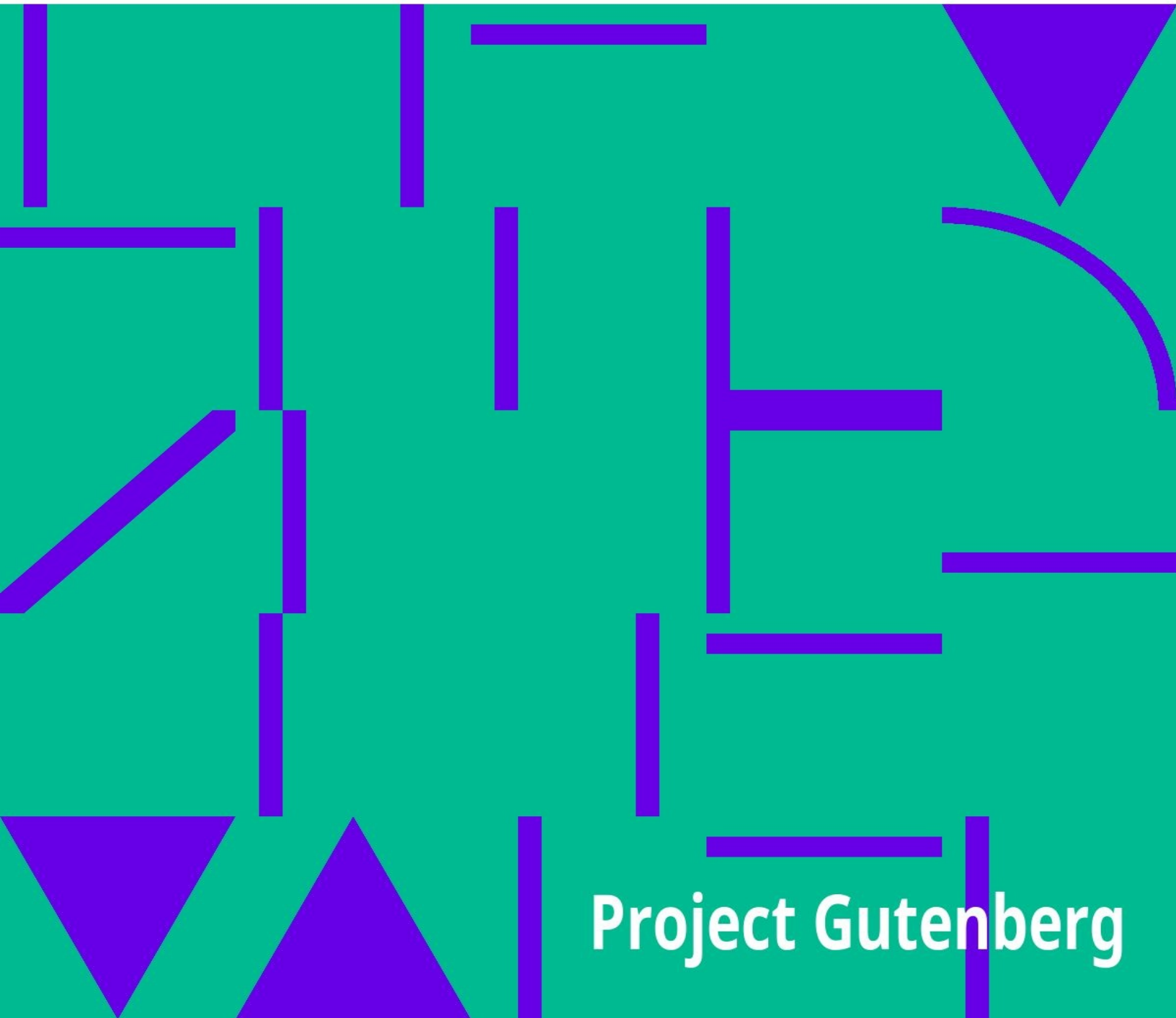
The Settling of the Sage

Hal G. Evarts



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[Frontispiece: His knees sagged under him as a forty-five slug struck him an inch above the buckle of his belt.]

THE SETTLING OF THE SAGE

BY HAL G. EVARTS

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"The Cross Pull," "The Yellow Horde," etc.

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The Settling of the Sage

I

A rider jogged northward along the road on a big pinto horse, a led buckskin, packed, trailing a half-length behind. The horseman traveled with the regulation outfit of the roaming range dweller—saddle, bed roll and canvas war bag containing personal treasures and extra articles of attire—but this was supplemented by two panniers of food and cooking equipment and a one-man teepee that was lashed on top in lieu of canvas pack cover. A ranch road branched off to the left and the man pulled up his horse to view a sign that stood at the forks.

"Squatter, don't let the sun go down on you," he read. "That's the third one of those reminders, Calico," he told the horse. "The wording a little different but the sentiment all the same."

Fifty yards off the trail the charred and blackened fragments of a wagon showed in sharp contrast to the bleached white bones of two horses.

"They downed his team and torched his worldly goods," the rider said. "All his hopes gone up in smoke."

He turned in his saddle and looked off across the unending expanse of sage. Coldriver—probably so named from the fact that the three wells in the town constituted the only source of water within an hour's ride—lay thirty miles to the south, a cluster of some forty buildings nestling on a wind-swept flat. Seventy miles beyond it, and with but two more such centers of civilization between, the railroad stretched across the rolling desolation. North of him the hills lifted above the sage, angling with the directions so that four miles along the Three Bar road that branched off to the left would bring him to their foot and a like distance along the main fork saw its termination at Brill's store, situated in a dent in the base of the hills, the end of the Coldriver Trail.

The man took one more look at the evidence left behind to prove that the sign

was no empty threat before heading the paint-horse along the left-hand fork. The crisp cool of early spring was blown down from the slope of the hills. Old drifts, their tops gray-streaked with dust, lay banked in the gulches and on sheltered east slopes, but the new grass had claimed the range to the very foot of the drifts, the green of it intensified in patches watered by the trickle that seeped from the downhill extremities of the snow banks. He noted that the range cows along his route were poor and lean, their hip bones showing lumpily through sagging skin, giving them the appearance of milkers rather than of beef stock. The preceding summer had been hot and dry, browning the range six weeks before its time, and the stock had gone into the winter in poor shape. Heavy snowfalls had completed the havoc and ten per cent. of the range stock had been winter-killed. Those that had pulled through were slow in putting on weight and recovering their strength.

A big red steer stood broadside to him, the Three Bar brand looming on its side, and the man once more pulled up his horse and lost himself in retrospection as he gazed at the brand.

"The old Three Bar, Calico," he remarked to the horse. "The old home brand. It's been many a moon since last I laid an eye on a Three Bar cow."

The man was gazing directly at the steer but he no longer saw it. Instead he was picturing the old-time scenes that the sight of the brand recalled. Step by step he visioned the long trail of the Three Bar cows from Dodge City to the Platte, from the Platte to the rolling sage-clad hills round old Fort Laramie and from Laramie to the present range. Many times he had heard the tale, and though most of the scenes had been enacted before his birth, they were impressed so firmly upon his mind by repetition that it seemed as if he himself had been a part of them.

His mind pictured two boys of somewhere round eighteen years of age setting forth from the little home town of Kansas City, nestling at the confluence of the Missouri and the Kaw. A year later Cal Warren was whacking bulls on the Santa Fe Trail while the other, William Harris, was holding the reins over four plunging horses as he tooled a lumbering Concord stage over the trail from Omaha to the little camp called Denver.

It was five years before their trails crossed again. Cal Warren was the first of the two to wed, and he had established a post along the trail, a rambling structure of 'dobe, poles and sod, and there conducted the business of "Two for One," a

calling impossible and unknown in any other than that day and place.

The long bull trains were in sight from horizon to horizon every hour of the day. The grind of the gravel wore down the hoofs of the unshod oxen, and when footsore they could not go on. One sound bull for two with tender feet was Warren's rule of trade. These crippled ones were soon made sound in the puddle pen, a sod corral flooded with sufficient water to puddle the yellow clay into a six-inch layer of stiff, healing mud, then thrown out on the open range to fatten and grow strong. But transitions were swift and sweeping. Steel rails were crowding close behind the prairie schooners and the ox-bows. Bull trains grew fewer every year and eventually Cal Warren made his last trade of two for one.

Bill Harris had come back to view the railroad of which he had heard so much and he remained to witness and to be a part of the wild days of Abilene, Hays and Dodge, as each attained the apex of its glory as the railroad's end and the consequent destination of the Texas trail herds. The sight of these droves of thousands implanted a desire to run cows himself and when he was wed in Dodge he broached this project to his boyhood pal.

It was the sincere wish of each to gain the other as a partner in all future enterprise, but this was not to be. Warren had seen the bottom drop out of the bull trade and he would not relinquish the suspicion that any business dealing in four-footed stock was hazardous in the extreme and he insisted that the solution of all their financial problems rested upon owning land, not cows. Harris could not be induced to farm the soil while steers were selling round eight dollars a head.

Warren squatted on a quarter of land. Harris bought a few head of she-stock and grazed his cows north and west across the Kansas line into the edge of the great unknown that was styled Nebraska and Northwest District. At first his range was limitless, but in a few short years he could stand on the roof of his sod hut and see the white points of light which were squatters' wagons dotting the range to the far horizon in any direction he chose to look. The first of these to invade his range had been Cal Warren, moving on before the swarm of settlers flocking into the locality of his first choice in such alarming numbers that he feared an unhealthy congestion of humanity in the near future. The debate of farming versus cows was resumed between the two, but each held doggedly to his own particular views and the longed-for partnership was again postponed.

Harris moved once more—and then again—and it was something over two decades after his departure from Dodge with the Three Bar cows that he made one final shift, faring on in search of that land where nesters were unknown. He made a dry march that cost him a fourth of his cows, skirted the Colorado Desert and made his stand under the first rim of the hills. Those others who came to share this range were men whose views were identical with his own, whose watchword was: "Our cows shall run free on a thousand hills." They sought for a spot where the range was untouched by the plow and the water holes unfenced. They had moved, then moved again, driven on before the invasion of the settlers. These men banded together and swore that here conditions should be reversed, that it was the squatter who should move, and on this principle they grimly rested.

Cal Warren had been the vanguard of each new rush of settlers that had pushed Bill Harris on to another range, and the cowman had come to see the hand of fate in this persistence. The nesters streamed westward on all the trails, filing their rights on the fertile valleys and pushing those who would be cattle barons undisputed back into the more arid regions. When the Warren family found him out again and halted their white-topped wagon before his door, Bill Harris gave it up.

"I've come up to see about getting that partnership fixed up, Bill," Warren greeted. "You know—the one we talked over in Dodge a while ago, about our going in together when either of us changed his mind. Well, I've changed mine. I've come to see that running cows is a good game, Bill, so let's fix it up. I've changed my mind."

"That was twenty years ago, Cal," Harris said. "But it still holds good—only I've changed my mind too. You was dead right from the first. Squatters will come to roost on every foot of ground and there'll come a day when I'll have to turn squatter myself—so I might as well start now. The way to get used to crowds, Cal, is to go where the crowds are at. I'm headed back for Kansas and you better come along. We'll get that partnership fixed up."

A single child had come to bless each union in the parents' late middle age. The Harris heir, a boy of eight, had been named Calvin in honor of his father's friend. Cal Warren had as nearly returned the compliment as circumstances would permit, and his three-year-old daughter bore the name of Williamette Ann for both father and mother of the boy who was his namesake, and Warren styled

her Billie for short.

Each man was as stubbornly set in his new views as he had been in the old. The Harrises came into possession of the Warrens' prairie schooner and drove off to the east. The Warrens took over the Three Bar brand and the little Williamette Ann slept in the tiny bunk built for the son of the Harris household.

For a space of minutes these old pictures occupied the mind of the man on the pinto horse. The led buckskin moved fretfully and tugged on the lead rope, rousing the man from his abstraction. Distant strings of prairie schooners and ox-bows faded from his mind's eye and he way once more conscious of the red steer with the Three Bar brand that had stirred up the train of reflections. He turned for another glimpse of the distant sign as he headed the paint-horse along the road.

"All that was quite a spell back, Calico," he said. "Old Bill Harris planted the first one of those signs, and it served a good purpose then. It's a sign that stands for lack of progress to-day. Times change, and it's been eighteen years or so since old Bill Harris left."

The road traversed the bench, angled down a side hill to a valley somewhat more than a mile across. Calico pricked his ears sharply toward the Three Bar buildings that stood at the upper end of it.

Curious eyes peered from the bunk house as he neared it, for the paint-horse and the buckskin were not without fame even if the man himself were a stranger to them all. For the better part of a year the two high-colored horses had been seen on the range,—south to the railroad, west to the Idaho line. The man had kept to himself and when seen by approaching riders he had always been angling on a course that would miss their own. Those who had, out of curiosity, deliberately ridden out to intercept him reported that he seemed a decent sort of citizen, willing to converse on any known topics except those which concerned himself.

He dropped from the saddle before the bunk house and as he stood in the door he noted half a dozen men lounging on the bunks. This indolence apprised him of the fact that they were extra men signed on for the summer season and that their pay had not yet started, for the cowhand, when on the pay roll, works sixteen hours daily and when he rests or frolics it is, except in rare instances, on

his own time and at his own expense.

A tall, lean individual, who sat cross-legged on a bunk, engaged in mending a spur strap, was the first to answer his inquiry for the foreman.

"Billie Warren is the big he-coon of the Three Bar," he informed. "You'll likely find the boss at the blacksmith shop." The lanky one grinned as the stranger turned back through the litter of log outbuildings, guided by the hissing squeak of bellows and the clang of a sledge on hot iron. Several men pressed close to the windows in anticipation of viewing the newcomer's surprise at greeting the Three Bar boss. But the man did not seem surprised when a young girl emerged from the open door of the shop as he neared it.

She was clad in a gray flannel skirt and black Angora chaps. The heavy brown hair was concealed beneath the broad hat that was pulled low over her eyes after the fashion of those who live much in the open. The man removed his hat and stood before her.

"Miss Warren?" he inquired. The girl nodded and waited for him to state his purpose.

"What are the chances of my riding for the Three Bar?" he asked.

"We're full-handed," said the girl. "I'm sorry."

"You'll be breaking out the remuda right soon now," he suggested. "I'm real handy round a breaking corral."

"They're all handy at that," she said. Then she noted the two horses before the bunk house and frowned. Her eyes searched the stranger's face and found no fault with it; she liked his level gaze. But she wondered what manner of man this was who had so aimlessly wandered alone for a year and avoided all other men.

"Since you've finally decided to work, how does it happen that you choose the Three Bar?" she asked, then flushed under his eyes as she remembered that so many men had wished to ride for her brand more than for another, their reasons in each case the same.

"Because the Three Bar needs a man that has prowled this country and gathered a few points about what's going on," he returned.

"And that information is for sale to any brand that hires you!" said the girl. "Is that what you mean?"

"If it was, there would be nothing wrong with a man's schooling himself to know all points of his job before he asked for it," he said. "But it happens that wasn't exactly my reason."

A shade of weariness passed over her face. During the two years that her father had been confined to the house after being caved in by a horse and in the one year that had elapsed since his death the six thousand cows that had worn the Three Bar brand on the range had decreased by almost half under her management.

"I'll put you on," she said. "But you'll probably be insulted at what I have to offer. The men start out after the horses to-morrow. I want a man to stay here and do tinkering jobs round the place till they get back."

"That'll suit me as well as any," he accepted promptly. "I'm a great little hand at tinkering round."

The clang of the sledge had ceased and a huge, fat man loomed in the door of the shop and mopped his dripping face with a bandanna.

"I'm glad you've come," he assured the new-comer. "A man that's not above doing a little fixing up! A cowhand is the most overworked and underpaid saphead that ever lost three nights' sleep hand running and worked seventy-two hours on end; sleep in the rain or not at all—to hold a job at forty per for six months in the year. The other six he's throwed loose like a range horse to rustle or starve. Hardest work in the world—but he don't know it, or money wouldn't hire him to lift his hand. He thinks it's play. Not one out of ten but what prides himself that he can't be browbeat into doing a tap of work. Ask him to cut a stick of firewood and he'll arch his back and laugh at you scornful like. Don't that beat hell?"

"It do," said the stranger.

"I'm the best wagon cook that ever sloshed dishwater over the tail-gate, and even better than that in a ranch-house kitchen," the loquacious one modestly assured him. "But I can't do justice to the meals when I lay out to do all the chores within four miles and run myself thin collecting scraps and squaw wood

to keep the stove het up. Now since Billie has hired you, I trust you'll work up a pile of wood that will keep me going—and folks call me Waddles," he added as an afterthought.

"Very good, Mr. Waddles," the newcomer smiled. "You shall have your fuel."

The big man grinned.

"That title is derived from my shape and gait," he informed. "My regular name is Smith—if you're set on tacking a Mister on behind it."

The girl waved the talkative cook aside and turned to the new hand.

"You'll take it then."

He nodded.

"Could you spare me about ten minutes some time to-day?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "I'll send for you when I have time."

The man headed back for his horses and unlashed the buckskin's top-pack, dropping it to the ground, then led the two of them back toward the corral, stripped the saddle from the pinto, the side panniers and packsaddle from the buckskin and turned them into the corral. He rambled among the outbuildings on a tour of inspection and the girl saw him stand long in one spot before the solid log cabin, now used as a storeroom for odds and ends, that had been the first one erected on the Three Bar and had sheltered the Harrises before her father took over their brand.

II

The Three Bar girl sat looking from the window of her own room, the living room of the ranch house, one end of which was curtained off to serve as sleeping quarters. The rattle of pots and pans came from the big room in the rear which was used by Waddles as a kitchen and dining hall for the hands. The new man

was still prowling about the place, inspecting every detail, and she wondered if he could tell her anything which would prove of benefit in her fight to stop the shrinkage of the Three Bar herds and help her to face the drastic changes that were reshaping the policies of the range country.

The Three Bar home range was one of many similar isolated spots where the inhabitants held out for a continuance of the old order of things. All through the West, from the Mexican border to the Canadian line, a score of bitter feuds were in progress, the principles involved differing widely according to conditions and locality. There were existing laws,—and certain clans that denied the justice of each one, holding out against its enforcement and making laws of their own. In some spots the paramount issue was over the relative grazing rights of cows and sheep, fanning a flame of hatred between those whose occupations were in any way concerned with these rival interests. In others the stockmen ignored the homestead laws which proclaimed that settlers could file their rights on land. As always before, wherever men resorted to lawlessness to protect their fancied rights, the established order of things had broken down, all laws disregarded instead of the single one originally involved.

In many communities these clashes between rival interests had furnished opportunity for rustlers to build up in power and practically take the range. Each clan was outside the law in some one particular and so could not have recourse to it against those who violated it in some other respect; could not appear against neighbors in one matter lest their friends do likewise against themselves in another.

This attitude had enabled the wild bunch to saddle themselves on certain communities and ply their trade without restraint. Rustling had come to be a recognized occupation to be reckoned with; the identity of the thieves was often known, and they visited from ranch to ranch, whose owners possibly were honest themselves but had friends among the outlaws for whom the latch-string was always out. The rustlers' toll was in the nature of a tribute levied against every brand and the various outfits expected certain losses from this source. It was good business to recoup these losses at another's expense and thus neighbor preyed on neighbor. Big outfits fought to crush others who would start up in a small way, and between periods of defending their own interests against the rustlers they hired them to harry their smaller competitors from the range; clover for outlaws where all factions, by mutual assent, played their own hands without recourse to the law. It was a case of dog eat dog and the slogan ran: "Catch your

calves in a basket or some other thief will put his iron on them first."

It was to this pass that the Three Bar home range had come in the last five years. As Billie Warren watched the new hand moving slowly toward the bunk house she pondered over what manner of man this could be who had played a single-handed game in the hills for almost a year. Was he leagued with the wild bunch, with the law, or was he merely an eccentric who might have some special knowledge that would help her save the Three Bar from extinction?

The stranger picked up his bed roll and disappeared through the bunk-house door as she watched him.

The lean man who had first greeted him jerked a thumb toward an unoccupied bunk.

"Pay roll?" he inquired; then, as the new man nodded, "I'm most generally referred to as Lanky," he offered tentatively. "Evans is the rest of it."

The stranger hesitated appreciably; then:

"Harris will do all right for me—Cal for every day," he returned and introductions had been effected. It was up to each man to use his own individual method of making his name known to the newcomer as occasion arose.

There had been much speculation about the brand worn by the two horses. The hands were a drifting lot, gathered from almost as many points as there were men present, but none of them knew the brand.

A dark, thin-faced man with a slender black mustache was the first to voice a query, not from the fact that his curiosity was large—it was perhaps less than that of any other man in the room—but for the reason that he chose to satisfy it at once. Morrow's personality was cold and bleak, inviting no close friendships or intimacies; uncommunicative to a degree that had impressed itself on his companions of the last few days and they looked up, mildly surprised at his abrupt interrogation.

"Box L," he commented. "Where does that brand run?"

"Southwest Kansas and Oklahoma," the stranger answered.

"Squatter country," Morrow said. "Every third section under fence."

Harris sat looking through the door at the valley spread out below and after a moment he answered the thrust as if he had been long prepared for it.

"Yes," he said. "And that's what all range country will come to in a few more years; farm what they can and graze what they can't—and the sooner the better for all concerned." He waved an arm down the valley. "Good alfalfa dirt going to waste down there—overrun with sage and only growing enough grass to keep ten cows to the quarter. If that was ripped up and seeded to hay it would grow enough to winter five thousand head."

This remark led to the old debate that was never-ending in the cow country, breaking out afresh in every bunk house and exhaustively rediscussed. There were men there who had viewed both ends of the game,—had seen the foremost outfits in other parts tearing up the sage and putting in hay for winter feed and had seen that this way was good.

Evans regarded Harris curiously as he deliberately provoked the argument, then sat back and listened to the various ideas of the others as the discussion became heated and general. It occurred to Evans that Harris was classifying the men by their views, and when the argument lagged the lean man grinned and gave it fresh impetus.

"It's a settled fact that the outfits that have put in hay are better off," he said. "But there's a dozen localities like this, a dozen little civil wars going on right now where the inhabitants are so mulish that they lay their ears and fight their own interests by upholding a flea-bit prejudice that was good for twenty years ago but is a dead issue to-day."

"And why is it dead to-day?" Morrow demanded. "And not as good as it always was?"

"Only a hundred or so different reasons," Evans returned indifferently. "Then beef-tops brought ten dollars a head and they're worth three times that now; then you bought a brand on the hoof, come as they run, for round five dollars straight through, exclusive of calves; now it's based at ten on the round-up tally. In those days a man could better afford to let part of his cows winter-kill than to raise feed to winter the whole of them through—among other things. These days he can't."

"And have your water holes fenced," Morrow said. "As soon as you let the first squatter light."

"The government has prohibited fencing water holes necessary to the adjacent range," Harris cut in. "If that valley was mine I'd have put it in hay this long time back."

"But it wasn't yours," Morrow pointed out.

"No; but it is now, or at least a part of it is," Harris said. "I picked up that school section that lays across the valley and filed on a home quarter that butts up against the rims." He sat gazing indifferently out the door as if unconscious of the dead silence that followed his remark. More men had drifted in till nearly a dozen were gathered in the room.

"That's never been done out here—buying school sections and filing squatter's rights," Morrow said at last. "This is cow country and will never be anything else."

"Good cow country," Harris agreed. "And it stands to reason it could be made better with a little help."

"Whenever you start helping a country with fence and plow you ruin it for cows," Morrow stated. "I know!"

"It always loomed up in the light of a good move to me," the newcomer returned. "One of us has likely read his signs wrong."

"There's some signs round here you better read," Morrow said. "They were posted for such as you."

"It appears like I'd maybe made a bad selection then. I'm sorry about that," Harris deprecated in a negligent tone that belied his words. "It's hard to tell just how it will pan out."

"Not so very hard—if you can read," the dark man contradicted.

The newcomer's gaze returned from down the valley and settled on Morrow's face.

"Do you run a brand of your own—so's you'd stand to lose a dollar if every foot of range was fenced?" he inquired.

"What are you trying to get at now?" Morrow demanded.

"Nothing much—now; I've already got," Harris said. "A man's interest lays on the side where his finances are most concerned."

"What do you mean by that?" Morrow insisted.

"You're good at predicting—maybe you're an expert at guessing too," Harris returned. And suddenly Evans laughed as if something had just occurred to him.

Morrow glanced at him without turning his head, then fell silent, his expression unchanged.

A chunky youngster stood in the door and bent an approving gaze on the big pinto as he swung out across the pasture lot. The boy's face was small and quizzical, a shaggy mop of tawny hair hanging so low upon his forehead that his mild blue eyes peered forth from under the fringe of it and gave him the air of a surprised terrier, which effect had gained him the title of Bangs.

"I bet the little paint-horse could make a man swing and rattle to set up in his middle, once he started to act up," he said.

"Calico wouldn't know how to start," Harris said. "A horse, inside his limitations, is what his breaker makes him. I never favored the idea of breaking a horse to fight you every time you climb him. My horses are gentle-broke."

"But you have to be able to top off just any kind of a horse," Bangs objected.

"That don't hinder a man from gentling his own string," Harris returned.

Bangs turned his surprised eyes on Harris and regarded him intently as if striving to fathom a viewpoint that was entirely new to him.

"Why, it don't, for a fact," he said at last. "Only I just never happened to think of it like that before."

Morrow laughed and the boy flushed at the disagreeable ring of it. The sound

was not loud but flat and mirthless, the syllables distinct and evenly spaced. His white even teeth remained tight-closed and showed in flashing contrast to his swarthy face and black mustache. Morrow's face wore none of the active malignancy that stamps the features of those uncontrolled desperadoes who kill in a flare of passion; rather it seemed that the urge to kill was always with him, had been born with him, his face drawn and over-lengthened from the inner effort to render his homicidal tendencies submissive to his brain, not through desire for regeneration, for he had none, but as a mere matter of expediency. The set, bleak expression of countenance was but a reflection of his personality and his companions had sensed this strained quality without being able to define it in words.

"You listen to what the squatter man tells you," Morrow said to Bangs. "He'll put you right—give you a course in how everything ought to be done." He rose and went outside.

"That was a real unhumorous laugh," Evans said. "Right from the bottom of his heart."

A raucous bellow sounded from the cookhouse and every man within earshot rose and moved toward the summons to feed.

"Let's go eat it up," Evans said and left the bunk house with Harris.

"Did you gather all the information you was prospecting for?" he asked.

Harris nodded. "I sorted out one man's number," he said.

"Now if you'd only whispered to me I'd have told you right off," Evans said. "It's astonishing how easy it is to pick them if you try."

"Waddles is a right unpresuming sort of a man in most respects," Evans volunteered as they entered the cookhouse. "But he's downright egotistical about his culinary accomplishments."

All through the meal the gigantic cook hovered near Billie Warren as she sat near one end of the long table. It was evident to Harris that the big man was self-appointed guardian and counsellor of the Three Bar boss. He showed the same fussy solicitude for her welfare that a hen would show for her helpless chicks.

"Praise the grub and have a friend at court," Harris murmured in Evans' ear.

Billie Warren had nearly completed her meal before the men came in. She left the table and went to her own room. When Harris rose to go he slapped the big man on the back.

"I'd work for half pay where you get grub like this," he said. "That's what I'd call a real feed."

Waddles beamed and followed him to the door.

"It's a fact that I can set out the best bait you ever throwed a lip over," he confessed. "You're a man of excellent tastes and it's a real pleasure to have you about."

Billie Warren opened the door and motioned to Harris. He went into the big front room that answered for both living room and sleeping quarters. A fire burned in the rough stone fireplace; tanned pelts, Indian curios and Navajo rugs covered the walls; more rugs and pelts lay on the floor. Indian blankets partitioned off one end for her sleeping room.

"You had something to tell me," she observed, after he had remained silent for the space of a minute, sitting in the chair she had indicated and gazing into the fire.

"And I'll have to start it a little different from the way I first counted on," he said. "Have any of the boys mentioned my name to you?"

She shook her head and waited for him to go on.

"You won't care much to hear it," he announced. "I'd thought some of spending two years here under some other name—but perhaps it's better to come out in the open—don't you think?"

The girl had straightened in her chair and was leaning toward him, her face white and her gray eyes boring straight into the man's. She knew now who he was,—the man she had more reason to despise than all others on earth combined. Of the Harris family she knew nothing at all except that her father's lifelong regret had been the fact that the partnership between himself and his oldest friend, William Harris, had never been brought to pass. And this regret

had, in the end, led him to try and cement that arrangement in the second generation. Five years before his trail had crossed that of the elder Harris for the first time since he had taken over the Three Bar brand; and when his will had been read she had known that on the occasion of that visit his old friend had played upon this sentiment to trick him into making it. On all sides of her she had evidence that men were wolves who preyed upon the interests of others, and there was not a doubt that the father of the man before her had preyed upon her interests through the sentiment of her parent; no other possible theory could account for the strange disposal of his property, the will dated and signed at the exact time of his visit to the Harrises.

The tenseness of her pose was replaced by lethargic indifference and she relaxed into her chair.

"I've known all the time you would come," she said.

"It's too bad, Billie," he said. "It's tough having me wished on to you this way."

"Don't play that game with me!" she flared. "Of course you've disproved every drop of human decency in advance."

"It sure looms up like that on the surface," he admitted ruefully. "But I didn't have a hand in cinching you this way."

"You could have proved that by staying away. I wrote you a year ago that I'd donate you a half-interest in the Three Bar at the expiration of the time if you'd only keep off the place. But at the last moment you couldn't resist having it all. Ten more days and you'd have been too late."

The man nodded slowly.

"Too late," he agreed and sat looking into the fire.

She had been almost a son to her father, had ridden the range with him, managed the Three Bar during his sickness; and such was her loyalty to his memory that not a trace of her bitterness had been directed toward her parent. He had loved the Three Bar and had always believed that old Bill Harris, its founder, had loved it too. His will had stipulated that half of his property should go to the younger Harris under the condition that the man should make his home on the

Three Bar for two out of the first three years after her father's decease. The whole of it was to go to him in case she failed to make her own home at the Three Bar during her co-heir's stay, or in the event of her marriage to another before the expiration of three years.

"Of course I'm tied here for two years," she said. "Or left penniless. If you can make it unpleasant enough to drive me away—which won't be difficult—you win."

"I wouldn't count too strong on that," he counseled mildly.

"Then why did you come?" she insisted. "Half of it was yours by merely keeping away."

"Maybe I'm sort of tied up myself—in ways you don't suspect," he offered.

"Very likely!" she returned; "sounds plausible. You might offer to marry me," she suggested when he failed to answer. "You could gain full possession at once that way."

He removed his gaze from the fire and looked long at her.

"It will likely come to that," he said.

"I'll put a weapon in your hands," she retorted. "Whenever it does come to that I'll leave the ranch—so now you know the one sure way to win."

"I hope it won't pan out like that," he said. "I'll be disappointed—more than I can say."

She rose and stood waiting for him to go.

"Good night, Billie," he said. "I expect maybe things will break all right for us."

She did not answer and he went out. Waddles hailed him in friendly fashion as he passed through the cookhouse, then wiped his hands and stepped into Billie's quarters. Waddles was a fixture at the Three Bar; he had ridden for her father until he had his legs smashed up by a horse and had thereafter reigned as cook. He was confidential adviser and self-appointed guardian of the girl. His

mind was still pleasantly concerned with the stranger's warm praise of his culinary efforts.

"That new man now, Billie," he remarked. "He's away off ahead of the average run. You mark me—he'll be top hand with this outfit in no time at all." Then he observed the girl's expression. "What is it, Pet?" he inquired. "What's a-fretting you?"

"Do you know who he is?" she asked.

Waddles wagged a negative head.

"He's Calvin Harris," she stated.

Instead of the blank dismay which she had expected to see depicted on Waddles's face at this announcement, it seemed to her that the big man was pleased.

"The hell!" he said. "'Scuse me, Billie. So this here is Cal! Well, well—now what do you think of that?"

"I think that I don't want to stay here alone with him while you're out after the horses," she returned.

"Wrong idea!" the big man promptly contradicted. "You've got to stick it out for two years, girl. The best thing you can do is to get acquainted; and figure out how to get along the best you can—the pair of you."

"That's probably true," she assented indifferently. "I'll have to face a number of things that are equally unpleasant in the next two years—so I might as well start now. He must have praised the food in order to win you to his side in two minutes flat."

Waddles's face expressed pained reproach.

"Now there it is again!" he said. "You know I'm only on one side—yours. Old Cal Warren had some definite notion when he framed this play; so it's likely this young Cal is on your side, too."

"But even more likely not," she stated.

"Then what?"

"Why, then I'll have to kill him and put a stop to it," the big man announced. "But it's noways probable that it will come to that. Let's use logic. He spoke well of my cooking—like you said—which proves him a man of some discernment. No way to get around that. Now a man with his judgment wouldn't suspect for one living second that he could play it low-down on you with me roosting close at hand. Putting two plain facts together it works out right natural and simple that he's on the square. As easy as that," he finished triumphantly. "So don't you fret. And in case he acts up I'll clamp down on him real sudden," he added by way of further reassurance.

His great paw opened and shut to illustrate his point as he moved toward the door and the Three Bar girl knew that when Waddles spoke of clamping down it was no mere figure of speech.

III

Billie Warren heard the steady buzz of a saw and later the ringing strokes of an axe. The men had departed three hours before to be gone for a week on the horse round-up but she had not yet issued from her own quarters. The music of axe and saw was ample evidence that her new and undesired partner was making valuable use of his time. She went outside and he struck the axe in a cross section of pine log as she moved toward him.

"We'll have to get along the best we can," she announced abruptly. "Of course you will have a say in the management of the Three Bar and draw the same amount for yourself that I do."

He sat on a log and twisted a cigarette as he reflected upon this statement.

"I'd rather not do that," he decided. "I don't want to be a drain on the brand—but to help build it up. Suppose I just serve as an extra hand and do whatever necessary turns up—in return for your letting me advise with you on a few points that I happen to have worked out while I was prowling through the

country."

"Any way you like," she returned. "It's for you to decide. Any money which you fail to draw now will revert to you in the end so it won't matter in the least."

His reply was irrelevant, a deliberate refusal to notice her ungenerous misinterpretation of his offer.

"Do you mind if I gather a few Three Bar colts round here close and break out my own string before they get back?" he asked.

"Anything you like," she repeated. "I'm not going to quarrel. I've made up my mind to that. I'll be gone the rest of the day."

Five minutes later he saw her riding down the lane. She was not seeking companionship but rather solitude and for hours she drifted aimlessly across the range, sometimes dismounting on some point that afforded a good view and reclining in the warm spring sun. Dusk was falling when she rode back to the Three Bar. As she turned her sorrel, Papoose, into the corral she noticed several four-year-old colts in the pasture lot. As she returned to the house Harris appeared in the door.

"Grub-pile," he announced.

They sat down to a meal of broiled steak, mashed potatoes, hot biscuits, coffee and raspberry jam. She had deliberately absented herself through the noon hour and well past the time for evening meal, confidently expecting to find him impatiently waiting for her to return and prepare food for him.

"You make good biscuits—better than those Waddles stirs up," she said. "Though I'd never dare tell him so." It was the first time she had conceded that there might be even a taint of good in him.

"Well, yes—they're some better than those I usually turn out," he confessed. "Having a lady to feed I flaked the lard in cold instead of just melting it and stirring her in like I most generally do. I'm right glad that you consider them a success."

When the meal was finished she rose without a word and went into her own quarters, convinced that this desertion would certainly call forth a protest; but

the man calmly went about the business of washing the dishes as if he had expected nothing else, and presently she heard the door close behind him and immediately afterwards a light appeared in the bunk-house window.

The rattle of pots and pans roused her before daylight. Some thirty minutes later he called to her.

"I've finished," he said. "You'd better eat yours before it gets cold," and the closing of the door announced that he had gone without waiting for an answer. She heard again the sound of saw and axe as he worked up the dry logs into stove lengths. At least he was making good his word to the cook. The sounds ceased when the sun was an hour high and when she looked out to determine the reason she saw him working with four colts in one of the smaller corrals.

He had fashioned a hackamore for each and they stood tied to the corral bars. He left them there and repaired to the big gates of the main corral. The two swinging halves sagged until their ends dragged on the ground when opened or closed, necessitating the expenditure of considerable energy in performing either operation. She watched him tear down the old support wires and replace them with new ones, stretching a double strand from the top of the tall pivot posts to the free ends of the gates. Placing a short stick between the two strands of heavy wire he twisted until the shortening process had cleared the gate ends and they swung suspended, moving so freely that a rider could lean from his saddle and throw them open with ease.

