The Free Range

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The titles given in the Table of Contents for Chapters VII and VIII differ from the chapter titles used in the text.

They rode needlessly close together and swung their clasped hands like happy children.

THE FREE RANGE

BY

ELWELL LAWRENCE

ILLUSTRATIONS BY

DOUGLAS DUER

GROSSET & DUNLAP

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To MATHEW WHITE Jr.,
Editor, author, critic, friend.

CONTENTS

THE FREE RANGE

CHAPTER I

FLINGING THE GAUNTLET

“Then you insist on ruining me, Mr. Bissell?”

Bud Larkin, his hat pushed back on his head, looked unabashed at the scowling heavy features of the man opposite in the long, low room, and awaited a reply.

“I don’t want to ruin anybody,” puffed old “Beef” Bissell, whose cattle overran most of the range between the Gray Bull and the Big Horn. “But I allow as how them sheep of yours had better stay down Nebrasky way where they come from.”

“In other words,” snapped Larkin, “I had better give up the idea of bringing them north altogether. Is that it?”

“Just about.”

“Well, now, see here, Mr. Bissell, you forget one or two things. The first is, that my sheep ranch is in Montana and not Wyoming, and that I want to run my southern herds onto the northern range before fall sets in. The second is, that, while your homestead may be three hundred and twenty acres, the range that has made you rich is free. My sheep have as much right there as your cattle. It is all government land and open to everybody.”

“Possession is eleven points out here where there isn’t any law,” replied Bissell imperturbably. “It’s a case of your sheep against my cattle, and, you see, I stand up reg’lar for my cows.”

Bud rolled a cigarette and pondered.

He was in the rather bare and unornamental living-room of the Bar T ranch. In the center was a rough-hewn table supporting an oil-lamp and an Omaha newspaper fully six months old. The chairs, except one, were rough and heavy and without rockers. This one was a gorgeous plush patent-rocker so valued a generation ago, and evidently imported at great expense.

A square of carpet that had lost all claims to pattern had become a soft blur, the result of age and alkali. However, it was one of the proudest possessions of the Bar T outfit and showed that old Beef Bissell knew what the right thing was. A calico shroud hid a large, erect object against the wall farthest away from the windows; an object that was the last word in luxury and reckless expense—a piano. The walls were of boards whitewashed, and the ceiling was just plain boards.

It had not taken Bud Larkin long to discern that there was a feminine cause for these numerous unusual effects; but he did not for a minute suppose it to be the thin, sharp-tongued woman who had been washing behind the cook-house as he rode up to the corral. Now, as he pondered, he thought again about it. But only for a minute; other things of vaster importance held him.

Although but two men had spoken during the conversation, three were in the room. The third was a man of medium height, lowering looks, and slow tongue. His hair was black, and he had the appearance of always needing a shave. He was trained down to perfect condition by his years on the plains, and was as wiry and tough as the cow pony he rode. He was Black Mike Stelton, foreman of the Bar T.

“What do you think, Mike?” asked Bissell, when Larkin made no attempt to continue the argument.

“Same’s you, boss,” was the reply in a heavy voice. “I wouldn’t let them sheep on the range, not noways. Sheep is the ruination of any grass country.”

“There you see, Mr. Larkin,” said Bissell with an expressive motion of his hand. “Stelton’s been out here in the business fifteen years and says the same as I do. How long did you say you had been in the West?”

“One year,” replied Larkin, flushing to the roots of his hair beneath his tanned but not weather-beaten skin. “Came from Chicago.”

“From down East, eh? Well, my woman was to St. Paul once, and she’s never got over it; but it don’t seem to have spoiled you none.”

Larkin grinned and replied in kind, but all the time he was trying to determine what stand to take. He had expected to meet opposition to “walking” his sheep north—in fact, had met it steadily—but up to this point had managed to get his animals through. Now he was fifty miles ahead of the first flock and had reached the Bar T ranch an hour before dinner.

Had he been a suspected horse-thief, the unwritten social etiquette of the plains

would have provided him with food and lodging as long as he cared to stay. Consequently when he had caught the reflection of the setting sun against the walls of the ranch house, he had turned Pinte's head in the direction of the corral.

Then, in the living-room, though no questions had been asked, Larkin had brought up the much-dreaded subject himself, as his visit was partly for that purpose.

He had much to contend with. In the first place, being a sheepman, he was absolutely without caste in the cattle country, where men who went in for the "woolly idiots," as someone has aptly called them, was considered for the most part as a degenerate, and only fit for target practice. This side of the matter troubled him not at all, however.

What did worry him was the element of right in the cattlemen's attitude! a right that was still a wrong. For he had to acknowledge that when sheep had once fed across a range, that range was ruined for cattle for the period of at least a year.

This was due to the fact that the sheep, cropping into the very roots of the gray grass itself, destroyed it. Moreover, the animals on their slow marches, herded so close together that they left an offensive trail rather than follow which the cattle would stand and starve.

On the other hand, the range was free and the sheep had as much right to graze there as the cattle, a fact that the cattlemen, with all their strict code of justice, refused to recognize.

Larkin knew that he had come to the parting of the ways at the Bar T ranch.

Old Beef Bissell was what was known at that time as a cattle king. His thousands of steers, wealth on the hoof, grazed far and wide over the fenceless prairies. His range riders rarely saw the ranch house for a month at a time, so great was his assumed territory; his cowboys outnumbered those of any owner within three hundred miles. Aside from this, he was the head of a cattlemen's association that had banded together against rustlers and other invaders of the range.

Larkin returned to the conversation.

"Try to see it from my standpoint," he said to Bissell. "If you had gone in for sheep as I have—"

"I wouldn't go in for 'em," interrupted the other contemptuously, and Stelton grunted.

"As you like about that. Every gopher to his own hole," remarked Bud. "But if

you had, and I guess you would if you thought there was more money in it, you would certainly insist on your rights on the range, wouldn't you?"

"I might try."

"And if you tried you'd be pretty sure to succeed, I imagine."

"It's likely; I allow as how I'm a pretty good hand at succeedin'."

"Well, so am I. I haven't got very far yet, but I am on my way. I didn't come out here to make a failure of things, and I don't intend to. Now, all I want is to run my sheep north on to the Montana range where my ranch is."

"How many are there?" This from Stelton.

"Five flocks of about two thousand each."

Bissell snorted and turned in his chair.

"I won't allow it, young man, an' that's all I've got to say. D'ye think I'm a fool?"

"No, but neither am I. And I might as well tell you first and last that those sheep are coming north. Now, if you do the fair thing you will tell your cowboys the fact so they won't make any mistakes. I have given you fair warning, and if anything happens to those sheep you will be held responsible."

"Is that all you got to say?" asked Bissell, sarcastically.

"Yes."

"Well, then, I'll do the talkin'. I'd as leave see Indians stampedin' my cows into the river as have your sheep come over the range. Since you've given me what you call a fair warning, I'll give you one. Leave your critters where they are. If you don't do it you'll be a sight wiser and also a mighty sight poorer before I get through with 'em."

"Just what do you mean by that?" asked Larkin.

"I ain't sayin' nothin' more than that now, because I'm a slow hand at makin' ornery promises, seein' I always keep 'em. But I'm just tellin' you, that's all."

"Is that your last word on the subject?" asked Larkin.

"It is, an' I want Stelton here to remember I said it."

"Then we won't say anything more about the matter," replied Bud calmly, as he rose. "I'll go outside and look to my horse."

“You’ll stay the night with us, won’t you?” asked Bissell anxiously.

“Yes, thanks. I’ve heard so much about the Bar T I should like to see a little more of it.”

When Larkin had left the room, Bissell, with a frown on his face, turned to Stelton.

“Tell all the boys what’s happened to-day,” he said, “and tell ’em to be on the watch for this young feller’s first herd. He’ll plenty soon find out he can’t run riot on my range.”

CHAPTER II

A LATE ARRIVAL

After visiting the corral, Larkin paid his respects to the pump and refreshed himself for supper. Then he strolled around the long, rambling ranch house. Across the front, which faced southwest, had been built a low apology for a veranda on which a couple of uninviting chairs stood. He appropriated one of these and settled back to think.

The late sun, a red-bronze color, hung just above the horizon and softened the unlovely stretches of prairie into something brooding and beautiful. Thirty miles away the Rockies had become a mass of gray-blue fleeced across the top with lines of late snow—for it was early June.

The Bar T ranch house itself stood on a rise of ground back from a cold, greenish-blue river that made a bend at this point, and that rose and had its being in the melting whiteness of those distant peaks. Between the willows of the river bottoms, Larkin could see the red reflection of the sun on the water, and could follow the stream's course across the prairie by the snake-like procession of cottonwoods that lined its banks.

On the plains themselves there was still a fading hue of green. The buffalo grass had already begun to wither under the increasing heat, and in a month would have become the same gray, cured fodder that supported millions of buffalo centuries before a steer was on the range.

For Bud Larkin, only a year in the West, this evening scene had not lost its charm. He loved this hour when the men washed up at the pump. There were enticing sounds from the cook house and enticing odors in the air. Sometimes it seemed as though it almost made up for a day's failure and discouragement.

His quick eye suddenly noted a dark speck moving rapidly across the prairie toward the ranch house. It seemed to skim the ground and in five minutes had developed into a cow pony and its rider. A quarter of an hour later and the pony proved himself of "calico" variety, while the rider developed into a girl who

bestrode her mount as though she were a part of the animal itself.

The front rim of her broad felt hat was fastened upward with a thong and exposed her face. Bud watched her idly until she dashed up to the front of the house, fetched her horse back on its haunches with a jerk on the cruel Spanish bridle, and leaped to the ground before he had fairly lost headway. Then with a slap on the rump she sent him trotting to Stelton, who had appeared around the end of the veranda as though expecting her.

Occupied with pulling off her soft white buckskin gauntlets, she did not notice the young man on the low porch until, with an exclamation, he had sprung to his feet and hurried toward her.

“Juliet Bissell!” gasped Larkin, holding out a hand to her. “What are you doing here?”

“Of all people, Bud Larkin!” cried the girl, flushing with pleasure. “Why, I can’t believe it! Did you drop out of the sky somewhere?”

“If the sky is heaven, I’ve just dropped into it,” he returned, trying to confine his joy to intelligible speech, and barely succeeding.

“That sounds like the same old Bud,” she laughed, “and it’s a pleasure to hear it. For if there is one thing a cowboy can’t do, and it’s the only one, it is to pay a woman a compliment. That speech brands you a tenderfoot.”

“Never! I’ve been out a year and can nearly ride a cow pony, providing it is lame and blind.”

So, bantering each other unmercifully, they reached the front door.

“Wait a few minutes, Bud, and I will be out again. I must dress for dinner.”

When she had gone Larkin understood at once the presence of the carpet, the patent rocker, and the piano.

“What a double-barreled idiot I am,” he swore, “to talk turkey to old Bissell and never connect him with Juliet. All the sheep in the world couldn’t get me away from here to-night.” And he ejaculated the time-worn but true old phrase that the world is a mighty small place.

Juliet Bissell had been a very definite personage in Bud Larkin’s other life—the life that he tried to forget. The eldest son of a rich Chicago banker, his first twenty-five years had been such years as a man always looks back upon with a vast regret.

From the mansion on Sheridan Drive he had varied his time among his clubs, his sports, and his social duties, and generally made himself one of many in this world that humanity can do without. In other words, he added nothing to himself, others, or life in general, and was, therefore, without a real excuse for existing.

Of one thing he was ever zealous, now that he had left it behind, and this was that his past should not pursue him into the new life he had chosen. He wished to start his career without stigma, and end it without blame.

Strangely enough, the person who had implanted this ambition and determination in him was Juliet Bissell. Three winters before, he had met her at the charity ball, and at the time she was something of a social sensation, being described as “that cowgirl from Wyoming.” However, that “cowgirl” left her mark on many a gilded youth, and Bud Larkin was one.

He had fallen in love with her, as much as one in his position is capable of falling in love, had proposed to her, and been rejected with a grace and gentleness that had robbed the blow of all hurt—with one exception. Bud’s pride, since his wealth and position had meant nothing in the girl’s eyes, had been sorely wounded, and it had taken six months of the vast mystery of the plains to reduce this pettiness to the status of a secret shame.

When Juliet refused him she had told him with infinite tact that her husband would be a man more after the pattern of her father, whom she adored, and who, in turn, worshiped the very air that surrounded her; and it was this fact that had turned Bud’s attention to the West and its opportunities.

When she returned to the porch Juliet had on a plain white dress with pink ribbons at elbows, neck, and waist. Larkin, who had always thrilled at her splendid physical vigor, found himself more than ever under the spell of her luxuriant vitality.

Her great dark eyes were remarkably lustrous and expressive, her black hair waved back from her brown face into a great braided coil, her features were not pretty so much as noble. Her figure, with its limber curves, was pliant and graceful in any position or emergency—the result of years in the saddle. Her feet and hands were small, the latter being firm but infinitely gentle in their touch.

“Well, have you forgotten all your Eastern education?” Larkin asked, smiling, as she sat down. “Have you reverted to your original untamed condition?”

“No, indeed, Bud. I have a reputation to keep up in that respect. The fact that I

have had an Eastern education has made our punchers so proud that they can't be lived with when they go to town, and lord it over everybody."

"I suppose they all want to marry you?"

"Yes, singly or in lots, and sometimes I'm sorry it can't be done, I love them all so much. But tell me, Bud, what brings you out West in general and here in particular?"

"Probably you don't know that a year and a half ago my father died," and Larkin's face shadowed for a moment with retrospection. "Well, he did, and left me most of his estate. I was sick of it there, and I vowed I would pull up stakes and start somewhere by myself. So I went up to Montana in the vicinity of the Musselshell Forks and bought a ranch and some stock."

"Cattle?"

"No, sheep. The best merino I ever saw—"

"Bud Larkin! You're not a sheepman?"

"Yes, ma'am, and a menace to a large number of cowmen, your father among them."

The girl sank back and allowed him to relate the story of his adventures up to the present time, including the interview with Beef. At the description of that she smiled grimly; and he, noting the fact, told himself that it would take a masterly character to subdue that free, wild pride.

"Now, Julie," he concluded, "do me the favor of instilling reason into your father. I've done my best and we have parted without murder, but that's all. I've got to have a friend at court or I will be ruined before I commence."

The girl was silent for a few minutes and sat looking down at her slippered feet.

"Bud," she said at last, "you've never known me to tell anything but the truth, and I'm going to tell it to you now. I will be your friend in everything except where you ask me to yield my loyalty to my father and his interests. He is the most wonderful father a girl ever had, and if he were to say that black was white, I should probably swear to it if he asked me to."

"I admire you for that," said Bud genuinely, although all his hopes in this powerful ally went glimmering. "Let's not talk shop any longer. It's too good just to see you to think about anything but that."

So, for a while, they reminisced of the days of their former friendship, by tacit

agreement avoiding any reference to intimate things. And Larkin felt spring up in him the old love that he had convinced himself was dead; so that he added to his first resolution to succeed on the range, a second, that he would, in the end, conquer Juliet Bissell.

The thought was pleasing, for it meant another struggle, another outlet for the energies and activities that had so long lain dormant in him. And with the undaunted courage of youth he looked eagerly toward the battle that should win this radiant girl.

But for the present he knew he must not betray himself by word, look or action; other things of greater moment must be settled.

At last, as they talked, the cook, a long-suffering Chinaman, seized a huge brass bell and rang it with all his might, standing in the door of the cook house.

There was an instant response in the wild whoop of the cowboys who had been suffering the pangs of starvation for the past half-hour.

“Of course you must come to our private table, Bud,” said Juliet. “I want you to see father’s other side.” So they rose and went in the front way.

The ranch house had been planned so that to the right of the entrance was the living-room, and back of that the dining-room. To the left three smaller rooms had been made into sleeping apartments. At the back of the structure and extending across the width of it was a large room that, in the early days of the Bar T, had served as the bunk-house for the cow punchers.

This had now been changed to the mess-room for them, while the family, with the addition of Stelton, the foreman, used the smaller private room. Owing to the large increase in the number of Bar T punchers a special bunk-house had been built in the rear of the main structure.

At table Larkin for the first time met Mrs. Bissell, who proved to be a typical early cowman’s wife, thin, overworked, and slightly vinegary of disposition, despite the fact that she had at one time in her life been the belle of a cowtown, and had been won from beneath the ready .45’s of a number of rivals.

At Bud’s entrance Stelton grunted and scowled, and generally showed himself ill-pleased that Juliet should have known the visitor. On the other hand, as the girl had promised, Beef Bissell, for years the terror of the range, displayed a side that the sheepman would never have suspected. His voice became gentle, his laugh softened, his language purified, and he showed, by many little attentions, the unconscious chivalry that worship of a good woman brings to the surface.

For her part, the girl appraised this devotion at its true value and never failed in the little feminine thoughtfulnesses that appeal so strongly to a worried and busy man.

That Stelton should be at the table at all surprised Bud, for it was not the habit of foremen to eat away from the punchers. But here the fact was the result of a former necessity when Bissell, hard-pressed, had called his foreman into consultation at meal times.

Old Bissell proved himself a more genial host than business rival, and when he had learned of Larkin and his daughter's former friendship, he forgot sheep for the moment and took an interest in the man. Mrs. Bissell sat open-mouthed while Bud told of the glories of Chicago in the early eighties, and never once mentioned her famous visit to St. Paul, so overcome was she with the tales this young man related.

Everyone was at his or her ease when the rapid tattoo of hoofs was heard, and a horse and rider drew up abruptly at the corral. One of the punchers from the rear dining-room went out to meet him and presently appeared sheepishly in the doorway where Bissell could see him.

"Is there a Mr. Larkin here?" asked the puncher.

"Yes," said Bud, pushing back his chair.

"There's a stranger out here that 'lows he wants to see you."

"Send him in here and give him something to eat, Shorty," sang out Bissell. "If he's a friend of Larkin's, he'd better have dinner with him. And, Shorty, tell that Chinaman to rustle another place here *pronto!*"

As for Bud Larkin, he was at a total loss to know who his visitor might be. With a sudden twinge of fear he thought that perhaps Hard-winter Sims, his chief herder, had pursued him with disastrous information from the flocks. Wondering, he awaited the visitor's appearance.

The stranger presently made a bold and noisy entrance, and, when his face came into view, Bud sank back in his chair weakly, his own paling a trifle beneath the tan. For the man was Smithy Caldwell, a shifty-eyed crook from Chicago, one who had dogged him before, and whom he had never expected to see again. How the villain had tracked him to the Bar T outfit Bud could not imagine.

Seeing the eyes of the others upon him, Larkin recovered himself with an effort and introduced Caldwell; but to the eyes of even the most unobservant it was

plain that a foreign element of disturbing nature had suddenly been projected into the genial atmosphere. The man was coarse in manner and speech and often addressed leering remarks to Juliet, who disregarded them utterly and confined her attention to Bud.

“Who is this creature?” she asked *sotto voce*. “What does he want with you?”

Bud hesitated, made two or three false starts, and finally said:

“I am sure his business with me would not interest you.”

“I beg your pardon,” said the girl, rebuffed. “I seem to have forgotten myself.”

“I wish I could,” ejaculated Bud bitterly, and refused to explain further.

CHAPTER III

AN UNSETTLED SCORE

As soon after dinner as possible Larkin disengaged himself from the rest of the party and motioned Caldwell to follow him. He led the way around the house and back toward the fence of the corral. It was already dark, and the only sounds were those of the horses stirring restlessly, or the low bellow of one of the ranch milch cows.

“What are you doing out here?” demanded Bud.

“I came to see you.” The other emitted an exasperating chuckle at his own cheap wit.

“What do you want?”

“You know what I want.” This time there was no chuckle, and Bud could imagine the close-set, greedy eyes of the other, one of them slightly crossed, boring into him in the dark.

“Money, I suppose, you whining blood-sucker,” suggested Bud, his voice quiet, but holding a cold, unpleasant sort of ring that was new to Caldwell.

“‘The boy guessed right the very first time,’” quoted Smithy, unabashed.

“What became of that two thousand I gave you before I left Chicago?”

“I got little enough of that,” cried Caldwell. “You know how many people there were to be hushed up.”

“Many!” snapped Larkin. “You can’t come any of that on me. There were just three; yourself, your wife, and that red-headed fellow,—I forget his name.”

“Well, my wife doesn’t live with me any more,” whined Smithy, “but she makes me support her just the same, and threatens to squeal on you if I don’t produce regularly; she knows where the money comes from.”

Suddenly Larkin stepped close to the other and thrust something long and hard

against his ribs.

“I’m going to do for you now, Smithy,” he said in a cold, even voice. Caldwell did not even move from his position.

“If you do,” was his reply, “the woman will give the whole thing to the newspapers. They have smelled a rat so long they would pay well for a tip. She has all the documents. So if you want to swing and ruin everybody concerned, just pull that trigger.”

“I knew you were lying.” Bud stepped back and thrust his revolver into the holster. “You are still living with your wife, for she wouldn’t have the documents if you weren’t. A man rarely lies when he is within two seconds of death. You are up to your old tricks, Smithy, and they have never fooled me yet. Now, let’s get down to business. How much do you want?”

“Two thousand dollars.”

“I haven’t got it. You don’t know it, perhaps, but my money is on the hoof out in this country, and cash is very little used. Look here. You bring your wife and that red-headed chap out to Arizona or California and I will set you up in the sheep business. I’ve got herds coming north now, but I’ll turn a thousand back in your name, and by the time you arrive they will be on the southern range. What do you say?”

“I say no,” replied the other in an ugly voice. “I want money, and I’m going to have it. Good old Chi is range enough for me.”

“Well, I can’t give you two thousand because I haven’t got it.”

“What have you got?”

“Five hundred dollars, the pay of my herders.”

“I’ll take that on account, then,” said Caldwell insolently. “When will you have some more?”

“Not until the end of July, when the wool has been shipped East.”

“All right. I’ll wait till then. Come on, hand over the five hundred.”

Larkin reached inside his heavy woolen shirt, opened a chamois bag that hung by a string around his neck, and emptied it of bills. These he passed to Caldwell without a word.

“If you are wise, Smithy,” he said in an even voice, “you won’t ask me for any more. I’ve about reached the end of my rope in this business. And let me tell you

that this account between you and me is going to be settled in full to my credit before very long."

"Maybe and maybe not," said the other insolently, and walked off.

Five minutes later Bud Larkin, sick at heart that this skeleton of the past had risen up to confront him in his new life, made his way around the ranch house to the front entrance. Just as he was going in at the door a man appeared from the opposite side so that the two met. The other skulked back and disappeared, but in that moment Bud recognized the figure of Stelton, and a sudden chill clutched his heart.

Had the foreman of the Bar T been listening and heard all?

Entering the living-room, where the Bissells were already gathered, Larkin expected to find Caldwell, but inquiry elicited the fact that he had not been seen. Five minutes later the drumming of a pony's feet on the hard ground supplied the solution of his non-appearance. Having satisfactorily interviewed Larkin, he had mounted his horse, which all this time had been tethered to the corral, and ridden away.

Half an hour later Stelton came in, his brow dark, and seated himself in a far corner of the room. From his manner it was evident that he had something to say, and Bissell drew him out.

"Red came in from over by Sioux Creek to-night," admitted the foreman, "and he says as how the rustlers have been busy that-a-way ag'in. First thing he saw was the tracks of their hosses, and then, when he counted the herd, found it was twenty head short. I'm shore put out about them rustlers, chief, and if something ain't done about it pretty soon you won't have enough prime beef to make a decent drive."

Instantly the face of Bissell lost all its kindliness and grew as dark and forbidding as Stelton's. Springing out of his chair, he paced up and down the room.

"That has got to stop!" he said determinedly. Then, in answer to a question of Larkin's: "Yes, rustlers were never so bad as they are now. It's got so in this State that the thieves have got more cows among 'em than the regular cowmen. An' that ain't all. They've got an organization that we can't touch. We're plumb locoed with their devilment. That's the second bunch cut out of that herd, ain't it, Mike?"

"Yes."

Beef Bissell, his eyes flashing the fire that had made him feared in the earlier, rougher days of the range, finally stopped at the door.

“Come on out with me and talk to Red,” he ordered his foreman, and the latter, whose eyes had never left Juliet since he entered the room, reluctantly obeyed.

Presently Mrs. Bissell took herself off, and Bud and the girl were left alone.

“I suppose you’ll marry some time,” said Larkin, after a long pause.

“I sincerely hope so,” was her laughing rejoinder.

“Any candidates at present?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Well, I know of a very active one—he just left the room.”

“Who, Mike? Bud, that’s preposterous! I’ve known him ever since I was a little girl, and would no more think of marriage with him than of keeping pet rattlesnakes.”

“Perhaps not, Julie, but Mike would. Will you take the word of an absolutely disinterested observer that the man is almost mad about you, and would sell his soul for one of your smiles?”

The girl was evidently impressed by the seriousness of his tone, for she pondered a minute in silence.

“Perhaps you are right, Bud,” she said at last. “I had never thought of it that way. But you needn’t worry; I can take care of myself.”

“I’m sure of it, but that doesn’t make him any the less dangerous. Keep your eye on him, and if you ever find yourself in a place where you need somebody bad and quick, send for me. He hates me already, and I can’t say I love him any too well; I have an idea that he and I will come to closer quarters than will be good for the health of one of us.”

“Nonsense, Bud; your imagination seems rather lively to-night. Now, just because I am curious, will you tell me why you went into the sheep business?”

“Certainly. Because it is the future business of Wyoming and Montana. Sheep can live on less and under conditions that would kill cows. Moreover, they are a source of double profit, both for their wool and their mutton. The final struggle of the range will be between sheep and cattle and irrigation, and irrigation will win.

“But the sheep will drive the cattle off the range, and, when they, in turn, are driven off, will continue to thrive in the foothills and lower mountains, where there is no irrigation. I went into the sheep business to make money, but I won’t see much of that money for several years. When I am getting rich, cowmen like your father will be fighting for the maintenance of a few little herds that have not been pushed off the range by the sheep. Cattle offer more immediate profit, but, according to my view, they are doomed.”

“Bud, that’s the best defense of wool-growing I ever heard,” cried the girl. “Up to this I’ve held it against you that you were a sheepman—a silly prejudice, of course, that I have grown up with—but now you can consider yourself free of that. I believe you have hit the nail on the head.”

“Thanks, I believe I have,” said Bud dryly, and a little while later they separated for the night, but not before he had remarked:

“I think it would benefit all of us if you drilled some of that common-sense into your father.”

CHAPTER IV

THE SIX PISTOL SHOTS

The next morning, after breakfast, which shortly followed the rising of the sun, Bissell called Bud Larkin aside just as that young man had headed for the corral to rope and saddle Pinte.

Gone was any hint of the man of the night before. His red face was sober, and his brown eyes looked into Bud's steel-gray ones with a piercing, almost menacing, intensity.

"I hope any friend of Julie's will continue to be my friend," was all he said, but the glance and manner attending this delicate hint left no doubt as to his meaning. His whole attitude spelled "sheep!"

"That depends entirely upon you, Mr. Bissell," was Larkin's rejoinder.

The cowman turned away without any further words, and Bud continued on to the corral. At the enclosure he found Stelton roping a wiry and vicious calico pony, and when he had finally cinched the saddle on Pinte, he turned to see Julie at his side.

"You had better invite me to ride a little way with you," she said, laughing, "because I am coming anyhow."

"Bless you! What a treat!" cried Bud happily, and helped to cinch up the calico, who squealed at every tug.

Stelton, his dark face flushed to the color of mahogany, sullenly left him the privilege and walked away.

Presently they mounted, and Bud, with a loud "So-long" and a wave of the hand to some of the punchers, turned south. Julie, loping beside him, looked up curiously at this.

"I thought you were going north, Bud," she cried.

“Changed my plans overnight,” he replied non-committally, and she did not press the subject further, feeling, with a woman’s intuition, that war was in the air.

Ten miles south, at the ford of the southern branch of Grass Creek, she drew up her horse as the signal for their separation, and faced north. Bud, still headed southward, put Pinte alongside of her and took her hand.

“It’s been a blessing to see you, you’re so civilized,” she said, half-seriously. “Do come again.”

“Then you do sometimes miss the things you have been educated to?”

“Yes, Bud, I do, but not often. Seeing you has brought back a flood of memories that I am happier without.”

“And that is what you have done for me, dear girl,” he said in a low tone as he pressed her hand. The next moment, with a nonchalant “So-long,” the parting of the plains, he had dug the spurs into his horse and ridden away.

For a minute the girl sat looking after this one link between her desolate existence and the luxury and society he still represented in her eyes.

“His manners have changed for the worse,” she thought, recalling his abrupt departure, “but I think he has changed for the better.”

Which remark proves that her sense of relative masculine values was still sound.

Larkin continued on directly south-east for twenty miles, until he crossed the Big Horn at what is now the town of Kirby. Thence his course lay south rather than east until he should raise the white dust of his first flock.

With regard to his sheep, Larkin, in all disputed cases, took the advice of his chief herder, Hard-winter Sims, the laziest man on the range, and yet one who seemed to divine the numbed sheep intelligence in a manner little short of marvelous.

Sims he had picked up in Montana, when that individual, unable to perform the arduous duties of a cowboy, had applied for a job as a sheep-herder—not so much because he liked the sheep, but because he had to eat and clothe himself. By one of those rare accidents of luck Sims at last found his *métier*, and Larkin the prince of sheepmen.

When Bud had determined to “walk” ten thousand animals north, Sims had accompanied him to help in the buying, and was now superintending the long

drive.

On his advice the drive had been divided into five herds of two thousand, he contending that it was dangerous, as well as injurious to the sheep, to keep more than that number together. The others were following at intervals of a few days. Larkin had left the leaders just north of the hills that formed the hooked southern end of the Big Horn Mountains, and expected that in two days' time they would have come north almost to the junction of Kirby Creek and the Big Horn, near where it was calculated to cross them.

After grazing his horse for an hour at noon, and taking a bite to eat himself, Larkin pushed on, and, in a short time, made out a faint, whitish mist rising against the horizon of hills. It was the dust of his leaders. Presently, in the far distance, a man appeared on horseback making toward him, and Bud wondered if anything had happened.

His fears were partially justified when he discovered the horseman to be Sims, and were entirely confirmed when he had conversed with the herder.

"We've sure got to get them sheep to water, and that mighty quick," was the latter's laconic announcement.

"Nonsense! There's plenty of water. What's the matter with 'em?"

"Ten miles out of the hills we found a water-hole, but the cattle had been there first, and the sheep wouldn't look at it. At the camp last night there was another hole, but some imp had deviled the herd an' they lay alongside the water, dyin' of thirst, but they wouldn't drink. We pushed 'em in an' they swam around; we half-drowned some of 'em, but still they wouldn't drink.

"So we made a night march without finding water, and we haven't found any to-day. They're gettin' frantic now."

Bud quirted the tired Pinte into a gallop, and they approached the herd, about which the dark, slim figures of the dogs were running. From the distance the first sound was the ceaseless blethering of the flock that proclaimed its misery. The next was the musical tinkling of the bells the leaders wore.

"Reckon they've found another hole," said Sims. "Thought I seen one when I was ridin' out."

On nearer approach it was seen that the herd was "milling," that is, revolving in a great circle, with a number of inner circles, half smothered in the dust they raised, without aim or knowledge of what they did, or why. About the herd at

various points stood the half-dozen shepherds, their long crooks in their hands. Whenever a blatting animal made a dash for liberty the dogs drove it into the press, barking and nipping.

Larkin rode to a tall, dark-skinned shepherd, a Basque from the California herding.

“What is it, Pedro?” he asked. “What is the matter with them?”

“Only the good God can tell. The leaders they take fright at something, I do not know, and we ’mill’ them before any damage is done.”

Larkin rode around the trampling, bawling mass to the rear, where were the cook wagon and a couple of spare horses. He at once dismounted and changed his uncomfortable riding-boots for the brogans of the herder. Pinte he relegated to the string, for the use of a horse with sheep is ludicrous, since the dogs are the real herders, and obey the orders given by the uplifted arms of the men.

When he rejoined Sims, the sheep had become calmer. The flock-mind, localized in the leaders, had come to the conclusion that, after all, there was nothing to fear, and the circling motion was gradually becoming slower and slower. In a quarter of an hour comparative quiet had been restored, and Sims gave the order to get the flock under way. Since they had not come upon water at this place, as the herder had hoped, it was necessary to continue the merciless drive until they found it.

Immediately the dogs cut into the dirty-white revolving mass (the smell of which is like no other in the world), and headed the leaders north. But the leaders and tail-enders were inextricably mixed, and for a long time there was great confusion.

Sheep on the march have one invariable position, either among the leaders, middlers or tailers, and until each animal has found his exact post, nothing whatever can be done with him.

Until night fell the animals fed on the dry bunch-grass, and then, under the trotting of the dogs, took position on the brow of a rising hill, as though bedding down for the night. But all did not rest, for perhaps fifty remained standing in the perpetual flock-watch.

In an hour these would lie down and others take their places, but all through the night, and at any time when the flock rested, this hereditary protection would become operative—seemingly a survival of a day when neither man nor dog had assumed this duty.

The cook dug his trench, built his fire and set his folding table out under the pale sky that was just commencing to show brilliant stars. After the last cup of steaming coffee had been downed and pipes lighted, Sims gave the order to march. The herd was nearly still now, and roused with much complaining, but the dogs were inexorable, and presently the two thousand were shuffling on, feeding now and then, but making good progress.

There was but one thing left to do in the present instance—find running water, for it was certain that all the springs on the plain would have been visited by cattle, and that, therefore, the sheep would stand by and idly perish of thirst.

