THE COW JERRY

GEORGE W. OGDEN

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BY

GEORGE W. OGDEN

AUTHOR OF
THE DUKE OF CHIMNEY BUTTE,
THE LAND OF LAST CHANCE,
THE TRAIL RIDER, ETC.

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CHAPTER I

THE TIME AND THE PLACE

McPACKEN was not much of a name for a town, but it was the name of that town. Doubtless it was good enough for what it designated, for there is no question that there was a certain dry-salt substantiality in the sound, suggestive of corned beef and cabbage, with such concomitant comforts as railroaders especially favor, and road-weary men of the range swing down from dusty saddles to enjoy.

The town lay close by the sprawling Arkansas River, colloquially called the Arkansaw, at a point where the Santa Fe trail of earlier days crossed that stream of deceptive shallows and wide-spreading bars of silt-white sand. Now another Santa Fe trail ran past its door, a trail wood-girded and steel-bound, whose roaring caravans made echoes among its planked buildings, trailing scents of alluring opulence out of their precious freight, rushing eastward from the orange groves of distant California.

Other scents, true, streamed from less romantic trains which jolted and thumped through the town with

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shrieking flange on curve, grinding brake-shoe against laboring wheel; scents of an industry to which men one knew and met on the street laid their hands, home-binding, intimate smells such as only cattle trains leave after them to speak of another sort of opulence, truly occidental. For McPacken was a town that had been established on cattle, and grown on cattle, and filled its stores and banks and homes and barber shops on cattle, from the very time that it welcomed the first dusty herd from Texas to its pens.

McPacken had lived and done well on the distinction of being the last loading-point to which Texas cattle were driven into Kansas for shipment to eastern markets. It had not been permitted to boast long of this peculiar favor of changing conditions. The day of the Texas cattlemen who brought their beef to the northern shipping-points on foot across a thousand miles of dusty trails, foraging them on the country as they passed, had come to an end shortly after the founding of McPacken on the Arkansas. The railroads had gone to Texas after the cattlemen's business, and the business of others along the way. Contrary to the expectations of everybody, the town did not die with the passing of the last driven herd.

Texas cattle had been brought to Kansas to fatten on its peculiarly succulent grass for many years before McPacken, and the railroad upon which it lay, graced that illimitable land. McPacken was a dot in the very center of the richest grazing country; chance had put it down at a place where each succeeding change seemed

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only to work its profit and contribute to its strength. Where herds formerly came to be loaded into trains, they arrived now on board of trains, to be dispersed among a hardy set of business adventurers known as feeders. These cattle were pastured along the broad river valley and brought to perfection for the butcher's block. On their day they were driven again to McPacken, loaded and shipped, their going and coming, their stay between, all leaving an accretion of profit in the town.

That was the reason for McPacken, and that was the way it grew. All that was not so very long ago as time runs under the bridges along the Arkansas. There are men still stumping around who rode after those long-horned herds of strangers from the Nueces as young chaps, able yet to take care of a man's ration of steak with their own teeth. Some of them have foreheads extending to their crowns by now; many are grizzled and whiskered, and galled by the saddle of time, but most of them are going strong. Measured by events, it was a long time ago, for things move fast along the Arkansas; counted back by leap-years, not far.

At the time this parting in the pages of McPacken's history is made, to show who cares to move up a chair and read the chapter so offered, the town was at its greatest consequence and prosperity as a center of the native and imported cattle industry. It was the hub of a wide sweep of open range, into which only a few daring adventurers had pushed forward with fence and plow. These homesteads were mainly along the

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river, the occupants of them looked upon with a curious, questioning interest, not wholly unsympathetic, as people who lent themselves to some heroic, but misguided, experimentation, out of which little good to themselves or humanity at large could come.

This was the attitude toward all agricultural adventurers in the valley of the Arkansas at that time, shared by cattlemen and town dwellers alike. There was no hostility, no unfriendliness. Everybody would have been glad to see them succeed, but nobody expected them to do so. Their low sod houses were lonely markers to the cowboys who rode from distant ranges to McPacken; their struggles with oxen and lank teams against the tenacious sod a never-ending source of mild entertainment for those rovers of the prairies, who twisted in their saddles to look back as they galloped on to the town's delights.

Agriculture, it will be seen, then, did not contribute anything of consequence to the prosperity of McPacken in those days. The little which the people who followed that industry bought and sold in the town would not have been missed if it had been withdrawn entirely, for McPacken did not look to the earth for its supplies. It was a place that lived out of tin cans and bottles, and threw them down in the back yard when it had emptied them.

The railroad had established a division point there, with shops for emergency repairs to cars and engines, a roundhouse for stabling and grooming the steeds of the iron trail, and a system of water works to serve

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these various enterprises. All of this, with the smoke and noise, gave the place a comfortably progressive atmosphere, in addition to adding to its citizenship many artisans, trainmen, engine wipers, and subsidiary attendants upon the aristocracy of railroad life.

There was the river, the railroad along its shore, where cottonwoods laced with wild grapevines made green refreshment for eyes weary of summer heat glimmering over vast prairie lands; beyond the railroad, McPacken. The town seemed to empty upon the railroad, as one river empties into another, its principal street holding the little red depot, like an island, in its mouth. One stood on the station platform and looked upon all the consequence of McPacken, which was, no doubt, much greater than it appeared.

Beer kegs lay heaped in pyramidal pile on this platform at all times, if not empty ones waiting a train, full ones waiting a wagon. This pile of kegs seemed to be a proclamation to all who arrived, or lingered, or passed by, of the town's defiance, its aloofness in its wickedness from application of the commonwealth's laws.

Yet this was a wickedness of sullen defiance rather than one of lurid depravity; a wickedness that bribed county officials with the left hand while it dispensed beer with the right, practice common to Kansas towns of that time. It was a small-bore wickedness, rather despicable than destructive, which endured until the busy long arm could find time to reach out and squelch

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it, as happened to McPacken in its day, but a day long after this one of which you read, to be sure. Taking McPacken all over, it was not a bad town for its frontier situation. It had all the material, but never made much of its opportunity.

Between the railroad and the beginning of town there was a wide strip of unoccupied land, owned jointly by McPacken, the county and the "company" as that principal institution of the country was called. Here the county highway entered McPacken from the west, a road that ran past the small sod houses and stubborn farms and lost itself finally in the trails which split from the ends of it like ravelled strands of a lariat. It was a dusty, trampled gray stretch of beaten ground, with hitching-racks along the sides of the buildings which stood at the beginning of the principal thoroughfare. Prominent on the corner of this trampled common, the Cottonwood Hotel stood, and in front of the hotel the place which concerned itself with beer kegs and defied the sovereign state.

That was the beginning of McPacken as one saw it from the railroad station: the hotel on the left, the saloon on the right. There were two cottonwood trees of considerable girth and spread of limb in front of the hotel, a pump and watering trough for horses between them. Here the sidewalk was double width, part of it being the hotel veranda, covered by a wooden awning to the curb.

Two benches, fixed solidly against the wall, flanked the door of the hotel, offering accommodations for no

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fewer than twenty loafers. At certain hours of the day these were filled, especially at evening, when the railroaders' day was done, and the withdrawing sun left it cool and pleasant there. Then Angus Valorous Macdougal, night clerk, dish washer, potato parer and waiter in a pinch, appeared with sprinkling can, gave the sidewalk planks a wetting down, leaving behind him a pleasant odor of allayed dust, reminiscent of a shower.

At such hour the railroaders and chance guests from the range planted their chairs in the street and cocked back with feet on the sidewalk edge, where they viewed at pleasure the passing life of McPacken. That was the original motion picture entertainment, very popular in its day, in Kansas towns, and other towns, a great deal bigger than McPacken. There is not an inch of room for legitimate question that the students of anatomy lined up along the sidewalk of that progressive city were of as much consequence in their orbit, their arguments and conclusions; of as much wit, wisdom and importance, as hotel loungers anywhere, before and since their time.

At the hour of this opening scene in McPacken, and on the veranda of the Cottonwood Hotel, there was very little wit and wisdom being discharged anywhere along the length and breadth of Santa Fe Street, as the main avenue was called. It was midafternoon of a withering hot summer day. Heat danced and wavered like clouds of transparent ephemera over the unpaved street, glimmered in distorting vexation above rails and

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ballast roadbed. There was a smell of jimson weed and fennel, and oil from the railroad, spiced with invigorating nip of cottonwood leaves like bitters in an insipid drink.

The sound of hammering came out of the railroad yards, where Orrin Smith, the section boss, was working his gang of terriers putting in a switch. It was a deep, whirring, musical note, that of sledge on rail as some sweating jerry labored to bend the stubborn metal for the curve of the lead, yet subdued in that summer furnace, that vacuum of heat about which nature did not appear to concern itself at all, not even with a zephyr strong enough to turn a feather in the road.

Two figures enlivened the somnolent front of the Cottonwood Hotel this drowsy hour, side by side upon one of the benches flanking the open door. Even a stranger would have known, by her bearing of authority, that the woman was the boss of that concern, and that no man was boss of her. She was that type of woman, common to small hotels and boarding houses, whose bearing seemed to say that if there was a man around the place who had been an incident of more or less interest in her life at one time, he had been reduced to the lowest possible terms, if not rubbed out altogether.

Julia Cowgill was a quick and eager woman, rather meagre of frame, and tall, with a persistent prettiness in her gaunt face, a saucy challenge in her quick-darting, wide-awake gray eyes. Gray was stealing away her black hair with its Irish wave and crinkle. She

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took no pains to hide the peculation, as she might have done with a little adroit adjustment and tucking under about the ears. There was a look of alertness and searching in her face, as if she lived a continual quest for something that she expected to spring up in the road ahead of her and elude her in the end. Some said it was money; there were more kindly souls who believed it was only rest.

The man beside her was not much of an example as men go, although he had a personality that generally drew a second look, especially when he spoke. He was a small man wearing a sandy little mustache; with a sharp little nose that seemed to have been pinched while in a plastic state just above the nostrils, making an indenture there which gave the organ a peculiar aspect of eagerness when he breathed. His head was broad, somewhat flat on top, well suited to the long line of parting and the cowlick that he had trained into his abundant black locks. A flowing crepe necktie adorned the low collar of his broad-striped shirt, the glory of which was not shadowed by either coat or vest.

There was a rich note in his voice that suggested a song; laughter seemed to lie so near the surface of him that he had only to open his mouth for it to appear in his eyes, slily, provokingly, like a chipmunk at its hole. For Banjo Gibson was a man who looked at life as a sort of one-sided joke, and humanity as an arrangement of comical figures paraded for his diversion. There was nothing much in him but a laugh.

"I'm glad to see you back again, Banjo," Mrs. Cow-

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gill said. "I said to Goosie last night when I heard you talkin' to Angus: 'That's Banjo Gibson. I'll bet anything that's Banjo Gibson.' If I hadn't been so tired I'd 'a' slipped on something and come down."

"Just as well you didn't, pleased as I'd 'a' been to see you. I know how it is here at the hotel—your day's like a rubber sack; the more you put in it the longer it stretches."

"Yes, it's so long, and such worthless help in the dining-room. I had a girl out from Hutchinson—she flew up and quit me in the middle of supper yesterday because Bill Connor pinched her leg. Well, she said he did. I don't believe it."

"Little old Bill. I remember him well. They tell me he's got a run now?"

"Yes, he's makin' regular money. Him and Goosie they're engaged. Goosie she was so put out over what the little freckled flip-tail said about Bill I looked for her to throw his ring in his soup."

"Some people's born to make trouble," said Banjo, with discreet mental reservation bearing on Bill Connor's behavior toward the new girl.

"I wish I could put a man in, but them railroaders wouldn't stand for a man. They seem to think biscuit-shootin' is stric'ly a lady's job."

"It ain't a man's job," Banjo declared with feeling, "though I had to come down to it while I was gone. It was after that quack shook me up in Cheyenne."

"You mean to tell me *you* waited table, Banjo?"

"If you'd 'a' happened through Chadron, out in the

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sandhills of Newbrasky, about a year ago, you'd 'a' seen a feller back of the pie counter in the railroad eatin' house you'd 'a' thought was runnin' me a purty tight race for good looks."

"I always said when you went off to play for that Indian doctor you'd see some hard knocks before you got back to McPacken."

"You said it right, for I sure did."

"I'd like to 'a' seen you workin' at that job," Mrs. Cowgill said, the light of her toil-harried spirit in her eyes, a little smile showing at the corners of her large thin mouth.

"I'm thankful we was both spared the sight," Banjo said, with a deep sigh for a shame lived down if not forgotten. "I worked nights, and that helped some, handin' out slam sangwiches and coffee to the passengers that rushed the counter. After the last train we fed passed through, I didn't have anything to do but stand out pie ready for the freight crews. It wasn't much work, only the blowin' was hard on a man's lungs."

"Blowin'?" she repeated severely, in her way of putting a fresh guy in his place. "What do you mean blowin'? to cool the pie?"

"No *ma'am.* I mean dust. That's what I mean. That's the sandiest land in creation, the wind blows so steady and hard you can lean up again it and go to sleep. They do, right along, up there in that country."

"Oh, you get out! I've heard the same thing said of Kansas, but I never saw anything do it but a horse."

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Banjo laughed a little, more out of politeness than humor. Nobody likes to have a spike put in his joke.

"I used to parade up and down before them six pieces of pie," he said, "blowin' off the sand. Believe me or not, that ain't no lie. I never found any other way to keep them cuts of pie clean and eatable."

"Sprinklin' tobacker juice over 'em!" said she.

"I used to blow till I was blue in the face," said Banjo, "with that sand siftin' in the screen door and all around. I got on middlin' comfortable till they changed time on a freight and throwed two crews on me at once. I thought I was gittin' the consumption keepin' twelve piece of pie clean, and I jumped the job."

Banjo did not wait for the effect on Mrs. Cowgill. It was so tremendous on himself that he doubled over with laughter. When he looked sidling up at her as the humor began to work out of him, his eyes were glistening with mirthful moisture. Mrs. Cowgill was not so much as smiling. She was looking down the track where Orrin Smith was herding his jerries putting in the switch, that sharp alertness for the thing she sought and never owned, bending her nice eyebrows together in a bunch.

"You're the beatin'est man, Banjo," she said, in concession to his comical reminiscence. There was little praise, less encouragement, in her tone for a man of humor such as Banjo Gibson, troubadour home from his adventures afar. A woman was crossing the railroad beyond Smith's gang. Mrs. Cowgill's interest was there.

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"Where did you go from there?" she inquired, the woman having passed out of sight, leaving at least a divided portion of Mrs. Cowgill's interest behind.

"I rambled back to Wyoming; I had a lot of good friends in Wyoming. They're the dancin'est crowd of people up there you ever saw, kep' me fiddlin' till I nearly forgot how to pick a banjo at all. But places are so darned far apart in that country it wears a man out travellin' around. I never would 'a' been able to make it around to all of 'em if a feller hadn't made me a gift of a horse, one of them little pinto horses with spots on him, the kind they call a calico horse back in Missouri."

"You must 'a' stood well with them, Banjo."

"Yes, I picked up more money there than I ever made before in my life, and I guess I could 'a' married one of them cowgirls and settled down if I'd 'a' cared enough about any of 'em to take a chance. They're too big and wild for me, I'm here to say. They sling a man's heels off of the floor when they swing, and slap him to sleep if he gives 'em any slack. I like a girl my arm'll reach around, and I like 'em that can take a joke."

Banjo looked rueful; his tone was indignantly resentful. Unpleasant memories appeared to rise beneath his striped shirt of the Wyoming maidens who were dull to the piquant humor of a roving musician.

"It might 'a' been better for you, Banjo, if you'd stayed up in that country and settled down on a ranch."

"Maybe I would if they hadn't got to shootin' the

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country up the way they're doin'. You've read in the papers about that rustlers' war they're havin' there, I guess? Darn reckless the way they're slingin' lead around."

"I heard some of the boys talkin' about it the other night. They said them Wyoming cowmen had sent out word to all the limber-jims on the range to come up there. I don't know how true it is, but there was a cowhand in here from the Cimarron yesterday on his way to Abilene, headin' for Cheyenne. That's what some of the boys said. I guess it's gettin' too peaceable and quiet in this country for some people."

"I'll take mine where a man can ride along the road at night with his girl without a swarm of bullets clippin' his hair," Banjo said, his deep voice vibrant with the moving memories of past perils. "They'd 'a' put a bullet through my fiddle if I'd 'a' stayed in that country. Feller did slam one through my banjo-head one night when I was seein' a lady home from a dance. He said it was a mistake. Lot of good his 'pologizin' 'd 'a' done me if that bullet 'd 'a' went through my gizzard. I left there after that."

"I don't believe there's been a shootin' here since you went away," Mrs. Cowgill said, reminiscently. "Yes, I guess there was, too; some drunken cowhands killed a man that worked on a travellin' paint gang. But none of 'em didn't amount to anything."