This completed to his satisfaction he fashioned heavy slabs of wood to serve as extra brake-blocks for the chuck wagon. Between the performance of each two self-appointed duties he spent some little time with the colts, handling them and teaching them not to fear his approach, cinching his saddle on first one and then the next, talking to them and handling their heads.

For three days there was little communication between the two. It was evident that he had no intention of forcing his society upon her, and her failure to prepare his meals failed to elicit a single sign to show that he had expected otherwise; the contrary was true, in fact, for he invariably prepared enough for two. It was clear that he exercised the same patience toward her that he showed in handling the green four-year-olds; and she was inclined to be a little scornful of his method of gentle-breaking them. She felt her own ability to handle any horse on the range although old Cal Warren had gentled every animal she had

wanted for her own and flatly refused to let her mount any others. Waddles was as insistent upon this point as her parent had been, but never had she known a cowhand who took time and pains to gentle his own string.

In the afternoon of the third day she saw him swing to the back of a big bay, easing into the saddle without a jar, and the colt ambled round the corral, rolling his eyes back toward the thing clamped upon him but making no effort to pitch. He dismounted and stripped off the saddle, cinched it on a second horse and let him stand, leading a third out to a snubbing post near the door of the blacksmith shop where he proceeded to put on his first set of shoes.

The girl went out and sat on the sill of the shop door and watched him. The colt pulled back in an effort to release the forefoot that the man held clamped between his leather-clad knees, then changed his tactics and sagged his weight against Harris.

"You Babe!" the man ordered. "Don't you go leaning on me." He pared down the hoof and fitted the shoe but before nailing it on he released the colt's foot and addressed the girl. "If I'd fight him now while he's spooky and half-scared it would spoil him maybe," he explained.

"I gentle-break mine, too," she said, and the man overlooked the inflection which, as plainly as words, was intended to convey the impression that his ways were effeminate. "If every man used up his time gentling his string he'd never have a day off to work at anything else."

"Why, it don't use up much time," he objected. "They halfway break themselves, standing round with a saddle on and having a man handle them a little between spells of regular work—like cutting firewood and such. And it's a saving of time in the end. There's three hundred odd days every year when a man consumes considerable time fighting every horse he steps up on—if they're broke that way to start."

"So your only reason for not riding them out is to save time," she said.

"If you mean that I'm timid," he observed, "why, I don't know as I'd bother to dispute it." He moved over and sat on his heels facing her, twisting the ever handy cigarette. "Listen," he urged. "Let's you and I try to get along. Now if you'll only make up your mind that I'm not out to grab the Three Bar, not even the half of it that's supposed to be mine—unless you get paid for it—why, we're

liable to get to liking each other real well in the end. I'll give you a contract to that effect."

"Which you know would be worthless!" she returned. "The will specifically states that any agreements between us prior to the time of division are to be disregarded. A written contract would have no more value than your unsupported promise and in view of what's happened you don't expect me to place a value on that."

He pulled reflectively at his cigarette and she rather expected another of the irrelevant remarks with which he so often replied to her pointed thrusts.

"No," he said at last. "But it's a fact that I don't want the Three Bar—or rather I do if you should ever decide to sell."

"I never will," she stated positively. "It's always been my home. I've been away and had a good time; three winters in school and enjoying every second; but there always comes a time when I'm sick to get back, when I know I can't stay away from the Three Bar, when I want to smell the sage and throw my leg across a horse—and ride!"

"I know, Billie," he said softly. "I was raised here, up until I was eight. My feeling is likely less acute than yours but I've always hankered to get back to where the sage and pine trees run together. I mentioned a while back that I was tied up peculiar and stood to lose considerable if I failed to put in two years out here—which wouldn't have been of any particular consequence only that I found out that the Three Bar was going under unless some one put a stop to what's going on. I'll pull it out of the hole, maybe, and hand it back to you."

She was swayed into a momentary belief in his sincerity but steeled herself against it, and in the effort to strengthen the crumbling walls of her dislike she fell back on open ridicule.

"You!" she flared. "And what can you do against it—a man that was raised in squatter country behind a barb-wire fence, who has to gentle his horses before he can sit up on one, who has hitched a gun on his belt because he thinks it's the thing to do, and has stowed it in a place where he'd have to tie himself in a knot—or undress—to reach it. And then you talk of pulling the Three Bar out of a hole! Why, there are twenty men within fifty miles of here that would kill you the first move you made."

"There's considerable sound truth in that," he said. He looked down at his gun; it swung on his left side, in front, the butt pointing toward the right. "It's easier to work with it sort of out of the way of my hands," he explained and smiled.

She found herself liking him, even in the face of the treachery he had practiced against her father and was correspondingly angry, both with herself and at him. She left him without a word and returned to the house.

He finished putting the shoes on the colt and as he turned him back into the corral he observed a horseman jogging up the lane at a trail trot. He knew the man for Slade, whose home ranch lay forty miles to the south and a little west, the owner of the largest outfit in that end of the State; a man feared by his competitors, quick to resent an insinuation against his business methods and capable of backing his resentment.

Slade dropped from his horse and accorded Harris only a casual nod as he headed for the house. Slade's face was of a peculiar cast. The black eyes were set very close together in a wide face; his cheek bones were low and oddly protruding, sloping far out to a point below each eye. His small ears were set so close to his skull that the outcropping cheek bones extended almost an inch beyond them to either side. Yet there was a certain fascination about his face and bearing that appealed to the spark of the primitive in women; that last lingering cell that harks fondly back to men in the raw. His age might have been anywhere above twenty-six and under fifty-six.

He walked through the cookhouse and opened the door of the girl's quarters without the formality of a knock, as if a frequent visitor and sure of his privileges.

"How many times have I told you to knock?" she demanded. "The next time you forget it I'll go out as you come in."

Slade dropped into a chair.

"I never have knocked—not in twelve years," he said.

"It was somewhat different when I was a small girl and you were only a friend of my father," she pointed out. "But now——"

"But now that I've come to see you as a woman it's different?" he inquired. "No reason for that."

She switched the channel of conversation and spoke of the coming round-up, of the poor condition of range stock owing to the severity of the winter; but it was a monologue. For a time the man sat and listened, as if he enjoyed the sound of her voice, contributing nothing to the conversation himself, then suddenly he stirred in his chair and waved a hand to indicate the unimportance of the topics.

"Yes, yes; true enough," he interrupted. "But I didn't come to talk about that. When are you coming home with me, Billie?"

"And you can't come if you insist on talking about that," she countered.

"I'll come," he stated. "Tell me when you're going to move over to the Circle P."

"Not ever," she said. "I'd rather be a man's horse than his wife. Men treat women like little tinsel queens before, and afterwards they answer to save a cook's wages and drudge their lives out feeding a hunch of half-starved hands—or else go to the other extreme. Wives are either work horses or pets. I was raised like a boy and I want to have a say in running things myself."

"You can go your own gait," he pledged.

"I'm doing that now," she returned. "And prefer going on as I am."

Slade rose and moved over to her, taking her hands and lifting her from her chair.

The girl pushed him back with a hand braced against his chest.

"Stop it!" she said. "You're getting wilder every time you come, but you've never pawed at me before. I won't have people's hands on me," and she made a grimace of distaste.

The man reached out again and drew her to him. She wrenched away and faced Slade.

"That will be the last time you'll do that until I give the word," she said. "I

don't want the Circle P—or you. When I do I'll let you know!"

He moved toward her again and she refused to back away from him but stood with her hands at her sides.

"If you put a finger on me it's the last lime you'll visit the Three Bar," she calmly announced.

He stood so close as almost to touch her but she failed to lift a hand or move back an inch, and Slade knew that he faced one whose spirit matched his own, perhaps the one person within a hundred miles who did not fear him. He had tamed men and horses—and women; he raised his arms slowly, deliberately, to see if she would flinch away or stand fast and outgame him. She knew that he was harmless to her—and he knew it. He might perpetrate almost any crime on the calendar and come clear; but in this land where women were few they were honored. One whisper from the Three Bar girl that Slade had raised his hand against her and, powerful as he was, the hunt for him would be on, with every man's hand against him.

His arms had half circled her when he whirled, catlike, every faculty cool and alert, as a voice sounded from the door. Both had been too engrossed to notice its noiseless opening.

"I've finished cleaning up round the shop and corrals," Harris said. "Is there any rubbish round the house you'd like to have throwed out and piled in a dry gulch somewheres out of sight?"

He stood in the door, half facing them, his left side quartering toward Slade. To the girl it appeared that the strange pose was for the purpose of enabling him to take a quick step to the right and spring outside if Slade should make a move and she felt a tinge of scorn at his precaution even though she knew that it would avail him nothing if Slade's deadly temper were roused by the insult. Slade, who had killed many, would add Harris to his list before he could move.

Slade's understanding of the quartering position and the odd sling of Harris's gun was entirely different and as he shifted his feet until he faced the man in the door, his movements were slow and deliberate, nothing that could be misconstrued.

"Who summoned you in here?" he demanded.

Harris did not reply but stood waiting for some word from the girl. She had a sudden sick dread that Slade would kill him and was surprised at the sentiment, for no longer than an hour before she had wished him dead. She made belated answer to his original question.

"No," she said. "Go on out, please."

He turned his back on Slade and went out.

"And you," she said to Slade, "you'd best be going too. We've been too good neighbors to quarrel—unless you come over again with the same idea you did to-day."

At sunset the girl called to Harris and he repaired to the house and found her putting a hot meal for two on the end of the long pine table, the first time she had deigned to eat with him since that first meal.

"There's no use of our going on like this," she said. "We've two years of it to face; so it's best to get on some kind of a neutral footing."

For her own peace of mind she had tried to smother her dislike of him and he was very careful to avoid any topic that would rekindle it. They washed the dishes together, and from that hour their relations, to all outward appearance, were friendly or at least devoid of open hostility. They no longer ate separately; she did not avoid him during the day, and the second evening she prepared two places at her own table in the big living room before the fireplace.

"It's so empty out there," she explained.

"With only the two of us at a table built for twenty."

He lingered for an hour's chat before her fire and each evening thereafter was the same. But he knew that she was merely struggling to make the best of a matter that was distasteful, that her opinion of him was unaltered. Her bitterness could not be entirely concealed, and she frequently touched on some fresh point that added to her distrust of his present motives and confirmed her belief in his double-dealing in the past. There were so many of these points; his refusal to accept her offer to give him his half-interest if he would stay off the place; his weak insinuations that there was some reason why he must spend two years on the Three Bar; his prowling the country for a year spying on the methods she

followed in running the outfit, half of which would soon be his; his buying the school section and filing on a quarter of land, the location blocking the lower end of the Three Bar valley. Whenever she mentioned one of these he refused to take issue with her. And one night she touched on still another point.

"What was the reason for your first idea—of coming here under another name?" she demanded.

"I thought maybe others knew I'd been left a part interest," he said, "and it might be embarrassing. The way it is, with only the two of us knowing the inside, I can stay on as a regular hand until the time is up."

"You're so plausible," she said. "You put it as a favor to me. Did it ever strike you that if the truth were known it might also be uncomfortable for you?"

He smiled across at her and once more she frowned as she discovered that he was likeable for all his underhandedness.

"Worse than that—suicidal," he admitted.

"If you mentioned what you think of me, that I've framed to rob you by law, you wouldn't be bothered with me for long." He laughed softly and stretched his feet toward the fire. "Look at it any way you like and I'm in bad shape to deal you any misery," he pointed out. "If you'd drop a hint that I'm an unwelcome addition it would only be a matter of days until I'd fail to show up for meals. If you view it from that angle you can see I'm setting on the powder can."

She did see it, but had not so clearly realized it till he pointed it out, and for the first time she wavered in her conviction that he had come simply to deprive her of her rights. But the thought that her father would not easily have willed away the home place to another without being unduly influenced served to reinstate her distrust along with a vague resentment for his having shaken it by throwing himself so openly on her mercy.

"You probably thought to overcome that by reaching the point the whole thing so patently aims for," she said. "And you calculated well—arriving at a time when we'd be alone for a week. The whole scheme was based on that idea and I've been patiently wondering why you don't rush matters and invite me to marry you."

He rose and flicked the ash from his cigarette into the fireplace.

"I do invite you—right now," he said, and in her surprise she left her chair and stood facing him. "I'd like real well to have you, Billie."

"That's the final proof," she said. "I'm surprised that you didn't tell me the first day."

"So am I," he said.

She found no answer for this but stood silent, knowing that she had suddenly become afraid of him.

"And that's the living truth," he affirmed. "Other men have loved you the first day. You know men well enough to be certain that I wouldn't be tied to one woman for the sake of owning a few head of cows—not if I didn't want her for herself." He waved an arm toward the door. "There's millions of miles of sage just outside," he said. "And millions of cows—and girls."

He moved across to her and stood almost touching her, looking down into her face. When Slade had stood so a few days past she had been coldly indifferent except for a shiver of distaste at the thought of his touching her. Before Harris she felt a weakening, a need of support, and she leaned back from him and placed one hand behind her on the table.

"You judge for yourself whether a man wouldn't be right foolish—with all those things I mentioned being right outside to call him—to marry a woman he didn't want for herself, because she had a few hundred head of cows." He smiled down at her. "Don't pull back from me, Billie; I won't lay a finger on you. But now do you think it's you I want—or the little old Three Bar?"

"You can prove it," she said at last. "Prove it by going away for six months—or three."

He shook his head.

"Not that," he said. "I've told you I was sewed up in a right peculiar way myself—which wouldn't matter a damn if it wasn't for this. I'd have tossed it off in a second if the girl on the Three Bar had turned out to be any other than you. Now I'm going to see it through. The Three Bar is going under—the brand both

our folks helped to found—unless some one pulls it out of the hole. Believe me if you can and if you can't—why, you know that one remark about my being unwelcome here will clear the road for you, like I mentioned a few minutes back."

He turned away without touching her and she had not moved when the door closed behind him.

An hour past noon on the following day a drove of horses appeared at the lower extremity of the valley and swept on toward the ranch. As Harris threw open the gates of the big corral he saw her standing in the door of the cookhouse watching the oncoming drove. Riders flanked the bunch well out to each side to steady it. There was a roar of hoofs and a stifling cloud of dust as three hundred half-wild horses clattered past and crowded through the gates, scattering swiftly across the pasture lot back of the corral. A dozen sweat-streaked riders swung from their saddles. There was no chance to distinguish color or kind among them through the dust caked in the week-old growth of beard that covered every face.

One man remained on his mount and followed the horses into the pasture lot, cutting out fifty or more and heading them back into the corral; for Waddles had decreed that they could have the rest of the afternoon off for a jaunt to Brill's Store and they waited only to change mounts before the start.

Calico stood drooping sleepily in one of the smaller corrals and Harris moved toward him, intending to ride over with the rest of the men.

"The boss said for you to ride Blue," Morrow stated as Harris passed the group at the gates of the corral. "He's clear gentle-broke, Blue is."

The men looked up in surprise. Morrow had not been near the house to receive instructions from the girl. The lie had been so apparent as to constitute a direct challenge to the other man.

Harris stood looking at him, then shrugged his shoulders.

"Whatever the boss says goes with me," he returned evenly.

A rangy blue roan swept past with the fifty or so others. At least once every round of the corral he laid back his ears and squealed as he scored some other horse with his teeth, then lashed out with wicked heels.

"I reckon that'll be Blue?" Harris asked of Evans and the lanky one nodded. The men scattered round the corral and each watched his chance to put his rope on some chosen horse. The roan kept others always between himself and any man with a rope but at last he passed Harris with but one horse between. Harris nipped his noose across the back of the intervening horse and over the blue roan's head.

Blue stopped the instant the rope tightened on his neck.

"You've been busted and rope-burnt a time or two," Harris remarked, and he led the horse out to saddle him. The big blue leaned back, crouching on his haunches as the man put on the hackamore. His eyes rolled wickedly as Harris smoothed the saddle blanket and he flinched away with a whistling snort of fear, his nostrils flaring, as the heavy saddle was thrown on his back.

Harris tightened the front cinch and the blue horse braced himself and drew in a long, deep breath.

"That's right, Blue, you swell up and inflate yourself," Harris said. "I'll have to squeeze it out of you." He fastened the hind cinch loosely, then returned to the front and hauled on the latigo until the pressure forced the horse to release the indrawn breath and it leaked out of him with a groaning sigh.

"I wonder now why Morrow is whetting his tommyhawk for me," Harris remarked as he inspected the big roan. "You're a hard one, Blue. I'll let that saddle warm up on you before I top you off."

Every horse pitched a few jumps from force of habit when first mounted, some of them indifferently, others viciously, then moved restlessly around, anxious for the start.

"Well, step up on him and let's be going," Morrow ordered surlily.

Harris took a short hold on the rope reins of the hackamore with his left hand, cramped the horse's head toward him and gripped the mane, his right hand on the horn, and swung gently to the saddle, easing into it without a jar.

"Easy, Blue!" he said, holding up the big roan's head. "Don't you hang your head with me." He eased the horse to a jerky start and they were off for Brill's at a shuffling trot. Three times in the first mile Blue bunched himself nervously and

made a few stiff jumps but each time Harris held him steady. The pace was increased to a long, swinging trot and he felt the play of powerful muscles under him as the blue horse seemed to reach out for distance at every stride.

"You'd have made one good little horse, Blue," he said, "if some sport hadn't spoiled you on the start."

"Don't speak loud or the blue horse might shy and spill his pack," Morrow remarked in a tone loud enough for Harris to overhear. Evans turned in his saddle and eyed the dark man curiously.

"He won't upset his load to-day," he prophesied. "Harris is just past the colt stage, round twenty-seven or eight somewheres, and has out-growed his longing to show off. But he'll be able to sit up in the middle of anything that starts to move out from under him."

They left the horses drooping at the several hitch rails before the post and crowded in. A few paused along the counters of merchandise that flanked the left side of the big room while the rest headed straight for the long bar that extended the full length of the opposite side. The Three Bar men had scarcely tossed off their first drink before there sounded a clatter of hoofs outside and twelve men from the Halfmoon D trooped in.

"Out of the way!" the foremost youth shouted. "Back off from the pine slab, you Three Bar soaks, and give parched folks a chance. Two hours' play and six months' work—so don't delay me."

The throng before the bar was a riot of color; Angora chaps ranging from orange and lavender to black and silky white; smooth leather chaps, and stamped, silver-ornamented and plain, with here and there an individual design, showing that the owner had selected some queerly spotted steer and tanned the pelt with the hair on to be fashioned into gaudy vest and pants. 'Twas an improvident, carefree lot who lived to-day with scarce a thought for to-morrow. The clatter of sardine and salmon cans mingled with the clink of glassware at the bar as the men who had missed the noon meal lunched out of cans between drinks.

Some few detached themselves from the group and occupied themselves with writing. Several started a game of stud poker at one of the many tables. Harris wrote a few letters before joining in the play, and as he looked up from time to time he caught many curious glances leveled upon him. Morrow had been busily spreading the tidings that a would-be squatter was among them and they were curious to see the man who had deliberately defied the unwritten law of the

Coldriver Range. When he had finished his writing he crossed over to the group, tossed a bill on the bar and waved all hands to a drink.

Waddles had instructed Evans to start the men back before the spree had progressed to a point where they would refuse to leave Brill's and so leave the Three Bar short-handed. At the end of two hours he looked at his watch and snapped it shut.

"Turn out!" he shouted. "On your horses!"

"That goes for my men, too," the Halfmoon D foreman seconded. "Outside!"

Morrow had not neglected to inform the men from the Halfmoon D that Harris gentled his horses.

"Handle the little roan horse gentle," he advised as they moved toward the door. "Better hobble your stirrups before you crawl him." Several men turned and grinned. In riding contests women were allowed to hobble their stirrups while the same precaution disqualified a man.

Most of the men were young, scarcely more than boys, full of rough play and youthful pride of accomplishment along with a desire to make a presumably careless display of it. A Halfmoon D youth mounted a blocky bay and as he threw his leg across it he loosed a shrill yip and reached forward to rake the horse's shoulder. The bay dropped his head and performed. A half-dozen others followed his example and their horses pitched off in as many directions. All eyes were turned on Harris as he neared the big roan.

"Oh, I might as well act up a little," he said to Evans. "They seem to be looking for it."

"He's a hard citizen, that roan," Evans remarked. "I'll wrangle for you, Cal."

Harris stepped over to the horse.

"I wonder what old Blue can do," he said. He hooked the roan in the shoulder as he mounted and the horse plunged his head between his knees and rose in the air. The big roan bawled and expelled a long-drawn "wa-a-augh" each time he struck the ground, then savagely shook his whole frame as he rose again. The first four jumps Harris swung both feet forward and hooked his shoulders and

the next two bounds reached back and raked his flanks, in accordance with the regulation rules prescribed for contest riding.

"He's riding for the judges," a megaphone voice announced. "Boy, you've rode your horse!"

Blue varied his leaps, draping himself in fantastic curves, lighting on a slant with his side arched out, sunfishing and swapping ends, then threw himself over and smashed down on his back. Harris slipped sidewise and cleared himself.

"Fourteen long jumps," one man testified. "One hell of a long time on an eel like that!"

As Blue regained his feet Harris stepped into the saddle and rose with him, the hackamore rope trailing loose under the horse's feet. A chorus of approving yelps broke out.

"Rake him from ears to tail roots!" "Ri-ide 'im, rider!" "Hang 'em up into that horse!" "Claw him!" "Scra-a-atch him!"

This wave of questionable advice ceased as Blue, after three short jumps, somersaulted forward and his rider made a headlong side-dive for safety.

Evans had flanked the roan's course and he now leaned from the saddle and seized the hackamore rope; as Blue scrambled to his feet he took two quick turns of the rope and snubbed his head short to the saddle horn. The roan struggled and threw himself, his head still suspended by the rope, rose and reared to strike savagely at the man who held him, but Evans left his saddle and leaned far out, his right foot on the ground, left still in the stirrup, and eased himself back into the saddle as the fighting horse slid down. He had never once lost his hold which snubbed Blue to the horn, a pretty bit of wrangling.

"He's on the fight now," Evans said. "I'll hold him solid till he cools down—which won't be long, for Cal didn't cut him any; he was swinging his feet free and never hooked him once." He jerked his thumb at the roan's shoulder and flanks where not a drop of blood appeared; his hide would have been tattered indeed if Harris had driven home his rowels each time he swung his feet. "Nice ride."

Harris walked back to a small group that had not yet mounted, Morrow

among them. His left side was quartering toward Morrow and apparently he was addressing the group as a whole instead of any one man.

"The next time some one frames me to put on a show like that," he said, "why, he'd better make certain beforehand about what part he's willing to play in the performance himself—for next time I won't take it out of the horse."

IV

It is said that there comes a day in the life of every handler of bad horses when he will mount one and ride him out, master him and dismount,—and forever after decline to ride another. Riley Foster was evidence of this. For three years Rile and Bangs had been inseparable, riding together on every job, and the shaggy youth topped off the animals in Foster's string before the older man would mount them. As Bangs went about his work his faded blue eyes were ever turned toward the Three Bar boss who stood in the door of the blacksmith shop.

The girl was vaguely troubled as she noted this. Bangs and Foster had returned for their second season at the Three Bar. All through the previous summer the boy had evidenced his silent adoration, his eyes following her every move.

The scene round Billie was one of strenuous activity, every effort bent toward whipping the remuda into shape for the calf round-up in the least possible space of time.

Every rider must have nine horses in his string. His five circle horses needed but little training, the only necessary qualifications being endurance and a sufficient amount of breaking to make it possible to saddle them; the two night mounts must be partially broken to work the herd, then switched to night guarding and thereafter used exclusively for that. But the two cow horses required long and skilful training. Every man gave one of his circle string the preliminary training of the cow horse each season, the work resumed by the man to whose string the horse was allotted the following year; thus new ones were coming on to replace the older horses as fast as they were condemned.

Four pairs of men worked within a hundred yards of the girl, taking equal turns at riding and wrangling. The one who wrangled put his rope on a horse and led him out, snubbed him to the saddle horn and frequently eared him as well, while the one who was to ride him out cinched on his saddle and mounted.

Green horses were led out, one after another, to be saddled for the first time, and those previously broken required a few work-outs to knock the wire edge off their unwillingness to carry a rider after a winter of freedom on the range.

Three men were shoeing horses tied to snubbing posts at ten-yard intervals before the shop. One animal that had fought viciously against this treatment had been thrown and stretched, his four feet roped to convenient posts, and while he struggled and heaved on the ground Rile Foster calmly fitted and nailed the shoes on him. Cal Harris finished shoeing the colt he was working.

"That's the last touch," he said. "My string is all set to go."

"You have five colts gentled for your circle bunch," she said. "But you didn't pick a single cow horse. The boys have sorted out the best ones and the few that are left won't answer for a man that insists on a gentled string."

"Creamer and Calico will do for me," he said. "I broke them myself and maybe I can worry along."

"Did you break them like that?" she asked. Bangs was topping a horse that strenuously refused to be conquered and as they looked on the animal threw himself.

"Like that? Well, no—not precisely," Harris said. "They're not breaking horses. They're proving that they're bronc-peelers that can ride 'em before they're broke. A horse started out that way will be a bronc till the day he dies. The first thing he knows some straddler swarms him and hangs the spurs in him. He bogs his head and starts out to slip his pack—and from right then on he thinks the first thing to do whenever a man steps up on him is to try his best to shake him off."

Three men were lashing their bed rolls and war bags on three pack horses and when this task was completed they rode down the lane, each one leading his pack animal. Harris knew this as evidence that they would start after the calves on the following day. The custom was to exchange representatives to ride with each wagon within a reasonable distance, the reps to look after the interest of the

brand for which they rode.

"How many reps do you trade?" he asked.

"Three," she said. "Halfmoon D, V L and with Slade."

The Halfmoon D lay some fifteen miles eastward along the foot of the hills; the V L the same distance to the west, but cached away in a pocket that led well back into the base of the range, a comparatively small outfit owned by the Brandons, father and four sons, who made every effort to keep the bulk of their cows ranging in their own home basin and exchanged reps only with the Three Bar.

Slade's home place lay forty miles south and a little west and his cows grazed for over a hundred miles, requiring three wagons to cover his range.

During the afternoon the three reps came in to replace the men who had left. The surplus horses had been cut out and thrown back on the range, only those required for the remuda remaining in the pasture lot. The chuck wagon was wheeled before the cookhouse door and packed for an early start. Before the first streaks of dawn the men had saddled and breakfasted. It was turning gray in the east when four horses, necessitating the attentions of four men, were hooked to the wagon. A man hung on the bit of each wheel horse while another grasped the bits of the lead team as Waddles made one last hasty trip inside.

"This will be a rocky ride for a mile or two," he prophesied, as he mounted the seat and braced himself. "These willow-tails haven't had on a strap of harness for many a month. All set. Turn loose!"

The men stepped back and the four horses hit the collars raggedly. One wheel horse reared and jumped forward. The off leader dropped his head and pitched, shaking himself as if struggling to unseat a rider, then the four settled into a jerky run and the heavy wagon clattered and lurched down the lane.

"Fine way to break work stock," Harris remarked to Evans. "That layout would bring maybe a dollar a head."

The men swung to their saddles and followed the wagon at a shuffling trot. From where she rode between Evans and Harris, the girl turned in her saddle and watched two men throw open the gates of the big corral where the remuda was

held. The wrangler, whose duty it was to tend the horse herd by day, and the nighthawk who would guard it at night sat on their horses at the far end of the corral and urged the herd out as the gates swung back. The remuda streamed down the valley, the two first riders swinging wide to either flank while the nighthawk and wrangler brought up the rear.

The four that pulled the wagon had settled to a steady gait and when some three miles below the Three Bar Waddles wheeled to the right and angled up the bench that flanked the bottoms, the wagon tilting perilously in the ascent, then struck out westward across a rolling country that showed not even a wagon track. The big cook unerringly picked the route of least resistance to the point from which the first circle would be launched, striking every wash and coulee at a place where a crossing was possible.

Shortly before noon the wagon was halted in a broad bottom threaded by a tiny spring-fed stream. The teams were unhitched; mounts were unsaddled and thrown into the horse herd, which was then headed into the mouth of a branching draw and allowed to graze. Waddles dumped off the bed rolls that were piled from the broad lowered tail-gate to the wagon top and each man sorted out his own and spread it upon some spot which struck him as a likely bed ground.

One man carried water from the stream. Two others snaked in wood for the chuck-wagon fire. Still another drove long stakes in the shape of a hollow square, stretching a single rope from one to the next and fashioning a frail rope corral.

Harris and Evans took three poles that were slung under the wagon, looped the top-rope of a little teepee round the small ends of them and erected the three, tripod fashion, after having first pegged down the teepee sides. Harris brought the girl's bed roll and war bag from the wagon and placed them inside.

"There's your house," he said. "All ready to move in."

The men repaired to the creek bank and splashed faces and hands. The big voice of the cook bellowed angrily from the wagon.

"Downstream! Downstream!" he boomed. "Get below that water hole!"

Two men who had elected to perform their ablutions above the point from which the culinary water supply was drawn moved hastily downstream.

It was not long before Waddles was dispensing nourishment from the lowered tail-gate, ladling food and hot coffee into the plates and cups which the men held out to him. They drew away and sat cross-legged on the ground. The meal was almost finished when six horsemen rode down the valley and pulled up before the wagon.

"What's the chance for scraps?" the leader asked.

"Step down," Waddles invited. "And throw a feed in you. She's still a-steaming."

Four of the men differed in no material way from the Three Bar men in appearance. The fifth was a ruffian with little forehead, a face of gorilla cast, stamped with brute ferocity and small intelligence. The last of the six was a striking figure, a big man with pure white hair and brows, his pale eyes peering from a red face.

"The roasted albino is Harper, our leading bad man in these parts," Evans remarked to Harris. "And the human ape is Lang; Fisher, Coleman, Barton and Canfield are the rest. Nice layout of murderers and such."

Harper's men ate unconcernedly, conscious that they were marked as men who had violated every law on the calendar, but knowing also that no man would take exceptions to their presence on that general ground alone, and as they had neared the wagon each man had scanned the faces of the round-up crew to make certain that there were none among them who might bear some more specific and personal dislike.

The Three Bar men chatted and fraternized with them as they would have done with the riders of any legitimate outfit. Harper praised the food that Waddles tendered them.

Billie Warren forced a smile as she nodded to them, then moved off and sat upon a rock some fifty yards from the wagon, despising the six men who ate her fare and inwardly raging at the conditions which forced her to extend the hospitality of the Three Bar to men of their breed whenever they chanced by.

Harris strolled over and sat down facing her, sifting tobacco into a brown paper and deftly rolling his smoke.

"Has it been on your mind—what I was telling you a few nights back, about how much I was loving you?" he asked.

"You had your chance to prove it by going away," she said, "and refused; so why bring it up again? The next two years will be hard enough without my having to listen to that."

"Our families must have been real set on throwing us together," he observed. "I was cut off without a dime myself—unless I spent two full years on the Three Bar."

She was angry with herself for believing him sincere, for being convinced that he too, as he had several times intimated, was tied in much the same fashion as herself. The explanation came to her in an illuminating flash. The elder Harris must have nursed a lifelong enmity against her father, who had believed him the most devoted friend on earth.

She had often heard the tale of how her parent had, in all friendliness, followed old Bill Harris step by step from Dodge City to the Platte, to old Fort Laramie and finally to the present Three Bar range. Perhaps the one so followed had felt that Cal Warren was but the hated symbol of the whole clan of squatters who had driven him from place to place and eventually forced him to relinquish his hope of seeing the Three Bar brand on a hundred thousand cows; that his friendliness had been simulated, his vindictiveness nursed and finally consummated by leaving his affairs in such fashion that his son must carry on the work his trickery had begun.

The voice of Waddles reached them. He was announcing a half-day of rest, according to her orders.

"It's kill-time for the rest of the day," he stated. "Make the most of it."

For three weeks past, excepting for the trip to Brill's, the men had toiled incessantly, breakfasting before sunup and seeking their bunks long after dark. Some immediately turned to their bed rolls to make up lost sleep. Others repaired to the stream to wash out extra articles of soiled clothing before taking their rest.

Harris resumed where he had broken off some five minutes before.

"And I'd have tossed it off, as I told you once, if the Three Bar girl had turned out to be any except you. You've had a tough problem to work out, girl," he said. "I sold out my little Box L outfit for more than it was worth—and figured to stop the leak at the Three Bar and put the old brand on its feet."

His calm assurance on this point exasperated the girl.

"How?" she demanded. "What can you do?" She pointed toward the six men near the wagon. "During the time you spent prowling the hills did you ever come across those men?"

"Not to pal round with them," he confessed. "But I did cut their trail now and then."

"Then don't you know what every other man in this country knows—that those six and a lot more of their breed are responsible for every loss within a hundred miles? They can operate against a brand one week and stop at the home ranch and get fed the next. That's where the Three Bar loss comes in. And I have to feed them when they come along."

"Some day we'll feed them and hang them right after the meal," he said. "They're not the outfit that's going to be hardest to handle when the time arrives."

"What do you mean?" she asked. "No one has ever been able to handle them up to date."

"Did it ever strike you as queer that Slade could come into this country twelve years back, with nothing but a long rope and a running iron, and be owning thirty thousand head to-day?"

"He has the knack to protect his own and increase," she said. "They're afraid of Slade."

Harris absently traced the Three Bar in the dust with a stick, then fashioned the V L and the Halfmoon D, the three brands that ranged along the foot of the hills. With a few deft strokes he transformed the Three Bar into the Three Cross T, reworked the V L into a Diamond Box and the Halfmoon D into Circle P, each one of the worked-overs representing one of the dozen or so brands registered by Slade. He blotted out his handiwork with the flat of his hand.

"Don't you suppose that the owner of every one of those brands knows that?" she scoffed. "A clumsy rebrand would loom up for a mile. Slade's no fool."

"Not in a thousand years," Harris agreed. "I was just commenting on how peculiar it was that the three brands he runs farthest north should be so easy worked over into any one of the three that his range overlaps up this way. And I happen to know his farthest south brands would work out the same way with the outfits at the other end of his range. But he earmarks all of his brands the same—with jinglebobs; and jinglebobs most generally drop off and leave nothing but a good big piece absent out of the ear."

"So you think a man as big as Slade is stupid enough to try his hand at brand-blotting on all sides at once?" she asked.

"No; nor even once on one side," he returned. "Not him. The one fact that the similarity of brands would make it easy to fall into the habit is enough to keep every outfit watching him. He couldn't start—and knows it."

"Then what does it all amount to?" she asked.

"While folks watch him on that score he could work in a dozen ways that don't concern those brands at all," he said.

The girl shook her head impatiently and looked across at the six men who ate her fare.

"Look at them," she flared. "Eating my food; and in a few nights they'll be hazing a bunch of Three Bar steers toward the Idaho line. Why doesn't some man that is a man kill that albino fiend and all his whelps and rid the country of his breed? Even Slade lets them put up at his place."

"If they're pestering you I'll order them off," he said.

"And what effect would that have?" she inquired scornfully.

"The effect of causing them to climb their horses and amble off down the country," he returned. He sprawled on the grass, his head propped on one hand as he regarded them.

"Then probably you'd better order them off," she suggested. "You have my

permission. Now's your chance to make good the lordly brag of helping the Three Bar out of the hole." She instantly regretted having said it. A dozen times of late she had wondered if she were turning bitter and waspish, if she would ever again be the even-tempered Billie Warren with a good word and a smile for every one.

Harris was, as always, apparently undisturbed by her words. Far down the bottoms she could see a point of light which she knew for a white sign that read: "Squatter, don't let sundown find you here." The man before her had defied these sinister warnings scattered about the range and publicly announced that he would put in hay on his filing, knowing that he was a marked man from the hour he turned the first furrow. Whatever his shortcomings, lack of courage was not one of them.

"I take that back," she said, referring to her words of a few moments before. Harris straightened to a sitting position in his surprise at this impulsive retraction, and as he smiled across at her she divined that this man, seemingly so impervious to her sarcasm, could be easily moved by a single kind word.

"Thanks, Billie," he said. "That was real white of you."

He rose and sauntered toward the wagon and Billie Warren felt a sudden clutch of fear as he halted before Harper and she realized that he had taken her words literally and intended ordering them off.

"I've been made temporary foreman of the Three Bar—just so the boss could try me out on that job for an hour or two," he remarked conversationally. "So I'm putting in a new rule that goes into effect right off. When you boys ride away, in a few minutes from now, you can tell folks that the grub line is closed as far as the Three Bar is concerned."