Sims knew his country, and directed the flock toward a shallow, rocky ford of the Big Horn, some five miles distant. In the meantime Bud Larkin was facing two alternatives, either one disastrous. The crossing of the Big Horn meant a declaration of war to the Bar T ranch, for in the loose division of the free country, the Bar T range extended south to the river.

On the other hand, should he turn the herds east along the bank of the Big Horn, it would be impossible to continue the march long in that direction, since the higher mountains were directly ahead, and the way through them was devious, and attended with many difficulties and dangers. On such a drive the losses to him in time and strayed sheep would be disastrous.

Larkin had no desire to clash with the cattlemen unless it were absolutely necessary, but he decided that his sheep should go through, since the free range was his as well as another’s. On that long night march, when the men were behind the sheep, driving them, contrary to the usual custom, he told Sims of his interview with Beef Bissell, and the herder cracked his knuckles with rage at the position taken by the cowman.

“Send ’em through, Mr. Larkin,” he advised, “and if the Bar T outfit start anything I allow we’ll return ’em as good as they give.”

It was within an hour of dawn when the leaders of the flock lifted their heads and gazed curiously at the line of trees that loomed before them along the banks of the river. The next instant they had started forward on a run, blethering the news of water back along the dim, heaving line. The dust beneath their sharp feet rose up into a pall that hid the sky as the whole flock got into motion.

Then dogs and men leaped forward, for now the blind singleness of purpose that pervaded the animals was more disastrous than when they refused to drink. Working madly, the dogs spread out the following herd so that all should not crowd upon the same point of the river and drown the leaders.

It was unavoidable that some should be lost by being pushed into the deeper waters north or south of the ford, but for the most part the watering was successfully accomplished, and at the first glow of dawn the animals were contentedly cropping the rich grasses in the low bottoms near the river.

But the work was not yet finished.

When it had become light enough to see, the leaders were rounded up at the ford, and, nipped into frenzy by the dogs, began the passage across the shallow bar. With the leaders safely over it was only a matter of time until the rest had followed, and by the time it was full day the last of the tailers were feeding in the opposite bottoms.

For Bud Larkin this was a very serious dawn. He had cast the die for war and led the invasion into the enemy’s country. Any hope that the act might remain unknown was shattered before the sheep had fairly forded the stream. Against the brightening sky, on a distant rise of ground, had appeared the silent figure of a horse and man, one of the Bar T range riders.

Six distant, warning pistol shots had rung out, and then the horse and rider had disappeared across the plain at a headlong gallop.

CHAPTER V

STRATEGY AND A SURPRISE

“Gub pi-i-i-le!” yelled the cook at the top of his voice.

The weary herders with Sims and Larkin answered the cry as one man, for they were spent with the exertions of the night, and heavy-eyed from want of sleep. The meal of mutton, camp-bread, beans, and Spanish onions was dispatched with the speed that usually accompanied such ceremonies, and Sims told off the herders to watch the flock while the others slept.

A general commanding soldiers would have pressed forward, thus increasing the advantage gained in the enemy’s country, but when sheep compose the marching column, human desires are the last thing consulted. After their long thirst and forced drive it was necessary that the animals recover their strength for a day amid abundant feed and water.

Immediately after breakfast Larkin called a small, close-knit herder to him.

“Can you ride a horse?” he asked.

“*Si, señor*,” replied the man, who came originally from the southern range.

“Then saddle that piebald mare and take provisions for four days. Travel day and night until you reach the Larkin ranch in Montana, and give this letter to the man who is in charge there.”

Bud drew a penciled note from the pocket of his shirt and handed it to the other. Then he produced a rough map of the country he had drawn and added it to the letter, explaining a number of times the distances from point to point, and tracing the route with his pencil. At last the herder understood.

“Tell them to hurry,” was Larkin’s parting injunction, as the other turned away to saddle the mare.

“*Si, señor*. Hurry like blazes, eh?” said Miguel, comprehending, with a flash of white teeth.

“Exactly.”

Hardly had the man galloped away north, following the bank of the river for the better concealment past the Bar T range, when Sims languidly approached.

“I reckon we’re in for trouble, boss,” he remarked, yawning sleepily, “an’ I’m plumb dyin’ for rest, but I s’pose I better look over the country ahead if we’re goin’ to get these muttons out o’ here.”

“I was just going to suggest it,” said Larkin. “I am going to stay by the camp and meet some friends of mine that I expect very shortly. Come back *pronto*, Hardy, for there’s no telling what we may have to do before night.”

Larkin’s predictions of a visit were soon enough fulfilled. It was barely ten o’clock when several horsemen were seen riding toward the banks of the Big Horn. Bud mounted Pinte and advanced to meet them.

First came Beef Bissell, closely attended by Stelton, and after them, four or five of the Bar T punchers. The actual encounter took place half a mile from the camp. Looking back, Larkin could see his sheep feeding in plain sight amid the green of the river bottoms.

“Howdy,” snapped Bissell, by way of greeting. And then, without waiting for a reply: “What does this mean?” He indicated the placid sheep.

“My flock was dying of thirst, and I brought them up last night,” said Bud. “They crossed the river early this morning.”

“Why didn’t you keep them on the other side? I warned you about this.”

“I warned you first, Mr. Bissell. My sheep have got to go North and the range West of the Big Horn is the only practicable way to drive them.”

“I warned you first, Mr. Bissell. My sheep have got to go north, and the range west of the Big Horn is the only practicable way to drive them. They would never come through if I started them through the mountains. You ought to know that.”

“Never mind what I ought to know,” cried Bissell angrily, his red face flaming with fury. “There’s one thing I do know, and that is, that those range-killers don’t go a step farther north on my side of the river.”

“If you can show me clear title to ownership of this part of the range I will risk them in the mountains; otherwise not,” replied Bud, imperturbably. “This range is free, and as much mine as yours. There’s no use going into this question again.”

“That’s the first true thing you’ve said,” snarled the cowman. “Now, you listen here. I don’t go hunting trouble nowhere, but there ain’t a man between the Rio Grande and the Columbia that can say I don’t meet it half-way when I see it headed in my direction. Now, I’ve given you fair warnin’ before. I’ll give it to you again, but this is the last time. Either you have them sheep t’other side of the river by this time to-morrow, or you take the consequences.”

“Is that your final word on the matter?”

“Yes. An’ I’ve got witnesses to prove that you were given a chance to clear out.”

“Then you give me only twenty-four hours?”

“Yes.”

Bud’s face took on a look of discouragement and failure, and he sat for a time as though seeking a loophole of escape from his ultimatum. At last he lifted his head and looked at the cowman with a listless eye.

“All right,” he said, hopelessly; “I’ll be gone by that time.”

And, without further words, he wheeled his horse slowly and rode back to the camp. As he rode he maintained his dejected attitude, but his mind was actively laying plans for the overthrow of Bissell. Under the mask of seeming defeat he sought to find means for an unexpected victory.

Though his whole being rose in revolt against the arbitrary claims of the cattle king, he had become so hardened to this injustice everywhere that he no longer wasted his time or strength in vain railings against it. Instinctively he felt that this was to be a struggle of strength against cunning, for the very thought of physical resistance to thirty fighting cowboys by half a dozen herders was ridiculous.

Many similar skirmishes, both on his home ranch and on the trail, had sharpened Larkin’s wits for emergencies, and it was with really no spirit of humble complaisance that he faced the future. Much, however, depended on the result of Sim’s explorations.

By the time Larkin arrived at the camp the visiting cowmen had disappeared. But this did not mean for a moment that they had all returned to the Bar T ranch

house. Merely to top the first hill would have been to see a horse with hanging bridle, and a cow-puncher near by camped on the trail that led to the north.

As fortune would have it, Sims slunk into camp just at the dinner hour.

“What’d they say to yuh?” he asked abruptly. “I seen the confab from over on that hogback yonder.”

The herder’s respect for his employer sometimes diminished to the vanishing point.

“Got to clear out in twenty-four hours or take what’s comin’.”

“What’d’ye tell ’em?”

“I said we would.”

The lank herder started back in amazement.

“Oh, blazes!” he grieved. “That I should’ve ever took on with a milksop boss. I’m plumb disgraced—” His voice trailed off into silence as he recognized the twinkle in Larkin’s eye. “Oh, I see what yuh mean,” he apologized, with a wide grin. “We’ll clear out all right. Oh, yes! Sure!”

He sat down.

“Depends on you a good deal,” remarked Bud, shoving the beans toward him. “What did you find this morning?”

“Found a new way north,” was the muffled and laconic reply. “Yaas,” he continued presently, after regarding his reflection in the bottom of a tin cup that had been full of coffee the moment before, “an’ it’s over on that hogback.”

A “hogback,” be it understood, is a rugged rocky mound, carved by weather erosion. It is the result of the level rock strata of the plains suddenly bending upward and protruding out of the earth.

“That ridge runs north for about two mile, and at the end seems to turn east into the Big Horn foothills. So far as I can see, no man or critter has ever been there, for there ain’t any water in that crotch, and nothin’ else but heat and rattlers. The point of the thing is this: Spring rains for a couple of million years have wore a regular watercourse down that crotch, and I think we can run the sheep over it, single file.”

“Yes, but won’t they be out on the open Bar T range when we get them over?”

“No, boss. D’ye think I’d do a thing like that? Honest, the way you misjudge a

man! Well, across that hogback, where it turns to the east, there is a string of range hills covered with good feed, and leadin' north, for twenty miles. My idea's this:

"I'll send Pedro with about a hundred rams and wethers directly north from here, as they're expecting we will. All of them will have bells on, and Pedro'll have to prod 'em some to make 'em bawl. While he is drawing all the trouble, we'll hustle the rest of the flock along behind the hogback, over the pass, and north behind the shelter of the hills."

"Fine, Sims; just the thing!" exclaimed Larkin, taking up with the idea enthusiastically. "It will be a thundering brute of a man who won't let the flock north once it has gone twenty miles."

"I allow that perhaps the Bar T punchers will be watchin' that hogback, although I couldn't find tracks there, new or old. If they ever catch the sheep in that gully, you're due to wish you'd stayed East."

"Well, that's our risk, and we've got to take it. Now, I think we'd better roll up for a few hours this afternoon, for we didn't sleep last night, and I don't believe we will to-night. Have Pedro call us at half-past four, and have him round up the sheep about five."

Sheep, because of some perverse twist in their natures, cannot graze standing still. They must walk slowly forward a few steps every few moments. To-day, however, because of the luxuriant grass along the river, the progress of the flock had been comparatively slow. Their day's "walk" would bring them, Larkin figured, to a point less than a mile distant from the hogback, and an ideal spot from which to start the march.

Pedro called the two men at the appointed hour, and they reached the flock just in time for the bedding down. Immediately all hands went through the sheep, removing bells from the animals that usually wore them, and fastening them about the necks of those delegated to act as a blind and cover the advance of the main body.

To a Bar T cow-puncher who knew anything about sheep, the evening scene would have exhibited nothing out of the ordinary. From the reclining hundreds came the soft bleating of ewes calling their young, which is only heard at the daily bedding, the low-toned blethering of the others of the flock, and the tinkle of bells.

Beside the cook wagon the fire glowed in the trench, and everything seemed to

be progressing normally.

Twilight came early among the trees and brush near the river, but it was not until absolute darkness had descended over the vast expanse of prairie that Larkin gave the order to march. Then the main body of the herd, with Sims at its head, the dogs flanking and Bud bringing up the rear on horseback, moved silently out toward the unknown hazards of the hogback pass.

Pedro and his hundred had been ordered to wait fifteen minutes, until the head of the column should have almost reached the shelter of the hogback. This he did, and then headed his small flock straight up the open prairie of the range, amid a chorus of bells and loud-voiced protest. Larkin, half a mile away, heard these sounds and smiled grimly, for the flocks before him made scarcely any sound at all.

In the darkness ahead he could hear the low voices of the men talking to the dogs and encouraging the unresponsive sheep. Overhead were the brilliant, low-swinging stars that gave just enough light to show him the trend of the long, heaving line.

For another half-hour there was silence. The sounds of Pedro and his flock became fainter as the two bodies diverged from each other. Now the dark wall of the hogback rose up on Larkin’s left; the last of the flock was behind shelter. The going was rough and Pinte chose each step carefully, but the sheep made good progress, because there was no grass to tempt them.

After another long space, broken only by the clatter of hard little feet on stone, distant shots rang out, accompanied by faint yells, and Larkin knew that Pedro had met with the first of the Bar T outfit.

The sheepman was resigned to losing the hundred, just as cattlemen do not hesitate to cut out and abandon all weak animals on a long drive. It is a loss credited to the ultimate good of the business, but Bud had not consented to this sacrifice if it meant also the sacrifice of the herder.

Pedro had, however, with many winks and glintings of teeth, made it clear that he did not expect to depart this life yet a while, hinting mysteriously at certain charms, amulets and saints that made it a business to keep him among the living.

Pedro, to Bud’s knowledge, had been in numerous seamy affairs before, and had always reappeared, rather the worse for wear, but perfectly sound in all respects. He did not doubt but what the Spaniard would turn up at the cook wagon for breakfast.

The sounds of distant conflict continued for perhaps five or ten minutes, at the end of which time perfect silence reigned again. Larkin wondered how many of the animals had been killed, or whether they had been merely scattered—the equivalent of death, for a sheep is unable to find water, and if frightened, will back against a face of rock and starve to death.

Another half-hour passed, and now Larkin could see the dim white backs of the herd rising before him as they climbed the steep watercourse. He judged that more than half the flock must be down the precipitous other side, and his heart beat with exultation at the success of Sim's strategy. The plan was to hide the sheep in some little green valley during the day and march them at night until discovered or until the upper range was reached.

Suddenly, just as the last of the flock was mounting the ascent, Larkin drew Pinte up short and listened intently. Then he quickly dismounted and placed his ear to the ground only to leap into the saddle again, swing his horse quickly and ride back along the trail.

He had heard the unmistakable pounding of feet, and an instant's sickening fear flashed before him the possibility that the Bar T cowboys had discovered the ruse after all; either that or they had extorted the secret of it from Pedro.

Larkin loosened the pistol in his holster, one of those big, single-action wooden-handled forty-fives that have settled so many unrecorded disputes, and prepared to cover the rear of the herd until it had safely crossed the hogback.

Pinte's ears twitched forward. The sound of galloping feet was nearer now. Larkin clapped on spurs and trotted to meet it.

Closer and closer it came, a mingled clatter of hoofs. Then suddenly there rang out the frightened bawl of a bewildered calf.

The aspects of the situation took on another hue. If these had been cattle stampeded by the shots and shouting on the plain, they would have made a vastly different thundering along the earth. Cattle never ran this way by themselves; therefore the obvious inference was that they were driven.

Again, the Bar T punchers had no call to drive cattle at night, particularly this night. Who, then, was driving them? In an instant Larkin's mind had leaped these various steps of reasoning and recalled old Beef Bissell's vehement arraignment of rustlers in the State. The answer was plain. The calves were being driven off the range into concealment by cattle-thieves.

Larkin knew that all the sheep had not yet passed the top of the hogback. It was

absolutely necessary that their passage be unknown and unobserved. There was but one thing to do.

Spurring his horse, he charged toward the oncoming animals, whose dark forms he could now discern a hundred yards away. As he rode, he shouted and drew his revolver, firing into their faces. When at last it seemed that he must come into violent collision with them, they turned, snorting, to the east and made off in the direction of the river.

His purpose accomplished, Larkin wheeled Pinte sharply and dug in his spurs, but at that instant two dark forms loomed close, one on each side, and seized the bridle.

“Hands up!” said a gruff voice. “You’re covered.”

CHAPTER VI

UGLY COMPANY

Larkin’s revolver was empty, and his hands mechanically went up.

The captor on his right relieved him of the useless weapon, and, in a trice, produced a rope, with which he bound the sheepman’s arms tightly behind him. With the other end of the rope turned about the pommel of his saddle, he dropped back into the darkness, while his companion rode to a position ahead of Larkin.

At a growled word from behind, the little cavalcade advanced, Larkin mystified, uncertain and fuming with impotent rage. Never in his life had he been so needed as he was at that time by Sims and the herdsmen; never in his life had he so ardently desired liberty and freedom of action.

Why these men had captured him he did not know; what they intended doing with him he had no idea—although his knowledge of plainsmen’s character supplied him with two or three solutions hardly calculated to exhilarate the victim. Where they were taking him was almost as much of a puzzle, for Bud, after the first few turns of his captors, completely lost his sense of direction, except for the general compass of the stars.

No longer the friendly loom of the hogback was on his left. He felt the free wind of the plains on his face, and calculated that they must have returned to the open range.

Who his captors were was another puzzle. If these men had been driving the cattle why did they not continue to drive them instead of turning aside to make prisoner a harmless sheepman? If they were not driving the cattle—

A horrible suspicion crossed Bud’s mind. If these were punchers from the Bar T outfit he was indeed in a bad way, for no one knew better than Larkin (by hearsay) the wild stories told of Beef Bissell’s methods in a cattle war.

The young man told himself calmly that if he got away with a few head of sheep

and an entire body he would consider himself fortunate in the extreme.

For seemingly endless ages the leader trotted on ahead—so far, in fact, did he ride that Larkin's arms and elbow joints were racked with pain from being held so long in an unnatural position. At the end of what was probably three hours, a small fiery glow made itself evident at some distance across the plain, and the sheepman knew by this camp-fire that the goal of his ride was in sight.

A solitary man sat by the fire, rolling and smoking a continuous stream of cigarettes. Dimly seen in the near-by shadows were the long figures of other men rolled in their blankets. Bud knew that not far off the hobbled horses grazed, or had lain down to rest.

"Kick up the boys, Bill," said the man who held the rope. "Got somethin' queer to look into this time."

"Aw, let 'em sleep, chief," drawled Bill without moving. "Some of 'em ain't closed their eyes in nigh on three days. What's the matter?"

"Got a young captain here who 'lows he's some brave man, I reckon. Leastways he come drivin' at us with fire a-poppin' out of his gun, an' Shorty and me thinks we better investigate. So we nabs him when his gun's empty and brings him in. A man that'll shoot around reckless the way this feller did is plumb dangerous to have runnin' loose.

"But I guess you're right about the boys, Bill. I'll let 'em sleep an' we'll talk to this maverick in the mornin'. Keep him under your eye."

Things were clearing up for Larkin. These men evidently thought that he was some ambitious puncher on the lookout for rustlers. Up to this time he had kept silent, borrowing no trouble and trusting to his ability to identify himself. But now at the prospect of idling here all night and part of the day he protested.

"Turn my arms loose, will you?" he demanded. "They're about broke off."

Joe, the chief, after carefully searching him for additional weapons, complied with his request, in so far that he bound his wrists together in front.

"Now, boys," said Bud, crisply, "I wish you'd tell me what this all means. If you want to question me, do it now and let me go, for I've got mighty important business up the line a way."

"I allow yuh have," remarked Joe, dryly. "Yuh also got some mighty important business right here, if yuh only knowed it."

“What business.”

“Fannin’ yore gun at us that-a-way. Yore plumb careless, young feller. But look here, I’m not a-goin’ to stay up all night talkin’ to yuh. You’ll have to talk to all the boys in the mornin’.”

“But I can’t wait till morning, I tell you,” cried Bud, exasperated. “Every minute I sit here I may be losing thousands of dollars. For Heaven’s sake let me go to-night, and I’ll come back any other time you say. I give you my word for it.”

“Can’t wait till to-morrer! Stranger, you may wait till the crack o’ doom before you ever get back to that business o’ yourn.”

“What do you mean by that?” asked Larkin, made strangely ill at ease by some veiled meaning in the other’s tone.

“Got to leave it to the boys,” was Joe’s evasive reply. “Better lay down and git some sleep; likely to be busy all day to-morrer.”

And Larkin, finding that all argument was as futile as trying to crack Gibraltar with a cold chisel, relapsed into silence, and prepared to get what rest he could until daylight.

Morning disclosed the fact that the group of men numbered about ten, each with a horse near by, and all fully supplied with arms. In fact, there was not a man among them who could not have “rolled a gun” with both hands if necessary, and at the same time carried a knife between his teeth. This matter of complete armament, together with Joe’s ambiguous speeches of the night before, wholly convinced Larkin that he had fallen in with a band of rustlers.

Breakfast was prepared for himself by each man, Joe attending to the wants of the prisoner, but no attempt was made to rope or saddle the horses. They were evidently waiting for something. What this was became evident shortly when another group of five men appeared around a distant rise and loped to the rendezvous. Larkin reasoned that these must be the men who continued the cattle drive after Joe and Pike had captured him.

The sheepman could not but admire the natural advantages of the place chosen by his captors for the meeting. Rolling hills surrounded the little pocket on all sides, and here and there a red scoria butte thrust its ugly height out of the plain. The chances of discovery were infinitesimal.

The evolution of the rustler was logical but rapid, and started with the general law that any ranch-owner was at liberty to brand with his mark any maverick

found on his range. As it was the cowboy who discovered these strays, he was usually provided with a branding-iron and put the seal of his employer on the animal wherever found.

From this it was but a step for unscrupulous punchers, or those with a shrewd eye for business, to drive off unbranded cattle and ship them independently to market, or to mark them with a private brand of their own. All this was before the introduction of brand inspectors at the stockyards of Omaha, Kansas City, or Chicago.

Therefore, among the men at this rendezvous Larkin noted types of cowmen equal to any on the range for horsemanship and ability to handle cattle. With his naturally quick eye, the sheepman observed them closely, but failed to recognize any of them.

His case came up quickly.

By various papers in his possession he proved his identity.

“What were you doing out on the range last night?” asked Joe.

Bud hesitated for a minute and then, deciding that his safest and quickest course would be to make a clean breast of things, replied:

“I was driving two thousand head of sheep north on the Bar T.”

“Then you’re not a cattleman?”

“No.” Larkin produced his bills of sale for the sheep and these were handed gravely about from one to another, although it was certain that some of the men could not read them.

“How long are you going to stay in this country?”

“Just as long as it takes to get my sheep north. I come from Montana.”

Joe beckoned a number of the men aside out of Larkin’s hearing.

“We’re plumb lucky,” he announced. “If I know my book, old Bissell will forget all about a few missin’ calves when he knows this feller has sent sheep up his range. Now we’ve got to run off about a hundred more head to that railroad camp north of here, and I think we can use this Larkin.”

A dark, sullen-looking puncher shook his head slowly.

“It’s takin’ chances,” he growled. “String him up, I say. He knows us all now, and I’d sooner he’d look through a rope than me.”

“You shore are ornery, Pete,” said a third, “an’ plumb set on stretchin’ yore neck. Cain’t yuh see that if yuh hang this feller we’ll have both the sheep and cattlemen ag’in us?”

“Shore, that’s sense,” broke in another. “Less hear Joe’s scheme.”

“’Tain’t so blame much, boys,” countered the chief modestly. “We’ll make this Larkin swear never to give word agin us if we don’t kill him. Then we’ll run him off into the hills for four or five days with a guard, finish our own drive, and clear out, lettin’ him go. What d’ye think of that?”

“It’s a reg’lar hum-dinger, Joe,” said one man, and the others concurred in the laudatory opinion.

But at the first sentence to Larkin, that young man upset their well-laid plans.

“Larkin,” said Joe, “we allow as how we’d like to make a bargain with yuh?”

“If you are going to bargain with me to break the law, you had better not say anything about it,” was the reply.

“I was jest about startin’ one of them mutual protective, benefit and literary sassieties,” suggested Joe tactfully as a feeler, while his comrades grinned.

“Don’t want to hear about it,” retorted Bud, divining the intention. “You can do anything you like with me, but don’t tell me your bargains. I’ve got troubles enough with my sheep without signing on any more. Now, look here, men, I don’t want to interfere with you, and it only wastes your time to bother with me. Suppose you let me go about my business and you go about yours.”

“Swear on oath never to recognize or bear witness against us?”

“No. What kind of a crook do you think I am? If I were put under oath by a sheriff, I would have to accuse you, and I’d do it.”

Joe Parker’s face lost its expression of genial amiability and he looked about on a circle of dark countenances.

“I’m plumb sorry you act this-a-way,” he said aggrievedly. “Boys, where’s the nearest tree?”

“Ten miles.”

“After dinner everybody saddle up,” came the order.

CHAPTER VII

PRAIRIE BELL

When Juliet Bissell rode back to the Bar T ranch after her parting with Larkin at the fork of Grass Creek, she was a decidedly more thoughtful and sober young woman than she had been at the same hour the day previous.

Although blessed with an adoring father and a rather eccentric mother, she had, for the last year, begun to feel the stirrings of a tiny discontent.

Her life was a good example of the familiar mistake made by many a wealthy cattle-owner. Her parents, realizing their crudity and lack of education, had seen to it that she should be given all the advantages denied them, and had sent her East to Chicago for eight consecutive years.

During this time, while hating the noise and confinement of the city, she had absorbed much of its glamour, and enjoyed its alluring pleasures with a keen appreciation. Music had been her chief study, and her very decided talent had opened a busy career for her had she chosen to follow it.

But Julie was true to her best instincts, and refused to consider such a thing. Her father and mother had done all in their power for her, she reasoned, and therefore it was but fair that she should return to them and make the closing years of their lives happy.

Though nothing had ever been said, the girl knew that when she had left the ranch house, even for a week’s visit with a girl friend two hundred miles away, the sun might as well have fallen from the heavens, considering the gloom that descended upon the Bar T.

It was this knowledge of their need for her that had brought her back to fulfill what she considered her greatest happiness and duty in life.

Now, a monkey cannot wear clothes, smoke cigarettes, perform before applauding audiences and return to the jungle without a certain feeling of hateful unfitness among his gibbering brethren.

No more could this wild, lovely creature of the plains become one of the most sought-after girls of Chicago's North Shore set, and return to the painful prose of the Bar T ranch without paying the penalty.

With the glory of health and outdoor life, she had failed to realize this, but since the sudden appearance of Bud Larkin she had done little else.

He had brought back to her a sudden powerful nostalgia for the life she had once known. And had old Beef Bissell been aware of this nostalgia, he would have realized for the first time that in his desire to give his daughter everything he had created a situation that was already unfortunate and might, with very little prompting, be unhappy.

But this knowledge was not vouchsafed to him, and Julie certainly would never make it plain.

The evening after Bud's departure, that same evening, in fact, when he was fighting toward water with his flocks, the cattleman and his daughter sat outside on the little veranda that ran across the front of the ranch house.

"That feller Larkin," remarked Bissell, terminating a long pause. "Kind of a dude or something back East, wasn't he?"

"That's what the punchers would call him, father," returned the girl gravely. "But he was never anything but a gentleman in his treatment of me."

"I don't know what you mean exactly by that word 'gentleman,' Julie, but I allow that no real man ever went into raisin' sheep."

"Perhaps not, dear," she said, taking his rough, ungainly hand in both of hers, "but I think there is bound to be money in it. Mr. Larkin himself says that in the end the cattle will have to give way before the sheep."

"An' he thought he was tellin' you something new when he said it, too, didn't he? Well, I've knowed that fact for the last five years. That's the main reason I won't let his animals through my range. Once they get a foothold, there's no stoppin' 'em. Judas! I'm tired of fightin' for things!"

"Poor father," and the girl's voice was full of tenderness. "You're not discouraged, are you, dear?"

"No, Prairie Bell, but I reckon I'm gettin' old, an' I can't get up the fight I used to. I thought I had my hands full with the rustlers, but now with the sheep comin'—well, between you and me, little girl, I wish I had somebody to stand up and take the licks."

“There’s Mike; he certainly can give and take a few.”

“Yes, of course I’ve got Mike, but, when you’re all done, he’s only a foreman, an’ his interest don’t go much beyond his seventy-five a month an’ grub. Yet—by George!” He sat suddenly erect and slapped his thigh with his disengaged hand.

“What is it?”

“Oh, nothin’.” They talked on in the affectionate, intimate way that had always characterized their relations since Julie had been a girl just big enough to listen to involved harangues about cattle without actually going to sleep. In the course of an hour Bissell suddenly asked:

“Did you ever think of marryin’, Prairie Bell?”

“If thinking ever helped any, I would have been a Mormon by this time.”

“Well, you are growed up, ain’t you?” and Bissell spoke in the wondering tone of a man who has just realized a self-evident fact “Fancy my little girl old enough to marry! How old are you, anyhow? ’Bout eighteen?”

“Twenty-five, you dear, old goose. Eighteen! The idea.”

“Well, twenty-five, then. Of course, Julie, when I die I will leave this place to you, and that’s what made me think about your marryin’. I want a good, sharp man to fight fer my cows an’ my range, a man that knows it and could make a success of it, an’ yet wouldn’t care because it was in your name.”

“Would you mind if I loved him a little bit, too?” asked the girl, with elaborately playful sarcasm.

“Bless you, no. Love him all you want to, but I ’low you couldn’t love a man very long who didn’t have all them qualifications I mentioned. I figger love out somethin’ like this. First there’s a rockbed of ability, then a top soil of decency, an’ out o’ these two, admiration kind o’ grows like corn. Of course you always grind up the corn and soak it with sentiment; then you’ve got mush. An’ the trouble with most people is they only think of the mush an’ forget the rock an’ the top soil.”

“Why, you old philosopher!” cried the girl, laughing and squeezing his big shoulders. “You’re awfully clever, really.” Which remark brought a confused but pleased blush to Bissell’s hard face that had become wonderfully soft and tender during this hour with his daughter.

“Now, see here,” went on the girl severely, “I think there’s something back of all this talk about marriage. What is it?”

Bissell looked at her, startled, not having expected to encounter feminine intuition.

“Nothin’, only I wish you could marry somebody that’d look out fer you the way I mentioned. Then I could die happy, though I don’t expect to be on that list fer a long while.”

“Anybody in mind?” asked Julie banteringly.

“Well, not exactly,” hesitated her father, with another sharp glance. “But I allow I could dig up one if I tried very hard.”

“Go ahead and try.”

“Well, now there’s Billy Speaker over on the Circle Arrow, as gentle a man for a blond as I ever see.”

“I’ve only met him twice in my life,” remarked the girl. “Try again.”

“There’s Red Tarken, foreman on the M Square. He’d be good to yuh, I know, and he’s a hum-dinger about cows.”

“I am glad he has one qualification aside from his red hair,” put in Julie seriously. “However, I am afraid that as a husband Red would be about as steady as a bronco saddled for the first time after the winter feeding. He’d better have free range as long as he lives. Once more, father.”

“Well, see here, Julie, it seems to me you could do a lot worse than take our own Mike Stelton. I’ve never thought of it much before, but to-night it sort of occurred to me an’—”

Juliet Bissell broke into an uncontrollable fit of laughter, at which her father fixed her with a regard as wondering as it was hurt. His cherished inspiration so tactfully approached had burst like a soap-bubble under the gale of Juliet’s merriment.

“Bud was right, after all,” said the girl, after her nervous outbreak. “He told me Mike had some silly hope or other, and I believe Stelton has given you absent treatment until you have made this suggestion. Father, he’s just as preposterous as the others.”

“I don’t agree with you,” contended Bissell stubbornly. “Mike is faithful, and has been for years. He knows the ins and outs of the business, and is willing to take

the hard knocks that I'm getting tired of. Then there's another thing. I could be half-blind an' still see what Mike has been wanting these last five years."

Juliet suddenly rose to her feet, all the laughter gone from her eyes and her heart. With a feeling of frightened helplessness she realized that her father was serious.

"Are you taking Mike's part against me?" she asked calmly.

"Well, I still don't see why you couldn't marry him."

"You've forgotten the mush, father, but that isn't all. There's something different about Mike lately, something I have never noticed before. His eye seems shifty; he avoids all the family. If I didn't know him so well, I should think he was a criminal. Leaving out the fact that I don't love him, and that the very thought of his ever touching me makes me shudder, this distrust of him would be enough to block any such arrangements. Why"—and her lip curled scornfully—"I would marry Bud Larkin a hundred times rather than Mike Stelton once."

"What!"

Bissell rose to his feet with the quiet, amazed exclamation. He could hardly credit his ears.

"Marry that dirty sheepman?" he continued in a tense, even voice. "I'd like to know what put that crazy notion in yore head. Don't tell me you are in love with that dude."

"No, I am not," answered the girl just as evenly, "but I may as well tell you frankly, that he is the only man within a radius of three hundred miles who has certain things I must have in a husband. I'm sorry if I displease you, father!" she cried, going to him affectionately, "but I could never love any one not of our class."

That diplomatic "our" did not deceive Bissell. For the first time he saw that the greatest treasure of his whole life had grown beyond him; that there were needs and ideals in her existence of which he had but the faintest inkling, and that in her way she was as much of a "dude" as the man she had mentioned.

He was encountering the seemingly cruel fate of parents who glorify their children by their own immolation, and who watch those same children pass up and out of their humble range of vision and understanding nevermore to return. Henceforth he could never see his daughter without feeling his own lack of polish.

Such a moment of realization is bitter on both sides, but especially for the one

who has given all and can receive less in return than he had before the giving. The iron of this bitterness entered into Beef Bissell's soul as he stood there, silent, on the low, rickety veranda under the starlight of the plains.

With the queer vagary of a mind at great tension, his senses became particularly acute for a single moment. He saw the silver-pierced vault of the sky, smelled the fragrance of the plains borne on the gentle wind, and heard the rustle of the dappled cottonwoods and the howling of the distant coyotes.

Then he came back to the reality of the moment, and exhibited the simple greatness that had always been his in dealings with his daughter. He slipped his heavy arm across her shoulders and drew her to him.

"Never mind, Prairie Bell," he said gently. "You know best in everything. Do as your heart dictates." He sighed and added: "I wish I was your mother to-night."