"No man don't amount to much when he's got a hole drilled through his bellus," Banjo sighed, as if in regret

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for the many good ones he had known who had gone that way.

"There's that woman again!" said Mrs. Cowgill, her voice sharp with resentful suspicion.

"Ma'am?" Banjo inquired, looking at her in startled surprise.

"Up the street, just comin' out of the Racket Store. She's been runnin' all over town today—she came in on Nine this morning. I'd like to know what *she's* up to, flippin' around that way."

One might have gathered from Mrs. Cowgill's hostile attitude that other women had come to McPacken in days past, and flipped around to the public detriment and Mrs. Cowgill's own personal embarrassment; and that she resented virtuously such invasion, mainly, if not entirely, on account of the stranger going about her mysterious business without first coming to the Cottonwood Hotel, which was a piece of unpardonable impertinence.

"I see her," said Banjo. "She's a peach!"

"She may be a punkin for all *you* know," Mrs. Cowgill rebuked him scornfully. She bore down on him hard, as if Banjo Gibson's erring judgment in the appraisal of ladies was a thing of notorious public cognizance, a mockery and a merry jest.

"Um-m-m-m!" said Banjo, deep in his chest, a safe and noncommittal sound for a man who has no argument to make, and one to which he can give a portentous shake, even an ominous tremolo, thereby saving his valor and his face.

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"She's headin' here," Mrs. Cowgill announced, still severe, but a little mollified by the prospect of having her curiosity served at last.

"Makin' a bee-line," Banjo added, not at all hurt by the scornful sitting down on. "What do you suppose—"

"Sh-h-h!" Mrs. Cowgill cautioned.

The stranger's foot was on the porch.

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CHAPTER II

THE GIRL

HER way seemed hesitant and apologetic, for all the brave dash she had made from the door of the Racket Store. The flash that burned in her face was not all due to the scorching heat that beat up, intensified by the reflection, from McPacken's dust-white street as she stood an indecisive moment a little distance from Mrs. Cowgill and Banjo Gibson, seated in comfort on the green bench beside the hotel door.

"Was you wantin' to see somebody?" Mrs. Cowgill inquired, turning casually, feigning a business interest that she did not feel, suppressing a greater one that she would not confess.

"I'm taking subscriptions for a work—a book—*this* book," the girl said, appealing from face to face with her serious, unsophisticated, wide-open brown eyes. "May I sit here a little while and tell you—show it to you?"

Mrs. Cowgill moved along a little, although there was ample room at her end of the bench, signifying by the shift that the stranger was to sit beside her, and not by the side of Banjo Gibson. Banjo found

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it necessary, for decorum and comfort, to edge along a little way himself, putting a space of half a yard between himself and the hostess of the Cottonwood Hotel. It was not quite far enough to give him a view beyond her; he shifted a yard more, pretending that his shoestring needed tightening, turning up his eyes in sly measurement of the girl's obvious good points as he leaned.

Banjo was confirmed in his first opinion by this adroit exploration. She was not only a peach, but any kind and all kinds of fruit which was lucious, colorful, sweet. To look at her was refreshment; to be near her a placid joy.

Banjo did not hold it against her that she stood at least a hand's breadth taller than himself, being accustomed by this time to the handicap that nature had placed upon him, thankful for it sometimes when there was fighting and working, and other hardships incidental to the estate of a proper man, to be met. He glowed with admiration as he noted her youthful freshness and the refinement of her face, like a costly fiddle beside a cheap one, he thought, compared to the wind-rough faces of those railroad and cow-ranch girls.

It would take black haws on the bush after the first frost to match her hair. A little hollow along the jaw, maybe; just a trifle too hollow there. But she would fill out with proper feeding. Her hands were strong and flexible, appealing hands to a musician. Music spoke out of them; Banjo could feel it as he

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could feel it in instruments viewed through a window. It would take apothecary's scales to weigh her when she walked.

So Banjo summed her up, slewed in respectful attention on the bench to look across Mrs. Cowgill. The girl was holding a dumpy thick book with red cover and black lettering clasped in both hands, in a supplicating way of innocence that carried an appeal to Banjo Gibson's heart. That Mrs. Cowgill was neither so friendly nor sympathetic was evident in the aloof suspicion of her bearing.

"It's called A Thousand Ways To Make Money," the girl said, looking that appealing way of hers from face to face, like some poor creature, Banjo thought —he would not insult her by saying a dog—running from door to door of a house on a winter night when everybody was too snug in bed and too selfish in their comfort to get up and let it in.

Mrs. Cowgill took the book from her. She held it in her hand unopened, gazing at it steadily and silently. Presently she turned to the agent, who smiled in timid expectancy.

"Was you in there tryin' to sell Jake Smolinsky one of them books?" Mrs. Cowgill demanded, rather than inquired.

"If you mean that little old man that makes a noise like a clock going to strike, I was," the agent confessed, the smile going from her lips, a sort of comical solemnity taking its place.

"Well, child, a thousand ways to make money

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wouldn't be more than half as many as Jake Smolinsky knows already," Mrs. Cowgill said, softening in her judgment, as Banjo was glad to see.

The lady agent sighed.

"It looks like the rest of the people in this town are just about as smart as he is," she said.

"You didn't sell a book all the time you've been runnin' around in this broilin' sun?"

"Not a one," the agent replied, but brave in her failure, Banjo could see; no tears within a mile of her.

"I suppose anybody ought to be glad to know a thousand ways to make money," Mrs. Cowgill reflected. "How much does it cost?"

"Only two dollars. And immediate delivery,"—hopefully—"no wait."

"Two dollars for a thousand ways to make money!" Banjo marvelled over the bargain. "And I'd nearly give my l— my ankle, for one sure-shootin' way."

"If you'd like one of the books, sir," the lady agent said, leaning to look at him in her innocence, her great, her pure, unsmirched, unworldly innocence, and no pretense about it, Banjo knew too well.

"Well, hum-m-m-m! Two dollars, hum-m-m-m!" Banjo turned it off with his noncommittal rumble and let it rest. Two hard dollars in the jeans were better, maybe; more certain, without a doubt, than a thousand theories for making more in a little red book with black letters on the back. For, if they were legal ways, they were ways involving work, a condition for

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obtaining money to which Banjo Gibson was unalterably opposed.

"Now, what's in that book worth two dollars to anybody?" Mrs. Cowgill wanted to know. She put the question pedantically, in the manner of a teacher who had the culprit right before her, and would have no evasion nor squirming out of it in the least.

The lady agent took the book and turned its pages, telling them what it was good for as she went along.

The book told how to make cider vinegar out of the cobs of green corn, horseradish out of turnips, tomato catsup from pumpkins, sofas out of salt barrels, bedsteads out of goods boxes; it told how to make honey out of corn silk, olive oil out of hickory nuts, neckties out of yarn, sofa pillows out of gunnysacks. It told how to preserve eggs in times of plenty, store them for a few years and sell them at a profit of six cents a dozen; it made plain the formulae of patent medicines, which anybody could make for three cents a bottle and sell for a dollar; it exposed the tricks of the grocery business, and gave a full working order for the practice of spiritualism and legerdemain. It told how to make valuable things from trash, giving tables of cost and return, showing what immense profits lay waiting the smart citizen in the very neighborhood at his hand. The man who owned the book had his hand in the world's pocket.

All of that, and a great deal more, the young lady agent recited, not very spiritedly, to be sure; not with the certainty of confidence.

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"Now, look here," said Mrs. Cowgill argumentatively; "it wouldn't put a person ahead any to make up all that bogus stuff, and maybe kill himself takin' the medicine and usin' the vinegar and preserved eggs. A person don't use enough of them things to make it profitable."

"You're not supposed to use them yourself; you manufacture and sell them."

"I'm thinkin' about that, too," Mrs. Cowgill said. "You say it's a book that ought to be in every home."

"Every home. There comes an opportunity in every life for making money. The secret of success is in being prepared when it comes. All the masters of finance realize this. They never would have been rich if they had not been ready. Every—"

"But suppose you did sell one to every house in McPacken; suppose everybody went to work manufacturin' and bottlin', and preservin' eggs and puttin' down butter, expectin' to sell their humbug stuff to the neighbors. Don't you think the business would be a little bit overdone?"

The lady agent bent her head, thinking it over. In a little while she looked up, grinning whimsically, as if it hurt somewhere, but she was not going to let anybody see the spot if it cost her life.

"I guess the man that wrote the book never thought of that; I'm sure I never did," she confessed.

"Did you ever sell any of them books anywhere?"

"Yes, I've sold a good many—about fifty-three, I

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think. I've got a good many left, though—over at the depot in my trunk."

"Where did you start from, child?"

"Hutchinson."

"How long ago?"

"About two months."

"And you've only sold fifty-three, clearin' maybe a dollar on a book?"

The lady agent nodded assent, slowly, her action detached from her thought, it seemed, judging by her eyes, which were fixed on some point beyond Orrin Smith and his gang of jerries; far, far beyond, indeed.

"It takes you a long time to find out you ain't got even one way to make money," Mrs. Cowgill said, but rather more in admiration than pity or reproof.

"I've never been whipped, I never will be!" the lady agent declared, very resolutely, very calmly, with steady voice.

"Some people's that way," Mrs. Cowgill said, nodding her head as if she understood the trait very well." I wish somebody—where are you headin' for from here?"

"I'm heading in here, as the railroad men say, I guess. If I can't sell any books, I'll have to stay."

"Ever teach school?"

"No, but I could. Is there an opening here?"

"I don't know. I don't suppose they've hired the teachers yet, it's nearly two months before school opens. I just wondered, you look so young for a

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travellin' book agent I thought you might be a teacher workin' through vacation. How did you come to take up sellin' books?"

"I guess I was talked into it. I bought the western half of Kansas for a hundred dollars."

"You paid too much, even if you got a deed," said Banjo, feelingly.

"I believe you," the lady agent agreed, leaning over in her attentive way to look at him fairly as she spoke.

"Just for the right to sell them books out here?" Mrs. Cowgill asked.

"That's the scheme. I paid another hundred dollars for a hundred books, put them in my trunk and started out."

"Where from, honey?"

Banjo was pleased to see Mrs. Cowgill softening more and more. How that girl could go tramping around Kansas with books to sell, or anything to sell, and not run out of stock in a week, was a mystery to him.

"I started from Kansas City."

"What was you doin' there before you bought in on that fool book?"

"I suppose I might as well tell you," said the girl, turning frankly to Mrs. Cowgill. "A person can't be a mystery in a little town, especially when she's got to find a job. I wasn't doing anything before dad went broke in the real estate boom. Then I sold some of my rings and ear-bobs and trinkets to raise the

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money I blew on the books. And that's all there is to tell, except my name."

Mrs. Cowgill waited, perking up a little with expectancy, to receive it.

"Louise Gardner," the girl introduced herself. "Maybe that's it, and maybe it isn't."

"That ain't nobody's business but your own," Mrs. Cowgill granted, with easy indifference, as if accustomed to such things right along.

"That's right!" Banjo declared with strong emphasis. He seemed ready to stand in defense of her name, true or false, against all aspersion and doubt.

"You never waited table," Mrs. Cowgill said. She spoke with something like regretful disparagement, as if the young woman had neglected a duty, or an opportunity at least, for which there was no remedy now.

"I could do it. Is there a job here? Do you want a girl?"

"I can only afford to pay five dollars a week, room with my daughter—she's about your age. It may not look like much, but it beats trampin' around in the hot sun."

"Not anything like it," said Louise Gardner.

"I'll not say it ain't heavy and hard while it lasts, but the rush don't last long."

"That will be all right," Louise said, cheerfully.

Banjo looked at her queerly. What did she mean? Was she going to take that job?

"There's time for a girl to do her washin' and sew-

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in' in the afternoon," Mrs. Cowgill seemed to argue for the place that she had to be filled, just as if the candidate held back instead of sitting keen and hopeful, a new light bright in her eyes.

"That will be fine!" Louise declared. "I'm ready to begin right now."

Banjo Gibson sat looking this way and that, his mouth open, his eyes staring, as if amazed by some extraordinary creature that had appeared on the hotel porch and vanished with the next breath in a puff of smoke. He seemed to be making a mute appeal to somebody to confirm him in this amazing event as the lady agent followed Mrs. Cowgill into the hotel.

What did she mean? Banjo marvelled. Was she going to take that hash-slinger job? A girl like that? with a build like that? and a face like that? What could she know about slinging hash in a railroad boarding house? What would happen if Bill Connor tried to pinch *her* leg?

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CHAPTER III

GOOSIE AND OTHERS

ODESSA COWGILL, commonly called Goosie, was a sentimental young lady who played the parlor organ. When Louise Gardner first met her she was laying out cutlery on the long table where the regulars assembled at so much a week to replenish their fires and keep up a head of steam for the railroading life.

Goosie was singing, as she spread out the implements of severance and conveyance, a song in which the singer bewailed in lugubrious anticipation the day when a lady sung as Ma-ha-goreet not only might, but positively would, forget him. It was a dismal conclusion, sympathetically and tremulously sung by Goosie, who went into the spirit of it with the feeling of one bereft and forsaken. The window shades of the dining-room were drawn to shut out as much of the afternoon heat as possible, giving Goosie a dim and sentimental light. It was a felicitous arrangement for the singer as well as the song, for Goosie was one of those girls who look better in a little light.

There is no doubt that suds, and soup, and steaming

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dishes of a boarding house where heavy railroad fare is served, do not contribute an atmosphere for aesthetic development. If beauty thrives in such environment it must of necessity be a rugged beauty, such as that of the hollyhock, the zinnia, or the scentless dahlia flaunting beside the fence. That was the order of Goosie; a big, broad-faced, full-breasted dahlia, boisterous and strong to face the wind.

She was a hearty, happy girl, with a big-spreading mouth, to enjoy so deeply the sad songs of separation, broken faith and blighted homes which were current in that day. Her greatest pleasure was to sing them when her duties threw her alone, as now. It was her melancholy enjoyment at such times to put herself in the heroine's part, with Bill Connor, the fireman to whom she was engaged, standing off in a dim and tearful background, holding out appealing hands, watching her drift hopelessly to ruin and desolation.

She knew that Bill would, in plain and unromantic action, take her by the neck and choke it out of her in such case. That's all the sentiment there was in Bill. Yet it gave her a dear diversion, a serene, sad happiness, to figure Bill off in the background holding out his hands, watching her go to the devil in that pale, drawn-faced way.

Just now she was Ma-ha-goreet, and Bill was the one who wailed of his dreary prospect when she should forget him. She saw herself leaving their home in Argentine—Argentine was the heaven of railroad men, where all of them hoped to go—with the chenille table

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cover and the gasoline stove and the golden oak furniture—all prospective, but just like that, she knew very well—and drifting away from Bill, lured on by the "festive dance, the rich, the gay," so different, indeed, from their home.

The picture brought comfortable tears, which crawled down beside her nose with a tickling, itchy feeling, making her sniff like a rabbit, and wipe them along her bare arm.

There was another song, sadder for the picture of consummate wreckage in the lives of herself and Bill. It was called We Never Speak As We Pass By. That was her favored one, reserved for rainy days.

> And then the tempter came to Nell,
> He dazzled her, alas, she fell!

It was terribly sad and sweet. The tempter came to Nell, and Goosie was Nell, in the little home in Argentine. And Earl Gray, the druggist, was the tempter. Earl Gray was not the druggist of McPacken when Goosie imagined him as the evil tempter of the song, but a grander Earl Gray, dressed in a long black coat and stove-pipe hat, like the man in the New York Weekly who was tempting Constance, The Pretty Sewing Girl. She cast Earl for the part on account of his long, wavy hair.

Goosie knew that a tempter in her home would not last as long as it would take to cook an egg, with Bill coming in from his run. Bill would slam him against the wall so hard he'd knock the stovepipe down, and

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that would be the end of that tempter and that temptation.

Yet it was such a sad pleasure to picture that passage where:

> We never speak as we pass by
> Although a tear bedims her eye.
> She often thinks of her past life,
> When we were loving man and wife.

Goosie always had it raining in this scene. Bill was coming along a deserted street, close against the wall, a prosperous, opulent-looking Bill, with a diamond stud. She came out of the distance like a misty gray garment blowing on a line, cold, thin as a snake, her hair hanging in wet ropes, ragged, stove-blacking on her hands and nose. She turned imploring eyes on Bill; he passed right on, going to the bank. He didn't give her a look, although she knew he saw her as well as anything. That was where it cut; that was the place where a sweet, deep pain wrung her heart and made her shiver in the ecstacy of refined remorse.

Goosie's mother broke upon her song, bringing the strange girl into the shadowy dining-room.

