what chance there might be of getting over the wall unseen. He did not know what good it would do him to get into the yard, but he hoped that he might be lucky enough to see any one who entered the back door, which would be the logical means of ingress.

He was standing back of the garage where he had found the cord tires, when the quiet of the night was split with the shrill, nerve-racking shriek of the fire whistle, four or five blocks away. In spite of himself, he was startled with its suddenness, and he stood tensed and waiting for the dismal hoots that would tell what ward the fire was in. One—two—three, croaked the siren like a giant hoot-owl calling in the night.

"Third ward—down around the depot, probably," he heard a voice say guardedly on the other side of the fence. Another voice, more guarded even than the first, muttered a reply which Starr could not catch. Neither voice was recognizable, and the sentence he heard was so obvious a remark as to be practically meaningless; probably a hundred persons in town had said "Third ward," when the siren had tooted the number.

At any rate some one was there in the yard of *Las Nuevas*, and it would not be wise for Starr to attempt getting over the wall. He waited therefore until he heard

careful footsteps moving away; whereupon he himself stole quietly to the corner, thence down the side wall to the front of the building, so that he could look across the street to where the Mexican had revealed himself for a moment in the light of a distant street lamp.

If the Mexican had been on watch there, he had left his post. In a minute Starr saw him hurrying down the unused side street, toward the angry glow that told where the fire had started. Too much temptation, Starr interpreted the fellow's desertion of his post; or else no more men were expected at *Las Nuevas,* and the outpost was no longer needed. Taking it for granted that a meeting had been called here, Starr reasoned from that assumption.

He waited another minute or two, watching and listening. There was nothing at the front to break the quiet or spoil the air of desertion that surrounds an empty office building at midnight. He went cautiously to the rear corner and turned there to look back at the building, watchful for any stray beam of light or any movement.

The upper story was dark as the rest of the yard and building, and Starr could almost believe that he was on the wrong track entirely, and that nothing was going on here. But he continued to stand there, loath to give up and go home with nothing accomplished.

Close beside the building and back perhaps twenty feet from the front corner, a telephone and electric light pole stood with outstretched arms, holding aloft its faintly humming wires. Starr stood looking that way for some time before it occurred to him that there was no street light near enough to send that warm, yellow glow across the second bar from the bottom. The rest of the pole was vague and shadowy, like everything else in the immediate neighborhood. The bottom of the pole he could not see at all from where he stood, it was so dark alongside the building. But that second cross-arm was lighted as from a near-by window. Yet there was no lighted window anywhere in the place.

Starr was puzzled. Being puzzled, he went slowly toward the pole, his face turned upward. The nearest street lamp was a full block away, and it would have lighted up the whole top of the pole evenly, if at all. At the foot of the pole Starr stood for a minute, still staring upward. Then he reached up, gripped the metal steps and began carefully to climb.

Before he had reached the lighted cross-arm he knew that the glow must come from a skylight; and that the skylight must be the one that had saved that hidden little office room from being dark. He was no lineman, but he knew enough to be careful about the wires, so it took him several minutes to work his way to where he could straddle a crosstree that had few wires.

Just below him and no more than twelve or fifteen feet distant was the skylight he had suspected, but before he gave that much attention, he looked across to where the fire was sending up a column of crimson smoke and bright, eddying sparks, four blocks or so away. The man left on guard would find it difficult to tear himself away from all that excitement, Starr thought satisfiedly; though if he came back he could scarcely help seeing Starr on that lighted perch, and he would undoubtedly take a shot at him if he were any man at all and had a spark of loyalty to his fellows. For Starr's business up there could not be mistaken by the stupidest greaser in the town.

With the fire to help his cause, Starr craned toward the building and looked down through the skylight. It had been partly raised for ventilation, which was needed in that little, inside room, especially since twelve men were foregathered there, and since every man in the lot was burning tobacco in some form.

Sommers was there, seated at the end of a table that had been moved into the center of the room, which brought it directly under the skylight. He sat facing Starr, and he was reading something to himself while the others waited in silence until he had finished. His strong, dark face was grave, his high forehead creased with the wrinkles of deep thinking. He had a cigar in one corner of his mouth, and he was absentmindedly chewing it rather than smoking. He looked the leader, though his clothes were inclined to shabbiness and he sat slouched forward in his chair. He looked the leader, and their leader those others proclaimed him by their very silence, and by the way their faces turned toward him while they waited.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THROUGH THE OPEN SKYLIGHT

Sommers took his cigar from his mouth and laid it carefully down upon the edge of the table, although he was plainly unconscious of the movement. He lifted his head with a little toss that threw back a heavy lock of his jet-black hair. He glanced around the table, and his eyes dominated those others hypnotically.