CHAPTER VIII

FOR REVENGE

Breakfast next morning at the Bar T ranch was disturbed by the arrival of a cowboy on a lathering, wicked-eyed pony who announced to Stelton that Bud Larkin and his sheep had crossed over into the range. What then occurred is already known, and after Bissell had returned from his final parley with Larkin, he retired sullenly into himself to rage silently.

In his perturbed state of mind, the sheepman's double-edged remark about clearing out had had but one meaning, and he took it for granted that Larkin had been awed or frightened into the better part of valor. This was a partial relief, but he foresaw that although this danger to his cattle was averted, it was merely the first of many such struggles that he might expect.

Human desires, particularly those of great urgency, are of such domination that they take little thought for anything but themselves, except in persons of particularly adroit mind. It was Stelton's misfortune, therefore, to embark on an ill-timed conversation with his chief.

The foreman for ten years had secretly adored Juliet Bissell with all the intensity of a soul made single of purpose by the vast, brooding immensity of his surroundings. So long as he might be near her, serving her in many little ways, he had been, in a manner, content with the situation.

But the sudden appearance of Larkin and the enthusiastic renewal of a former intimacy had spurred Stelton to seek some sort of a definite understanding. Bissell's retirement to the veranda after the noonday meal was shortly followed by Stelton's appearance there, timorous and abashed.

The interview had been short and not very satisfactory. The cowman, remembering with considerable pain the conversation with his daughter, told his employé frankly that he had better give up any such ideas as evidently possessed him. Stelton, who had with some right formerly felt he might count on the favorable attitude of his chief, was astounded, and took the venom of the curt

refusal to heart.

Retiring without betraying his emotion, he had resolved to speak to the girl herself, and that same afternoon asked permission to accompany her on her daily ride across the prairies, a thing not unusual with him.

Juliet, although she wished to be alone, consented, and at four o'clock they set out, unobserved by Bissell.

It was not until they had turned their horses homeward that Stelton spoke, almost tongue-tied by the emotions that rent him, alternate waves of fear and hope.

"Miss Julie," he began, "I allow I've known you a long while."

"Yes, Mike, you have."

"An' I allow that I would be plumb miserable if you ever went away from here again."

"Thank you, Mike; I should miss you, too," replied the girl civilly, growing uneasy at the unusual trend of the man's speech, halting and indefinite though it was.

"Miss Julie, I ain't no hand at fine talk, but I want to ask yuh if you will marry me? I've thought about it a lot, an' though I ain't noways good enough fer yuh, I'd try to make yuh happy."

Juliet, taken aback by the suddenness of this declaration, particularly after her talk with her father, remained silent.

"Take yore time, Miss Julie," pleaded Stelton, riding closer to her. "I ain't in no hurry."

"I can't tell you how much I appreciate what you've said, Mike," she replied slowly. "I've always liked you and I always will, but I don't love you, and I would sooner tell you now than keep you in suspense. I can't marry you."

Stelton bit his lip and his dark face grew even blacker with rage at the futility of his position. With anyone other than Juliet Bissell, perhaps, he realized that insistent pressure of his suit might have favorable results. But this cool, calm girl offered no opportunity for argument or hope.

"Mebbe if yuh waited a bit, yuh might think different about it," he ventured nevertheless. She shook her head.

"No, Mike, I wouldn't, I am sure. If you care for me you will never mention this again. And for my part, I shall always remember what you have said to me to-

day. It is a sweet thing for a girl to know that a man loves her."

Such gracious refusals are effective with most men, both because they succeed in closing a tender subject and at the same time leave an unwounded pride. But Stelton was not the ordinary type of lover.

Repressed emotions in somber minds feed and grow fat upon their own substance, and it was inconceivable that Stelton's genuine though distorted love, an abnormal product of ten long years, should be dismissed thus with a few words.

"Why won't you marry me?" he demanded, looking angrily into her level, brown eyes.

"I have told you I did not love you. That is the reason and the best reason in the world. Now I ask you to drop the subject."

"Love somebody else, I suppose," he sneered, baring his teeth in a fatal attempt at an ugly smile.

"If I do, it is none of your business," she replied, her eyes beginning to blaze.

"That dude sheepman, I allow. He's a gilt-edged vanderpoop, he is! But I'd hate to be in his boots, if you want to know it."

"Look here, Mike Stelton," and Juliet drew her horse abruptly to a stop, "either you say nothing more on this subject or I shall tell my father what you have done this afternoon when we reach home."

Instantly the man saw he had gone too far, and, with a quickness born of hatred, immediately changed his front.

"I was only thinkin' of protectin' you," he muttered, "and I'm sorry I was ornery about things. That feller Larkin is a bad lot, that's all. He wouldn't be out here if he wasn't."

Perhaps it was that Juliet had given a greater place to Larkin in her thoughts than she realized; perhaps his eloquent defense of wool-growing had not been sufficient explanation for his unheralded appearance on the range. Whatever the reason, the girl rose to the bait like a trout when the ice has left the rivers.

"What do you mean by that?" she demanded.

"You remember that feller Caldwell that rode in late to supper the night Larkin come?"

"Yes."

“Well, I heard him blackmail Larkin for five hundred dollars back by the corral fence. An’ Larkin knew what he had to do as soon as Caldwell showed up. Didn’t yuh see him turn yaller at the table?”

As a matter of fact Larkin’s perturbation at that time had been puzzling and inexplicable to Juliet. Also the disappearance of the two men immediately after supper had mystified her. But without admitting this to Stelton she asked:

“What was it all about?”

“I don’t know exactly, Miss Julie, but it worked in somethin’ he done back in Chicago a year or so ago. From what I heard ’em say, Larkin just dodged the calaboose. Now there ain’t no disgrace in that—that’s really credit—but that don’t clear him of the crime noways. Why, I even heard ’em talk about two thousand dollars that Larkin give this Caldwell a couple of years back.”

“How did you learn all this?” she asked.

“I was a goin’ back to the corral for a rope I left hangin’ on a post there, an’ I heard ’em talkin’.”

“And you listened, I suppose,” remarked Julie contemptuously.

“Mebbe I did,” he retorted, stung by her tone. “But you can be thankful for it. I’d be plenty mad if you throw’d yourself away on a man like-a-that. A hoss that’ll kill one puncher’ll kill another. Same with a man.”

“What are you saying, Mike?” cried the girl, frightened out of her attitude of aloof reserve. “Kill a man! He’s never killed a man, has he?”

“He didn’t say so in so many words, no ma’am, but that talk o’ their’n was mighty suspicious.”

Unwittingly Stelton had struck his hardest blow. To him, as to other rough and ready men in the West, life was a turbulent existence conducted with as few hasty funerals as was absolutely necessary. But in the girl who had absorbed the finer feelings of a civilized community, the horror of murder was deep-rooted.

She knew that to a man in Larkin’s former position the slightest divergence from the well-defined tenets of right and wrong was inexcusable. Crime, she knew, was a result of poverty, necessity, self-defense or lack of control, and she also knew that Bud Larkin had never been called upon to fall back on any of these. How much of truth, therefore, was there in Stelton’s innuendoes?

“Would you swear on the Bible that you overheard what you have told me?” she

asked suddenly.

“Yes, ma’am, I shore would,” Stelton answered with solemn conviction.

There was no question now in her mind but that Larkin was paying the piper for some unsavory fling of which she had heard nothing. She did not for a moment believe that the affair could be as serious as Stelton wished her to imagine; but she was sorely troubled, nevertheless, for she had always cared for Larkin in a happy, wholehearted way.

Many times since her final coming West she had remembered with a secret tenderness and pride that this wealthy and popular young man had been willing to trust his life to her. It was one of the sweetest recollections of those other far-off days.

Now, because the thought of Stelton’s revelations was unbearable to her she resolutely put it from her until a time when she could mourn alone over this shattered illusion.

“Thank you, Mike, for telling me this,” she said gently. “Please never say anything further about it.”

And Stelton, elated that his plan of revenge had worked so well, smiled with satisfaction and relapsed into silence during the remainder of the ride home.

All of these events are set down here with some pretense at detail to indicate the important trend of affairs after Larkin had said a more-or-less indifferent good-by to Juliet Bissell at the fork of Grass Creek. While he was wrestling with material problems, these others that destiny had suddenly joined to him were undergoing mental disturbances in which he was the principal though unconscious factor. And this unconscious prominence was to be the main reason for what next occurred.

It was perhaps noon of the day following Larkin’s capture by the rustlers, when from a point directly east of the ranch house a cowboy appeared, riding at a hard gallop. Contrary to most fictions, cowboys rarely ever urge their ponies beyond a trot, the only occasions being the round-up, the stampede, the drive, or when something serious has occurred.

Mike Stelton saw the puncher from a distance and walked to the corral to meet him. Jerking his pony back on his haunches, the rider leaped from his back before the animal had fairly come to a stop.

“Mike, we’ve been tricked!” he cried. “That whole two thousand head of sheep

are tracking north as fast as they can go far over east on the range, beyond the hills."

"What!" cried the foreman, hardly able to credit his ears. "The boys down on watch at the Big Horn swore they had scattered the flock last night when Larkin started to run them north on the range."

"Well, they swore wrong, then, for I've just come from where I seen 'em. I was over back of them hogbacks and buttes lookin' for strays and mavericks when along come them muttons in a cloud of dust that would choke a cow. I allow that darned sheepman has made us look like a lot of tenderfeet, Mike."

Stelton at this intelligence fairly gagged on his own fury. Larkin had scored on him again. The two were joined at this moment by Bissell who had noted the excitement at the corral. When apprised of what had happened, the cowman's face went as dark with anger as that of his foreman.

Beef Bissell was not accustomed to the sensation of being outwitted in anything, and the knowledge that the sheep were nearly half-way up the range put him almost beside himself.

For a few moments the trio looked at one another speechless. Then Bissell voiced the determination of them all.

"By the devil's mare!" he swore. "I won't be beaten by any sheepman that ever walked. Stelton, how many men will be in to-night?"

"Fifteen."

"Get 'em and bring 'em to me as soon as they come."

While the foreman went off about this business Bissell learned from Chuck, the cowboy, just where he had seen the sheep last, how fast they were traveling, and how far he calculated they would go before bedding down for the night.

"I reckon the outfit ought to camp somewhere about Little Creek," said Chuck. "That's runnin' water."

"And how far beyond that is Little River?"

"Two miles more or less."

"Fine. Wait around till the rest of the boys come in, Chuck. Oh, by the way, how near are the sheep to our eastern herd of cows?"

"Five miles more will bring 'em to the range the cows are on now."

An hour before supper the rest of the punchers began to come in from riding the range and rounding up strays. Before they were permitted a mouthful, however, Bissell went out to the bunk house with Stelton.

“Boys,” he said, “which of you was down at the Big Horn last night an’ turned them sheep back?”

A man spoke up and then two more who had been left on guard in the vicinity.

“How many did you scatter?”

“Dunno, boss,” replied the first judicially. “From the noise they made I allow there was at least a thousand.”

“Well, I bet you a month’s wage there wasn’t more’n a hundred,” said Bissell, glaring at the puncher.

“Won’t take yer, boss,” returned the other calmly. “Why?”

“Because practically the whole flock is beddin’ down at Little Creek now. Chuck seen ’em. Now I want all you fellers to get supper an’ then rope an’ saddle a fresh hoss. There is shore goin’ to be some doin’s to-night.”

CHAPTER IX

THE MAN IN THE MASK

As Bud Larkin jogged along on Pinte, apparently one of the group of men with whom he was riding, he wondered mechanically why his captors insisted on traveling ten miles to a tree sufficiently stout to bear his weight.

“I should think they’d stand me up and do the business with a bullet,” he thought.

But a moment’s reflection furnished the answer to this query. These men were cattle-rustlers and horse-thieves, than which no more hazardous existence ever was since the gentle days of West Indian piracy, and to them merely a single pistol shot might mean betrayal of their whereabouts, capture and death.

The character of the country through which they rode gave sufficient evidence of their care in all details, for it was a rough, wild, uninhabitable section that boasted, on its craggy heights and rough coulees, barely enough vegetation to support a wild mustang.

It was three o’clock of the afternoon and behind them the party could still see the place where they had camped. Joe Parker, fearful of stirring about much until the thoughts of range-riders were turning homeward like their ponies’ steps, had delayed the departure beyond the hour first intended.

The rustlers really did not want to dispose of Larkin. Being plainsmen, their acute sense of justice told them that this man was absolutely guiltless of any crime deserving of death. Untoward circumstances had forced him into their hands, and, like the boy with the fly-paper, they were unable to get rid of him peaceably. Their abuse of his insane folly was colorful and vivid.

But Larkin had reasons for his stubborn attitude. With the arrogance of youth and the inexperience of real danger, he had resolved that as soon as his sheep should be safely up the range he would devote some time, money, and effort to the running down of these rustlers. Some of their faces were unforgetably

stamped on his memory now, and he had no doubt that he could be of great service to Wyoming Territory, which was just at this time petitioning for the dignity of Statehood.

He had known the losses and insolence of rustlers on his own sheep ranch in Montana, and, like every sympathizer with justice and order, had sworn to himself many times that all of them should be run to earth.

The longer Bud remained with the rustlers the more nervous some of them became. Since morning a number had been wearing masks made of their neckerchiefs, and one man had not shown his face since the moment he rode into camp after the all-night drive. This man's peculiar actions piqued Bud's curiosity, and he tried a number of times to draw him into conversation. But the rustler refused to speak and moved away whenever he found himself in the prisoner's vicinity.

About five o'clock the cavalcade arrived at a point where, ahead of them, through the barren buttes and hogbacks, they could see the long, level expanse of the range; and, about half-way to the horizon, a line of trees that indicated the snake-like progress of a river. Here Joe called a halt and gave orders that the party should lie concealed until after dark, as the remainder of their business could then be conducted with less danger to themselves.

Accordingly the horsemen turned away from the trail they had been following and after fifteen minutes of tortuous riding, made camp on the other side of a particularly uninviting wall of rock.

After eating supper prepared around the little fires Larkin saw the rustlers all gather into a circle and start drawing lots. He shivered a little at the thought that this was his execution party being made up.

Four men had been designated as the number to see Larkin off on his long journey, and when at last the drawing was finished it was found that Joe Parker, the masked rider, and two others had been selected.

As darkness drew on Parker began to lose his patience with Bud.

"Look-a-here, Larkin," he drawled, "I don't love no sheepmen, noways, an' I never did, but you ain't no ordinary 'walker' an' I ain't ashamed to talk with y'u. Now the boys want to meet y'u half-way on this business, an' you won't do it. All you got to say is that you won't appear agin any of us in any court, an' won't ever say anythin' agin any of us. Now what in blazes you're actin' like a mule balkin' at a shadder for, I dunno. Be sensible."

But to all such entreaties Larkin remained unmoved.

“If you hang me,” he said, “you’ll only hang yourselves, for all the sheepmen in Wyoming as well as the men from my own ranch will come down here, join with the cattlemen, and clean you fellows out. And if my Basque herders start in on you don’t imagine you will have the luxury of hanging. They’ll take their skinning knives and work from the neck down. No, I’d advise you to let me go and take your chances rather than kill me and wait.”

Such talk as this made a great impression on some of the rustlers and again opened up the subject of letting Larkin off. But the majority held firm and the sentence stood.

It was perhaps eight o’clock when the party of four approached Larkin and roused him up. This time his hands were bound behind his back and he noticed that the masked rustler was fastening them tightly but with a rotten rawhide. This peculiar circumstance caused a wild thrill to flash all through Larkin’s being. Perhaps, after all, here was the weak link in the rustler’s chain. The surmise became a certainty when the man, unobserved by his companions, sawed Bud’s arms back and forth, showing him the quickest and easiest way to work them loose.

Then came the greatest surprise of all. The man, who had spoken no word the whole time, thrust a heavy .45 revolver into his trouser-pocket. To permit this being done the eight-inch barrel had been sawed off five inches short, ruining the gun for ordinary use, but making it particularly handy and light for close work.

This action convinced Larkin that the man in the mask was not only willing that he should escape, but was actually determined that the event should occur. He also knew that he could count on the support of this ally in the final moment when the four men must fight it out two and two.

Whether this sudden change of aspect was the result of a determination by a minority of the rustlers not to let the execution take place, or whether by some miraculous means one of his own friends had succeeded in joining the organization, he could not determine, although he tried to sound the man in the mask when the others were busy with their horses. His only reply was a low hiss commanding silence.

A quarter past the hour found them on their way, the ponies picking their path gingerly over the bad ground until they reached the range. Here the three rustlers drew up short, for in the distance could be seen the twinkling of a camp-fire.

“One of the Bar T punchers,” said Joe; “but I reckon he won’t hear us.”

For half a mile further they walked their horses, and then urged them to a trot in the direction of the river whose tree-lined banks they had seen late in the afternoon. They paused only once in this place, and then to cross a small stream that lay in their path.

As he rode Larkin worked his arms cautiously back and forth until he felt the rotten rawhide give, and knew that a single violent motion would free him entirely. But he refrained from making that motion, feeling certain that the man in the mask would give the signal when the time was ripe.

At last they discerned the loom of the trees against the low northern sky and pulled their horses to a walk, until they arrived directly underneath a big cottonwood, which stood in sinister readiness.

“Here’s your last chance,” said Parker in a low voice. “If you swear as we have told you, you can go free now. We take a man’s word out here.”

“Never,” replied Larkin firmly. “Don’t waste time talking.”

“Shore not,” rejoined the other. “We always grant a man’s last request. Come on, boys, let’s finish this thing quick.”

He had hardly spoken when from the distance came the sound of rapid revolver firing, mingled with the wild shouts of men. For a few moments the drama beneath the cottonwood came to an abrupt halt.

“By gum!” cried Joe, “the Bar T punchers have found the boys and there’s the devil to pay back there. Lively, now.”

One of the others took his lariat from the throng at the side of his saddle and heaved the coil over an outstretched limb of the cottonwood. He had hardly done so when another sound reached them, a low, menacing rumble that grew momentarily louder until it reached a dull roar.

“A stampede!” bawled one of the men; “and it’s heading this way.”

Joe and the man in the mask still on their horses led Pinte directly beneath the limb of the cottonwood, and the former reached down to take the noose of the rope from the one who had arranged it. Suddenly Larkin felt a hand fumbling with the rawhide about his arms, and a low voice in his ear whispered: “Now.”

With the same motion Bud wrenched his hands free and dug his spurs into the sides of his horse. Pinte, startled, leaped forward just as Larkin drew the revolver

from his pocket.

Joe, though caught by surprise, did not let go of the bridle that was wound about his right hand, but a blinding shot from the gun of the man in the mask did the work. With a groan Parker pitched forward out of his saddle and fell to the ground just as Larkin fired pointblank at the third man who appeared before him, still on foot.

The fellow went down, but not until a yellow stab of light flashed up from where he had been and Bud felt the wind of a bullet as it sped past his cheek. The fourth man was nowhere to be seen.

The stranger in the mask and the man he had rescued were now alone, but their thoughts were fully occupied. The sound of the distant stampede had become a veritable rumbling roar that told of its nearing proximity. Aside from this drumming of many feet, there was no sound, for the animals of the range when in the grip of panic are silent.

With glazed eyes and muscles strained to the utmost they thundered into the dark, unconscious and heedless of the sure destruction in their path. It was as though thousands of creatures, with their brains removed, had been turned loose to run at will.

“To the river!” cried the masked man, suddenly panic-stricken, spurring his horse in the direction of the stream.

But Larkin was at his heels, and in a moment had seized the other’s bridle and thrown the horse back on his haunches.

“No!” bawled he at the top of his voice. “The bank here is twenty feet high, and at the bottom are rocks.”

“Better a jump and a chance than sure death in the stampede,” yelled the stranger, but Bud would not yield and drew the horse back.

“We can divide the herd,” he cried. “Come, we haven’t a moment to lose!”

They wheeled as one and dashed out of the brush into the open of the range. The earth was now trembling beneath them and the pounding feet sounded a low, steady note, ominous with warning. Occasionally there was a revolver shot, but this was the only other sound.

Straight toward the oncoming living avalanche the two men rode until they had left an open space a hundred yards wide behind them. Then they pulled up short and dismounted.

Now out of the threatening thunder sounded a single individual note, the rapid beating of a horse's feet—some horse that was bearing a desperate rider ahead of the stampede but powerless to avoid it.

Instantly Larkin saw the picture of the yawning precipice toward which the frantic rider was hurrying at breakneck speed. He raised his revolver and fired into the air. The signal was instantly acted on, for in another moment a lathering, heaving pony dashed up to them, and the rider leaped to the ground.

"Oh, what shall I do? Hello! Who are you?" cried a female voice, and Larkin's heart leaped as though it had turned over in its place.

"Juliet!" he cried, seizing the girl with one arm and drawing her close.

"Bud!" For an instant she clung to him.

"Lead the horses together and shoot them!" he ordered, although the others could scarcely hear him.

Every instant was priceless now, for dimly at the edge of their vision the front wave of the living, leaping tide could be seen.

Larkin swung the girl's horse alongside Pinte, and without a thought or a pang shot them both. They fell one on top of the other. Then the stranger in the mask led his animal in front of the two that had fallen and put a bullet through its brain. All now leaped behind this still throbbing barricade.

"Got a gun, Julie?" demanded Bud.

"Yes."

"Give it to me and load mine from your belt." They exchanged weapons and the girl with practiced hand slipped the cartridges into their chambers. The unknown had drawn two guns from some place in his equipment, and now the three peered over their shelter.

The advance line of animals was scarcely twenty-five yards away, and, with a clutch of horror at his heart, Bud recognized that they were not cattle as he had supposed, but sheep—his own two thousand.

In the instant that remained he remembered the shots and shouting of a quarter-hour before, and realized that the animals had been stampeded deliberately.

"Let 'er go," he screamed above the tumult, "and yell like blazes!"

On the word yellow fire streamed out from the four guns and, accompanying it, a perfect bedlam of shrieks and cries. The sheep were now upon them, and the hail

of bullets dropped some in their headlong career, piling them up against the horses and adding to the barricade. But it could not stop all, and a stream of the animals made its way over the bodies up to the very mouths of the spitting guns.

Now others stumbled and fell, to be instantly engulfed by the swirling flood behind; small, sharp feet were caught between the limbs of the struggling mass that eddied about the dead horses. Still the yellow fire stabbed out into the faces of the middlers—for now the leaders were already piling up mangled and dying in the rocky river-bed—but, past each side of this island of expiring creatures, thundered a vast, heaving stream, turbulent, silent, irrevocable.

The man in the mask with a revolver in each hand was firing steadily, and Larkin, thrilled at the sight of his apparent coolness, turned to look at him.

To his amazement he found that the mask had fallen or been snatched away. Again the man fired, and Bud Larkin's jaw fell as he gazed on the queer, unmistakable features of the man who had saved his life that night.

It was Smithy Caldwell.

The sheep mind has the power of tenacity, but not that of change. There was scarcely a shot left in the guns, and still the fear-blinded animals battered at the growing wall of dead and dying that divided them. But at last they began to push to each side, and gradually the idea of splitting took full hold.

Then the prisoners behind the dead horses sank down in almost hysterical relief, for there was no danger that any more would attempt to mount the barricade. In fact, had the obstacle to their progress been suddenly removed, the stampeded herds would have continued to split for an indefinite period.

Now, listening, Larkin could hear the crash of the animals through the underbrush and the horrid, sickening sounds of the writhing, half-dead mass in the river-bed as more and more, following their predecessors blindly, took the leap.

At last the stream on each side thinned, the rumbling thunder of pounding feet grew less, and the tail of the flock passed, leaving behind it a sudden, deathly silence. In the distance a faint murmur was heard, and Larkin found later that this was made by the two or three hundred which escaped death in the river.

As a matter of fact, the great number of the animals had filled the narrow gully, and the last few charged across the bodies of their fallen comrades to solid ground and safety beyond.

Now that the danger had passed, Larkin felt a certain miserable nausea in the pit of his stomach, and fought it down with all his might. Caldwell was not so successful, however, and stumbled from the shelter and his companions, furiously sick. Juliet began to weep softly, the tears of nervous reaction coming freely when neither pain nor fear could have brought them.

Bud passed his arm gently about her shoulders, and patted her with soft encouragement and praise for her bravery. Nor did the girl resent his action. Rather it seemed to steady her, and after a few minutes she looked up with an unsteady laugh.

“Isn’t it funny for that other man to get seasick out here where we can’t get enough water to drink?” she asked, with a sudden tangent of humor that made Bud laugh uproariously, and seemed to relieve the strain that oppressed them.

“Brave little girl!” he said, getting up. “That reminds me. I wonder where our friend is?”

He walked out in the direction Caldwell had taken and expected to find the other recovering from his attack. But he could see or hear nothing to indicate that the man was within a dozen miles. He called, and his voice sounded puny and hollow against the vastness of the sky. He heard no hails in answer, except the long, shrill one which the coyotes gave from a neighboring rise of ground.

Smithy Caldwell had disappeared.

Larkin returned to Juliet Bissell perplexed, mystified, and disturbed. What possible reason could there be for the quixotic actions of the man he hated more than any other in the world? How did he happen to be received and at perfect ease among a band of desperate rustlers?

How and why? Caldwell presented so many variations on those two themes that Larkin’s head fairly swam, and he turned gladly to relieve the situation in which Juliet Bissell now found herself.

CHAPTER X

WAR WITHOUT QUARTER

He found her where he had left her, but now she was standing and looking out over the silent prairies, as though searching for someone.

“What are you trying to see?” Bud asked.

“I thought father and some of the cowboys would probably follow the sheep once they had started them. Oh, what have I said?”

“I imagined it was they who had done it,” said Bud quietly, the full enormity of the thing not yet having sunk deep into his mind. “How did you get mixed up in it?”

“Simply enough,” replied Julie. “Late in the afternoon Chuck, one of the men on the eastern range, came riding in and said that your sheep were directly east of the ranch house. Father and Mike Stelton talked a lot about it at supper, and figured up then that the easiest way—well, to teach you a lesson, they called it—was to run them over the bank of the Little River.

“I don’t like sheep, Bud, as you know; but that was going too far for me, and I protested, with the result that father took Mike outside with him, quite upset that I said anything at all. Both of them looked black as a silk hat.”

“Good little girl!” cried Bud gratefully, and she turned her face directly toward him and smiled; just such a smile, Larkin remembered, as he had seen her use on other soft nights years before, in circumstances so totally different.

“After supper,” she continued, “there was a great bustle of getting away, and I grew curious to see what they would do and how. So as soon as they left I saddled my calico and set out after them, keeping about abreast but a couple of miles to the north. The next thing I heard was a terrific lot of shooting and yelling, and the business was done. I don’t wonder the sheep were in a panic!

“Then I heard the sound of the stampede, but I did not realize it was driving

straight at me. I must have been confused in my idea of where the Little River was. Anyway, before I had time to think about it I realized I was directly in their path and with a very small advantage. I could escape neither to right nor left, for the wings of the running flock were wide, and all I could do was to run my pony as hard as he could go.

“He seemed to know the danger; all cow ponies do, I guess, for I never saw him travel like that in all my life; he stretched so flat along the ground that it almost seemed as though I could reach down and touch it with my hand. You know what such speed as that is at night with the gopher-holes and other ankle-breakers! Well, we took the chance, and Billy actually drew away from the sheep, panicky as they were.

“But I couldn’t gain enough to dare to turn to right or left, and I had just about given up hope because the trees were ahead, when I saw the flash and heard the report of your gun. Thank God it was you, Bud. I’ve never known you to be a coward or to fail in any situation. I can’t say how grateful I am for what you have done to-night.”

“I assure you I didn’t do it, Julie; it was that man who got sick and left us. He’s disappeared now.”

“Who was he? One of the Bar T punchers?”

“No, it was that fellow, Caldwell. Perhaps you don’t remember him—he came to the Bar T for supper the same night I did.”

“Yes, I remember him,” said Julie in a tone out of which all the impetuous warmth had gone. Suddenly in this strange situation she found herself face to face with another chapter in the mystery that baffled her.

“Well, he saved my life to-night, and, though I can’t say I admire the fellow very much, I am mighty grateful to him.”

“It is strange you two should be together out here when your sheep were somewhere else,” hazarded Juliet, looking full at Larkin and expecting some action or word to betray his fear of her suspicions.

“Not at all strange when you know the circumstances,” he replied. “Just listen to this tale of adventure. But first I think we had better start walking toward the Bar T ranch house. We ought to meet some of the cowboys. Br-r—it’s cold!” and Bud shivered in the piercing chill of the spring night.

To the plainsman walking is the most refined form of punishment. Your real

cowboy slouches miserably along in his tight-fitting, uncomfortable high-heeled boots, looking about as much in his element as a stranded whale. In cowboy parlance his “feet don’t track,” his backbone wilts, and his knees bow naturally as a result of early horseback riding. On solid earth the cowboy is a crestfallen and dejected object.

As the two trudged along beneath the calm stars that had seen a thousand stampedes since the millions of buffalo roared up and down its length, Larkin told Juliet of the events that had occurred since they had said farewell at the fork of Grassy Creek. At the mention of the rustlers and the activities they were carrying on the girl gave a little, low cry.

“Father must hear that,” she said. “He would give a lot to have descriptions of those men.”

“He couldn’t give me back two thousand sheep and lambs,” rejoined Bud bitterly.

“No, but I think he would give you their value.”

“Yes, and stampede it into another gully when I brought it across his range. Juliet, I’m not done with this thing. I’ll fight your father or any other man that ever heard a calf bawl for milk, until I get my rights on the free range.”

Larkin’s voice was deep and full-throated with the righteous anger that surged through him over the outrage that had been wrought that night.

As for the girl, she did not recognize this Bud Larkin. The man she had known had been one of gay pleasantries, but rather ineffectual endeavors; this man who spoke was one to whom his will was his law, and obstacles merely helps because of their strengthening of his determination. For the first time she saw the Bud Larkin that had developed in the last year, and a kind of admiring thrill at the mental stature of the man went through her.

And yet she knew that war—hard, tenacious, ugly war—war without quarter, mercy, or respite, was irrevocably declared between Larkin and her father; and, even in her instinctive loyalty to her house, she had to admit that Bud was justified.

“Oh, I wish you would give the whole thing up!” she said plaintively. “It will only result in ruin to everybody.”

Larkin laughed harshly.

“I’ll never give it up until I am either dead or haven’t a dollar left,” he replied. “I

am determined to have my rights in this matter, and I shall have them whatever the cost."

For a time there was silence between them, each realizing that further discussion could only prove unhappy.

They had gone about two miles from the scene of the stampede when suddenly a man appeared close in front of them and commanded them to halt.

"Hello, Sims!" cried Larkin joyfully, recognizing the other's voice, but at the same time hoisting his hands above his head.

"Well, chief," said the herder imperturbably, returning his revolver to its holster, "I allow your vacation has cost you a lot of money."

Bud then outlined his experiences briefly, concluding with his story of the stampede, and Sims whistled in amazement, his one method of expressing astonishment.

"Well, what's the story now?" Bud asked.

Juliet had walked ahead when the two men met, and now Larkin dropped far enough behind to be out of ear-shot and yet keep the girl dimly in sight.

Hurriedly, for him, Sims related the story of the ill-fated expedition up to the time of the stampede. He and the herders had put up what defense they could, he said, and, as a result, two of his men were dead and the others scattered. However, he expected they would return to the now deserted camp.

"I want you to take them back south to the Badwater River," ordered Larkin. "The second flock ought to be there by this time, but I want you to hold them there. In two days the boys from Montana ought to be down, and when you're ready to start north you will have force enough to fight any bunch of cowboys old Bissell can scrape together."

"But if we don't move that flock out right away the others will come and pile up there, and then we shore will have our hands full."

"All right, let 'em pile up. We'll get 'em through just the same. Now, Sims, we are in this thing for blood from now on, and don't you forget it for a minute."

"Trust me, boss," drawled the herder. "Are you comin' down to join us?"

"Yes, if I can. As soon as I get Miss Bissell into safe hands I'll come. But don't count on me; I may never get there. Do whatever you think best, but bring those sheep through. And tell the herders and the boys from the north that while this

trouble is on I'll pay them five dollars a day apiece."

"Shore, they'd rassle the devil himself for that," commented Sims.

"And you get ten," supplemented Larkin. "Now go ahead and make all preparations the way you think best. Everything is in your hands."

Sims faded from sight noiselessly, and Larkin hurried forward to overtake Juliet. They had not been together five minutes when the rapid trotting of horses was heard ahead and Larkin, taking the chance of falling into evil hands, called out to the travelers.

"Who's there?" came a gruff voice, accompanied by the click of hammers drawn back.

"Oh, father, it's I—Juliet!" cried the girl, recognizing the speaker and running toward him.

There was a surprised exclamation out of the darkness, and the sound of a man vaulting from the saddle. The next moment and he had clasped his daughter in his arms.

Larkin, his mission completed, started to back away from the scene, but the girl herself wrecked this intention.

"It was Mr. Larkin who called out," she said, evidently in answer to a question. "He saved my life, father, and he has brought me safely back. He is standing right over there."

At this Bud turned and ran, but the sound of a pony closing in on him brought him to a stop.

"Well, what do you want?" he demanded angrily.

"Bissell wants to see you," said the rider whose voice the sheepman recognized as that of Stelton.

Not deigning to enter an argument with the foreman, Bud walked back to where Bissell stood beside his horse.

"Now the sheep are out of the way, if you want to learn anything about rustlers I guess our friend here can tell you," remarked Stelton suddenly, in a voice exultant as it was ugly.

"Oh, yes, father," added Juliet, "he's been with them for almost two days."

"Is this so, Mr. Larkin?" asked Bissell.

“Yes.”

“Well, we won’t discuss it now,” said the cowman. “Let’s go back to the ranch house and get something to eat. I have an extra horse here, Larkin, if you care to ride.”