Lang took a half-step toward him, his face reflecting his gathering rage as his slow brain comprehended the fact that this speech was but another way of announcing that he and his men would find no welcome at the Three Bar from that moment on. Harper caught his arm and jerked him back. The albino was an old hand and could rightly read the signs.

"The gentleman was remarking to me," he said to Lang; "not you." He turned to Harris, noting as he did so that every Three Bar man, excepting those asleep, had suddenly evidenced keen interest in what was transpiring there; several

carelessly shifted their positions. "There's no law to make you feed any man," he said to Harris. "From now on we'll pay our way—as far as the Three Bar is concerned."

His tones were casual; only his pale eyes, fastened unblinkingly on Harris's face, betrayed his real feeling toward the man who, notwithstanding the roundabout nature of his announcement, had practically ordered him to stay away from the Three Bar for all time.

"But even in the face of that," he resumed, "we'll welcome you any time you happen to ride down our way."

Every man within earshot understood the threat that lay beneath the casual words.

"Then I'll likely drop in some time," Harris said. "If you'll send word where it is. And I'll bring fifty men along."

The albino motioned his men toward their horses and they mounted and rode off down the bottoms. Harris walked back and resumed his seat near the girl, who sat looking at him as if she could not believe what she had just witnessed.

"You see it was just as easy as I'd counted on," he said. "It'll be a considerable saving on food."

"But how did you know?" she asked. "Why is Harper afraid of you?"

"He's not," Harris said. "Not for a single second. But he's an old hand and has left a few places on the jump before he came out here."

"And he thinks you know it!" she guessed.

"He don't care what I know; it's what he knows himself—that the wild bunch is always roosting on the powder can even when it appears like they're sitting pretty—that counts with him. You thought I was taking a fool chance of out-gaming him. In reality I was taking almost an unfair advantage of him, providing he had the brains he must possess to have lived to his age."

She could find no ready-made answer to this surprising statement. He sprawled comfortably on the grass, turning over in his mind the conditions that

were but a repetition of the history of so many frontiers; first the earliest settlers resenting the intrusion of the later ones and resorting to lawless means of protecting their priority; then the strengthening of the outlaw element, half the countryside in league with the wild bunch, the two opposing factions secretly hiring the predatory class to prey upon rival interests; then, inevitably, the clean split, usually occasioned by the outlaws having increased in power until they felt competent to defy both sides, to play both ends against the middle, to commit atrocities that opened the eyes of those who, believing they had subsidized the lawless, suddenly woke to the fact that they had subsidized themselves; then the outlaws, in their turn, discovering that every man's hand was against them; the ruthless establishing of a definite line between those inside and those outside the law, replacing the vague middle ground of semi-lawlessness. Always their friends fell away from them, those secretly leagued with them fearing to be seen in their company, and those not too definitely known to belong to their ranks invariably quitting them cold, often joining forces against them and developing into more or less substantial citizens, according to the standards of their day.

"Don't you know that the albino will kill you for that?" the girl asked at length.

"Not unless he can stage it as a personal quarrel," he said. "He'll never follow it up as coming out of what happened to-day by taking it out on me as temporary foreman of the Three Bar—for ordering him off."

"Why?" she puzzled. "What possible difference would that make to a man like him?"

"Just this," he said: "There's a good majority of folks that don't relish seeing Harper's bunch ride up—that feed them through policy. But whenever you make it plain to a man that he's compelled to do a thing whether he likes it or not it's ten to one he'll balk out of sheer human pride. If Harper kills the Three Bar foreman on the grounds that he refused to feed all his men—why then, right off, every other foreman and owner within a hundred miles starts to resenting the possibility that maybe the albino feels the same way toward him. Harper knows that."

"But if your theory had been wrong?" she persisted. "What then?"

"Then," he said, "then there'd have been hell and repeat. I wasn't just acting

as me, a personal affair, but, as I took pains to remark aloud, as the foreman of the Three Bar. Every Three Bar man would have gone into action the second Harper made a move at me. You know that—and Harper knew it."

She realized the soundness of this statement. The one unalterable code of the country, a code that had been fostered till it eclipsed all others, decreed that a man should be loyal to the brand for which he rode. The whole fabric of the cow business was based on that one point.

"And a wrangle of that magnitude was something he couldn't risk," Harris said. "It would stir folks up, and any time they're stirred a mite too far Harper has come to the end of his rope. Any other brand could have done the same—only folks fall into a set habit of mind and figure they must do what others do just because it's custom."

"But now they'll work their deviltry all the stronger against the Three Bar," she predicted. "They could wreck us if they tried. You couldn't get a conviction in five years. Not a man would testify against one of Harper's outfit."

"Then we'll put on a fighting crew and hold them off," he said. "But that's not the layout that will be hardest to handle in the long run. Slade is the one real hard nut for the Three Bar to crack. He can work it a dozen different ways and you couldn't prove one of them on him to save your soul. He's one smooth hombre—Slade."

Harris rose and headed for his bed roll and the girl sought the shelter of her teepee for a rest. All was quiet near the wagon till Waddles boomed the summons to feed. After the meal a youth named Moore mounted a saddled horse that was picketed nearby and rode up a branching gulch, returning with a dry cedar log which he snaked to the wagon at the end of his rope. After a few hours' rest and the prospects of a full night's sleep ahead the hands snatched an hour for play.

They sat cross-legged round the fire kindled from the cedar and raised their voices in song. Waddles drew forth a guitar and picked a few chords. Bentley, the man who repped for Slade, carried the air and the rest joined in. The voices were untrained but from long experience in rendering every song each man carried his part without a discordant note. Evans sang a perfect bass. Bangs a clear tenor; Moore faked a baritone that satisfied all hands and Waddles wagged

his head in unison with the picking of his guitar and hummed, occasionally accenting the air with a musical, drumlike boom. They rambled through all the old familiar songs of the range. The Texan herded his little dogie from the Staked Plains to Abilene; the herd was soothed on the old bed ground—bed down my dogie, bed down—and the poor cowboy was many times buried far out on the lone prair-ee.

Bangs had stationed himself so that he could see the girl and throughout the evening his surprised eyes never once strayed from Billie Warren's face.

She leaned back against the wagon wheel, enjoying it all, but her complacence was jarred as she half-turned and noted Morrow's face, drawn and bleak, unsoftened by the music. Again the feeling of dislike for him rose within her; but he was an efficient hand and she had nothing definite against him. At the end of an hour Waddles rose and returned his instrument to the wagon. The group broke up and every man turned in.

Billie Warren lay in her teepee, her mind busily going over the events of the day. The night sounds of the range drifted to her. A bull-bat rasped a note or two from above. A picketed horse stamped restlessly just outside and a range cow bawled from an adjacent slope. The night-hawk had relieved the wrangler and she could half-hear, half-feel the low jar of many hoofs as he grazed the remuda slowly up the valley, singing to while away the time.

She reflected that Cal Harris was at least possessed of self-confidence and that procrastination was certainly not to be numbered among his failings. It came to her that his interests, for the present, were identical with her own. As half-owner in the Three Bar it would be as much to his advantage as to her own to build it up. Waddles's warped legs prevented his acting as foreman on the job and it might be that the other man would find some way to prevent the leak that was sapping the life from the Three Bar. His half-ownership entitled him to the place. Billie Warren loved her brand and her personal distrust of Harris was submerged in the hope that his sharing the full responsibility with herself might be a step toward putting it back on the old-time plane of prosperity.

The jar of hoofs had ceased and she knew that the remuda had bedded down; and having at last reached a decision she fell asleep with the crooning voice of the nighthawk drifting to her ears.

V

It seemed but a few fleeting moments before Waddles's voice roused her.

"Roll out!" he bawled. "Feet in the trough!"

There was instant activity, the jingle of belts and spurs and in five minutes every man was fully clothed and splashing at the creek. It was showing rose and gray in the east when the meal was finished and the cook's voice was once more raised.

"All set! Ru-un-n 'em in!" he called, and there came the rumble of hoofs as the nighthawk acted on this order and headed the remuda toward the wagon. Two men mounted the horses that had been picketed close at hand throughout the night and stationed themselves on either side of the open end of the rope corral to guide the horse herd into it.

The horses could not be seen until almost upon them, looming suddenly out of the dim gray of early morning and surging into the corral. The nighthawk and the two men already mounted rode around it, driving back any horse that showed a disposition to leave the corral by a downward slash of a doubled rope across his face and ears. The men went in and scattered through the milling herd, each one watching his chance to put his noose on a circle horse of his own string.

When most of the men were mounted Billie urged Papoose over near Harris's horse.

"Do you know how to throw a circle?" she asked.

"After a fashion," he said. "I've bossed one or two in the past."

"Then we'd better be off," she suggested. "Since you're the Three Bar foreman it's for you to say when."

"I only preempted that job for ten minutes or so," he explained with evident embarrassment. "You surely didn't think I was trying to boost myself into the

foreman's job for keeps?"

"No," she said. "But you're half-owner—and you can handle men. I'm giving you free rein to show what you can do."

Harris straightened in his saddle and motioned to the men.

"Let's go!" he ordered, and headed his horse for the left-hand flank of the valley. They ascended the first slopes, picked a long ridge and followed it to the crest of the low divide between that valley and the next.

Harris increased the pace and they swept up-country along the divide at a steady lope. When traveling or making a long day's ride on a single horse the cowhand saves his mount and travels always at a trail-trot, but with work to be done, three circles to be thrown in a day and with a string of fresh horses for every hand, the paramount issue of the circle is the saving of time rather than the saving of mounts. As they reached the head of the first draw that led back down into the valley Harris waved an arm.

"Carp," he called, and a middle-aged man named Carpenter, abbreviated to Carp, wheeled his horse from the group and headed down the draw.

A half-mile farther on they reached the head of another gulch.

"Hanson!" the new foreman called, and the man who repped for the Halfmoon D dropped out. One man was detailed to work each draw and when some five miles up the divide there were but half the crew left. Harris dropped down a long ridge and crossed the bottoms. Far down the valley the wagon showed through the thin, clear air. The foreman led the way to the opposite divide and doubled back, sending a man down every gulch.

The girl rode with him. Down in the bottoms they could see the riders detailed on the opposite side hazing the cows out of their respective draws and heading them toward the wagon. The first few men left their cows in the flat and veered past them to station themselves near the wagon and block the valley, sitting their horses at hundred-yard intervals across it.

Harris and the girl worked the last draw themselves and when they drove their cows out of the mouth of it they found a herd already milled, two hundred yards above the wagon. Harris left her and circled the bunch, estimating it.

A few belated riders were bringing their quotas to swell the herds. Frequently a bunch of cows made a break to leave and many were allowed to make good their escape to the safety of the broken slopes. But these were only marked stuff previously branded and any attempt including a cow with an unbranded calf was instantly blocked. Each rider noted the brands of any cows which he let escape and more particularly still he scanned them with an eye for the presence of a "slick," an animal missed in previous round-ups and wearing no brand. Slick cows were fair prey for any man who first put his rope on them and he was entitled to run his own brand on a slick or to mark it with the brand for which he rode and draw down a certain scale of premiums at the end of the round-up season.

Harris changed mounts, throwing his saddle on the paint-horse. When the last rider appeared with his bunch and threw it into the herd Harris signaled all hands to change mounts. Half the men repaired to the rope corral and caught up cow horses while the balance of the crew held the herd, each one relieving some other as soon as he had saddled a fresh horse.

When the hands commenced working the herd the Three Bar girl watched the trained cow horses with an interest that was always fresh, for from long experience they thoroughly understood every move of the game.

A sagebrush fire was burning fifty yards above the wagon and each man rode past it, leaned from his saddle and dropped his running iron in the flame.

The men worked round the edge of the bunch and slipped a noose on every calf that was thrown to the edge of the constantly shifting mass. Morrow roped the first calf and dragged it to the fire. A cow darted away with her calf and Bangs's horse whirled to head her back. As Bangs shook out his rope the horse changed tactics and abandoned the course that would have carried him past to turn them, following in close behind them instead. After two preliminary swings Bangs made his throw and missed. The horse did not miss a step but kept on close behind the calf while his rider coiled the rope. The second throw fell fair and the horse set his feet and braced himself as the calf hit the end of the rope.

As much as she loved the round-up, many times as she had seen it, Billie Warren had never become calloused to the brutalities perpetrated on the calves. She withdrew and sat in the shade of the wagon. She was downwind and the dust raised by the trampling hoofs floated down to her, mingled with the odor of

steaming cows, the acrid smoke of the sage fire and the taint of scorched hair and flesh.

Some of the men handled their hot irons with makeshift tongs of split sage, which were soon burnt through and replaced. Others used slender, long-handled pliers for the work.

The horses held the calves helpless, moving just enough to keep the ropes taut. Evans loosed a fresh-branded calf and rode over to the wagon for a drink. Several cows raced wildly round at a distance from the fire.

"One of those old sisters will go on the prod and make a break for some one right soon," he predicted to the girl.

A calf bawled in pain and a cow, maddened by the appeal of her offspring, charged the group around the fire. The horses that stood there, holding calves, pricked their ears and watched her rush alertly but before it was necessary for any one of them to dodge, Slade's rep slipped his rope on her, jumped his horse off at an angle and brought her down.

Evans pointed to where Harris, seated on the big pinto, was working slowly through the center of the herd.

"He's gone in after another slick," Evans said. "Watch the paint-horse work."

Calico was moving after the animal Harris wanted, working easily and without a single sharp rush that would cause undue disturbance among the cows.

"A good cow horse is like a hound," Lanky observed. "Let him spot the critter you're wanting and nothing can shake him off."

Calico followed a serpentine course through the mass, crowded a three-year-old to the edge and cut him out. The animal attempted to dodge back among his fellows but the paint-horse turned as on a pivot and blocked him, then started him off in a straightaway run.

"There's a real rope-horse," Lanky said. "I've been noticing him work. Look!"

Calico had braced himself as the slick was roped, shoving his hind feet out ahead, squatting on his haunches and raising his forefeet almost clear of the

ground.

"Cal broke him without shoes in front," Evans explained. "His feet got tender after he'd jerked a steer or two and he learned to sock his hind feet ahead and take the jar on them. He'll last two years longer that way. A horse that takes all the weight on his front feet in jerking heavy stuff soon gets stove up in the shoulders and has to be condemned. This Cal Harris has one whole bagful of knowing tricks."

He rode back to the work after this endorsement of her choice of a foreman.

Through all the turmoil the nighthawk slept peacefully in the shade of a sage-clump. Waddles dozed in the wagon but suddenly came to life with a start and signaled to the wrangler who, in his turn, waved an arm to the man nearest him. The four wagon horses were roped and harnessed while Waddles loaded the bed rolls on the tailgate and lashed them fast. The rope corral was dismantled and loaded. The chuck wagon veered past the herd and lumbered up the valley and the wrangler and one other followed with the horse herd.

In a short space of time the herd had been worked, the last calf branded, and Harris led the men up the bottoms. As they rode each one reported the brands of all stock which he had let break away from his bunch before reaching the herd. Each rep entered the number and kind of his own brand so reported to the former tally taken of the herd.

Five miles up the valley, at the spot where Harris had crossed it a few hours before, they found the wagon waiting at the new stand, the corral refashioned and the remuda inside it. It was but ten o'clock but the first circle had commenced at four. The noon meal on the round-up was served whenever the first circle was completed. The men fell ravenously on the hot meal, changed to fresh circle horses and started again.

It was falling dusk when the herd gathered in the third circle had been worked and the last calf branded for the day. The men had unsaddled and spread their bed rolls before Waddles had announced the meal. The nighthawk came riding up on the horse he had picketed prior to going to sleep before sunup at the first stand. His bed roll was lashed on a half-wild range horse he had roped and it sagged to one side, having no pack saddle to keep it from slipping, and he spoke in no gentle terms of an outfit that would pull out without troubling to throw his

pack saddle from the wagon or taking pains to picket an extra horse. His fretfulness passed, however, as he smelled the hot coffee and he repaired to the wagon, his ill humor dissipated.

There was no music that night, every man retiring to his bed roll the instant he finished his meal.

At the end of the first week out from the ranch Harris pulled up his horse beside the girl's and showed her his tally book.

"We've run Slade's mark on more calves than we have our own," he said. "That's one way he works."

"But that's not his fault and it doesn't mean anything," she said. "His cows are sure to drift. This first strip we've worked is the southernmost edge of our range and his north wagon works the strip right south of us. We're sure to find a number of his cows. As we double back on our next lap we'll not find the same proportion."

"Not quite—but plenty," he predicted. "We've marked more calves for Slade in one week than all his three wagon crews will mark for the Three Bar in a year. The first three weeks of each season your men do a little more work for Slade than they do for you. It's a safe bet that the Halfmoon D does the same, and so on through every brand that joins his range. That puts him way off ahead."

"But that is pure accident," she said.

"It's pure design," he stated. "His boys are busy shoving his cows from the middle all ways so that when fall comes he has a good inside block that's only been lightly fed over. They fall back on that for winter feed. Last winter, when cows were dying like rats, his men were out drifting Slade's stuff back toward his middle range."

"That's true enough," she admitted. "But——"

"But you thought he was doing it as a favor to you—getting his surplus off your territory so your own cows would have a better chance. That's the same kind of talk he floated all round the line; playing the benevolent neighbor when in reality the old pirate had deliberately planned, year after year, to overcrowd your range and feed you out."

"But his men would know," she objected.

"Not many of them would grasp the whole scheme of it," he said. "You hadn't thought of it yourself. He'd detail a pair of boys to shove a few hundred head way off to the south. A few days later another couple would be throwing a bunch off northeast. See? And what if a few of them did surmise? They're riding for his brand."

The girl nodded. That unalterable code again,—the religion of being loyal to one's brand. Not one of Slade's men would balk at doing it knowingly; each would do anything to advance his interests as long as he drew his pay from Slade.

"I doubt if there's a dozen men within two hundred miles that haven't lifted a few calves now and then for the brand they were riding for. That's the way it goes. A rule that was fine to start—loyalty to the hand that paid you; then carried too far until it's degenerated into a tool that's often abused," he said.

As they talked Harris detailed men for each draw but when they reached the point where they were due to drop down and cross the valley he pulled up his horse.

"You take the rest of the circle, Carp," he instructed Carpenter. "I'm going to ride off up the ridge a piece." The girl regarded him curiously. No less than three times in the last week he had stopped midway of the circle and asked her to complete it. Now he had turned it over to Carp and he signaled her to remain with him.

"Where are we going?" she asked as she watched the men ride down toward the bottoms. "And why?"

"Back the way we came," he said. "And maybe I can show you why."

He headed back the divide they had just followed until he came to the saddle at the head of a draw that led down to the valley. Far below them they could see a rider hazing a bunch of cows out into the bottoms. High on the right-hand slope of the gulch lay a notch, a little blind basin watered by the seepage from a sidehill spring, and there on the green bed of it a dozen cows with their calves grazed undisturbed. For perhaps five minutes Harris lolled sidewise in the saddle and watched them. Then a rider appeared on the ridge that divided that draw

from the next, dropped in below the cows and headed them back over the ridge into the draw from which he had appeared. Even at that distance she recognized this last man as Lanky Evans. Harris resumed his way down the divide and she knew that he had discovered some irregularity for which he had been seeking.

"Who was the man that overlooked those cows?" she asked. "Who worked that draw?"

"Morrow," he said. "His eyesight is getting bad. That's the second time this week—and the last. I've detailed Lanky to work the gulch next to him every circle so that he could drop over the ridge and see what was going on. That's why he's always late coming in—not because he's lazy but because he's been working almost a double shift."

"Then Morrow is an inside man for Harper," she said. "Drawing Three Bar pay and working against us too."

"Yes," he said. "Only he's an inside man for Slade."

"But how could his leaving those calves behind benefit Slade?" she demanded.

"How could it benefit Harper?" he countered. "Can you tell me that?"

She could not and motioned for him to go on.

"None of Harper's men has a brand of his own," he said. "They're living on the move. They can't wait for calves to grow up. The way they work is to run a bunch of beef steers across into Idaho. They'll pick up another bunch there and shove them across the Utah line and repeat by moving a drove of some Utah brand up in here. Only beef steers—quick turning stuff. You know about the reputation of the O V and the Lazy H Four."

She knew all too well. There was a half-feud, a smoldering distrust displayed between cowmen on each side of the three State lines, a triangle of ill feeling. It was current rumor that the O V and the Lazy H Four, ranging far southwest of the Three Bar, would traffic in any steers that came from across either the Utah or Idaho line. In the corner of those States were similar outfits that were receiving stations for rustled stock from the opposite sides. But they were good neighbors and kept hands off so far as brands on their home range were

concerned. It was part of the game, and as long as their own interests were not disturbed the adjacent outfits were blind. The triangular feud had been fostered to a point where the thieves were immune. Even if a direct complaint should be brought against them they had but to ride across into another State and a sheriff following them would be helpless, the inhabitants resenting this intrusion into their affairs by an officer from another State, truly having no right there, and refusing to aid him even if they did not actually oppose his passage.

"But how would it benefit Slade?" she repeated.

"Why, suppose that Morrow overlooked a nice bunch of Three Bar calves all along this first strip next to Slade's range," Harris said. "Then some Slade rider happens to drop along after our wagon has moved on and he hazes them off south. Later another picks them up and shoves them along another half-day's drive—way beyond where our boys ever work, even beyond the strip covered by Slade's north wagon, the only one that carries a Three Bar rep; what then?"

"The calves would still be with mothers wearing the Three Bar mark," she said. "After they leave the cows they're slicks, fair game for the first man that puts his rope on them—and Slade wouldn't risk running one of his own brands on them before they left the cows."

"Not one of his own, no," Harris said; "only one that's going to be his later on. Did it ever strike you as queer that Slade, whose way is to crush every new outfit, should suffer a soft-hearted streak every year or so and befriend some party that had elected to start up for himself right in the middle of Slade's range? And later buy him out? That's the way he came into nearly every brand he runs."

"He's impulsive in his friendships," she defended. "He has always been like that."

"And his impulses embrace some right queer folks," Harris remarked. "Several of those dinky little owners have moved out right sudden with a dozen riders from some other outfit fanning along close behind; McArthur didn't even get moved, for the Brandons went on the war trail before he had time to start. But it transpired that he was all set to go because Slade showed bill of sale for Mac's holdings, dated only the day before. That's how he came to own every one of those brands that match up so close with those of every outfit that overlaps his range."

"But if he actually dealt with so many as you believe, some one of them would be sure to have trouble later on and tell of it," she argued.

"And it would be the word of a self-confessed thief against that of the biggest owner within two hundred miles, and Slade would laugh at him—or kill him, according to whatever mood he happened to be in."

They had turned their horses down a long ridge that led to the wagon in the bottoms.

"I'll mention to the boys that Morrow sold out the interests of the Three Bar while he was drawing down your pay. They'll pass sentence on him right sudden. Four hours from now they'll have dry-gulched him so far from nowhere that even the coyotes can't find him."

"Not that," she said. "Turn him over to the sheriff. You caught him in the act."

"In the act of missing a few cows on his detail. The sheriff would hold him almost an hour before he let him go."

"Then give him his check and send him off the Three Bar range," she said.

Harris waited till the herd had been worked and the men had gathered round the wagon. Then he handed Morrow a check.

"Here's your time," he said. "You can be leaving almost any time now."

Every man knew that Morrow had been caught at some piece of work contrary to the interests of the Three Bar. The discharged hand gave a short ugly laugh.

"As soon as you pussyfooted into the foreman's job I knew it was only a question of time," he said.

"Exactly," Harris returned. "Pack your stuff."

"A foreman has a scattering of a dozen or so men to back him up," Morrow observed with a shrug of one shoulder toward the rest of the men.

Harris turned to the girl.

"I resign for about sixty seconds," he said and swung back toward Morrow; and again all hands noted his queer quartering stand. "I'm not foreman right at this minute," he said. "So if you had anything in particular to address to me in a personal vein you can start now. Otherwise you'd better be packing your stuff."

Morrow turned his back and headed for the rope corral. When he had saddled one horse and packed his effects on another he turned to Evans.

"You helped frame this on me," he said. "I thought I saw you messing over into my detail a few days back."

"Right on the first ballot," Lanky assented. "I'm only riding for one brand at a time."

"One day right soon I'll run across you again," Morrow prophesied.

"Then I'll take to riding with my head over my shoulder—surveying my back-track," Lanky promised. "Because we'll most likely meet from behind."

For the first time Morrow's bleak face changed expression, the lines deepening from the strain of holding himself steady in the face of the contemptuous insults with which Lanky casually replied to his threats.

He started to snarl an answer, his usual self-repression deserting him, but Harris waved an impatient hand.

"Drag it!" he snapped. "Get moving. If I had my own way we'd lead your horse out from under you—and we will if I ever hear of your turning up on the Three Bar range again."

VI

Billie Warren rode with Harris on the last lap of the circle. There were but two men remaining with them.

"Moore!" Harris called, and the man turned his horse down the head of a

draw that would lead him out into the bottoms a trifle less than a mile above the wagon. Harris heard a shrill whistle behind him and turned sidewise in the saddle to look back, saw that Moore had regained the ridge and was signaling. They turned and rode back to him.

"There's another," Moore said, pointing down the gulch. "It's getting to be a habit."

A dead cow lay on a little flat a hundred yards below. For three consecutive days some rider had found a fresh-killed Three Bar cow. Every animal had been shot.

"I'll look this one over myself," Harris decided. "There's only two more gulches to work. Each one of you boys take one."

The girl followed him as he turned down the first steep pitch. They pulled up their horses and sat looking at the cow. A trickle of blood oozed out of a hole between her eyes. Harris rode in a circle round the spot.

"He downed her from some point above," he said. "Not a sign anywhere close at hand." He surveyed the ridges that flanked either side of the draw and the little saddle-like depression at the head of it from which they had just descended. From beyond this gap came the shrill nicker of a horse, the sound chopped short as if a man had clamped his hand on the animal's nostrils to silence it. Harris turned swiftly to the girl.

"It's a plant," he said. "Ride—hard!"

He suited his action to the words and jumped his horse off down the bottoms. He waved her over to one side.

"Keep well away from me!" he ordered. "They don't want you."

They hung their spurs into their mounts and the horses plunged down the steeply-pitching bottoms, vaulting sage clumps and bounding along the cow trails that threaded the brush. Two hundred yards below the cow the draw made an elbow bend. The girl rounded it and as Harris followed a jump behind he felt a jarring tug at the cantle of his saddle and the thin, sharp crack of a rifle reached him. The gulch made a reverse bend and as they swept around it Harris swung sidewise in the saddle and looked back. They were entirely sheltered from any

point on the divide six hundred yards behind them. He pulled his horse to a swinging trot and they rode down the sloping meadow that led straight to the main valley.

"It was certainly stupid of me not to know right off that it was a decoy," he said. "A man just out to act spiteful would have piled up a dozen cows at one stand and left. He's downed one every day—in plain sight of the divide we'd follow on the circle, knowing that I'd soon ride down to look one over myself. All he had to do was to cache himself on the far side, watch for me to ride down, wait until the rest had gone on and climb to the divide and pot me. And it would have been so dead easy to turn the tables and bushwhack him," he added regretfully. "If only I'd have used my head in time."

A sick chill swept the girl as she thought of an enemy with the patience to kill a cow every day, use it for a decoy and wait for a chance at his human prey.

The cows that grazed on the meadow raced off ahead of them. A bunch of wild range horses swept up the broken slopes and wheeled to watch them pass.

"We didn't get started any too soon," Harris said. "His horse wasn't more than a hundred feet beyond the notch when he blew off and warned us—not time for me to get cached and drop him as he topped the ridge."

The girl's eyes suddenly riveted on a small round hole in the cantle of his saddle where the ball had entered. On the inside and far to the left extremity of the cantle a ragged gash showed where if had passed out. The shot had been fired as he wheeled round the sharp bend, quartering away from the man above, but even then the ball had not missed his left hip to exceed an inch.

She started her horse so suddenly that before he realized her purpose she was well in the lead and going at a dead run toward the mouth of the gulch where it opened out into the main bottoms two hundred yards beyond.

From the opposite slope riders were hazing cows out of their respective draws; some had reached the wagon; others were coming down from above. The running horse caught every man's eye as the girl careened out into the center of the valley, rose in her stirrups and waved an arm in a circle above her head. In five seconds riders were whirling in behind her from all directions as she headed for the wagon.

She waved those already on the spot toward the rope corral.

"Change horses!" she called, and as each man rode in he caught up a fresh horse.

"Scatter out; some of you below where we came down, some above," she said. "Five hundred to the man that brings Morrow in."

"It's no use, Billie," Harris counseled mildly. "He's plum out of the country by now. It'll be dark in three hours—and it's right choppy country over there."

Waddles interposed and seconded her move.

"Let 'em rip," he said. "There's just a chance."

Bangs was the first to change mounts. The boy's physical qualifications were as sound as his mental ability was limited and it was his pride to have a string of mounts that included the worst horses in the lot. He rode from the corral on Blue, holding the big roan steady, and headed up the ridge a mile below where Harris and the girl had come down. Rile Foster chose the next; five riders were but a few jumps behind. Harris did not change horses but searched hastily in his war bag and slipped the strap of a binocular case across his shoulders and rode off with the girl as she finished cinching her saddle on a fresh horse.

In less than five minutes from the time she had reached the wagon the last Three Bar man had mounted and gone. Harris rode with her up a long ridge that led up to the divide; they followed another into the next bottoms and ascended the second divide. This was sharp and rocky, its crest a maze of ragged pinnacles. He chose the highest of these and dismounted to sweep the range with his glasses. The low country beyond them was broken and choppy, a succession of tiny box canyons and rough coulees. Off to the right he made out Rile Foster working through the tangle. Somewhere beyond him Bangs would be doing the same. Riders came into view off to the left, crossing some ridge, only to disappear once more. The high point afforded a view of every ridge for miles. After perhaps half an hour Harris caught five horsemen in the field of his glasses. They were riding in a knot.

"They've picked up his trail," he said. "But he'll have too long a lead. He'll be fanning right along and they'll have to work out a track. In less than two hours it will be dark—and by morning he'll be forty miles from here and up on a fresh

horse."

He rested his elbows on the ground to steady the glasses as he trained them off in the direction the five men had gone. Twice he saw them cross over ridges. Then a tiny, swift-moving speck came into his field of view, traveling up the slope of a distant divide. The ant-like rider dipped over the crest of it and was gone.

"He's more than five miles in the lead of them," he said. "Across rough country too. There was just a chance that he would work back through these breaks below us instead of making a ride for it, and we could have spotted him from up here. We might as well be going."

They mounted and headed to the right along the divide.

"If Rile is in sight we can wait for him," he said. "And see if he's picked up any tracks."

A half-mile along the ridge they saw Foster off through the breaks and he was working back their way.

"Thanks, Billie," Harris said. "For losing a circle trying to run him down."

"I'd have done as much for any Three Bar man," she returned.

"Of course," he said. "I'd have expected that. But all the same I'd hardly looked to see you show much concern over what happened to me."

"I don't want to see even you shot in the back," she said. "Is that answer enough?"

"It shows that I'm progressing," he smiled. "Maybe my good qualities will grow on you until you get to thinking right well of me."

They waited till Foster joined them on the ridge.

"Bangs crossed over a mile below," Rile said. "We might pick him up."

"Any sign?" Harris asked as they moved down the divide.

"A bunch of shod horses went down through there a few days back," Rile said. "Three or four men likely, with a few pack horses along. There was a fresh track, made this morning, going up-country alone. He likely stayed at their camp all night, wherever it is. I worked across, thinking he might go back to it; but there was no down trail. He's pulled out."

"I saw him," Harris said. "He's gone."

They stopped in the saddle of the ridge where a fresh track showed the spot Bangs had crossed.

The girl was looking at Harris and saw a sudden pallor travel up under his tan and as she turned to see what had occasioned it he crowded his horse against her own.

"Don't look!" he ordered, and forced her horse over the far side of the ridge. "You'd better ride on back to the wagon," he urged. "There's been some sort of doings over across. Rile and I will ride down and look into it." Without a word she turned her horse toward the wagon.

"It's God's mercy she didn't see," Harris said, as the two crossed back over the ridge. "Isn't that a hell of a way for a man to die?"

But the girl had seen. Her one brief look had revealed a horse coming round a bend in a little box canyon below. A shapeless thing dragged from one stirrup and at every third or fourth jump the big blue horse side-slashed the limp bundle with his heels.

As the two men reached the bottoms the frenzied horse had stopped and was fighting to free himself of the thing that followed him. He moved away from it in a circle but it was always with him. He squealed and kicked it, then dashed off in a fresh panic, side-swiping his pursuer.

Harris's rope tightened on his neck and threw him. As he rolled over Foster's noose snared both hind feet and he was held stretched and helpless between two trained cow horses while the men disengaged the bundle that had once been Bangs. One boot heel was missing and his foot was jammed through the stirrup, evidence that the horse had pitched with him and the loosened heel had come off, allowing his foot to slip through as he was thrown.

Harris pointed to a burnt red streak across the right side of Bangs's neck. He unbuttoned his shirt and revealed a similar streak under his left armpit.

Old Rile cursed horribly and his face seemed to have aged ten years.

"They learned that from the albino," he said. "It's an old trick that always works. They dropped a rope on him and jerked him, pried off his heel, shoved his boot through and laid the quirt on his horse. Blue did the rest."

Both men knew well how it had happened. Bangs had run across the camp of some of the wild bunch, men he had known for long, and the slow-thinking youth had suspected no more danger from riding on up to them at this time than at any other. He had told them of the shot fired at Harris and they had known that some other Three Bar man would find the trail leading from the direction of their camp. And Bangs would mention having found them there, linking them with the bushwhacker.

When Bangs had left a pair of them had ridden a distance with him and accomplished their aim.

"It's coming dark," Harris said. "And by morning they'll be thirty miles away. That sort of a killing was never fastened on to any man yet."

The old man raised a doubled fist and his face was lined with sorrow.

"Bangs was almost a son to me," he said. "I taught him to ride—and we've rode together on every job since then. You hear me! Some one is going to die for this!"

It was an hour after sundown when they reached the wagon with all that was earthly of Bangs lashed across the blue horse and it was midnight before the five men who had followed the trail returned with the word that they had been unable to even sight the man they tracked.

During the next week the girl inwardly accused the men of heartlessness. They jested as carelessly as if nothing unusual had occurred and she heard no mention of Bangs. It seemed that it took but a day for them to forget a former comrade who had come to an untimely end. Rile Foster had disappeared but on the fifth day he turned up at the Three Bar wagon and resumed his work without the least explanation of his absence.

The old man was gloomy and silent, his face set in sorrowful lines as he went about his work, and it was evident that he was continually brooding over the fate of the youth he had loved. It seemed to the girl that the men were even more cheerful and thoughtless than usual, that they concerned their minds with every conceivable topic except that which was uppermost in her own. The death of Bangs had affected them not at all.

She could not shake off the remembrance of the boy's adoring gaze as his eyes had followed every move she made and in some vague way she felt that she was responsible for the accident. She often rode near Rile Foster, knowing what was in his mind. He spoke but little and, in common with the rest, he never once mentioned Bangs.

At the end of a week Slade rode up to the wagon as the men were working the cows gathered in the second circle of the day. He jerked his head to draw her aside out of range of Waddles's ears.

"How's the Three Bar showing up this spring?" he asked abruptly.

"Better than ever," she retorted and he caught a note of defiance in her voice.

"You're lying, Billie," he asserted calmly. "The Three Bar will show another shrinkage this year."

"How do you know?" she flashed; and the distrust of him that Harris had roused in her, lately submerged beneath the troubling thoughts of Bangs, was suddenly quickened and thrown uppermost in her mind. In gauging him from this new angle she sensed a ruthlessness in him that was not confined solely to business efficiency; he would crush her interests without a qualm if it would gain his end.

"I know," he asserted. "It's my business to know everything that goes on anywhere near my range. There's not another outfit within a hundred miles that's on the increase. They're just hanging on, some of them making a little, some of them not. You say you want to run the Three Bar brand yourself. There's not a man in this country that would touch a Three Bar cow if you was hooked up with me."

"And then the Three Bar would be only one out of a dozen or more Slade

brands," she said. She pointed to the men that worked with the milling cows in the flat. "That's what I want," she said. "To run an outfit of my own—not one of yours."

For no reason at all she was suddenly convinced of the truth of Harris's suspicions concerning Slade. She noted that his eyes traveled from one man to the next till he had scrutinized every one that worked the herd.

"Are you looking for Morrow?" she demanded, and instantly regretted her remark. Slade's face did not change by so much as the bat of an eye and he failed to reply for a space—too long a space, she reflected—then turned to her.

"Morrow—who's he?" he asked. "And why should I look for him?"

"He rode for you last year," she said.