"I have here," he began in the sonorous voice and the measured enunciation of the trained orator, "a letter from our esteemed—and unfortunate—comrade and fellow worker, Elfigo Apodaca. Without taking your valuable time by reading the letter through from salutation to signature, I may say briefly that its context is devoted to our cause and to the inconvenience which may be entailed because of our comrade's present incarceration, the duration of which is as yet undetermined.

"Comrade Apodaca expresses great confidence in his ultimate release. He maintains that young Medina is essentially a traitor, and that his evidence at the preliminary hearing was given purely in the spirit of revenge. That Comrade Apodaca will be exonerated fully of the charge of murder, I myself can entertain no scintilla of doubt. We may therefore dismiss from our minds any uneasiness we may, some of us, have entertained on that score.

"The question we are foregathered here to decide to-night is whether the date set for our public demonstration shall remain as it stands; whether we shall seek permission to postpone that date, or whether it shall be deemed expedient to set it forward to the earliest possible moment. As you all are doubtless aware, our esteemed compatriots in Mexico are ready and waiting our pleasure, like hounds straining at the leash. The work of organization on this side of the line has of necessity been slow, because of various adverse influences and a slothful desire for present ease and safety, which we have been constrained to combat. Also the

accumulation of arms and ammunition in a sufficient quantity for our purpose without exciting suspicion has required much tactful manipulation.

"But we have here assembled the trusted representatives from our twelve districts in the State, and I trust that each one of you has come prepared to furnish this Junta with the data necessary for an intelligent action upon the question we have to decide to-night. Am I right, gentlemen, in that assumption?"

Eleven men nodded assent and looked down at the slips of paper they had produced from inner pockets and held ready in their hands.

"Then I shall ask you, compadres, to listen carefully to the report from each district, so that you may judge the wisdom of foreshortening the interval between to-night and the date set for the uprising.

"Each representative will give the number, in his district, of armed members of the Alliance; the amount of ammunition at hand; the number of agents secretly occupying positions of trust where they can give the most aid to the movement; the number of Spanish-Americans who, like our unfortunate neighbor, Estancio Medina, have refused thus far to come into the Alliance; the number, in his district, who may be counted upon to come in, once they see that the cause is not hopeless; who may be expected to take the purely American side, and who may be safely depended upon to remain neutral. I shall ask each of you to tell us also the extent and nature of such opposition as your district must be prepared to meet. There has been a rumor of some preparation for resistance to our movement, and we shall want to know all that you can tell us of that phase of the situation as observed in your district.

"These seemingly unimportant details are absolutely essential, gentlemen of the Junta. For in this revolutionary movement you must bear in mind that brother will rise up against brother, as it were. You will be called upon, perchance, to slay the dearest friend of your school days; your neighbor, if so be he is allied against you when the great day comes. We must not weaken; we must keep our eyes fixed upon the ultimate good that will come out of the turmoil. But we must know! We must not make the irretrievable error of taking anything for granted. Keeping that in mind, gentlemen, we will hear first the report from Bernalillo district."

A man at the right of Sommers unfolded his little slip of paper, cleared his throat

and began, in strongly accented English, to read. The eleven who listened leaned forward, elbows on the table, and drank in the terrible figures avidly. Sommers set down the figures in columns and made notes on the pad before him, his lips pressed together in a straight line that twisted now and then with a sinister kind of satisfaction.

"That, gentlemen, is how the Cause stands in the county that has the largest population and approximately the smallest area of any county in the State. While this report is not altogether new to me, yet I am struck anew with the great showing that has been made in that county. With the extensive yards and shops of the Santa Fe at Albuquerque seized and held by our forces, together with the junction points and—"

Starr did not wait to hear any more, but edged hastily back to the pole and began to climb down as though a disturbed hornets' nest hung above him. The report that had so elated Sommers sent a chill down Starr's back. If one county could show so appalling an insurrectory force, what of the whole State? Yes, and the other States involved! And the thing might be turned loose at any time!