“I don’t care to, thanks,” answered Bud dryly. “Since you have ruined me, you will do me a favor by letting me go.”

“I allow I’d like to do you a favor,” rejoined Bissell with equal courtesy, “but I’ve got to find out about them rustlers. We won’t keep yuh long.”

“Come on, get up on that horse,” said the voice of Stelton close beside him, and Bud turned to look into the long barrel of the foreman’s gun that was stuck under his nose.

Trembling with suppressed fury, he did as he was told, but on the ten-mile ride to the Bar T ranch said nothing, and only revolved in his mind one question: How did Stelton know he had been with the rustlers before Julie had said anything about them?

CHAPTER XI

MADE PRISONER

At three o’clock the next afternoon Beef Bissell felt better than he had for some time, this condition being a result of his vindictive triumph over Bud Larkin, and the fact that that young man was in his hands. He felt that the back of the sheep business had been broken as far as his range and his county were concerned.

I have put the opening of this chapter at three o’clock, because that was the hour at which life began to be manifest at the Bar T ranch after the stirring events of the night before. Bud Larkin himself, worn out with his nights and days of vigil, had gone to sleep on his bed almost in the act of taking his boots off. Vague ideas of escape had coursed through his mind only to be overtaken and killed by the slumber he had evaded for so long.

His window faced southwest, and when he awoke it was to find the dazzling gold of the sun warming his face. For a moment he did not realize where he was, staring thus into the blinding radiance; but memory is only a few seconds sleepier than its master, and shortly everything came back to him.

A sinking sensation came over him as he remembered the wanton slaughter of his sheep, more because of the helpless agony of the poor dumb brutes than because of the monetary loss, although the latter was no trifling consideration, since nearly eight thousand dollars had been wiped out in less than half an hour.

Added to this sickening sensation was one of dull, choking rage that Bissell, a man of wealth and certain prominence in the State, should suggest and pursue a course that the most despised sheep-herder would never countenance. That, Larkin told himself, showed the real man; the rough, crude product of a rough and bitter country.

For the slogan of the earlier West was selfishness.

“All this is mine and don’t you come a-nigh me!” bawled the cowman when the nesters or grangers began to make their appearance.

The cowboy himself was the chief exponent of this philosophy. Restraint was unknown to him—his will was his law, and he tried to make it everyone else's. When thousands of men have the same idea the result is trouble; hence the practice of cluttering up one's person with artillery.

The one person for whom the cow-puncher had no respect and for whom the cow country was no fit abiding place was the man who allowed himself to be domineered. For that man convict-labor on a coral road would have been paradise compared to his ordinary existence.

Thus was the West the supreme abode at that time of the selfists or anarchists who have no thought or consideration outside their own narrow motives and desires.

Though Bud Larkin could not have analyzed his feelings in words, perhaps, yet he felt this keenly, and knew that now or never must he take his stand and keep it. He labored under the double handicap, in this country, of having gone in for sheep and having been beaten at it the very first thing. Consequently, if he ever expected to gain any caste, or at least a hearing, he must turn the tables and that as soon as possible.

At the present moment, as he washed his face in the thick white wash-bowl that made the guest-room of the Bar T celebrated for leagues around, he had nothing but the remotest ideas of how this might be done. The fact, in brief, was that his sheep were and would continue piling up in the hills north of the Badwater, ready to enter the hazardous stretch of dry territory that had so nearly been disastrous to his first flock.

Until he should be free and could reconnoiter his chances and resources he would hesitate to order them sent north. And yet they could not stay forever near the Badwater. Neither could they be halted on their march north, because they were crossing the range of Wyoming sheepmen at the time and common plains courtesy demanded that they be removed as fast as possible.

But for the fact that Sims was in personal charge Bud Larkin would have been in utter despair. Such was his confidence in his indolent herdsman that he felt that though ultimate failure attended their efforts no blame could ever be attached to Sims.

Leaving the guest-chamber, Larkin immediately stepped into the dining-room and the gloomy thoughts fled, for there sat Juliet near the window, sewing. She greeted him with a smile and immediately rose.

“Well, Mr. Man, I thought you would never wake up,” she remarked in mock reproof. “I’ve been waiting here since dinner to see that you had something to eat when you came out. You must be wild hungry.”

“I could eat a saddle,” said Larkin.

“Sorry, but the saddles are all out,” she replied with a smile. “However, we have some nice fresh broiled quirts, garnished with rawhide.”

“Bring me a double order,” said Bud, laughing, as he seated himself.

When he was almost through with his meal Juliet remarked:

“Father asked me to say that he would like to have a talk with you on the veranda when you were ready.”

“I’ll go right out,” he answered, thanking her for the trouble she had taken.

He found Bissell seated in one of the big chairs outside, and took the other. Both men rolled a cigarette and then Bissell spoke.

“I owe you a great deal, Larkin, for saving my daughter last night,” he said with genuine emotion in his voice. “Under the circumstances I am sorry for what I did, and wish I had it to do over again.”

“As for the first, I don’t deserve much credit. Juliet really saved her own life by coming to us when I fired the warning shot. As to the sheep, it’s too late to think about them now; we’ll come to another reckoning in that matter later on. I’d hardly expect a horse-thief to do a trick like that.”

Bissell’s tanned face turned a deep mahogany hue under the sting of this remark, and his eyes lost the soft look they had held when he spoke of Juliet.

“I’m willing to pay yuh the money loss,” he replied, still anxious to make amends.

“On guarantee, I suppose, that I don’t try to bring the rest of my sheep north.”

“Yes.”

“That’s impossible, as you might know.”

“I allow you’re right foolish, Mr. Larkin; better think it over.”

“I did that last night when the sheep went into the river,” said Bud dryly.

“I suppose so, but a night’s sleep sometimes changes a man’s mind.”

“Not mine. The first night I was here I told you that I would bring my sheep

north, and I still intend to do it. I am always willing to meet a man half-way; but you wouldn't meet me. Instead of that you started in to ruin me. I have no objection to that, but you'd better take care that your schemes don't work two ways."

Bissell shrugged his shoulders. He still had the upper-hand of the situation, and his temper, in that case, was not hard to control.

"I allow I can look out for myself," he said.

"No doubt, but you had better look out for me," was the retort.

"I reckon I'll manage," remarked Bissell contemptuously. "But all this isn't what I wanted to ask you. I'd be some pleased if you'd tell me about them rustlers you were with."

"Why do you want to know about them?" countered Bud.

"Because they're ruinin' the cattle business. I dunno how many head they run off last year, but I do know that profits were cut in half by 'em. You was with 'em long enough to know some of 'em again, I allow?"

"Yes. I would know nearly all of them. What's left of three is out there near the cottonwoods along Little River, but I don't believe there's enough to bury."

"How is that?" inquired Bissell, who had evidently not heard of Larkin's narrow escape from death at the rustler's hands.

Bud told him briefly.

"You shore were lucky," remarked the cowman with a Westerner's appreciation of the situation. "Now, I'm the head of the cattlemen's association in this part of the State, and o' course it's our business to clear the country of those devils. You're just the man we want, because you've seen 'em and know who they are. You tell me what yuh know and there'll be the biggest hangin' bee this State ever seen."

As has been said, Bud Larkin had the legitimate owner's hatred of these thieves who preyed on the work of honest men, and had sworn to help run them out of the country as soon as his own business was finished. Now, in the flash of an eye he saw where he could turn the knowledge he had gained to good account.

"You have rather queer ideas of me, Mr. Bissell," he said. "First, you fight me until I am nearly ruined, then you expect I will turn around and help you just as though nothing had happened."

“But in this,” cried the cowman, “you’ve got to help us. This is all outside of a war between the cows and the sheep. This is a matter of right and justice.”

“So is the matter of my sheep. The range is free and you won’t let me use it. Do you call that right or just, either one?”

Bissell choked on his own reply, and grew red with anger. Suddenly, without exactly knowing how, the tables had been turned on him. Now, instead of being the mighty baron with the high hand, he was the seeker for help, and this despised sheepman held the trump cards.

Furthermore, Larkin’s direct question was capable of a damaging reply. Bissell sought desperately for a means of escape from the trap in which he found himself.

“Do you mean, young feller, that you won’t tell me about them rustlers?”

“That’s about it. But I might on one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“That your cattlemen’s association give the rest of my sheep undisturbed passage north across the range to Montana.”

“By gosh!” yelled the cowman, beside himself, springing out of his chair and glaring at the other with clenched hands on his hips. “That’s your game, is it? Yuh pull our teeth an’ then offer us grub, eh? Why, tan my hide—” he gagged with wrath and stood speechless, a picture of impotent fury.

Larkin laughed quietly.

“The shoe’s on the other foot, but it doesn’t seem to feel any too good,” he sneered. “Better be reasonable now, hadn’t you?”

“Reasonable? Sure, I’ll be reasonable!” cried the other vindictively, almost suffocated with his emotion. “Let me ask yuh something. Do you absolutely refuse to tell about them rustlers if I don’t do as you want and let your sheep through?”

“Well, not exactly,” replied Bud, grinning. “I’ll tell you this: they’re going to run off a hundred head or so of your stock yet this week for the railroad camps up the State. I think it’s fair to give you warning beforehand.”

“Darn you and your warning! What I want is the names and descriptions of them men. Will yuh give ’em to me?”

“No, not unless we can strike a bargain. You talk about right and justice. Now

let’s see a little of it,” answered Larkin.

“All right, young feller, you’ve said your say. Now listen to me. I’m a deputy sheriff in this county”—he ripped open his vest and showed the badge pinned to the inside lining—“an’ I hereby arrest yuh for bein’ a party to them rustlers. Yer either a criminal or yuh ain’t, accordin’ to our notions out here, an’ if yuh wun’t help us catch yer friends there ain’t nothin’ more to be said. Now roll that into a cigarette an’ eat it alive if yuh want to.”

He glared defiantly down on Larkin, whose brows had drawn together as he went into executive session with himself.

In five seconds the situation between these men was once more reversed. It was not that Larkin had overreached himself; he simply had encountered a circumstance of which he was unaware. The possibility of Bissell being a deputy sheriff had never occurred to him, and now he sat balked and perplexed, balancing his chances on either hand.

It was not in the man to yield supinely to this new danger. He could not even think of the possibility without shame. He was right, he told himself over and over again, and, listen as he would, he could detect no contradictory reply from the still, small voice we are all credited with possessing.

His mission in life was to get his sheep through. In that circumstance the rustlers were unexpected allies and he hoped they would put burs under the tails of every steer on the range and drive them to the Gulf of Mexico. Once his merinos and angoras were safe across the line Bud would gladly return and help round them up.

The idea that he, clipped, helpless, and harmless as he was, should now turn in and assist his despoilers to better their own fortunes was so maddening that he grinned with fury as he thought of it. No, the thing was impossible!

Bissell had not changed his menacing position during all of Bud Larkin’s ponderings and was waiting patiently for some outbreak from his victim. But at last he could stand it no more.

“Well,” he snarled, “say something! What’s your answer?”

“That bargain goes as she stands,” said Bud, after a moment’s thought. “You help me and I’ll help you. Otherwise you won’t get a word out of me, and you can do whatever you like.”

“You’re under arrest,” snapped Bissell. “Give me your gun!” and he covered

Bud with a single swift motion of his hand.

The younger man did as commanded and rose.

“Now go into that room; you’re a prisoner,” ordered Bissell.

CHAPTER XII

JULIET ASSERTS HERSELF

Now that the owner of the Bar T ranch had succeeded again in a match of wits with Larkin, he put sheep out of his mind and turned his attention to the more-immediate danger of rustlers. It had been a matter of a couple of years since the last determined attempt of the cowmen to oust these poachers by force of arms, and Bissell thought that the time was ripe for another and, if possible, final expedition.

With Larkin in his power, he had no doubt that the necessary information could be procured from him in one way or another, and, after talking matters over with Stelton, dispatched cowboys at top speed to the ranches in his district, asking that the owners and as many men as they could spare should come at once to a conference at the Bar T.

Having got them there, it was his intention to sweat Larkin for names and descriptions, and then let him go. Should the sheepman refuse all information, then his case could be acted upon by the members of the association without any further delay.

All these plans Larkin learned from Juliet and her mother, who looked after most of his wants. The latter, good woman, quite flustered at having what she termed a “regular boarder,” became rather fond of the patient young man from the East who never failed to listen attentively to her narrative of the famous trip to St. Paul.

The regular boarder, for his part, could not but sympathize with this homely, hard-working, lonely woman. One rarely connected Martha Bissell with old Beef Bissell except in an impersonal way, as one would have connected the corral, or the barn, or the brand. In fact, the cowman seemed hardly cognizant of her existence, long since having transferred all the affections his hard life had left him to the daughter he worshiped.

But Martha, as is so often the case with women who grow old slaving for their

husbands, had not changed in her devotion to Bissell since the proud day they had eloped on one horse and been married by a “sky pilot” in the nearest cow town.

Mrs. Bissell had come to that dolorous time in a woman’s life when she no longer has the power of attracting male attention—which power is not a matter of age, but merely of mind and spirit. And yet there were depths in her, Larkin found, unsuspected because unsought.

Loving her daughter as she loved her husband, she derived a certain negative happiness from the fact that their exclusive companionship brought them pleasure.

For herself she asked nothing, and, as is the way of the world, she got it.

For Bud Larkin, who had only known her as an angular, uninteresting addendum of the Bar T, she took on a certain pathetic interest, and he went out of his way to talk with her about the glories of Chicago, since her one dissipation seemed to be mental journeys back East.

Larkin was not strictly a prisoner at the Bar T ranch-house, for this had been found impracticable from a number of standpoints. He had the run of the ranch, an old, decrepit cow pony to ride, and could go in any direction he chose under the supervision of a cowboy who carried a Winchester and was known to have impaled flies on cactus spines at thirty yards.

Occasionally Bud and Juliet rode out together, with this man in the rear, and renewed the old friendship that had lain dormant for so long. During one of these rides the girl, after debating the matter with herself, opened on a delicate subject.

“That Caldwell man is a strange-looking fellow, Bud. Who is he?”

Larkin looked at Juliet closely before replying, but could find nothing in her face to indicate any but a natural curiosity.

“He is a Chicago character I used to know,” he returned shortly. “But what brought him out here is a puzzle to me.”

“You seemed to want to see him pretty badly,” said she, assuming a pout. “I was really jealous of him taking you off the way he did that first night you came.”

“That’s the first time I have been flattered with your jealousy,” Bud returned gayly. “I’ll ask him to come again.”

And that was the closest she could come to a discussion of Caldwell’s

connection with Larkin. The fact, although she would not admit it, gave her more concern than it should have, and kept her constantly under a cloud of uneasiness. Bud's evasion of the subject added strength to the fear that there was really something horrible in Bud's past.

It was on one of his rides alone that Bud suddenly came to a very unflattering solution of another problem in regard to Caldwell. Ever since the stampede he had been giving time to the consideration of Smithy's strange actions that night. There was no love lost between the two, that was certain, and why the blackmailer should risk his life to defeat the rustlers and save the man he hated was beyond Bud's comprehension.

But at last he arrived at a solution that removed all his doubts, and this was that Smithy Caldwell had saved him for the same reason that the old lady in the fairy story was told to preserve the goose.

"Kill the goose and there will be no more golden eggs," remarked the fairy sagely, and evidently Caldwell was ready to heed her advice.

It certainly was worth the effort on Smithy's part, and even when Larkin had finally discovered the man's sordid motives he felt a species of admiration for the man's coolness and bravery. He felt, too, that, if he could not get a grip on the blackmailer before another payment was demanded, he could part with the money for the first time with the feeling that Caldwell had partially earned it.

As to Caldwell's presence among the rustlers, that was another matter entirely, and Larkin could not fathom the mystery. How Smithy, a low Chicago tough, whose only knowledge of a horse had been gained by observation, could so quickly become a trusted member of this desperate gang of cattle-thieves he could not conceive. Was there some occult power about the man—some almost hypnotic influence that passed his crossed eyes and narrow features in that company?

Larkin gave it up. But he knew that, should he ever again get his full liberty, his sheep safely across the range, and the leisure to pursue rustlers, Mr. Smithy Caldwell of Chicago would be his especial prey. And he grinned with anticipation at the glory of that moment when he should have the blackmailer in his power with enough evidence to swing him.

Stelton was the one man of the whole Bar T outfit who had suffered from the boomerang of his evil plans. It had been through him that Larkin was forced to accompany Bissell home after the stampede; and now he passed days and nights of misery, watching the progress of Bud's very evident suit. Chained down by

his daily round of duties, his time was not his own, and with a green venom eating at his heart he watched the unfettered Bud ride off across the plains with Juliet, laughing, care-free, and apparently happy.

So greatly did this irk Mr. Stelton that his morose melancholy increased to a point where his own cowpunchers entertained fears for his sanity, and made him acquainted with the fact in their well-known tender manner. This did not serve to buoy his spirits, and he cursed himself roundly for the ridiculous position into which he had led himself.

As to Juliet, he hardly dared pass a civil time of day with her, so terrible a trial had his thwarted desires in regard to her become.

The fourth day after Bud's arrest old Beef Bissell called for his horse and rode away to the Circle Arrow ranch. Old man Speaker had not seen fit to rally to the cowmen's gathering, and Bissell valued his counsel very much; he had, therefore, gone to fetch him.

During the three days of his absence Mike Stelton suffered another of those reverses which are so exasperating because they are brought about by our own ugly spirits.

All the time he had continued to eat at the ranch table, and had been accorded his share of the conversation and attention. Now, with old Bissell out of the way, his status immediately changed. Mrs. Bissell, Juliet, and Bud were the best of friends, and presented a solid front of uniform but uninterested politeness to the foreman against which he was helpless. On the second day, for the first time in ten years, he moved his seat down into the punchers' dining-room and ate with them.

Such a defeat as this could not pass unnoticed among the punchers, who had never been accorded the pleasure of their gloomy foreman's presence at meal times, and Stelton suffered keenly from the gibes of the men.

Stelton endured all this with seeming calmness, but when Bissell returned the foreman got his revenge. He outlined with full detail and considerable embellishment the constant progress that Larkin was making with Juliet. Disclaiming any interest of his own in the matter, he explained that the reason for his complaint was the character of Larkin.

"Why, boss, yuh shore wouldn't want a darned sheepman breakin' Julie's heart," he said, "an' him a Eastern dude at that. You should 'a' seen that feller. Yuh no more'n got yore back turned than he carried on with Juliet all the time. It made

me plenty mad, too; but what could I do about it? I just moved my grub-pile down with the boys an' thought I'd tell yuh when yuh came home."

A half an hour of this was sufficient to work Bissell up into a furious rage, and, in something the same temper, he sent for Juliet an hour before dinner.

Now, a man who is subjected to choleric outbursts should never send for anything but food an hour before dinner, for the reason that a very trivial thing looks, at that time, big enough to wreck the nation. Bissell, however, failed to recollect this simple truth, and greeted his daughter with smoldering eyes, that gradually softened, however, the longer he looked at her.

"There is somethin' I want to ask yuh, Prairie Bell," he began. "Yuh won't mind?"

"No, dear," she answered. "What is it?"

"This sheepman Larkin—is it true yuh been courtin' with him while I been away?"

"I've been riding with him a good deal, and I've seen him every day, if that is what you mean. You trust me to be sensible, don't you, father?"

"Yes, Julie, o' course I do; but I'm just thinkin' of yerself—and of me. Dunno what people'd say if they knowed ol' Bissell's daughter was traipsin' around with a sheepman that stands in with the rustlers. An' you—I allow it'd break my heart if yuh ever got fond of that rascal. He's a bad lot."

"I can't agree with you in any of those things," said the girl, with just the right mixture of determination and affection in her voice. "To anyone who is fair, it is no disgrace to be a sheepman; Mr. Larkin is not in with the rustlers, as I believe he outlined to you, nor is he a rascal in any way. Lastly, I don't care what people say about whom I ride with. Mr. Larkin is a gentleman, and that is all I require."

During this speech, which held the middle ground between daring and prudence, independence and acquiescence, civility and impertinence, Bissell's jaw dropped and his eyes opened. He had rarely, if ever, known his daughter to make such an explicit refutal of his inferences. His brow darkened.

"Yuh never stuck up fer a man like that in yore life, Julie," he accused her severely. "That Larkin is a bad one. Mebbe yuh don't know it, but he can't answer for everything in his life. O' course, you can't understand these things, but I'm just tellin' yuh. Now, I'm plumb sorry to have to do it, but I want yuh to tell me yuh won't go out with him any more."

“I don’t think you should ask me that, father,” said the girl quietly. “I am old enough to choose my own associates. I have known Mr. Larkin for years, where you have only known him for days. I love you too much to disgrace you or mother, daddy dear; but you must not ask me to act like a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl.”

To Bissell, after dinner, this talk would have served its intended purpose—that of presenting reasonably the reverse side of the argument. Now, however, it merely stirred him up. He looked sharply at his daughter with his small, piercing eyes.

“Do you defy me?” he thundered, amazed at the girl’s temerity. “All I do is try to think up ways of makin’ yuh happy, an’ now yuh insist on havin’ this scoundrel make love to yuh, whether I want it or not. Answer me this, Julie, are you in love with him?”

“I’ve never met another man I cared as much for,” she returned with calm frankness, looking at him with big, unafraid brown eyes.

“Great Heavens!” cried Bissell, leaping out of his chair and raising his clenched fists above his head. “That I should come to this! Julie, do yuh know what yore sayin’? Do yuh know what yore doin’?”

“Yes, I do; and do you want to know the reason for it?”

“Yes.”

“Because I think the things that have been done to Mr. Larkin are contemptible and mean.” There was no placidity in those brown eyes now. They flashed fire. Her face had grown pale, and she, too, had risen to her feet. “I’m a cowman’s daughter, but still I can be reasonable. Our range is free range, and he has a perfect right to walk his sheep north if he wants to. And even if he hadn’t, there is no excuse for the stampede that took place the other night.

“And last of all, you have no right to keep Mr. Larkin here against his will so that he does not know what is happening to the rest of his flocks. I consider the whole thing a hideous outrage. But that isn’t all. You have talked to me this afternoon in a suspicious manner that you have no right to use toward me. I am not a child, and shall think and act for myself.”

“What do you mean by that? That you will help this scoundrel?”

“Yes, if I think it is the right thing to do.”

Bissell started back as though someone had struck him. Then he seemed to lose his strength and to shrivel up, consumed by the flame of his bitterness and

disappointment. At the sight, the girl's whole heart melted toward the unhappy man, and she longed to throw her arms around him and plead for forgiveness. But the same strain that had made her father what he was, in his hard environment, was dominant in her, and she stood her ground.

For a minute Bissell looked at her out of dull, hurt eyes. Then he motioned toward the door.

"Go in," he said gently; "I don't want to see yuh."

CHAPTER XIII

THE HEATHEN CHINEE

Hard-winter Sims, lying at full length on the grass, indulging in another of his frequent siestas, was rudely awakened by one of his herders.

“More sheep they come,” said the man.

“Great Michaeljohn!” swore Sims, heaving his long length erect. “More?”

“Yes; it is Rubino with the third flock.”

Sims cast a practiced eye over the sides of the swelling hills, where already two thousand animals, the second consignment, were feeding. It was now a week since he had met Bud Larkin after the stampede, and he was worried over the non-appearance of his chief. Here, in the hills of the southern hook of the Big Horn Mountains, he had fed the second flock up one valley and down the next, waiting for Larkin’s arrival or some word from him.

Hurrying south after that midnight meeting, he had reached his destination just in time to check the advance of the second two thousand that had come the night before. Knowing the hard march north, but ignorant of the conditions now prevailing on the Bar T range, he had hesitated to expose more of Larkin’s animals to ruin.

The arrival of this third flock complicated matters in the extreme, since the feeding-ground became constantly farther away from the original rendezvous.

He looked in the direction indicated by the herder and saw the cloud of dust that betokened the advance of the new flock. Soon the tinkle of the bells and the blethering of the animals themselves reached him, and he started leisurely back to meet Rubino.

He found the sheep in good physical shape, for they had been traveling at a natural pace, a condition not always easily brought about, and totally dependent on the skill of the herder. If the dogs or men follow constantly behind the

animals, they, feeling that they are being constantly urged, will go faster and faster, neglecting to crop, and so starve on their feet in the midst of abundant feed. For this reason herders often walk slowly ahead of their flock, holding them back.

“Where are the next two thousand?” Sims asked Rubino.

“Two days behind, and coming slowly.”

“And the last?”

“Three days behind them, but farther to the east.”

Sims whistled. He realized that in five days, if nothing were done, he would have eight thousand sheep on his hands, scattered over the hills in every direction and subject to heavy loss both by wild animals and straying.

With the aplomb of a general disposing his forces, Sims indicated the rising hill on which Rubino should bed his flock down, and watched critically as they went through this evolution.

Sheep are the most unresponsive to human affection of any domesticated animal. Never, in all the thousands of years of shepherding, have they come to recognize man as an integer. They still cling to the flock life. Even when attacked by wild animals at night they do not seek the shepherd, but stand and bawl to the valiant (?) rams to beat off the enemy. On the march, the dogs do the actual herding, so that the “muttons” do not look to man for their orders.

The only occasion that they appeal to a human being is when their bodies crave salt. Then they run to him with a peculiar guttural cry, and, having been supplied, forget the herder immediately. Some people have tried to prove that this trait predicates a recognition of the human being as such, but it seems far more likely that they regard him with the same indifference as a giver that they do the water-hole which quenches their thirst.

Without intelligence, or the direct appreciation of man, they are entirely unattractive, ranking far below the dog, horse, or even cow. Consequently but few men in the sheep business have any affection for them. Of these few, Hard-winter Sims was probably the leader. Something closely akin to a maternal obligation was constantly at work in him, and the one thing that brought instant response was the cry of distress of a lamb or ewe.

Now, as Rubino’s flock dotted itself over the hillside in the sunset, Sims watched what was to him the most beautiful thing in the world. The sounds were several

—the mothering mutter of the ewes, the sharp blat of some lamb skipping for dinner, the plaintive cries of the “grannies”—wethers who, through some perverted maternal instinct, seek to mother some stray lamb as their own—and the deeper, contented throating of the rams.

The dogs, panting and thirsty with the long day’s march, saw that their charges were finally settled, except for the few lone sentinels against the cobalt sky. Then they trotted with lolling tongues to the little stream that trickled down the valley and waded in to drink. After that they sought out their masters and sat beside them with pricked ears, wondering why no preparations for supper were going forward.

To the herders after the long trail the luxury of a cook wagon was appreciated. Only the first and last detachments carried one, and Rubino’s men had cooked their meals over tiny fires made in the barren places, as the herdsmen have done since time immemorial.

The cook, a sullen man at best, grumbled audibly at the increase of his duties. Where before he had cooked for six men, now he must cook and clean up for twelve. All things considered, it was a “helluva” note, he declared, until Sims, overhearing his remarks, booted him a couple of times around the cook wagon, so that he much preferred the arduous duties of his calling.

“If yuh could only make every man love his job by contrast with somethin’ else a lot worse, what a peaceful world this would be,” thought Sims. “Now, sheep-herdin’ ain’t so plumb gentle yuh could call it a vacation, but when I think of cows an’ a round-up I shore do bless them old blackfaces for bein’ alive.”

Finally the long-drawn yell of the cook gave notice that the meal was ready and all hands fell to with a will. They had hardly got started, however, when there came a sound of galloping feet from the north that brought them all upstanding and reaching for their weapons.

Over a near-by hill swept a body of perhaps fifty horsemen, each with a rifle across his saddle and a revolver at hip. They were typical plainsmen, and as the last radiance of the sun lighted them up, Sims could see that they wore the regular broad-brimmed white Stetsons of the cattle men.

“Put down yore guns, boys,” said Sims after a moment’s thought. “Let’s get out o’ this peaceable if we can.”

The men put away their weapons and waited in silence. The horsemen swept up at the tireless trot of the plains until they recognized the tall, gaunt figure of the

chief herdsman. Then, with a yell, they galloped into camp, drew rein abruptly, and dismounted.

Sims recognized the leader as Jimmie Welsh, the foreman of Larkin's Montana sheep ranch, and a happy, contented grin spread over his face.

"Glory be, boys!" he yelled, going forward to meet the horsemen. "Rustle around there, cookee," he called back over his shoulder, "yuh got company fer supper!"

The riders after their long journey were only too glad to see a permanent camp, and dismounted with grunts of pleasure and relief. They had come a distance of nearly two hundred and fifty miles in four days, and their horses were no longer disposed to pitch when their riders got upon them in the morning. The party was composed of all the available men from Larkin's ranch and others from the neighboring places.

In these men the hatred of cowmen and their ways was even more intense than *vice versa*, this being a result, no doubt, of the manifold insults they had suffered, and the fact that, as a rule, cowboys far outnumber sheep-herders and run them off the country at will. The call to arms taken north by Miguel had met with instant and enthusiastic response, and these men had come south to wipe out in one grand mêlée their past disgraces.

During supper Sims told of Larkin's offer of five dollars a day, and the riders nodded approvingly; it was the customary hire of fighting men in the range wars.

"But how did you get down over the Bar T range?" asked the chief herder.

"We done that at night," replied Jimmie Welsh, who was a little man with a ruddy face, bright eyes and a crisp manner of speech. "Tell me what's that ungodly mess up in Little River; it was night an' we couldn't see?"

"Two thousand of Larkin's sheep," replied Sims, laconically, and an angry murmur ran through the men. "Old Bissell, of the Bar T, stampeded 'em when we were just a-goin' to get 'em through safe. Shot up one herder, lammed cookee over the head an' raised ructions generally. Yes, boys, I'm plumb shore we have one or two little matters to ask them Bar T punchers about."

"But what's your orders, Simmy?" asked Welsh.

"I'm in charge o' the hull outfit till the boss shows up an' can do whatever I want. I'm gettin' real concerned about him though, not hearin' a word for a week. I 'low if he don't turn up to-morrow I'll have to send you boys lookin' fer

him.”

But the morrow brought its own solution of the problem.

In the middle of the morning a lone horseman was seen approaching over the hills, and the restless sheepmen, eager for any sport, spread out into a veritable ambuscade, taking position behind rocks and in depressions along the hills on either hand.

The horseman was very evidently a poor rider, for, instead of holding the reins easily and jauntily in his upturned right hand, he was clinging to the pommel of the saddle, while the pony slipped and slid along the difficult path.

Within a furlong of the camp, the man’s nationality was made apparent by the flapping shirt and trousers he wore, as well as the black, coarse cue that whipped from side to side.

Among the secreted sheepmen a grin spread from face to face at the sight of this distressful figure, evidently in real wo from hours in the hard saddle. About a hundred yards from camp a single shot rang out, and then there arose such a wild chorus of reports and yells as would have terrified a stone image.

The cow pony (which of all horses loathes a bad rider) showed the whites of his eyes wickedly, laid his ears back into his mane and bucked madly with fright. The Chinaman, chattering like a monkey, described a perfect parabola and alighted right side up on the only tuft of grass within ten yards.

In an instant he bounced to his feet, took one look at the surrounding society, and made a bolt for the cook-wagon, the one place that was familiar to him.

At the door he encountered the sheepmen’s regular cook coming out to see what the trouble was, and the next moment witnessed the near-annihilation of the yellow peril.

Sims and Jimmie Welsh pulled the burly cook off in time to save the Oriental, and the latter sat up with a dazed, frightened air.

“Yah! Makee much damee hellee!” he announced.

“Too much damee hellee,” said Sims sententiously. “John, you good fighter. Me like you. What you do here?”

“Me bling message,” and he reached into his blouse and drew out a piece of paper folded and pinned.

This he handed to Sims, who promptly opened it and started to read. In a minute

he stopped and yelled for everyone who was not in the immediate circle to gather round and listen. Then, haltingly, he read aloud the following:

> DEAR SIMS:
>
> Ah Sin who brings you this is a bang-up cook, and I am sending him to you to get a job. Pay him fifty dollars on the spot in advance for his first month. I told him you would. He was the Bar T cook, I am sorry to say, but there was no other way of getting a message to you than to send him.
>
> For the last few days I have been a prisoner in the "guest room" of the Bar T ranch-house. This is the middle room on the northwest side. After a certain row here I was clapped into confinement, and the Chinaman had to do the honors for me at all meals. I got friendly with him and found he was getting only thirty a month.
>
> When he told me he owned one of the horses in the corral the whole thing was easy. I offered him fifty, gave him exact directions how to find your camp, and told him the best time to start.
>
> If he ever reaches you, you will know where I am, and I want some of you to come and get me out of this. The cattlemen from all over are here, and they accuse me of standing in with the rustlers. What will happen to me I don't know, but I'm sure of this, it won't be healthy.
>
> I should think the boys would be down from the north by this time.
>
> Now, Simmy, keep everything under your hat and work quietly. Let the sheep pile up if you have to. Things aren't ripe here yet to move 'em north.
>
> I'll be looking for you any day.
>
> BUD.

When Sims had read the entire note twice, a puzzled silence ensued. Men lifted their hats and scratched their heads meditatively. Here among fifty men there was plenty of energy for action once the action was suggested, but very little initiative.

"I allow we'll shore have to get 'im out o' there," seemed to be the consensus of opinion.

"Shore, boys, shore," said Sims impatiently; "but how? That's the question. There's about a dozen real smart shooters on that ranch, and I'm plenty sure they

don’t all sleep to once. Besides, the worst part of it’ll be gettin’ near the dum place. If a hoss squeals or whinnies the rescuin’ party might as well pick out their graves, ’cause yuh see only two or three can make the trip.”