"Oh! That fellow. I recall him now. Bleak-looking citizen," he said. "And what about him?"

"You tell me," she countered.

"That new foreman of yours—the fellow that was scouting round alone for a few months—has been talking with his mouth," Slade said. "If he keeps that up I'll have to ask him to speak right out what's on his mind."

"He'll tell you," she prophesied. "What then?"

"Then I'll kill him," the man stated.

The girl motioned to Lanky Evans and he rode across to them.

"Lanky, I want you to remember this," she said. "Slade has just promised to kill Harris. And if he does I'll spend every dollar I own seeing that he's hung for it," she turned to Slade. "You might repeat what you just told me," she suggested.

Slade looked at her steadily.

"You misunderstood me," he stated. "I don't recall any remark to that effect or even to mentioning the name of Harris. Who is he, anyhow?"

Evans slouched easily in the saddle and twisted a smoke.

"Now let's get this straight what I'm to remember," he said. "Mr. Slade was saying that he planned to down Cal Harris the first time he caught him out alone. I heard him remark to that effect." He turned and grinned cheerfully at Slade. "That's his very words—and I'd swear to it as long as my breath held out. I'll sort of repeat it over to myself so that I can give it to the judge word for word when the time comes."

Slade favored him with a long stare which Lanky bore with unconcern, smiling back at him pleasantly.

"I've got my little piece memorized," Evans said; "and in parting let me remark that Cal Harris will prove a new sort of a victim for you to work on. If you tie into him he'll tear down your meat-house." He turned his horse and rode back to the herd.

"I'll play your own game," the girl told Slade. "If anything happens to another man who is riding for me and I have any reason to even suspect you were at the bottom of it I'll swear that I saw you do the thing yourself. The Three Bar is the only outfit with a clean enough record to drag anything up for an airing before the courts without taking a chance. This rule of every man for himself won't hold good with me."

She moved toward the wagon and Slade kept pace with her, leading his horse. There was no sign of life around the wagon and the jerky movement of a hat, barely visible through the tips of the sage, indicated that Waddles was washing out some clothing at the creek bank fifty yards away.

Slade leaned against the hind wheel on the far side from the herd and looked down at her.

"You're a real woman, Billie," he said. "You better throw in with a real man—me—and we'll own this country. I'll run the Three Bar on ten thousand head whenever you say the word."

"I'd rather see it on half as many through my own efforts," she said. "And some day I will."

"Some day you'll see it my way," he prophesied. "I know you better than any

other man. You want an outfit of your own—and if the Three Bar gets crowded out you'll go to the man that can give you one in its place. That will be me. Some day we'll trade."

"Some day—right soon—you'll trade your present holdings for a nice little range in hell," a voice said in Slade's ear and at the same instant two huge paws were thrust from the little window of the cook-wagon and clamped on his arms above the crook of his elbows. Slade was a powerful man but he was an infant in the grip of the two great hands that raised him clear of the ground and shook him before he was slammed down on his face ten feet away by a straight-arm thrust. His deadly temper flared and the swift move for his gun was simultaneous with the twist which brought him to his feet, but his hand fell away from the butt of it as he looked into the twin muzzles of a sawed-off shotgun which menaced him from the window.

It occurred to him that the nighthawk must have been restless and had elected to wash at the creek bank instead of indulging in sleep, thus accounting for the bobbing hat he had seen, for assuredly it did not belong to the cook, as he had surmised. The face behind the gun was the face of Waddles.

"I'm about to touch off a pound of shot if you go acting up," Waddles said. "Any more talk like you was just handing out and you'll get smeared here and there."

"Are you running the Three Bar?" Slade asked.

"Only at times, when the notion strikes me," Waddles said. "And this is one. Whenever you've got any specific business to transact with us why come right along over and transact it—and then move on out."

Billie Warren laughed suddenly, a gurgle of sheer amusement at the sight of the most dreaded man within a hundred miles standing there under the muzzle of a shotgun, receiving instructions from the mouth of the Three Bar cook. For Slade was helpless and knew it. Even if he took a chance with Waddles and won out he would be in worse shape than before, for if he turned a finger against her old watchdog and friend he would gain only her deadly enmity.

"Waddles, you win," Slade said. "I'll be going before you change your mind."

As the man walked toward his horse which had sidled a few steps away the

big cook gazed after him and fingered the riot gun regretfully.

The wagon did not move on when the men had finished working the herd as the rest of the day had been set aside for kill-time. An hour after Slade's departure the hands were rolling in for a sleep. The girl saw Rile Foster draw apart from the rest and sit with his back against a rock. He was regarding some small object held in his hand. As he turned it around she recognized it as a boot heel and the reason for Rile's absence was clear to her. He had back-tracked the blue horse to the scene of the mishap.

She was half asleep when a voice some distance from the teepee roused her by speaking the name of Bangs.

"I've a pretty elastic conscience myself," the voice went on. "I'm not above lifting a few calves for the brand I'm riding for or any little thing like that, but this deal sort of gorges up in me. They'll never cinch it on to any man—they never do. Old Rile is brooding over it. He'll likely run amuck. One way or another he'll try to break even for Bangs."

Billie recognized the voice as Moore's and knew that one of her men, at least, had not forgotten Bangs. It was the first time an intimation that the affair was other than an accident had reached her ears.

In the evening, after resting, the men once more gathered round a fire for an hour's play. They had evidently blotted out the memory of a friend who had raised his voice with theirs on the last such event, for they sang mostly the rollicking airs with even more than the usual amount of chaff between songs. But there was one old favorite that they did not sing. At last Waddles swung into the tune of it and as they buried the poor cowboy far out on the lone prair-ee she noted the difference at once, and more clearly than ever before she divined the reason why cowhands were apparently so devoid of sentiment, refusing to be serious on any topic, passing off those things nearest to their hearts with a callous jest. It was only that there were so many rough spots in the hard life they led that they avoided dwelling too seriously on matters that could not be rectified lest they become gloomy and morose. There were warm hearts under the indifferent exteriors. For now the voices were soft and hushed and she knew that every man was thinking of the lonely mound of rocks that marked the last resting place of Bangs.

VII

The calf round-up was nearing the end. Two weeks would see the finish and supply the final tally. The figures had already progressed to the point where they gave evidence of another shrinkage from the count of the previous year; and during one of the weekly half-day periods of rest three members of the Three Bar personnel found their minds occupied with a problem which excluded all thoughts of sleep. The problem in each case was the same but each one viewed it from the individual standpoint of his own particular knowledge of the subject.

Harris sat on a rock and reviewed the plans he had formulated for the salvation of the Three Bar brand, realizing the weak spots and mapping out some special line of defense that might serve to strengthen them. In the seclusion of the wagon Waddles was carefully rereading a much-thumbed document for perhaps the hundredth time. A man had come in at daylight with the mail from Brill's and Billie Warren was within her teepee poring over her share of it. The men had finished theirs and were sleeping.

The girl read first the four letters in the same handwriting, one to mark each week she had been on the round-up. The fifth was from Judge Colton, her father's old friend, to whose hands all his affairs had been entrusted. After scanning this she read again the other four. Ever since her last visit to the Coltons, just prior to her father's death, the arrival of these letters had been as regular as the recurrence of Sunday, one for each week, and in moments of despondency over the affairs of the Three Bar she drew strength from them. Very soon now, in the course of a few months at the outside, she and the writer would meet away from his native environment and in the midst of her own. Always before this had been reversed and her association with Carlos Deane had held a background of his own setting,—a setting in startling contrast to her log house, nestling in a desert of sage. The Deane house was a wonderful old-fashioned mansion set in a grove of century-old elms and oaks. She knew his life and now he would see her in her natural surroundings.

Perhaps it was her very difference from other girls that had first interested Carlos Deane, and the fact that he stood out from others, even among his own

intimates, that had drawn her interest to him. Deane had been an athlete of renown and a popular idol at school and his energy had been brought to bear in business as successfully as in play. In a hazy sort of way she felt that some day she would listen to the plea that, in some fashion or other, was woven into every letter; but not till the Three Bar was booming and no longer required her supervision. Everything else in the world was secondary to her love for her father's brand and the anxiety of the past two years of its decline eclipsed all other issues.

Her reflections were interrupted by Harris's voice just outside her teepee.

"Asleep, Billie?" he asked softly.

"No," she said. "What is it?"

"I've thrown your saddle on Papoose," he said. "Let's have a look around."

She assented and they rode off up the left-hand slope of the valley. A mile or so from the wagon Harris dismounted on a high point.

"Let's have a medicine chat," he offered. "I've got considerable on my mind."

She leaned against a rock and he sat cross-legged on the ground, facing her and twisting a cigarette as an aid to thought. Her head was tilted back against the rock, her eyes half-closed.

"They say folks get disappointed in love and go right on living," he observed. "I wonder now. I've met quite a scattering of girls and maybe there were a dozen or so out of the lot that sized up a shade better than the rest. Looking back from where I sit it occurs to me that it was a right colorless assortment, after all. I've heard that men run mostly to form and at one time or another let it out to some little lady that there's no other in the world. That's my own state right about now. Are you always going to keep on disliking me?"

"I don't dislike you," she said. She was still convinced of his father's trickery toward her own; but Cal Harris's quiet efficiency and his devotion to Three Bar interests had convinced her, against her will, that he had taken no part in it. "But if you brought me out here to go into that I'm going back."

"I didn't," he denied. "But I drifted into it sort of by accident. No matter what

topic I happen to be conversing on I'm always thinking how much I'd rather be telling you about that. Whenever I make some simple little assertion about things in general, what I'm really thinking is something like this, 'Billie, right this minute I'm loving you more than I did two minutes back.' You might keep that in mind."

The girl did not answer but sat looking off across the jumbled foothills, rock-studded and gray with sage. Some distance from them a bare shale-slide extended for half a mile along a sidehill, barren and devoid of all vegetation. Here and there, far off across the country, vivid patches on the slopes indicated thickets of willows and birch growing below spring seeps. A few scattered cedars sprouted from the rocky ledges of the more broken country and a clump of gnarled, wind-twisted cottonwoods marked a distant water hole. A whitish glare was reflected from an alkali flat in the bottom of a shallow basin. Twenty miles to the north the first rims of the hills rose out of the low country and through the breaks in them she could see long sloping valleys of lodgepole, the dark green relieved by the pale silvery sheen of aspen clumps; dense spruce jungles of the more precipitous slopes topped by rugged peaks covered with perpetual snow; certainly no soft or homelike scene. One must be filled with a vast love of it—or die of it—for without that love of the open life would be a deadly thing to bear in a desert of sage.

"I've always loved it," she said. "Whenever I've been away there always came a time when I was restless to get back. I've always felt that it would kill me to leave with the idea that I'd never see the Three Bar range again. But now the country has changed. At times it seems as if it would be a vast relief to me to leave it all behind."

"It's the people that have changed," he said. "It's only the history of all frontiers. The first settlers win it for themselves. Then clashing elements creep in; sheep and cattle wars; stockmen and squatter quarrels; later the weeding out of the wild bunch—parasites like Harper's crew: still later there'll be squabbles between the nesters themselves; jumping claims and rowing over water rights. Then it will all iron out, the country will settle up according to its topography and give its best to the human race. You may grow to think you hate the hills for what happens to you individually during the change—but it's in your blood to love them and that love will always return."

"It may return if the Three Bar weathers the change," she said.

"We'll weather it," he asserted cheerfully. "Shall I tell you how?"

"Yes. Tell me," she said. "I'd like to know. The Three Bar is going to show another loss this year."

"And likely the next," he assented. "Maybe still another. But that will be about all."

"That will surely be all," she said. "Two more years of decrease and there won't be enough left of the Three Bar to divide."

"Listen," he said, tapping his knee with a forefinger to emphasize his point. "Cal Warren always wanted to put the Three Bar flats under cultivation. He's probably told you that a hundred times."

"A thousand," she amplified. "But the sentiment of the country was against it the same as it is to-day."

"But it's not," he contradicted.

"Then why all those signs?" she asked. "They run every squatter out now just as they always did."

"Who?" he asked. "Do you have a hand in it?"

"No," she said. "The others do."

"Probably they think the same of you," he pointed out. "There's just one man in this country that profits by keeping that no-squatter sentiment alive."

"You must hate Slade," she observed.

"I haven't any feeling toward him one way or the other," he asserted. "He's an obstacle, that's all. That's the way he would feel about me if I stood in his way. There's at least one Slade in every locality and in every line of business throughout the world. Ambition for power. He wants the whole countryside. If he'd win out on that he'd want the next—and finally he'd want the world."

"He has this particular part of the world under his thumb," she said.

"But he won't have for long," he insisted. "He's topheavy and ripe for a fall. Those signs are all that saves him from going to pieces like an over-inflated balloon. He's the only man we'll have to fight."

"What convinces you of that?" she asked.

"See here," he urged, the emphasizing forefinger tapping again. "This will always be range country. It will only support a certain number of cows. If the Three Bar had a section in hay to winter-feed your stuff you could run double what you do now on the same range. It's the same with every other small concern. There's only a few spots suitable for home-ranch sites and every one of those has a brand running out of it now—excepting those sites down in Slade's range. If all those outfits put in hay it wouldn't cut up the range any more than it is now—except down Slade's way. Every outfit in the country could run twice as many head as they do now—except Slade. He couldn't."

"Why?" she asked. "Why wouldn't that apply to him as well?"

"Because he's strung out over a hundred miles. The minute farming starts there'll be squatters filing on every quarter where they can get water to put it in crop. There's twenty places Slade would have to cover by filings to hold his range where the others would only have to file on one to control the amount of range they're using now."

She nodded as she caught this point.

"Folks have fallen into a set habit of mind," he explained. "You think because every squatter is burned out that every outfit but the Three Bar is against sticking a plow in the ground. The rest probably feel the same way—know they haven't a hand in it but figure that you have. As a matter of fact, it's Slade alone. That's how I got a line on Morrow the first night I landed. I said something about putting in hay and he came right to the front and made a red-hot anti-squatter talk. I knew right off he was Slade's man."

"How could you be sure of that?" she asked. "I've heard men with every outfit express the same views."

"Morrow hasn't a brand of his own," Harris said. "He wouldn't lose a dollar if the whole range was under fence. He's drawing down money to keep that feeling alive. You'll find one with every outfit in this country. And the chances are you'll

find every one of them overlooking a few calves on his circle—same as Morrow did. There's a persistent rumor to the effect that any man who burns out a squatter can drop in at Slade's and get five hundred dollars in cash. The wild bunch will handle every case that turns up if that rumor is true."

"The sheriff has never been able to pick up a single one of the men who have burned those squatters out," she said.

"And he never will without some help," Harris agreed. "Alden's hands are tied. He's only an ornament right now and folks have come to believe he's real harmless. But Alden is playing his own game single-handed the best he can. One day he'll get his hooks into some of these torch-bearers so deep they'll never shake them out. The homestead laws can't be defied indefinitely. The government will take a hand and send marshals in here thicker than flies. Then the outfits that have hedged themselves in advance are on top. The rest are through."

"But what can the Three Bar do against Slade until those marshals come?" she asked.

"There's a difference between sacking an established outfit with a big force of hands and burning out some isolated squatter roosting in a wagon," Harris said. "I've filed on water out of the Crazy Loop to cover the section I bought in the flats. We can pick men and give them a job with the Three Bar between spells of doing prove-up work. We can put in a company ditch to cover all the filings, pay them for working on it and charge their pro-rata share of improvements up against each man's final settlement. When they've made final proof we can buy out those who want to sell."

"The cost of a project like that would be too big for the Three Bar to stand," she objected.

"I'll put it up," he offered. "The money from the sale of the little old Box L. I want to see this go through. We can square accounts when the Three Bar makes the top of the hill."

He pointed to a bunch of cows that fed in a bottom below them.

"Look at that. Every color under the sun—and every shape. Let's put the flats in hay, girl, and start grading the Three Bar up. We'll weed out the runty

humpbacked critters and all off-color she-stuff; keep only straight red cows. It doesn't take much more feed to turn out a real beef steer than one of those knife-backed brothers down in the flat. We'll gather our own cows close to the home ranch and shove other brands off our range, throw forty white-face bulls out close round the place and start building up real beef; steers that will bring fifty a head where those runts bring twenty-five. And big red she-stock will bring more money too. In five years we'll have a straight red brand and the Three Bar will be rated at thirty dollars a head, come as they run on the range, instead of round ten or twelve as they'd figure us now. We'll have good hay land that will be worth more by itself than the whole brand is to-day. Say the word, girl, and we'll build up the old outfit that both of our folks helped to found."

The girl had closed her eyes as he painted this picture of possibilities and except for the difference of voice it might well have been old Cal Warren speaking; the views and sentiments were the same she had so often heard her father express. Next to the longed-for partnership with old Bill Harris the dream of his life had been to see the Three Bar flats a smooth meadow of alfalfa.

"I'll put a bunch of terriers in there that will be hard for Slade to uproot," Harris said. "What do you say, Billie? Let's give it a try."

"I'd like to see it done," she said. "But so much depends on the outcome. I'll have to write Judge Colton first. He has all my affairs in charge."

Harris smiled across at her.

"That's right peculiar," he observed. "The Judge is holding the reins over my little prospects too. They've tangled your interests and mine up all along the line it seems. You drop a line to Judge Colton and sort of outline the plan. Maybe he'll see it our way."

They mounted and rode back to the wagon and the girl went straight to Waddles with the proposition Harris had urged. The big man had fallen asleep with the paper he had been perusing still clutched in his hand.

"Tell him to go his best," Waddles advised, when she had outlined Harris's scheme. "He'll put a bunch of terriers on the Three Bar that will cut Slade's claws. If they burn out the boys Cal Harris puts on the place then there'll be one real war staged at the old Three Bar."

"He's been telling you," she accused.

"He did sort of mention it," Waddles confessed.

"Then his idea is to import a bunch of gun-fighters," she said. "I won't have a bunch of hired killers living at the Three Bar."

"These boys will just be the sort that's handy at knowing how to avoid getting killed themselves," Waddles evaded. "You can't rightly blame any man for that. And besides, Slade has to be met on his own ground."

"Do you think Slade is at the bottom of the Three Bar losses every year?" she asked.

"Every hoof," Waddles stated. "Every last head! Maybe the albino's layout rustles an odd bunch on and off. But Slade is the man that's out to wreck your brand." The big cook heaved a sigh as he reached a decision on a matter which had been troubling him for days. "That's what Cal Warren was afraid of—Slade's branching out our way like he had already toward the south. And that's one reason he left things tied up the way he did."

He tapped the much-thumbed document on his knee and handed it to the girl.

"You and Young Cal have been sort of half-hostile," he said. "Cast an eye over that and maybe it'll help you two youngsters to get along."

Three times the girl read every word of the paper while Waddles smoked his pipe in silence. Then she sat on the gate of the wagon and gazed off across the sage; and she was picturing again the long trail of the Three Bar cows; but this time she was reconstructing the scene at the end of it. Instead of one man scheming to trick an old friend at the last crossing of their trails she now visioned two old men regretting that the life-long hope of a partnership had never been fulfilled and planning to cement that arrangement in the next generation. For old Bill Harris had left her a full half-interest in everything he owned on earth with the single stipulation that she retain her half of the Three Bar for five years after her father's death.

"But why?" she asked presently. "Why did he do that for me? He'd never seen me since I was three years old."

"He did it for the girl of old Cal Warren, the best friend he had topside of ground," Waddles said. "Your dad and Bill Harris had been pals since they was hatched."

"But why didn't they let us know?" she insisted. "Instead of tangling it up in this round-about way?"

"Bill Harris had a soft spot in his heart for the old Three Bar the same as your daddy had," Waddles said. "They knew there was hard times and changes ahead and both hated to think of the old brand going under or changing hands. They was afraid that if both you and the boy knew your path was going to be carpeted soft in any event that you might sell out if things got to breaking wrong. This way it looked like you'd be sure to stick. But they both knew too that when old folks go mixing into young folks' affairs without consulting them, things are liable to get all snarled. So they hedged it for both of you."

"How?" she asked. "What if either or both of us should have refused to abide by the terms?"

"Then both properties would have been split between the two of you, the same as if you'd carried them out," he said. "You didn't go and think now, Pet, that them two wise old heads was going to leave the youngsters in the lurch! They was planning the best they knew. Your dad told me to keep an eye on the general lay. And Judge Colton sent me that copy to have on hand to sort of iron things out when I thought best. I'm telling you because I know you wouldn't quit the Three Bar as long as there's two cows left."

"Does Cal know?" she asked.

"Not a word," Waddles asserted. "He's likely considerable puzzled himself. But he's of a optimistic turn of mind, Cal is, and white folks too. He surmises things will break right some day, knowing his own dad and havin' visited round a day or two with yours. 'I don't know what they're at,' he says to me. 'But they was both square shooters, those old boys, and whatever it was they didn't aim to cook up any misery for either the little girl or me, so what's the use to fret?' You drop the Judge a line, girl, and turn Harris loose to rip up the Three Bar flat and seed it down to hay."

She nodded and slipped from the end-gate of the wagon, taking the paper with her. Harris was soaking a flannel shirt in the little stream, flattening it in a

riffle and weighting it down with rocks. She went straight to him and sat on the bank, motioning him to a seat by her side. He dried his hands and took the paper she held out to him.

"What's in the wind?" he asked.

She nodded to indicate the document and he sat down to look over it. His quizzical expression was erased as he saw his father's name and the girl watched his face for some evidence of resentment as he read on. Their status was now reversed, for Bill Harris's holdings had been easily double those of her own parent. She saw the sun wrinkles deepen at the corners of his eyes as he grasped the text of it and he looked up at her and laughed.

"Now we're resting easy," he said. "An even trade."

"Uneven," she dissented. "Of course you know that I'll not take advantage of that."

"Accounts are all squared off between us now," he said. "And of course you'll do just what it says." He held up his hand as she started to dissent. "Don't you!" he reproved. "Let's let that end of it slide—rest for a while. Maybe some day we'll lump both into one and the two of us boss the whole job."

She rested a hand on his arm.

"Of course you know I'm sorry for a number of things I've said to you," she said. "But I want to thank you for being too decent to return them in kind. You're real folks, Cal."

"Good girl, Billie," he thanked her. "As to what you said, it's remarkable that you didn't say more. I knew you weren't crabbing over what you might lose for yourself but over the thought that your father had been tricked. I tried to put myself in your place and if I'd been you I know I'd have kicked me off the place, or told Waddles to turn loose his wolf."

He switched abruptly away from the topic in hand and reverted to the subject they had discussed an hour past.

"We've a clear field now with nothing on our minds but the job of putting the Three Bar on its feet," he said. "The Three Bar is a pretty small outfit the way

things are to-day but in a few more years the brand that runs three thousand head will be almost in the class of cattle kings. The range will be settled with an outfit roosting on every available site. The big fellows will find their range cut up and then they're through. If the Three Bar files on all the water out of Crazy Loop and covers the flat with hay we'll control all the range for a number of miles each way. There's not another site short of Brandon's place west of us—twelve miles or so; about the same to the east; still farther off south of us. We'll be riding the crest."

"If we can only hold on against Slade," she agreed. "But can we?"

"Watch us!" he said. "The Brandons would file on their home basin and put the V L bottoms in hay to-morrow if they could. McVey's been wanting to do it on the Halfmoon D ever since he bought out the brand five years back. They're all afraid to start. But they'll be for us—and follow us as soon as we show them it can be done. Art Brandon is repping with us and I've been sounding him out. You talk to him. In the meantime you try and get a letter off to the Judge to-day."

The girl nodded.

"We'll try it," she said. "I know that Cal Warren would rather see the Three Bar go to pieces from its own pressure, fighting from the inside to grow, than to see it whittled down from the outside without our fighting back."

She crossed to her teepee to write the letter asking Judge Colton's advice on this matter which would mean the turning point in Three Bar affairs. An hour later a man rode away from the wagon, his bed roll packed on a led horse, heading for Brill's with the message that meant so much to the Three Bar. As he left Harris handed him two letters he had written weeks past, before leaving the ranch.

Presumably only the three of them knew of the intended move but in the course of the next few days it had become rumored among the men that the Three Bar was to turn into a farming outfit. The girl learned that Carpenter was the source of these whispers. Hanson, the rep from the Halfmoon D, apprised her of this fact.

Ever since the departure of Morrow Carp had been sullen. Twice he had taken exceptions to some order of Harris's but the new foreman had patiently overlooked the fact. However on the fifth day after the departure of Horne with

the letter to Judge Colton, Harris whirled on the man as he made an anti-squatter remark when the hands were gathered for the noon meal.

"That'll be all," he said. "I'll figure out your time. You took things up where Morrow left off. Now you can go hunt him up and compare notes."

"Can't a man speak his mind?" Carp demanded.

"He can talk his head off," Harris said. "But he can't overlook any Three Bar calves on his circle while I'm running the layout. Morrow tried that on while he was breaking you in."

Carp surveyed the faces of the men and started to speak but changed his mind and headed for the rope corral.

"He's a cringing sort of miscreant," Moore said as Carp rode off. "He was even afraid to speak up for himself—thought maybe the boys would pass sentence on him before he could get out of sight. I expect Carp is poor sort of folks."

"That's going to leave us short-handed," Harris said to the girl. "Morrow, Carp and Bangs—three short. Horne ought to get back from Brill's to-day. We've only one more week out so I guess we can worry through."

"How did you know?" she asked. "About Carp, I mean."

"Lanky caught him overlooking a bunch of cows with calves," Harris explained. "Lanky is worth double pay."

The Three Bar girl had noted that Carpenter had been much with Bentley, Slade's rep, since Morrow had gone. She had come to be suspicious of all things connected with Slade.

"Are you watching Bentley?" she asked.

Harris shook his head.

"No use," he said. "Slade wouldn't work that way. Bentley is his known representative and anything Bent might do would reflect on Slade. Slade only works through one or two others who arrange for all the rest. Morrow is likely

one of his right-hand men. He'd fix it for Carp without Slade's name even coming into it at all. Carp might have a good idea where the money came from but he'd draw it from Morrow and never get to the man behind. We'll never get anything on Bentley for that reason—because he's known to draw Slade's pay."

"Then how can we ever prove anything on Slade?" she insisted.

"It's ten to one we can't," he said. "Even if one of his chief fixers should turn him up it wouldn't work. It would be the same old story—the word of an owner against that of a self-confessed thief. We may have to handle Slade without proof."

Horne came back from Brill's in the early evening and another man rode with him.

"Alden," Billie said. "I wonder what the sheriff is doing out in here."

The sheriff stripped the saddle from his horse and the wrangler swooped down to haze the animal in with the remuda as Alden joined Harris and the girl. He was a tall, gaunt man with a slight stoop. His keen gray eyes peered forth from a maze of sun-wrinkles surmounted by bushy eyebrows, the drooping gray mustache accentuating rather than detracting from the hawk-like strength of countenance. He dropped a hand on the girl's shoulder and looked down at her.

"How are things breaking this season, Billie?" he asked. "Everything running smooth?"

"About the same," she said. They were old friends and the girl knew that Alden would help her in any possible way.

The sheriff turned to Harris.

"I see you've settled down to a steady job, Cal, instead of browsing round the hills alone. I run across Horne at Brill's and he was telling me about some one gunning for you from the brush. Morrow, he says. Do you want me to pick Morrow up?"

"It would only waste your time," Harris said. "We couldn't prove it on him—the way things are."

"Fact," Alden agreed. "But I could hold him till after you're back at the ranch. Some day folks may wake up and need a sheriff. It's hard to say."

The men had finished working the herd and were crowding around the wagon for their meal.

"You go ahead and eat, Billie," Alden said. "Cal and I'll feed a little later on. I've got a fuss to pick with Cal."

Billie left them together and the sheriff squatted on his heels.

"What's this rumor about your farming the Three Bar?" he asked. "Horne said all the hands were guessing, but I haven't heard anything about it outside."

"And I don't want it leaking out before we start," Harris said. "But we're going to break out the flat. I had the plans all laid and sent word off. Things are moving toward the start right now."

"It'll stir things up," Alden predicted. With one forefinger he traced a design in the dust, then blotted it out. "I'll play in with you the best I can."

"We've got to make a clean split," Harris said. "Get the wild ones definitely set apart. Then they can be handled." When he spoke again it was apparently as if to himself. "Al Moody sprung it in the Gallatin country a few years back," he said reflectively. "And old Con Ristine worked it on the Nations Cow-trail twenty years ago. It always brings the split."

"That kind of thing is dead against the law," the sheriff said. "But it works right well—that backfire stuff. And it's never been proved on either Al Moody or old Con Ristine, so I hear."

"But of course I wouldn't have a hand in anything like that," Harris stated.

"No. Neither would I," said the sheriff. "Nothing like that."

Alden was regarding old Rile Foster who had drawn apart from the rest and was eating his meal in solitude. The old man had taken a boot heel from his pocket and was studying it as if fascinated by the somber reflections it roused in him. Alden shook his head as he rose and moved toward the wagon.

"Horne was telling me about Bangs too," he said. "Pretty tough for Rile. They was as close as father and son, those two."

Harris and the sheriff joined the rest at the wagon and held out plates and cups to Waddles. The girl was oddly excited, anxious for the start, now that the decision had been made.

"How long will it take to get things moving after we get back?" she asked.

"Not more than a week at the outside," Harris said. "Probably less."

"You don't mean that," she stated. "I want to know the truth."

"You have it," he assured her. "I had the plans all laid. Our crew is already headed for the Three Bar. Before they get there every man will have filed on a quarter I designated for him. Inside a week we'll have covered the flat."

Long after the hands had turned in for the night she heard a faint murmur of voices and looked from her teepee. The brilliant moonlight showed Harris and the sheriff sitting off by themselves. For no apparent reason she thought of Carlos Deane and, point by point, she contrasted him with the man who sat talking to the sheriff. Each was almost super-efficient in his own chosen line and she caught herself wondering what each one would do if suddenly transplanted to the environment of the other. Then her mind occupied itself with Harris who would soon break out the first plow furrow that had ever scarred the range within a radius of fifty miles and she pictured again a sign she had seen that day: "Squatter let your wagon wheels keep turning."

VIII

Three heavy wagons, each drawn by four big mules, traveled north along the Coldriver stage trail. Every wagon was loaded to the brim of the triple box. Two men were mounted on each wagon seat, the man beside the driver balancing a rifle across his knees. The butt of another protruded from a saddle scabbard that was lashed to each wagon within easy reach of the man who handled the reins.

"Nice place to camp, Tiny," said the guard on the lead wagon. He pointed off across a flat beside the road toward a sign that loomed in the center. The black-browed giant designated as Tiny swung the mules off the road and headed for the sign. The three wagons were drawn up some fifteen yards apart in the shape of a triangle, the mules unhitched and given a feed of grain from nose-bags, tied to the wagons and supplied with baled hay. Tiny walked over and viewed the sign.

"Squatter don't let sunset find you here," he read.

"It's about that time now," he observed, squinting over his shoulder. "It'd be a mistake to leave evidence like that around." He tore down the sign and worked it into firewood with an axe. "Now they can't do nothing to us for drifting in here by error," he remarked to his companions. "It wouldn't be fair."

While four of them slept the other two remained awake, rousing a second pair after a three-hour period. In the morning the three wagons lumbered on. Near sunset they passed another sign where the Three Bar road branched off to the left. Tiny pulled up the mules.

"Uproot that little beauty, Russet," he advised. "We're getting close to home."

The carrot-haired guard descended and threw his weight against the sign, working it from side to side until the posts were loosened in the ground, pried it up and loaded it on the wagon.

"Quick work, Russ," the big man complimented. "For a little sawed-off runt, you're real spry and active." He clucked to the mules and they settled steadily into the collars and moved on to the Three Bar. As they rolled up the lane the freighters could see the chuck wagon drawn up before the house, the remuda milling round the big pasture lot and a number of men moving among the buildings. The calf round-up was over.

The Three Bar men viewed the freighters curiously as they swung the mule teams in front of the blacksmith shop, noted the rifle in the hands of each guard and the second one in easy reach of each driver. They knew what this portended.

The freighters had stripped off the wagon-sheet lashed across the top of each load and the Three Bar men moved casually toward the wagons, curious to view the contents.

"You boys get to knowing each other," Harris said. "These mule-skinners will be hanging out at the Three Bar from now on."

The short man, known as Russet, removed his hat and scratched his head reflectively as he studied the first move in unloading his wagon. Moore promptly uncovered his own head and revealed his brilliant red shock of hair, his freckled face breaking into a genial grin.

"Hello, you red-hot little devil," he greeted. "I'm glad some one has turned up with redder hair than mine. Brother—shake!"

Russ looked him over carefully.

"Don't you claim no relationship with me, you sorrel hyena," he said. "I won't stand it for a holy second. Get a move on and help me snatch off this load."

All down the line the Three Bar men were getting acquainted with the freighters, introductions effected in much the same manner as that between Russet and Moore. A thousand pounds of oats were tossed from the top of the first wagon and when the concealing sacks were cleared away there were three heavy plows showing underneath, the spaces between them filled with shining coils of fence wire. The second load consisted of a dismantled drill, a crate of long-handled shovels, and more barbed wire; the third held a rake and a mowing machine, more wire, kegs of fence staples and a dozen forks.

"The Three Bar will be the middle point of a cyclone," Moore prophesied as he viewed the implements. "Just as soon as this leaks out."

"We fetched our cyclone openers with us," Russ assured him. "Let her buck."

From the cook-shack door the girl viewed these preparations, then turned her eyes to the flat and visioned it with a carpet of rippling hay.

There was a clatter of hoofs and a rattling of gravel as five horsemen put their sure-footed mounts down the steep slope two hundred yards back of the house and followed along the fence of the corral. The five Brandons had cut across the shoulder of the mountain. The girl wondered at this visit as she heard Lafe Brandon, the father and head of the tribe, ask Harris to put them up for the night.

An hour later Harris and Lafe came to her door and she let them in.

"The Brandons are riding down to file on a quarter apiece," Harris said. "Art quit the wagon below their place as we came in and told the rest that we're going to farm the Three Bar."

"Then you're doing the same?" she asked Lafe with sudden hope that her brand would have company in the move.

Old man Brandon shook his head.

"Not right off," he said. "Until we see how you folks pan out. We can't fix to handle it the way you do. We're filing to protect ourselves before some nester outfit turns up at our front door."

The old man explained his views. There was enough flow in the stream that cut their home valley to water something over a section of land. With that filed on they would control their home range. They could grade up their cows and increase a hundred per cent. with a section under hay. He hoped the Three Bar would win, but he feared to start in the face of the wave of opposition he was sure would rise against the move.

"We're not fixed for it," he explained again.

"But the other small outfits feel the same way," Harris said. "If two of us start the rest will join in."

"Maybe so," the old man said doubtfully. "But noways likely. They're too set on the other side." The thought was deep-rooted and he could not be moved.

"We'll let it out it's only for protection that we all are filing," he said. "And that we don't aim to prove up. The outfits that don't file now will lose out. This will always be open range, more than ninety per cent. of it, and those who file on their water will control the grass. As soon as the squatters see one outfit starting, they'll take out papers on every piece of dirt they can get water to. They'll have six months to move on, then a six months' stay. They'll hang round waiting for things to open up so they can rush in here. The brand owners who haven't hedged theirselves beforehand will run down to file and find that nesters have had papers on all the good pieces right in their dooryard for months. They'll have only the plots left that their home ranch sets on, and likely no water even for that."

The Brandons stayed for the night and rode off at daylight the next morning, while the Three Bar men prepared for a trip to Brill's. As the rest were saddling for the start Harris saw old Rile Foster seated by himself, gazing off across the hills.

"Better come and ride over with us, Rile," he urged. "Bangs would want you to try and forget."

The old man shook his head.

"I'm drifting to-day," he said. "I'll likely be back before long. I back-tracked Blue to their camp and trailed them twenty miles to where they joined another bunch. It was some of Harper's devils—I don't know which four. One way or another, whether I get the right four or not, I'm going to play even for Bangs."

When the rest of the men rode off the old man was still leaning against the shop.

There were less than a dozen others in Brill's store when the Three Bar men crowded through the door. Five men sat at one of the tables in the big room and indulged in a casual game of stud. Harper and Lang were among them. Two of them Harris knew as men named Hopkins and Wade. The fifth was unknown to him.

The albino's eyes met Harris's steadily as he entered at the head of the Three Bar men. Those among the hands who had formerly fraternized as freely with Harper's men as with those who rode for legitimate outfits now held way from them since their foreman had ordered Harper from the Three Bar wagon. They merely nodded as they filed past to the bar.

"Who is the man dealing now?" Harris inquired of Moore.

The freckled youth turned to the card players.

"Magill," he said. "Same breed as the rest."