"Goosie, this is Louise Gardner, the new dining-room girl. Louise, this is Odessa, my daughter. Goosie's her pet name; she's been called by it so long she wouldn't hardly answer to any other by now."

Goosie put down the undistributed cutlery, offering her hand with frank equality.

"Hello," she said. "When did you come in?"

"I came on Nine this morning," Louise returned,

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speaking of the train by its number with the readiness of a regular railroader.

"Take her to the room and let her fix herself up. You'll have to lend her some of your aprons till she can get some made."

Goosie led the way to the stairs, which came down beside the door connecting dining-room and office, vastly relieved to know she was going to have help that hot evening, eager to get the new girl out into a strong light to see if her complexion was really as good as it looked.

Mrs. Cowgill turned to the kitchen, from which a moaning, long-drawn note of lamentation sounded, as if somebody there labored in a bondage that rent the heart to bear. A tall spare negro woman was standing at the stove frying chicken. She turned at Mrs. Cowgill's approach, her prolonged note diminishing, falling away, like the whistle of a fast-running train rounding a woodland curve. The cook grinned, her solemn face glistening with sweat.

"I done got all the chicken on, Mis' Cowgill," she said.

"You'd better go out and cool off a while when you take it up, Rachel," Mrs. Cowgill suggested, with a sort of reticent, grudging kindness.

"I ain't none so hot," Rachel replied cheerfully. "Druther have it hot than them cold winter days when the win' snoops under the doo' and gives me the rheumatis' in my legs and the misery in my back. Ain't

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no misery hatchin' in my jints this kind of weather. I just dreens the drugs of that misery off in sweat."

"Ain't Angus come down and started on them putaters yet?" Mrs. Cowgill inquired sharply.

"Yassum, he's out there on the po'ch josselin' 'em around, playin' train like he's always a doin'."

Mrs. Cowgill set her foot against the screen door, which had fringed paper tacked along the top to make a commotion among the flies waiting a chance to wing into that paradise of alluring scents. It was equal to opening the door against a driving rain; some of it was bound to get in. A few fortunate ones of the impertinent loafers winged past her, in defiance of Mrs. Cowgill's savage batting with open hand. There was very little hope of refreshment for a fly, once he had made his way by trick and evasion into the kitchen. Everything there was so hot that a sip of it meant instant death to the most tropical fly that ever buzzed.

Mrs. Cowgill let the door close gently, to stand beside it with displeasure coming over the strained look of worriment and longing in her tired face. Angus Valorous Macdougal was sitting on the edge of the shady porch twenty feet or so beyond her, a large bucket of potatoes beside him, a pan to receive the pared ones standing a little way along. Between bucket and pan Angus had a string of the humble vegetables stretched out like a line of freight cars, headed by an immense potato with a protuberance that served for the engine's smokestack.

Angus Valorous was chuffing and hissing equal to

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any switch engine between Argentine and McPacken as he pushed his little train slowly along, leaning as it progressed, stopping between chuffs to straighten the alignment, entirely absorbed in the pastime, so childish and ridiculous for one of his growth and years.

"Is that what I pay you for?" Mrs. Cowgill broke out in wrath, her voice rising sharp and high.

Angus Valorous started guiltily, ashamed of being caught in the indulgence of a pleasure that he should have left behind him with his knee pants, unconscious, no doubt, in his rather thick-headed and totally unimaginative way, that his overwhelming ambition was only illustrating itself in this homely concrete form. Angus Valorous lived for nothing in life but to be a conductor. That ambition was in his round soft head when he was born; it was in his round hard head now that he was nineteen, and big enough to be thirty-nine. He scrambled the potatoes toward him, letting some of them fall, confused and red behind the ears.

"Is that what I pay you for?" Mrs. Cowgill demanded again, coming forward in long strides as if she meant to assault him. "Don't you know we have supper in this hotel at six o'clock? you great big good-for-nothing lump of mutton!"

"Aw, keep your shirt on!" Angus retorted, twisting his head to scowl at her, growling from the corner of his mouth. "All you're payin' me ain't goin' to break nothing but your heart! If you don't like it you can git another man!"

Angus spoke in explosions, great sarcasm in his tone,

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great contempt in the slewing of his mouth. He threw down his knife, and stood facing Mrs. Cowgill, jerking at the strings of his coffee-sack apron as if through with the job.

Angus was a short-built young man, heavy in the thighs, his shoulders thick, his arms short and strong. His black hair was brushed to such a polish that a spider would have needed a hand-line to climb it. His face was round and boyish, his little snub nose quite comical in the midst of his present bluster. But for the black whiskers which crowded his fair ruddy skin, so thick and so fast-growing that no amount of shaving could keep them out of sight, Angus would have looked in the face like a hearty, full-blooded boy of twelve. As it was, he looked twelve, with the whiskers of forty-five.

He was the son of Doctor Macdougal, one child of many children. Doctor competition was sharp in McPacken; Angus had been crowded out to shift for himself when he should have been finishing the grade school, yet not before his whiskers had marked him for an early-ripening man. He could not get a job as brakeman—even conductors, in their consequence and grandeur, must begin there—until he became twenty-one. The Cottonwood Hotel was a very good place to fill the intervening years, which Angus had breasted until only two now stood between him and his happy day of matriculation in the college of conductors.

It was the habit of people native to McPacken, as well as those of transplanted stock who remained in its

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atmosphere a little while, to be outspoken and independent. A superior might be acknowledged on a job, scorned and contemned for the pull that put him there, but in no other connection, social or civil. Angus Valorous was simply living up to the standards of McPacken when he bristled before Mrs. Cowgill and stood on his rights as a man. If he had acted otherwise he would have been despised, not alone by the men of McPacken, but by the women and children, and Mrs. Cowgill first of all.

"Aw, go ahn!" said Angus, jerking at his apron-strings. "Go ahn! If you want somebody else to do your dirty work for you, go and git him. That's ahl I got to say!"

Mrs. Cowgill stood regarding him in towering scorn, knowing very well that Angus had no more notion of quitting than she had of discharging him.

"Whatever sense you had when you was born leaked out of you before they could bring a teacup to catch it in!" she said. "Go to work, and don't give me any more of your slack!"

To relieve Angus of the necessity of carrying his bluff any farther, and to save her own dignity in the bargain, Mrs. Cowgill left him with that humiliating aspersion. She marched through the kitchen and dining-room, heading for the office, from which she heard the faint tinkle of the little desk bell. She was in no great hurry to attend the caller; as she went along she speculated on whether it might be a cowhand wanting a cigar, or a railroader a plug of tobacco, or an agent

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wanting to sell something, or some fool that didn't know what he wanted. She was by natural bent a little uncharitable in her estimation of mankind.

As she passed the wash-room—fitted with modern plumbing, supplied with water by the railroad water works—she stopped at the sound of a snorting ablution, familiar in her ears.

"Is that you, Myron?" she called.

"Yup," a soapy, cheerful voice replied.

"What're you doin' home this time of day?"

"Run out of shingles," the soapy voice replied, after some blowing as if to clear water out of a dripping mustache.

"Wasn't there any more in the lumber yard?"

"Schudy broke a wheel; couldn't get 'em over till morning, honey."

"Well, when you're through wastin' water in there you go on out and saw up some of them ties."

"Yes, pet."

Mrs. Cowgill went on to the office. Myron Cowgill, under the shadow of whose name the hotel lady lived, came from the wash-room damp and uncombed, with towel lint in his long brown mustache, a cheerful, even a glad, light in his mild blue eyes. He was one of those beings cut to the pattern of a nothing at the beginning. Gangling, loose-jointed, slip-slap and go easy; long black hair with a brown sunburn at the ends, long brown mustache that appeared to draw hard on his cheeks, which were so thin that he seemed to have sucked them in and swallowed all but the rind. His

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neck was bony and long, slashed across with wrinkles in the tough brown skin, into which more or less dust and grime had collected in his carpentering career in and about McPacken.

Myron produced the bowl of a corncob pipe from a pocket of his bagging overalls, tapped it in his palm to dislodge the shingle nails; brought the stem of it out of the ruler pocket along his leg, connected the parts and fired up. Pipe in mouth, Myron looked a degree less useful than before, yet undoubtedly the little tucking-up of the mustache over the stem added to the humor and good nature of his simple face. He went out through the kitchen to begin operation on the gritty, hard oak ties which the thrift of his wife secured, through a pull with the roadmaster, to supply fuel for her kitchen range.

"You-all hongry, Mist' Cowgill?" the black cook inquired, with a gentle patronage, as she might have spoken to a child.

"I guess I can make out till supper, Rachel." But unwillingly, his tone implied, and with hardship and repression of desire.

Rachel forked the biggest leg she could find, a double-jointed one, the way they cut them in Kansas in those days of generosity and plenty. Myron accepted it with an engaging network of wrinkles growing in his tough brown face around the eyes, and with a little laugh that was soundless, but expressive of the humor that kindled in him with the thought of beating his wife through the bountiful hand of her cook.

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Myron sat on his saw-horse under the cottonwood tree in the back yard, while he cleaned the chicken bone and licked his fingers. Then he began sawing ties, to continue sawing ties until the last boarder was fed, the last transient guest served, even Angus Valorous satisfied behind his black smear of beard. Then if there was anything left, Myron got it, and ate it in silent appreciation of a humor, his mild eyes seemed to say, that no other being in all the world could see.

Mrs. Cowgill heard the summons of the little bell again as she paused at the foot of the stairs to call Goosie. She resented the insistent ring; there was something imperative about it that seemed to place her in an inferior position. She went along deliberately, turning her eyes on this and that, making out that she came casually. She wanted the bell-ringer to understand that she was a necessity in McPacken, not a convenience.

The insistent ringer of the little desk bell was no less important person than Verney Carr, station agent, in his white shirt and pink sleeve-holders. Mrs. Cowgill put off her resentment, edging around the counter with a smile. Verney was an important railroad peg in McPacken. He was not the man to call her out without sufficient reason.

"There's a big stock extra in five sections coming," the agent announced without preliminary greeting. "They're bringin' three thousand head from Texas, over west of the Brazos where they've got a big drouth."

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"I've heard the cowmen talkin' about it," she nodded, leaning her bare arms on the open register, adjusting herself in position of comfortable confidence.

"First of a lot of 'em, they say," the agent said. "I thought you might want to make some preparations for takin' care of the bunch that'll be comin' with them five extras."

"I'll have Myron kill some more chickens. Thanks, Verney."

"They're goin' to flood this country with them Texas cattle. They'll eat these cowmen up here holler."

"This range 'll take care of just so many, and no more, I've heard the cowmen say. The Texas men have to lease from them, you know, Verney, or pay so much a head by the month for usin' their grass. I guess it's a good thing for our people, all them cow-hands comin' in here. too. They'll spend their money here in town."

"And raise hell at all hours." The agent spoke like a man with unpleasant recollections.

"It'll liven things up," Mrs. Cowgill said. "McPacken will be more like it was when I came here and opened the hotel. There's no harm in them Texas boys if you take them right."

"I know I've got one sweet time ahead of me!" the agent said with what seemed unwarranted feeling. "They'll be all night unloadin' them five trains—the first one's due to arrive about seven."

"I'll take care of 'em as long as they come. We've got to go out of our way to serve the cattle trade."

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"Everybody in this country has to," the agent said, with anything but pride or ease of dignity in his part of the service.

"It's the business that counts; there wouldn't be anything here without it."

"Oh, I don't know about that," the agent said, loftily. "I'm gittin' darn sick of seein' these spider-leggid cowhands under sombrero hats with guns hung around on 'em. Don't ever shoot anything with 'em, not even themselves."

"A gun's about the same to them as a watch is to a railroad man, Verney."

"A railroad man needs his watch, but no man needs a gun slung on him in this country."

"It's custom, more than anything. The boys wouldn't look the same without their guns. I'd kind of hate to see them go. But some of them are. I saw Cal Withers ride by a little while ago with only one gun on him. I remember when he used to carry two, and a knife."

"Darned old fool! This bunch of cattle's comin' consigned to him. He's been gettin' messages all afternoon."

"It's a handful for Cal if he's bought 'em. I hope he don't go broke again."

"Lot of his men with their toy pistols swingin' on 'em rode in a while ago to receive the cattle. I'll have to be right there on the spot till the last car's empty."

"'To bad," Mrs. Cowgill said indifferently. "Much obliged for comin' over to tell me, Verney." She

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brought a box of her best brand of cigars from the showcase. The agent picked two with critical deliberation. For such services as this to the Cottonwood Hotel, his smokes cost him nothing.

"Wild bunch," said the agent, turning to go back to the red depot and await the arrival of the vexatious Texans.

"Men, or animals?" she laughed.

"Both," the agent answered over his shoulder from the door.

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CHAPTER IV

A TEXAS MAN

THERE was nothing in common between the railroaders of McPacken and the cowhands who rode in to refresh themselves with its shabby entertainment. Even the most prominent drovers, some of whom risked more in one season's speculation with the caprices of nature and the markets than the combined railroaders of McPacken earned in a year, were looked upon with a sort of patronizing tolerance by conductors and brakemen when they loaded for Kansas City and rode in the caboose on stock-shippers' passes.

The railroaders prided themselves on their sophistication, which was only a shallow pertness at the best. But the world came to McPacken every day. If it did not always stop and get out for a look around, it roared through with an upswirling of dust that made its passing all the more important. The latest slang was ready in the mouths of the railroaders; they could make sport of cowmen and cowhands in an unknown tongue.

A superior caste to range men and grangers, according to their own rating, these railroaders of McPacken. Yet every one of them was serving cattle, living and

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prospering on cattle. But for cattle they would not have been there at all.

Peace generally prevailed between railroad and range, although an outbreak came now and then. There was no public dance hall in McPacken, that being an institution belonging to the days before the town's beginning, but there was a big saloon with its three beer-jerkers on busy nights and Sundays, where the soil was always raked for the seeds of trouble.

It was the custom still to carry guns on the range in those days, a habit that had become a tradition, rather than a necessity. The railroaders, with few exceptions, stuck pistols in their hip pockets when going out for the evening. Railroad taste favored that style of weapon known as bulldog, on account of its short and chunky build being adapted to gentlemanly concealment. It was considered boorish in railroad society to make a show of one's weapon, but there were men enough with guns stuck around them in McPacken every night to line up a considerable battle. That such general engagement between railroad and range never had taken place was the marvel of all peaceable citizens.

There were staid and respectable railroad men who had their families and homes in McPacken, who neither mingled in the swilling nor mixed in the barroom brawls, forerunners of the substantial respectability that railroad men, as a class, came in time to enjoy. In those days, especially out on the edge of things as in McPacken, a railroader was a man with a reputation for roughness, a notoriety that he fully enjoyed and

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sustained. In McPacken they were young men, mainly; car repairers, wipers, switchmen, machinists, brakemen and firemen, who had a pride in their calling, a glowing satisfaction in their generally hard name.

On the other hand there were the cowhands, as the men who followed the herds were commonly called in and around the town. Several hundred of them could have been rounded up within a three-days' ride of McPacken, youngsters full of cayenne and vinegar, with a snort and go to them such as free youth has in any calling, anywhere. There was a sprinkling of older men among them, hardy, wiry ones who had ridden the long trail from Texas to Montana, following slow herds over perilous ways.

Things were coming easier to the cowboy gentry in those McPacken days. The railroad was no longer a thousand miles away; lights and liquids were within three or four days' ride, at the farthest. These encroachments of civilization had shown their influence on the cowboy habit, which was growing somewhat gentler, due to frequent breaks, perhaps, in the long periods of drouth, or maybe coming of the fact that something easy to procure is no longer ardently desired. Whatever the cause, the effect was apparent to the older citizens of McPacken, who had recollections of times not very far back when those yelping revellers made night a torture in the town.

Altogether, the effect of business methods, which were supplanting the old-time make-or-lose gamble of cattle raising, were showing amazing results, not alone

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in the taming down of cowboys, but in stabilizing an industry left hitherto dependent on chance. This worked out to the advantage of McPacken and all within it. More cattle, more railroaders; more railroaders, more money turned loose every pay-day to make everybody glad.

Mrs. Cowgill was pleased to hear of the five trains coming into her port with cattle from the burned-up range of Texas. Every carload brought in lean meant something more than a carload to go out again fat in the fall. More trains, more lay-over men for the Cottonwood Hotel. It was all very comfortable and satisfactory as Mrs. Cowgill contemplated the future, near and far, standing there as the station agent had left her, with arms across the pages of the open register.

Yet Mrs. Cowgill might as well have turned to her register after the station agent left her door, and written, in that log-book of her adventurous establishment: "So ends this day." As it was, she stood turning over in her mind the chance of the cattle trains arriving when the agent expected them, knowing the ways of such trains as well as any railroader. She concluded at last to spare Myron the slaughter of more chickens. The trains would not begin to get in before nine or ten o'clock. More than likely, out of a misguided sense of loyalty, the Texas cowhands would peg on up the street and get their supper in the Lone Star Cafe.