He dropped to the ground, sending a scared glance for the watchman who had gone to the fire. He was nowhere to be seen, and Starr, running to the rear of the lot, skirted the high wall at a trot; crossed a narrow, black alley, hurried down behind the next lots to the cross street, walked as fast as he dared to the next corner, turned into the main street, and made for the nearest public telephone booth.

He sweated there in the glass cage for a long ten minutes before he had managed to get in touch with Sheriff O'Malley and the chief of police, and to tell each in turn what he wanted and where they must meet him, and how many minutes they might have to do it in. He came out feeling as though he had been in there an hour, and went straight to the rendezvous he had named, which was a shed near the building of *Las Nuevas*, only on another street.

They came, puffing a little and a good deal mystified. Starr, not daring to state his real business with them, had asked for men to surround and take a holdup gang. All told, there were six of them when all had arrived, and they must have been astounded at what Starr told them in a prudent undertone and speaking swiftly. They did not say anything much, but slipped away after him and came to the high wall that hid so much menace.

"There was a hombre on guard across the street," Starr told the sheriff. "He went off to the fire, but he's liable to come back. Put a man over there in the shade of that junk shop to watch out for him and nab him before he can give the alarm. This is ticklish work, remember. Any Mexican in town would knife you if he knew what you're up to.

"Johnson, you can climb the pole and pull down on 'em through the skylight, but wait till you see by their actions that they've got the tip something's wrong, and don't shoot if you can help it. Remember this is Secret Service work, and the quieter it's done, the better pleased they'll be in Washington. There can't be any hullabaloo at all. You two fellows watch the front and back gates, and the no-shooting rule goes with you, too. If there's anything else you can do, don't shoot. But it's better to fire a cannon than let a man get away. Sabe? Now, Chief, you and the sheriff can come with me, and we'll bust up the meetin' for 'em."

He went up on the shoulder of the man who was to watch outside the rear wall, and straddled the wall for a brief reconnoiter. Evidently the Junta felt safe in their hidden little room, for no guard had been left in the yard. The back door was locked, and Starr opened it as silently as he could with his pass key. Close behind him came Sheriff O'Malley and the chief of police, whose name was Whittier. They had left their shoes beside the doorstep and walked in their socks, making no noise at all.

Starr did not dare use his searchlight, but felt his way down past the press and the forms, to where the stairs went up to the second floor. On the third step from the bottom, Starr, feeling his way with his hands, touched a dozing watchman and choked him into submission before the fellow had emitted more than a sleepy grunt of surprise. They left him gagged and tied to the iron leg of some heavy piece of machinery, and went on up the stairs, treading as stealthily as a prowling cat.

Starr turned to the right, found the door locked, and patiently turned his key a hair's breadth at a time in the lock, until he slid the bolt back. Behind him the repressed breathing of O'Malley fanned warmly the back of his neck. He pushed the door open a half inch at a time, found the outer office dark and silent, and crossed it stealthily to the closet behind the stove. O'Malley and Whittier were so close behind that he could feel them as they entered the closet and crept along its length.

Starr was reaching out before him with his hands, feeling for the door into the secret office, when Sheriff O'Malley struck his foot against the old tin spittoon, tried to cover the sound, and ran afoul of the brooms, which tripped him and sent him lurching against Starr. There in that small space where everything had been so deathly still the racket was appalling. O'Malley was not much given to secret work; he forgot himself now and swore just as full-toned and just as fluently as though be had tripped in the dark over his own wheelbarrow in his own back yard.

Starr threw himself against the end of the closet where he knew the door was hidden in the wall, felt the yielding of a board, and heaved against it with his shoulder. He landed almost on top of a fat-jowled representative from Santa Fé, but he landed muzzle foremost, as it were, and he was telling the twelve to put up their hands even before he had his feet solidly planted on the floor.

Holman Sommers sat facing him. He had been writing, and he still held his pencil in his hand. He slowly crumpled the sheet of paper, his vivid eyes lifted to Starr's face. Tragic eyes they were then, for beyond Starr they looked into the stern face of the government he would have defied. They looked upon the wreck of his dearest dream; upon the tightening chains of the wage slaves he would have freed—or so he dreamed.