The news that the Three Bar had turned into a squatter outfit had been widely noised abroad. Carpenter had stopped at Brill's late the night before and announced the fact. Others had seemed already aware of it.

From behind the bar Brill covertly studied the man who was responsible for this change. Four men from the Halfmoon D stood grouped at one end of the room. They split up and mingled among the others. Brill moved up and down behind the bar, polishing it with a towel. One after another he drew each of the men from the Halfmoon D into conversation with the Three Bar foreman to determine whether or not they resented his move. There was no evidence of it in their speech. They had all been present when Harris rode the blue horse and had heard his subsequent remark to Morrow. There was but one reference to the state of affairs at the Three Bar.

"Now you've gone and raised hell," one boy from the Halfmoon D remarked to Harris. "You'll have folks out looking for your scalp." He lowered his voice and Brill moved nearer to wipe away an imaginary spot on the bar. "It's Slade you'll have to buck," the boy warned. "There's likely to be some excitement over in your neighborhood. I'd like right well to ride for the Three Bar next year. Hold a job for me in the spring."

The men from the two outfits mingled as unrestrainedly as before and at last Harris smiled across at Brill.

"Well, have you sized it all up?" he asked.

The storekeeper looked up quickly, knowing that Harris had read his purpose in drawing him into conversation with the four men. He polished the bar thoughtfully, then nodded.

"A man in my business has to keep posted—both ways," he said. "I just wanted to make sure. Five years ago every man would have quit the Three Bar like a snake—feeling was that strong. But the boys drift from place to place and they've seen both ends of it. They don't give a damn one way or the other now. Why should they? They've got nothing at stake. Five years ago you couldn't have hired a man to ride for you. Now they'll be pouring in asking for jobs—just because they figure there'll be some excitement on tap."

The men from the Halfmoon D were due back and inside of an hour they rode off, leaving only Harris's men and the five card-players in the place. Harris walked over to the table and the Three Bar men shifted positions, slouching sidewise at the bar or leaning with their backs to it, alertly watching this unexpected move as the foreman spoke to the albino.

"Let's you and I draw off and have a little talk," he said. "If you can spare the time."

Harper looked up at him in silence. He carefully tilted up the corner of his hole-card and peeked at it, then turned his other cards face down on the table.

"Pass," he said, and rose to face Harris. "Lead the way."

Harris moved over to another table and the two men sat down, facing each other across it. He motioned to Evans and Lanky joined them. Harris plunged abruptly into what he had to say.

"First off, Harper, I want you to get it straight that I'm not fool enough to threaten you—for I know you're not any more afraid of me than I am of you. This is just a little explaining, a business talk, so we'll both know where we stand. It's up to you whether we let each other alone or fight."

"Good start," the albino commented. "Go right on."

"All right—it's like this," Harris resumed. "I'm going to have my hands full without you hiring out to pester us. I'm not out to reform the country. They set the fashion of dog eat dog and every man for himself; so the Three Bar is all that interests me. You keep out of my affairs and I'll let you go your own gait. If you mix in I'll have your men hunted down like rats."

Harper glanced toward the group at the bar.

"You were prudent enough to pick a time when you're three to one to tell me about that," he said. "If I'd kill you in your chair I might have some trouble getting out the door."

"Of course I'd take every chance to play safe," Harris admitted. "But that is beside the point. I'd have told you the same thing if the odds had been reversed."

"Would you?" the albino pondered. "I wonder."

"You know I would," Harris stated. "You've got brains, or you'd have been dead for twenty years. If I thought you were a haphazard homicide I wouldn't be sitting here. But you wouldn't kill a man without looking a few weeks ahead and making sure it was safe."

"Go ahead—Let's hear the rest of it," Harper urged. "You've got an original line of talk."

"You're playing one game and I'm playing mine," Harris said. "You're in the saddle now—like you have been once or twice before. But you know that the sentiment of a community reverses almost overnight. You've stepped out just ahead of a clean-up a time or two in the past. You know how it goes—your friends drop off like you had the plague. Every man's out after your scalp. I've got a hard bunch of terriers over at the Three Bar and you couldn't raid us without a battle big enough to go down in history as the Three Bar war. Either way you'd lose for it would stir folks up—and when they're stirred you're through. Do you remember what Al Moody did up on the Gallatin and what old Con Ristine sprung on the Nations Trail? That will happen again right here."

The two men were leaning toward each other, elbows resting on the table. Harper relaxed and leaned back comfortably in his chair as he twisted a smoke. Evans propped his feet on the table and Harris hung one knee over the arm of his chair. The men at the bar knew that some crisis had been safely passed.

"You talk as if I was running an outfit of my own and had a bunch of riders that could swarm down on you," Harper objected. "I don't even run a brand of my own or have one man riding for me."

"The wild bunch is riding for you," Harris stated.

"Suppose that was true," Harper said. "Then what?"

"In one country after the next they've hit the toboggan whenever they got to feeling too strong. If you line up against me that time has come again. If I get potted from the brush I've hedged it so that those boys that filed over there won't be left in the lurch. There'll be a reward of a thousand dollars hung up for the scalp of each of fifteen men whose names I gathered while I was prowling round—reliable men to carry on what I've begun; and marshals thicker than flies to protect the homestead filings on the Three Bar."

"Then it might be bad policy to bushwhack you," Harper observed.

"You can go your own gait," Harris said. "As long as you lay off Three Bar cows. You invited me one time to come down to your hangout in the Breaks. I won't ever make that visit unless you call on the Three Bar first; then, just out of

politeness, I'll ride over at the head of a hundred men."

"Then it don't look as if we'd get anywhere, visiting back and forth," Harper said.

"Now don't think I'm throwing a bluff or threatening; I'm just telling you. You could recite a number of things that could happen to me in return—all of 'em true. I'm just counting that you've got brains and can see it's not going to help either one of us to get lined up wrong. What do you say—shall we call it hands off between the Three Bar and you?"

The albino half-closed his eyes, the pale eyeballs glittering through the slit of his lids as he reflected on this proposition, tapping a careless finger on his knee. He glanced absent-mindedly toward the bar, his thoughts wholly occupied with the matter in hand. A pair of eyes that gazed back at him drew his own and he found himself looking at Bentley, the man who repped with the Three Bar for Slade. The albino's suspicions were as fluid and easily roused as those of a beast of prey in a dangerous neighborhood. With one of those quick shifts of which his mind was capable he concentrated every mental effort toward linking Bentley with some unpleasant episode of the past. The man had turned away and Harper could only sense a vague feeling that he was dangerous to him, without definite point upon which to base his suspicions. At the sound of Harris's voice his mind made another lightning shift back to the present.

"Well?" Harris asked.

"Why, if I had anything to do with it, like you seem to think, I'd advise against our bucking each other," Harper said. "I'd try to get along—and declare hands off." He rose, nodded to the two men and returned to the stud game.

"He'll do it too," Evans predicted. "There's that much fixed anyway—not a bad piece of work."

The two men returned to the bar and Brill moved close to Harris. For fifteen years he had stood behind that bar and observed the men of the whole countryside at their worst—and best; and he knew men. As well as if he had heard the words of the three at the table he knew that Harris and Harper had reached an agreement of some sort that was satisfactory to both.

"Take the boys over a drink on me," Harris said, and Brill slid a bottle and

five whisky glasses on to a tray and moved over to the table.

"Here's a drink on the Three Bar boss," he announced.

Lang scowled, remembering the recent occasion when Harris had ordered them off.

"To hell with——" he commenced, but the albino cut him short.

"Drink it," he said.

Ten minutes later the five men rose to go. Harris looked at his watch.

"I'm off," he said to Evans. "Try and get the boys home by to-morrow morning if it's possible."

He went outside and mounted as the five rustlers swung to their saddles.

"I'm going your way as far as the forks," he said to Harper.

The Three Bar men were treated to the sight of their foreman riding down the road beside Harper at the head of four of the worst ruffians in the State.

And behind the bar Brill moved softly back and forth when not serving drinks, pausing opposite first one group and then the next to dab at the polished wood with his cloth, listening carefully to the conversation and gauging it to determine whether the apparent sentiment toward the squatter foreman was sincere or would prove different when the men, flushed with undiluted rye, were unrestrained by his presence. At one end of the bar Evans and Bentley conversed together in low tones but whenever Brill strolled casually to their end the conference lagged. The few sentences which reached his ears were of trivial concern.

IX

There was a new contentment in the eyes of the Three Bar girl as she sat her

horse beside Carlos Deane and looked off down the bottoms. A haze of smoke drifted above the little valley of the Crazy Loop. Three mule outfits were steadily ripping up the sage flats. Men lifted the uprooted brush on forks and piled it for the burning. The two rode down to the fields with the pungent sage smoke drifting in their faces. Harris joined them, a smudge of fire-black across his forehead, and swept his arm across the stretch of plowed ground.

"Can you picture that covered with a stand of alfalfa hay?" he asked.

The girl nodded.

"Yes—and cut and cured and in the stack yards," she said. "And a straight red run of Three Bar cows wintering under fence."

Harris wondered if her new contentment came wholly from the progress the Three Bar was making or was derived partly from the presence of Carlos Deane. Each man had recognized the other as a contender for the love of the Three Bar girl and during the two days of Deane's stay each one had been covertly sizing and estimating the caliber of the other man.

"The opposite faction hasn't succeeded in wrecking the Three Bar up to date," Deane said. "It's probable they see you're too strong for them."

"It's hard to wreck plowed ground," Harris pointed out. "And that's all they have to work on right now; not a fence to tear up, a stack to fire or any growing crops to trample down. All they can do right now is to wait. It must be wearing. But sooner or later they'll show their teeth."

For a month prior to Deane's arrival Harris had been occupied from dawn till dark with the details of the new work. The wagons had made a week's trip to the railroad to freight in more implements and supplies. A hundred acres of plowed ground lay mellowing under the sun. Five miles back up the slope of the hills two men worked in a valley of lodgepole pine, felling, trimming and peeling sets of matched logs for the cabins that must be erected on each filing. The cowhands were out working the range in pairs, branding late-dropped calves and moving drifted stock back to the home range. Forty white-face bulls had been trail-herded from the railroad and thrown out along the foot of the hills to replace the other bulls that had been rounded up and brought in. These old stags now grazed in the big pasture lot until such time as the beef herd should be gathered and shipped. In a few more days the boys would come in from the range and gather

at the home ranch, preparatory to going out once more on the beef round-up.

"I'm about to take a vacation," Harris said. "The ranger is coming over to mark out some more trees for us and to run the U. S. brand on the logs we've already cut. I'm going back up in the hills with him to sort out a valley or two for summer range."

"We don't need any extra range now," Billie said. "Why pay grazing fees before we need the room."

"Just to get our wedge in first," Harris explained. "We can get grazing permits on the Forest now—right in the best grass valleys. Each year we'll throw some cows up there to hold our rights. There'll always be good grass on the Forest Reserves for they won't permit overstocking. The day will come when we'll be glad to have permits to summer-feed a thousand or so head on the Forest. I was thinking maybe you and Deane would like to make the jaunt."

"We'll go," the girl decided.

"It's a question of time," Deane said. "How long will we be gone?"

"We'll start in an hour or two," Harris said. "Just as soon as Wilton turns up. We'll only be gone five days at the most."

"Then I'll stretch my stay to cover it," Deane accepted. "I'd certainly hate to pass up a chance for a trip in the hills."

"We'll ride back and make up an extra bed roll," Harris said. "Then we'll be all set to start when Wilton shows up."

Calico had sidled off the plowing and was cropping the grass at the edge of it. As Harris moved toward him Evans rode down the right-hand slope and the three waited for him.

"Moore and I were working in close and I thought I'd ride over to tell you that the wild bunch has lost a veteran," he said. "Some one put Barton out over in the Breaks."

Barton, whose name was linked with that of Harper, had been found with a rifle ball through his chest. His own gun, found by his out-stretched hand, had

showed one blackened cylinder, the empty shell sufficient proof that he had fired a single shot at his assailant.

"Anyway, he had a chance to see who got him," Lanky philosophized. "He was likely ordered to turn round—given a fighting chance maybe."

The girl could find no sorrow in her heart over the passing of Barton but there was an uneasy feeling deep within her,—a vague suspicion that she should be able to pronounce the killer's name. This elusive thought was crowded from her mind when the ranger rode up to the Three Bar accompanied by Slade, each man leading a pack horse.

"Slade's going to look over a little territory up on the Forest," Wilton explained. "So we can get it all done on one trip."

There was no way to avoid this unexpected addition to their party. Harris and the ranger packed the three bed rolls and Billie's teepee along with the necessary equipment and in half an hour the little cavalcade filed up a gulch back of the Three Bar, the ranger in the lead with his pack horse. The other pack animals followed and the three other men and the girl brought up the rear in single file. By noon they made the first rims and followed over into a rolling country, heavily timbered in the main. In the early evening they rode out on to a low divide and Blind Valley showed below them, a broad expanse of open grassland. A little stream threaded the bottoms and its winding course was marked by thickets of birch. In places it disappeared under the leafy tunnels of aspen groves, their pale silvery trunks and leaves contrasting with the heavy blue-green of an occasional water-spruce. In a narrowing of the valley it was choked from wall to wall by a cottonwood jungle, opening out once more into wide meadows immediately below the neck. Long open parks extended their tongues well back up the timbered sidehills.

"Feed!" Harris said. "Feed. Worlds of it."

They angled down the slope and struck the rank grass of the bottoms,—mountain hay in which the horses stood knee-deep. They made camp at the mouth of a branching canyon, just within the timber. The ranger threw the horses up this side gulch while Harris felled a dead pine and kindled a fire. When the ranger returned he picketed one horse in the heavy grass while Slade pitched Billie's teepee under a spruce. The meal was finished, dishes washed and the five

sat round a fire.

Harris sensed Deane's attitude toward it all for he knew something of the other man's way of life. Those with whom Deane was thrown most in contact were careful of appearances. It was unheard-of in his code that a girl should jaunt for days accompanied by four men. Here appearances seemed entirely disregarded and no one gave the matter a thought.

The moon swung over the ridges and shed its radiance over Blind Valley. Deane motioned to Billie and the girl rose and followed him to the edge of the timber where they sat on a blow-down.

"Billie, let me take you away from all this," he urged. "All this hard riding and rough man's work. Let me give you the things that will shut out all the hardships. What's the use of going on like this?"

The girl was conscious of a vague sense of disappointment. Deane was an active figure in the business life of his own community and she had felt some pride in the fact that when he should come to the Three Bar he would find that she too was doing real work in the world. She reflected that his attitude was that of so many other men, his idea of love synonymous with shelter for the object of it, and his main plea was that of providing her with shelter against all the rough corners of life. Shelter! And what she wanted was to be part of things—to have a hand in running her own affairs. It came to her that of all men perhaps Slade understood her the best.

"I don't want shelter!" she said. "And I can't think of anything else till after the Three Bar is a going concern."

The voices of the three men round the fire drifted to them.

"Listen," she urged.

"Blind Valley ought to summer-feed three hundred head," the ranger was saying. "I'll recommend permits for that many cows."

"That'll suit me," Slade nodded. "I'll put in application through you?"

"Not if I can help it you won't," Harris said. "Why should you have permits right in the back yard of the Three Bar with all the rest of the hills open to you? There's a natural lead right down to the corrals; divides to form wings. It's up to Wilton, of course, but I'm going to make application to graze Blind Valley myself. They'll allow whichever one he recommends."

"Harris has first call," the ranger stated mildly. "This is the logical range for his stuff—this and one or two others right close. We can fix you up in a dozen other good grass countries further on, Slade, if it's all the same."

Slade nodded agreement. The ranger had authority to recommend the issuing of permits and his superiors would not go contrary to his suggestions in any but exceptional cases—certainly not in this matter. Slade's eyes turned frequently toward the two figures on the log, silhouetted against the white of the moonlit meadow, and his slashed mouth set in disapproval. Harris noted this and smiled as it occurred to him that Slade's views on the subject of Deane's appropriating the girl for himself were about on a par with Deane's ideas relative to her touring the hills with four men.

The two came back and sat with the others round the dying fire, then all turned in for the night, Billie in her teepee and the men in their bed rolls with no other overhead shelter than the trees. In less than an hour Harris raised on one elbow. The ranger woke just as Harris slipped from his bed roll and tugged on his chaps. The steady thud of hoofs had penetrated each man's consciousness and apprised him of the fact that the horses were coming down.

Wilton closed his eyes as Harris departed to head them back. Three times during the night Deane was roused as one or the other of the three men left his bed roll to frustrate an attempt of the horses to make a break for home. Near morning he was once more wakened by a clammy dampness on his face. A fine drizzle was falling. Slade was on his feet, shoving a few sticks of wood inside the flap of Billie's teepee.

In the first gray light of morning Harris was up and slicing shavings from the few dry sticks Slade had so thoughtfully tucked away. Breakfast was cooked under the dripping trees. The ranger was soaked to the knees as he waded through the tall grass to the picketed horse. He saddled him and went up-country after the other horses. The outfit was packed up and the little procession filed

away toward the next valley—and Carlos Deane proved his real caliber to Harris.

Throughout the day they rode in a fine drizzle; in the timber the wet branches whipped them and sprayed water down the necks of their slickers; in the boggy meadows of the bottoms the mosquitoes hovered round them in humming swarms. The horses stamped, shook their heads angrily and switched their tortured flanks with dripping tails till at last the men greased their noses, eyes and flanks to protect the animals from the singing horde. When they dismounted to lead their horses up precipitous game trails leading to the crest of some divide Deane's Angora chaps flapped like dead weights and seemed to drag him back. From the lofty ridges they gazed down upon white clouds floating in the valleys; and at night they made camp and slept in damp bed rolls with the clammy mist chilling them. The next day was the same.

Harris knew that a man might evidence great courage in the face of danger, risk his life in the heat of excitement, but that the true test of iron control is to experience grinding discomfort and smile. Deane's neck was raw and chafed from the wet neckband of his flannel shirt and his hands and cheeks were puffed with the bites of the buzzing pests. But Deane had been cheerful throughout and had uttered no complaint.

Toward evening of the second gloomy day Harris rode up beside him.

"You'll do," he said.

"How's that?" Deane asked.

"There's maybe one man out of every two hundred that can go along like this and not get to blaming every one in sight for what's happening to him. I don't know as I'd have blamed you any if you'd been cussing us all out for the past two days."

Deane laughed and shook his head.

"I've been rather enjoying it," he said.

"You're just a plain, old-fashioned liar, Deane," Harris returned. "You haven't been enjoying it any more than the rest of us—which is mighty little; but you've got insides enough to let on like it's considerable sport—which is a whole lot."

"No one else has done any beefing," Deane said. "So why should I?"

"This is everyday business with us," Harris pointed out. "And right unusual for you. There's likely a number of things you do every day back your way, but that doesn't signify that I could amble back there and perform as well as you."

"I suspect you'd make out all right," Deane said. "Anyway—I'm much obliged for the endorsement."

They camped again in the drizzle but by noon of the following day the sun peeped through. In an hour every cloud and fog-bank had been dispersed with a rapidity which is seen only in the hill country. The ranger pulled up his horse as they struck a game trail in the saddle of a low divide. A bunch of shod horses had been over it a few hours past.

"Some of the albino's layout," Wilton surmised. "They cross through here to that camp of theirs down in the Breaks. I've run across their trails up here before."

They rode out on to a spur and looked down on the low country. Slade and the ranger were going on, the others returning to the Three Bar. Harris pointed to the country spread out below them.

"That's the Breaks," he told Deane. "I'll point out the albino's stronghold."

"While they're looking I want to talk to you," Slade said to Billie.

"Let's get together," he said, when the others had passed on. "Why are you so dead set on making a squatter outfit of the Three Bar? Don't you know the nesters will flock in here and cut the range all up as soon as they see a chance?"

"Not my range," she said. "Outside of the V L and the Halfmoon D there's not another site they can get water for, except maybe a couple of spring gulches where flood reservoirs will hold back enough to water a forty. So we'll still control our home range."

"But there's a dozen sites down in my range," he said.

"And a dozen small outfits wouldn't run any more cows than you do now," she said. "At least not on my range; so what difference will it make to me? Why

don't you have men file on all those sites?"

"You can't make a contract that will hold a man to turn over his homestead after it's proved up," he said. "Half of them would keep their land."

"Of course," she agreed. "But then you'd have half instead of nothing at all. Do you want the world?"

"I want you!" he said. "Throw in with me, girl. I'm going to fight these nesters off—the Three Bar among the rest if you don't quit. I'll smash the Three Bar into mincemeat unless you run this damned Harris off and quit this game."

It was the first time Slade had ever threatened. Her spirits had soared over the prospects of the Three Bar and she was suddenly afraid for her brand if Slade, who had whittled down a dozen outfits at once, should suddenly turn his whole attention to the Three Bar.

"I've got it to do," Slade stated. "Since you've started this deal there's been nesters filed papers on every good site in my range, waiting to rush in as soon as I lose my grip. Do you think I'll let them crowd me out? Not in a thousand years! I'm telling you—I'll break the Three Bar if you keep it up."

"All right!" she said. "And what about the homestead laws?"

"I'm the law out here," he asserted.

It came to her that Slade was fighting on the defensive, that he feared to let the Three Bar succeed and set up a precedent in defiance of the signs that dotted the range.

"Then it's war!" she said. "And you'll go under yourself, from your own size, if you haven't the judgment to hedge yourself now like the rest. The Three Bar is going ahead—and we're going to win."

She turned her horse but Slade caught her arm and whirled her around. He jerked a thumb at the two men down the ridge.

"What can Deane, a half-baked boy, give you?" he demanded. "Money—and trinkets to hang all over you till you flash like a Mexican's bridle; a flower garden and a soft front lawn to range in—and after a year or two you'd give your

soul to trade it off for an acre of raw sage. You'd trade a castle full of glittering chandeliers for one hour at the round-up fire—your box at the opera for a seat on the ground with your back against the chuck-wagon wheel while the boys sang just one old song. I know! You'd soon get fed up on too much of that. You want an outfit of your own. I'll give you that—the biggest in the State."

She shook her head without answering.

"Then I'll break you," he predicted a second time. He drew a folded slip of paper from his pocket and held it out to her. "That's the exchange slip," he said. "It calls for three hundred odd head of mixed stuff. You can send yours over any time." He turned his horse and followed after the ranger while the girl joined Harris and Deane.

Harris had slipped the strap of his glasses and handed them to Deane who had dismounted and was peering off at the spot Harris had pointed out. A few scattered shacks, showing as toy houses from the distance, stood in the center of a broad open basin, sheltered on all sides by the choppy mass of the Breaks. A solid corral, almost a stockade, stood near the buildings and a few white points indicated that a teepee or two had been pitched along its edge.

"That's Arnold's stockade," Harris explained to Deane. "Arnold was an old-time rustler that finished at the end of a rope fifteen years ago. Now all the drifters in the country stop over here if they want a place to hole up."

Deane had been striving to fathom the attitude of a community where the thieves were known as such, their headquarters a matter of common knowledge, and yet allowed to carry on their trade.

"Can't the sheriff clean them out of there?" he asked.

"He could," Harris said. "But no man will make a complaint. They can rustle every steer in the country and the losers are afraid to make a report. Every outfit is supposed to protect its own. If Alden should ride up to almost any ranch within a hundred miles and ask them if they'd missed any stock in the last three years they'd shake their heads and swear that they hadn't lost a hoof. But the Three Bar has a clean page; we're not afraid he'll get a line on us while we're having him round up some one else. The first time we get a scrap of real evidence on any man we'll call Alden in."

"You told me the Three Bar herds have been cut in half," Deane said. "How much evidence do you need?"

"It's like this:" Harris explained. "We'd have to make a specific charge against a few men—name them in connection with some raid. That nest down there is only a sort of stopping place. There's twenty or so that use it on and off. Maybe the very men we'd name would be in Coldriver or some other place and could prove it. Even if they couldn't we couldn't get a man to testify. Then too, rustling is about the hardest thing in the world to prove. There's a dozen ways they can work it. I could catch some of them driving a bunch of Three Bar cows toward the Idaho line. They'd look up and see me and calmly ride on past the cows. They could say the bunch was just drifting ahead of their horses—that they weren't driving them at all. Who can prove a case of rustling even if you see it, unless you actually catch one altering a brand—which they wouldn't do anywhere within a hundred miles of that brand's range."

"Then how will you ever convict one?" Deane asked.

"The only way to convict a rustler right now is to kill him and swear that you run up on him changing a brand," Harris said. "I expect that's what we'll have to do."

Deane looked at the girl to determine how she met this suggestion. Instead of the shiver of distaste which he rather expected her lips were pressed tight.

"A little of that would help Slade too," she said. "He told me just now that he'd smash the Three Bar."

The man reflected that this sort of a life could not help but wear off some of her natural fineness and harden her.

They followed the rims till they had cleared the Breaks, then angled down to the foothills and headed for the Three Bar. They held a steady gait until a half hour after sunset and camped in the open near a tiny spring. Again Deane was impressed with the impropriety of the girl's being out with two men who loved her and the thought was an ache that remained with him. It was a natural reaction,—the lifelong training to guard against appearances which were open to criticism as religiously as against the accomplished fact.

As they sat round the little fire the girl handed Harris the paper Slade had

given her. It was a scrawled bill of sale calling for three hundred odd head of Circle P cows, listed in the exact numbers of all ages and sexes. In return she would send him an exchange slip for the same number of Three Bar stock. This exchange system was one of Slade's own devising, intended to eliminate the time and expense of sending riders to scour adjacent ranges in search of drifted stock. Each outfit exchanged slips based on the round-up tally with every other brand and so could show bill of sale for off-brand stuff in their beef shipments or for any rebrands on the range.

"This labor-saving device is Slade's trump card," Harris said. "It works all his way. We couldn't turn in a false report. But he has three crews covering his range, each under a different wagon foreman and no one of them wise to what the rest are doing. It's only the foremen that jot down the daily tallies and keep the final score. Even if they talked among themselves, why, they're all riding for Slade's brand—and there you are."

Deane was regarding the penciled memorandum signed by Slade.

"Not a very impressive document," he observed.

Harris laughed at the other's evident disapproval of such a slipshod method of property transfer.

"Not very," he agreed. "But it's absolutely good. You could borrow money against that at the bank. He doesn't get us that way but here's how he does: He's mapped out a rebrand system. His rebrand is Triangle on the hip. When he gets our exchange slip all he has to do is go on his range and run the Triangle on the hip of the number of Three Bar stock it calls for. There are Three Bar cows ranging a hundred miles from here, just as there's brands a hundred miles off whose stock turns up here—with a Triangle on the hip. Who's going to check Slade up? It would take three crews to cover his range and tally the fresh Three Bar rebrands of this one season—a few here and a few there. He ships trainloads of cows in a year. There's some old rebrands in each lot, say; maybe more than last year's exchange. Well he simply has been holding them over. He can easy explain that. It would break a small outfit to hire enough hands to cover his range and check him up—and he'd buy part of those. The albino's men are petty-larceny bandits compared with Slade."

Deane turned to the girl.

"Billie, why don't you get out of a game where everything is crooked—a game of who can steal the most and every man for himself?" he asked.

"Why don't you fold your hands and give up your business the first thing that goes wrong?" she countered. "Instead of trying to remedy it?"

"But you don't have to do it," he urged.

"Neither do you," she said. "I've the same pride in the Three Bar that you have in anything you've helped build up. You'd fight all the harder for one of your schemes that was hard-pressed—and so would I."

She turned to her teepee and ended the discussion, her pride a little hurt that Deane should so little appreciate her work—and the spirit that made her hold on instead of giving up.

That evening they rode up to the Three Bar just as Waddles announced the evening meal.

"She's hot!" the big voice wailed. "She's re-e-ed hot!"

The hands were gathering at the ranch, coming in from the range for a frolic before the beef round-up should keep out for another month. Deane's time was up and he had planned to leave on the following day.

"You can't do that," Harris said. "Two more days for you. I've given orders not to let you off the place till after the dance at Brill's. This is Tuesday and the big frolic will be staged Thursday night. Then you're free to go."

Deane shook his head and prepared to offer an excuse but Harris smilingly refused to consider it.

"No use to try," he said. "The boys won't let you go. We've had you out in the rain and now we'll try to make amends for it. Billie, don't let him leave the place. I'll detail you as guard."

"You hear the orders," she said. "You're stuck for two more days at the Three Bar whether you like it or not."

"That settles it," Deane said. "I do want to see that dance."

Horne strolled up to them as they reached the corral.

"Another of the wild bunch down," he said. "Magill this time. Got it just the same as Barton did last week. Shot from in front; one empty shell in his gun. The Breaks is getting to be a hard place to reside in."

Again the girl felt that queer sensation of having expected this to transpire, as if possibly she had helped plan the deed herself and had forgotten it. That night as she lay in bed her mind was concerned with it and at times the solution seemed almost to reach the surface of her consciousness. Two belated riders came up the lane. As they rode past her open window she heard the name of Magill.

"That's two for Bangs," said a voice she knew for Moore's.

The evasive sense of familiarity, of being in some way identified with the killings, was suddenly clear to her,—so clear that she marveled at not having known at once.

Old Rile Foster was haunting the Breaks near Arnold's, imposing grim and merciless justice on all those whom he suspected of having had a hand in the finish of Bangs.

X

Harris had left the ranch an hour before daylight, his ride occasioned by the reports of several of the men. In the last three days each couple that worked the range had found one or more of the new white-face bulls shot down in their territory. The evidence, as Harris pieced the scraps together, indicated that a lone rider had made a swift raid, riding for forty miles along the foot of the hills in a single day, shooting down every Three Bar bull that crossed his trail. A dozen dead animals marked his course. A few more such raids and the Three Bar calf crop would be extremely short the following spring. The near end of the foray had extended to within ten miles of the home ranch and Harris had gone out to have a look at some of the nearer victims. He located two by the flights of meat-

eating birds but range stock had blotted out all possible signs. He rode back to the corrals in the early afternoon and joined Billie and Deane.

"Not a track," he said. "We must expect more or less of that. They'll cut in on us wherever there's a chance."

As Harris left them the girl pointed out a horseman riding up the lane.

"The sheriff," she volunteered, and Deane noted an odd tightening of her lips.

Alden dismounted and accosted Moore and Horne. From their grinning faces she knew that they were deliberately evading whatever questions the sheriff might be asking. Horne's voice reached them.

"Whoever it is seems to be doing a right neat job," he said. "Why not let him keep it up?"

The sheriff came over to Deane and the girl.

"Billie, I expect you can tell me who's doing this killing over in the Breaks," he said.

She was unaccustomed to the easy dissimulation that was second nature to the men of the whole countryside and her eyes fell under the sheriff's steady gaze. Deane was looking into her face and with a shock he realized that she could pronounce the name of the assassin but was deliberately withholding it. She raised her head with a trace of defiance.

"No. I can't tell you," she said.

Deane expected to hear the sheriff's curt demand that she divulge the name of the man he sought. It must be easily apparent to him, as it was to Deane, that she knew. But Alden only dropped a hand on her shoulder and stood looking down at her.

"All right, girl," he said mildly. "I reckon you can't tell. He can't be such a rotten sort; if you refuse to turn him up." He pushed back his hat and smiled at Deane. "We have to humor the womenfolks out here," he explained, as he turned toward the bunk house.

Deane, already at a loss to grasp the mental attitude of the range dwellers, was further mystified by a sheriff who spoke of humoring the ladies in a matter pertaining to a double killing.

"Billie, you know!" he accused; "why wouldn't you tell?"

"Because there's a good chance that he's a friend of mine," she stated simply. "Those men had it coming to them and some way I can't feel any regret."

"But if it was justified he should give himself up and stand trial," he said.

"Then let him do it of his own accord," she said. "I certainly won't." The memory of little Bangs, his adoring gaze fastened on her face, was uppermost in her mind and brought a lump to her throat. "I hope he gets them all."

"Billie, let me take you away from all this," Deane urged again. "Let me give you the things every girl should have—shut all the rough spots out of your path. I want to give you the things every girl needs to round out her life—a home and love and shelter."

Shelter! Slade's words recurred to her: "A soft front lawn to range in."

"This is what I need," she said and waved an arm in a comprehensive sweep. Two hands, recently arrived, were unpacking before the bunk house. A third was shoeing a horse near the blacksmith shop. The mule teams were plowing in the flats. A line of chap-clad men roosted as so many crows on the top bar of the corral, mildly interested in the performance of another who twirled a rope in a series of amazing tricks. "That's what I need; all that," she said. "And you're asking me to give it up."

"But it's not the life for a girl," he insisted.

"You've told me a hundred times that I was different from other girls. But now you're wanting me to be like all the rest. Where would the difference be then?" she asked a little wistfully. "Why can't you go on liking me the way I am, instead of making me over?"

But Carlos Deane could not see. It was his last evening alone with her and after the meal they rode across the hills through the moonlight. In that hour she was very near to doing as he wished. If only he had suggested that she come to

him as soon as the Three Bar was once more a prosperous brand; had only pointed out how she could spend months of each year on the old home ranch,—then he might have won his point without waiting. But that is not the way of man toward woman. His plea was that she leave all this behind—for him. And his hold was not quite strong enough to induce her to give up every link of the life she had loved for long years before Carlos Deane had been even a part of it.

"I can't tell you now," she said as they rode back to the corrals. "Not now. It would take something out of me—the vital part—if I had to leave the old Three Bar in the shape it's in today. It's sort of like deserting a crippled child."

The next day her stand was unaltered and in the evening, when the whole Three Bar personnel swung to their saddles and headed for the frolic at Brill's, Deane had been unable to gain her promise. His luggage had been sent ahead in a buckboard, for the dance was to be an all-night affair and he would leave on the morning stage.

There were but few horses at the hitch rails when they reached the post but a dozen voices raised in song drifted faintly to their ears and apprised them of the fact that other arrivals were not far behind. As the Three Bar girl entered at the head of her men she saw Bentley and Carpenter leaning against the bar, well toward the rear of the room.

Within the last week she had heard that Carp, after being let off by Harris, had started up a brand of his own down in Slade's range. Harris's remarks about Slade's mode of acquiring new brands recurred to her,—that he fostered some small outfit for a few seasons, then bought it out. As the men scattered she commented on this to Harris. The Three Bar foreman nodded.

"Likely the same old move," he said. "I've been trying to get a line on Carp. He started off with a bill of sale from Slade for a hundred head of Three Bar rebrands. But it didn't come direct from Slade at that. Morrow engineered the deal. Said he came into the paper for two years' back pay from Slade; last year and the one before—had figured to start up for himself and was to draw his pay in cows. The paper is dated at the time Morrow quit Slade last year. What can we prove wrong with that? Morrow simply sells the paper to Carp. Of course it's a plant. All Carp has to do is to run Slade's Triangle on the hips of any number of Three Bar she-stock. Like I told you, there's no way to check Slade up on the number of our rebrands. If Carp gets caught it's his own hard luck."

A dozen men from the Halfmoon D swarmed in the door. Mrs. McVey, the owner's wife, stationed herself in one corner with the Three Bar girl while the men gravitated to the bar.

"I'll take Deane in tow for a while," Harris said. "And get him acquainted with folks." He led Deane to the bar and gave him scraps of the history of various neighbors as they arrived.

Harper's men came in, the albino standing half a head taller than any other on the floor, and they mingled with the rest as if their records were the most immaculate of the lot. Two of Slade's foremen arrived with their families. The wife of one was lean and bent, worn from years of drudgery. The other was an ample, red-cheeked woman of great self-confidence, her favorite pose that of planting both hands on her hips, elbows outspread, and nodding vigorously to emphasize her speech.

Bart Epperson, a trapper from far back in the hills, had brought his family to the frolic. Mrs. Epperson was a tiny, meek woman who had but little to say. Her two daughters, in their late teens, had glossy black hair, high cheek bones and faint olive tinge of skin which betrayed a trace of Indian ancestry.

Lafe Brandon came at the head of his tribe. Ma Brandon, white-haired and motherly and respected by all, was possessed of a queer past known to the whole community. Forty years before Lafe Brandon had stopped at a sod hut on the Republican and found a girl wife with both eyes discolored from blows of her heavy-handed spouse. Lafe had left the bearded ruffian unconscious, with a broken nose and three fractured ribs, and had ridden off with the girl. Five sons and a daughter had been born to them. Two years before, Kit Brandon, the daughter, had been wed to a merchant in Coldriver. The traveling parson who married them heard of the parents' queer case, learned that Ma Brandon's former mate was long since dead, and spoke earnestly to the pair. Both were willing to do anything which might prove of future benefit to Kit. The conference resulted in the old couple's standing before the parson and having the marriage service performed for them an hour before a like rite was rendered for the daughter.