While Mrs. Cowgill was revolving these thoughts,

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and arriving at her wise conclusions, the nearest of the five cattle trains was still a hundred miles distant from McPacken. On top of this train, back a few cars from the engine to give the cinders a chance to cool before they hit him, a young man was sitting, his prod-pole between his knees, watching the Kansas landscape as the train jogged by.

Tom Laylander was favorably impressed by the state. They had left the region of elms and maples along the streams, the dark-green fields of corn, and mellow stubble-lands where wheat shocks stood amazingly thick, it seemed to him, accustomed to the thin yields of that sandy postoak land beyond the Brazos. Now they were passing through a paradise of prairies, big enough, it seemed, to pasture all the starving herds between the Panhandle and the Big Bend. It was an empty country, as far as he could see, shaggy with gray-green short grass, heaved in gently-rounded hills that looked like the backs of gigantic buffalo. It looked like a place where a man might turn out his herd with nobody to set bounds to his coming and going.

Tom Laylander knew that it was not so; that men of his calling had all that country under their control, in one way or another; that bounds were set and respected, and that a stranger with five hundred-odd starving cattle, such as the thirty cars in that train of his contained, must go where he was apportioned and pay what he was asked. Better than starving down on the Brazos, he reflected; better than hanging on there,

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hoping for the rain that had been nearly three years in coming, except an aggravating shower now and then.

The bones of many a herd whitened that sandy country, set with its tenacious, never-dying postoak trees; hundreds of his father's cattle had gone in that miserable way while the old man had hung on in the belief that his losses would not equal the expense of running away from the drouth, hoping for the rain that never before had played him quite such a disastrous trick.

It had broken the old cowman at last, and put him in his grave. Young Tom had picked up what was left and set out for Kansas, in the hope that he might save enough to return to Texas after the drouth was broken, and start another herd. Kansas was a good place to retreat upon in the day of necessity, but Texas was the only place to live. The only place, because it was the only place he knew.

Calhoun Withers, the biggest cattle speculator in the southwest, had come into that famine-stricken neighborhood and pretty well cleaned it up at his own price. It was a bone and hide price, Withers had said. That was all the cattle of that country were worth. His purchases were coming along behind Tom Laylander, twenty-five hundred head or more.

Withers, as an old friend of Tom Laylander's father, had advised the young man not to sell at these famine prices. There was going to be a shortage in cattle, with good prices as a consequence, that fall, owing to the unfitness of the Texas supply for the butcher's block.

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Load, he advised, and ship to Kansas, where he had range to rent at a reasonable figure.

Tom had been in the mind for this all along, and here he was on his way to gamble with Kansas for the remnant of his herd. He had arranged to pay Withers by the head for the use of his range, settlement to be deferred until the cattle were sold. It was the young adventurer's hope that his bones and hides would become beeves in the course of three or four months.

Mrs. Cowgill woke in the night to hear them unloading the cattle into the whitewashed pens, the high-pitched tremolo of man and steer sounding lonesome as the plaint of creatures which belong by right to wide and distant places wailing in the dark for home. There always was something in that wild cowboy note more of melancholy than jubilation to Mrs. Cowgill's ear. Like coyotes, she often thought, shivering and howling in hunger of a winter night in bleak places among the snow. Why this thought always came to her with the sound she did not know; only that it was so.

It was evening before Laylander got his herd across the river and spread in the green and abundant valley. The cattle were being held there for their first feed on Kansas grass, by two cowboys who had accompanied Laylander from Texas. They were mounted on horses borrowed from Withers.

Tom's intention was to pay these boys off as soon as they had worked the herd out to the range he was to occupy, and let them go back home or find employment in Kansas, as they might elect. He planned to do his

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own herding, such as might be necessary. Withers had said he could handle the cattle alone on that range, where the feeding was so plentiful they did not travel far.

Laylander wanted to sniff bay rum, and feel the barber's shears around his ears once more. It seemed a long time since he had enjoyed those luxuries; his beard felt long enough to hide a rabbit. He was greatly cheered by his hopeful outlook as he rode one of Withers's horses to McPacken to leave his mane and tail, as he said, in the barber shop.

The regular boarders in the Cottonwood Hotel took their meals at a long table that extended in state down the middle of the dining-room. Casual guests, such as drummers and cowhands, did not share this table d'hote. Goosie Cowgill, who usually combined the duties of reception committee and waiter, piloted them to the small side tables, at which two or four might sit in such comfort as the stale pie-crust atmosphere of the dining-hall offered.

The railroaders and other regulars were pretty well cleared out of the dining-room when Tom Laylander arrived. Goosie, being engaged in an exchange of wit with the roundhouse foreman, did not see the hesitant stranger as he paused with a question that amounted to an apology for his intrusion, near the door. Louise Gardner, who had taken to her new job with confident alacrity, caught the arrival's eye and beckoned him on with hearty signal.

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"Back up!" said a brakeman, who saw the signal from his place at the long table.

The few others at this common board looked up from their various engagements and laughed. The brakeman, his essay as a humorist thus approved, repeated the sign, looking across at Tom Laylander, who stood in confusion, his big hat in his hand.

"She wants you to make a couplin' with that flat down there on the house track," the brakeman explained.

Laylander grinned, going on to the table where the new biscuit-shooter waited, a chair pulled out to receive him.

"Oh, leave her alone," Goosie laughed. "You was green once yourself."

"Who's green?" The brakeman feigned a large surprise. "That girl learnt biscuit-shootin' in college. They've got a class of 'em down at Lawrence."

"What're you sore about, Windy?" the roundhouse boss inquired with patronizing contempt. "Did she step on your steak?"

"Ya-a, y' clinker-puller!" the brakeman sneered.

"A little shack got his neck broke in Argentine last week, tryin' to stretch himself out to pass for a man," the roundhouse boss returned, his sarcasm sharper than any knife on the table.

While this passing of pleasantries across the table between the railroading caste was going on, Louise was taking stock of the customer bound for her table. It seemed to her that a window had been opened to the

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broad prairies, admitting a cool wind with the soft, indefinable scents of lonely places in it, there was such a frank confession of unworldliness in this young man's face.

It was a plump face, boyish, ruddy through the brown of wind and sun, freckled a little in keeping with the sandy hair. The young man came walking on his toes, as if afraid he might disturb somebody, his pistol against his thigh, spurs tinkling on his freshly polished boots. His scarlet neckerchief made a fine effect along with the tawny gray of his cougar-skin vest, both of them carried from Texas in his gripsack on top of a cattle car, reserved for an hour such as this.

He was a tall and slender youth, younger in appearance than in fact, as the new biscuit-shooter could see, yet with something of competence and assurance in his forehead, rather narrow and combative; and in his blue eyes, small, with light lashes peculiarly noticeable, arched by sandy eyebrows as delicate and long as a girl's.

The young Texas man took off his pistol before seating himself, hanging it on the back of his chair, in respect to the hospitality of that house, perhaps, or maybe in observance of the ancient custom among armed men when they sat down together to bread. Whatever the purpose or the prompting, Louise Gardner thought better of him for the act. She seemed to get a little look into his simple ethics, and to find them strongly enforced by honor, a quality that did not speak

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from the faces of many who filled their bunkers at Mrs. Cowgill's board.

As for Tom Laylander, he felt that he had been served a banquet before Louise brought him the bread and butter. Her voice seemed to touch a rib, or something equally remote and mysterious inside of him, making it vibrate with a pleasant feeling that hummed through him. He felt so glad he wanted to whoop. He thought it must be because he was away off up there in a strange country, kind of lonesome and cold around the gills, and she had spoken to him in that friendly, understanding way.

He looked after her when she went to the kitchen, carrying her tray beside her in the way he had come in carrying his hat. He just sat and looked, drawing in his breath. The farther she went the longer he drew that breath, as if its expiration might dissolve her, and sweep away the enchanting bit of romance like a flood.

Tom was not more than half through his supper when one of the men that he had left with the cattle came in looking for him, breathing hard as if he had run across the river, excitement pushing out his eyes. Louise saw Laylander rise at the first hurried words and buckle on his gun. He picked up his hat and started for the door; stopped, seeming to consider the situation, the cowboy arguing earnestly, hand on the young man's shoulder, as if to stop him in some unwise design.

Presently Laylander returned to his supper, the cowboy with him. Louise noted as she served the other

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man that Tom's news had filled him; he did not seem to have room for another bite. It was indigestible news; it had brought a cloud to the young man's clear eyes, a lowering, portentous shadow over his good-humored face. Louise hoped it might not be as bad as his face reflected it, whatever it might be. She moved his plate aside and slipped the pie before him. He thanked her with his eyes, but did not touch the pie.

The cowboy finished his hastily gobbled meal and left in as much of a hurry as he had come, plainly on the young drover's order. Laylander buckled on his gun again and stooped to get his hat from under the table, where it had been kicked in the excitement of the conference.

"Don't you like pie?" Louise inquired, coming forward with her tray.

"Yes ma'am, I love it," Laylander replied, red from the stooping for his hat, and something more. "But I just got some news that kind of took away my appetite for pie, if you'll excuse me, ma'am."

"I noticed it. You're one of the Texas boys that came in with the cattle last night, aren't you? I hope it wasn't about your cattle, stampeded or something?"

"It was about my cattle, ma'am," Laylander replied, his eyes on the door, the desire big in him to be gone, she could see. She wanted to hold him, in a woman's unaccountable way, not so much to have her curiosity satisfied as just to hold him when he was itching to be gone.

"I'm sorry," she said, her hands busy among the

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dishes, her eyes lifted for one sympathetic glance. "I used to hear so much about the foolish things cattle do on the range—"

"They wasn't to blame, ma'am," he corrected her with grave courtesy. "I've been turned a trick—"

Louise saw him stiffen as for a jump, his words broken off there and left hanging. Mrs. Cowgill was bringing a man into the dining-room with considerable importance; a tall, heavy-shouldered gray man, with broad red suspenders over his gray woolen shirt, a colored cotton handkerchief awry about his neck. He was dusty and saddle-soiled, but full of loud words and boisterous animation, his big voice ringing in the dining-room audible to its remote corners. He was belted with a pistol; a shaggy gray mustache dropped over his mouth.

"Excuse me, ma'am," said Laylander, going forward to meet the man under Mrs. Cowgill's solicitous convoy.

Louise could feel trouble in the air, trouble in the way the young Texan stepped out to meet this man. The new guest stopped when he saw Laylander, squaring off as if to stand on the defense.

"Colonel Withers, is it true you've sent the sheriff out and attached my cattle?" Laylander demanded.

"You seem to be posted about right," Withers replied.

They stood set, each waiting for the other to make a move, each knowing the man before him well enough to understand what a false start would bring.

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"I don't owe you, or any other man in Kansas, a cent, Colonel Withers. What kind of a trumped-up trick is this you're tryin' to throw over on me?"

"I don't trump up tricks, bud. You'll learn to pick your words better if you hang around where I'm at for a while. Maybe you don't owe me anything, personally, but your old daddy owed me ten thousand dollars long enough to make it an heirloom. I've been waitin' four years for him to send a herd into this state, but I never could git a twist on the old wolf's tail, so I trapped the cub."

"I never heard of any debt owin' to you," the young man said. He spoke more in challenge than denial, the ruddiness fading out of his face.

"Likely not, kid. But the longer you live the more you're due to pick up. I've got old Tom Laylander's note for ten thousand dollars, and it's a good and legal paper. I'm out to collect on it."

"You tolled me on to ship up here so you could levy on my herd!" Tom charged indignantly.

"You guessed it," Withers replied, exulting in the success of his deception.

"Debt or no debt, Colonel Withers, it was a low-handed, sneakin' trick! It was a trick that no man outside of a thief and a liar—"

Withers spun half around, hand on his gun, presenting himself side-on, like a fencer. He seemed to contract and expand, to bunch and spread, concentrating his strength for an outburst of destruction.

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"Any man that spits them words in my face has got to eat 'em! got to eat 'em!" he said.

"You know the way to the door," Tom Laylander replied.

Calhoun Withers, called colonel from his auctioneering days, turned and marched toward the door, followed by young Laylander, whose courage was as high as his honor. Mrs. Cowgill was thrown into a frenzy of consternation by this sudden shaping of tragedy among her peaceful tables. She lifted her arms in impotent signal of distress, running to the long table where the few railroaders lingered over their late supper.

"Stop 'em, stop 'em, some of you men!" she appealed. "Cal Withers is goin' to kill him, and his supper ain't paid for!"

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CHAPTER V

FLAGGED

MRS. COWGILL's fear that Tom Laylander might walk out of her door, and out of the world at the same time, leaving his supper bill unpaid, was premature and unfounded. While she stood making her appeal for interference to the railroad men, who had no concern whatever in what might happen to either of the combatants beyond the entertainment their engagement might afford, the little desk bell began to clamor in insistent and imperative call.

Mrs. Cowgill ran from the room, followed by the railroaders, who came crowding and jesting, working their jaws on the last hurriedly snatched bite, Goosie in the midst of them as gay as if going to a fair. Louise stood a few moments beside the table, hands on the dish-laden tray as if to lift it and go about her duty, let tragedy run out of the door as it might.

She felt a cold numbness settle over her, a shocking realization of the sacrifice that youth was marching out so passionately white and erect to make to honor. She had no doubt that Laylander had been cheated out of his property, or was in the way of being cheated, by

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a groundless claim, but she could not see how he was to help matters any by killing or being killed in the dusty road before the hotel door. She ran after the others, hoping to see somebody come between the angry men and send them away without a fight.

Laylander was before the desk, waiting for Mrs. Cowgill, who was just edging around behind it as Louise reached the office. The railroaders were bunched where they had stopped just inside the office door, not rash enough to allow curiosity to draw them into danger. Angus Valorous, in his white shirt without a collar, the neckband open on his whiskered throat, was pushing after Mrs. Cowgill as if to lend his assistance in the crisis which seemed to confront the establishment. Withers had gone out to the sidewalk. Louise saw him stand there a moment, then turn to the right and saunter nonchalantly past the window out of sight.

"I wish to pay for myself and the other gentleman that et with me," Laylander said, his voice calm and steady.

"It'll be a dollar," Mrs. Cowgill told him, a flutter in her tone, a greater flutter in her heart, which, as she said when recalling the experience, felt like it would wear itself out against her ribs.

Laylander put the money down. At the sight of it all of Mrs. Cowgill's concern for herself was dissipated, the humane and gentle part of her nature, pretty well hardened and driven back out of sight by frontier boarding house life for twenty years and more, impelled her to grasp the young man's hand.

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"Don't go out there, don't you go!" she begged. "Cal Withers has killed three or four men in his time—they say he's a man that never takes chances—he'll not take any chances with you. He'll drop you the minute you step out of that door!"

"Thank you, ma'am," said Laylander, too haughtily proud in his anger and outraged feelings to be embarrassed by her restraining hand. "That was a very nice supper, ma'am. I'm much obliged."

He drew his hand away, gently, thoughtful of her, a kind stranger who wished him well, and started for the door.

"Don't go out there!" Mrs. Cowgill leaned over the counter and stretched her arms out in womanly appeal, the desperation of his situation growing on her as she pleaded. "Go to law and fight him, but don't try to do it with your gun!"

Laylander was at the door, his hand on the screen to push it open. He paused long enough to face around to her in grateful acknowledgment of her concern. He lifted his hand to her in a gallant little salute, and smiled.

"Can't some of you men stop him?" Mrs. Cowgill demanded of them savagely, turning to Windy Moore, the brakeman, the roundhouse foreman and three others who made up the little crowd. "It's murder—it's murder!"

Angus Valorous reached under the counter and drew out a club, a stick such as brakemen used in those days for coupling cars and setting brakes. He made a dash

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for the end of the counter with it in his capable fist. Mrs. Cowgill threw herself in front of him, denying him passage.

"Not you—I don't mean you. One boy's enough to be killed!"

She cornered him behind the counter, pushing along close to the window, where Angus stood glaring and white, holding his club in both hands, like a ball bat, leaning over as if calculating his chances of jumping the counter and making for the door. Mrs. Cowgill caught him by the suspenders and held him prisoner.

Laylander was in plain view through the screen door, standing where he had stepped to the sidewalk, hand close to his gun. He was looking down the street in the direction Withers had gone.

"Somebody make him come in here!" Mrs. Cowgill begged.

The railroaders did not respond. They spread out a little, moving toward the door for a better view, indifferent to anybody's safety but their own. Louise went to the front of the office, where she stood leaning against the counter, feeling as weak and breathless as if her own life depended on some quick action of which she was not capable. She was only dimly conscious of other people in the room, the dread that chilled her was so benumbing and intense. She saw Laylander walk slowly across the broad sidewalk under the hotel awning, hand hovering over his pistol, fingers spread stiffly, awkwardly for such a tremendous emergency, it seemed. He stepped carefully, like a man wading a

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shallow, rapid, rocky stream, head turned to watch down the street.