Starr stared back, his own mind visioning swiftly the havoc he had wrought in the dream of this leader of men. He saw, not a political outlaw caught before he could do harm to his country, but a man fated to bear in his great brain an idea born generations too soon into a brawling world of ideas that warred always with sordid circumstance. A hundred years hence this man might be called great. Now he was nothing more than a political outlaw chief, trapped with his band of lesser outlaws.

Sommers' eyes lightened impishly. His thin lips twisted in a smile at the damnable joke which Life was playing there in that room.

"Gentlemen of the Junta," he said in his sonorous, public-platform voice, "I find it expedient, because of untoward circumstances, to advise that you make no resistance. From the unceremonious and unheralded entry of our esteemed opponents, these political prostitutes who have had the effrontery to come here in the employ of a damnable system of political tyranny and frustrate our plans for the liberation of our comrades in slavery, I apprehend the fact that we have

been basely betrayed by some foul Judas among us. I am left with no alternative but to advise that you surrender your bodies to these minions of what they please to call the law.

"Whether we part now, to spend the remaining years of our life in some foul dungeon; whether to die a martyr's death on the scaffold, or whether the workers of the land awake to their power and, under some wiser, stronger leadership, liberate us to enjoy the fruits of the harvest we have but sown, I cannot attempt to prophesy. We have done what we could for our fellowmen. We have not failed, for though we perish, yet our blood shall fructify what we have sown, that our sons and our sons' sons may reap the garnered grain. Gentlemen, of the Junta, I declare our meeting adjourned!"

Starr's eyes were troubled, but his gun did not waver. It pointed straight at the breast of Holman Sommers, who looked at him measuringly when he had finished speaking.

"I can't argue about the idea back of this business," Starr said gravely. "All I can do is my duty. Put on these handcuffs, Mr. Sommers. They stand for something you ain't big enough to lick—yet."

"Certainly," said Holman Sommers composedly. "You put the case like a philosopher. Like a philosopher I yield to the power which, I grant you, we are not big enough to lick—yet. In behalf of our Cause, however, permit me to call your attention to the fact that we might have come nearer to victory, had you not discovered and interrupted this meeting to-night." Though his face was paler than was natural, he slipped on the manacles as matter-of-factly as he would have put on clean cuffs, and rose from his chair prepared to go where Starr directed.

"No, sit down again," said Starr brusquely. "Sheriff, gather up all those pieces of paper for evidence against these men, and give them to me. Give me a receipt for the men—I'll wait for it. I want you and Chief Whittier to hold them here in this room till I come back. I won't be long—half an hour, maybe." He took the slips of paper which the sheriff folded and handed to him, and slipped them into his pocket.

He was gone a little longer than he said, for he had some trouble in locating the railroad official he wanted, and in convincing that sleepy official that he was

speaking for the government when he demanded an engine and day coach to be placed on a certain dark siding he mentioned, ready for a swift night run to El Paso and a little beyond—to Fort Bliss, in fact.

He got it, trust Starr for that! And he was only twenty minutes behind the time he had named, though the sheriff and the chief of police betrayed a nervous relief when he walked in upon them and announced that he was ready now to move the prisoners.

They untied the terrified watchman and added him to the group. In the dark, and by way of vacant lots and unlighted streets, he took them to a certain point where an engine had just backed a single, unlighted day coach on to a siding and stood there with air-pump wheezing and the engineer crawling around beneath with his oil can. By the rear steps of the coach a mystified conductor stood waiting with his lantern hidden under his coat. A big man was the conductor; once a policeman and therefore with a keen nose—don't laugh!—for mysteries.

He wore a satisfied look when he saw the men that were being hustled into the car. His uniform tightened as he swelled with the importance of his mission. He nodded to Sheriff O'Malley and the chief of police, cast an obliquely curious glance at Starr, who stayed on the ground, and when Starr gave the word he swung his lantern to the watching fireman, and caught the handrail beside the steps.

"Fort Bliss it is; and there won't nothing stop us, buh-lieve me!" he muttered confidentially to Starr, whom he recognized only as the man who stood behind the mystery. The engine began to creep forward, and he swung up to the lower step. "We may go in the ditch or something; but we'll get there, you listen to me!"

"Go to it, and good luck," said Starr, but there was no heartiness in his voice. He stood with his thumbs hooked inside his gun-belt and watched the coach that held the peace of the country within its varnished walls go sliding out of the yard, its green tail lights the only illumination anywhere behind the engine. When it had clicked over the switch and was picking up speed for its careening flight south through the cool hours of early morning, he gave a sigh that had no triumph in it, and turned away toward his cabin.