Harris laughed as he informed Deane of this bit of history.

"They both considered it rather an unnecessary fuss," he said. "And it's rumored that they had their first quarrel of a lifetime on the way home from the

service."

Two of the sons were married and living at the home ranch. They came to the dance with the rest of the family. Lou Brandon's wife, Dolly, was a former dance-hall girl of Coldriver, and Al Brandon's better half, Belle, was the daughter of a Utah cowman.

An extra stage-load rolled in from Coldriver and four couples joined the throng.

"Ex-school-teachers," Harris informed. "They marry them so fast that it's hard to keep one on the job instructing the rising generation in the Coldriver school."

Deane shrank from the thought of the Three Bar girl in such a mixture. Someway she seemed many shades finer than the rest.

"It couldn't be otherwise," Harris said, when Deane expressed this thought. "She was raised at the knee of one of the finest women in the world. I remember her mother myself—a little; and I've heard my own mother sing the praises of Elizabeth Warren a thousand times."

The albino interrupted them.

"Cal—how come?" he greeted. The three men conversed in the most casual, friendly fashion, as if there had never been a hint of friction between Harris and Harper in the past.

A great voice rose above the buzz of conversation, filling the big room to the very rafters.

"Choose your pardners for the dance!" Waddles bellowed from the makeshift platform at one end of the room. "Go get your ga-a-als!"

Deane moved across to the Three Bar girl. There was a general rush for the side opposite the bar where the ladies had gathered. Couples squared off for the Virginia reel, the shortage of ladies rectified by a handkerchief tied on the arm of many a chap-clad youth to signify that he was, for the moment, a girl. Waddles picked his guitar; two fiddles broke into "Turkey in the Straw" and the dance was on with Waddles calling the turns.

All through the room they shuffled and bowed, whirled partners, locked elbows and swung, the shriek of fiddles and scrape of feet punctuated by the caller's boom.

"Grab your gals for the grand right an' left!" the big voice wailed. "Swing, rattle and roar!" "Clutch all partners for a once and a half!" "Swing your gals and swing 'em high!" "Prance, scuffle and scrape!"

Slade came in alone as the first dance was ended.

A croupier and lookout, imported from Coldriver for the event, opened Brill's roulette layout in one corner, a game he usually operated himself on the occasions when his patrons chose to try their fortune against the bank. The rattle of chips, the whir of the ivory ball and the professional chant of lookout and croupier sounded between dances.

"Single ought in the green," the croupier droned.

"Single ought in the green," the lookout echoed. "The pea-green shade is the bank's per cent. The house wins and the gamblers lose. Place your bets for another turn."

"She's off," the croupier chanted. "Off again on the giddy whirl. The little ivory ball—she spins!"

"Ten in the black," the croupier called. "Ten in the black," the lookout seconded. "The black pays and the red falls off; the even beats the odd."

The full enjoyment of a novel scene was spoiled for Deane by the sickening realization that the Three Bar girl was part of it, rubbing elbows with the nondescript throng. He looked again at Harper, the rustler chief; at Slade, with his peculiar turtle-like face, Slade the cattle king—the killer. Billie Warren stood between the two Epperson girls whose faces betrayed the taint of Indian blood, an arm about the shoulders of each of them. The sheriff who had said that men must humor womenfolks was leaning against the bar. Deane turned to Harris but found him looking off across the room. He turned his own eyes that way and glimpsed a dark man with an overlong, thin face and a set bleak stare. Morrow had just come in.

Five minutes later Harris stepped out the back door and Deane followed him.

At the sound of a footfall behind him Harris whirled on his heel and when he confronted Deane the dim light from the door glinted on something in his hand.

"Sho," Harris deprecated. "I'm getting spooky. I thought it was some one else." He slipped the gun back in its holster. "There's one or two that would like right well to run across me from behind."

"I followed you out to tell you it was decent of you to insist that I stay over a few days," Deane said. "It was a white thing to do, considering that we both want the same thing."

"We both want her to have what's best for her," Harris said. "And I don't know as she could do any better than to take up with you."

"It may sound rather trite—coming after that," Deane said. "But anyway, I'll have to say that I feel the same way about you."

"Then, if we're both right in our estimates, why she can't go very far wrong, either way she turns," Harris said. "So I reckon we're both content."

Harris moved on and motioned Deane to accompany him.

"I thought I glimpsed a man I knew a few minutes back," Harris said. "I'd like right well to have a talk with him."

They wandered completely round the post and looked in the shadows of the outbuildings but could find no trace of life.

"Likely I was mistaken," Harris said at last. "I saw a face just outside the door. He was more or less on my mind—the party I thought it was. Some one else I expect, and he's gone inside."

They returned to the hall. Morrow stood with two Halfmoon D men at the end of the bar. Harris motioned him aside and Morrow withdrew from the others.

"This is pretty far north for you, Morrow," Harris suggested.

"Is there any one restricting my range?" Morrow demanded. "If there is I'd like to know."

"Then I'll tell you," Harris answered. "The road is open—as long as you keep on the road. Any time you stray a foot off the beaten trail you're on the Three Bar range. I don't figure to get gunned up from the brush more than once by the same man. Every Three Bar boy has orders to shoot you down on sight any time you heave in view anywhere within twenty miles of the Three Bar; so I wouldn't stray off the main-traveled road any time you're going through."

Lanky Evans had detached himself from a group and Morrow looked up to find the tall man standing at his shoulder.

"So you hunt in pairs," Morrow remarked.

"And later in packs," Lanky returned. "Why don't you ever come up and visit us? Every time I'm riding north I keep looking back, expecting to see you come cantering up from the south. Harris been commenting about the little dead-line we've drawn on you?"

"What's the object of all this conversation?" Morrow flared. "If you've got anything to say to me why get it over with."

"Nothing special," Evans said. "I just thought maybe I could goad you into being imprudent enough to come up our way—which I'm sure hoping to observe you north of the line and somewhere within a thousand yards."

Evans turned away and Morrow rejoined the two men he had left at the bar. Deane looked about him. Apparently no one had noticed the little by-play.

"Evans didn't exactly mean quite all of that," Harris explained. "Of course if Morrow does come up our way Lanky would prefer to see him first—but he would rather he'd keep away. He staged that little talk as a safeguard for me. If Morrow acquires the idea that several folks are anxious to see him up there, he's apt to be real cautious how he prowls round the Three Bar neighborhood looking for me."

Deane looked again at Morrow and saw that Moore and Horne had drawn him aside from the rest. The two Three Bar men were grinning and Morrow's face was set and scowling.

"The boys must have framed it up among themselves," Harris said. "That's the third pair I've seen conversing with him. It's doubtful whether Morrow is

deriving much pleasure out of the dance."

Deane crossed over to Billie. The music started but she shook her head as he would have led her to the floor.

"Sit down. I want to talk with you. Long time no see 'um after to-night," she said. "It'll be daylight soon and I've a long tale to tell."

As the others danced she gave him a dozen messages to impart to various friends.

"Tell Judge Colton that Three Bar stock is rising," she said. "And that as soon as things are all smoothed out, he can expect me for a boarder. I'm going to make him one nice long visit."

Practically all of her time away from the Three Bar had been spent with Judge Colton's family and she was accepted as part of the household. It was there she had met Deane and those others to whom her messages were sent.

Through an opening in the dancing throng Deane suddenly had a clear view of the open rear door—one brief glimpse before the crowd closed once more and shut off his view. He had an idea that he had seen a face, hazy and indistinct, a few feet outside the door. He wondered if it could be the friend for whom Harris had searched.

"Make the visit soon, Billie," he urged. "It's been a long month since we've had you with us. We thought maybe you'd deserted us back there. How soon will this visit start—and how long will it last?"

"It will start as soon as the Three Bar doesn't need me," she said. "And last a long time."

Again a lane opened through the crowd, affording a view of the door. Deane saw the face outside in the night, and a foot or more below if some bright object glinted in the dim light which filtered through. The music ceased and the chant of the roulette croupier began, mingling with the smooth purr of the ivory ball. There came a sudden hush from the vicinity of the rear door, a hush that spread rapidly throughout the room, so swift are the perceptions of a frontier gathering.

Old Rile Foster stood just inside, his gun half-raised before him. Canfield and

Lang stood together in the center of the floor, apart from the rest and with no others in line beyond them. Rile tossed a boot heel on to the floor and as it rolled toward the two men he shot Canfield through the chest. Lang's gun crashed almost with his own. Rile's knees sagged under him and he pitched face down on the floor, his arms sprawled out before him.

The surge of the crowd, pressing back out of line, threw the albino on the edge of it, his big form towering alone.

The old man raised his head from the floor and crooked his wrist with the last of his ebbing strength.

"Four for Bangs," he said, and shot Harper between the eyes.

XI

The two loggers had finished cutting their quota of timber for the homestead cabins and the white peeled logs lay piled and ready to be snaked down to the Three Bar on the first heavy snows of fall. The choppers had transferred their operations to the lower broken slopes which they scoured for the scattered cedars of the foothills, cutting them for fence posts and piling them in spots accessible to the wagons to be hauled whenever the mule teams could be spared.

The acreage of plowed ground increased day by day and would continue till frost claimed the ground. As soon as the brush was burnt the mule teams pulled heavy log drags across the field, pulverizing the lumps and leveling inequalities of the surface.

Evans had been sent out as foreman of the beef round-up while Harris remained behind to direct the operations at the ranch. The details of the new work were unfamiliar ones for the girl and she was entirely absorbed in learning the reasons for every move; so much engrossed, in fact, that she had not left the Three Bar during the month which had elapsed since the dance at Brill's. A few days before Evans was due with the beef herd she rode Papoose away from the ranch, intending to make a long-deferred visit to the Brandons.

After covering two-thirds of the distance along the foot of the hills to the V L she saw a rider dip over a ridge two miles away. She unslung Harris's glasses and dismounted to watch for his reappearance. When he came again into her field of view another man was with him and they were driving a few head of cows before them. They angled into a valley that led off to the south, dropping into it some three miles from her.

She mounted Papoose and headed him on a parallel course, keeping well out of sight behind the intervening waves of ground. After holding her direction at a stiff lope till satisfied that she had passed the men she angled across to intersect their course.

As Papoose topped a low hogback that flanked the valley she saw the men riding toward her down the bottoms, driving twenty or more head of cows. One of the horses threw up his head, his ears pricked sharply toward her, and the swift upward tilt of the rider's hat, as swiftly lowered, informed her that she had been sighted. The other man did not look up. They lifted their horses from a walk to a stiff trot and veered past the cows, then looked up as if just aware of her approach, and waited for her. The men were Bentley and Carp.

Bentley greeted her cheerily. Carp nodded without a word.

"What are you two doing up here?" she demanded without parley.

"I repped with the Three Bar wagon and Carp worked with you for a spell so we sort of know the range," Bentley explained. "Slade sent us up to drift any strays back south."

"Those you were driving are Three Bar stuff—every hoof," she said. "All two-year-old she-stock."

Bentley turned and regarded the little herd they had just passed.

"Them? Sho—we wasn't driving them," Bentley denied easily. "They just drifted ahead of us as we rode down the bottoms. A cow critter will always move on ahead of a man. We rode on past 'em as soon as we decided to amble along."

She knew that they were on safe ground. Any cow would drift on before a horseman.

"The only way to convict a man on a case like this is to shoot him out of the saddle before he has a chance to pass the cows," she said. "That's what will happen to the next Slade rider that gets noticed with any Three Bar cows moving out in front of him and headed south. You can carry that word to Slade."

She whirled Papoose and headed back for the ranch, the intended visit to the Brandons postponed. Harris was piling brush in the lower field when she arrived and she informed him of the act of the two men.

"I wouldn't put it past Carp," he said. "But I hadn't sized Bentley up just that way. It's hard to tell. If Carp shows up here again we'll make him a visit in the middle of the night—and he won't trouble us much after that."

"We'd better pay Slade a night visit too," she said. Her feelings toward Slade had undergone a complete revulsion. She knew beyond a doubt that he had been responsible for the raid on Three Bar bulls. The wild bunch would have had no object in such a foray. Figuring it from any angle Slade was the only one man who could possibly derive any benefit from that. She had come to see that Slade was fighting with his back to the wall,—that he had run his course and come to the end of it if squatters secured a start in his range, and he considered the act of the Three Bar the opening wedge which would throw open the way for the nesters to crowd him out.

The evening of the following day the beef herd trailed into the lower end of the Three Bar valley and bedded for the night. In the morning the trail herd was headed for the railroad under a full crew, for Harris had kept all hands on the job.

There was none of the fast and varied work of the round-up; the trail-herding of beef to market seeming a slow and monotonous procedure in comparison. The cows were drifted slowly south, well spread out and grazing as they moved. Harris detailed two men to ride the "points," the two forward extremities of the herd; two others rode the "drags," holding to either flank of the rear end of the drive. In choppy country he detailed a third pair to skirt the middle flanks and prevent leakage up any feathering coulees.

The chuck wagon followed a mile behind and the horse wrangler brought up the rear, bringing the remuda, much depleted in numbers from full round-up strength, for it now carried but three extra horses for each man.

Three hours out from the Three Bar some of the cows showed a disposition to

rest and calmly bedded down; the forward drift of the herd was arrested. After a prolonged rest they rose in scattering groups to feed and once more they were moved slowly to the south. The men not on active duty with the herd rode in knots and whiled away the time as best they could. It was the habit to cover less than twenty miles a day with the beef herd as any strenuous exertion would reduce the weight of the grass-fattened steers.

The drove was a nondescript lot. In addition to the steers and older cows that comprised every trail herd, the off-color she-stock had been carefully culled from the range.

Harris pointed to the bunch.

"Look that assortment over well, Billie," he advised. "A few seasons more, with fair luck, and you won't see one of these rainbow droves with every color from brindle to strawberry roan; none of those humpbacked runts; they'll all be gone. That's almost the last mongrel herd that will ever wear your brand. They'll run better every year until we have all big flat-backed beef stock—a straight white-face run."

The third morning out from the home ranch broke stormy. Gray, leaden skies and low scudding, drab clouds drifted over the foothills and obscured the view of the peaks. A nasty drizzle dampened the face of the world and laid its clammy touch on all living things. This condition prevailed all through the day and shortly after the cows had been milled and bedded for the night the drizzle turned to rain, now falling straight and soft, again in fierce squalls whipped by varying shifts of wind. A saddled night horse was picketed for every man. The wagon stood close under a hill while the herd was bedded on a broad flat at the mouth of a valley.

The men lay in the open, their bed-tarps folded to shed as much moisture as possible. The soggy patter of the rain on her teepee lulled the girl to sleep but she was frequently roused. A dull muttering materialized suddenly into a sharp thunderstorm and the canvas walls of her teepee were almost continuously illuminated by successive flashes. The picketed horses fretted and stamped. Between peals she heard the voices of the night guards singing to soothe their restless charges on the bed ground. One of the men shifted his bed roll from a gathering puddle to some higher point of ground.

She dropped to sleep again but was roused by voices outside as the guards changed shifts and she estimated that it must be near morning, the fourth change of guards.

The sounds ceased as the men who had just been relieved turned in for their sleep. A horse neighed shrilly within a few yards of her teepee. Another took it up and an answer sounded from the flats. There was a crash of pistol shots, a rumble of hoofs and the instant command of Harris.

"Roll out! Roll out!" he called. "Saddles! On your horses."

Even as he shouted there came the swish of wet canvas as the men tumbled from their bed rolls, the imprecations of the suddenly awakened. Billie thrust her head from the teepee flap, the water cascading down her neck. The successive flashes showed the men tugging desperately at boots and chaps, their grotesque, froglike leaps for their tethered mounts. She saw Harris, buckling his belt as he ran, and the next flash showed him vaulting to Calico's back.

The thunder of hoofs drew her eyes to the bed ground where a black mass surged, then bore off up the valley. A scattered line of riders bore down on the herd, two ghostly apparitions among them throwing the cows into a panic of fear. She knew these for riders flapping yellow slickers in the wind. As the light faded she saw three horizontal red streaks cut the obscurity and knew that one of her guards was in the midst of the rustlers, doing his single-handed best. The red splashes of answering shots showed on all sides of him. She tugged on her chaps and boots, slipped Papoose's picket rope and vaulted to his back.

The scene was once more illuminated as she rode from the wagon. A big pinto horse was strung out and running his best, the other Three Bar men pounding after him. A riderless horse circled in the flat, a dark shape sprawled near him, and she wondered which one of her men had gone down. A knot of horsemen were turning up an opening gulch on the far side of the valley. A half-dozen Three Bar riders veered their horses for the spot. Harris turned in his saddle and his voice reached her above the tumult.

"Let 'em go!" he shouted. "Let 'em go! Hold the herd!"

Far off on the opposite side she made out a lone horseman riding at a full run along the sidehill above the cows as he made a supreme effort to reach the head of the run. The Three Bar men split and streamed up both sides of the bottoms.

The flashes had ceased except for brief, quivering plays of less than a second's duration. She hung her spurs into Papoose and trusted to his footwork. The swift little horse passed one rider, then another. There were only the rumble of hoofs and the crazed bawling of cows to guide her as she drew near the rear of the herd. A half-flare showed the pinto a bare twenty yards ahead, with Harris putting him at the slope to pass the cows. She swung her own horse after him and she felt the frequent skid of his feet on the treacherous sidehill. Papoose braced on his haunches and slid down a precipitous bank, buckled up the far side and down again, then swooped across a long flat bench. Three times she felt the heaving plunge and jar as the little horse skimmed over cut-bank coulees and washes which her own eyes could not see in the dripping velvet black.

From the sounds below she knew they were well up on the flanks of the run and nearing the peak. The stampede seemed slowing. A long, wavering flash revealed Harris a dozen jumps ahead. Papoose followed the paint-horse as Harris put Calico down the slippery sidehill and lifted him round the point of the herd. In the same flash Billie had seen two slickers out before the peaks of the run, flapping weirdly in the faces of the foremost cows. This accounted for the slowing-up she had sensed. Two of her men were before them and she wondered how this had come to pass.

The lightning-play broke forth once more. She saw two riders swinging round the opposite point. The two slickers were working in the center. Harris's gun flashed six times. She jerked her own and rolled it. The two riders who had just rounded the far point joined in. Cows in the front ranks held back from this fearsome commotion out in front. Others, driven by the pressure behind, forged past them, only to hold back in their turn as the guns flashed before their eyes.

The storm ceased as suddenly as it had begun and for two miles she rode in inky darkness. The last mile was slower. It was showing gray in the east and the night run had spent its force. The herd stopped and the cows gazed stupidly about, standing with drooping heads and heaving sides. Three Bar men showed on both flanks and in the rear. They had held the drove intact and prevented its splitting up in detachments and scattering through the night.

Horne and Moore rode over to them and for the first time the girl noticed that the two men who had wielded slickers out in front of the run were nowhere to be seen.

"Who was the pair out ahead?" Moore asked. "And what swallowed 'em up?"

Harris shook his head.

"Billie and I were the first to make the front," he said.

"Not any," Moore stated positively. "I saw 'em five minutes before you two swung round the point. I was wondering who had outrode the paint-horse and Billie's little nag."

Moore's left side was plastered with mud, as was the left side of his mount.

"I was on guard and halfway up the far side," he said. "Split Ear took a header with me and delayed me some."

He pointed to the mud crusted on his clothes. Billie knew that he was the lone rider she had seen on the flanks of the herd as she rode away from the wagon. The fall accounted for their Founding the point ahead of him. Moore was looking off across the country.

"Do you mean to tell me you didn't see those two slickers flapping out in front?" he demanded.

"I confess I didn't observe any," Harris said. "You're getting spooky, Moore. A couple of white cows, likely, out ahead of the rest."

Moore regarded him curiously.

"Maybe that's so," he said. "Waving their tails in the air, sort of." He grinned and turned his horse to head back a bunch that had drifted out of the herd.

"The boys made a nice ride," Harris said to Horne. "You float round from one to the next and tell 'em we'll soon have a feed. I'll ride back and send the wagon up."

Billie rode with him as he skirted the herd and started on the return trip. Her mind was occupied with the two riders who had slowed the run and disappeared. There had been something familiar about them, for every man has his individual way of sitting a saddle as he has an individuality of gait when on foot. As she had viewed them in the lightning's flash they had closely resembled Bentley and

Carp. But she decided that this resemblance had been but a fancied one, suggested by the fact that the two men had been much on her mind of late.

"We're not hurt bad," Harris said. "The boys held them bunched in good shape. Maybe forty or so head down with broken legs—and ten pounds of fat apiece run off the rest."

A hatred of Slade was growing within her. Here, too, was a case where no other would benefit by the senseless stampede. If the beef herd could be broken up it would cause a delay to round it up in a strange range with the certainty of many cows being missed,—a case of weakening the Three Bar.

She had been so absorbed in learning the details of the new work, so elated at its progress, that she had come to believe in its ultimate success. And they had been unmolested for so long a time. Then had come the wanton slaughter of Three Bar bulls and now the stampede of the trail herd. It was conclusive proof that Slade had abandoned his former wearing-down process as too slow and was out to crush the Three Bar in the speediest possible way and through any available means.

There rose in her a flare of resentment against her neighbors, the Brandons of the V L and the McVeys of the Halfmoon D. Both had taken out papers on the best land in their respective localities as soon as forewarned of her intended move. Ostensibly this was done merely as a protection against outsiders but in reality they were hoping that she would win out, in which case they would go through with their filings and prove up. But neither outfit would come out in the open and give her their support, preferring to hold aloof and benefit by her success if it so transpired and lose nothing themselves if she should fail—part of the policy of every man for himself—in the meantime letting her brand bear the brunt of the fight.

Harris, too, was pondering over Slade's change of tactics. He felt assured that Slade's own men had not participated in starting the run. Slade would not let any considerable number of his boys know that much about him. Some of Lang's men had undoubtedly been hired to stampede the Three Bar herd.

"The very fact that Slade is so bald with it is proof that he sees the necessity of crowding us fast," Harris said. "If we get too big a start he's blown up—and he hasn't had anything to work on but plowed ground. He's out now to worry us

at odd ends. We can expect a steady run of mishaps now, for he'll work fast—but we'll win out in the end."

She nodded a little wearily for she knew that with Slade throwing all his forces against her the Three Bar would be hard pressed. In addition to this worry her mind was concerned with the riderless horse she had seen as she rode away from the wagon, the huddled figure sprawled in the flat. Every Three Bar rider was a friend and she hesitated to hear which one of her men had gone down in the raid.

"Who was it?" she asked at last, and Harris divined that she was harking back to the fallen night guard who had tried to head the raiders alone.

"I've been trying not to think about that," he said. "Lanky was a good pal of mine. I saw him go down, but I couldn't stop right then."

Evans occupied a place in her regard that was perhaps a notch higher than that of any other of the crew.

"Can't we prove anything on Slade—do anything to stop him?" she demanded. "If they've killed Lanky, I'll perjure myself if it's the only way. I'll have Alden pick him up and I'll swear I saw him do the thing himself. He's as guilty as if he actually had."

"I've a bait or two out for Slade," Harris said. "But that way may prove too slow. If Lanky's gone under, I expect I'll have to pick a quarrel with Slade and hurry things along."

"Don't you!" she objected. For all of her confidence in Harris's efficiency in most respects, her implicit belief in his courage, she could not forget the awkward swing of his gun and she had a swift vision of him facing Slade without a chance.

A crash of wagon wheels and the voice of Waddles admonishing the horses interrupted her. The chuck wagon rolled round a bend as the big cook followed the trail of the night run. Every bed had been rolled and loaded to eliminate the necessity of a return. The remuda trailed behind the wagon under the combined supervision of the nighthawk and the wrangler.

"How is Lanky?" was Harris's first query.

Waddles jerked a thumb over his shoulder. Evans, shot once through the arm and a second time through the shoulder, reclined on the triple-thickness bed roll the cook had spread for him on the floor of the wagon.

"Only nicked—clean holes and no bones," Lanky said. "I'll be all right as soon as Waddles will let me out of this chariot and I get to riding comfortable on a horse."

"He'll come round fine in a few days if we can keep him offen a horse and riding comfortable in the wagon," Waddles countered. "I've give him orders to that effect."

Evans groaned.

"He drives over places I wouldn't cross afoot," he complained. "Did you hold the run?"

Reassured on this point he flattened out on his pallet and the wagon held on toward the herd.

The weary cows were held over for a day of rest. The night guards were doubled and this precaution was maintained during the succeeding two stops before reaching the shipping point.

Harris and Billie sat on the top rail of the loading chute while the last few Three Bar steers were being prodded on board the cars.

Harris slipped from his perch and motioned to Moore and Horne.

"You can go up town now and take on a few drinks. Hunt up an old friend or two and wag your chins. Make it right secretive and confidential and make each one promise faithful not to breathe a syllable to another living soul. That way the news is sure to travel rapid."

He returned to the girl as the stock train pulled out. Two hands waved a joyous farewell from the top of the cars, delighted at the prospect of a trip to market with the steers.

"I don't pretend to regret that old Rile played even for Bang's," Harris said. "But I wish he'd sorted out some one else in the albino's place. It was bad

business for the Three Bar when Harper went down."

"He was the head of the gang," she said. "The worst of the lot."

"And for that reason he was able to hold them down," Harris explained. "It was some of the outfit from over in the Breaks that stampeded us. Slade wouldn't let his own boys know that much about him so he'd hire Lang. Harper had brains. He wouldn't have gone in for that. Lang has thrown in against us. He's all bulk and no brains and as savage as an Apache buck. He'll hang himself in the end but in the interim he may hand us considerable grief."

XII

The wild riders of the Breaks no longer mingled with other men with the same freedom as of old. Some fifteen men throughout the country felt themselves marked and set apart from others. Friends no longer fraternized with them at the bars when they rode into the towns. Doors which had always been open in the past were now opened furtively if at all. Lukewarm adherents fell away from them and avoided them even more studiously than the rest. This swift transition had sprung apparently from no more than a whisper, a murderous rumor which persisted in the face of flat denials issued from its supposititious source.

All through the range and as far south as the railroad it was current gossip that the Three Bar would pay a thousand dollars reward for each of fifteen men, a fast saddle horse thrown in and no questions asked. The men were named, and if the rumor was based on truth it was virtually placing a bounty on the scalps of certain men the same as the State paid bounty on the scalps of wolves,—except that it was without the sanction of the law.

This backfire rumor had established a definite line with fifteen men outside, conspicuous and alone, and those who had once followed the hazy middle ground of semi-lawlessness with perfect security now hastened to become solid citizens whose every act would stand the light; for the whispers seemed all-embracing and it was intimated that new names would be added to the original

list to include those who fraternized with the ones outside the pale.

Those not branded by this alleged bounty system were quick to grasp the beautiful simplicity of it all. Some recalled that a similar rumor, supposed to have originated with old Con Ristine, had wiped out the wild bunch that preyed on the Nations Cow-trail—that the Gallatin clean-up had resulted from a like report which Al Moody was reported to have launched.

It had the effect of causing the men so branded to view all others with suspicion, as possible aspirants out to collect the bounty on their heads. It sowed distrust among their own ranks for there was always the chance that one, in seeking safety for himself, might collect the blood-money posted for another. The reference to the fast saddle horse was guarantee that no questions would be asked before the price was paid and no questions answered after the recipient had ridden away from the Three Bar with his spoils.

Yet, if the thing were true, it was the most flagrant violation of the law ever launched, even in the Coldriver Strip where transgression was the rule. For the branded men were not wanted on any charge. It was merely the wholesale posting of rewards for the lives of some fifteen citizens whose standing in the community was legally the same as the rest,—prize money offered by an individual concern for its enemies without reference to the law. On every possible occasion Harris flatly denied that there was a shred of truth in the report. Al Moody, years before, had also denied his responsibility for the rumors on the Gallatin range; and Con Ristine had repudiated all knowledge of the whispers that traveled the Nations Trail. But in each case these very natural denials had served only to strengthen men's belief in the truth of the reports; and inevitably they had established a hard line that cut off the men so named from the rest of the countryside.

Harris knew that his own life was forfeit any time he chanced to ride alone. He had not a doubt but that Slade had put a price on his head and that perhaps a dozen men were patiently waiting for a chance at him. Any man whose name appeared on the black list which he was supposed to have sponsored would overlook no opportunity to retaliate in kind. In addition to this there was always the chance of a swift raid on the men who had filed their homestead rights in the valley.

As a consequence Harris had taken every possible precaution. Winter had

claimed the range and hardened the ground with frost. The full force of Three Bar hands had been kept on the pay roll instead of being let off immediately after the beef was shipped. These riders were stationed in line camps out on the range, their ostensible purpose being to hold all Three Bar cows close to the home ranch but in reality they served two ends, acting as a cordon of guards as well. The two woodcutters were camped in the edge of the hills behind the ranch and daily patrolled the drifts that now lay deep in the timber for signs of skulkers who might have slipped down from behind and stationed themselves on some point overlooking the corrals.

Three times in as many weeks strangers drifting in from other localities stopped in Coldriver and profanely reported the fact that for no reason whatever, while passing through the Three Bar range, they had been held up and forced to state their business in that neighborhood.

Hostilities had ceased. The Three Bar girl had anticipated a series of raids against the cows wearing her brand, swift forays in isolated points of her range, but no stock losses were reported. On the surface it appeared that Slade had given up all thought of harassing the Three Bar. But the girl had come to know Slade. He would never recede from his former stand. She noted that Harris's vigilance was never for an instant relaxed and it was gradually impressed upon her that the cessation of petty annoyances held more of menace than of assurance. Slade had seen that the Three Bar was not to be discouraged in its course and he now waited for an opportunity to launch a blow that would cripple, striking simultaneously at every exposed point and delaying only for a propitious time. In the face of continued immunity she was filled with a growing conviction of impending trouble.

Christmas had found the range covered with a fresh tracking snow which precluded possibility of a raid and all hands had been summoned to the home ranch for a two-day rest. Harris knew that cowhands, no matter how loyal to the brand that pays them, are a restless lot and must have their periodical fling to break the monotony of lonely days; so he had provided food and drink in abundance. The frolic was over and the hands back on the range. Harris sat with Billie before her fire.

"They'll be satisfied for another two months," he said. "Then we'll have to call them in for another spree."

This evening conference before the fire had come to be a nightly occurrence. Together they went over the details of the work accomplished during the day and mapped out those for the next. From outside came the crunch of hoofs and the screech of logs on the frozen trail as the last mule team came down with its load.

Most of the logs had been skidded down and the men now worked in pairs, erecting the cabins on each filing. The cedar posts had been hauled and strung out along the prospective fence lines. The wagons, under heavy guard, had made two trips to the railroad to freight in more implements and supplies. Thousands of pounds of seed oats and alfalfa seed were stored at the Three Bar along with sixty hundred of cement.

"Another two months and the cabins will be roofed and finished," Harris said. "Then we'll be through till the frost is out of the ground. We'll start building fence as soon as you can sink a post hole; and we'll have time to break out another two hundred acres of ground before time to seed it down."

The girl nodded without comment, content to leave him to his thoughts, her mind pleasantly occupied with her own. For long her evenings had been lonely but now she had come to look forward to the conferences before the blazing logs. She had made no attempt to analyze the reasons for the new contentment which had transformed her evenings, formerly periods of drab reflections, into the most pleasant portion of each day.

Harris gazed about the familiar room and wondered what the future held out to him if he should be forced to spend his evenings alone after having shared them for six months with the Three Bar girl. The weekly letters still came from Deane. The girl valued Harris as a friend and partner without apparent trace of more intimate regard. He wondered which would prevail, the ties which bound her to the life she had always known or the lure of the new life which beckoned.

Suddenly, without having sought it, the explanation of her recent contentment bubbled to the surface of the girl's consciousness, and she turned and gazed at Harris. Night after night she had sat here with old Cal Warren and discussed the details of their work and after his passing her evenings had been hours of restlessness. Now Harris, the partner, had crept into the father's place,—had in a measure filled the void.

Harris rose and flicked the ash from his cigarette, suppressing the desire to

take her in his arms, for he knew that time had not yet come. As he opened the door to leave an eddy of steam curled in at the opening as the warm air of the room battled on the threshold with the thirty-below temperature of the outside world. She heard the hissing crunch of his boots on the frozen crust—and reached for Deane's Christmas letter to reread it for perhaps the fifth time.

During the night a chinook poured its warm breath over the hills and morning found the snow crumpling before it. The surface was a pulpy mass intersected by rivulets. Water trickled from the eaves of the buildings and there was a breath of spring in the air; false assurance for those who knew, for it was inevitable that, once the chinook had passed, bitter frost would clamp down once more.

Such days, however, inspire plans for spring and Billie rode with Harris through the lower field as he pointed out the various fence lines and the lay of the ditches and laterals which would carry water to irrigate the meadow, all these to be installed as soon as winter should lose its grip.

As Harris outlined his plans his words were tinged with optimism and he allowed no hint of possible disaster to creep into his speech. But the girl was conscious of that hovering uncertainty, the feeling that the months of peace were but to lure her into a false sense of security and that Slade would pounce on the Three Bar from all angles at once whenever the time was right.

She found some consolation in the fact that Lang's men no longer rode through her range at will, but skirted it in their trips to and from the Breaks. She attributed this solely to Harris's precautions in the matter of outguards, for of all those within a hundred miles she was perhaps the single one who had not heard of the sinister rumor that was cutting Lang and his men off from the rest of the world.

Men were discussing it wherever they met; in Coldriver they were speculating on the possible results, the same in the railroad towns; across the Idaho line and south into Utah it was the topic of the day. And the single patron of Brill's store found the same question uppermost in his mind.

Carson was one of the many who were neither wholly good nor hopelessly bad, one who had drifted with the easy current of the middle course. And he was wondering if that middle course would continue to prove safe. He played solitaire to pass the time. His horse and saddle had been lost in a stud-poker game just prior to his catching the stage to Brill's, where his credit had always been good. He rose, stretched and accosted Brill.

"Put me down for a quart," he said.

"Whenever you put down the cash," Brill returned.

"What's the matter with my credit?" Carson demanded. "I've always paid."

Brill reached for a book, opened it and slid it on to the bar. He flipped the pages and indicated a number of accounts ruled off with red ink.

"So did Harper," he said. "He always paid; and Canfield—and Magill; these others too. Their credit was good but they've all gone somewheres I can't follow to collect. And they was owing me." He tapped a double account.

"Bangs was into me a little. Old Rile paid up for him and then got it in his turn—with his name down for a hundred on my books. Harris and Billie Warren paid up for Rile. Now just whoever do you surmise will pay up for you?"

"Me?" Carson inquired. "Why, I ain't dead. I'm clear alive."

"So was they when I charged those accounts," Brill said. "But it looks like

stormy days ahead. I sell for cash."

"I'm not on this death list, if that's what you're referring to," Carson announced.

"But it's easy to get enrolled," Brill said. "Your name's liable to show up on it any time. Seen Lang in the last few days?"

"Not in the last few months," Carson stated. "Nor yet in the next few years. He's no friend of mine."

"I sort of remember you used to be right comradely," Brill remarked.

"That's before I really knowed Lang intimate," Carson said. "He didn't strike me as such a bad sort at first; but now he's going too strong. Folks are getting plum down on him."

"What you mean is that folks who used to be friendly are growing spooky about getting their own names on that list," Brill said. "That's what has opened their eyes."

"Maybe so," the thirsty man confessed. "But anyway, I'm through."

"They're all through!" Brill said. "A hundred others just like you, scattered here and there. It's come to them recent just what a bad lot Lang is. It's hell what a whisper can do."

"It is when that whisper is backed by a thousand-dollar reward," Carson agreed. "If he really pays up it'll wreck Lang's little snap for sure."

Brill dabbed his cloth at an imaginary spot on the polished slab and nodded without comment.

"I reckon he launched that scheme because Slade put a price on him first," Carson said.

"I didn't know Slade was into this," Brill stated softly. "There's no proof of that. Not a shred."

"No more than there's any proof that Harris is behind these rewards," Carson

said. "But you know that Slade is out to wreck the Three Bar since they've planted squatters there."

The storekeeper failed to respond.

"There's likely a dozen men looking for Harris right now," Carson prophesied.

"But it's hard for one of 'em to get within ten miles of the ranch," Brill observed. "So while they're maybe looking for him it's right difficult to see him that far off."

"I don't mind admitting that I'm for Harris—as against Slade," Carson said.

"Just between us two I don't mind confessing that I'm neutral—as against everything else," Brill returned.

"Now you know how I'm lined up. Do I get that quart?" Carson urged.

"I knew how you was lined up months back." Brill turned on a dry smile.

"I ain't told a soul till right now," Carson objected. "So how could you know?"