“Mebbe they can an’ mebbe they can’t,” broke in Jimmie Welsh, his little, bright eyes twinkling with suppressed merriment. “I should think the hull outfit, cook-wagons, an’ all, could make the visit to the Bar T.”

“Yeah?” remarked Sims politely scornful but inquisitive. “Tell us about it.”

And Welsh did.

CHAPTER XIV

SENTENCED

Everybody at the Bar T ranch house was laboring under suppressed excitement. It was now the middle of June when the yearly round-up should be under way, yet, owing to the invasion of the sheep and the recent rustler troubles, the cowboys had not been free to undertake this task.

On other ranches this spring work was well advanced, and the fact that the Bar T had not yet begun was a source of constant worry to Bissell and Stelton. The former, when he had sent out his call for other cowmen of the region, had encountered great difficulty in getting his neighbors to give up their time to the disposal of Bud Larkin's case.

At last, however, ten owners, impatient at the summons and anxious to return as quickly as possible to their work, had ridden in, some of them alone and others with a cowboy taken from the round-up.

Since the Bar T ranch house was incapable of accommodating them all, the punchers had been ousted from their bunk-house and the structure given over to the visitors.

The sudden disappearance of the Chinese cook had added to Bissell's troubles and shamed the hospitality of his home. This situation had been relieved temporarily by the labors of Mrs. Bissell and Juliet until an incompetent cowboy had been pressed into service at an exorbitant figure.

Therefore it was with short temper and less patience that Bissell began what might be called the trial of Larkin. The meeting-place of the men was under a big cottonwood that stood by the bank of the little stream curving past the Bar T.

As each man arrived from his home ranch he was made acquainted with the situation as it stood, and one afternoon Larkin was brought out from his room to appear before the tribunal. The owners were determined to end the matter that day, mete out punishment, and ride back to their own ranches in the morning.

It was a circle of stern-faced, solemn men that Larkin faced under the cottonwood tree, and as he looked at one after another, his heart sank, for there appeared very little of the quality of mercy in any of them. Knowing as he did the urgency that was drawing them home again, he feared that the swiftness of judgment would be tempered with very little reason.

Bissell as head of the organization occupied a chair, while at each side of him five men lounged on the grass, their guns within easy reach. Larkin was assigned to a seat facing them all, and, looking them over, recognized one or two. There was Billy Speaker, of the Circle-Arrow, whom he had once met, and Red Tarken, of the M Square, unmistakable both because of his size and his flaming hair.

“Now, Larkin,” began Bissell, “these men know what you’ve been tryin’ to do to my range—”

“Do they know what you did to my sheep?” interrupted Bud crisply.

Bissell’s face reddened at this thrust, for, deep down, he knew that the stampede was an utterly despicable trick, and he was not over-anxious to have it paraded before his neighbors, some of whom had ridden far at his request.

“Shut yore mouth,” he snarled, “an’ don’t yuh open it except to answer questions.”

“Oh, no, yuh can’t do that, Bissell,” and blond Billy Speaker shook his head. “Yuh got to give ’im a chance to defend himself. Now we’re here we want to get all the facts. What did yuh do to his sheep, Beef? I never heard.”

“I run a few of ’em into the Little River, if yore any happier knowin’,” snapped Bissell, glowering on Speaker.

Larkin grinned.

“Two thousand of ’em,” he volunteered. There was no comment.

“These gents know,” went on Bissell, after a short pause, “that yuh were two days with them rustlers and that yuh can tell who they are if yuh will. Now will yuh tell us how you got in with ’em in the first place?”

Bud began at the time of the crossing of the Big Horn and with much detail described how he had outwitted the Bar T punchers with the hundred sheep under Pedro, while the rest of the flock went placidly north. His manner of address was good, he talked straightforwardly, and with conviction and, best of all, had a broad sense of humor that vastly amused these cowmen.

Sympathetic though they were with Bissell's cause, Larkin's story of how a despised sheepman had outwitted the cattle-king brought grins and chuckles.

"I allow yuh better steer clear o' them sheep, Bissell," suggested one man drolly. "First thing yuh know this feller'll tell yuh he's bought the Bar T away from yuh without yore knowin' it. Better look up yore land grant to-night."

By this time Bissell had become a caldron of seething rage. His hand actually itched to grab his gun and teach Larkin a lesson. But his position as chairman of the gathering prevented this, although he knew that plains gossip was being made with every word spoken. Among the cowmen about him were some whose ill success or smaller ranches had made them jealous, and, in his mind, he could see them retailing with much relish what a fool Larkin had made of him. He knew he would meet with reminders of this trial during the rest of his life.

However, he stuck to his guns.

"Now what we want to know, young feller, is this: the names an' descriptions of them rustlers."

"I will give them to you gladly and will supply men to help run them down at my own expense if you will let the rest of my sheep come north on your range. Not only that, but I will not ask any damages for the animals you have already killed. Now, men," Larkin added, turning to the others and with a determined ring in his voice, "I want peace. This fighting is cutting our own throats and we are losing money by the hour.

"The range is free, as all of you know; there is a law against fencing it, and that means that no grangers can settle here and make it pay—the animals would eat all their unfenced farm truck. I have a ranch in Montana with about three thousand sheep on it. I tried to buy more there, but couldn't.

"Therefore, I had to come down south and 'walk' them north. Now I don't like to fight anybody, chiefly because it costs too much; but in a case like this, when I find a dog in the manger"—he looked directly at Bissell—"I make it a principle to kick that dog out of the manger and use it.

"I am just as much of an American as any of you, and Americans never had a habit of letting other people walk all over them. Now you men can do anything with me you want—I can't prevent you. But I can warn you that if I am judged in any way it will be the worst job the cowmen of Wyoming ever did.

"Understand, this isn't a threat, it's just a statement. Because I refuse to turn in and help that man, who has done his best to ruin me, he wants me to suffer the

same penalty as a criminal. Now I leave it to you. Has he much of a case?”

Bud, who had risen in the fervor of his speech, sat down and looked at his hearers. Never in his life had he pleaded for anything, but in this moment necessity had made him eloquent. He had hardly taken his seat when Mike Stelton strolled over and sat down on the grass.

For a few minutes there was silence as the men, slow of thought, revolved what Larkin had said. Bissell, ill-concealing his impatience, awaited their comments anxiously. At last Billy Speaker remarked:

“I can’t see your bellyache at all, Bissell. It seems to me you’ve acted pretty ornery.”

“I have, eh?” roared Beef, stung by this cool opinion. “Would yuh let sheep go up yore range? Tell me that, would yuh?”

“I allow I might manage,” was the contemptuous retort. “They’re close feeders on the march, an’ don’t spread out noways far.”

Bissell choked with fury, but subsided when another man spoke.

“I figure we’re missin’ the point, fellers,” he said. “This here association of our’n was made for the purpose of doin’ just what Bissell has been tryin’ to do—that is, keep the range clear for the cows. We don’t care what it is that threatens, whether it’s sheep, or wolves, or rustlers, or prairie fires. This association is supposed to pertect the cows.

“Now I ’low that Mr. Larkin has had his troubles right enough, but that’s his fault. You warned him in time. I’m plumb regretful he’s lost his sheep, but that don’t let him out of tellin’ us where them rustlers are. It’s a pretty mean cuss that’ll cost us thousands of dollars a year just for spite or because he can’t drive a hard bargain.

“Up on my place I’ve lost a hundred calves already, but I’d be mighty glad to lose a hundred more if I could see the dirty dogs that stole ’em kickin’ from a tree-limb. An’ I’m in favor of a tree-limb for anybody who won’t tell.”

“Yore shore gettin’ some long-winded, Luby,” remarked a tall man who smoked a pipe, “an’ likewise yore angry passions has run away with yore sense. Yuh can’t string a man up because he won’t talk; ’cause if yuh do we’ll sick the deputy sheriff on yuh an’ mebbe you’ll go to jail.”

The speaker rolled a droll, twinkling eye at Bissell and the whole gathering burst into a great guffaw at his expense. This was all the more effective since Bissell

had decorated the outside of his vest with the nickel-plated star of his authority.

At this sally he nearly had apoplexy and bawled out for a drink, which somebody accommodatingly supplied from a flask, although such things were rarely carried.

When the merriment had subsided a fourth man volunteered the opinion that, although there was nothing that could force Bud to tell what he knew, still, such a defiance of their organization should not go unpunished. The fact that the cowmen were opposed to the entrance of sheep into the territory was enough excuse, he thought, to make an example of Bud Larkin and thus keep other ambitious sheepmen away from the range in this section.

One after another of the men gave their opinions and finally lined up in two camps, the first resolved on punishing Larkin in some manner, and the second in favor of letting him go with a warning that he must take the consequences if he ever attempted to walk any more sheep over the Bar T range or any other range of the association.

As has been said, the right of justice and fair-dealing was the very backbone of the cattle-raising industry, and owners depended almost entirely upon other men's recognition of it to insure them any profits in the fall.

For this reason six of the eleven men were in favor of letting Larkin go. The matter rested with the majority vote and was about to be put to the final ballot when Mike Stelton got on his feet and asked if he might put a few questions.

Bissell, only too eager for any delay or interruption that might change the sentiment of the majority, granted the request.

Stelton's dark face was illumined for a moment with a crafty smile, and then he said:

"Yuh know a man by the name of Smithy Caldwell, don't yuh?"

"Yes," said Bud, cautiously, not seeing quite where the question might lead.

"He was in that stampede with yuh, wasn't he?"

"Yes."

"He was one of the party sent out to string yuh up, wasn't he?"

This time there was a long hesitation as Bud tried vainly to catch the drift of the other's interrogation.

"Yes," he answered slowly at last.

“Well, then, he must have been one of the rustlers,” cried Stelton in a triumphant voice, turning to the rest of the men, who were listening intently.

“All right, I admit it,” remarked Larkin coolly. “I don’t see where that is taking you.”

“Just keep yore shirt on an’ yuh will in a minute,” retorted Stelton. “Now just one or two more questions.

“Do you remember the first night Caldwell came to the Bar T ranch?”

Larkin did not answer. A premonition that he was in the toils of this man concerning that dark thing in his past life smote him with a chill of terror. He remembered wondering that very night whether or not Stelton had been listening to his talk with Caldwell. Then the recollection suddenly came to him that, even though he had heard, the foreman could not expose the thing that was back of it all. Once more he regained his equilibrium.

“Yes, I remember that night,” he said calmly.

“All right!” snapped Stelton, his words like pistol-shots. “Then yuh remember that Smithy Caldwell got five hundred dollars from yuh after a talk by the corral, don’t you?”

“Yes,” replied Larkin, in immense relief that Stelton had not mentioned the blackmail.

“Well, then, gents,” cried the foreman with the air of a lawyer making a great point, “yuh have the admission from Larkin that he gave money secretly to one of the rustlers. If that ain’t connivance and ackchul support I’m a longhorn heifer.”

He sat down on the grass triumphantly.

It seemed to Bud Larkin as though some gigantic club had descended on the top of his head and numbed all his senses. Careful as he had been, this wily devil had led him into a labyrinthic maze of questions, the end of which was a concealed precipice. And, like one of his own sheep, he had leaped over it at the leader’s call!

He looked at the faces of his judges. They were all dark now and perplexed. Even Billy Speaker seemed convinced. Bud admitted to himself that his only chance was to refute Stelton’s damaging inference. But how?

The cowmen were beginning to talk in low tones among themselves and there

was not much time. Suddenly an idea came. With a difficult effort he controlled his nervous trepidation.

“Men,” he said, “Stelton did not pursue his questions far enough.”

“What d’yuh mean by that?” asked Bissell, glaring at him savagely.

“I mean that he did not ask me what Caldwell actually did with the money I gave him. He made you believe that Smithy used it for the rustlers with my consent. That is a blamed lie!”

“What did he do with it?” cried Billy Speaker.

“Ask Stelton,” shouted Bud, suddenly leaping out of his chair and pointing an accusing finger at the foreman. “He seems to know so much about everything, ask him!”

The foreman, dazed by the unexpected attack, turned a surprised and harrowed countenance toward the men as he scrambled to his feet. He cast quick, fearful glances in Larkin’s direction, as though attempting to discover how much of certain matters that young man actually knew.

“Ask him!” repeated Bud emphatically. “There’s a fine man to listen to, coming here with a larkum story that he can’t follow up.”

“Come on, Stelton, loosen yore jaw,” suggested Billy Speaker. “What did this here Caldwell do with the money?”

Stelton, his face black with a cloud of rage and disappointment, glared from one to another of the men, who were eagerly awaiting his replies. Larkin, watching him closely, saw again those quick, furtive flicks of the eye in his direction, and the belief grew upon him that Stelton was suspicious and afraid of something as yet undreamed of by the rest. Larkin determined to remember the fact.

“I don’t know what he done with the money,” growled the foreman at last, admitting his defeat.

“Why did you give Caldwell five hundred in the first place, Larkin?” asked Bissell suddenly.

“That is a matter between himself and me only,” answered Bud freezingly, while at the same time he sat in fear and trembling that Stelton would leap before the cowmen at this new cue and retail all the conversation of that night at the corral.

But for some reason the foreman let the opportunity pass and Bud wondered to himself what this sudden silence might mean.

He knew perfectly well that no gentle motive was responsible for the fellow's attitude, and wrote the occurrence down on the tablets of his memory for further consideration at a later date.

After this there was little left to be done. Stelton's testimony had failed in its chief purpose, to compass the death of Larkin, but it had not left him clear of the mark of suspicion and he himself had little idea of absolute acquittal. Under the guard of his sharpshooting cow-puncher he was led back to his room in the ranch house to await the final judgment.

In an hour it was delivered to him, and in all the history of the range wars between the sheep and cattle men there is recorded no stranger sentence. In a land where men were either guilty or innocent, and, therefore, dead or alive, it stands alone.

It was decided by the cowmen that, as a warning and example to other sheep owners, Bud Larkin should be tied to a tree and quirted, the maximum of the punishment being set at thirty blows and the sentence to be carried out at dawn.

CHAPTER XV

COWLAND TOPSY-TURVY

To Bud Larkin enough had already happened to make him as philosophical as Socrates. Epictetus remarks that our chief happiness should consist in knowing that we are entirely indifferent to calamity; that disgrace is nothing if our consciences are right and that death, far from being a calamity is, in fact, a release.

But the world only boasts of a few great minds capable of believing these theories, and Larkin's was not one of them. He was distinctly and completely depressed at the prospect ahead of him.

It was about ten o'clock at night and he sat in the chair beside his table, upon which a candle was burning, running over the pages of an ancient magazine.

The knowledge of what the cowmen had decided to do with him had been brought by a committee of three of the men just before the supper hour and since that time Larkin had been fuming and growling with rage.

There seems to be something particularly shameful in a whipping that makes it the most dreaded of punishments. It was particularly so at the time in which this story is laid, for echoes of '65 were still to be heard reverberating from one end of the land to the other. In the West whippings were of rare occurrence, if not unknown, except in penitentiaries, where they had entirely too great a vogue.

Larkin's place of captivity was now changed. Some enterprising cowboy, at Bissell's orders, had fashioned iron bars and these were fixed vertically across the one window. The long-unused lock of the door had been fitted with a key and other bars fastened across the doorway horizontally so that should Larkin force the lock he would still meet opposition.

Since Juliet's unpleasant episode with her father Bud had seen her just once—immediately afterward. Then, frankly and sincerely, she had told him what had happened and why, and Larkin, touched to the heart, had pleaded with her for the

greatest happiness of his life.

The realization of their need for each other was the natural outcome of the position of each, and the fact that, whatever happened, Juliet found herself forced to espouse Bud's cause.

In that interview with her father she had come squarely to the parting of the ways, and had chosen the road that meant life and happiness to her. The law that human intellects will seek their own intellectual level, providing the person is sound in principle, had worked out in her case, and, once she had made her decision, she clung to it with all the steadfastness of a strong and passionate nature.

It was Bissell's discovery of a new and intimate relation between his daughter and the sheepman that had resulted in the latter's close confinement, and from the time that this occurred the two had seen nothing of each other except an occasional glimpse at a distance when Bud was taken out for a little exercise.

To-night, therefore, as Larkin sat contemplating the scene to be enacted at dawn, his sense of shame increased a hundredfold, for he knew that, as long as she lived, Julie could not forget the occurrence.

It should not be thought that all this while he had not formulated plans of escape. Many had come to him, but had been quickly dismissed as impracticable. Day and night one of the Bar T cowboys watched him. And even though he had been able to effect escape from his room, he knew that without a horse he was utterly helpless on the broad, level stretches of prairie. And to take a horse from the Bar T corral would lay him open to that greatest of all range crimes—horse-stealing.

To-night his guards had been doubled. One paced up and down outside his window and the other sat in the dining-room on which his door opened.

Now, at ten o'clock the entire Bar T outfit was asleep. Since placing the bunk-house at the disposal of the cowmen from other ranches, the punchers slept on the ground—rolled in their blankets as they always did when overtaken by night on the open range.

At ten-thirty Bud put out his candle, undressed, and went to bed. But he could not sleep. His mind reverted to Hard-winter Sims and the sheep camp by the Badwater. He wondered whether the men from Montana had arrived there yet, and, most intensely of all, he wondered whether Ah Sin had got safely through with his message.

He calculated that the Chinaman must have arrived three days before unless

unexpectedly delayed, and he chafed at the apparent lack of effort made on his behalf. The only explanation that offered itself was—that Sims, taking advantage of the events happening at the Bar T, had seized the opportunity to hurry the gathering sheep north across the range. If such was the case, Larkin resigned himself to his fate, since he had given Sims full power to do as he thought best.

At about midnight he was dimly conscious of a scuffling sound outside his window, and, getting softly out of bed, went to the opening. In a few minutes the head of a man rose gradually above the window-sill close to the house, and a moment later he was looking into the face of Hard-winter Sims.

Controlling the shock this apparition gave him, Larkin placed his finger on his lips and whispered in a tone so low it was scarcely more than a breath:

“Did you get the fellow outside?”

Sims nodded.

“There’s another one in the dining-room just outside my door. He ought to be relieved at one o’clock, but he’ll have to go out and wake up his relief. He’ll go out the kitchen door, and when he does nab him, but don’t let him yell. Now pass me a gun.”

Without a sound, Sims inserted a long .45 between the clumsy bars, and followed it with a cartridge belt.

“How’ll we get yuh out?” he whispered.

“After fixing the man inside come out again and loosen these bars; the door is barred, too.”

“Where are the cowmen?” asked Sims.

“All in the bunk-house, and the punchers are sleeping out near the corral.”

“Yes, I seen ’em. Now you go back to bed an’ wait till I hiss through the window. Then we’ll have yuh out o’ here in a jiffy.”

The herder’s form vanished in the darkness, and Larkin, his heart beating high with hope and excitement, returned to his bed. Before lying down, however, he dressed himself completely and strapped on the cartridge belt and gun.

The minutes passed like hours. Listening with every nerve fiber on the alert, Bud found the night peopled with a multitude of sounds that on an ordinary occasion would have passed unnoticed. So acute did his sense of hearing become that the crack of a board in the house contracting under the night coolness seemed to him

almost like a pistol shot.

When at last it appeared that Sims must have failed and that dawn would surely begin to break, he heard a heavy sound in the dining-room and sat bolt upright. It was merely the cow-puncher there preparing to go out and waken his successor. Although the man made as little noise as possible, it seemed to Bud that his footsteps must wake everybody in the house.

The man went out of the dining-room into the mess-room of the cowboys, closing the door behind him softly, and after that what occurred was out of the prisoner’s ken.

After a while, however, Bud’s ears caught the faintest breath of a hiss at the window, and he rolled softly out of bed on to the floor in his stocking feet. Sims was there and another man with him, and both were prying at the bars of the window with instruments muffled in cloth.

“Did you get him?” asked Bud.

“Shore! He won’t wake up for a week, that feller,” answered Sims placidly.

For a quarter of an hour the two worked at the clumsy bars, assisted by Bud from the inside. At the end of that time two of them came loose at the lower ends and were bent upward. Then the combined efforts of the three men were centered on the third bar, which gave way in a few minutes.

Handing his boots out first, Larkin crawled headforemost out of the window and put his arms around the shoulders of his rescuers, resting most of his weight upon their bent backs. Then they walked slowly away from the house and Bud’s feet and legs came out noiselessly. Still in the shadow of the walls they set him down and he drew on his boots.

It was not until then that Sims’s assistant made himself known.

“Hello, boss,” he said and took off his broad hat so that Larkin could see his face.

“Jimmie Welsh, by George!” whispered Bud joyfully, wringing his hand. “Did you bring many of the boys down with you?”

“Fifty,” replied the other.

“Bully for you! I don’t know what would become of me if it weren’t for you and Hard-winter.”

As they talked they were moving off toward the little river that wound past the

Bar T house.

“Got a horse for me?” asked Bud.

“Yes,” said Sims, “over here in the bottoms where the rest of the boys are.”

“What do you plan to do now?”

Sims told him and Bud grinned delightedly at the same time that his face hardened with the triumph of a revenge about to be accomplished.

“Let’s get at it,” he said.

“Wait here and I’ll get the rest of the bunch.”

Hard-winter left them, and in a few minutes returned with a dozen brawny sheepmen, mostly recruited from Larkin’s own ranch in Montana. When greetings had been exchanged they moved off quietly toward the ranch-house.

The corral of the Bar T was about fifty yards back of the cook’s shanty and as you faced it had a barn on the right-hand side, where the family saddle horses were kept in winter, as well as the small amount of hay that Bissell put up every year.

To the left of the corral the space was open, and here the Bar T punchers had made their camp since leaving their former quarters. The bunk-house on the other hand stood perhaps fifty feet forward of the barn. It was toward this building that the expedition under Sims took its way.

Silently the rough door swung back on its rawhide hinges and ten men, with a revolver in each hand, filed quietly in. Sims and Larkin remained outside on guard. Presently there was a sound of muttering and cursing that grew louder. Then one yell, and the solid thud of a revolver butt coming in contact with a human skull. After that there was practically no noise whatever.

The men outside watched anxiously, fearful that the single outcry had raised an alarm. But there was no sound from either the house or the cowboys’ camp. Presently Welsh stuck his head out of the door.

“How is she? Safe?” he asked.

“Yes, bring ’em out,” answered Bud, and the next minute a strange procession issued from the bunk-house.

The cowmen, gagged, and with their hands bound behind them, walked single file, accompanied by one of the sheepmen. Without a word the line turned in the direction of the river bottoms, where the rest of the band and the horses were

waiting.

To do this it was necessary to pass behind the cook-house. Bud leaned over and spoke to Sims.

“Can’t we get Bissell in this party? He’s the fellow that has made all the trouble.”

“Sure, Jimmy and I will go in and get him. I had forgotten all about him.”

But they were saved the trouble, for just as they were opposite the cook-house, Larkin saw a burly form outlined for an instant in the doorway of the cowboys’ dining-room. With three bounds he was upon this form and arrived just in time to seize a hand that was vainly tugging at a revolver strapped on beneath his night clothes.

Had fortune not tangled Bissell’s equipment that night Bud Larkin would have been a dead man. Snatching off his hat, he smashed it over the cattle king’s mouth, and an instant later Bissell, writhing and struggling, but silent, was being half-carried out to join his friends.

Matters now proceeded with speed and smoothness. The prisoners were hurried to where the remainder of the band awaited them. Then, still bound and gagged, they were mounted on spare horses.

Only thirty of Welsh’s raiders had come on this trip, the rest remaining to help with the sheep, but their horses had been brought so that there might be ample provision for everybody.

With a feeling of being once more at home, Larkin climbed into a deep saddle, and a wave of triumph surged over him. He was again free, and at the head of a band of brave men. He had the ascendency at last over his misfortune, and he intended to keep it. Then when everything was finished he could come back and he would find Juliet—

The remembrance of her brought him to a pause. Must he go away without as much as a word from her, the one for whom he cared more than all the rest of the world? Quietly he dismounted.

“Let Jimmie go on with the prisoners and the rest of the boys,” he said to Sims. “You wait here with me. I must leave one message.”

A minute later the cavalcade stole away, following the winding river bank for a mile before setting foot on the plain.

Then, with Sims crouching, armed, behind the nearest protection, Bud Larkin walked softly to the house. He knew which was her window and went straight there, finding it open as he had expected. Listening carefully he heard no sound from within. Then he breathed the one word, “Julie,” and immediately there came a rustling of the bed as she rose.

Knowing that she had been awake and was coming to him, he turned away his eyes until he felt her strong little hand on his shoulder. Then he looked up to find her in an overwrap with her luxuriant hair falling down over her shoulders, her eyes big and luminously dusky.

“Darling,” she said, “I have heard everything, and I am so glad.”

“Then you could have given the alarm at any time?”

“Yes.”

“God bless your faithful little heart!” he said fervently, and, reaching up, drew down her face to his and kissed her.

It was their second kiss and they both thrilled from head to foot with this tantalization of the hunger of their love. All the longing of their enforced separation seemed to burst the dam that had held it, and, for a time, they forgot all things but the living, moving tide of their own love.

At last the girl disengaged herself from his eager hands, with hot cheeks and bright, flame-lit eyes. Her breath came fast, and it was a moment before she could compose herself.

“Where are you going now, Bud?” she asked.

“Back to the sheep.”

“Can I do anything to help you?”

“I can only think of one thing, and that is to marry me.”

“Everything in time, sir!” she reproved him. “Get your muttons out of the way and then you can have me.”

Larkin groaned. Then he said:

“If anything comes for me or anybody wants me, I want you to do as I would do if I were here. Things are coming to a climax now and I must know all that goes on. Watch Stelton especially. He is crooked somewhere, and I’m going to get him if it takes me the rest of my life.”

Suddenly there was a loud knock from outside the girl's bedroom door, and they both listened, hardly daring to breathe.

"Julie, let me in!" cried Mrs. Bissell's querulous voice. "Where's your father?"

"Run, dear boy, for your life!" breathed the girl.

Larkin kissed her swiftly and hurried back to the underbrush, where Sims was awaiting him in an access of temper.

"Great Michaeljohn, boss!" he growled as they rode along the bank, "ain't yuh got no consideration fer me? From the way yuh go on a person'd think yuh were in love with the girl."

CHAPTER XVI

A MESSAGE BY A STRANGE HAND

What were the feelings of Mr. Mike Stelton that dawn had better be imagined than described. The first he knew of any calamity was when Mrs. Bissell, unable to find her husband near the house, shook him frantically by the shoulder.

“Get up, Mike,” she cried into his ear. “Somethin’s wrong here. Henry’s nowhere around.”

Dazed with sleep, unable to get the proper focus on events, the foreman blundered stupidly about the place searching cursorily, and cursing the helplessness of Beef Bissell.

Presently he got awake, however, and perceived that dawn was coming up in the east. Then he reveled in the delightful anticipation of what was to occur out under the old cottonwood along the river bank. Mentally he licked his chops at the prospect of this rare treat. He intended if possible to make Juliet witness her lover’s degradation.

After vainly hunting some valid excuse for Bissell’s untimely departure, Stelton thought he would call the boys, which he did. Then he turned his attention to the bunk-house, for he knew the cowmen were in a hurry to get away and would want to be called early.

“All out!” he bawled jovially, thrusting his head in at the door.

Not a sound came in response. Then for the first time Stelton had a premonition of trouble. He walked into the bunk-house and took quick note of the ten tumbled but empty bunks. Also of the ten belts and revolvers that hung on wooden pegs along the wall—the sign of Western etiquette.

In those days, and earlier, if a man rode by at meal-time or evening he was your guest. He might take dinner with his hat on, and get his knife and fork mixed, but if he hung up his belt and revolver he was satisfied that all the amenities had been observed, whether you thought so or not.

The one other unspoken law was that every man’s business was his own business and no questions were allowed. You might be entertaining a real bad man like Billy the Kid, and you might suspect his identity, but you never made inquiries, and for three reasons.

The first was, that it was bad plains etiquette; the second, that if you were mistaken and accused the wrong man, punishment was sure and swift; and the third was, that if you were right the punishment was still surer and swifter, for an escaping criminal never left any but mute witnesses behind him.

Looking at these ten indications of good-will along the bunk-house wall, Stelton’s alarm was once more lulled. Perhaps the men had all gone for a paddle in the stream before breakfast, he thought. If so, they would take care of themselves, and turn up when the big bell rang. He couldn’t waste any more time this way.

Now to relieve the man who was guarding Larkin outside the window.

He hurried around the house and came upon the prone figure of a cow-puncher, rolled close against the house. The man’s head was bloody, his hands were tied behind him, and his neckerchief had been stuffed into his mouth and held there by another. He was half-dead when Stelton, with a cry of surprise, bent over him and loosened his bonds.

With a prolonged yell the foreman brought all hands running to him and, giving the hurt man into the care of a couple of them, ran along the house to Bud’s window. The bent bars showed how the bird had flown. Stelton was about to give way to his fury when another cry from the rear of the cook-house told of the discovery of the second watchman’s body, that had lain hidden in the long grass which grew up against the walls.

Then didn’t Stelton curse! Never had he been so moved to profane eloquence, and never did he give such rein to it. He cursed everything in sight, beginning with the ranch house; and he took that from chimney to cellar, up and down every line and angle, around the corners and out to the barn. Then he began on the barn and wound up with the corral. The cowboys listened in admiration and delight, interjecting words of approval now and then.

But once having delivered himself of this relief, the foreman’s face set into its customary ugly scowl, and he snapped out orders to saddle the horses. Presently a man rode up from the river bottoms and told of the discovery of many hoof tracks there, and the place where they had waited a long while.

“I’ve got it!” bawled Stelton, pounding his thigh. “Larkin’s men have been here and carried off all the owners. Oh, won’t there be the deuce to pay?”

Then he picked out the cowboys who had come with their bosses and added:

“Crowd yore grub and ride home like blazes. Get yore punchers an’ bring grub for a week. Then we’ll all meet at the junction of the Big Horn and Gooseberry Creek. If yuh punchers like a good job you’ll get yore owners out o’ this. And I’m plumb shore when we get through there won’t be a sheepman left in this part of the State. To-morrer night at Gooseberry!”

Then was such a scene of hurry and bustle and excitement as the Bar T had seldom witnessed. The parting injunctions were to bring extra horses and plenty of rope, with the accent on the rope, and a significant look thrown in.

By seven o’clock, the time that Larkin, bloody, humiliated and suffering, would already have paid his penalty, there was scarcely a soul at the Bar T ranch, for the cowboys had disappeared across the plains at a hard trot.

The Bar T punchers were sent out on the range to scour for tracks of the fugitives, but, after following them some distance from the river bottom, gave up in despair when a night herder admitted that the Bar T horses had been feeding in the vicinity the night before, thus entangling the tracks. Meantime the cook was preparing food for the punchers to carry, guns were being oiled and overhauled, knives sharpened, and ropes carefully examined.

Yet as the men went about their duties there was a kind of dazed, subdued air in all they did, for it was, indeed, hard to realize that the ranch owners of nearly a quarter of Wyoming’s best range had disappeared into the empty air apparently without a sound or protest.

The following afternoon the entire Bar T outfit, excepting a couple of punchers who were incapacitated from former round-up injuries, swept out of the yard and headed almost directly east across the plain.

Julie and her mother watched them go and waved them farewell, the former with a clutch of fear at her heart for her lover and the latter in tears for her husband, thus unconsciously taking opposite sides in the struggle that they knew must ensue.

It must not be thought that Juliet had turned against her father since their final difference. After her first outbreak against his narrow views and unjust treatment of Larkin, the old love that had been paramount all her life returned, and with it a kind of pity. She knew that in a man of her father’s age his nature could not be

made over immediately, if ever; the habits of a rough lifetime were too firmly ingrained. But at the same time there was something gone from the sweet and intimate affection that had formerly characterized their relations.

Lovers or married folk who declare for the efficacy of a quarrel as a renewer of love are wrong in the last analysis. Loss of control always entails loss of respect, and fervent “making up” after such an outbreak cannot efface the picture of anger-distorted features or remove the acid of bitter words. Thus it was with Juliet and her love for her father.

As to his safety she was not worried, for she knew that Bud would not allow any harm to come to him as he was in command of the men who had effected the taking-off. What Larkin’s plans were she did not fully realize, but she knew this sudden *coup* had been executed to further his own ends in the imperative matter of getting his sheep north. And of this she finally convinced her mother, although that lady wept copiously before the thing was accomplished.

The evening following the departure of Mike Stelton and his punchers was made notable by the arrival of a man on horseback, who carried across his saddle a black box, and in thongs at his side a three-legged standard of yellow wood. His remaining equipment was a square of black cloth.

Without invitation he turned his dejected animal into the Bar T corral and made himself at home for the evening. At the supper table he revealed his identity and explained his purpose.

“I’m Ed Skidmore,” he announced, “and I take photographs. This thing I’ve got is a camera.” He had already mounted the instrument on his tripod. “I’ve been going around from ranch to ranch and the pictures have been selling like hot cakes.”

Juliet, listening, noted that his conversation was that of a comparatively well-educated man and that he had none of the characteristic drawl or accent of the plainsmen. To her a camera was nothing out of the ordinary, although she had not seen one since her final return West, but her mother was vastly interested.

In those days photography was not a matter of universal luxury as it is now, and the enterprising Skidmore was practically the first to introduce it as a money-maker in the widely scattered ranches of the cow country.

“How do yuh sell ’em?” asked Martha Bissell, fluttering with the possibilities of the next morning, the time the young man had set for his operation. Martha had not been “took” since that far-off trip “East” to St. Paul, when she and Henry had

posed for daguerreotypes.

“Five dollars apiece, ma’am,” said Skidmore, “and they’re cheap at the price.” And they were, since the cost of something universally desired is dependent on the supply rather than the demand.