"Well, there goes the revolution," he said somberly to himself. "And here I go to

do the rest of the job; and alongside what I've got to do, hell would be a picnic!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

STARR TAKES ANOTHER PRISONER

With a slip of paper in his pocket that would have gone a long way toward clearing Helen May, had he only taken the trouble to look at it, Starr rode out in the cool early morning to Sunlight Basin. He looked white and worn, and his eyes were sunken and circled with the purple of too little sleep and too much worry, for in the three days since he had seen her, Starr had not been able to forget his misery once in merciful sleep. Only when he was busy with capturing the Junta had he lost for a time the keen pain of his hurt.

Now it was back like an aching tooth set going again with cold water or sweets. He tried to make himself think that he hated Helen May, and that a girl of that type—a girl who could lend herself to such treachery—could not possibly win from him anything but a pitying contempt. He told himself over and over again that he was merely sore because a girl had "put something over on him"; that a man hated to have a woman make a fool of him.

He tried to gloat over the fact that he had found her out before she had any inkling of how he felt toward her; he actually believed that! He tried not to wince at the thought of her at Fort Bliss, a Federal prisoner, charged with conspiring against the government. She must have known the risk she took, he kept telling himself. The girl was no fool, was way above the average in intelligence. That was why she had appealed to him; he had felt the force of her personality, the underlying strength of her character that had not harshened her outward charm, as strength so often does for a woman.

That was the worst of it. Had she been weak she would never have mixed with any political conspiracy; they would not have wanted her, for intrigue has no place for weaklings. But had she been weak she would never have attracted Starr so deeply, however innocent she might have been. So his reasoning went round

and round in a circle, until he was utterly heartsick with no hope of finding peace.

There was one thing he could do: it would be tightening the screws of his torture, but he meant to do it for her sake. He would take her to Fort Bliss himself, shielding her from publicity and humiliation; and he would take charge of Vic, and see that the kid did not suffer too much on account of his sister.

He would make a man of Vic; he never guessed that he was taking up mentally the burden which Peter had laid upon Helen May. He believed there was good stuff in that kid, and with the right handling he would come out all right. He would put in a plea to his chief for leniency toward the girl too. He would say that she was young and inexperienced and that Holman Sommers had probably drawn her into his scheme—Starr could see how that might easily be—and that her health was absolutely dependent upon open air. They couldn't keep her shut up long; a girl could not do much harm, if the rest of the bunch was convicted. Maybe the lesson and the scare would be all she needed to pull her back into lawful living. She was not a hardened adventuress; why, she couldn't be much over twenty-one or two! After a while, when she had straightened up, maybe …

So Starr thought and thought, fighting to keep a little hope alive, to see a little gleam of light in the blackness of his soul. His head bent, his eyes staring unseeingly at the yellow-brown dust of the trail, he rode along unconscious of everything save the battle raging fiercely within. He did not know what pace Rabbit was taking; he even forgot that he was on Rabbit's back. He did not know that his duty as a man and his man's love were fighting the fiercest battle of his life, or if he did, he never thought to call it a battle.

There had been one black night in the cabin—the night before this last one, it was—when he had considered for a while how he might smuggle Helen May out of the country, suppressing the fact of her complicity. He planned just how he could put her on a train and "shoot her to Los Angeles," as he worded it to himself. How she could take a boat there for Vancouver, and how he could hold back developments here until he knew she was safe. He figured the approximate cost and the hole it would make in his little savings account. He thought of everything, even to marrying her before she left, so that he could not be compelled to testify against her, in case she was caught.

He had dozed afterwards, and had dreamed that he put his plan to the test of

reality. He had married Helen May and taken her himself to Los Angeles. But there had not been money enough for him to go any farther, and his chief had wired him peremptorily to return and arrest the leaders of the Alliance and all connected with it. So he had bought a steerage ticket for Helen May and put her aboard the boat, where she must herd with a lot of leering Chinamen. He had stood on the pier and watched the boat swing out and nose its way to the open sea, and a submarine had torpedoed it when it had sailed beyond the three-mile limit off the coast, so he could not go after her. He was just taking off his coat to try it, anyway, when he awoke.