Through the window at the end of the counter Louise saw Withers and three other men, all armed, starting across the street at a point about opposite the farther corner of the hotel. They were walking in the same cautious way, feet raised high at every step, heads twisted to watch the lone man who was wading out into that invisible stream of death, as it seemed to Louise, to face them and fall.

The railroaders craned their necks; nobody spoke. Angus Valorous, held by Mrs. Cowgill's determined hand, was beating the counter in quick, savage blows of his club, like a caged gorilla venting its impotent rage. Myron Cowgill came, pipe in his mouth, moved by a slow curiosity, to stand behind the railroaders and stretch his spine and tiptoe, in the deferential way of a man who had been subordinated to boarders for many years. A thin stream of smoke issued from the bowl of his pipe, to be drawn slowly out through the screen door.

Laylander was about a quarter of the way across the broad, dust-smothered street, his left hand a little before him, his feet lifted slowly and put down carefully, wading, wading into that invisible swift stream. He was watching Cal Withers and the three men along with him, as he went. Withers had come to the middle of the street, and stopped.

Louise Gardner moved a little nearer the door. She was taut as a wet rope, choked with the indignant,

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voiceless protest against one man's foolish courage and four men's shameless threat. The others who stood watching the oncoming tragedy were silent. Angus Valorous ceased his clatter to lean and look, breath held for the first shot. Mrs. Cowgill stood clinging to his suspenders, her eyes big with the terror that paralyzed her ready tongue.

Laylander reached the middle of the street. There he squared around to face the little bunch of men twenty yards or less along the dusty way, backing from them a little, as if the distance did not agree with his method, or to give himself more time to calculate his chance against this unexpected number. As if in derision of this maneuver, but in fact to provoke Laylander into firing the first shot, Withers jerked off his hat and flung it sailing into the space that lay between them.

Laylander fell into the trap that would give Withers an excuse in law for shooting him down. He slung out his gun and put a bullet through the hat before it struck the ground.

Louise saw Laylander skip and leap, as a boy prances to dodge rocks and confuse the aim of his assailants, when the others began to shoot; she saw the little spurts of dust around his feet, and the jerking motion of his arm as he threw a quick shot in reply.

"Stop her! stop that girl!" Mrs. Cowgill screamed.

Angus Valorous beat a frenzied tattoo on the counter with his club as Louise dashed open the screen door and ran into the street between the fighting men,

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before Laylander could steady himself for a second, and more effective, shot.

"They'll murder her!" Mrs. Cowgill cried out, her voice broken by alarm.

She hurried to the door, Angus close after her, club in his hand.

Louise stood facing Withers, her arms stretched out in commanding gesture, as if she barred the way to both his bullets and himself.

"She's flagged him!" said Windy Moore.

The shooting stopped with the appearance of Louise in the road. Mrs. Cowgill and Angus rushed in to enforce her demand for peace; everybody thought it was a good time to go out and hear what was said. Windy Moore, the brakeman, led the way from the hotel; Banjo Gibson came at the head of those who started over from the saloon. There was such a crowd between the lines in a few seconds that any more shooting for that occasion was out of all safety bounds.

Withers put up his pistol; somebody handed him his hat. He jerked it ungraciously from the man who had picked it up, beat the dust out of it against his leg, put it on, and stood glaring at Angus Valorous as if the blame for the whole disturbance lay on his head. Nobody appeared to be hurt on either side, although Laylander was lost sight of for the moment in the crowding forward and the up-trampling of dust.

"If I ever saw a low-down houn' on two legs," said Mrs. Cowgill, "I'm lookin' at one right now. Four of

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you to pile onto that innocent boy, no more shame in you, Cal Withers, than a dog!"

"When your opinion's needed, ma'am, it'll be called for," Withers said, the sting of her reproach bringing a surge of blood into his face.

"Put up that gun!" Angus Valorous commanded, lifting his club against one of Withers' men who stood with his weapon drawn as if he wanted to go on with the fight. The fellow looked with a sort of startled surprise at the bristling young man with the unsullied new club. "Put it up, I said!" Angus repeated, in the deep harsh voice of a terrible man.

The cowboy seemed to be charmed by the peculiar weapon that menaced his head. He fixed his eyes on Angus with startled, staring attention as his hand moved slowly to restore the pistol to its place.

"If you ever pull a gun on me I'll bust you wide open!" Angus threatened.

The people who had crowded up to see and hear pressed around Withers and his men in that questioning silence peculiar to a crowd that has arrived when the thing is over. There is an expression in such silence of feeling cheated out of something, and a question of whether it is going to begin again. Laylander approached, pushing his way apologetically among those who stood near Mrs. Cowgill.

"It's a handy thing to have a lady friend around to do your fightin' for you!" Withers said.

"The lady is a stranger to me, but no man can speak a slight against her where I'm at," Laylander replied.

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Mrs. Cowgill put herself between them as the others fell back to make room for the show they had hoped all along would open again.

"She's the same to me as my daughter," Mrs. Cowgill declared. "You keep a still tongue in your mouth when you speak of that girl, Cal Withers!"

"Ma'am, I don't need any he-woman to tell me my business." Withers scored her with a look as he spoke. "You got through this time, but," turning to Laylander, "but you're not apt to be so lucky the next time I catch you away from the women folks. I just want to say this to you, kid: you're standin' where the roads branch; one of 'em runs off to nowhere, the other one to Texas. I'll leave it to you to pick the one you take."

"I'll be found right around here till I get my property back, Colonel Withers."

"He's no more colonel than my old black Rachel!" Mrs. Cowgill declared.

"You'll stay some time," Withers said, passing over Mrs. Cowgill's challenge to his honorable auctioneering title.

"I'll law you ten years, but I'll get them cattle of mine," Laylander said.

"You'll never live ten seconds if I meet you in the road!"

"There never will be a better time than right now, Colonel Withers."

"That's right!" said Windy Moore. "You might as well have it out right here."

"Four to one, the way Cal Withers always fights,

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I've heard it said, and I'll bet money he could clean you up, too," Mrs. Cowgill said. "I'm not goin' to have any fightin' and scrappin' in front of my hotel, now or any other time, if I can put a stop to it."

The city marshal appeared at that moment. He had a word or two with Cal Withers, who started off in the direction of the saloon, his men shouldering up close around him, their heads together in close talk.

"They look as mean as misery," Banjo Gibson said.

Laylander looked around for the girl who had imperiled her life to save his own. She was not there. Windy Moore, who had an eye for every direction, saw what was passing in the young man's mind.

"I saw her skim across to the hotel," he said.

The crowd scattered, the sun went down, red as a clinker from a fire-box, with clouds banked darkly in the northwest threatening rain. Mrs. Cowgill looked strangely at Angus Valorous as he returned to the hotel beside her, his good sound club in hand. It was as if she had seen the man rise up in him, and was puzzled to account for it by any reasoning at her command.

Tom Laylander, under tow of Banjo Gibson, returned to the hotel and sat on a bench beside the door. From that haven they saw Withers and his men get on their horses presently and ride away, lifting, for a time at least, the constraint of watching from Laylander's troubled mind.

"She run right up to the room," Goosie whispered as she stood with her mother looking into the deserted dining-room.

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"Well," said Mrs. Cowgill, in meaningless, empty way. "I'll send Angus to clear away the dishes."

"Didn't she make a sight of herself!" Goosie said, shocked beyond all bounds.

"I spoke my mind to Cal Withers," her mother returned, with wide irrelevance. "It'll cost me money, but I can live without his business. And I spoke my mind."

When she sent Angus Valorous to help Goosie with the dishes, Mrs. Cowgill gave him that queer, baffled, questioning look again. She went outside to take the cool of the evening on the bench along with Banjo Gibson and the young man from Texas, whose fresh, honest, homely face made her think of a pink cosmos flower, it was so plain, and yet so good to see. She did her best to assure him that he was among friends at the Cottonwood Hotel, no matter what might wait for him out in the road.

Business was slack at that hour; cowhands did not begin to come in until much later in the night, after they had made the round of the town. Angus Valorous—commonly called by her Angus V'lor's, after his own pronunciation of the sonorous word—would take care of them, as always. She puzzled again over that unexpected showing of the man in him, thinking in her own strange way that he must have grown up in the night without her noticing it.

She looked in at the window to see if Angus Valorous had returned to his duty behind the desk. Angus was there. He had taken three cigar boxes from the

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showcase, put the ink-bottle on one of them, making an engine of it. He was pushing this little train forward and back the length of the short counter, between show-case and wall, fat little mouth puckered, black-whiskered cheeks rising and falling in the rapid exhaust of his chuffing engine, the world and its business, its comedies and tragedies, shut out of his thoughts as by an iron door.

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CHAPTER VI

ONE THING AND ANOTHER

THE parlor of the Cottonwood Hotel was in the front of the house, opposite the office. It was a room that was a sort of left-over, suitable for nothing else but a parlor, small and pinched, with two lean windows looking out on a cottonwood tree, the sidewalk and the end of the watering trough. Drummers sometimes used it for a sample room, making it gay with red underwear, silk petticoats, and neckties of assertive hues.

There was a little round table in the middle of the room, with a knitted cord cover; on the table a copy of Gems For The Fireside, a thick brown book with tinsel lettering, representing Mrs. Cowgill's sole literary investment during the course of her life; a folding panorama of Niagra Falls; a lamp with a china bowl and festive, pleated shade. There was a sofa which presented disconcerting inequalities, like the carcass of a dead horse; and a chair with spiral springs, upholstered in ingrain carpeting, standing over against the window which gave the best view upon the street. This chair sighed and creaked when sat on, very much like

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the sound of air brakes under freight cars, well in harmony with the railroad atmosphere of the house.

There was a picture of a plate of fish on the wall, and another one of Pharaoh's Horses, alarmed and wild-eyed, seeming always about to bolt away from the scent of the fish and never making a start. There were rocking chairs with spindles in the backs, like the balusters of stairs, and narrow arms which crowded a railroader or stockman to force himself into their embrace; and a carpet with big flowers such as never grew in any field but that of the loom; and in a corner an organ, with work on the top of it similar to the headboard of an old-time walnut bed. It was a very grand organ, having many stops and starts, all of which were known to Goosie like the toes on her feet. When Goosie played it and sang Ma-ha-goreet, her tears fell down upon the keys.

Mrs. Cowgill liked to sit in the carpet chair on rainy days, such as this, and watch the cowhands come and go on their drenched horses, mud to the fetlocks in the street that was dust but yesterday, water slithering from their slickers, not much gaiety in them, and no regard for anybody who wanted to cross on foot. Banjo Gibson was sitting at the other window, facing Mrs. Cowgill in amiable propinquity. Banjo was living at the Cottonwood Hotel on his means; he would continue on that arrangement until his wad of sixty dollars was gone, which would be a good while at five dollars a week for room and board, the current rate for regulars at that house. Which was a high rate for that

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town and that day, sufficient to keep the vulgar in their proper place.

It was that slack hour in the afternoon between dinner and supper—there was no such meal as luncheon in the heavy economy of the Cottonwood Hotel—when cook and dining-room girls, as well as Mrs. Cowgill, had a little while to catch their breath. Mrs. Cowgill encouraged the girls to make use of the parlor during this lull, their presence there giving the house an air of liveliness and continual business. Goosie frequently pumped the organ in the afternoon, and sang her sentimental songs, although she could not merge herself so completely and comfortably with the lost ladies of the ballads when there was anybody around as she could when alone, and in a darkened place.

Mrs. Cowgill had a son, a knock-kneed, shambling, long-armed stuttering chap of twenty-four or five, who had a regular run firing a through freight. She called him Herby, but everybody else called him Pap. He was laying over today, and he also was in the parlor, spread out on the sofa in the elegant repose of a man who could afford it. He had blue sleeve-holders with tassels. Pap had a naturally leering and goggling look about him which seemed to mock and discredit everybody, and everything they said. He talked slowly and thickly, his words catching frequently, like a knot at the end of a rope.

So these three lights of civilization were in the parlor of the Cottonwood Hotel, engaged in a three-cornered

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talk, the subject of which was Tom Laylander, and his adventures in McPacken.

"I sent him to Judge Dockum," Mrs. Cowgill said. "I knew if his case was to *be* won, Judge Dockum could win it."

"It'll be five or six weeks before court meets," said Banjo, "and them cattle they're out there with nine or ten deputy sheriffs herdin' and watchin' over them. It don't matter much, it looks to me, who wins, with all them costs to pay. Won't be nothing left."

"Poor feller! He paid them two men that helped him bring the cattle up from Texas, and he had to put down a hundred dollars before Judge Dockum he'd touch the case. It left him strapped."

"I hu-hu-hope you ain't carryin' him on," said Pap.

"He paid a week in advance, but his time's up today. Well, I wouldn't shut down on him, even if he didn't have a job."

"Got a job, has he?" Banjo inquired, a laugh in his words as if he saw humor in the necessity that drove a man to that pass.

"Funny the way that boy hunted high and low over this town for work and couldn't find it anywhere," Mrs. Cowgill soliloquized. "Yes; oh yes. He got a job this morning; starts in tomorrow, he told me."

"Cow job?" Banjo inquired.

"No; too bad it ain't. But he didn't want to leave town, he said. I think the poor boy wants to be here in hopes he'll meet that old rascal Withers and shoot it out between them."

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"From what I hear of Withers he ain't so long on the fight as you might take him to be," Banjo said.

"He'll fight, all right," Mrs. Cowgill corrected him, seriously and glumly enough. "The trouble with him is he wants to have a sure thing. That boy never will meet him alone; Cal's always goin' to be careful to have two or three limber-jims with him when he comes to town. I saw him in yesterday morning with that same gang he had the other day, but Tom was out hustlin' around for a job and didn't even know he was in town."

"Maybe he wasn't lookin' for him very hu-hu-hard," said Pap.

"Don't fool yourself!" Banjo advised, seriously. "That boy he'd wade through a river of wildcats for a crack at that old crook."

"He won't make the mistake of shootin' first next time, though," Mrs. Cowgill said confidently. "I posted him on *that*. Well, when he goes to work maybe he'll be kep' out of the way. Cal don't come to town except to do his business with the bank and buy his supplies. He's only around here in business hours. I hope to mercy we can put off that shootin' match till Tom beats the case in court."

"What kind of a job's he got?" Pap asked.

"It was funny the way he went around town huntin' work," Mrs. Cowgill said, ignoring the importunities of Banjo and her son, bound to begin at the beginning and move all the trifles out of her way clear down to the end. "He was wearin' that old white Stetson—well it was white once—with the crown pushed up as high as

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it would go, his gun hangin' on him like he was out to kill. He went to the roundhouse first, and struck Ford Langley to take him on. Ford said he looked like a toothpick under a toadstool with that big hat on, his face kind of peakid the way it's got since this trouble struck him. Ford sent him on to the shops, and the boys there got onto the joke and passed him along from one fool thing to another. They kep' him trottin' two or three days before he caught on they were kiddin' him."

Banjo Gibson laughed; a care-free, head-back, mouth-open laugh that rang with an appreciation of life. Pap seemed indifferent to the further adventures of the Texas cowman, ignoble creature at the best.

"He tried the livery stable and the stores, and I believe he even tried the bank," Mrs. Cowgill continued.

"Where'd he pick up a job?" Banjo asked, trying politely to bring the evasive narration to an end.

"Jerryin'. Orrin Smith took him on the section."

"The hu-hu-hell you say!" said Pap.

Banjo said nothing. He looked sort of foolish, his face coloring a little, as if he had heard something obscene.

"He asked me for board when he come in at noon, and I told him I'd let him stay."

"The hu-hu-hell you did!" said Pap.

"I've been kind of thick with that feller, I kind of took up with him," Banjo confessed, regret, humiliation, in his tone.

"Well, he didn't know any better than to go to jerry-

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in'. He's as green as grass," Mrs. Cowgill excused him.

"Jerryin'!" Banjo derided. "I'd ruther git me a tin bill and shovel mud with the ducks."

"It was funny," Mrs. Cowgill reflected, the humor of the case bright in her eyes. "When he come back today he said he was goin' railroadin'."

"The hu-hu-hell he did! Damn jerry!" Pap was so moved by the fellow's presumption that he sat up, his greasy countenance inflamed, his pop eyes leering.

"What're they payin' the jerries now?" Banjo asked, indifferently.

"Two-and-a-half on this division; east of here only two," Mrs. Cowgill replied.

"You'll be losin' a lot of railroad men if you make this hu-hu-house a dump for jerries," Pap warned her.