"You didn't need to tell. As soon as that rumor leaked out it was a cinch where you'd stand. And a hundred others are crowding on to the same foothold along with you."

"And why not?" Carson demanded. "Who wants to get a thousand plastered on his scalp? It would tempt a man's best friends."

"Or scare 'em off," the storekeeper commented. "Which is all the same in the end."

A half dozen men clattered up in front and surged through the door. More arrivals followed as the regular afternoon crowd gathered before the bar. There were many jobless hands drifting from one ranch to the next, "grublining" on each brand for a week or more at a time during the slack winter months.

Carpenter rode up alone. Brill lowered one lid and jerked his head toward

Carson.

"Broke—and reformed," he said. "Maybe."

Some minutes later Carp bought the thirsty man a drink.

"You looking for a job?" he asked. "I can use you down my way."

Carson was well versed in the bends of the devious trail and Carp's ways smacked of irregularities. Carson had ideas of his own why the other man was allowed to start up an outfit down in Slade's range. One day Carp's name would be cited on the black list. As diplomatically as possible he refused the offer of a job.

The storekeeper smiled as he noted this. Carson had turned into a solid citizen almost overnight. As Carp left him and joined another group Brill poured Carson a drink.

"You're a fair risk at that—as long as you stay cautious," he remarked. "I'll stake you to a horse and saddle. You can ride the grubline with the rest of the boys till spring and get a job when work opens up." He slid a bottle across the bar. "Here's your quart."

He stood looking after him as Carson moved to a table and motioned several others to join him over the bottle.

"That's about the tenth reformation that's transpired under my eyes in as many days," Brill mused. "Give us time and this community will turn pure and spotless. I don't mind any man's owing me if he stands a fair show to go on living."

The sheriff dropped in for one of his infrequent visits to Brill's. He waved all hands to a drink.

"I've just been out to the Three Bar to see Harris," he announced. "And asked him about this news that's been floating about. He came right out flat and says he's not offering a reward. That's all a mistake."

Every man in the room grinned at this statement. There was no other possible reply that Harris could make.

"Of course," the sheriff said reflectively. "Of course there's just a chance that Cal lied to me."

"He lied all right," Carp prophesied. "I'd bet my shirt he'll stand to pay the price for every man that's cited on that list."

"Shaw," the sheriff deprecated. "That's dead against the law, that is. He can't do that."

"He will do it," Carp predicted. "If I was on that list I'd be moving for somewheres a long ways remote from here."

"Then you'd better be starting," Alden counseled mildly. "For Harris was just telling me that your name had got mixed up with it. Morrow's name has sprung up too. Cal seemed mystified as to how it had come about for he says you and Morrow never rode with the others on the list. He couldn't figure how this thing come to start."

"Figure!" Carp snapped. "He figured it out himself, who else? Are you going to stand for his putting a price on every man he happens to dislike?"

"But he says he don't know anything about it," the sheriff expostulated. "So how can I prove he does? I'd like to know for sure. If I thought he was actually set to pay those rewards I'd have to ride over and remonstrate with Cal. That would be in defiance of the law."

One or two who had been drinking with Carp moved over to speak with others and failed to return. He was left standing alone at the bar. He shrugged his shoulders and went out.

"Folks are considerable like sheep," Brill observed. It occurred to him that in every saloon and in every bunk house within a hundred miles the topic of conversation was the same.

He lowered one lid as he looked at the sheriff and jerked his head toward Carson.

"He's broke—and reformed," he said. "Absolutely."

The sheriff drew Carson aside.

"If you're wanting a job I'll stake you to an outfit and feed you through till spring. Forty a month from then on. I'll need a parcel of deputies, likely, after that."

"You've got one," Carson stated. "I'll sign now."

The storekeeper, the sheriff and the new deputy stood at one end of the bar.

"It's queer that folks don't see the real object of this rumor," Brill observed.

"Its object is to clean out the hardest citizens in the country," Carson said. "That's why they're named. Why else?"

"The object is to clean up the rest of the country first," Brill said.

Carson grunted his disbelief.

"If Harris only wanted to wipe out those on the list he wouldn't go to all this fuss," Brill explained. "He'd just put on an extra bunch of hands and raid the Breaks himself. Swear he caught them running off a bunch of Three Bar cows. Simpler and considerable less expense."

"Then what's the object of this bounty?" Carson insisted.

"That's aimed at the doubtful folks," Brill stated. "Folks that was on the fence—like you. This death list makes them spooky and they turn into good little citizens in one round of the clock. It leaves the worst ones outside without a friend. Every one lined up solid behind the law. Public sentiment will start running strong against those outside. Then it'll be easy for the sheriff and a bunch of deputies—like you—to clean the country up from end to end, with the whole community backing your play."

Carson considered this for some time.

"Well, I can furnish the deputies," he said at last. "Boys that are strong for law and order from first to last."

"I've got about all I need," the sheriff said. "A dozen or so. Mostly old friends of yours. I've picked 'em up on and off in the last two weeks. They're strong for upholding the last letter of the law—just like you said."

"A dozen?" Carson asked. "How'll you raise the money to pay that many at once?"

"I'm sort of expecting maybe the Three Bar will make up the deficit," Alden said. "It's cheaper than paying rewards. That's another reason I don't think Cal had a hand in this blacklist report."

The storekeeper grinned.

"Surely not. Surely not. I'd never suspect him of that," he said. "But all the same it's working just as well as if he really had."

XIII

The first warm days of spring had drawn the frost from the ground. Billie rode beside Harris down the lane to the lower field. A tiny cabin stood completed on every filing. Two men were digging post holes across the valley below the edge of the last fall's plowing and the mule teams were steadily breaking out another strip.

"Almost a year," she said, referring to the commencement of the new work.

"Just a year to-day," Harris corrected, and he was thinking of the day he had first met the Three Bar girl. "This is our anniversary, sort of."

She nodded as she caught his meaning.

"The anniversary of our partnership," she said. "You're good on dates. We've pulled together pretty well, considering our start."

"It was a rocky trail for the first few days," he confessed. "But all the time I was hoping it would get smoothed out."

"You told me there were millions of miles of sage just outside," she recollected. "And millions of cows—and girls."

"Later I told you something else," he said. "And I've been meaning it ever since. The road to the outside is closed. If I was to start now I'd lose the way."

She pointed down the valley as a drove of horses moved toward them under the guidance of a dozen men. The hands would start breaking out the remuda the following day. The spring work was on.

"Off to a running start on another year," he said. "And sure to hold our lead." They drew aside as the remuda thundered past and on toward the corrals. "From to-day on out, you and I'll be a busy pair," he prophesied.

His prediction proved true. The Three Bar was a beehive of activity and it seemed that the hours between dawn and dark were all too short for the amount of work Harris wished to crowd into them.

The cowhands were breaking out the horses in the corrals while the acreage of plowed land in the lower fields steadily increased.

The heaviest cedar posts were tamped in place for the outer fence and a six-wire barrier held range cows back from the bottoms which would soon be in growing crops. It crossed the flats below the lower filings and followed the road that held to one side of the valley clear to the Three Bar lane. On the far side it mounted the bench that flanked the bottoms and followed the crest of it, tying into the home corrals. Lighter three-wire fences marked the homestead lines within.

The day that Evans led the men out on the calf round-up, the mule teams made their first trip across the plowed land with the drill.

Harris and the girl sat their horses and watched the initial trip. The fields were being seeded to alfalfa and oats so that the faster growing grain might shade and protect the tender shoots of hay. Before the grain ripened it would be cut green for hay, cured and stacked.

When the seeding was completed Billie worked with Harris and together they ran a level over the seeded ground, marking out the laterals on grade across the fields from points where they would tap the main feed ditches and carry water to the crops.

Russ and Tiny followed the lines of stakes which marked their readings of the

level, throwing a plow furrow each way. A second pair of homesteaders followed behind them, their mules dragging a pointed steel-shod ditcher which forced out the loosened earth.

A concrete head gate was installed at a feasible take-out point on the Crazy Loop. Then all hands worked on a main feed ditch which would carry sufficient volume of water to cover every filing. Lead ditches tapped the main artery at frequent intervals, each one of capacity to carry a head of water to irrigate one forty. These in turn feathered out into the tiny laterals across the meadow.

Early rains had moistened the fields and they were faintly green with tiny shoots of oats. These thickened into a rank velvety carpet while the homesteaders were hauling a hundred loads of rocks to form a crude dam across the stream below the take-out. The water was gradually raised till it ran almost flush with the top of the head gate. The gates were lifted and the diverted waters sped smoothly down the new channel to carry life to a portion of the sagebrush desert.

A few days would find the cowhands back from the round-up. The homesteaders must make one more trip to the railroad to freight in the stacker and the two buck-sweeps to be used in putting up the hay. This trip was delayed only till the round-up crew was back from the range for a week of leisure and could act as guards while the others were away.

As the tangible results of the work became more apparent Harris's vigilance increased. There was now more than plowed ground to work on; crops to be trampled at a time when they would not lift again to permit of mowing; fences to be wrecked so that range stock might have free access to the fields. A single night could upset the work of many months. But as he stood with Billie at the mouth of the lane he allowed none of his thoughts to be reflected in his speech.

It was two hours before dark and the perspective toward the east was already foreshortened. Two jackrabbits hopped into the lane and moved down toward the meadow. The homesteaders had turned their hands to another job. Tiny and Russ, shod with rubber boots, were leaning on their long-handled shovels in the forty nearest the house. Beyond them the other irrigators were spreading the water over the growing crops.

Billie Warren half-closed her eyes and viewed the broad expanse of rippling

green in the bottoms. How many times she had stood here in the past with old Cal Warren while he visioned this very picture which now unrolled before her eyes in reality; the transformation of the Three Bar flat from a desert waste to a scene of abundant fertility under the reclaiming touch of water.

It was a quiet picture of farm life if one looked only upon the blooming fields and took no account of the raw, barren foothills that flanked them,—the gaunt, towering range behind. She found it difficult to link the scene before her with the deviltry of a few months past. The killing of Bangs and Rile Foster's consequent grim retaliation; the raid on Three Bar bulls and the stampede of her trail herd; all those seemed part of some life so long in the past as to form no part of her present.

The continued immunity had had its effect, regardless of her earlier suspicions. She still realized the possibility of further raids but they had been so long delayed that the prospect had ceased to impress her as imminent. Tiny and Russ changed their head of water. As they shifted positions she noted that each carried some tool beside his irrigator's shovel. No man in the field ever strayed far from the rifle which was part of his equipment. But even this was an evidence of vigilance which had met her eye every day for months and had ceased to impress.

They walked to the near edge of the field and Harris stooped to part the knee-deep grain, pointing to the slender stems of alfalfa with their delicate leaves.

"We have a record stand of young hay," he said. "It's thick all through—every place I've looked." He straightened up and laughed. "And I expect I've looked at every acre. I've been right interested in those little shoots. It's deep-rooted now. The worst is past. I don't see that anything that could happen now would kill it out. Next year we'll put up a thousand tons of hay."

He dropped a hand on her shoulder and stood looking down at her.

"Billie, don't you think it's about time you were finding out what Judge Colton wants?" he asked. "He's been right insistent on your going back to confer with him."

The girl shook her head positively. Two months before Judge Colton had written that he must advise with her on matters of importance and suggested that she come on at once. Harris had urged her to go and almost daily referred to it.

"I can't go now," she said. "Not till I've seen one whole season through. When the first Three Bar crop is cut and in the stack I'll go. All other business must wait till then. You two can't drive me away till after I see that first crop in the stack."

"If you'd go now you'd likely get back before we're through cutting," he urged. "And the Judge has written twice in the last two weeks."

Before she could answer this a horseman appeared on the valley road. The furthest irrigator, merely a speck in the distance, exchanged shovel for rifle and crossed to the fence. The rider, as if expecting some such move, pulled up his horse and approached at a walk.

Harris saw the two confer. The horseman handed some object to the other and urged his horse on toward the house. He was one of the sheriff's deputies. He grinned as he tapped his empty holster.

"One of your watchdogs lifted my gun," he said. He handed Harris a note.

After reading it Harris looked at his watch and snapped it shut, glanced at the sinking sun and turned to the girl.

"I have to make a little jaunt," he explained.

"Alden wants to see me. I'll take Waddles along. As we go down I'll send Russ or Tiny up to cook for the rest."

The deputy turned his horse into the corral and five minutes later Harris and Waddles rode away. Waddles was mounted on Creamer, the big buckskin.

"We'll have to step right along," Harris said. "It's forty miles."

They held the horses to a stiff swinging trot that devoured the miles without seeming to tire their mounts. For four hours they headed south and a little east, never slackening their pace except to breathe the horses on some steep ascent. The buckskin and the paint-horse had lost the first snap of their trot and it was evident that they would soon begin to lag. Another hour and they had slowed down perceptibly.

The two men dismounted and tied the horses to the brush in a sheltered

coulee, then started across a broad flat on foot. Out in the center a spot showed darker than the rest,—the old cabin where Carpenter had elected to start up for himself after being discharged from the Three Bar.

When within a hundred yards of the cabin a horse, tied to a hitch post in front, neighed shrilly and Harris laid a restraining hand on Waddles's arm. They knelt in the brush as the door opened and a man stood silhouetted against the light. After a space of two minutes Carp's voice reached them.

"Not a sound anywheres," he said. "Likely some horses drifting past." He went inside and closed the door. The two men circled the cabin and came up from the rear. A window stood opened some eight inches from the bottom. Through the holes in the ragged flour sack that served as a curtain Harris secured a view of the inside. Carp and Slade sat facing across a little table in the center of the room.

"I want to clean up and go," Carp was saying. "This damn Harris put me on the black list."

"You've been on it for three months," Slade said. "Nothing has happened yet. But don't let me keep you from pulling out any time you like."

"But I've got a settlement to make," Carp insisted. "Let's get that fixed up."

"Settlement?" Slade asked. "Settlement with who?"

Carpenter leaned across the table and tapped it to emphasize his remarks.

"Listen. Morrow gave me a bill of sale from you calling for a hundred head of Three Bar she-stock, rebranded Triangle on the hip."

Slade nodded shortly.

"I gave Morrow that for two years' back pay when he quit. He could sell out to you if he liked."

"And now I want to sell out," Carp said. "And be gone from here."

"How many head have you got?" Slade asked.

"Three hundred head," Carp stated.

"You've increased right fast," Slade remarked. "I'd think you'd want to stay where you was doing so well. How much do you want?"

"Five dollars straight through," Carp said.

"Cheap enough," Slade answered. "If only a man was in the market." He looked straight at Carp and the man's eyes slipped away from Slade's steady gaze. "But I'm not buying. Likely Morrow will buy you out."

"Morrow ought to be here now," Carp stated. "He's coming to-night."

"Then I'd better go," Slade said. "I don't like Morrow's ways."

The thud of horse's hoofs sounded from close at hand. The two men outside lay flat in the shadow of the house. A shrill whistle, twice repeated, called Carp to his feet and he crossed to the door to answer it. Morrow dismounted and came to the door. He nodded briefly to Slade, hesitating on the sill as if surprised to find him there. Carp lost no time in stating his proposition. He spoke jerkily.

"I want to get out," he said. "I'll sell for five dollars a head."

Morrow held up a hand to silence him.

"I'll likely buy—but I never talk business in a crowd." He crossed the room and sat with his back to the window. "There's plenty of time."

"I take it I'm the crowd," Slade remarked. "So I'll step out."

Morrow stiffened suddenly in his chair as a cold ring was pressed against the back of his neck through the crack of the window. At the same instant Carp had tilted back and raised one knee. The gun that rested on his leg was peeping over the table at Slade.

"Steady!" he ordered. "Sit tight!"

The window was thrown up to its full height by Waddles and the curtain snatched away from the gun which Harris held against Morrow's neck. Carp's apparent nervousness had vanished. He flipped back his vest and revealed a

marshal's badge.

"I'd as soon take you along feet first as any way," he said. "So if you feel like acting up you can start any time now."

Slade's eyes came back from the two men at the window and rested on the badge.

"So that's it," he said with evident relief. "A real arrest—when I figured it was an old-fashioned murder you had planned. What do you want with me?"

Waddles had reached down and removed Morrow's gun.

"A number of things," Carpenter said. "Obstructing the homestead laws for one."

Slade shook his head and smiled.

"You've got the wrong party," he said. "You can't prove anything on me."

"I don't count on that," Carp said. "You've covered up right well. We know you work through Morrow but can't prove a word. We've got enough to hang him; but I expect maybe you'll get off."

There was a scrape of feet outside the door and the sheriff entered and took possession of Slade's gun as Harris and Waddles moved round from the window and went inside.

"I'm a few minutes late," Alden said. "I wasn't right sure how close I was to the house so I left my horse too far back."

"Here's your prisoners," Carp said. "Captured and delivered as agreed. I haven't anything on Slade myself but if you want him he's yours."

"What do you want with me?" Slade demanded a second time.

"I'm picking you up on complaint make by the Three Bar," Alden said. "I'll have to take you along."

Slade turned on Harris.

"What charge?" he asked.

"Killing twelve Three Bar bulls on the last day of August," Harris stated.

"I was out with the ranger," Slade said. "Back in the hills. You know that yourself. That charge won't stick."

"Then maybe it was the second of May," Harris returned. "I sort of forget."

Slade suddenly grasped the significance of this arrest.

"How many of you fellows are pussy-footing round out here?" he inquired of Carp.

"I don't mind confessing that several of the boys are riding for you," Carp informed. "But while we've cinched Morrow we haven't been able to trace it back to you. I even got put on the black list, thinking you might do business with me direct after that—knowing my word wouldn't stand against yours. But not you! You've covered your tracks."

Carp spoke softly, as if to himself, detailing his failure to gather conclusive evidence against Slade.

"I even run your rebrand on fifty or so Three Bar cows. You knew there wasn't a dollar changed hands when Morrow gave me that paper which licensed me to rustle my own she-stock. We can't even prove that you didn't owe him two years' back pay and square up by giving him that bill of sale. There's never a check of yours made out to Morrow that's gone through the bank. The boys who staged the stampede drew down a lump sum from Morrow for the job. We know who was financing the raid—can't be proved. The idea in my starting up was to run your rebrand on any number of Three Bar cows. Later Morrow would buy me out—acting for you; can't be proved. Oh, you're in the clear, all right."

Slade broke in upon the monologue. This recitation of his probable immunity from conviction on every count, far from reassuring him, served to confirm his original suspicion as to the reason for this arrest without witnesses. If the sheriff had wanted him he had but to send word for Slade to come in. He threw out one last line and the answer convinced him beyond all doubt.

"Then a lawyer will have me out in an hour," he predicted.

"A lawyer could," Alden said. "If you saw one. But we've decided not to let you have access to legal advice for the first few days."

Slade turned on Carpenter.

"This sort of thing is against the law," he said. "You're a United States marshal. How can you go in on a kidnapping deal?"

"I'm not in on it," Carp shrugged. "The sheriff asked me to arrest you at the first opportunity. I've turned you over to him. The rest is his affair. Besides, like I was mentioning, they can't prove a thing on you. As soon as they're convinced of that they'll turn you loose."

The sheriff nodded gravely.

"The very day I'm satisfied Harris can't prove his charges I'll throw open the doors. You'll be a free man that minute."

A vision of the near future swept across Slade's mind. If he should be locked up for three months and discharged for lack of evidence it would wreck him as surely as the rumors of the last few months had cut Lang's men off from the rest of the world. Squatters had filed on every available site throughout his range and now waited to see if the Three Bar would win its fight. If the news should be spread that he was locked up these nesters would rush in. On his release he would find them everywhere. With marshals scattered through the ranks of his own men, intent on upholding the homestead laws, he would be helpless to drive them out. The pictures of the different valleys suitable for ranch sites, scattered here and there over his extensive range, traveled through his mind in kaleidoscopic procession—and he visioned a squatter outfit established on every one. If they locked him up at this time he was lost.

He nodded slowly.

"Well, I guess you've got me," he said. "I don't see that it will amount to much, anyway. Sooner or later you'll let me out." He raised his arms high above his head and stretched. Under cover of this casual move he swiftly raised one foot.

Slade planted his boot on the edge of the light table and gave a tremendous shove. The far edge caught the sheriff across the legs and overthrew him. The

lantern crashed to the floor and at the same instant Morrow aimed a sidewise, sweeping kick at Carpenter's ankles. As the marshal went down his head struck the corner post of a bunk and he did not rise.

With a single sweep Morrow caught the back of his chair and swung it above his head for the spot which Waddles had occupied at the instant the light went out. The weapon splintered in his hands as it found its mark, and as the big man struck the dirt floor Morrow leaped for the dim light which indicated the open door.

A huge paw clamped on one ankle and a back-handed wrench sent him flying across the room to the far wall. With a sweep of the other hand Waddles slammed the door with a bang that jarred the cabin.

"We've got 'em trapped," the big voice exulted. "We've got 'em sewed in a sack."

Harris made one long reach and swung the butt of his gun for Slade's head as the table went down but Slade, with the same motion, vaulted the prostrate sheriff. The force of the blow threw Harris off his balance and as he tripped and reeled to his knees Slade's boot heel scored a glancing blow on his skull and floored him. He regained his feet, gripping a fragment of the chair Morrow had smashed over Waddles's head, and struck at a dim form which loomed against the vague light of the window.

The shape closed with him and he went down in a corner with Slade. Slade struck him twice in the face, writhed away and gained his feet, back-slashing at Harris's head with his spurs. Harris caught a hand-hold in the long fur of the other's chaps, wrapped both arms round Slade above the knees and dragged him back. His hand found Slade's throat and he squeezed down on it as the man raised both knees and thrust them against his stomach to break the hold. Slade's arm swept a circle on the floor in search of the gun Harris had dropped but he was jerked a foot from the floor and Harris jammed his head against the log wall, —jammed again and Slade crumpled into a limp heap. Harris held him there, unwilling to take a chance lest the other might be feigning unconsciousness. But Slade was out of the fight.

The sheriff struggled to his feet as Waddles tossed Morrow back from the door and slammed it shut. He closed with Morrow but the man eluded him. He

dared not shoot with friends and enemies struggling all about the black pit of the little room.

Morrow leaped one way, then the opposite, as the sheriff groped for him. Alden turned toward a rattle at the stove as he heard Slade's head crunch against the wall under Harris's savage thrust.

"Down him!" Waddles roared. "Tear him down! Tear him down! I'm holding the door."

From the corner by the stove an iron pot hurtled across the room for the sound of the voice and crashed against the wall a foot from his head. A second kettle struck Alden in the chest and he went down. Waddles saw the light vanish from the window, then reappear. Morrow had made a headlong dive through the little opening.

Waddles swung back the door and sprang outside as Morrow vaulted to the saddle. The big man lunged and tackled both horse and man as a grizzly would seek to batter down his prey.

The frightened horse struck at him, numbing one leg with the blow of an iron-shod forefoot, then reared and wheeled away from the thing which sprang at him, but Waddles retained his grip in the animal's mane, his other hand clamped on Morrow's ankle.

The rider leaned and struck him in the head. The crazed horse shook Waddles off but as he fell the other man fell with him, dragged from the saddle by the jerk of one mighty hand. They rolled apart and Morrow leaped to his feet but Waddles had wrenched the leg already numbed by the striking horse and it buckled under him and let him back to the ground as he put his weight on it. He reached for his gun. A form loomed above him, a heavy rock upraised in both hands. The gun barked just as a downward sweep of the arms started the rock for his head. Morrow pitched down across him and Waddles swept him aside with a single thrust.

He rose and stirred the limp shape with his toe as the sheriff reached his side.

"Dead bird!" Waddles announced and turned to limp back to the cabin.

A match flared inside as Harris lighted the lantern. Carpenter stirred and sat

up, moving one hand along the gash in his scalp. The sheriff stooped and snapped a pair of handcuffs on Slade's wrists. They splashed water on his face and he opened his eyes. He regarded the steel bracelets at his wrists as he was helped to his feet and turned to Harris.

"Don't forget that I'll kill you for this," he said. It was a simple statement, made without heat or bluster, and aside from this one remark he failed to speak a syllable until the sheriff rode away with him.

The sheriff waved the lantern outside the door and before he lowered it two deputies rode up, leading his horse.

"We started at that shot," one of them announced in explanation of their prompt arrival.

Alden motioned Slade to his horse and helped him up.

"Shoot him out of the saddle if he makes a break," he ordered briefly.

"Now you can move against those men I've sworn out complaints for," Harris said to Alden. "Public sentiment has turned against them to such an extent that they won't get any help—and there won't be any to fill their places, once we've cleaned them up. Deputize the whole Three Bar crew when you're ready to start."

The sheriff nodded and led the way with the two deputies riding close behind, one riding on either side of Slade.

XIV

The freight wagons rattled away from the Three Bar as the first light showed in the east, and the grind of wheels on gravel died out in the distance as Harris and Billie finished their breakfast.

They walked to the mouth of the lane and watched the light driving the shadows from the valleys. A score of times they had stood so, never tiring of the

view afforded from this spot, a view which spoke of Three Bar progress and future prosperity. The hands had come in from the round-up the night before, prior to the return of Harris and Waddles from their mysterious two-day trip in response to the sheriff's message, and Evans had led them to Brill's for a night of play. They were due back at the ranch in the early forenoon and Harris had allowed the freighters to depart before the others arrived.

"We'll be short of guards for the next hour or two," he said. "Till the boys get back from Brill's—but they'll be rocking in most any time now."

"What did Alden want?" she asked, referring to the trip from which he and Waddles had returned late the night before.

"We made a call on Carp," he said. "He had some good news we've been waiting for."

"Then Carp is a Three Bar plant," she said.

"He's a U. S. plant," Harris corrected. "But he's been working in with us to get something on Slade—to gather proof that he's behind these squatter raids of the last few years and the ones they've aimed at us up to date. He couldn't get a shred that would hold in court. But Slade is almost through. His claws are clipped."

The girl started to question him as to Carp's activities but after the first sentence she became aware that his attention was riveted on something other than her words. He had thrown up his head like a startled buck and was peering down the valley.

Her range-bred ears caught and correctly interpreted the sound which had roused him. A distant rumble reached her and the surface of the earth seemed to vibrate faintly beneath her feet. She knew the jar for the pounding of thousands of hoofs, the drone for the far-off bawling of frightened cows. A low black line filled the valley from side to side, rushing straight on up the gently-sloping bottoms for the Three Bar flat.

"They're on us," Harris said. "I might have known. Get back to the house—quick!"

As they ran she noticed that his eyes were not upon the surging mass of cows

in the valley but were trained on the broken slopes back of the house.

"Anyway, they don't want you," he said. "We'll do the best we can."

Waddles stood in the door of the cookhouse, his big face flushed with wrath as he gazed at the oncoming sea of cows. He reached up and took the shotgun which reposed on two pegs above the door.

He slammed the heavy door and dropped the bar as they sprang inside.

"I made that prediction about clipping Slade's claws too soon," Harris said. "What with Slade locked up and Morrow six feet underground, I was overconfident. I might have known it was planned ahead."

His face was lined with anxiety, an expression she had never before seen him wear even in the face of emergency. She had no time to question him about the assertions relative to Morrow and Slade.

The front rank of the stampede was bearing down on the lower fence. The barrier went down as so much spider web before the drive; posts were broken short, wire was snapped and dragged, and three thousand head of cows pounded on across the meadows.

The girl had a sickening realization that the work of a year would be blotted out in a space of seconds under those churning hoofs. It seemed that she must die of sheer grief as she witnessed the complete devastation of the fields she had watched day by day with such loving care. The stampede swept the full length of the meadow and held on for the house. The acute stab of her grief was dulled and replaced by a mental lethargy. The worst had happened and she viewed the rest of the scene with something akin to indifference.

The foremost cows struck the corrals and they went down with a splintering crash under the pressure from behind. She looked out on a sea of tossing horns and heaving backs as the herd rushed through, the heavy log buildings shaking from the mass of animals jammed against them and squeezing past.

The force of the run was spent on the steep slope back of the house and the herd split into detachments and moved off through the hills.

The west side of the house was windowless, a blank wall built against the

standing winds. Waddles was busily engaged in knocking out a patch of chinking and endeavoring to work a loophole between the logs. Harris was similarly engaged between two windows which overlooked the blacksmith shop, storerooms and saddle room that formed a solid line of buildings a hundred yards to the east. She reflected hazily that there was little cause for such petty activity when the worst had happened and the Three Bar had suffered an irreparable loss.

Harris pointed down the valley to the south and she turned mechanically and crossed to that window. A few riders showed on the ridges on either flank of the valley.

"They were cached up there to pick us off if we rode down to try and turn the run," he said. "If it had been light they might have opened on the wagons. But they knew the rest hadn't started the cows."

She nodded without apparent interest. What might transpire now seemed a matter to be viewed with indifference.

"It's time for me to go," Harris said. "I'll hold the bunk house. Good luck, Billie—we'll hold 'em off."

He turned to Waddles who still worked to make a loophole through the blank wall.

"If it gets too hot put her outside and tell her to give herself up. Even Lang would know that the whole country would be hunting them to-morrow if they touched her. They won't if they can help it. But this is their last hope—to trust in one final raid. They'll go through with it. Make her go outside if it comes to that."

He opened the door and leaped across the twenty yards of open space which separated the main building from the bunk house. The fact that no rifle balls searched for him as he sprang inside was sufficient testimony that the raiders who might be posted in the hills back of the house were not yet within easy range. He barred the door and looked from the south window. The riders along the valley rims had descended to the bottoms. Smoke was already rising from one homestead cabin and they were riding toward the rest. Two men had dismounted by the head gate.

Harris cursed himself for not having anticipated this very thing. The whole plan was clear to him. Slade would have known of the implements at the railroad waiting to be freighted in. He would have known, too, that when the cowhands came in from the round-up there would follow the inevitable night at Brill's. Morrow had mapped out the raid long in advance, engaging Lang to gather the cows throughout the first night the round-up crew was in from the range and hold them a few miles from the ranch. In case the freighters failed to leave before the others came back from Brill's the raid would have been staged just the same; men cached along the lip of the valley to pick off all those who should attempt to ride down and turn the run; others ready to slip down from behind and torch the buildings while the fight was going on in the flat. Lang could not know that Slade was locked up and that Morrow was dead so the raid had gone through as planned.

Smoke was rising from two more cabins in the flats and Harris reproached himself for another oversight in allowing the wagons to pull out before the others arrived. The crop would have been ruined in any event but with the hands at home they could have prevented the destruction of the cabins.

He turned to the opposite side and scanned the face of the hills for signs of life. Not a sage quivered to show the position of bodies crawling through the brush; no rattle of gravel indicated the presence of men working down through any of the sheltered coulees behind; yet he knew they were near. The silence was in sharp contrast to the rumble and roar of the stampede just past. The only sounds which shattered the quiet were the muffled thuds of Waddles's hand-axe as the cook worked on a single idea and endeavored to gouge a loophole through the cracks of the twelve-inch logs. Harris transferred his attention to the long line of log buildings a hundred yards to the east. The row afforded perfect cover for any who chose that route of approach. They could walk up to them in absolute safety, screened both from himself and those in the main house.

As he watched the doors and windows for sign of movement within a voice hailed them from the shop.

"You might as well come out," it called. "We're going to fire the plant."

Harris stretched prone on the floor and rested the muzzle of his rifle on a crack between the logs. It was hard shooting. He was forced to shift the butt end of the gun, moving with it himself to line the sights instead of swinging the free

end of the barrel. He trained it on a crack some two feet from the door of the shop. Behind the aperture the light of a window on the far side showed faintly.

"Come out!" the voice ordered. "Or we'll cook you inside. We've no time to lose. Rush it!"

The light disappeared from the crack and Harris pressed the trigger. With the roar of his gun a shape pitched down across the door of the shop. Some unseen hands caught the man by the feet and as he was dragged back from sight Harris saw the red handkerchief which had served as a mask.

From all along the row of buildings a fire was opened on the bunk house. Apparently one man was detailed to search out a certain crevice between the logs. Harris threw himself flat against the lower log which barely shielded him. One rifleman covered a crack breast-high, another the one next below, drilling it at six-inch intervals. Shreds of 'dobe chinking littered the room. The balls which found an entrance splintered through the bunks and buried themselves in the logs of the far wall. A third marksman worked on the lower crack. Puffs of 'dobe pulverized before Harris's eyes as the systematic fire crept toward him down the crack in six-inch steps.

A flash of dust a few inches before his nose half blinded him. The next shot drilled through an inch above his head, flattened sidewise on the floor, and a fragment of shell-jacket, stripped in passing through, scored his cheek and nicked his ear. The next fanned his shirt across the shoulders and the biting scraps of 'dobe stung his back.

The shooting suddenly ceased. Billie Warren, dazedly indifferent as to what should happen to the Three Bar since the wreck of the lower field, had roused to action the instant she saw the spurts of chinking fly from the cracks of the bunk house before the fusillade sent after Harris. She threw open the door and stepped out, holding up one hand.

"Don't kill him!" she commanded. "If you fire another shot at him I'll put up every dollar I own to hang every man that ever rode a foot with Lang! Do you hear that, Lang?"

"Lang's in Idaho," a voice growled surlily from the shop. "None of us ever rode with Lang. We're from every brand on the range—and we're going to burn you squatters out."

"Draw off and let us ride away," she said. "You can have the Three Bar."

"All but Harris," the voice called back. "He stays!"

She threw up the rifle she carried and touched it off at a crack near the shop door. As the splinters flew from the edge of the log a figure sprang past the door for the safety of the opposite side and she shot again, then emptied the magazine at a crevice on the side where he had taken refuge.

"Get back inside, damn you!" a voice shouted. "We're going to wreck the Three Bar—and you with it if you stand in the way. Get back out of line!"

Harris knew that the men would not be deterred in their purpose—would sacrifice her along with the rest if necessary to accomplish their end.

"Get back, Billie," he called from the bunk house. "You can't do us any good out there. Take the little cabin and sit tight. We'll beat them off."

A haze of smoke showed through the storeroom door, a bright tongue of flame leaping back of it.

She turned to the door but Waddles had barred it behind her.

"Take the little house, Pet," he urged. "Like Cal said. You'll be safe enough. We'll give 'em hell."

She walked to the little cabin that stood isolated and alone, the first building ever erected on the Three Bar and which had sheltered the Harrises before her father had taken over the brand.

The smoke had spread all along the row of buildings and hung in an oily black cloud above them, the hungry flames licking up the sides of the dry logs. The men had withdrawn after putting the torch to the row in a dozen spots.

From her point of vantage she saw two masked men rise from the brush and run swiftly down toward the main house, each carrying a can. She divined their purpose instantly.

"Watch the west side!" she called. "The west side—quick."

The sound of Waddles's hand-axe ceased and an instant later the roar of the shotgun sounded twice from within the house, followed by the cook's lament.

"Missed!" the big voice wailed. "Two minutes more and I'd have made a real hole."

The muffled crash of a rifle rolled steadily from the house as Waddles fired at the chinking in an effort to reach the two men outside. But they had accomplished their purpose and retreated, the house shielding them from Harris's field of view; and they kept on the same line, out of sight of the bunk house, till they reached a deep coulee which afforded a safe route of retreat.

The row of buildings was a seething mass of flames rolling up into the black smoke. Flames hissed and licked up the blank wall of the main House, traveling along the logs on which the two masked raiders had thrown their cans of oil. The men outside had only to wait until the occupants were roasted out. A stiff wind held from the west and once the house was in flames they would be driven down upon the bunk house and fire it in turn. She knew Waddles would come out when it grew too hot. The raiders might let him go. It was Harris they waited for.

The girl ran across and pounded on the bunkhouse door.

"Run for it," she begged. "Make a run for the brush! I'll keep between you and them. They won't shoot me. You can get to the brush. There's a chance that way."

"All right, old girl," Harris said. "In a minute now. But you go back, Billie. Get back to the little house. As soon as it gets hot I'll run for it. I've got ten minutes yet before I'm roasted out. I'll start as soon as you're inside the house."

"No. Start now!" she implored. The flames were sliding along one side of the house and even now she could feel the heat of them fanned down upon the bunk house by the wind. "Run, Cal," she entreated. "Run while you've got a chance." She leaned upon the door and beat on it with her fists.

"All right, Billie," he said. "I'll go. You stay right where you are as if you're talking to me."

She heard him cross the floor. He dropped from the window on the far side from the men. When he came in sight of them he was running in long leaps for

the brush, zigzagging in his flight. Their gaze had been riveted on the girl and he gained a flying start of thirty yards before a shot was fired. Then half a dozen rifles spurted from two hundred yards up the slope, the balls passing him with nasty snaps. He reached the edge of the sage and plunged headlong between two rocks. Bullets reached for him, ripping through the tips of the sage above him, tossing up spurts of gravel on all sides and singing in ricochets from the rocks.