After supper Martha retired to her bedroom to overhaul her stock of “swell” dresses, a stock that had not been disturbed in fifteen years except for the spring cleaning and airing. This left Skidmore and Juliet alone. She civilly invited him out on the veranda, seeing he was a man of some quality.

“I had a queer experience to-day,” he remarked after a few commonplaces. “I was riding to the Bar T from the Circle-Arrow and was about twenty miles away, rounding a butte, when a man rode out to me from some place of concealment.

“When he reached me he suddenly pulled his gun and covered me.

“‘Where are you goin’?’ he said. I told him I was on my way here and why. He examined my outfit suspiciously and let me go. But first he said:

“‘Take this letter to the Bar T and give it to Miss Bissell.’” Skidmore reached inside his shirt and pulled forth a square envelope, which he handed to Juliet. “The whole thing was so strange,” the photographer went on, “that I have waited until I could see you alone so that I could tell you about it.”

Juliet, surprised and startled, turned the missive over in her hands, hopeful that it was a letter from Bud and yet fearful of something that she could not explain. When Skidmore had finished she excused herself and went into her room, closing the door behind her.

On the envelope was the simple inscription, “Miss Bissell,” written in a crabbed, angular hand. This satisfied her that the message was not from Bud, and with trembling fingers she opened it. Inside was an oblong sheet of paper filled with the same narrow handwriting. Going to the window to catch the dying light, she read:

MISS:

This is to tell yuh that Mr. Larkin who yuh love is already merried. It ain't none of my biznis, but I want yuh to no it. An' that ain't all. The U. s. oficers are looking for him on another charge, tu. Nobody noes this but me an' yuh, an' nobody will as long as the monie keeps comin' in. If yuh doant bileeve this, axe him.

Yurs Truly,
A FRIEND.

In the difficulty of translating the words before her into logical ideas the full import of the statements made did not penetrate Juliet's mind at first. When they did she merely smiled a calm, contemptuous smile.

With the usual fatuous faith of a sweetheart, she instantly consigned to limbo anything whatever derogatory to her beloved. Then in full possession of herself, she returned to the veranda, where Skidmore was smoking a cigarette.

"No bad news I hope?" he asked politely, scrutinizing her features.

"Oh, no, thanks," she replied, laughing a little unnaturally. "Not really bad, just disturbing," and they continued their interrupted conversation.

But that night when she was in bed the crude letters of that missive appeared before her eyes in lines of fire. Of late the old mystery of Bud's past life had not been much in her thoughts; love, the obliterator, had successfully wiped away the last traces of uneasiness that she had felt, and like all true and good women, she had given him the priceless treasure of her love, not questioning, not seeking to discern what he would have shown her had it seemed right in his mind that she should see.

But this scrawled letter to-night brought back with stunning force all the distress and doubts that had formerly assailed her. She guessed, and rightly, that Smithy Caldwell was the author of it, but she could not analyze the motives that had inspired his pen.

She told herself with fatal logic that if all this were a lie, Caldwell would not dare write it; that Larkin had paid this man five hundred dollars on another occasion not so far gone; and that it was avowedly a case of impudent blackmail. She knew, furthermore, that Bud carefully avoided all references to Caldwell even when she had brought forward the name, and that in the conversation overheard by Stelton there had been mention of someone by the name of Mary.

What if this money were going to another woman!

The thought overwhelmed her as she lay there, and she sat up gasping for breath, but in a moment the eternal defense of the man, inherent in every woman who loves, came to the rescue, and she told herself vehemently that Bud was honorable, if nothing else. Then the sentence concerning the United States officers wanting him on another charge recurred to her, and she found her defense punctured at the outset. If he were honorable, how could it be that the officers were after him?

In despair at the quandary, but still clinging to her faith, she fell back on the unanswerable fact of feminine intuition. Bud *seemed* good and true; it was in his eyes, in his voice, in his very manner. He looked at the world squarely, but with a kind of patient endurance that bespoke some deep trouble.

Then for the first time the thought came to Juliet that perhaps he was shielding someone else.

But who? And, if so, why did Caldwell write this letter?

Unable to answer these questions, but confronted by the thought that Bud’s love was the sweetest thing in the world to her, she at last fell asleep with a smile upon her lips.

CHAPTER XVII

A BATTLE IN THE DARK

“Everything ready?”

Bud Larkin sat his horse beside Hard-winter Sims and looked back over the white mass that grew dimmer and dimmer in the dark.

“Yes.” Sims lounged wearily against the horse’s shoulder. It had been a hard day.

“Get ’em on the move, then.”

Sims, without changing his position, called out to the herders. These in turn spoke to the dogs, and the dogs began to nip the heels of the leader sheep, who resented the familiarity with loud blatting and lowering of heads. But they knew the futility of resisting these nagging guardians and started to forge ahead. Other dogs got the middlers in motion, and still others attended to the tailers, so that in five minutes from the time Larkin gave the word the whole immense flock was crawling slowly over the dry plain.

Eight thousand of them there were; eight thousand semi-imbecile creatures, unacquainted with the obstacles they must encounter or the dangers they must face before they could be brought to safety or lost in the attempt. And to guard them there were nearly seventy men whose fear lay not in the terrors to be met, but in the sheep themselves: for there is no such obstacle to a sheep’s well-being as the sheep himself.

The last flock had arrived the night before, well-fed and watered. The preceding six thousand were in good condition from days and weeks of comfortable grazing in the hills; all were in good shape to travel.

In moving them at this time Larkin had seized the psychological moment.

The disgruntled cattle-owners, under a guard of ten men, were resting quietly far from anything resembling excitement in one of the untracked places among the mesas and scoria buttes. Bud had ascertained, by spies of his own that scoured

the country, that the great posse of rescuing cowpunchers had gone safely off on a wild-goose chase, misled by one of the sheepmen who was unknown in the country.

For the present, therefore, the range was clear, and Bud reckoned on its remaining so until the cattlemen had been rescued from their durance vile. In such a time the sheep-danger shrank into insignificance, and Larkin counted on having his animals across the Bar T range before the finding of the cattlemen, after which, of course, the men would be turned loose with much commiseration and apology.

Of the seventy men guarding and driving the sheep not more than thirty were regular herders. Forty were mounted and belonged to Jimmie Welsh's fighting corps, which was composed mostly of owners and superintendents from the north country.

Your usual Western shepherd is not a fighting man and cases have occurred in the bitter range wars where a herder has been shot down in cold blood unable to make a defense because of the grass growing out of his rifle.

Years alone in the brooding silence of the Sierra slopes or the obscure valleys of the northern Rockies take the virulence out of a man and make him placid and at one with nature. Into his soul there sinks something of the grandeur of cloud-hooded peaks, the majesty of limitless horizons and the colors of sky-blue water and greensward. With him strife is an unknown thing except for the strife of wits with another herder who would attempt to share a succulent mountain meadow.

Common report has it, and such writers as Emerson Hough put it in their books, that a sheep-herder can scarcely follow his calling for seven years without going mad. On the other hand, those who have lived for years among the sheep declare that they have never seen a sheep-herder even mentally unbalanced.

Probably both are right, as is usual to a degree in all discussion; but the fact remained that, sane or insane, the herder was not a fighting man—something had gone out of him. Therefore in bringing men other than herders south with him, Jimmie Welsh had shown his cleverness. To fight riders he had brought riders, and these men now helped to direct the river of animals that flowed along over the dry plain.

There were two cook outfits to feed the men, one of which contained the incomparable Ah Sin, who had amply revenged himself on the herders for his warm reception at the camp.

That first night they marched ten miles, and, as before, found the water-holes polluted by the cattle which take delight in standing in the mud, and thus in a dry country work their own destruction by filling the springs.

The next day the sheep cropped fairly well, although the sun was terrific and no more water was discovered. Nightfall found them becoming nervous and uneasy. They milled a long while before they bedded, and more of them than usual stood up to watch.

Not a rider had been seen all day. Through the baking glare there had moved a cloud of suffocating dust, and under it the thirsting, snorting, blethering sheep, with the dogs on the edges and the men farther out at regular intervals along the line.

After supper some of the men slept, for it was not planned to start the sheep until midnight, as they needed the rest, being footsore with long traveling. It was calculated also that they would reach the ford at the Big Horn by shortly before dawn.

But the sheep would have none of it, and moved and milled uneasily until, in order to save the lambs that were being crushed in the narrowing circle, Sims gave the order to resume the march.

The night “walk” of sheep is a strange thing. First, perhaps, rides a shepherd, erect and careless in his saddle, the red light glowing from the tip of his cigarette; and beside his horse a collie-dog, nosing at objects, but always with ears for the sheep and the voice of his master.

Then come the sheep themselves, with cracking ankle-joints, clattering feet, muffled blethering, a cloud of dust, and the inevitable sheep smell. Perhaps there is a moon, and then the herders must watch for racing cloud-shadows that cause stampedes.

Such was the picture of the Larkin sheep that night, only there was no moon. They started at ten, and Sims sent Miguel forward to walk before them, so they would not exhaust themselves with too fast traveling. On the move the sheep seemed more contented.

It was perhaps one o’clock in the morning that Larkin, in company with his chief herder, spurred out far in front of the advancing flock to reconnoiter. The sheep would be within approaching distance of the ford in a couple of hours, and Bud wished everything to be clear for them.

Nearing the Big Horn, Sims suddenly drew up his horse, motioning Bud to

silence. Listening intently, they heard the voice of a man singing an old familiar plains song. The two looked at each other in amazement, for this was one of the "hymns" the cowboys use to still their cattle at night, the time of the most dreaded stampedes. It was the universal theory of the cow country that cattle, particularly on a "drive," should not be long out of hearing of a human voice.

So the night-watchers, as they rode slowly about the herd, sang to the cattle, although some of the ditties rendered were strong enough to stampede a herd of kedge-anchors.

"Cows here?" said Sims. "What does this mean, boss?"

"It means that we're beaten to the ford and will have to hold the sheep back."

"Yes, but who's driving now? This is round-up and branding season."

"I don't know, but between you and me, Sims, I'll bet a lamb to a calf that the rustlers are running their big pickings north. There are some mighty good heads at the top of that crowd, and they have taken advantage of the deserted range, just as we have, to drive their critters."

"By George! You've hit it, boss!" cried Sims, slapping his thigh. "Now, what do yuh say to do?"

For a long minute of silence Bud Larkin thought. Then he said:

"Here's my chance to get those rustlers and at the same time benefit myself. There can't be more than a dozen or fifteen of them at the outside. Ride back to the camp, Simmy, and get twenty men, the best gun-rollers in the outfit. Tell anybody that's afraid of his hide to stay away, for the rustlers are top-notch gun-fighters."

"But what'll yuh do with a thousand cattle on yore hands?" demanded Hard-winter in amazement.

"I'll tell you that if we get 'em," was Bud's reply. "As I see it, we can't do without them."

The plan of campaign was somewhat indefinite. The last intention in the world was to frighten away the cattle by a grand charge and a salvo of young artillery. With great caution the sheepmen approached near enough to discern the white cover of the cook-wagon, when it was seen that the whole herd was slowly moving toward the ford, the singing rustlers circling around it.

Bud told off a dozen of his riders and instructed each to pick a man and to ride as

near in to him as possible without being seen. Then, at the signal of a coyote's howl twice given, to close in and get the drop on the rustlers, after which the remainder of the body would come along and take the direction of things.

Sims was put in charge of this maneuver, and was at liberty to give the signal whenever he thought circumstances justified it. It was a strange procession that marched toward the ford of the Big Horn—first fifteen hundred head of calves and young steers, guarded by unsuspecting rustlers; then the knot of sheepmen and the dozen riders closing in on their quarry, and, last of all three miles back, eight thousand sheep clattering through the dust.

For what seemed almost half an hour there was silence. Then suddenly came the far-off, long-drawn howl of a coyote, immediately followed by another. Bud set spurs into his horse, revolver in hand, the remaining eight men at his heels, and made directly for the cook-wagon, where he knew at least one or two of the outfit might be sleeping.

The drumming of the horse's hoofs could now be plainly heard from all sides, and a moment later there was a stab of light in the dark and the first shot rang out.

After that there were many shots, for the rustlers, keyed up to great alertness by the hazardness of their calling, had opened fire without waiting for question or answer.

Bud, as he dashed up to the cook-wagon, saw two men crawl out and stand for a minute looking. Then, as their hands moved to their hip-pockets like one, he opened fire. At almost the same instant the flames leaped from their guns, and Bud's hat was knocked awry by a bullet that went clean through it.

Meantime the man who had been riding beside him gave a grunt and fell from his saddle. One of the rustlers doubled up where he stood.

Larkin, to avoid crashing full into the cook-wagon, swerved his horse aside, as did the others. The horse of the man who had been shot stood still for a moment, and in that moment the rustler who remained standing gave one leap and had bestridden him.

Bud saw the maneuver just in time to wheel his horse on a spot as big as a dollar and take after the man in the darkness, yelling back, "Get the others!" as he rode.

It was now a matter between the pursuer and the pursued. Pounding away into the darkness, heedless of gopher-holes, sunken spots, and other dangers, the two sped. Occasionally the man ahead would turn in his saddle and blaze away at his

pursuer, and Bud wondered that none of these hastily fired bullets came near their mark. For his part he saved his fire. It was not his idea to shoot the rustlers, but rather to capture them alive, since the unwritten law of that lawless land decreed that shooting was too merciful a death for horse- or cattle-thieves.

A moment later there was a stab of light in the dark and the first shot rang out.

But Larkin found, to his dismay, that the horse of the other was faster than his own, and when they had galloped about a mile he had to strain his eyes to see the other at all. He knew that unless he did something at once the other would get away from him.

He lifted his revolver and took careful aim at the barely perceptible form of the horse. Then, when the other fired again, Larkin returned the shot, and almost immediately noticed that he was creeping up. At fifty yards the fleeing man blazed away again, and this time Bud heard the whistle of the bullet. Without further delay he took a pot-shot at the rustler’s gun arm and, by one of those accidents that the law of chance permits to happen perhaps once in a lifetime, got him.

After that the rustler pulled up his failing animal to a walk and faced him around.

“Hands up!” yelled Larkin, covering the other.

The answer was a streak of yellow flame from the fellow’s left hand that had been resting on his hip. The bullet flew wide as though the man had never shot left-handed before, and Bud, furious at the deception, dashed to close quarters recklessly, not daring to shoot again for fear of killing his man.

This move broke the rustler’s courage, and his left hand shot skyward. His right arm being broken, he could not raise it. Larkin rode alongside of him and peered into his face.

It was Smithy Caldwell.

Quickly Bud searched him for other weapons.

“What’re yuh goin’ to do with me, Larkin?” whined the blackmailer. “Don’t take me back there. I haven’t done nothin’.”

“Shut up and don’t be yellow,” admonished Bud. “If you’re not guilty of anything you can prove it quick enough, I guess.”

“I saved your life once,” pleaded the other. “Let me go.”

“You saved it so you could get more money out of me. Think I don’t know you, Caldwell?”

“Let me go and I’ll give you back all that money and all the rest you’ve ever given me. For God’s sake don’t let ’em hang me!”

The cowardice of the man was pitiful, but Bud was unmoved. For years his life had been dogged by this man. Now, an openly avowed rustler, he expected clemency from his victim.

“Ride ahead there,” ordered Bud. Caldwell, whimpering, took his position.

“Put your hands behind you.” The other made as though to comply with this command, when suddenly with a swift motion he put something in his mouth.

Instantly Bud had him by the throat, forcing his mouth open. Caldwell, forced by this grip, spat out something that Bud caught with his free hand. It was a piece of paper. Larkin slipped it into the pocket of his shirt and released his clutch. Then he bound Smithy’s hands and started back toward the scene of the raid.

When he arrived, with his prisoner riding ahead on the limping horse, he found that all was over. Two of the rustlers were dead, but the rest were sitting silent on the ground by the side of the cook-wagon. One sheepman had been killed, and another’s broken shoulder was being roughly dressed by Sims.

Others of the sheepmen were riding around the herd, quieting it. That there had been no stampede was due to the fact that the shooting had come from all sides at once, and the creatures, bewildered, had turned in upon themselves and crowded together in sheer terror, trampling to death a number in the center of the herd.

Less than half a mile ahead were the banks of the Big Horn and the ford. A mile behind the leaders of the sheep were steadily advancing. There was only one thing to be done.

“Drive the cows across the ford,” commanded Bud. Then he told off a detail to guard the prisoners, and the rest of the men got the cattle in motion toward the crossing.

Bud did not join this work. Instead, he pulled from his pocket the bit of paper that Smithy Caldwell had attempted to swallow. By the light of a match he read what it said:

> The range is clear. Drive north fast to-nite and travel day and nite. Meet me to-morrow at Indian Coulee at ten. Burn this. STELTON.

For a minute Bud stared at the incriminating paper, absolutely unable to digest the information it carried. Then with a rush understanding came to him, and he knew that Mike Stelton, the trusted foreman of the Bar T ranch, was really the leader of the rustlers, and was the most active of all of them in robbing old Beef Bissell.

For a long time he sat motionless on his horse, reviewing all the events that had passed, which now explained the remarkable activity of the rustlers and their ability to escape pursuit and capture.

“I don’t know where Indian Coulee is, Stelton,” he said to himself, “but I’ll be there at ten if it’s within riding distance.”

CHAPTER XVIII

THE IMMORTAL TEN

Jimmie Welsh threw his hand into the discard and grinned sheepishly.

“Yuh got me this time,” he said.

Billy Speaker, who held a full house, kings up, smiled pleasantly.

“I allow yuh’ll have to put yore gun in the next pot if you want to stick along,” he said. “An’ if yuh do I’ll win it off yuh and get away from here.”

“No,” said Jimmie regretfully, “if it was any other time I might resk it, but not now.”

Red Tarken, who had been shuffling the single greasy pack of cards, began to deal. In the game beside these three were two more sheepmen and another cattle-raiser.

The six sat in the shade of a huge bowlder that had broken off and rolled down the side of the red scoria butte. The game had been going on for hours, and captors and captives alike played with all the cowboys’ fervent love of gambling. Tarken, Speaker, and their companion were free to move as they liked, but were on parole not to try to overpower their guardians.

Others of the eleven owners sat about in the shade of rocks, playing cards, or talking and doing their best to pass away the time. It was a strange gathering. Only one man remained sitting by himself with bent head and his hands bound behind him. This was Beef Bissell, the cattle-king, who had steadfastly refused to give his word to remain peaceable, and fumed his life away hour after hour with vain threats and recriminations.

At either end of the small inclosure that backed against the butte, two men with Winchesters in their hands bestrode motionless horses.

This perpetual guard, kept night and day, though invisible from all but one small point, was the only sign that there was anything but the kindliest relations among

all the members of the party.

When the cowmen had found that no personal harm was to be done them, all but Bissell and one other had resigned themselves to making the best of a laughably humiliating situation. It was Billy Speaker himself who had suggested the idea of the paroles, and as Jimmie Welsh knew the word of a Westerner was as good as his bond, the pact was soon consummated.

It was a remarkable formation in a desolate spot that the sheepmen had taken for a prison. It is a common fact that on many of these high buttes and mesas the pitiless weather of ages has chiseled figures, faces, and forms which, in their monstrous grotesquery, suggest the discarded clay modelings of a half-witted giant.

This place was a kind of indentation in the side of a precipitous butte, above which the cliff (if it may be so called) arched over part way like a canopy. The floor was of rock and lower than the plain, but over it were scattered huge blocks of stone that had fallen from above. Other stones had, in the course of time, made a sort of breastwork about this level flooring so that the retreat was both a refuge and a defense.

Better even than its construction was its situation. This particular spot was a corner of real “bad lands,” and lumpy ridges, hogbacks, and barren buttes arose on all sides like waves in a sea. So numerous were they that unless riders passed directly by the sheepmen’s hiding place the chances of discovery were almost nil. At one spot only was it visible, and that was a place where the edges of two hogbacks failed to lap and hide it.

The sheepmen were aware of this, and their two guards were placed out of range of that single opening. The distance to it was almost half a mile.

The game of poker went on. Billy Speaker sat with his back to this opening, and after a while, in the natural progress of things, the sun crept over the top of the rock and smote him. It was a hot sun, although it was declining, and presently Billy gave warning that he was about to take off his coat.

When he did so without an alarming display of hidden weapons, the fancy suspenders he wore came in for considerable attention. Now cowmen or cowboys almost never wore braces; either their trousers were tight enough at the waist to stay up, or they wore a leather strap to hold them. Suspenders hampered an active man.

But Billy Speaker, who had originally come from Connecticut fifteen years ago,

wore these braces and treasured them because his mother had given much light from her aging eyes and many stitches from her faltering needle to the embroidery that traveled up and down both shoulder straps. She had embroidered everything he could wear time and again, and at last had fallen back on the braces as something new.

After free and highly critical comment regarding this particular aid to propriety, the game was permitted to go on. It happened to be Billy Speaker's lucky day, and he had nearly cleaned the entire six of all their money and part of their outfits. In the exhilaration of raking in his gains he moved about really lively, forgetful of the brilliantly polished nickel-plated buckles that decorated his shoulder-blades and denoted the height to which his nether garment had been hoisted.

Out in the bad lands a troop of horsemen moved slowly forward, detached bodies scouring the innumerable hogbacks for signs of their prey. There were a few more than a hundred in this body, and it represented the pick of ten ranches. At the head of it rode a stolid, heavy-faced man, who appeared as though he were in constant need of a shave, and whose features just now were drawn down into a scowl of thought and perplexity.

This man's body remained quite motionless as his horse plodded on with hanging head, but his small black eyes darted from side to side ceaselessly.

It was in one of these quick glances that he experienced a blinding flash upon his retina. A second later it occurred again, and then a third time. Suspiciously the man drew his horse to a stand, and those behind him did likewise.

Stelton thought for a moment that there must have been an outbreak from the near-by Wind River or Shoshone Reservation, and that the Indians were heliographing to one another. Presently, in an open space between the edges of two buttes he caught the flash close to the ground.

It probably was a tin can left by a herder—they often flashed that way—but he would prove it before he went on. He took from their case the pair of field-glasses that swung from his shoulder and raised them to his eyes.

What he saw caused him to swear excitedly and order the company to back out of sight.

At the same instant Jimmie Welsh, holding a straight flush, looked up triumphantly at Billy Speaker who had just raised him. He looked over Billy's shoulder and the smile froze on his face. He continued to look, and the cards

dropped one by one out of his hand. Then his face became stern and he jumped to his feet.

“No more of this,” he ordered. “We’re discovered. You fellows get back out of sight,” he added to the cowmen. “Here, Harry, Bill, Chuck, search these fellers again an’ see they ain’t got nothin’ in their shoes.”

“What ails yuh, Jimmie? Are yuh locoed?” asked a man who had not understood the sudden change in Welsh.

“I plenty wish I was,” came the reply, “but I ain’t. We’ve been discovered, an’ we’ve got to fight. I don’t know how many there was in the other party, but I ’low we ain’t in it noways. Red an’ Plug, you take yore horses round the butte to where the others are tethered, an’ help Jimmie and Newt bring in them casks o’ water. They ought to be back from the spring by this time. Tip, Lem, and Jack, help me put our friends here in the most-sheltered places.”

In a moment the camp that had been sleepy and placid was bustling with a silent, grim activity. From secret places men produced Winchesters, revolvers, and knives, if they carried them. In half an hour all the food had been brought in, and the casks of water laboriously filled at a brackish pool five miles away.

“That flush excited yuh so you seen a mirage, Jimmie,” bantered Speaker, whose ready wit and genial manner had won their way into the sheepman’s affection.

“I hope so,” was the curt response. But Welsh had seen no mirage, and he was aware of the fact, knowing that a council of war was delaying the action of the other party.

His chief concern was the disposal of his prisoners. Excepting for the first line of breastworks, the only protection in the flat area of the camp was derived from the masses of stone that had fallen into it, and behind which one or two men could hide. At last it was decided that the prisoners, unarmed as they were, should lie down behind the wall out of danger’s way, while the sheepmen should take their chances behind the rocks. Another reason for this was, that it would never do to have the prisoners behind the men who were doing the fighting, ready to attack from the rear at first chance.

Each man had fifty rounds of ammunition, and was a fairly good shot, not, of course, equaling the cowboys in this respect. The prisoners had hardly been placed when, from behind a neighboring hogback, rode a man waving a white handkerchief.

Welsh stepped out of the camp and drove him back before he could talk,

realizing the fellow’s clever idea of spying on the defenders’ position.

The cowboy had little to say except to demand the immediate surrender of the cattle-owners and the delivery up to court martial of half the sheepmen. Jimmie laughed in the messenger’s face, and told him to tell whoever was boss of that outfit to come and take anything he wanted, and to come well heeled.

Then he went back to the rocky camp and stood his men up in a row.

“We got to keep our guests another week yet, boys,” he said. “Mr. Larkin won’t be up the range till that time, and our job is to keep them cowboys occupied so as to hold the range open for the sheep. Now anybody what don’t want to take chances with lead can go from here now and get hung by the punchers. If there’s many of ’em I allow we won’t see Montana ag’in till we’re angels; if there ain’t, they won’t see the Bar T. Now that’s the story. One other thing.

“Our guests are out in front. If yuh see any of ’em actin’ funny or tryin’ to get away, put a hole in ’em an’ end that right off. Hear that, boys?” he yelled to the cowmen who were on the ground behind the defense.

“Yep,” they shouted, and continued to chaff one another unmercifully in the greatest good-humor.

The old story states that the Spartans prepared for the battle of Thermopylæ by oiling their bodies and brushing their hair, much to the surprise of the Persians, who were forever wailing to their gods. This story has come down to us to illustrate solid, supreme courage in the face of certain death.

No less inspiring, though in a different way, was the preparation of Jimmie Welsh and his nine sheepmen. They cracked jokes on the situation, reminded one another of certain private weaknesses under fire, recalled famous range yarns, and enumerated the several hundred things that were going to happen to the enemy during the next few hours.

In all this banter the cowmen joined with their own well-flavored wit.

These facts have been given to show the natures of these men who made the West; who carved, unasked, an empire for the profit of us who live now, and who, in a space of less than forty years, practically passed from the face of the earth. Trained by their environment, they finally conquered it and left it to a more-civilized if softer generation.

At four o’clock of that afternoon came the first attack.

Stelton and his men were under a great disadvantage. In front of the sheepmen’s

defense was a little plain some three hundred yards across which was bare of any protection. The canopy of rock that overshadowed the camp prevented attack from above or behind. There was nothing for it but an onslaught in the face of a deadly fire.

Suddenly from around the butte that faced the camp poured the charge of the cowboys. Instantly they scattered wide, adopting the circling Indian mode of attack. On they raced to a distance of a hundred, then fifty yards.

Then, as though by preconcerted word, the Winchesters of both parties spoke, and the cowboys, turning at a sharp angle, galloped off out of range with one riderless horse, and two men, clinging, desperately wounded, to their pommels.

Jack Norton, one of the sheepmen, who had exposed himself for a better shot, dropped dead where he stood.

Now there was no word spoken. The helpless cowmen huddled against the wall while the hail of bullets swept over them in both directions, cursed softly to themselves, and smoked cigarettes. The punchers, having learned the lay of the land, drew off for consultation. Half of them were dispatched around the butte that protected the defenders and the plan of attack was changed.

On signal, the parties from both sides charged along the face of the butte toward each other, this movement being calculated to bring them out close to the enclosure without the danger of an attack in front, and at the same time give them the chance to fire upon the sheepmen from a destructive angle at either side.

The maneuver resulted in concentrating the fire within a zone of twenty-five yards, and it was fire so murderous that, before the cowboys could get out of range, ten were dead or wounded, while two of the sheepmen were killed outright and a third was disabled and rolled out into the sun to writhe in agony until his pal ran from cover and dragged him back.

The result was now a foregone conclusion, for the cowboys had solved the difficult problem of attack. Mushrooming out on either side at a distance of three hundred yards, they formed again in the shelter on either side and charged once more.

The wounded man, hearing the drumming of hoofs, seized his revolver, rolled out into the sun, and sat up on the ground. And from this position he emptied his gun at the yelling cowboys until another shot put him out of his misery.

More cowboys fell, and now, in front of the stone breastworks, a dozen bodies

lay, some twitching, and others still. The number of the defenders was reduced to five capable of holding and using a weapon, for such marksmen were the punchers that, if they did not kill outright, their bullets inflicted mortal wounds.

Jimmie Welsh was undisturbed and unhurt. He and Newt were sheltered behind one rock, while Tip and Lem defended another, and Chuck Durstine held a third by the side of his dead partner, Red. The fourth charge found them lying on the ground, contrary to their former practice of standing, and they escaped unhurt, although their ability to shoot the mounted punchers above the wall was not diminished. Again they wrought terrible havoc.

“I sure wish I could’ve cleaned up on that straight flush, Billy,” remarked Jimmie Welsh to Speaker.

“So do I, Jimmie,” returned the other; “yore bad luck was just breakin’. But, look here. Suppose you fellers quit this business now. I don’t relish yore all bein’ slaughtered this-a-way, and it’s shore a comin’ to yuh if yuh don’t quit.”

“Yuh talk like a Sunday-school class had stampeded on yuh, Billy. I’m surprised!” gibed Welsh. “Mebbe yuh don’t like yore flowery bed of ease out there, what?”

“All horsin’ aside, I mean it,” insisted Speaker. “Yuh better quit now before they come ag’in.”

“Yeah, an’ get strung up to the nearest tree fer my pains, eh? Oh, no; I like this better; but, of course, if any o’ the boys—”

“Naw! What the deuce are yuh talkin’ about?” demanded an aggrieved voice, instantly joined by the other three.

“You’re wrong, Jimmie; of course, I don’t mean that. If yuh’ll quit I’ll see that yuh don’t get strung up.”

“You’re shore some friendly, Billy,” said Jimmie, shaking his head; “but I couldn’t never look my boss in the face if I even thought o’ quittin’. That ain’t what he pays me fer.”

“I’ll give yuh a job as foreman on the Circle Arrow. I see one of you hellions got my foreman; he’s layin’ out there kickin’ still. What d’ye say?”

“I’m plumb regretful, Billy,” returned Welsh, without hesitation; “but I can’t do it. Mebbe one o’ the boys—”

“Naw!” said the boys in unified contempt.

“Well, yuh pig-headed sons o’ misery, go on an’ die, then!” cried Speaker, quite out of patience.

“Jest a minute an’ we’ll oblige yuh, Billy,” rejoined Welsh, as the dreaded drumming of hoofs foretold the next charge.

There was a tense moment of waiting, and then the fusillade began again, pitifully weak from the sheepmen. When the horsemen had whirled out of sight Lem and Newt lay groaning on the ground, while Tip O’Niell lay strangling in a torrent of blood that rushed from what had once been his face.

Welsh took one look at the tortured man, and with a crack over the head from the butt of his pistol, rendered him unconscious and stilled his blood-curdling agonies. Then he walked over to the cowmen.

“Anybody got the makin’s?” he asked. “One o’ them punchers spilt mine out o’ my pocket last time.”

Nonchalantly he showed the clean rent on the left side of his flannel shirt, just over his heart, where his pocket had been.

Somebody handed up the paper and tobacco, and he rolled a cigarette, tossing the materials back to Chuck Durstine, who sauntered up, examining his gun curiously.

Durstine, from his appearance, had no right to be alive. His cheek bled where a bullet had grazed him, his left arm was scratched, and there were three holes in his clothes. His revolver was so hot he could hardly hold it.

When they had finished their smoke they started back to their shelter, the middle rock of the enclosure.

“Well, good-by, boys,” said Jimmie. “I allow it’s pretty near my turn an’ Chuck’s.”

“Good-by!” came the chorus from the owners, all of whom had pleaded steadily with the two to give up the unequal struggle. These men were hard and brave men, and they appreciated genuine grit as nothing else in the world, for it was a great factor in their own make-up.

“I’ll tell yuh this, Jimmie,” called out Beef Bissell, whose conceptions had been undergoing a radical change for the last two hours, “if you an’ Chuck are sheepmen, I take off my hat to yuh, that’s all! I never seen better fighters anywhere.”

“Yuh ought to see us when we ain’t dry-nursin’ a dozen cattle-owners,” retorted Welsh, amid a great guffaw of laughter.

Suddenly again sounded the roar of the galloping horses.

“Well, so-long, boys!” yelled Chuck, his voice barely audible.

“So-long.”

The chorused response was cut short by the spitting of weapons. Chuck faced to the left, Welsh to the right. Both pumped two guns as fast as they could. Presently Chuck dropped one and leaned against the rock, his face distorted, but the other gun going. Jimmie felt a stab of fire, and found his weight all resting on one foot. Dropping their pistols, they drew others from holsters and fought on.

A bullet furrowed Chuck’s scalp, and the blood blinded him so that he could not shoot. He stepped out from behind the rock, “fanning” one gun and clearing his eyes with the other hand. Three bullets hit him at once, and he dropped dead, firing three shots before he reached the ground.

He had scarcely fallen when Welsh’s other leg and both arms were broken, and he tumbled in a heap just as the last of the charging cowboys swept past. When they had gone there was a moment’s silence. Then:

“Hello, anybody!” called Speaker.

There was a pause.

“Hello!” came a muffled voice. “Come an’ git me. I cain’t fight no more.” And with a great shout the owner of the Circle Arrow outfit ran to where Jimmie Welsh, the indomitable, lay helpless, disabled by six bullets, but still full of fight.

“Stick me up on that wall, Billy,” he said faintly, “an’ put a gun in each hand. I can’t shoot ’em, but them punchers’ll think I can and finish me.”

“You go to Hell!” remarked Speaker joyfully.

“Don’t call yore ranch names,” admonished Jimmie with a grin, and fainted.