"There'll only be him and Orrin. Nobody's got any kick comin' on Orrin, him boss, even if it ain't such a very high-up job. I'll put him and Tom off together at a corner table, and Louise can wait on 'em. Nobody'll notice. Well, I don't care if they do. He's a good, decent boy; he didn't know what he was doin' when he took a section-hand job."

"Let him go over to Ryan's with the rest of the jerries," Pap suggested indignantly.

"He'll stay right here in this house till he gets good and ready to leave," said Mrs. Cowgill.

She closed her mouth very tightly on the declaration, her thin lips fitting like some excellent piece of joinery.

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Pap knew what it meant when she spoke and looked that way. A switch engine couldn't move her.

Pap went to the office and helped himself to one of the best cigars in the case, which was no great drain on the finances of the establishment. He sat on the porch smoking. Mrs. Cowgill could see him, sitting there gloomy and disgruntled, as much out of sorts over her harboring a common jerry in that house as if he had been called on to share his bed with a stranger.

Louise came to the parlor door, looked in, and started away.

"Was you lookin' for something, Louise?" Mrs. Cowgill called.

"The rest of the Kansas City paper." Louise displayed part of it, with a nod and friendly smile to Banjo, who waved his hand airily.

"I ain't seen it," Mrs. Cowgill returned indifferently, "but I expect Myron's got it off in a corner somewhere. That man he'll read anything; he'll let business go any day to set down with a book or a paper and read."

Mrs. Cowgill was censorious and severe. She had no pride in her husband's facility with an accomplishment that was only a business adjunct to her, and loosely grasped at the best. She had heard Myron boast that he could read his carpenter's square, once in an argument with a timber carpenter on a bridge gang. Myron had meant to prove by that assertion that he was an aristocrat among carpenters, one who had learned his trade by a long apprenticeship and could "lay out" a house. It had become a prodpole in his

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wife's hands, much to Myron's discomfort in subsequent years.

"Oh well, let him read it then," said Louise, unwilling to snatch one of Myron's few pleasures out of his hand. She entered the parlor, and sat on the end of the sofa.

"If he'd do more of his readin' on his square, as I tell him, maybe I wouldn't have to slave my head off runnin' a hotel," Mrs. Cowgill said bitterly, at war on every point with all manner of printed matter that was not pressed into steel. "Now, there goes Herby over to the saloon! Banjo, I wish you'd go after him and tell him to let that slop alone. Tell him I said he'd better remember he's got to go out on his run tonight, and to let that slop alone!"

Banjo was not reluctant to go. He felt that he could carry a shot or two very cheerfully that gloomy day himself.

"I guess he's just goin' over to play a game of seven-up," said he, rising, making preparation to follow. "Well, Louise, how're you stackin' up?"

"I'm as gay as possible, Mr. Banjo."

"Mr. Banjo!" Mrs. Cowgill repeated in comical astonishment, as she might have exclaimed over finding a ribbon on the handle of her frying pan. Then she laughed, shrilly, in sudden outbreak, according to her habit, very little change in her facial expression indicative of mirth except her wide-stretched mouth.

"I thought you might be in love," said Banjo, face-

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tiously. "You kind o' look like you'd been losin' sleep. If you need any advice, come to me."

"Thank you, Mr. Banjo." Louise made him a little bow, a merry light in her agate-clear brown eyes.

"I never heard you was a love doctor, Banjo," Mrs. Cowgill said. Her fit of merriment had brought a flush to her cheeks, as brandy starts its fires under the eyes of one not accustomed to its use. Perhaps laughter intoxicated Mrs. Cowgill in like manner, so unaccustomed to her lips.

Banjo laughed in his own loud way, the machinery being well oiled and easy to swing in his case. It was a pleasant sound, tuneful, contagious. One scarcely could help laughing with Banjo Gibson, let the matter that moved it be as trivial as a gnat. He waved his hand, jaunty and care-free as a troubadour should be. At next sight of him he was picking his way across the muddy street.

"Well, he ought to be posted in love matters, if he ain't," Mrs. Cowgill reflected, watching him with a sort of aloof and impersonal interest, as she might have watched a rooster engaged on a similar expedition. "He's been married to three women; he ought to know something about love."

"Young as he is?" Louise marvelled, taking the chair lately vacated by the notable under discussion. "What became of them all?"

"Two of them run off with other men and one divorced him," Mrs. Cowgill replied, Banjo Gibson's simple history succinct and ready on her tongue.

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"He's had a lot of experience for a little man," said Louise, looking after him with new interest. "But his losses don't seem to trouble him very much."

"No, nor make him any wiser. He's as light in the head as smoke. Well, if there ain't Maud Kelly! Look at her—just look at her—liftin' up them skirts!"

Louise leaned to see. A tall young woman, wearing a man's sombrero, a rubber cape around her shoulders, was crossing the street a little below the point where Banjo Gibson had forded it. She was displaying considerably more shank than was countenanced in those long-skirted days, stopping now and then to sling the viscous mud from her feet with a vigorous forward kick, which did not add to the decorum of her march.

It was plain that public opinion had very little weight with Maud Kelly. She was careless of the curious eyes fixed on her up and down the street. She crossed over to the hotel, where she stamped the rough of the mud off and continued on her way.

"Well, as I live! If that girl was a daughter of mine I'd sew her up in a sack," Mrs. Cowgill declared.

"She seems to be unconscious of any unusual display," said Louise. "Who is she? I mean, does she belong to anybody in particular?"

"Her father's one of our retired men; lives here in town. He used to be a cattleman, and a big one in his day, but he lost most of his money in mines. Maud's got a job in the court house; deputy county treasurer. Fine one to be trustin' with all that money!"

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"She seems to be rather strong-minded," Louise ventured. She was looking at Maud Kelly's back as she went swinging up the street, skirts held high above her shoetops with careless grasp, swishing about her legs as she strode along swinging her arm.

"I don't think she's got much of any kind of a mind. She's just dare-devilish and don't care. Last winter she was ont on a hayride with some of the young folks here in town and the boys bantered her to strike a match like a man. Well, *she done it!*"

"She looks like she would," said Louise. "Was it day or night?"

"Night, thank goodness! But it wouldn't 'a' made no difference to *her*. Anyhow, we'll soon be rid of her in the treasurer's office. She's goin' to resign her job in a month or so to be married. She's marryin' a man named Cook, baggage-smasher here on the road. He's a big, fine-lookin' man with a brown mustache. He's got a good job, too, better than brakeman; he makes good money, but I don't think it's the kind of a job the man that marries that girl ought to have—home one day and away two. The man that marries Maud Kelly wants to be at home *every* day."

"I wish I was a citizen of this town; I'd go and apply for her job."

"Yes, it'd be more suitable to you than dining-room work. If Goosie had the education you've got I wouldn't keep her around this place a minute. Why don't you try for the job, anyhow? Mr. Montgomery,

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the treasurer, he stops in every morning on his way to the office for a cigar—he says I keep the best in town. I'll speak to him about it in the morning. I wouldn't doubt he'd hire you in a minute."

"I never did that kind of work; I don't know a thing about it, but I believe I could handle the job, all right."

"Of course you could. Nothing to do but make out tax receipts and take in money. I could nearly do that myself—I could if I could write and spell a little better."

"There are mighty few things you couldn't do," said Louise, with more sincerity than flattery. She had seen enough of Julia Cowgill to know that she was a highly competent woman, indeed.

"I'll speak to him about it in the morning for you. It's a good place to get married from, better than a dining-room, respectable and nice as that is if a girl wants to make it that way. Of course Goosie she's doin' well with Bill Connor. He'll get his engine next year and they can live in style down in Argentine. But every girl in dining-room work can't do that well. Goosie ain't a hired girl. It's like marryin' a member of the firm."

"Yes, there's a big difference," said Louise.

She had felt this difference from the first in the attitude of the regular boarders who were familiar with her standing there. They attempted familiarities with her which they would not dare with the landlady's

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daughter, subjected her to coarse jokes and boisterous humor from which Goosie was supremely exempt.

Ford Langley, roundhouse foreman, was one of the leading humorists of the dining-room. He was as persistent as one of those gnats which dance and dart before the face when one walks at evening along a woodland path, innocuous but irritating. Ford Langley was no more to be brushed aside nor frightened away from his provoking witticisms than one of those inconsequential creatures, which fill no purpose in nature save to provoke and irritate, that any man ever has found out.

Langley was playing up to Goosie, plainly in the hope of supplanting Bill Connor, employing all the small flatteries of a sycophant. The most favored trick Langley had among his crude devices was showing Goosie in light superior to the green girl.

Langley would wink and smirk, and pass remarks about educated biscuit-shooters. He had many witty things to say about the thousand ways to make money that such a superior person knew, of which biscuit-shooting was the surest and best. Langley was an under-sized, dark-visaged man, with a nose sharp enough to work embroidery, as Mrs. Cowgill said. He had been reduced from engineer, and hoped to mount to that exalted station again in his day. Louise took Langley's banter with outward indifference, only now and then giving him a cut with some clever retort that turned the laugh to her side. These little flashes of

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repartee, her ready efforts to please everybody with her service, no matter how gay or how glum, raised up certain champions for her, who were not silent in her defense. Louise would much rather have had them keep their peace.

Goosie was friendly, but cynical and impatient, after the way of people who know much about some common thing, and hold all the rest of the world ignorant and in contempt. Try as she might, Louise could not march up to the swinging door between kitchen and dining-room with a loaded tray on her palm, held at shoulder's level, back up to it and give it a kick with anything approaching the art of Goosie.

Louise had to take the door slowly, pushing it with her free shoulder and edging through; Goosie marched out while it was on the swing from her competent and practiced foot. Louise was afraid to risk more than half as high a stack of empties on the tray as Goosie bore in triumph to the kitchen sink, where Angus Valorous washed them in the midst of a clatter from which he drew no knowing what simulation of jangling freight trains and puffing engines.

There was no romance, and mighty little dignity, in the labor of carrying on food at the Cottonwood Hotel; perhaps there is not much romance nor dignity in such a job anywhere. Louise did not doubt that Goosie's complaint of the unequal distribution of work, due to her assistant's want of bone and muscle, and inability to master the art of kicking open a swinging door, had led to Mrs. Cowgill's suggestion about the court house

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job. There was hope in the outlook, Louise knew, for Mrs. Cowgill was a woman with a pull. If her pull with the county treasurer was only half as strong as it was with the division superintendent of the railroad, Louise believed Mrs. Cowgill could land her in Maud Kelly's place without putting her influence to much of a strain.

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CHAPTER VII

A LOWLY MAN

ONE day of sun turned the mud of Santa Fé street into dust again, not so deep and comfortable under a horse's hoof as before, yet plentiful enough to give the two cottonwood trees in front of the hotel a gray and familiar look. Angus Valorous came to the door at four o'clock, neckband open, sleeves rolled above his elbows and held there by pink elastic bands with crinkled edges, which looked as if they had been designed for feminine purposes not quite so public.

This was beefsteak and onions day at the Cottonwood Hotel; Angus Valorous was still inflamed and lacrimose from paring and slicing half a peck of Irish figs. His attitude toward the public was resentfully indignant, as a man who had been put under a slight. He looked up and down the sidewalk, turned his head like a chicken and took a one-eyed quick calculation of the sun, sniffing inaudibly, but visibly, as he glanced at Banjo Gibson, who was sitting on one of the green benches beside the door.

Angus went for his watering pot after making these

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observations, and dampened down the sidewalk planks. There was no question, after that proceeding, that dry weather had come back to McPacken again. Angus sprinkled very close to Banjo Gibson's feet, suspended his stream suddenly, looked up with an expression of forbearing injury, as if he had met with another public affront.

"Can't you move?" he demanded, his voice rumbling in manly threat.

"I guess I can," Banjo replied, equally injured and insulted.

"I got to sprinkle here," Angus insisted.

Banjo kept his place on the end of the bench. The watering pot was dribbling a little stream near the toe of his polished shoe.

"If your head swells any bigger," said Banjo, unimpressed by the imperative necessity of water on that particular spot, "it'll bust like a fall cabbage after a rain. When that happens to you, young feller, all that'll be left of you will be a little mist."

Banjo moved along the bench a few feet after handing out this, leaving the dry spot open to the operations of Angus.

"Ya-a-a! what's it *to* you!" snarled Angus, sprinkling away.

"If you ever do get to be a brakey you'll be one of the kind that thinks the train's a runnin' for your sport and pleasure, and you're doin' the passengers a favor to let 'em ride."

"Ya-a-a! what's it *to* you!"

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"You'll never see the day you'll climb a boxcar with a badge on your hat. Even a brakey's got to have brains enough to turn around."

"Aw-w-w! go ahn an' bite yourself!"

Angus emptied his can and stood swinging it to drain out the last drops, belligerent, bristling. He was not taken down by Banjo's sarcasm; he was not to be taken down by any reproof that human tongue could frame. Banjo ignored him. He crossed his legs comfortably, and went on in pursuit of his own thoughts and ambitions, which perhaps were neither very deep nor high.

Angus went in to let his sleeves down and put on his collar, signal that his menial tasks were over for that day, and that he was not going to help the girls bear off and on in the dining-room that evening. When Angus put his collar on he felt that he had put up the flags of an extra. He was then official in the front office; he had the right of way over everything. Mrs. Cowgill respected that signal. She would have turned in and helped the girls herself before she would have asked Angus to carry on beefsteak and onions with his stand-up collar on.

Banjo Gibson remained on the green bench beside the door, building the sort of castles a shallow little inconsequential grig of a man may lift in the romantic distances of his vision. Tinsel castles, doubtless, with painted ladies in them, and no board to pay. He remained there until the whistle at the shops announced the close of the railroad day, and the men began to arrive for supper. As they passed him, Banjo had a

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hearty word for everyone, and they were no less cordial, although somewhat patronizing and indulgent, as toward an inferior who had the special license of a peculiar gift or genius which lifted him almost up to their plane.

Bill Connor came in from his run, the first time Banjo had seen him since his return. Banjo had left him a wiper in the roundhouse when he went away from McPacken two years before to follow the fortunes of the medicine man. Now Bill had grown in bulk and consequence, but Banjo knew him the moment his foot struck the sidewalk under the awning.

It was a delightful reunion, at least for Banjo. He exclaimed in the wondering pleasure that an accomplished flatterer can make so pleasing to the object of it, as he looked Bill over from his little black cap with green visor to the soles of his oily big shoes. They were talking that way, Banjo all laughter, Bill grinning tolerantly, his broad face sooted and black, when Tom Laylander came in from his first day's work as a section hand, or jerry, as the men who made the road safe for the wheels were called in derision.

"Hello, Mr. Gibson," Tom hailed, warmly and ingenuously, pausing a moment, a smile lighting up his face.

Banjo cut short his animated talk, turning slowly, as if an unwelcome, impertinent hand had been laid on his shoulder. He looked blankly, coldly, into Tom Laylander's face, seeming to say: "Now, who is this rascally vagabond?" Only he did not say anything.

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Just stood that way, haughtily, coldly; displeasure, contempt, in his sneering little face. He turned to Bill Connor again, having cut the impudent jerry to the bone.

Tom Laylander's face burned with the insult; his heart seemed to drop so low in his mortification that it hit the ground. He went on, lame of foot from his high-heeled boots, which were made for the saddle, and not the ballast bed of a railroad. His hands were blistered by the tamping-bar that he had swung with the killing vigor of a greenhorn for the longest ten hours he ever had lived.

Laylander's pistol was buckled around him, as he had worn it all day, much to the entertainment of the jerries, the leather of his belt sweat-soaked and sagging, his body galled from the drag of it. He wondered what he had done to forfeit the friendship of Banjo Gibson, quite innocent yet of the barrier that he had raised between himself and other railroad men when he went to work for Orrin Smith on the section.

The jerry, to the better paid, more pleasantly employed railroad men, was a sort of clown, a comical low fellow to be laughed at and treated with jest, and regarded with complacent self-felicitation on one's natural and social superiority over him. These more fortunate servants of the same master drew a rigid social line. This was as pronounced between conductor, engineer, brakeman, fireman, shop mechanic and the like on one hand; the jerry on the other, as between white men and black.

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Mrs. Cowgill was fully cognizant of this social division. She knew she was going squarely in the face of public prejudice when she took Tom Laylander to board as a section hand. It did not need Pap's objections, nor Banjo Gibson's scorn, to tell her this. But she liked the boy. She did not have the heart to hurt him by pointing out an inferiority that was not his, that he did not and could not feel.

But she would draw the line with Tom. No other jerry could sit at her table or sleep in her beds. Railroad men washed up and put on clean collars and clean clothes before coming to supper. They went out in the morning to the shops looking like gentlemen, their greasy garments in neat rolls under their arms. She knew how the jerries at Ryan's came and went in the same clothes day after day, sneaking a bar of soap from Mrs. Ryan on Sunday to wash their shirts and overalls in the river. Nobody could blame a railroad man for refusing to sit with such a crowd at the table. Goosie would not wait on men like that.