One raider, in his eagerness to secure a better view, incautiously exposed his head. He went down with a hole through his mask as a shot sounded from the main house. From the window, his big face red and dripping from the heat, Waddles pumped a rifle and covered Harris's flight as best he could, drilling the center of every sage that shook or quivered back of the house.

Two men turned their attention to the one who handicapped their chances of locating the crawling man and poured their fire through the window. A soft-nose splintered the butt of the cook's rifle and tore a strip of meat from his arm as another fanned his cheek. He dropped to the floor and peered from a crack. The firing had suddenly ceased. He saw a hat moving up a coulee, a mere flash here and there above the sage as the owner of it ran. As he watched for the man to reappear, the roof of the whole string of buildings to the east caved with a hissing roar and belched sparks and debris high in the air.

The fire was filtering through the cracks and circling its hungry tongues inside. The smoke hurt his eyes and the heat seemed to crack his skin. He crossed over to see if Harris was down; that would account for the sudden cessation of shooting from the hills back of the house.

The raiders in the lower field were riding swiftly for the far side of the valley. One man knelt near the head gate, then mounted and jumped his horse off after the rest. Waddles put the whole force of his lungs behind one mighty cheer.

Fifty yards back in the brush Harris cautiously raised his head to determine the cause of this triumphant peal.

Far down along the rim of the valley, outlined against the sky, four mules were running as so many startled deer under the bite of the lash and six men swayed and clung in the wagon that lurched behind. High above the crackle of the flames sounded Tiny's yelps, keen and clear, as he urged on the flying mules. Three men unloaded from the wagon as it came opposite the cluster of men

riding far out across the flats. They opened a long-range fire at a thousand yards while the others stayed with the wagon as it rocked on toward the burning ranch.

Billie was running to the brush at the spot where Harris had disappeared. He rose to meet her.

"Cal, you're not hurt?" she asked.

"Not a scratch," he said. "Thanks to you."

In her relief she grasped his arm and gave it a fierce little squeeze.

"Then it's all right," she said.

Waddles burst from the door of the burning house, his arms piled high with salvage.

"We'll save what we can," Harris said and started for the house. As he ran the valley rocked with a concussion which nearly threw him flat and a column of fragments and trash rose a hundred feet above the spot where the head gate had been but a second past.

A dozen running horses flipped over the edge of the hill and plunged down toward the ranch. The men were back from Brill's. Tiny halted the mules on the lip of the valley and the three men came down the slope on foot.

Harris held up his hand to halt the riders as they would have kept on past the house. He knew that the raiders stationed behind the ranch had long since reached their horses and were lost in the choppy hills. He waved all hands toward the buildings and they swarmed inside, carrying out load after load of such articles as could be moved and piling them out of reach of the flames.

The girl sat apart and watched them work. Her lethargy had returned. It seemed a small matter to rescue these trinkets when the Three Bar was a total wreck. The wind fanned the flames down on the bunk house and one side was charred and smoking. The men drew back from the heat. Tiny spurts of fire flickered along the charred side. Then it burst into a sheet of flame.

Harris spoke briefly to Evans and the tall man nodded as he itemized the orders in his mind.

"Now I'll get her away from here," Harris said. "It's hell for her to just sit there and watch it burn."

He caught two of the saddled horses that had carried the men from Brill's and crossed over to where she sat.

"Let's ride down to the field," he said. "And see what's got to be done. I expect a week's work will repair that part of it all right."

She gazed at him in amazement. He spoke of repairing the damage while the Three Bar burned before his eyes. But she rose and mounted the horse. He shortened her stirrup straps and they rode off down what had once been the lane, the fence flattened by the rushing horde of cattle that had swept through.

The homestead cabins smoked but still stood intact.

"Look!" he urged cheerfully. "Those logs were too green to burn. We won't even have to rebuild. They'll look a little charred round the edges maybe, but otherwise as good as new."

Behind her sounded a gurgling roar as the roof of the main house fell but Harris did not even look back.

"We can restring that fence in a right short while," he asserted. "We've lost one crop of oat-hay—which we didn't much need, anyhow. That young alfalfa is too deep rooted to be much hurt. Next spring it'll come out thick, a heavy stand of hay; and we'll cut a thousand tons."

They rode across fields trampled flat by thousands of churning hoofs and reached the spot where the head gate had been, a yawning hole at which the water sucked and tore. A section of the bank caved and was washed away. And through it all he planned the work of reconstruction and the transformation which would be effected inside a year,—while behind them the home ranch was ablaze.

"We're not bad hurt," he said. "They can't hurt our land. I'd rather have this flat right now—the way it stands—than three thousand head of cows on the range and no land at all. We can rebuild the place this winter while work is slack. Build better than before. Those buildings were pretty old, at best. There'll be enough hungry cowhands riding grub-line at the Three Bar to rebuild it in two

months. Every man that feeds on us this winter will have to work."

His enthusiasm failed to touch her. For her the Three Bar was wrecked, the old home gone, and her gaze kept straying back to the eddying black smoke-cloud at the foot of the hills.

XV

They rode from the devastated fields and angled southwest across the range. Harris pointed out the calves along their course.

"Look at those chunky little youngsters," he said. "Nearly every one is good red stock. Only a scattering few that threw back to off-color shades. This grading-up process doesn't take long to show."

When some ten miles from the Three Bar he dismounted on a ridge and she joined him, listening with entire indifference to his optimistic plans.

"We're only scratched," he said. "It won't matter in the end."

"This is the end," she dissented. "The Three Bar is done."

"It's just the start," he returned. "It's the end for them! Don't you see? They staked everything on one big raid that would smash the Three Bar and discourage the rest from duplicating our move. That would give Slade a new lease of life—delay the inevitable for a few more years. They made one final attempt and lost."

"Did they lose?" she inquired. "I thought they'd won."

"They're through!" he asserted positively. "Slade is locked up. Inside of a week the sheriff would have cleaned out the Breaks. It was my fault this happened. With Slade locked up and Morrow dead it didn't occur to me that anything was planned ahead. If the albino had lived he'd never have run his neck into a noose by a raid like this. But Lang was born without brains. Slade could hire him for anything."

"Can you prove this on Slade?" she demanded. It was the first sign of interest she had shown. Deep under her numbed indifference a thought persisted,—a hope that Slade, the man who had brought about the raid, should be made to pay. Harris shook his head.

"As usual, Slade's in the clear," he said. "There's been a rumor afloat which would be considered sufficient cause for Lang's men to raid the Three Bar without other incentive."

He resumed his glowing plans for reconstruction.

"That's their last shot," he said. "We're only delayed—that's all. We lost a few fences. Posts are free for the cutting and most of the wire can be restrung. New wire is cheap. The corral poles are scattered right on the spot; only the posts broken off. We can set more posts and throw up the new corrals in two days. The homestead cabins are only charred. The old buildings at the ranch are gone. I'll put a crew in the hills getting out new logs and there'll be enough out-of-job peelers riding grub-line to rebuild the whole place. We can put up a few tents for the hands till the new bunk house is built. We've got our land. The hay is tramped flat right now but the roots aren't hurt. Next spring will show the whole flat coming up with a heavy stand of hay."

"You're a good partner, Cal," she said. "You've done your best. But the whole thing would only happen over again. Slade's too strong for us."

"Slade's through!" he asserted again. "He's locked up and when he gets out his hands will be tied. Inside of a month the law will be in the saddle for the first time in years. Public sentiment is running that way. All it ever needed was a start. Once Alden gets a grip on things, with folks behind him, he'll never lose it again. From now on you'll see every wild one cut short in his career. Folks will be busy pointing them out instead of helping them cover it up."

He painted the future of the Three Bar as the foremost outfit within a hundred miles, but her mind was busy with a future so entirely different from the one he portrayed that she scarcely grasped his words. She felt a vague sense of relief that there was no decision for her to make. It had been made for her and against her will, but it was done. Always she had heard her parents speak of the day when they should go back home; and she had always felt that the day would come when she too would live in the place from which they had come,—with

frequent trips back to the range. The love for the ranch had delayed her departure from year to year. But now the old familiar buildings were gone and there were no ties to hold her here, or even to call her back once she was gone.

Harris rose and pointed, rousing her from her abstraction. Down in the valley below them filed a long line of dusty horsemen. Behind them came two men wrangling a pack string carrying equipment for a long campaign.

"There is the law!" he said. "That's what I brought you here to see. It's what we've been waiting for. That is the first outfit of its sort ever to ride these hills. There have been gangs organized by one brand or another that rode out and imposed justice of their own, according to their own ideas—and the next day perpetrated some injustice against men whose ideas were opposed to theirs. But that little procession stands for organized law!"

She turned and looked behind her as her ear caught the thud of hoofs and jangle of equipment. The Three Bar men were just topping the ridge.

They had caught up a number of the horses released from the pasture lot by the stampede. Calico and her own little horse, Papoose, were among them. Waddles and Moore brought up the rear with a pack train loaded with the bed rolls saved from the bunk-house fire.

Harris knew that action, not inaction was the best outlet for her energies, temporarily smothered by the shock of the raid. It was not in her nature to sit with folded hands among the ruins of the ranch and patiently wait for news.

"I thought maybe you'd like to go," he said. "The jaunt will do you good."

She showed the first sign of interest she had evidenced.

"And we're going to the Breaks," she stated.

"That's where," he said. "We'll order them to give up and stand trial. They won't. Then we'll clean them out. Hunt them down like rats! We've only been waiting for folks to wake up to the fact that they were sick of having the country run by men like Slade and harassed by the wild bunch—and till after we'd picked up Slade. The way it's transpired we'd maybe have done better to ride over a week ago."

The little band in the valley was drawing near. She recognized Carp, Bentley and another Slade man riding with the sheriff at their head.

"What's Bentley doing there?" she asked.

"One of Carp's men," Harris said. "If any of them get away from us Carp will hound them down. He wears the U. S. badge and won't be stopped by any feeling about crossing the Utah or Idaho lines. Rustling is of no interest to him. That's the sheriff's job. But Carp will round them up for obstructing the homestead laws."

The Three Bar men came up and halted. Harris and the girl changed mounts and led their men down to join the file of riders below. As she rode she speculated as to Carlos Deane's sensations if he could but know that she rode at the head of thirty men to raid the stronghold Harris had once pointed out to him from the rims.

For hours they rode at a shuffling trot that covered the miles. It was well after sundown when they halted in a sheltered valley. Waddles cooked a meal over an open fire. Bed rolls were spread and the men were instantly asleep. Three hours before sunup the cook was once more busy round a fire. The men slept on, undisturbed by the sounds, but when he issued the summons to rise they rolled out. In a space of five minutes every man was eating his meal; for they were possessed of that characteristic which marks only the men who live strenuously and much in the open,—the ability to fall instantly asleep after a hard day and to wake as abruptly, every faculty alert with the opening of their eyes.

The meal was bolted. The men detailed to guard the horses hazed them into a rope corral. Saddles were hastily cinched on and the men rode off through the gloom, leaving Waddles and three others to pack and follow later in the day. Each man lashed a generous lunch on his saddle before riding off.

They held a stiff trot and in an hour out from camp they struck rough going, the choppy nature of the country announcing that they were in the edge of the Breaks. The horses slid down into cut-bank washes and bad-land cracks, following the bottoms to some feasible point of ascent in the opposite wall. Daylight found them twenty miles from camp and the horses were breathing hard. They turned into a coulee threaded by a well-worn trail. Three miles along this Bentley turned to the right up a branching gulch with eight men. Another

mile and Carp led a similar detachment off to the left. Billie rode with the sheriff and Harris at the head of the rest, holding to the beaten trail.

"They had hours the start of us," Harris said. "They'd catch up fresh horses on the range and keep on till they got in sometime in the night."

He motioned to Billie.

"You fall back," he said. The men had drawn their rifles from the scabbards. "They never did post a guard. It wouldn't occur to Lang that such a force could be mustered and start out short of a month. If he thought so they'd be out of here and scattered instead of having a lookout along the trail. But there's just a chance. So for a little piece you'd better bring up the rear."

She started to dissent but the sheriff seconded Harris's advice.

"You move along back, Billie," he said. He patted her shoulder and smiled. "I'm a-running this layout and if you don't mind the old sheriff he'll have to picket you."

She nodded and pulled Papoose out of the trail till the others filed by, riding with Horne in rear of the rest.

The party halted while Harris dismounted to examine the trail. It was hard-packed but the scant signs showed that shod horses had come in since any had gone out.

"At least, there's some of them back," he said. "Likely all."

"Lang is busy gloating over the fact that the Three Bar is sacked," Alden said. "Figuring that the whole country will be afraid of him now and that his friends will stand by—without a thought that his neck will maybe get stretched a foot long before night."

Harris turned up a side pocket and the men waited while he and the sheriff climbed a ridge on foot to investigate. Harris motioned to the girl.

"Come along up where you can see," he said and she followed them up the ridge. Two hundred yards from the horses they came out on a crest which afforded a view of the basin that sheltered Lang's stockade.

From behind a sage-clump Harris trained his glasses on the group a mile out across the shallow basin. Smoke rose from the chimney of the main building. Two men stood before a teepee near the stockade. There were two other tents inside the structure, with a number of men moving about them. Three sat on the ground with their backs against the log walls of the main house. Thirty or more horses fed in a pasture lot and a little band of eight or ten stood huddled together inside the stockade at the far end from the tents.

He handed his glasses to the girl.

"We'll be starting," he said. "By the time we get fixed the rest will be closing in. You stay here and watch the whole thing."

"I'm going along," she said.

The sheriff demurred.

"It will be dirty business down there—once we start," he said. "Business for men; and you're a better man than most of us, girl; but you surely didn't reckon that Cal and me would let you go careening down in gunshot of that hornet's nest."

"I'm as good a shot as there is in the hills," she said. "And it was my ranch they burned."

The sheriff shoved back his hat and pushed his fingers through his mop of gray hair.

"Fact," he confessed. "Every word. But there's swarms of men in this country—and such a damn scattering few of girls that we just can't take the risk. That's how it is. If you don't promise to stay out of it we'll have to detail a couple of the boys to ride guard on you till it's over with."

She knew that the other men would back Harris and Alden in their verdict. She nodded and watched them turn back toward the horses. She wanted to lead her men down in a wild charge on the stockade, shooting into it as she rode, avenging the sack of the Three Bar in a smashing fight.

But there was nothing spectacular in the attack of Harris and the sheriff. They went about it as if hunting vermin, cautiously and systematically, taking every possible advantage of the enemy with the least possible risk to their men.

An hour after the two men had left her she saw a figure off to the right. She trained the glasses on it and saw that it was Alden moving toward the buildings. She swept the glasses round the edge of the circular basin. From all sides, from the mouth of every coulee that opened into it, dark specks were converging upon the stockade. Some of them stood erect, others crouched, while a few sprawled flat and crawled for short distances before rising and moving on.

From her point of vantage it seemed that those round the buildings must see them as clearly as she did herself; but she knew they were keeping well out of sight, taking advantage of every concealing wave of ground and all inequalities of surface. The advance was slower as they closed in on the stockade. There was a sudden commotion among the men at the buildings. They were moving swiftly under cover. Some of the attacking force had been seen. The majority of the rustlers took to the stockade. Four ran into the main cabin.

It was as if she gazed upon the activities of battling ants, the whole game spread out in the field of her glasses. There came a lull in the action and she knew that the sheriff had raised his voice to summon them to come out without their guns and go back as prisoners to stand trial for every crime under the sun.

Not a shot had been fired. One after another she picked up the men with her glasses. Occasionally one moved, hitching himself forward to some point which afforded a better view. One or two knelt in the bottom of shallow draws, peering from behind some sheltering bush. Inside the stockade she could see Lang's men kneeling or flattened on the ground as they gazed through cracks in the walls.

She made out Harris, crouching in a draw. A thin haze of smoke spurted from his position. Three similar puffs showed along the face of the stockade. Then the sounds of the shots drifted to her,—faint, snappy reports. Harris had dropped flat and shifted his position the instant he fired. A dozen shots answered the smoke-

puffs along the stockade.

Throughout the next half-hour there was not a shot fired in the flat; no general bombardment, no wild shooting, but guerilla warfare where every man held his fire for a definite human target. A man shifted his position in the stockade, raised to peer from a hole breast high, and she saw him pitch down on the ground before the sound of the shot reached her. One of her men had noted the darkening of the crack and had searched him out with a rifle shot. Three shots answered it from the main cabin.

The thud of hoofs on the trail below drew her eyes that way. Waddles was riding out into the basin. He had brought the pack string up to some point near at hand and deserted it to the care of the others while he rode on ahead to join in the fight. He was almost within gunshot of the place before he dismounted and allowed the horse to graze. She watched his progress as he covered the last half-mile on foot. He had discarded his heavy chaps, his blue and white shirt and overalls giving him the appearance of some great striped beetle as he crawled up a shallow ravine. The figures were small from distance, even when viewed through the glasses, thus lending her a feeling of detachment and lessening the personal element and the grim reality of the scene. Rather it was as if she gazed into some instrument which portrayed the moves of mannikins; yet the scene wholly absorbed her interest.

Waddles cautiously raised his head for a view of the stockade and she could see his convulsive duck as a rifle ball tossed up a spurt of gravel round it. The man who had fired the shot went down as the sheriff drilled the spot where a faint haze of smoke had shown.

She presently noted one of her men sitting under a sheltering bank and eating his lunch. She looked at her watch; it was after three,—the day more than half gone and less than a hundred shots had been fired. Five men were down in the stockade.

The sun was sinking and the higher points along the west edge of the basin were sending long shadows out across the flats before there was further action except for an occasional shifting of positions. Those remaining alive in the stockade were saddling the bunch of horses kept inside. These were led close under the fence on her side where she could no longer see them.

The shadows lengthened rapidly and her view through the glasses was beginning to blur when the gates of the stockade swung back and five horses dashed out, running at top speed under the urge of the spurs. A rider leaned low upon the neck of each horse and they scattered wide as they fanned out across the basin, a wild stampede for safety, every man for himself.

She saw one man lurch sidewise and slip to the ground; another straightened in the saddle, swung for two jumps, and slid off backwards across the rump of his mount. She saw the great striped bug which was Waddles rise to his knees in the path of a third. The rider veered his mount and swung from the saddle, clinging along the far side of the running horse. Then man and horse went down together and neither rose. Waddles had shot straight through the horse and reached the mark on the other side. The shooting ceased when six shots had been fired. Four riderless horses were careening round the basin. Five hits out of six, she reflected; perhaps six straight hits.

The stockade was empty, leaving only the four in the house to be accounted for. The dark specks in the brush were working closer to the house, effectually blocking escape. Then she could no longer make them out. The building showed only as a darker blot in the obscurity. A tiny point of light attracted her eye. It grew and spread. She knew that one of her men had crawled up under cover of night and fired the house. It was now but a question of minutes, but the sight oppressed her. She thought of the burning buildings on the Three Bar and rose to make her way back to the pocket where the horses had been left in the care of a deputy.

"It will be over in an hour," she told the horse guard.

All through the day she had scarcely moved and she was tired. The hours of inactivity had proved more wearing than a day in the saddle. Harris and the sheriff came in with their detail.

There were no prisoners.

"So they wouldn't give up even when they was burnt out," the horse guard commented. "I thought maybe a few would march out and surrender."

"I'd sort of hoped we'd have one or two left over so we could put on a trial," the sheriff said. "There was three come out. But the light was poor and all. Maybe they did aim to surrender. It's hard to say. But if they did—why, some of

the Three Bar boys read the signs wrong. Anyway, there won't be any trial."

They rode to the sheltered box canyon where Waddles had left the pack train. A little later Bentley's men rode up and five minutes behind them came Carp with the rest. The bed rolls were spread among the stunted cedars on the floor of the canyon and all hands turned in. At daylight the long return journey to the Three Bar was commenced. The horses were tired and the back trip was slow. They camped for the night twenty miles out from the ranch and before noon of the next day the sheriff and the marshals had split off with their men, leaving the Three Bar crew to ride the short intervening space to the ranch alone.

As she neared the edge of the Crazy Loop valley the girl dreaded the first glimpse of the pillaged ranch. For the first time it occurred to her to wonder at the speed with which Harris had planned and executed the return raid while the Three Bar still burned.

"How did you get word to them all?" she asked. "Did you have it all planned before?"

"It was Carp," he said. "One of Lang's men rode down to inquire for Morrow and told Carp the cows were gathered for the run and held near the Three Bar. They figured Carp was a pal of Morrow's and all right. It was near morning then. Carp sent Bentley fanning for Coldriver to see if the sheriff was back and to bring out the posse if he hadn't turned up. He started out for the Three Bar himself. The run was under way when he came in sight so he cut over and headed the mule teams at the forks and turned them back, then kept on after the boys at Brill's. Sent word to me by Evans to meet them where we did."

She did not hear the latter part of his explanation for they had reached the edge of the valley and she looked down upon the ruins of her ranch.

"Now I'm ready to go," she said. "I'll go and see what Judge Colton wants."

"He wanted you to get away before anything like this occurred," Harris said. "I knew that maybe we'd have tough going for a while at some critical time and wanted you to miss all of that—to come back and find the Three Bar booming along without having been through all the grief. So I wrote him to urge you to come."

"Well, I'm going now," she said. "I don't need to be urged."

Three of the homesteaders had been detailed to stay at the ranch. They were putting up a temporary fence across the lower end to hold range stock back from the trampled crops until a permanent one could be built and linked up with the side fences which still stood intact. She showed no interest in this. The sight below turned her weak and sick. She wanted but to get away from it all.

Harris pointed as they rode down the slope. The little cabin that old Bill Harris had first erected on the Three Bar, and which had later sheltered the Warrens when they came into possession of the brand, stood solid and unharmed among the blackened ruins which hemmed it in on all sides.

"Look, girl!" he exclaimed triumphantly.

"Look at that little house. The Three Bar was started with that! We have as much as our folks started with—and more. They even had to build that. We'll start where our folks did and grow."

XVI

Harris sat on a baggage truck and regarded the heap of luggage somberly. Way off in the distance a dark blot of smoke marked the location of the onrushing train which would take the Three Bar girl away.

"Some day you'll be wanting to come back, old partner," he predicted hopefully.

Billie shook her head. There is a certain relief which floods the heart when the worst has passed. Looking forward and anticipating the possible ruin of the Three Bar, she had thought such a contingency would end her interest in life and she had resolutely refused to look beyond it into the future. Now that it was wrecked in reality she found that she looked forward with a faint interest to what the future held in store for her,—that it was the past in which her interest was dead.

"Not dead, girl; only dormant," Harris said, when she remarked upon this

fact. "Like a seed in frozen ground. In the spring it will come to life and sprout. The Three Bar isn't hurt. We're in better shape than ever before and a clear field out in front; for the country is cleaned up and the law is clamped on top."

She honestly tried to rouse a spark of interest deep within her, some ray of enthusiasm for the future of the Three Bar. But there was no response. She assured herself again that the old brand which had meant so much to her meant less than nothing now. That part of her was dead.

The trail of smoke was drawing near and there was a rhythmic clicking along the rails. Harris leaned and kissed her.

"Just once for luck," he said, and slipped from his seat on the truck as the train roared in. It halted with a screech of brakes and he handed her up the steps.

"Good-by, little fellow," he said. "I'll see you next round-up time."

As the train slid away from the station she looked from her window and saw him riding up the single street on the big paint-horse. The train cleared the edge of the little town and passed the cattle chute. A long white line through the sage marked the course of the Coldriver Trail. Three wagons, each drawn by four big mules, moved toward the cluster of buildings which comprised the town, the freighters on their way to haul out materials for the rebuilding of the ranch.

The work was going on but she no longer had a share in it. She was looking ahead and planning a future in which the Three Bar played no part.

Deane was with Judge Colton, her father's old friend, to meet her at the station. The news of the Three Bar fight had preceded her and the press had given it to the world, including her part of it. As they rode toward the Colton home she told the Judge she had come to stay and Deane was content. After the strenuous days she had just passed through she needed a long period of rest, he reflected; but the older man smiled when he suggested this.

"What she needs now is action," he said. "And no rest at all. If it was me I'd try to wear her down instead of resting her up—keep her busy from first to last. Cal Warren's girl isn't the sit-around type."

Deane acted on this and no day passed without his having planned a part of it to help fill her time. Her interest in the new life was genuine and she was

conscious of no active regret at parting from the old. It was so different as to seem part of another world. The people she met, their mode of life, their manner of speech; all were foreign to the customs of the range. And this very dissimilarity kept her interest alive until she grew to feel that she belonged.

All through the fall and early winter she had scarcely an idle hour. Her days here were almost as fully occupied as they had been before. And in the late winter, after having visited other school friends who lived farther east, she found herself anticipating the return to the Colton home as eagerly as always in the past she had looked forward to seeing the Three Bar after a long period away from it.

The grip of winter was receding and a few of the hardier trees were putting out buds when she returned. Every evening Deane was with her and together they planned the next, as once she and Harris had planned before her fireplace in the old ranch house. For the first time in her life she was glad to be sheltered and pampered as were other girls. Gliding servants anticipated her wishes and carried them out. But with it all there was a growing restlessness within her,—a vague dissatisfaction for which she could not account. She groped for an answer but the analysis could not be expressed or definitely cleared in her mind.

She sat in the Colton library waiting for Deane to come and take her to a lakeside clubhouse for the evening. Tiny leaves showed on the trees and the lawn was a smooth velvet green.

Slade's words of the long ago recurred to her.

"A soft front lawn to range in," she quoted aloud. The reason for her restlessness came with the words.

Deane planned with her of evenings but the planning was all of play. No word of work crept into it. If only he would accept her as wholly into that part of his life as he did into the rest. She suddenly felt that he was excluding her from something it was her right to share. Their planning together was not constructive but something which led nowhere, a restless, hectic rush for amusements which she enjoyed but which could not make up the whole of her life. Always she had said that men went to extremes and made of their wives either drudges or little tinsel queens. They never followed the middle course and made them full partners through thick and thin.

And suddenly she longed to sit for just one evening before the fire and plan

real work with Cal Harris. He had been the one man she had known who had asked that she work with him, instead of insisting that she work for him,—or that he should work for her. She had drifted along, expecting that that same state of affairs would go on indefinitely, believing that he filled the void left by old Cal Warren. But now she knew he held that place he had created for himself. They had worked together and she had deserted the sinking ship to play the part of the tinsel queen.

The men would be just in from the horse round-up and breaking out the remuda, preparatory to starting after the calves. She pictured Waddles bawling the summons to feed from the cook-house door. She was conscious of a flare—half of resentment, half of apprehension—toward Harris for not having sent a word of affairs at the ranch.

"There's millions of miles of sage just outside," she quoted. "And millions of cows—and girls." Perhaps he had gone in search of them. Perhaps, after all, he had found that the road to the outside was not really closed as he had once told her it was.

Judge Colton entered the room and interrupted her reverie by handing her a paper. In the first black headline she saw Slade's name and Harris's; an announcement of the last chapter of the Three Bar war.

The first line of the article stated that Slade, the cattle king, had been released. There was insufficient proof to convict on any count. She felt a curious little shiver of fear for Harris with Slade once more at large. The article retold the old tale of the fight and portrayed Slade, on his release, viewing the range which he had once controlled and finding a squatter family on every available ranch site.

She had a flash of sympathy for Slade as she thought his sensations must have been similar to her own when she had looked upon the ruins of the Three Bar. But this was blotted out by the knowledge that he had only met the same treatment he had handed to so many others; that he had dropped into the trap he had built for her. She found no real sympathy for Slade,—only fear for Harris since Slade was freed. The old sense of responsibility for her brand had been worn too long to be shed at will. She knew that now.

"I suppose you'll be surprised to hear that I'm going back," she said.

Her father's old friend smiled across at her and puffed his pipe.

"Surprised!" he said. "Why, I've known all along you'd be going back before long. I could have told you that when you stepped off the train."

He left her alone with Deane when the younger man arrived. She plunged into her subject at once.

"I'm sorry," she said. "But I'm going home. I'm not cut out for this—not for long at one time. In ten days they'll be rounding up the calves and I'll have to be there. I want to smell the round-up fire and slip my twine on a Three Bar calf; to throw my leg across a horse and ride, and feel the wind tearing past. I'm longing to watch the boys topping off bad ones in the big corral and jerking Three Bar steers. It will always be like that with me. So this is good-by."

Four days later, in the early evening, the stage pulled into Coldriver with a single passenger. The boys were in from a hundred miles around for one last spree before round-up time. As the stage rolled down the single street the festivities were in full swing. From one lighted doorway came the blare of a mechanical piano accompanied by the scrape of feet; the sound of drunken voices raised in song issued from the next; the shrill laughter of a dance-hall girl, the purr of the ivory ball and the soft clatter of chips, the ponies drowsing at the hitch rails the full length of the street, the pealing yelp of some over-enthusiastic citizen whose night it was to howl; all these were evidences of the wide difference between her present surroundings and those of the last eight months. She gazed eagerly out of the stage window. It was good to get back.

Both the driver and the shotgun guard who rode beside him were new men on the job since she had left and neither of them knew the identity of their passenger. As the stage neared the rambling log hotel where she would put up for the night a compact group of riders swung down the street. Her heart seemed to stop as she recognized the big paint-horse at their head. She had not fully realized how much she longed to see Cal Harris. As they swept past she recognized man after man in the light that streamed from the doorways and dimly illuminated the wide street.

Instead of dismounting in a group they suddenly split up, as if at a given signal, scattering the length of the block and dismounting singly. There was something purposeful in this act and a vague apprehension superseded the rush

of gladness she had experienced with the first unexpected view of the Three Bar crew. Men who stood on the board sidewalks turned hastily inside the open doors as they glimpsed the riders, spreading the news that the Three Bar had come to town. The driver pulled up in front of the one hotel.

"It'll come off right now," he said. "Slade's in town."

"Sure," the guard replied. "Why else would Harris ride in at night like this unless in answer to Slade's threat to shoot him down on sight? Get the girl inside."

The reason for the scattering was now clear to her. Slade, on his release, had announced that he would kill Harris on sight whenever he appeared in town. Slade had many friends. The Three Bar men were scattered the length of the street to enforce fair play.

The guard opened the door and motioned her out but she shook her head.

"I'm going to stay here," she asserted.

Her answer informed him of the fact that she was no casual visitor but one who knew the signs and would insist on seeing it through. He nodded and shut the door.

Harris had dismounted at the far end of the block and was strolling slowly down the board sidewalk on the opposite side. Groups of men packed the doorways, each one striving to appear unconcerned, as if his presence there was an accident instead of being occasioned by knowledge that something of interest would soon transpire. A man she knew for a Slade rider moved out to the edge of the sidewalk across the street from Harris. She saw the lumbering form of Waddles edging up beside him. Other Three Bar boys were watching every man who showed a disposition to detach himself from the groups in the doors. The blare of the piano and all sounds of revelry had hushed.

The girl felt the clutch of stark fear at her heart. She had come too late. Harris was to meet Slade. It seemed that she must die with him if he should pass out before she could speak to him again and tell him she was back. She had a wild desire to run to him,—at least to lean from the window and call out to him to mount Calico and ride away. But she knew he would not. She was frontier bred. Even the knowledge that she was in town might unsteady him now. She sat

without a move and the driver and guard outside supposed her merely a curious on-looker interested in the scene.

"A hundred on Harris," the driver offered.

The guard grunted a refusal.

"I'd bet that way myself," he said.

From this she knew that the two men were hoping Harris would be the one to survive; but the fact that their proffered bets backed their sentiments was no proof that they felt the conviction of their desire. She knew the men of their breed. No matter how small the chance, their money would inevitably be laid on the side of their wishes, never against them, as if the wagering of a long shot was proof of their confidence and might in some way exercise a favorable influence on the outcome. No man had ever stood against Slade. She noted Harris's gun. He carried it with the same awkward sling as of old, on the left side in front with the butt to the right.

"Fifty on Slade," a voice offered from the doorway of the hotel. The guard started for the spot but the bet was snapped up by another. Wild fighting rage swept through her at the thought that to all these men it was but a sporting event.

Her eyes never once left Harris as he came down the street. When almost abreast of the stage Slade stepped from a doorway twenty feet in before him and stopped in his tracks. Harris turned on one heel and stood with his left side quartering toward Slade,—the old pose she remembered so well. There was a tense quiet the length of the street.

"Those you hire do poor work from behind," Harris said. "Maybe you sometimes take a chance yourself and work from in front." His thumb was hooked in the opening of his shirt just above the butt of his gun.

Slade held a cigarette in his right hand and raised it slowly to his lips. He removed it and flicked the ash from the end, then inspected the results and snapped it again,—and the downward move of his wrist was carried through in a smooth sweep for his gun. It flashed into his hand but his knees sagged under him as a forty-five slug struck him an inch above the buckle of his belt. Even as he toppled forward he fired, and Harris's gun barked again. Then the Three Bar men were vaulting to their saddles. Evans careened down the street, leading the

paint-horse, and within thirty seconds after Slade's first move for his gun a dozen riders were turning the corner on the run. Before the spectators had time to realize that it was over, the Three Bar men were gone. Slade had many friends in town.

The girl had seen Harris's draw, merely a single pull from left to right and by his quartering pose the gun had been trained on Slade at the instant it cleared the holster; not one superfluous move, even to the straightening of his wrist. The driver's voice reached her.

"Fastest draw in the world for the few that can use it," he said.

The guard opened the door. The girl was sitting with her head bowed in her hands.

"Don't take it that way, Ma'am," he counseled. "He was a hard one—Slade."

But he had misread his signs. She felt no regret for Slade, only a wave of thankfulness, so powerful as almost to unnerve her, over Harris's escape, untouched. She accused herself of callousness but the spring of her sympathy, usually so ready, seemed dry as dust when she would have wasted a few drops on Slade.

The next day, in the late afternoon, Harris looked up and saw a chap-clad rider on the edge of the valley. She had ridden over unannounced on a horse she had borrowed from Brill. She answered the wave of his hat and urged the horse down the slope. He met her at the mouth of the lane and together they walked back to the new buildings of the ranch. The men breaking horses in the new corrals were the same old hands. The same old Waddles presided over the new cook shack. Her old things, rescued from the fire, were arranged in the living room of the new house. A row of new storerooms and the shop stood on the site of the old. And in the midst of all the improvements the old cabin first erected on the Three Bar stood protected by a picket fence on which a few vines were already beginning to climb.

"It didn't take long to throw them up, with all hands working, along in the winter when there wasn't much else to do," he said.

After the men had quit work to greet the returning Three Bar boss she went over every detail of the new house. The big living room and fireplace were

modeled closely along the lines of her old quarters; heads and furs were on the walls, pelts and Indian rugs on the floors. Running water had been piped down from a sidehill spring. The new house was modernized. Then Harris saddled Calico and Papoose and they rode down to the fields.

As they turned into the lane they heard the twang of Waddles's guitar from the cook shack, the booming voice raised in song in mid-afternoon, a thing heretofore unheard of in the annals of Three Bar life.

"There'll be one real feast to-night," Harris prophesied. "Waddles will spread himself."

They rode past the meadow, covered with a knee-deep stand of alfalfa hay.

"It was only tramped down," he said. "She came up in fine shape this spring. We'll put up a thousand tons of hay."

He held straight on past the meadow, turned off below the lower fence and angled southwest across the range. The calves and yearlings along their route gave proof that the grading-up of the Three Bar herds was already having its effect. Ninety per cent. were straight red stock with only a few throwbacks to off-color strains. The two spoke but little and near sunset they rode out and dismounted on the ridge from which, almost a year before, they had viewed the first move of organized law in the Coldriver strip.

A white-topped wagon came toward them up the valley along the same route followed by the file of dusty riders on that other day. A woman held the reins over the team and a curly-haired youngster jostled about on the seat by her side. A man wrangled a nondescript drove of horses and cows in the rear.

"That's the way we both came into this country first, you and I," Harris said. "Just like that little shaver on the seat."

"Will they find a place to settle?" she asked, with a sudden hope that the newcomers would find a suitable site for a home.

"Maybe not close around here," he said. "Most of the good sites you can get water on are picked up. But they'll find a place either here or somewhere else a little further on."

He slipped an arm about her shoulders.

"It's been right lonesome planning without a little partner to talk it all over with at night," he said. "Have you come back for keeps to help me make the Three Bar the best outfit in three States? I can't hold down that job alone."

She nodded and leaned against him.

"That's what they wanted—old Bill and Cal," she said. "But it's nice that we want it too. I've come for keeps; and the road to the outside is closed."

They stood and watched the sun pitch over the far edge of the world; and down in the valley below them the hopeful squatters were looking for a place to camp.

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