CHAPTER XIX

AN INDIAN COULEE

By four o’clock in the morning the fifteen hundred head of cattle had crossed the ford of the Big Horn and were bedded down on the other side. When this hazardous business had been completed, Bud Larkin ordered the sheep brought up and kept on the eastern bank among the cool grass of the bottoms.

The captive rustlers, under guard, were being held until daylight, when, it had been decided, they would be taken to the almost deserted Bar T ranch, and kept there until further action could be determined on in regard to them.

When dawn finally came Bud looked at the stolid faces of the men, and recognized most of them as having belonged to the party that had so nearly ended his earthly career. He called them by their names, and some of them grinned a recognition.

“Hardly expected to meet yuh again,” said one amiably. “Thought it might be t’other side of Jordan, but not this side of the Big Horn.”

“That’s one advantage of raising sheep,” retorted Bud. “Mine are so well trained they stampede in time to save my life. You fellows ought to have joined me in the business then.”

“Wisht we had,” remarked another gloomily. “’Tain’t so hard on the neck in the end.”

Bud wondered at the hardihood of a man who, facing sure death, could still joke grimly about it.

Directly after breakfast the rustlers were mounted on their horses, with their arms tied behind them, and, under a guard of six men, started on their journey to the Bar T. In charge of the outfit was a gray-haired sheep-owner from Montana, and to his care Bud entrusted a long letter to Juliet that he had added to day by day with a pencil as opportunity offered.

It was such a letter as a lonely girl in love likes to get, and Bud's only thought in sending it was to prove that she was ever in his mind, and that he was still safe and well.

Weary and sleepless, Bud then prepared for the ordeal with Stelton. From Sims, who seemed to know the country thoroughly, he learned that Indian Coulee was almost thirty miles south-east, and could be distinguished by the rough weather-sculpture of an Indian head on the butte that formed one side of the ravine.

Lest there be a misunderstanding, it should be said here that this was the second day after the battle of Welsh's Butte, as it came to be known. The first day the punchers had been busy burying the dead and attending to the numerous things to which such an occasion gives rise. It was on the morning of this day that Stelton, giving as an excuse his urgent desire to return to the Bar T, had ridden away, commanding his cowboys to remain and do their portion of the work.

Late in the afternoon he had met Smithy Caldwell in a secret place, and given him a note to the leader of the band of rustlers. This Caldwell, with his usual tricky foresight, did not deliver, giving the message by word of mouth, and keeping the piece of paper as evidence in case Stelton should turn against him.

Stelton, anxious to hear how the commencement of the drive fared before returning to the Bar T ranch, camped in the hills that night, and moved on to Indian Coulee the next morning to await the messenger.

Just previous to starting on the long ride, Larkin called Sims to him.

"Now, I'll tell you why I want these cows," he said. "We've got to rush the sheep up the range. As soon as I'm gone start 'em, but surround the sheep with a line of cows, and keep a good bunch ahead. From a distance it will look like a cattle-drive, and may serve to throw the punchers off the track if they're anywhere in sight."

"By Michaeljohn! That's a good idea!" exclaimed Sims; "but I don't allow either of them will feed much."

"Let 'em starve, then; but keep 'em moving," said Bud. "We win or bust on this effort. Fact is, we've got to keep those cows anyhow, to return them to their owners if possible, and you might as well make some good use of them."

Mike Stelton, meanwhile, who had often used the place as a rendezvous before, went into the usual shady spot, dropped the reins over his horse's head, and lay down.

Stelton's heart was at peace, for the sheepmen he considered defeated at every angle. Jimmie Welsh, half dead and delirious, was on his way to the Circle Arrow ranch under Billy Speaker's care. Consequently, it was impossible that Bud Larkin should know anything of the battle at Welsh's Butte.

Larkin would go on about his plans, dreaming the cowmen still in captivity, and the pursuing punchers on a false trail, Stelton calculated. Then he chuckled at the surprise in store for the ambitious sheepmen, for the remaining cowboys under Beef Bissell had already begun to talk of a war of extermination and revenge.

When he had disposed of Larkin to his satisfaction, the foreman recollected with delight that the rustlers must have the fifteen hundred cows well up the range by this morning. The chance of their being intercepted by the cowboys was small, and the probabilities were that they would be at the northern shipping-point and well out of the way before the punchers had finished with the miserable sheep.

Two things Mike Stelton had not counted on. One was the prompt and daring action of Larkin in risking his all on one forced march up the range; the other was the treachery of Smithy Caldwell in not burning the note according to instructions.

From the first Stelton had "doped" Caldwell out all wrong. He took him for a really evil character supplied with a fund of sly cunning and clever brains that would benefit the rustlers immensely, and for that reason had warmly supported his application for membership. Somehow he did not see the cowardly streak and dangerous selfishness that were the man's two distinguishing traits.

Now, as Stelton lay in the shade with his hat over his face, steeped in roseate dreams, the weariness of a week of long marches and an afternoon's hard fighting oppressed him. He had been riding nights of late, and just to lie down was to feel drowsy. He would like to get a nap before the sun got directly above and left no shade whatever, but he did not permit himself this luxury, although, like all men with uneasy consciences, he was a very light sleeper.

He figured that he could hear the trotting of a horse in plenty of time to prepare for any possible danger, and remained flat on his back in the warm sun, half-asleep, but yet keenly alert.

Bud Larkin, sighting the coulee and Stelton's horse at a considerable distance, dismounted and promptly got out of range. Then he continued stealthily to approach, wondering why Stelton did not put in an appearance somewhere and start hostilities.

A quarter of a mile from the spot where Stelton's horse stood dejectedly Larkin left his own animal and proceeded on foot. Nearer and nearer he approached, and still there was no sign of Stelton.

Bud unslung his glasses, and scanning the rocks near the horse carefully, at last made out the small outline of a booted foot along the ground. Then he drew his revolver and crept forward, choosing every step with care.

At a distance of thirty yards his foot unconsciously crunched a bit of rotten stone. There was a scrambling behind the rock, and a moment later Stelton's head appeared. Bud had him covered with two revolvers, and on sight of the dark face ran forward to finish the job.

But the foreman was no mollycoddle, and with one lightning-like motion unlimbered his .45 and began to shoot. Like most Western gun-handlers, his revolver commenced to spit as soon as its mouth was out of the holster, and the bullets spurted up the sand twice in front of Bud before the muzzle had reached a dangerous angle, so swiftly was it fired.

But the sheepman was not idle, and had both guns working so accurately that at last Stelton drew in his head, but left his hand around the corner of the rock, still pulling the trigger. He would never have done this with any other man, but he still considered Larkin a "dude" and a sheepman, and knew that neither was much of a shot.

With a ball through his right foot, Bud hopped out of the path of the stream of lead and discharged each revolver once at the same spot. The result was a broken hand and a wrecked gun for Stelton, who, unfortunately, did not know that Larkin, on occasions, had split the edges of playing cards with dueling pistols.

Before the Bar T foreman could reach his Winchester, Bud was around the rock, and had him covered. Stelton gave one look at the hard, determined eyes of the sheepman and thought better of the impulse to bolt for the rifle on a chance. He slowly hoisted his hands.

"Well, darn it, what do yuh want?" he snarled.

"First I want you to back up against that rock and keep your hands in the air until I tell you to take 'em down," said Bud, in a tone that meant business.

Stelton obeyed the command sullenly. Then Larkin, keeping him covered, picked up the Winchester and found another .45 in an extra holster thrown over the pommel of the saddle. Next he took down Stelton's rope.

Larkin was satisfied with his investigations. “Turn around and face the rock, and hold your hands out behind you!” he ordered.

With the wicked glitter of an animal at bay in his eye, Stelton did as he was told, and in a moment Larkin had him bound and helpless, and on the end of a tether. Still covering his man, he mounted Stelton’s horse and told him to march ahead.

But the sheepman was not idle, and had both guns working so accurately that at last Stelton drew in his head.

In this manner they traveled the quarter-mile to Bud’s animal. There they exchanged beasts, and started on the long ride back to the sheep camp.

“What’re yuh doin’ this for?” stormed Stelton, at a loss to explain the sudden appearance of Larkin in Caldwell’s place, but beginning to have a terrible fear.

“Don’t you know?”

“No, I don’t.” His tone was convincing.

“Well, I’ll tell you. All the rustlers are taken, and I have absolute proof that you are their leader,” replied Bud coolly. “I allow old Bissell will be glad to see you when you’re brought in, eh?”

Stelton laughed contemptuously.

“What proof?” he demanded.

“A note to Smithy Caldwell that he forgot to burn. He tried to swallow it when I captured him, but I saw him first.”

Stelton stood the blow well and made no answer, but Larkin, watching him, saw his head drop a trifle as though he were crushed by some heavy weight.

“What’re yuh goin’ to do with me now?” he asked at last.

“Ship you under guard to the Bar T ranch, where the rest have gone. Then the cattlemen can settle your case when they come back from their vacation.”

For an instant it was on Stelton’s tongue to blurt out what had happened two days previous, but an instinctive knowledge that Larkin would profit by the information restrained him, and he continued riding on in silence, a prey to dismal thoughts better imagined than described.

CHAPTER XX

SOMEBODY NEW TURNS UP

Utterly exhausted with his day's riding and the stress of his other labors, Bud Larkin, driving his captive, arrived at the sheep camp shortly before sundown. Faint with hunger—for he had not eaten since morning—he turned Stelton over to the eager sheepmen who rode out to meet him.

Things had gone well that day with the drive, for the animals, under pressure, had made fifteen miles. The cattle, at first hard to manage, had finally been induced to lead and flank the march, but neither they nor the sheep had grazed much.

When Larkin arrived they had just reached a stream and had been separated from the sheep that both might drink untainted water. Sims had set his night watchers, and these were beginning to circle the herd. The sheep were bedding down on a near-by rise of ground.

Larkin, having eaten, cooled and bathed himself in the stream and returned to the camp for rest. Shortly thereafter a single horseman, laden with a bulky apparatus, was seen approaching from a distance. Immediately men mounted and rode out to meet him, and returned with him to camp when he had proved himself harmless and expressed a desire to remain all night in the camp.

It was Ed Skidmore, the photographer, who had just completed a profitable day at Red Tarken's ranch, the M Square.

Larkin, who was lying on the ground, heard the excitement as the newcomer rode into camp, and got up to inspect him. Skidmore had dismounted, and had his back turned when Bud approached, but suddenly turned so that the two came face to face.

As their eyes met, both started back as though some terrible thing had come between them.

"Bud! My Heavens!" cried Skidmore, turning pale under his tan.

“Lester!” was all that Larkin said as he stared with starting eyes and sagging jaw at the man before him. Then, as one in a dream, he put out his hand, and the other, with a cry of joy, seized and wrung it violently.

For a moment the two stood thus looking amazedly at each other, while the sheepmen, suddenly stricken into silence, gazed curiously at the episode. Then, one by one, they turned and walked away, leaving the two together.

It was Bud who found his voice first.

“What under heaven are you doing out here, Lester?” he asked at last.

“Earning a living making pictures,” returned the other with a short laugh. “It must be quite a shock to you to see me actually working.”

“I can’t deny it,” said Bud as he smiled a bit. “But when did you come out?”

“Six months after you did.”

“But why on earth didn’t you let me know? I would have given you a job on the ranch.”

“That’s just why I didn’t let you know. I didn’t want a job on the ranch. I wanted to do something for myself. I concluded I had been dependent on other people about long enough. I’m not mushy, or converted, or anything like that, Bud, but I figured that when the governor died and left me without a cent I had deserved everything I got and was a disgrace to the family and myself.”

“Same with me, Lester,” acknowledged Bud. “If you had only told me how you felt about things we could have struck out here together.”

“And you with all the money? I guess not,” and Lester spoke bitterly.

“I’d have divided with you in a minute, if you had talked to me the way you’re doing now. We always used to divide things when we were kids, you know.”

“That’s square of you, Bud, but I really don’t want the money now. I’m making a good go of my pictures; I don’t owe anybody, and I haven’t an enemy that I know of. What have you done with your money?”

Larkin turned around and motioned toward the thousands of sheep dotted over the hills.

“There’s all my available cash. Of course there was some in securities I couldn’t realize on by the terms of father’s will, and if I go to the wall I can always get enough to live on out of that. But my idea is to get a living out of *this*, and just now I am in the very devil of a fix.”

“How?”

Bud narrated briefly the stormy events that had led up to this final stroke by which he hoped to defeat the cowmen and save his own fortune; and as he did so he observed his brother closely.

Lester Larkin was three years younger than Bud, was smaller, and had grown up with a weak and vacillating character. The youngest child in the wealthy Larkin family, he had been spoiled and indulged until when a youth in his teens he had become the despair of them all.

Even now, despite the tanned look of health he had acquired, it could still be seen that he was by no means the strong, virile young man that Bud had become. His face was rather delicate than rugged in outline; his brown hair was inclined to curl, and his blue eyes were large and beautiful.

The sensitive mouth was still wilful, though character was beginning to show there. He was, in fact, a grand mistake in upbringing. With all the instincts of a lover of beauty he had been raised by a couple of dull parents to a rule-of-thumb existence that started in a business office late one morning and ended in a café early the next.

It was the kind of life to which the poor laborer looks up with consuming envy, and which makes him what he thinks is a socialist. Given a couple of sharp pencils and some blocks of paper, along with sympathy and encouragement, Lester Larkin might have become a writer or an artist of no mean ability.

But the elder Larkin, believing that what had made one generation would make another, had started young Lester on a high stool in his office with a larger percentage of dire results than he had ever imagined could accrue to the employment of one individual. With the high stool went a low wage and a lot of wholesome admonitions—and this, after a boyhood and early youth spent in the very lap of luxury.

Thus, when the father died, the boy, at nineteen, knew more ways to spend a dollar than his father had at thirty-nine, and less ways to earn it than his father at nine. So much for Lester.

“Well, if I can help you in any way, Bud, let me know,” he said when his brother had finished his story of the range war that was now reaching its climax. “I rather imagine I would like a jolly good fight for a change.”

“I don’t want you to get hurt, kid,” replied Bud, smiling at the other’s enthusiasm, “but I have an idea that I can use you somehow. Just stick around

for a day or two and I'll show you how to 'walk' sheep so your eyes'll pop out."

"It's purely a matter of business with me," rejoined Lester. "Pictures of seventy men at five dollars apiece, selling only one to each, will be three hundred and fifty dollars. I think I'll stick."

"Suppose I get 'em all in one group so you can't take individuals, then what will you do?"

"I'll make more money still," retorted the other promptly. "I'll sell seventy copies of the same picture at five apiece and only have to do one developing. What are you tryin' to do, kid me?"

Bud laughed and gave up the attempt to confuse the boy.

During the next two days Bud saw more sheep-walking than he had seen since going into the business, and Lester amused himself profitably by taking pictures of the embarrassed plainsmen, many of whom would not believe it possible that an exact image of them could be reproduced in the twinkling of an eye, but who were willing to pay the price if the feat were accomplished.

When he had filled all his private orders, the picturesqueness of the life and outfit with which he traveled so appealed to Lester that he made nearly a hundred plates depicting the daily events of the drive and the camp. And these hundred plates, three-quarters of which were excellent, form by far the best collection of actual Western scenes of that time and are still preserved in the old Larkin ranch house in Montana.

At the end of the two days the Gray Bull River was still twenty miles away and would require an equal amount of time to be reached and crossed. During this period Bud Larkin knew nothing whatever of the fate of Jimmie Welsh and his companions, believing that they still held the repentant cowmen captive, and that the punchers in pursuit were still searching the bad lands for them—an almost endless task.

He was in a state of high good humor that his plans had carried out so well, and looked forward with almost feverish impatience to the glorious hour when the last of his bawling merinos should stand dripping, but safe, on the other side of the Gray Bull. The nearer approach to the stream brought a greater nervous tension and scouts at a five-mile radius rode back and forth all day searching for any signs of spying cowpunchers.

The thought that he might effect the passage without hindrance or loss was stretching the improbable in Bud's mind, and he devoted much time every day to

an inspection of his supplies and accouterments.

CHAPTER XXI

JULIE INVESTIGATES

The occasion when nine men with their hands tied behind them arrived at the Bar T ranch, accompanied by six others with Winchesters across their saddle bows, was an extremely happy one for Juliet Bissell. This happiness was not associated, except superficially, with the capture of the rustlers, but had to do especially with the receipt of a certain smeared and blackened journal from a certain tall and generously proportioned young man.

The captives arrived at noon, but it was nearly supper-time before she had finished reading, around, amid, among and between the lines, despite the fact that the lines themselves left very little doubt as to the writer's meaning.

This was not the same beautiful girl Bud Larkin had left behind him that early morning of his escape. Since that time she had changed. The eyes that had formerly been but the beautiful abode of allurement and half-spoken promises, had taken on a sweet and patient seriousness. The corners of her mouth still turned up as though she were about to smile, but there was a firmer set to them that spoke of suppressed impulses.

She moved with a greater dignity, and for the first time became aware of the real worth of her mother, who until now she had somehow taken for granted. Martha's consternation and grief at her husband's sudden and prolonged disappearance, only broken by the visit of Skidmore and his camera, had been really pitiful, and the girl's eyes were opened to the real value and beauty of an undying love.

Her own misery, after the receipt of the letter brought by Skidmore, she had faced alone, and in her, as in all good and true natures, it had worked a change. It had softened her to the grief of another, and showed her, for the first time, that happiness is only really great when in sharp contrast with pain.

So this long and simple love-letter from Bud, while satisfying the cravings of the lover, stirred up again the misgivings of the doubter. And her cogitations resulted

in the admission that Bud must be either one of two things. Either he was absolutely innocent of the imputations contained in the letter that Skidmore brought, or he was one of the most consummate villains at large.

There were grounds for both suppositions, and the girl, after hours of vain struggle, found herself still in the middle ground, but more nervous and anxious than she had ever been.

The arrival of Mike Stelton under guard two days after that of the other rustlers created a sensation. For the girl it was the blow that shattered another illusion, for although she had never cared for the foreman, her belief in his unswerving faithfulness to the Bissell house was absolute. Now to see him the admitted leader of the gang that had steadily impoverished her father was almost unbelievable.

The man who brought Stelton in also brought a hurried scrawl to Juliet from Bud, which read:

> DARLING:
>
> We are more than half-way up the range. Have recovered 1,500 head of rebranded stock, much of which is Bar T. Stelton is the head of the rustlers and I have the proof. Sorry to foist these criminals on the Bar T, but it was the nearest ranch, and besides, I want them there when your father comes home. Also I want to be able to tell you that I love you, and will love you always. With luck, two days ought to see the end of all these troubles.
>
> YOUR BUD.

Probably the most miserable man in the whole cow country at this time was Smithy Caldwell. Aside from the fate he feared, his position among the captured rustlers was one of utter torture. The men had discovered that it was through his selfish scheming that Stelton had been betrayed, and they treated him with the cruelty and scorn of rough, savage men.

So, when Stelton appeared, Caldwell fairly cringed. With the strange, unreasoning terror of a coward he feared bodily harm at the hands of the foreman, forgetting that, in all probability, his life was forfeit sooner or later.

His fear was all but realized, for no sooner were Stelton’s hands unbound as he caught sight of Caldwell than he made a leap for him and would have strangled him then and there had not others pulled the two apart.

“There, you whelp!” bellowed Stelton. “That’s a sample of what you’ll get later on. All I ask is to see you kickin’ at the end of a rope, you yellow-bellied traitor!” And Smithy, clutching at his throat, staggered, whimpering, away.

The day after Stelton’s arrival Juliet conceived the idea of questioning the foreman about the letter that she knew Smithy Caldwell had written her. At her request he was brought into the living-room of the ranch house with his hands tied to permit of the guard leaving them together.

Now that all Bud’s prophecies in regard to the man had been fulfilled, she feared him, and one glance at his dark, contorted face as he was led in increased this fear.

For his part the very sight of this sweet, quiet girl for whom he had waited so long, and through whose lover he was now doomed, brought a very eruption of rage. His lips parted and bared his teeth, his eyes were bloodshot, and his swarthy face worked with fury.

“Mike, I’m sorry to see you here like this,” said Juliet gently.

“A lot you are!” he sneered brutally. “You’re tickled to death. Hope to see me swing, too, I suppose?”

“Don’t talk like that,” she protested, horrified at the change in the man. “I’m going to try to see what I can do for you, though Heaven knows you don’t deserve much.”

Fury choked him and prevented a reply. At last he managed to articulate.

“What do yuh want of me?” he growled.

“I want you to tell me about a letter that I received a few days ago. It was brought here by a man by the name of Skidmore, who takes pictures.”

At the identification of the letter, Stelton’s eyes glittered and his mouth grinned cruelly.

“What do yuh want to know about it?” he asked.

“First I want to know why you wrote it?”

“I didn’t write it,” he snarled.

“Well, then, why you had Caldwell write it?”

“How do you know I had Caldwell write it?”

His tone was nasty and she could see that he was enjoying the misery he caused

her.

But though Juliet was humbled, she was none the less a daughter of her father, and at Stelton's tone and manner her imperious anger flashed up.

"Look here, Stelton," she said in a cold, even tone, "please remember who I am and treat me with respect. If you speak to me again as you have this afternoon I will call those men in and have you quirted up against a tree. If you don't believe me, try it."

But Stelton was beyond speech. All the blood in him seemed to rush to his head and distend the veins there. He struggled with his bonds so furiously that the girl rose to her feet in alarm. Then she walked to the library table, opened the drawer and took out a long, wooden-handled .45.

With this in her possession she resumed her seat. Presently the foreman, unable to free his hands, ceased his struggles through sheer exhaustion.

"I know you made Caldwell write that letter," she said, balancing the gun, "and I want to know why you did it?"

Stelton, finding physical intimidation impossible, resorted to mental craft.

"I didn't want you to love that sheepman," he replied sullenly.

"Why not?"

"Because all those things about him are true, and I thought I'd let yuh know before yuh broke yore heart."

She searched his face keenly and had to confess to herself that he spoke with absolute sincerity. Her face slowly paled, and for a moment the room seemed to whirl about her. The world appeared peopled with horrible gargoyles that resembled Stelton and that leered and gibbered at her everywhere.

The foreman saw her wince and grow pallid, and his fury was cooled with the ice of fiendish satisfaction. He could hurt her now.

"Because you say so doesn't prove it to me," she managed to say at last, though she scarcely recognized the voice that came from her tremulous lips.

"I can give you proof enough if you want it," he snapped, suddenly taken with an idea.

"You can?" The words were pitiful, and her voice broke with the stress of her misery.

“Yes.”

“How?”

“Get Smithy Caldwell in here. He knew that lover of yore’s when he wasn’t quite such a sheepman. He’ll tell yuh things that’ll make yore hair stand on end.”

In his delight at his plan Stelton could not keep the exultant cruelty out of his voice.

Juliet pounded on the floor with the butt of her weapon (this was the signal agreed upon for the removal of Stelton), and a sheepman almost immediately thrust his head in at the door.

“Yes, ma’am?” he inquired.

“Bring Smithy Caldwell in, please,” she requested, “and tie his hands.”

When the miserable fellow was pushed through the doorway and saw Stelton standing inside he shrank back against the wall and stood looking from one to the other with the quick, white eyes of a trapped animal. The thought came to him that perhaps these two were already deciding his fate, and his weak chin quivered.

“Sit down, Caldwell,” said Juliet, coolly motioning him to one of the rough chairs. He slunk into it obediently.

“I want to ask you about that letter you sent me in which you said several things about Mr. Larkin,” she went on not unkindly, her heart going out to the wretch, so abject was his misery.

“Mike here says that everything in that letter is true, and that you can prove it,” she continued. “Is that so?”

Involuntarily Caldwell looked toward Stelton for orders, as he had always done, and in those beetling brows and threatening eyes saw a menace of personal injury that indicated his course at once.

“No, don’t look at Mike; look at me,” cried Juliet, and Caldwell obediently switched his gaze back. “Are those things true?”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Caldwell without hesitation.

“You mean to tell me that he was married before?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Where?”

“In Chicago to a woman by the name of Mary. She was a cousin of mine.”

“Oh, God!” The low cry burst from Juliet’s pale lips before she could recover herself, and Stelton lay back in his chair, feeding his unspeakable nature upon the girl’s torture.

“Shall I tell you about it?” Caldwell, seeing his former chief was pleased, now took the initiative.

“Oh, no, no!” she cried frantically. “I don’t want to hear. I never want to hear!”

For a few moments there was silence in the low, bare room while Juliet recovered herself. Then she said:

“And about that other thing in the letter. Why are the officers after Bud?”

“For forgery, ma’am. That is, I mean, they would be after him if they knew everything.” A cunning smirk crossed Smithy’s countenance.

“Why don’t they know everything?” asked the girl.

“Because I haven’t told ’em,” was the reply.

“And so you blackmailed him under threat of telling, did you?”

“Well, he seemed to be willin’,” countered Smithy evasively, “or he wouldn’t have paid.”

“Why did you write me that letter, Caldwell?”

“The boss here told me to,” motioning toward Stelton.

“What reason did he give for telling you?”

Caldwell did not like this question. He turned and twisted in his seat without replying, and shot a quick glance at Stelton, uncertain what reply was expected of him. But he got no help there.

Stelton was relishing the fear and anxiety of his tool and watched to see which way the other’s cowardice would lead him. He was quite unprepared for the answer that came.

“It is a long worm that has no turning,” someone has remarked, and Caldwell had reached his length. The pure cruelty of Stelton’s conduct revolted him, and now, sure that Stelton could do him no harm because of his tied hands, he took a vicious dig at his former leader.

“He wanted to marry you himself,” he said, “and offered me a hundred dollars to

write you that letter."

Stelton sat for a moment open-mouthed at the temerity of his subordinate and then leaped up with a roar like the bellow of a bull.

Juliet pounded hastily on the floor, and the sheepmen appeared just as Stelton fetched Caldwell a kick that sent him half-way across the room.

"Take them both away," ordered the girl, suddenly feeling faint and ill after the mental and physical struggle of the interview.

When the two had gone she sank back in her chair and faced the awful facts that these men had given her.

"Bud! Bud! My lover!" she cried brokenly to herself. "I want you, I need you now to tell me it is all a lie!"

She remained for several minutes sunk in a kind of torpor. Then, as though she had suddenly arrived at some great decision, she rose slowly, but determinedly, and left the room. Finding one of the men, she ordered her horse saddled and retired to change her clothes.

Her mother came in and asked if she were going riding alone.

"Yes, mother," replied the girl quietly. "I am going to Bud and find out the truth about him. I cannot live like this any longer. I shall go crazy or kill myself. But I promise you this, that I will find father and bring him home to you."

The eyes of Martha Bissell clouded with long-suppressed tears.

"God bless you, Juliet," she said. "I can't live without him any longer."

CHAPTER XXII

THE USE OF PHOTOGRAPHY

It was noon and the great column of parched animals and hot, dusty men had come to a halt under their alkali cloud beside a little stream. The foot-weary sheep and cattle, without the usual preliminaries, lay down where they stood, relieved for once from the incessant nipping of the dogs and proddings of the men.

Sims, walking among the sheep with down-drawn brows, noted their condition, how gaunt they were, how dirty and weary, and shook his head in commiseration. Had he but known it he was as gaunt and worn-looking as the weakest of them. Returning to where Larkin had dropped in the shade of the cook-wagon, he said:

“We’ve got to make it to-night if the Old Boy himself is in the way.”

Larkin realized the seriousness of the situation. Water and feed were plentiful, but owing to the hurry of the drive the animals were starving on their feet. Less than five miles away was the Gray Bull River, the goal of their march. Once across that and they would be out of the Bar T range and free to continue north, for the next ranch-owner had gone in for sheep himself (one of the first to see the handwriting on the wall), and had gladly granted Larkin’s flocks a passage across his range.

“What I can’t understand is where all those cowpunchers are,” continued Sims. “I’m plenty sure they wouldn’t let us through if we was within a foot of the river, they’re that cussed.”

He had hardly got the words out of his mouth when from ahead of the herd appeared a horseman at a hard gallop, quirting his pony at every few jumps.

Pulling the animal back on its haunches at the cook-wagon, the rider vaulted out of the saddle and was blurting out his story almost before he had touched the ground.

“Up ahead there!” he gasped. “Cow-punchers! Looks like a hundred of ’em. I seen ’em from a butte. I ’low they’ve dug fifty pits and they’ve stuck sharp stakes into the ground pointed this way. They’re ready fer us, an’ don’t yuh ferget it.”

Sims and Larkin looked at each other without speaking. Now it was plain that the punchers had had plenty of reason for not molesting them; they had been preparing a surprise.

“An’ that ain’t all, boss,” went on the rider. “I took a slant through my glasses, and what d’yuh suppose I seen? There, as big as life, was old Beef Bissell an’ Red Tarken, and a lot more o’ them cowmen. How they ever got there I dunno, but it’s worth figurin’ out of a cold winter’s evenin’.”

This information came as a knockdown. The two men questioned their informant closely, unable to credit their ears, but the man described the ranch-owners so accurately that there was no room left for doubt.

“Then what’s become o’ Jimmie Welsh and his nine men?” asked Sims wonderingly.

“Mebbe they’re captured; but I couldn’t see anythin’ of ’em.”

“Nope,” said Bud slowly, “they aren’t captured. They’re dead. I know Jimmie and his men, and I picked them for that job because I knew how they would act. Poor boys! If I get through here alive I’ll put a monument where they died.”

He ceased speaking, and a sudden silence descended on all the company, for the other men had been listening to this report. Each man’s thoughts in that one instant were with Jimmie and his nine men in their last extremity at Welsh’s Butte, although the site of the tragedy was as yet unknown to them.

“What about the lay of the country?” Sims finally asked of the scout.

“Dead ahead is the big ford, but that is what the punchers have protected. I could see that either up or down from the ford the water’s deep, because there ain’t no bottoms there—the bank’s right on top of the river.”

“Where is the next nearest ford?”

“Ten miles northeast, this season of the year,” was the reply.

“Thunderation, boss, what’ll we do?” inquired Sims petulantly.

“Call Lester, and we three will talk it over,” said Bud, a half-formed plan already in his mind.

Presently the three were alone and discussing the situation. Bud proposed his scheme and outlined it clearly. For perhaps a quarter of an hour he talked, interrupted by the eager, enthusiastic exclamations of Lester. When he had finished, Sims lay back on his two elbows and regarded his employer.

“If yuh keep on this-a-way, boss,” he remarked, “I allow we might let yuh herd a few lambs next spring, seein’ yuh *will* learn the sheep business.”

Bud grinned at the other’s compliment and noted Lester’s enthusiasm. Then they plunged into the details.

“Better ride your horse around by way of the ford ten miles away,” were the instructions as Lester saddled up. “Then you can come at ’em by the rear.”

No word of young Larkin’s intention had passed about the camp, and the sheepmen watched with considerable wonder the departure of the boy, placing it to Bud’s fear of his receiving an injury in the trouble that was almost surely bound to happen that night.

At three o’clock in the afternoon, or thereabouts, Lester, with his outfit strapped on his dejected horse, rode slowly away from the sheepmen’s camp.

Meanwhile, behind the various defenses that had been erected against the coming of Bud Larkin and his animals, the cowmen and their punchers were making ready for their night’s battle. The chief actor in these fevered preparations was Beef Bissell, whose hatred of Larkin was something to frighten babies with at night.

Since the gallant battle at Welsh’s Butte, Bissell had changed some of his ideas regarding sheepmen in general; but he had changed none regarding Larkin in particular. It was now a matter of pride and determination, almost of oath with him, to fight this matter of the range to the finish. The other cowmen stood by him out of principle and because of the need of a unified stand by men of their association.

So here in the last ditch, ready to sacrifice men, animals, and money, wrong and knowing it, these beef barons prepared to dispute the last inch of their territory. It should never be said, they had sworn, that sheep had crossed the cattle-range of any of them. On this elevating platform they proposed to make their fight.

To be perfectly just to all concerned, it is only right to add that all who did not choose to remain, either owners or punchers, were perfectly free to withdraw, but in doing so they forfeited their membership in the association. But one man had taken advantage of this—Billy Speaker.

“If there’s any damage to be done, those sheep have already done it. Why don’t yuh let ’em through, yuh ol’ fat-head?” said Speaker to Bissell as, with his cowboys, he threw his leg over the saddle and started homeward.

Despite the havoc to their numbers occasioned by the battle with Jimmie Welsh, all the others stood by. With the cowboys this matter of war and its hazards was a decided improvement over the dangerous monotony of spring round-ups. Moreover, as long as one remained able to collect it, five dollars a day was several pegs better than forty dollars a month and all found.

To-day as the late sun drooped low toward the horizon revolvers and guns were being oiled, and other preparations made for a vigorous campaign. The camp backed directly on the river at the only fordable spot within ten miles, the stream forming the fourth side to a square, the other three sides of which were breastworks of earth and trenches.

A rope stretched from the three cook-wagons served as a coral for the horses, and in it were gathered fully sixty-five animals, waiting impatiently to be hobbled, and turned out to feed. They waited in vain, however, for it was a matter of course that they should stand saddled and ready for instant use.

Directly before the front of these earthworks were the pits and *chevaux de frise* of sharp stakes that had been reported to Bud. The intention was to stampede the animals if possible, and run them into the pits and upon the stakes while a force of men, protected by the trenches, poured a withering and continuous fire into the on-surging mass. Meanwhile the greater force on horseback would be engaging the sheepmen.

That the cowboys knew the location of the flocks goes without saying, for had they not had spies on the lookout, the telltale pillar of dust that ever floated above the marching thousands would have betrayed their exact position.