It was a big concession, therefore, to lodge Tom Laylander after he had fallen to the low estate of section hand. It was not mercenary; she had plenty of boarders without him. It was nothing in the world but that assertion of tenderness and humanity that dies so hard in people's breasts, living in most of us long after we believe we have smothered it in the interest of our business and social success.

Tom came to supper as fresh as a pink, tidy in a clean shirt and neck-tie, his cougar-skin vest hiding his

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suspenders from the ladies' eyes. Mrs. Cowgill believed he even had gone to the trouble to shave. Orrin Smith, the section boss, had finished his supper and gone; Goosie had put a pair of cowhands at his table. She was sitting at the foot of the long common table, taking her supper with Bill Connor. Everybody else had cleaned up their pie and gone.

Mrs. Cowgill led Tom to a little table in a secluded corner, even farther away from the center of activities than she had intended. It was a pleasant situation beside a window. The evening wind was blowing the draggled lace curtains, bringing in with it a scent of curing prairie hay.

"After you wait on Tom, take your own supper," Mrs. Cowgill directed Louise. "Goosie she's about through; she'll catch anybody that happens in."

Tom hung his gun on the back of his chair, and stood a moment hesitantly deferential, as if he could not bring himself to sit down first in the presence of a lady. His face was red from the heat and sweat of the day, which something that he had put on it out of a little bottle with a ribbon around its neck had stimulated. This was a lotion thought to be very balmy and refreshing to the freshly shaved railroad face. It was in strong demand at Earl Gray's drug store.

"You're late, Mr. Laylander. There isn't much left," Louise said.

"Anything the cook can throw on a dish will do," Tom replied, growing redder, as if the lotion struck deeper every moment.

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"Liver or steak?" Louise inquired, trying to look and feel detached and indifferent, as became her profession, but fighting a great deal harder to keep from smiling in the ingenuous young man's face. "I could get you some French fried, if you like them."

"I love 'em!" Tom declared, with such ardent simplicity that the smile could be restrained no longer.

Louise looked up; Tom, still standing beside the chair, tall and bashful and red, looked down. Each smiled into the other's eyes, and both felt more comfortable, the constraint removed, the way to something friendly, even steak and liver, made clear.

"I recommend the steak," said Louise, in advisory tone.

"It'll hit me fine, ma'am," said Tom, hand on the back of the chair as respectfully as if he waited for the roadmaster, or the section boss, or the governor, or somebody equally high and important, to depart. "But I'm not in *any* kind of a hurry," Tom protested. "You go ahead and get your own supper first."

"Certainly not," Louise returned, so decisively it made the young man start as if Cal Withers had taken a shot at him through the window. "But I'll take it along with you—if you don't mind," Louise proposed, smiling away the confusion her apparently snappish refusal had brought upon him.

"I'll be honored and delighted," said Tom. "I've been wantin' to have a little talk with you ever since you stepped out there in the road—"

"Wait till I bring on the supper," she suggested.

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Tom found himself up against a ledge when it came to going into the subject of his obligation to Louise for stepping between him and Cal Withers when the odds stood so heavily against him that day. It was past, and it deserved nothing but to be forgotten, she said.

"That's easy to say, Miss Gardner, ma'am, but not so easy done. I owe you nothing short of my life. They'd 'a' got me that time; I didn't know he was goin' to bring out a bunch of them."

"They say it's his way. But forget about it, Mr. Laylander." She put her hand on his with a quick hovering touch, like the lighting of a bird, looking her appeal for no more thanks into his eyes.

"I'll have to let it pass, then, with this said, till you're better paid," he yielded. "Please just call me Tom. I'm nothing *at* all but a common jerry now."

"And I'm nothing but a common biscuit-shooter; call me Louise. But why do you say you're *nothing* but a jerry? A jerry is the same as any other railroader to me."

"Not to everybody," said Tom, shaking his head sadly. "It didn't strike me that it was such a poor and low-down job till that little Banjo Gibson man refused to speak to me this evenin'. He acted like I'd given him a mortal insult."

"Oh, that little loafer!"

"He was standin' talkin' to that man over at the table with Miss Goosie. He was plumb mortified and ashamed."

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"How do you know it was because you're a jerry?"

"I asked that Angus boy. He was insulted, too. He said a jerry didn't have any business hornin' in amongst railroad men."

"It appears that we're both social outcasts, then, Tom. They kid me because I fell from book-agent to biscuit-shooter, and it seems like a comical sort of one, at that. They guy me till I feel like breaking dishes on them sometimes, especially Ford Langley. He seems to have a diabolical sort of pleasure in turning the laugh against a poor workin' girl."

Louise laughed, but it was only a pretense, as Tom Laylander must have been very stupid, indeed, if he had not seen.

"I'll speak to the scoundrel," he said, the fire of indignation in his eyes.

Louise touched his hand again, in that correcting, restraining, and yet assuring manner that was almost a caress.

"Please don't—he isn't worth it. Let them laugh, there's nothing else in life for them; they can't think. Who knows but you and I may have our own private little laugh one of these days? Maybe we'll not always be biscuit-shooters and jerries."

"Yes, you'll rise up and pass on," Tom said in his quaint, soft way of speaking; "I can see it in the cards you will. But for me I can't see anything more than a trampled trail, crisscrossed till it makes my eyes ache to try to read it."

Louise looked across the little table into his face,

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startled, alert, a question, or rather an appeal, in her concentrated attention. Another man had appeared for a moment from behind the ingenuous simplicity of this Texas cowboy. He had spoken and stepped back again, leaving the curtain that masked him scarcely agitated to show that he had passed. Tom was looking out of the window, his thin whitish eyebrows drawn, making little wrinkles run across his narrow, combative forehead from the bridge of his nose.

"Trampled trails," she repeated thoughtfully. "But they're broader when they're trampled, Tom, and easier to follow along."

"I mean when a lot of people have got the start over you and gone ahead," he explained. "They trample out the tracks of the thing you're tryin' to overtake and throw your rope on, mixin' it up so you can't tell whether you're on the right road or a blind one that spreads out to open range and nowhere in the end. That's what bothers a man, ma'am—Miss Louise."

"What have you been following, Tom, that you've lost in this crisscrossed road?"

Tom turned from the window, put down the knife that he had been holding, blade pointing upward, in his big freckled hand. He met her inquiring, perplexed eyes with a look of leaping eagerness in his own.

"I started out to make a man of myself, Miss Louise. I wanted to get an education in my head and turn out something better than a cowman down among the post-oaks on the Brazos. Circumstances, Miss Louise, jerked the rope out of my hand. The animal I thought

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I was about to throw and brand loped off and left me gappin' after it like a fool. I don't guess I'll ever overtake it any more."

"How long were you in the university, Tom?"

"I left in the middle of my junior year, Miss Louise. But how did you know? The brand must be so dim on me by now it'd take a spyglass to see it."

"Not so dim," she said. "Do you plan to go back?"

"No, I'll turn my face elsewhere, Miss Louise. I'll go on tryin' to pick up something on the start I've got while I'm waitin' for the road to run a little plainer under my feet."

"But you could go back, Tom."

"Ma'am?" said Tom, the cowboy in complete possession again, staring into her animated face with bewildered eyes.

"When you sell you cattle, I mean."

"When I sell 'em, ma'am? I ain't even got 'em *to* sell."

"You will have them; you're bound to beat that old thief."

"My lawyer says we'll beat him. He says the note Withers holds over me was outlawed in this state five years ago, if it never was paid. But I tell you, Miss Louise, if my father ever owed that man ten thousand dollars that long ago, it was paid."

"He ought to have been careful to get his note back," she said.

"They were awful careless about such little things in those days, Miss Louise."

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"Little things! It seems to me a lot of money to loan on nothing but an unsecured note, as Withers says this one was."

"No, not so very much. In the old days when cattlemen were makin' money that wasn't any more to my father than ten dollars would be to one of these self-admirin' railroad men. They just handed such little sums around among themselves without a line of writin' most of the time. That was only small change in the days range cattle paid."

"It was a careless way to handle small change, anyhow."

"Yes, it does seem so," Tom admitted gloomily. "Withers says my father borrowed it when he had a herd up here on Kansas grass a long time ago. I never heard about it if he did. I've wrote to mother to search the old books. It'll be down there if father ever borrowed money from Withers and made his note, for he was a careful man about writin' down his records. I didn't tell mother I'd been attached; I just said Colonel Withers had put in a claim."

"That was better than the whole truth, I think. Have you seen Withers since that—since he put the attachment on your herd?"

"I haven't had the pleasure of meetin' him," said Tom, with peculiar stress.

"I saw him here in town swelling around with two guns on today. He had a gang with him, four or five limber-jims, as Mrs. Cowgill calls them. They trailed after him wherever he went, like a lot of dogs."

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"I'm not astonished to hear of it," said Tom.

"Tom," her hand on his again in that impulsive, open and ingenuous way of arresting attention and holding it, "I can't ask you to keep out of his way, I'm not going to ask you to dodge him. But don't hunt him up, Tom, please don't hunt him up. If you see him here in town some evening spreading it around that way, just let him strut—don't rush out and begin to shoot."

"I'd like to do most anything to please you, Miss Louise," said Tom, his face very red, as if what she had asked of him made him ashamed.

"Withers will try to provoke you to make the first break, the way you did before. Don't you see his scheme? They say it's his old trick, to have the slim excuse of defending his life. It puts the law on his side, technically, as the lawyers say. What I mean is, let him start it next time. Let him come to you, don't you go to him."

"Circumstances, I expect, would have to control my actions, Miss Louise. I see the point of your argument, and I'll try to keep it in my mind. I'd rather not have any ruction with him till after the law disposes of my case."

"It would be much better, it would be so much more in your favor. And remember, if you do meet him, let him make the first break. You'd just as well have the law on your side as his."

"That's mighty good advice, and I'll do my best to follow after it, Miss Louise."

So they sat over their supper and talked, those two

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inferiors among the railroad aristocracy, jokes, both of them, to the hogheads and shacks and clinker-pullers, mainly because they were people who had been up and had come down. Their sympathies enveloped them like a fog, drawing them together in an unworded compact such as grows between the hearts of youth sometimes, to endure longer than solemn treaties of nations engrossed on parchment and set with imposing seals.

Bill Connor, sitting beside Goosie, easy in that proprietary feeling of a man who knows his situation is secure, lit a cigar and flipped the match contemptuously toward the table where the jerry and the biscuit-shooter sat.

"Looks like she's took a kid to raise," he said.

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CHAPTER VIII

FANNING BULLETS

ORRIN SMITH gave Tom a little fatherly advice that night on the proper costume and deportment of a jerry. As a consequence of it, Tom appeared next day clad in blue overalls and brogans. When the gang arrived at the place where the day's work was to be done, Tom left his gun on the handcar with the jerries' dinner pails. Smith said he had no objection to any of his men wearing guns coming and going to work, but he didn't want them encumbered by weapons out on the track. A man's enemies were not likely to seek him there, in the presence of so much company, said Smith.

Tom accepted the boss's view of the case cheerfully. There was not much of a Texas look about him that day, except his old dingy-white Stetson, which bobbed around among the jerries' miscellaneous headgear as prominently as a white duck in a flock of gray ones. Mike Quinn, Tom's working partner, wore a narrow-brimmed little dicer, with holes cut in the sides of it to let the air in to his brain, he said. He advised Tom gravely to lay aside that fine costly sombrero for festive

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occasions, and get himself one that would not represent such a big investment, or be so subject to damage from contact with black oil and the hard knocks of a trackman's life.

Tom was respectful toward Mike Quinn and his advice, as he was toward all suggestions, serious and jocose, offered by his fellow toilers. This readiness to listen, his polite bearing and soft speech, quickly made a way for Tom where a flippant smart fellow would have found it hard going. The gang adopted him, very much in the way that a household adopts a strange animal, and took a vast pride in the distinction of having the only cowboy jerry that ever was known.

The jerries were proud of Tom's refined and deferential manners, at least refined in comparison with any manners they came in daily contact with; proud of the pistol that he wore to and from work and hung on the lever of the handcar; proud of his big sombrero, which he retained against all argument to get him out of it at first. After a week they would have felt hurt and affronted if Tom had appeared in any other hat.

Section gangs in those times were made up mainly of old-timers who had followed the steel from the Lackawanna to the Santa Fé, grizzled men with thick arms and mighty chests, "good dhrinkin' men" as they described themselves with pride. Nearly all of them were Irish, who had come to America young and stepped from the ship to the ties. They were a craft to themselves, as distinctive as sailors, with a speech full of terms applying to their trade, mystifying and foreign

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to the ears of the uninitiated. A careless, spendthrift, hardy set of rovers, veterans of the army that pushed the rails across desert and mountains, not insensible of the romance of their past, or the sacrifice of their service to their kind.

They are gone, long ago. The last old jerry is dragging out his slow dim years in some Little Sisters' home, mumbling of the days that were worth a man's while to live, when he was lead spiker on the *Pas*-i-fic back in the times of Jay Gould. But there were plenty of them to man the handcars of the middle-western sections in the time when Tom Laylander came to serve on the section at McPacken.

They were single men, with old home ties broken long ago and forgotten, many of them illiterate, signing their pay checks with a mark, so accustomed to hardship that the word scarcely had any meaning to them. There was nothing they had that a man in distress could not have for the asking, and nothing they wanted when out of a job and "starvin' wit' th' hoonger" that somebody did not appear at length to supply. What came in by this hand went out through that, with never a thought for winter, when the gangs were cut, nothing put by for the evil day of old age. They always looked forward to the "Nittle Sisters", as they called them, to take care of them when they could no longer handle shovel, tamping-pick and bar.

Few of them ever rose to be bosses, or more than straw-bosses, at the best, owing to their illiteracy. They never learned any more about railroad building

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and maintenance than the routine of their daily toil, nor cared to learn. They were land sailors who had learned the ropes; it was not for them to be captains, and they knew it very well.

Once in a while there was one to be met like Mike Quinn. Mike was a reading man, although as good a drinkin' man as ever breasted the bar. He could discourse about the Pyramids and the Missouri River; about Napoleon and Brigham Young. He followed politics, and read the prize-fight news to the jerries under the cottonwood trees at Mrs. Ryan's boarding house beside the track. It took a crafty man at an argument to get ahead of Mike, who would come around with unexpected quips and turns, sharper than Plato ever was in his life.

Trainmen were greatly amused by the sight of Tom Laylander in his big hat, humping over a tamping-pick; infinitely diverted by his pistol swinging on the handcar lever at the side of the track. They called him the "cow jerry"; the news of his presence on the section at McPacken went up and down the line.

Firemen stood in the cab doors to look at him as they passed, some of them making facetious gestures of drawing a gun or swinging a rope. Brakemen on the tops of freight trains varied these, to Tom, questionably comical antics, by whooping, and prancing around in imitation of a bronco.

All of these cracks at him on the part of the intellectuals, taken in addition to the general run of mockery and derision thrown at the jerries in passing, began to

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nettle Tom after a while. All railroaders were alike to him, these on the trains only fellow-servants of the same master served by the section men. It seemed small business to Tom, this imitating the pumping of a handcar, driving spikes, lining track, which so amused brakemen and firemen. Conductors and engineers, to their everlasting credit and respect in Tom Laylander's memory, never stooped to these mocking frivolities.

Where it hit Tom was its intentional insult and malignancy, or perhaps insolent exultation over men placed by chance or misfortune, or choice, and proud enough in their selection, in this lowly way of earning their daily chuck. He resented this attitude strongly, often speaking his mind on it to Mike Quinn, who as regularly came forward with his philosophy to calm Tom's indignation.

"Consither the source," said Mike, "as the man said whin the jackass kicked him, and let it pass."

It took all of Mike's philosophy, as well as such of his own as he could command, to hold Tom from pitching a rock at Windy Moore when he went by, prancing and making derisive pantomime, leaning over and shouting "Cow jerry! Ya-a-a! Ya-a-a!"

This happened every second day when Windy passed. Windy was not a very high man in the aristocracy of trainmen, being nothing more than brakeman on the local freight, which was the very beginning, in fact, of the long and bumpy road to the conductor's seat in the cupola of a caboose. Windy had a long way to go before arriving among the great, but he was ages in

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the evolution of labor above the lowly state of section hand.

"Let ye stand on your dignity, lad, and lave 'em pass," Mike advised. "If the poor crathurs get any pleasure out of their prancin' and dancin' and posthurin' around, let 'em have it. They're a lot of poor ignorant fellys that never read a book of histhory in their lives. Savages, they are, lad. The nagur savages in the wilds of Africa make faces at strangers, and prance and mock and posthure in insultin' capers, the same as these poor brakeys do, tryin' to provoke the first blow.