That was all the good his sleep had done him: set him upright in bed with a cold sweat on his face and his hands shaking. But the reaction from that nightmare had been complete, and Starr had not again planned how he might dodge his plain duty. But he kept thinking around and around the subject for all that, as though he could not give up entirely the hope of being able to save her somehow.

He did not know, until he passed the corral, that he was already in Sunlight Basin, and that the house stood just up the slope before him. Rabbit must have taken it for granted that Starr was bound for this place and so had kept the trail of his own accord, for Starr could not remember turning from the main road. He did not even know that he had passed not more than a hundred yards from Vic and the goats, and that Vic had shouted "hello" to him.

He took a long breath when he glanced up and saw the house so close, but he did not attempt to dodge or even delay the final tragedy of his mission. He let Rabbit keep straight on. And when the horse stopped before the closed front door, Starr slid off and walked, like a tired old man, to the door and knocked.

Helen May had been washing the breakfast dishes, and Starr heard the muffled sound of her high-heeled slippers clicking over the bare floor for a minute before she came into the front room and opened the door. She had a dish towel over her right arm, opening the door with her left. Starr knew that the dish towel was merely a covering for her six-shooter, and his heart hardened a little at that fresh reminder of her preparedness and her guile.

"Why, good morning, desert man," she said brightly, after the first little start of surprise. "Come on in. The coffee's fine this morning; and I just had a hunch I'd better not throw it out for a while yet. There's a little waffle batter left, too."

Starr had choked down a cup of coffee and a sandwich at the station lunch counter before he left San Bonito, and he was glad now that he was not hungry. He stepped inside, but he did not smile back at Helen May; nor could he have accepted her hospitality to save himself from starvation. He felt enough like Judas as it was.

"Don't put down your gun yet," he said abruptly, standing beside the door with his hat in his hand, as though his visit would be very short. "You can shoot me if you want to, but that's about all the leeway I can give you. I rounded up the revolution leaders last night. They're likely at Fort Bliss by now, so you can take your choice between handing me a bullet, or going along with me to Fort Bliss. Because if I live, that's where I'll have to take you. And," he added as an afterthought, "I don't care much which it is."

Helen May stood with her chin tilted down, and stared at him from under her eyebrows. She did not speak for a minute, and Starr leaned back against the closed door with his arms folded negligently and his hat dangling from one hand, waiting her decision. He stared back at her, somberly apathetic. He had spoken the simple truth when he said he did not care which she decided to do. He had come to the limit of suffering, it seemed to him. He could look into her tawny brown eyes now without any emotion whatever.

"You don't smell drunk," said Helen May suddenly and very bluntly, "and you don't look crazy. What is the matter with you, Starr of the desert? Is this a joke, or what?"

"It didn't strike me as any joke," Starr told her passionlessly. "Thirteen of them I rounded up. Holman Sommers was the head of the whole thing. Elfigo Apodaca is in jail, held for the shooting of Estan Medina. Luis Medina is in jail too, held as a witness and to keep Apodaca's men from killing him before he can testify in court. I hated to see the kid tangled up with it—and I hate to see you in it. But that don't give me any license to let you off. You're under arrest. I'm a Secret Service man, sent here to prevent the revolution that's been brewing all spring and summer. I guess I've done it, all right." He stared at her with growing bitterness in his eyes. His hurt began dully to ache again. "Helen May, what in God's name did you tangle up with 'em for?" he flashed in a sudden passion of grief and reproach.

Helen May's chin squared a little; but she who had not screamed when she found

her father dead in his bed; she who had read his letter without whimpering held her voice quiet now, though womanlike she answered Starr's question with another.

"What makes you think I am tangled up with it? What reason have you got for connecting me with such a thing?"

A stain of anger reddened Starr's cheek bones, that had been pale. "What reason? Well, I'll tell you. In the office of *Las Nuevas*, in that little, inside room with the door opening out of a closet to hide it, where I got my first real clue, I found two sheets of paper with some strong revolutionary stuff written in English. Also I found a pamphlet where the same stuff had been printed in Spanish. I kept that writing, and I kept the pamphlet. I've got it now. I'd know the writing anywhere I saw it, and I saw a sample of it here in this very room, when the wind blew those papers off your desk."

"You—in this room!" Helen May caught her breath. "Why—why, you couldn't have! I never wrote any revolution stuff in my life! Why—I don't know the first thing about *Las Nuevas*, as you call it. How could my writing—?" She caught her breath again, for she remembered.