The sun had just dropped below the horizon, when a man in the cowpunchers’ camp discerned a weary horse bearing a hump-shouldered rider disconsolately in the direction of the ford. The man, bore strange-looking paraphernalia, and could be classified as neither fish, flesh, nor fowl—that is, cowboy, sheepman, or granger.

Without pausing the man urged his horse into the water at the ford, where it drank deeply. The man flung himself off the saddle and, scooping the water in his hands, imitated the horse’s eagerness. When he had apparently satisfied an inordinate thirst he looked up at the man across the river and said:

“Say, could I git some grub in yore camp?”

“Yuh better move on, pardner. This here’s resky territory,” replied the other, his Winchester swinging idly back and forth across the stranger’s middle.

“I’m hungry enough to take a chance,” was the reply as Lester walked his mount deliberately across the stream. “Besides, I want to do business with yuh.”

Another man, hearing the controversy, came up and ordered the newcomer away. Lester asked him who he was.

“My name’s Bissell,” snorted the man.

Lester advanced the rest of the way to shore his hand outstretched.

“I’m plumb glad to know yuh,” he said. “My name’s Skidmore, an’ I’ve just come from the Bar T. I take pitchers, I do—yessir, the best in the business; an’ if yuh don’t believe me, just look at these.”

From somewhere in his saddle-bags Skidmore whipped out two photographs and handed them to Bissell.

There, looking at him, sat Martha, in some of her long-unused finery, and Juliet, the daughter who had until now been the greatest blessing of his life.

Bissell started back as though he had seen a ghost, so excellent and speaking were the likenesses.

“Yes, they asked me to come an’ take one of yuh, Mr. Bissell,” went on the photographer.

“They did?” snapped Beef suspiciously. “How’d they know where I was?”

“Stelton told ’em. I was there when he got home.”

“Oh, yes—Stelton, of course,” apologized the owner. “How d’ye take the blame things? With that contraption yuh’ve got there?”

“Yes, and I think there is still light enough for me to get you!” cried Skidmore, snatching his outfit from the back of his horse and starting hurriedly to set it up.

By this time quite a crowd had gathered, some of whom had never seen a camera in operation, and none of whom had seen such pictures as Skidmore was able to pass around.

Bissell posed with the embarrassed air of a schoolboy saying his first piece, and after that Skidmore was busy arranging his subjects long after it was too dark to make an impression on the plates. Finally, affecting utter weariness, he asked for

food, and the best in the camp was laid before him.

“Can’t do any more to-night,” he said when he had finished. “But to-morrow I can take a few; I have about half-a-dozen plates left.”

“I may not look as tidy to-morrow morning as I do now,” remarked one puncher suggestively. “Too bad yuh can’t take pictures at night as well as in the daytime.”

“I can,” announced Skidmore, quite complacently.

“Well, didn’t yuh just tell me,” demanded an irate cowboy who vainly undertook to grasp the science of photography, “that the light actin’ on the plate made the pitcher?”

“Yes.”

“Well, how in the road to hell can yuh take ’em when it’s dark?”

“He rents a star, yuh fool!” volunteered another.

“I make my own light,” explained Skidmore.

“How? With a wood-fire?” asked the curious puncher.

“No. Shall I show yuh?”

“Yes.”

The reply came in a chorus, for the arrival of this man with his strange apparatus had created a stir among his hosts that one cannot conceive in these days of perfect pictures. The cowpunchers were not worrying about attack, for they had outposts on duty who could warn them of the advance of the enemy in plenty of time. The amusement of the camera was a fine thing with which to pass the lagging hours.

“All right,” said Skidmore. “By George,” he cried, “I’ve just the idea! My plates are low, and I’ll take a picture of the whole outfit together.”

“What! Get seventy men on the same thing that’ll only hold one?” cried another puncher, furious that these wonders eluded him. “If yuh’re foolin’ with me, son, I’ll shoot yer contraption into a thousand pieces.”

“Easiest thing in the world,” said the photographer carelessly. “Only I’ll have to ask yuh to move away from the fire; that’ll spoil the plate. I think over here is a good place.” He led the way to a spot directly in front of the horse corral.

Then he caused the lowest row to sit on the ground, the one behind it kneel, and the last stand up, and after peering through his camera made them close up

tightly so that all could get into the picture. By the glow from the camp-fire it was a wonderful scene. The light showed broad hats, knotted neckerchiefs, and weather-beaten, grinning faces. It glanced dully from holsters and brightly from guns and buckles.

On a piece of board Skidmore carefully arranged his flashlight powder and took the cap off the lens. Then he ran to the fire and picked up a burning splinter, telling them all to watch it.

“Steady, now!” he commanded. “All quiet.”

He thrust the lighted spill into the powder, and there was a blinding flash, accompanied by a hollow roar like a sudden gust of wind.

The next instant a terrific commotion arose in the corral. There were squeals of terror, and before the men could catch their breath the sixty-five cow ponies had bolted in a mad stampede, overturning the cook-wagons and thundering across the prairie.

The punchers, absolutely sightless for the instant from looking at the flash of the powder, broke into horrible cursing, and ran blindly here and there, colliding with one another and adding to the already great confusion. Their one desire was to lay hands on the wretched photographer, but that desire was never fulfilled.

For Lester Larkin, having shut his eyes during the flash, easily evaded the men and made his way to his horse that had been tethered to a tree near the river. With his instrument under his arm he untied the animal, climbed on his back, and dug in the spurs. A moment later, during the height of the confusion, he was galloping along parallel to the river. A mile and a half from the camp he turned his horse’s head and sped at full speed toward the advancing herds.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE CROSSING

Darkness had scarcely fallen over the Larkin flocks and herd when the former were set in motion. The bells had been removed and the sheep were urged forward at the fastest possible pace.

Riders going by long détours had found a spot on the banks of the river two miles up from the camp of the cowmen where the water was not more than five or six feet deep at most, though of considerable swiftness. It was here that it had been determined the sheep should cross. So, when the last march was begun, the animals were driven at an angle, avoiding all the pits and defenses of the cowmen's ingenuity.

The herders, some of them on horseback and others on foot, did not speak. The only sounds that rose from the densely packed flocks were the clatter of their hard feet on the earth, the cracking of their ankle bones, and an occasional bawl of protest. But even this last was rare, for the sheep, worn with fast traveling and ignorant of the meaning of the strange things that were happening to them, were half-frightened; and only contented flocks blether much.

Bud Larkin and Sims rode back and forth, one on each side of the dim, heaving line, seeing that the herders and dogs kept their places and preventing any tendency to bolt.

An hour after the start half the distance was accomplished. It was just at this time that Larkin, looking northeast toward the camp of the cowmen, saw a sudden brilliant flash of light, and knew that Lester had succeeded in his daring project. A moment later and the distant rumble of the earth told him of the stampeded horses.

In depriving the cowboys of their ponies Larkin had accomplished a master-stroke, for he had played upon the one weakness of their equipment. A cowboy without his horse is less effective than a seal on land. His boots, tight-fitting and with high heels, make walking not only a difficult operation, but a painful one.

Unaccustomed to this means of locomotion, a puncher is weary and footsore within two miles.

Aside from this fact, a cowboy disdains setting his foot on the ground except in a cow town, and even there daring ones sometimes rode their animals into saloons and demanded their drinks. It is a saying that a puncher will chase his horse half a mile in order to ride a quarter of a mile on an errand.

The *coup* of Lester Larkin had, therefore, left the camp of the cowmen in serious straits. Afraid to chase their animals and leave the camp deserted, as soon as they recovered enough sight to recognize their surroundings they took their places in the trenches to carry on their defense as best they could.

Busy as Larkin's thoughts were with the duty of getting his sheep safely across the river, his mind occasionally flashed back to the rear of the flock where the cook-wagons were trailing, for there in the company of a friendly sheepman rode Juliet Bissell.

Only that afternoon she had left the Bar T ranch-house, and, directed by one of the men guarding the rustlers there, had set out to find the sheepmen's camp. Not realizing how fast the outfit was traveling, she had struck the trail far to the rear, and had not overtaken Larkin until just at the time when the sheep were set in motion.

Then she realized her mission would have to wait until a later time. But so sweet and full-hearted had been Bud's joyful greeting that her faith in him had again returned, and she rode along meekly where he placed her, fond and comforted.

The proprieties of the situation never occurred to her. She knew that she was safe in his hands, and only bided the time when she could pour out her sorrow and pain to him after all this struggle was over.

To Bud her coming had been inexpressibly sweet. He knew by her face that some great necessity had driven her to him, but he did not question her, and with the undisturbed security of a clean conscience he wondered anxiously what had occurred.

At the time when the sheep were half-way to the river-bank there was another movement back at the camp where the cattle had been left. Men there working on schedule started the cattle-drive. But this drive was not at any diverging angle. It led straight forward to the pits and sharpened stakes of the cowmen's defenses.

Presently the outposts of the force by the ford heard a distant rumbling of the

earth. These men on their horses—for they had not been in camp at the time of the flashlight—rode slowly forward and waited. But not long. Nearer and nearer came the sound until there was no more doubt that an animal-drive was headed in their direction.

Slowly they retreated to the camp and gave the warning. Immediately the fire was extinguished, and the punchers, still cursing over their misfortune, loaded every available weapon, breathing a hot and complete vengeance against the men that had outwitted them. Much to their chagrin they now recognized that Skidmore was but a clever member of the enemy, for if he had not been they felt that he would not have accomplished such a speedy and well-planned escape.

Now, as the sheepmen drove their animals nearer and nearer to the pits, they urged them faster until the unhappy creatures, besides themselves at the weird occurrences of a night of terror, were at a headlong gallop.

Suddenly one of the punchers heard that unmistakable accompaniment of running steers and the clashing of horns as the animals with lowered heads charged the works.

“They’re cows!” he yelled. “Don’t shoot!”

But it was too late. The maddened cattle were already at the first pits, plunging in with terrified bellows, or being transfixed on the stakes by the onrush of those behind. The pits were not more than ten feet deep, and only served to check the herd until they were full. Then those following trampled over their dying companions and charged the trenches where the cowboys lay.

“Fire!” yelled Bissell, who was in command, and the guns of nearly seventy men poured a leaden hail of death into the forefront of the heedless cattle.

Larkin’s men by this time had drawn off to see that the havoc ran its course, and when they heard the desperate volleys they turned and rode southwest along the river-bank to the point where the sheep expected to cross.

The cattle, which had been driven in a rather narrow column, continued to come on endlessly. The leaders dropped in windrows, but the followers leaped over them only to fall a little farther on.

Driven by the resistless impulse of these behind, the animals unconsciously appeared like a charging regiment. Nearer and nearer the tide approached the cowboys’ defenses; but now it was coming more slowly because of the dead bodies and the wounded animals that dragged themselves here and there, bellowing with pain and terror.

At last, at the very mouths of the spitting guns the last of the steers dropped, and the few that remained alive turned tail and fled wildly back the way they had come. In front of the trenches was a horrible tangle of trampled, wounded creatures, rearing as best they could and stabbing one another with their long, sharp horns.

“Everybody out an’ kill the ones that ain’t dead!” yelled Bissell, and the cowboys leaped over the breastworks on this hazardous errand of mercy.

“Where are the sheep?” was the question every man asked himself and his neighbor, but no one could reply.

It had been reported to Bissell by the scouts that with the sheep were a body of cattle. Consequently when the steers charged all had expected the sheep to follow. But in all that grisly battle-field there was not a head of mutton to be found, and the punchers looked at one another in mystified wonder.

“They must be crossin’ somewheres else,” said Bissell, wringing his hands in despair. “Oh, blast that man that stampeded them horses!”

The thought was in every man’s mind, for here the beauty of that strategy was made manifest. Uninjured, full of fight, and furious, the forces of the cowmen were helpless because they had nothing to ride, and were utterly useless on foot.

Two miles away on the bank of the river another scene was being enacted.

Here the eight thousand sheep had come to a halt with the leaders on the very bank, and the herders walking back and forth talking to them to keep them quiet. The river was not more deep than the height of a man, but the current was swift and icy with the snows of the far-off Shoshone Mountains.

“Are you ready, boys?” sang out Larkin.

“All ready.”

“Strip and into it, then,” and, the first to obey his own command, he hurried off his clothes and plunged into the frigid river.

Sims, who had devised this scheme from memory of an Indian custom, stood at the head of the leaders to superintend the crossing.

Now the men entered the water by tens, and stretched out in a double line all the way from bank to bank, facing each other and leaving but a scant yard between them.

“Ready?” yelled Sims.

“Ready! Let ’em go!” sang out Larkin.

The chief herder and others heaved the leading sheep into the water between the first two men. These lifted it along to the next pair who shoved it on, swimming all the time. So it came snorting and blatting to the other side and climbed up the bank.

After it came the next, and then the next, and as the work became easier the sheep caught the notion that man had suggested and incorporated it into the flock mind. They took to the water because their predecessors had.

And now the stream of sheep was steady and continuous. The current was swift and the men’s bodies ached and grew numb in the intense cold, but they stood their ground. Only in one place was the water too deep to work, and here they lost a few terror-stricken animals who turned aside from the chain and were swept downstream.

The river between the men was churned like that of a rapid; there was heard the constant *slap-slap!* of their arms as they smote the water in pushing the sheep along. A man took cramp and clung to a companion until he could kick it out of himself.

At last, though, all the sheep had passed over the river, and Bud Larkin had won!

Then came the getting over of the wagons and camp outfits, all done in the dark, and with scarcely sound enough to be heard a furlong away. As some men worked, others dressed and swam the horses over, leading them in bunches.

Presently, dressed, happy, and glowing with the reaction from his icy bath, Bud Larkin appeared out of the dark beside Juliet Bissell.

“You are the one who has enabled me to do all this,” he said gently. “Now, will you go over with me or will you go down the river to your father two miles away?”

She looked up at him proudly.

“To the victor belongs the spoils,” she said, and lifted her face to him. “Are you going to make me go?”

“Darling!” he cried in the sweet, low voice she loved and drew her to him.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE STORY OF LESTER

Bud's sleep of exhaustion was ended by the sound of voices calling to one another. So deep had been his unconsciousness that as he slowly struggled back to light and reason he forgot where he was and what had happened.

One thing was certain, the sun had been up a long while, and it was growing extremely hot even under the sheltering cottonwood tree where he lay.

The voices continued to call to one another, and Bud finally sat up to investigate.

On the opposite bank another camp was being made by bow-legged men who wore heavy chaps over their trousers, broad hats, and knotted neckerchiefs. Some of these men limped, and most of them swore at their cramped toes as they went about the business in hand.

A short distance away from where Bud sat some of the sheepmen were lying comfortably on their elbows, chaffing the punchers.

"I allow you cowmen're gettin' pretty swell," remarked one. "They tell me yuh kinder hanker after photygrafts of yerselves. How about it?"

"Better lose a hoss fer the sake of yer good looks than be a comic valentine all yore life, what?" was the drawling retort.

"Mebbe so, but if I'd lost hosses the way you fellers did last night I wouldn't have enough vanity left no ways to look a pony in the left leg. I'd go to raisin' grasshoppers to sell to old ladies' chicken ranches, I plumb would."

At this sally such a guffaw of laughter greeted the discomfited punchers that they retired from the field for the time being. Larkin grinned with the rest. Then he turned his attention to the little tent set up near by between two trees. He remembered that Julie had slept there and wondered if she were awake yet.

He called her name and presently a very sleepy voice responded, so tender and helpless in its accents that he laughed for joy.

“Lazy girl!” he cried. “Do you know what time it is? I’ve been up for hours.”

“All right; I’ll get up, I suppose. Is breakfast ready?”

“Not quite,” he replied seriously, “but I’ll have the maid bring it in as soon as the eggs are shirred.”

“Bud Larkin, you’re horrid!” she cried. “I don’t believe you have even started a fire. Do you expect me to get your breakfast?”

“It would tickle me silly,” he confessed, unrepentant. “Shall I wait for you? You see the cooks are getting dinner now. Breakfast was over hours ago.”

“Oh, dear, I suppose so! We’re not even married and you want me to cook for you. Oh, dear!”

“Well,” he said, relenting, “I’ll get things started, but you come out as soon as you can.”

So saying he beckoned to Ah Sin who had been waiting for the boss, and gave him a number of orders. Then he thrashed about the river bank as though looking for fagots, while Julie continued pretending to mourn over her hard lot. When at last she appeared, however, and had dashed the sleep from her eyes in the icy waters of the river, it was not to cook, but to sit down at one of Ah Sin’s little tables and eat a glorious breakfast.

“You perfect darling!” she cried happily and ran and kissed Bud though the Chinaman was looking on.

During breakfast she noticed the work going forward on the other side of the river and asked Bud about it.

“The cowmen moved their camp down here opposite us as soon as they could find out where we were,” he explained. “I guess they want to talk with me regarding several matters. I’m pretty sure I have a thing or two to say to them, now that I am out of their clutches.”

“Oh, then my father must be among those men.”

“He must, although I have not seen him. I intend to take you over to him immediately after breakfast.”

Suddenly for the first time, the girl’s face clouded; through their sweet bantering pierced the hideous visage of the thing that haunted her and that she had come to ask him about.

“Talk to me a little while first, will you?” she pleaded. “You know I came to see

you for a special reason last night but had no time to discuss it then."

"Certainly, dear girl," he replied.

When they had finished eating they strolled a little way up the noisy stream and finally found a cozy nook between two trees. All about them in the succulent grass of the banks and river bottoms they could hear the bells and contented blethering of the flocks; for Sims had determined to rest his animals for a few days before starting again the long trek north.

"Bud," she began, speaking slowly so as to choose her words, "I am going to ask you questions about things that you have never chosen to discuss with me for some reason I could not fathom. If it is unmaidenly I am sorry, but I must ask them. I cannot stand any more such anxiety and pain as I have suffered in the last few weeks."

Bud's features settled themselves into an expression of thought that told the girl absolutely nothing.

"Yes, go on," he said.

"First I want you to read this note," she continued, drawing a soiled bit of paper from the bosom of her dress. "A photographer called Skidmore was held up by the rustlers and asked to bring it to the Bar T and give it to me."

Her hand trembled a little as she held the paper out to him. He took it gravely, unfolded and read it.

Then he smiled his old winning smile at her and kissed the hand she had extended.

"Lies! All lies!" he said. "Please think no more about them."

She looked at him steadily and withdrew her hand.

"That won't do, Bud," she replied firmly, but in a low voice. "What is the thing for which Caldwell blackmailed you three years ago and again this year?"

Bud looked at her quizzically for a moment, and then seemed to recede into thought. She waited patiently, and, after a while, he began to speak.

"Yes, I suppose you are right," he said. "It is a woman's privilege to know what a man's life holds if she desires it. There are but a few rare souls who can marry men against whom the world holds something, and say: 'Never tell me what you were or what you have done; what you are and what you will be are enough for me.'

“Putting myself in your place, I am sure I should do what you are doing, for I have always told myself that those who marry with points unsettled between them have taken the first step toward unhappiness. Suspicion and deceit would undermine the greatest love that ever existed. Acts in the past that cannot be explained create suspicion, and those in the present that are better unobserved father deceit.”

He paused for a few moments, and appeared to be thinking.

“Do you know who that Ed Skidmore is?” he asked abruptly.

“No; only he was quite nice, and evidently from the East.”

“He is my brother Lester, and he is the man who stampeded the punchers’ horses last night with his flashlight.”

“He is? I should never have suspected it; you are absolutely different in looks.”

“I know we are, or I shouldn’t have risked his life last night. Well, I bring him into this because I have to. He is part of the story. Lester was always a wild youth, particularly after the governor stuck him on a bookkeeper’s stool and tried to make a business man out of him. The boy couldn’t add a column of figures a foot long correctly inside of ten tries. I took to the game a little better than he did, and managed to get promoted occasionally. But Lester never did.

“Father believed, and announced often enough, that anybody that couldn’t add figures and keep accounts had no business to handle money. To discipline Lester, who he thought was loafing when he really was incapable, the governor cut off the boy’s allowance almost entirely and told him he would have to live on his wages until he showed he could earn more.

“Well, Julie, you know what kind of a cad I was back in the old days—rich, spoiled, flattered by men, and sought after by women. (I can say these things now, since I’ve learned their opposites!) Just try to imagine, then, the effect of such an order on Lester, who was always the petted one of us two because he was small and delicate! It was like pouring cold water on a red-hot stove lid.

“Tied more than ever to his desk, Lester wanted more amusements than ever. But he had only about fifteen a week where he had been accustomed to five times the amount. He drifted and borrowed and pledged and pawned, and finally was caught by some loan-sharks, who got him out of one difficulty only to plunge him into three others.

“Although my father had a narrow-gauge mind as far as life in general is

concerned, I will say this for him: that he was right in everything he did about business. He had made it a rule of the firm that anybody who borrowed money was fired on the spot. Lester knew this, and, while he would have liked nothing better than the sack, he did not want to disgrace the governor before his employees and all the business world. So he clung along and tried to make a go of it.

“I must confess that I think some of the blame for what followed should be laid at my door. I had been patient with the kid and loaned him money until I came to the conclusion that it was like throwing it down a well. Then I got fond of a certain person”—he paused a moment and smiled at Julie—“and I needed all my money to entertain her properly; so I quit loaning.

“I don’t know whether to tell you the rest or not; it isn’t what I would want anyone else to tell you, even about a perfect stranger, but I think it is right you should know everything if you know anything.”

The girl nodded without speaking.

“In the loan-shark office was a very pretty little girl, and Lester thought he fell in love with her. She had a red-headed cousin and an admirer named Smithy Caldwell, who belonged to a tough gang on the South Side.

“The girl was fond of Lester for a while, but she wouldn’t forsake her friends as he ordered her to, and they quarreled. Her name was Mary, and after the fuss the three friends, together with the loan-shark people, played Lester for a gilt-edged idiot, basing their operations on alleged facts concerning Mary. In reality Smithy Caldwell had married her in the meantime, and Lester eventually proved he had always treated her honorably, though now she denied it.”

“Poor, innocent boy in the hands of those blood-suckers!” cried Juliet compassionately.

“Naturally driven frantic by the fear of exposure and the resulting disgrace of the whole family, the boy lost his head and tried to buy his persecutors off. And to do this he took money out of the safe. But what’s the use of prolonging the agony? Finally he forged my father’s signature, and when the check came back from the bank he tried to ’fix’ the books, and got caught.

“I’ll pass over everything that followed, except to say that the disgrace did not become public. But it broke father’s heart and hastened his death. When that occurred it was found that practically all the estate had come to me, and this fellow Smithy Caldwell threatened to disclose the forgery if I did not buy him

off.

“That scared me, because I was now the head of the family, and I handed over two thousand dollars. Then I came West, and thought the whole matter was buried, until Caldwell turned up at the Bar T that night for supper.

“That’s about all. You see, it’s an ugly story, and it paints Lester pretty black. But I’ve thought the thing over a great many times, and can’t blame him very much, after all, for it really was the result of my father’s stern and narrow policy. The boy was in his most impressionable years, and was left to face the music alone. It seemed to age him mightily.”

“But what will happen now?” asked Julie anxiously. “Aren’t the other two still alive? Can’t they make trouble?”

“Yes, but I don’t think they will. I have the drop on Smithy now, and he will either write a full dismissal of the matter for all three of them or he will swing with the rustlers. And if I know my Smithy Caldwell, he won’t be able to get pen and paper fast enough.”

“But can you save him, even at that cost, do you think? The cowmen won’t understand all this.”

“That will rest with your father, dear,” replied Bud, getting to his feet. “Now, let’s go over and see him, for I have something else I want to ask him.”

His face that had been clouded during his recital was suddenly flooded with the sunlight of his smile, and Julie realized for the first time what it had cost him to lay bare again these painful memories of a past he had sought to bury.

When he had helped her to her feet she went to him and laid her hands on his shoulders, looking up into his face with eyes that brimmed with the loosed flood of her love, so long pent up.

“Can I ever be worth what I have cost you to-day?” she asked humbly.

Tenderly he gathered her to him.

“In love there is no such word as cost,” he said.

CHAPTER XXV

THE THREADS MEET

It could not have been later than ten o'clock in the morning when a puncher with sharp eyes might have seen two figures approaching the Bar T ranch house on horseback. They rode needlessly close together and swung their clasped and gauntleted hands like happy children.

One was a girl into whose radiant eyes a new wonder had come, and the other a handsome, tanned young man bathed in a deliriously happy expression.

"Isn't it jolly to be married without anyone's knowing?" cried Julie. "Oh, but won't they be surprised at home?"

"Rather!" remarked Bud, with a sobered expression. "I only hope your father doesn't widow you just as I ride into the yard with the olive branch."

"Stop it, Bud! What puts such awful thoughts into your head?"

"Experience. Your father was so mad about my getting the sheep across the river that he started his punchers walking home that same night, and nobody has seen him since."

Larkin spoke the truth, but little exaggerated. Beef Bissell, humiliated, beaten, and forced to accept the small end of a deal for once in his life, had started from the useless cowmen's camp by the Gray Bull the very night of the crossing. He ordered the men to follow and round up their stampeded horses and then to ride home.

Meanwhile he appropriated one horse that had not been in the corral and trotted homeward, eaten by chagrin and beside himself with impotent fury.

Bud and Julie had found this out the day of their talk concerning Lester, when they forded the stream on horses and asked for Bissell. Under the circumstances Bud developed a genius for inspiration that was little short of marvelous.

"What's the use of riding all the way home and having a grand row with your

father?" he asked. "Why not go over to Rattlesnake, where there's a sky-pilot, and be married? Then we'll go home, and there can't be any row, because there will only be one party in the mood for it."

But the girl demurred. It was cruel to her father and mother, she said, not to have them present on the greatest day of her life. She allowed it was mighty ungrateful after all they had done for her. Then Bud took her hand in his and told her his principal reasons.

"I'm a business man, honey, and I've got to start north after Simmy and the sheep in three or four days," he said. "Shearing is late now, but I guess we can make it. This trouble has set me behind close to fifteen thousand dollars, and everything is in a critical state.

"I know it don't sound much like a lover, but as soon as we get on our feet we'll take a honeymoon to Japan that will make you think I'd never heard of a sheep.

"You want your mother and father in on the joy, I know, but it doesn't seem to me there can be much joy with nine or ten men sitting around waiting for their necks to be stretched. Does it to you?"

"No," said Julie, and shuddered.

"Then come along over to Rattlesnake and be married. Then we'll ride back to the Bar T, so you can see your folks, and I can see Caldwell. We can be through and away before anything is really done about the rustlers."

So it was arranged, and the two were married by an Episcopal clergyman who had a surplice but no cassock, and whose trouser-legs looked very funny moving about inside the thin, white material—and Julie nearly laughed out loud.

After the ceremony they had ridden out of town with their equipment and made their first honeymoon camp in a cool, green place beside a little brook that had trout in it and sang to them for hours on end.

Now, the day afterward, they were on the way home, and not without a few secret misgivings.

As they neared the Bar T a single man rode out to meet them. It was Lester, who had come the night before and was waiting for Bud, so as to be present at the interview with Smithy Caldwell, whom he had not yet seen.

He congratulated the pair warmly and rode with them to the corral.

Suddenly there was a shriek, and Martha Bissell tore out of the cook-house. She

ran to Julie, kissed her, and welcomed her back; then when she heard the news she picked up her apron to start crying, and dropped it again, undecided what to do.

What with Bissell's safe arrival and Julie's glorious home-coming the poor woman was nearly out of her mind.

The excitement brought Beef Bissell around the house from the front veranda, where he had been grumbling and swearing all the morning. At sight of Larkin he halted in his tracks and began to redden. But he got no farther, for Julie flung herself into his arms, tears of happiness streaming down her face, and overwhelmed him with caresses.

Bissell was mightily relieved to see her. In fact, it had been all his wife could do to restrain him from starting out to unearth Julie when he arrived home and found her gone. But Martha said that the girl had gone to find Larkin, and added that the two were old enough to settle their troubles between them. So Bissell, remembering his last miserable interview with his daughter, decided not to interfere.

"Father, I'm married; please be happy and good to me," the girl said, clinging to him, and the fury that had flown to his head like wine died a natural death. After all, to see her happy was what he most wanted.

"Are you sure he will love you always?" he asked gently.

"Yes, father, I am. I refused to marry him long ago in Chicago." He kissed her for the first time in a long while, and then gently disengaged himself and took a step toward Bud.

"Larkin," he said, "yuh were always lucky, but yuh've beat all records for Wyoming now. I allow yuh can take her away with yuh on one condition."

"What's that?"

"That yuh never beat her like yuh beat me."

"Agreed!" laughed Bud, and grasped the other's hand. "But can you stand a sheepman in the family?"

"I sure can, Larkin. Ever since I seen Jimmie Welsh and his men fight, I ain't got anythin' against sheepmen."

"Jimmie Welsh!" cried Bud. "Tell me, did any of his party come through alive?"

"Jes' Jimmie himself; the boys couldn't kill him, so he's over at Billy Speaker's

mendin' up. Heart's pretty near broke because he hasn't seen yuh to explain why he's still alive."

"Good old Jimmie!" said Bud, the tears leaping to his eyes. "Dearest," he added, turning to Julie, "there's one more stop on our honeymoon, and that's at Billy Speaker's to-morrow."

Bissell continued the conversation, and asked for the full story of how Bud had run down and captured the rustlers, saying that the whole cow country owed him a debt, and if they had only known of the capture in time would have let his sheep through without protest.

"I imagined as much," remarked Bud; "but I didn't care to get them through that way once I had started the other. I hope, Mr. Bissell, that we can be friends, although we have been enemies up to now. I'm sorry I had to sacrifice those cattle of the association, but there was no other way out of it."

"I'll tell yuh this, Larkin," returned Bissell. "Anybody that can beat me at anything is good enough to be my friend fer life, an' I'm here to state that yuh could count my friends of that type, before you came, on the hairs of a hairless dog!"

Bud laughed, they shook hands again, and peace was finally made between them; but not until Beef Bissell had signed away half of the interest in the Bar T to Julie as her dower.

That was a happy and hilarious dinner at the ranch. Some of the cowboys coming in at noon from near-by ranges heard of the marriage and cheered the bride lustily when she appeared on the veranda. Bud made himself solid with the disgruntled punchers by walking out to them and talking over the battle of Welsh's Butte, while he rolled cigarettes and smoked them one after another.

Shortly afterward, Bud and Lester found themselves in a room with Smithy Caldwell. The blackmailer, when he saw Lester, fell down in a faint, so great was the shock to his already wrecked nervous system. The man was really in a terrible condition both from physical fear and the tormenting by his comrades. He started at every slight sound, whirled about fearfully to meet any footfall that sounded near, and trembled with uncontrollable nervous spasms.

To both the Larkins he was a piteous sight, and Bud wondered that the miserable creature had not gone mad.

The wretch fell on his knees and pleaded with them for his life, so that when Bud put the proposition squarely up to him that he forswear everything in regard

to the Larkin family, he could not accept it eagerly enough.

“But about the papers that you said were in Chicago?” asked Bud.

“I lied about them,” replied Smithy. “They’re sewed in the lining of my shirt. Give me your knife and I’ll get ’em for you.”

“Give me your shirt and I’ll find them,” countered Bud; and he presently did.

Together the brothers looked them over. Every bit of incriminating evidence was there, and as Bud slipped it all into his pocket he gave a great sigh: “Thank Heaven, that’s over!”

He did not let Caldwell off, however, without securing from him the written and signed statement that he wanted. When all was done they let him go, and now his mind was almost as unbalanced by joy as it had formerly been by fear.

Bissell, knowing Caldwell’s condition, had agreed to his being released on clearing his account with the Larkins, for he realized that the man, in fearing death, had suffered the penalty a thousand times, and that the memory would remain with him through life, and perhaps help keep him straight.

Shortly after Bud and Lester had joined the others on the veranda again, a sudden scream was heard from the bunk-house, followed by the sounds of a terrible struggle. All hands rushed around to the rear and, with drawn revolvers, forced an entrance among the sullen rustlers.

On the floor in the middle of the room lay Smithy Caldwell, white and contorted, while Mike Stelton was just rising from his prostrate body, making sounds in his throat like a wild animal. Smithy was dead.

“How’d it happen, boys?” asked Bissell.

“This here Caldwell come out an’ ’lowed as how he wasn’t goin’ to swing like the rest of us, an’ he began packin’ up his truck. Stelton asked him about it, an’ when Smithy repeated what he said before and got plumb cocky about it, Mike there smeared him plenty. Then he broke his neck. Smithy betrayed Stelton, yuh know.”

There is not much more to tell, except that, three days later, the rustlers paid the penalty of their lawless daring. It was the biggest “hangin’ bee” Wyoming had ever seen, and was largely attended by men of all sections who stood for right and justice, if not law and order.

Bud and Julie brought pride and sunlight to a slowly recuperating Jimmie Welsh

on their way north, and from him and Billy Speaker heard again the details of the great fight. Now, if you go to Welsh's Butte, you will see a tall white shaft rising amid the tumbling of the wretched hogbacks. On one side are the names of the sheepmen who fell (including Jimmie, who is still alive), and on the other those of the cowmen. It is the humble offering of Bud and Julie Larkin.

Time has proven that Bud's prophecy in regard to sheep was right. Wyoming has far more sheep than cattle now, and one of the biggest of the ranches is the former Bar T, run under the Larkin name, in connection with the home ranch in Montana.

I hope it will not be a shock to some readers to know that the first Bud and Julie have another Bud and Julie, who are over twenty years of age, quite old enough to have romances of their own.

All their lives they have heard the story of the adventures that brought their parents together, but all four rather sadly admit that the Free Range, which Bud fought for so hard, is now almost a thing of the past, that the great drives have passed never to return, and that the cowboy himself is a dim figure against the prairie sunset.

THE END

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