"Why, Starr of the desert, that was Holman Sommers' writing you saw! I remember now. Some pages of his manuscript blew off the desk when you were here. See, I can show you a whole pile of it!" She ran to the desk, Starr following her mechanically. "See? All kinds of scientific junk that he wanted typed. Isn't that the writing you meant? Isn't it?" Her hands trembled so that the papers she held close to Starr's face shook, but Starr recognized the same symmetrical, hard-to-read chirography.

"Yes, that's it." His voice was so husky that she could hardly hear him. He moistened his lips, that had gone dry. Was it possible? His mind kept asking over and over.

"And here! I don't ask you to take my word for it—I know that just those pages don't prove anything, because I might have written that stuff myself—if I knew enough! But here's a lot that he sent over by the stage driver yesterday. I haven't even opened it yet. You can see the same handwriting in the address, can't you? And if he has written a note—he does sometimes—and signed it—he always signs his name in full—why, that will be proof, won't it?" Her eyes burned into

his and steadied a little his whirling thoughts.

"Open it, desert man! Open it, and see if there's a note! And you can ask the stage driver, if you don't believe me; here, break the string!"

She was now more eager than he to see what was inside the wrapping of newspaper. "See? That's an El Paso paper—and I don't take anything but the *Times* from Los Angeles! Oh, goody! There is a note! You read it, Starr. Read it out loud. If that doesn't convince you, why—why I can prove by Vic—"

Starr had unfolded the sheet of tablet paper, and Helen May interrupted herself to listen. Starr's voice was uneven, husky when he tried to control the quiver in it. And this he read, in the handwriting of which he had such bitter knowledge:

"My Dear Miss Stevenson:

"I am enclosing herewith a part of Chapter Two, which I have revised considerably and beg you to retype for me. If you have no asterisk sign upon your machine, will you be so kind as to make use of the period sign to indicate a break in the context of the quotations from the various authors whom I have cited?

"I wish to inform you that I am deeply sorry to place this extra burden of work upon you, and also assure you that I am more than delighted with the care you have exercised in deciphering correctly my most abominable chirography.

"May I also suggest, with all due respect to your intelligence and with a keen appreciation of the potent influences of youth and romance upon even the drudgery of an amanuensis, that in writing "stars of the universe" in a scientific document, the connotation is marred somewhat when stars is spelled "Starr's."

"Very apologetically your friend,

"HOLMAN SOMMERS."

It took several seconds for the full significance of that last paragraph to sink into minds so absorbed with another matter. But when it did sink in—

"Oh-h!" gasped Helen May, and backed a step, her face the color of a red hollyhock.

Starr looked up from reading those pregnant words a second time to himself. He reached out and caught Helen May by her two shoulders.

"Did you do that?" he whispered impellingly. "Did you spell my name into that man's manuscript?"

"No, I didn't! I don't believe I did—I never noticed—well, even if I did, that doesn't mean—anything." I hope the printers will set that *anything* in their very smallest type, just to show you how weak and futile and scarcely audible and absolutely unconvincing the word sounded. For one reason, Helen May did not have much breath to say it with; and for another reason, she knew there was not much use in saying it.

* * * * *

Helen May, sitting unabashed on Starr's lap, with an arm around his neck and her head on his shoulder, with her dish towel and gun lying just where she had dropped them on the floor some time before, took Peter's last letter from Starr's fingers and drew it tenderly down along her cheek.

"I only wish you could have known dad," she said with a gentle melancholy that was a great deal lightened by her present happiness. "He wasn't at all striking on the surface; he was so quiet and so unassuming. But he was just the dearest and the bravest man—and when I think what he did for me…"

"I know he was dear and brave; I can judge by his daughter." Starr reached up and prisoned hand and letter together and held them against his lips. "Seems like a nightmare now that I ever thought—And to think I headed out here to…"

"Well, I *am* your prisoner." Helen May answered that part of the sentence which Starr had left unspoken. "Listen, desert man o' mine. I—I want to be your prisoner forever and ever and ever!"

"You won't get anything less than a life sentence, lady! And—"

"Hully gosh!" Vic, bursting open the door just in the middle of a kiss, skidded precipitately through to the kitchen. "Fade out!" he advised himself as he went. "But say! When you get around to it, I'd like something to eat, Helen Blazes!"

THE END

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