"These boxcyar lads think they're the important men in railroadin'. They are not. Take away the section boss and his gang for tin days and lave the thrack go: where would these fine lads land? In the ditch, with the freight cyars on top of them, and not one among the lot with sinse enough in the head of 'im to dhrive a spike.

"It's the lads on the thrack that count in railroadin'; nobody else. Take you and me, spikin' these ties. What would happen if we spread the rails, or dhrawed 'em, three or four inches out o' gauge aither way? Where would Windy Moore be when the ingin sthrook the spot? Sailin' through the wind like a mateor, rammin' the head iv 'im in the ditch. Let 'em go, I tell ye, lad; let 'em pass."

This argument, aside from Mike's prejudice in favor of his own calling, had considerable truth to enforce it, Tom realized, but it did not excuse the offense nor palliate the sting. He studied the worst offenders,

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Windy Moore among them, marking each man well. As the days passed they became familiar figures, both on the road and in the streets of McPacken. He waited for them to try some of their funny business with him when they stood man to man on the ground.

This never happened. While the cow jerry was an object of great entertainment and ribald mockery to brakemen and firemen going by at thirty or fifty miles an hour, he was no funnier than any other man when met on the streets in town. Trainmen passed him there without a word or wink, as oblivious to his presence on earth, it appeared, as one of the myriad leaves on Mrs. Cowgill's cottonwood trees. If there was no spoken insult in this passing him over as if he did not exist, there was no aggression. Tom was satisfied to have it that way in town; he would have been happy and comfortable if they would have given him the same peace out on the road.

Let them have their joke, said Tom, even at his expense, though what there was so diverting and comical in the aspect of a man who had ridden the range all his life coming down to railroading, he could not see. For it was a come-down on his part; it would have been just as much of a come-down to Laylander shovelling coal into an engine firebox, or trotting the tops of boxcars, as tamping ties on the section. Railroading was all railroading to him, one job as respectable as another, all of it far below the freedom and independence of the range.

It was a comfort to Tom that he was not to be a regular railroader, that he was using the job as a tem-

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porary bridge to cross the few weeks which lay between him and the recovery of his cattle. It might be well, he considered, if he could enter into the spirit of the thing with the trainmen, and show them that he, also, looked on his present occupation as a joke.

This notion pleased him. He went grinning around at his work while he turned over certain schemes for expressing his appreciation of their humorous banter to the passing brakemen, Windy Moore in particular. The more he thought of it the better it pleased him. Mike Quinn asked him if he had found a purse.

Tom's opportunity to put his plan of responsive appreciation into practice came when he had been a little more than a month on the gang. The jerries were going home from their day's work of picking up joints when overtaken by the local freight, which came pounding toward McPacken with a long train of empties gathered at way stations during the day. The local was late, the engineer in a great sweat to make it in to McPacken, out of humor with the dispatcher for laying him out everywhere for the numerous stock extras which had kept the rails hot that day.

This thing of overtaking a handcar and forcing the jerries to look lively for a spot to drag it off; their excited flinging of shovels and bars to lighten it if they had time; their shouts and agile jumping about, always amused trainmen as no other bit of comedy in the day's work. There were always two or three old jerries in every gang who went to pieces in a pinch of that kind, invoking the protection of the saints, laying hold of

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coats, dinner pails, tools; flinging them without regard of direction, the assistance or impediment of the urgent work in hand.

Orrin Smith's crew was no exception in this regard. There were three handcar-loads of terriers in his gang, proceeding that evening in close order toward the tool house, most of them smoking comfortably, pumping with leisurely stroke, standing so thick that few could get more than one hand on the levers.

Smith was riding on the first car, watching back for the local, which he knew had not passed and was hours late. It caught them on a straight piece of track, with plenty of time to get the cars off, but the nervous old-timers strewed the right-of-way with shovels, picks and dinner buckets, flinging them as if they jettisoned the cargo of a floundering ship.

This scene of excitement ahead of them, the bright pails flashing, covers flying off, coats sailing with arms outspread, gave a seasoning to the humor of the situation for the trainmen which even the crusty engineer unfixed his face to enjoy. The fireman came to the right-hand side of the cab—the jerries were going off the rails on that side—where he stood grinning. As the engine flashed by he made the sign which commonly passed in such cases: smashing his right fist into his left palm, spreading his hands with an upward motion of dispersion, complete obliteration, illustrative of a burst rocket, nothing left but the smoke. That's what's going to happen to this gang of jerries one of these

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days. Smart as you are, we'll get you yet. So this sign of collision and dismemberment meant.

Windy Moore was standing on top of a boxcar about midway of the long train, leaning against the wind, his loose overalls flagging around his skinny legs. As he approached the jerries, scattered around their hastily removed handcars, picking up their coats, looking for pipes that had been lost in the wild throwing off, Windy came over to the edge of the car roof, where he leaned, derision wide in his mocking face.

Tom Laylander was standing by, smoking a cigarette. He was in a glow of quickened blood, the little flurry having been quite to his liking, a welcome break in the monotony of a long and grinding day. His pistol was in its scuffed holster against his leg, his big hat threw a slantwise shadow across his face. Jerrying wouldn't be a bad job at all if there was more of this kind of stuff in it, he thought. And there came Windy Moore across his moment of pleasure, leaning out to fling his taunt and jeer.

"Cow jerry! Ya-a-a!" yelled Windy Moore, singling Tom out for his malicious witticism, as always.

Windy passed in a roar and swirl of dust, his long-drawn *ya-a-a-a* streaming after him as seeds fly out of a milkweed pod when it is held to the wind. Tom pulled out his gun between puffs on his little cigarette and threw a shot over the top of Windy Moore's boxcar, plugging another one after it so fast it followed the same hole through the air.

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The bullets must have whispered something new to Windy Moore, something that he could hear above the roar and jangle of the loose-jointed freight. He stooped and dodged, fanning the wind as if fighting a sudden attack of hornets, looking all the time for some place to go. There never was a little brakeman on that division with such urgent business behind him as Windy Moore had for the next few seconds, Tom Laylander standing back at the other end of the quick-stretching distance, emptying his gun over the boxcar that Windy rode.

The train was going fast, but not fast enough for Windy. He was near the end of the car, but it was the wrong end, the ladder was on the side of the shooting cow jerry. Windy even outran the train when he broke for the forward end of the boxcar, where he grabbed the top bracket of the ladder and swung himself to safety on the opposite side.

"Stop shootin' at that man!" Orrin Smith yelled, his face white in the fear for his job that rushed over him at sight of this act of *lese majestie.*

The caboose jerked by, leaving the jerries in sudden silence.

"What do you mean shootin' at that man?" Smith demanded, his order to hit the grit and look for another job plain to his excited eyes.

"I wasn't shootin' *at* him," Tom corrected his boss, grinning in the pleasure of recalling Windy Moore fanning the bullets away from his ears. "I was only shootin' to-*wards* him."

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"Dang the difference, dang the difference!" said Smith, who was a notably temperate man.

"When you shoot *at* a man you hit him," Tom explained. "That's the difference, Mr. Smith."

Smith was a man with thick, sloping shoulders, like a bottle. His voice was in the front of his mouth; his words came out with a blab, like the bleat of a sheep.

"They'll report it, they'll report it the minute they hit town! Well, git them cars on—git them cars on!"

Smith looked mighty glum the rest of the way to the tool house, sitting on the water keg with his foot beside the brake. The jerries were silent, throwing a ham into the little old handcar with unusual vigor. They looked at Tom with slanting glances, rolling their eyes, keeping their faces straight ahead. They acted like a crowd of boys accessory to a disastrous prank by one of their number, anxious to prove by their present conduct that they were in no manner implicated nor to blame.

Smith brought the handcar to a stop before the tool house door. Foot on the brake he looked up with reproachful severity at Tom, who was swinging to the ground.

"You're fired," said Smith.

"I'm sorry if I hurt your feelin's, Mr. Smith," Tom said, rather jolted by this unexpected ending of what he had meant to be nothing more than a pleasant prank.

"You and your dang gun, shootin' around here!"

"Yes sir," said Tom, feeling decidedly foolish.

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"I'll give you your time this evenin'. I'm through with gun-toters on my section."

That appeared to close the matter; Tom having no word to add. He went to the Cottonwood Hotel humiliated and downcast, wondering why it was so hard for some people to see through a harmless little joke.

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CHAPTER IX

MORE THAN MORAL SUPPORT

CONTRARY to Orrin Smith's fearful forebodings, Windy Moore did not make a report of the cow jerry's pleasant little diversion. If it had been left to Windy to give the incident publicity, nobody ever would have heard of it. But Windy's conductor was sitting with his head out of the caboose cupola to get the breeze when the local passed the overhauled jerries that evening. His appreciation of Windy's antics while fanning the bullets away from his ears with open hand was so keen that he could see no seriousness in the case at all. Within half an hour after the local's arrival, all the railroaders in McPacken had heard the story, and great was the roar of mirth at Windy Moore's expense.

For all that, Tom was fired. Smith was not running chances on getting called down by the roadmaster for having a gun-slinging wild fellow like that in his peaceful gang of terriers. Smith stopped at the hotel desk to write Tom's time check, his indignation and resentment, his severity and censure increasing as his rum-

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bling mind turned the disturbing speculation of his own peril.

It was a terrifying thought to Smith that he might lose his fine job on account of a wild Texas boy who didn't know any better than to run the risk of damaging company property with his fool gun, even though he may not have tried to hit Windy Moore. Suppose he'd shot a hole in the side of that boxcar!

Tom's momentary exuberance, the thrill that had quickened him like old times, over seeing Windy Moore jump for the ladder, had died away to a cold and hopeless feeling when he corralled courage enough at last to go down to supper. He was depressed and ashamed; he could not have felt much worse if Windy Moore had pitched off into the ditch with a bullet through his neck.

To make the situation worse, several railroaders were at the long table. Somebody among them started clapping his hands when Tom appeared; the others took it up, leaning back in unctuous repletion, pie crumbs around their gills, as if the hero in the melodrama had arrived with the money to pay off the old farmer's mortgage.

Tom was as red as if fury had set its torch to his fur. He could not have suffered a more distressing pang if he had lost a leg. Shame hits some modest people that way, with a torture that is harder to bear than fire. But the railroaders were more than half in earnest, as Tom learned when several came to his table presently, clapped him on the back, shook hands with him and had their roaring laugh at this Texas joke,

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the humor of which seemed to grow as they carried it around.

They knew that Smith had discharged Tom. He was no longer a jerry, there was no degradation in the touch of his calloused hand. He had been only a sort of experimental jerry, anyway, never a serious one growing a hump on his back over a tamping-pick. Ford Langley lingered a little after the others. He approached Tom's table picking his teeth.

"Hang around town till pay-day, kid," he advised, "and I'll see what I can do for you. Nearly always somebody drops out after pay-day."

Tom thanked him with so much gratitude and sincerity in his soft, slow-dragging voice that the roundhouse foreman went away swelled up with a feeling of magnanimity, just as if he had stooped and lifted some wreck of a jerry out of the ditch and taken him into the saloon and given him a drink.

Tom thought it would be a big and sudden jump for him if he intended to follow railroading, for a job in the roundhouse led to fireman, and fireman to engineer. In those days of much road building and quick promotion, the road from wiper to engineer was not a long one. Engineer was the top of consequence in McPacken. It combined dignity, affluence, high honor. An engineer could take the pick of anything in that town. It was the same in every little railroad center throughout the west in those days.

Louise waited until the congratulatory press had moved on, then approached Tom for his supper order.

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When she came from the kitchen with his order she brought her own supper also, the custom of taking this meal with the cow jerry being so well established that both looked upon it as a fixed event.

Tom told Louise about losing his job, and the reason for it, which she knew already. He mentioned the prospect leading to the right side of a locomotive cab which opened before him in Langley's friendly offer. Louise was not impressed by the magnificent future of this prospect. She sniffed; she tossed her head with lofty disdain.

"I'd rather see you a section boss than an engineer," she declared. "A man gets to be a hoghead, and there he stops; his ambition is fulfilled when he gets a passenger run, with all the silly girls along the line waving at him as he goes by."

"I suppose a man's got to stop somewhere, though," Tom ventured.

"But not hanging out of a cab window. There are not any traditions around here of engineers who rose to be presidents of railroads, or anything else. Once an engineer, always an engineer."

"Most men are satisfied when they hit a good thing, Louise. I think that accounts for engineers stayin' engineers, instead of any lack of ambition. They looked to me like a mighty fine class of men, seein' them ride past me while I was laborin' on the section. They never had a word of ridicule for us jerries."

"So much to their credit, anyway," she said. "Do

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you think you'll take the job if Ford Langley offers you one?"

"It'll be two weeks till pay-day; my case it'll come up in court and be settled before then. I can decide on the job after I know where I'm at. Court opens in five days from now. My lawyer says he'll bring my case to a hearin' not later than the second day."

"You can rest up till the trial, and not bother about a job. From what I hear these lily-handed aristocrats of railroad society say, section work must be a terrible strain on a man's physical and moral forces."

"It was hard at first, cruel hard," said Tom, reflectively. "But I got toughened to it so I didn't mind. If it wasn't for the remarks they pass on a man, jerryin' wouldn't be such a bad job *at* all."

"If you win your case, you'll sell your cattle in the fall and go back to Texas."

"I've always been aimin' to, Louise, till around here lately. I've been considerin' and plannin' on stayin' up here in the north if I can get something under my feet."

"It's bound to come right," she cheered him. "One way or another you'll come into your own again."

"I don't see how the judge can go against me when he learns the facts. There ain't one word in my father's records about a loan from Withers that stands unpaid, as far as mother has been able to find, and she's made a careful search. I believe that old rascal changed some paper bearin' my father's signature and made a note out of it."

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"I think he might do even that, he's got a look about him of a crook. But if he wins in court, what then?"

"Time will have to answer that, Louise."

"It wouldn't do a bit of good to go and shoot him up, though," she said.

"We can think of enough disagreeable things every minute, Louise, without reachin' out ahead so far after them," he reminded her, gently.

"Then I've got something to tell you that's not so disagreeable," she said, coming brightly out of the gloomy cloud that always obscured her when she talked of violence between him and Withers. "I'm going to quit my job tomorrow."

"You don't tell me?" There was consternation, rather than joy, in Tom's voice. He felt the blood creeping down, down, out of his face. "Are you goin' to leave McPacken, Miss Louise?"

"I've got Maud Kelly's place in the court house. Maud's been plugging for me strong, backed by Mrs. Cowgill, who despairs of ever seeing me catch an engineer in my present lowly situation."

"She's a calculatin' lady," said Tom. "What kind of a situation will you have in the court house, if I'll be allowed to inquire?"

"A sort of cashier, taking in money and giving out tax receipts. Maud says there is no great rush of business."

"There will be, I'll bet you. When you begin' takin' in money they'll come in from away out on the edges to pay their taxes. When do you aim to begin?"

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"Day-after-tomorrow, just getting the run of the ropes while Maud's there, but my pay doesn't start for nearly three weeks. Maud's vacation begins Saturday; she's allowed two weeks off with pay, and she's already arranged for one of the other girls in the office to fill her job. It's the custom for one to relieve the other. So Maud and I are going to visit her brother's family, down on his ranch somewhere between here and the Nation. Maud's impatient to get down there and ride around. She's a regular cowgirl—she was brought up on a big ranch."

"She sure steps along like a fresh-air lady. I always *ad*-mire that girl's gait."

"She's already spoken for, Tom; your case is hopeless."

"Ma'am?" Tom's blood was hot in his cheeks. He seemed to be mentally tip-toeing away from her, in his questioning, deferential, easily frustrated way.

"She's going to marry Mr. Cook, the baggage smasher."

"You don't tell me?" in expression of wonderment far greater than the subject, or Tom's own conscience, justified. "I've seen the gentleman," he continued, beginning to grow easy again, "enterin' a blue house down by the railroad yards."

"He lives there with his mother."

"He walks like a sheriff," said Tom, "with his chin held out from him so he can see his mustache."

"I never have made a study of the gait of sheriffs," Louise said, "but I fail to discover any of the fine

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points Maud sees in Mr. Cook, especially when he appears in the door of the baggage car as a background to a trunk."

"It's not a very exalted situation," Tom said thoughtfully, yet respectfully, remembering the humble job that was his own until that evening.

"Maybe he'll rise from baggage smasher with Maud to shove him."

"I bet he'll go clean through the top of the car," said Tom, with such warm assurance that Mr. Cook's future seemed to enlarge far beyond either the ambitions or the capabilities of a commonplace, fully satisfied man in a large brown mustache.

Louise had a trick of lifting her eyebrows and rolling up her eyes, as an elderly person does when looking over the rim of his glasses. She did this in a sly appraisement of the object under scrutiny, as if she veiled her appreciation, or perhaps her mirth. Tom was accustomed to that glance; he was always on the lookout for it, watching for the little grin that illuminated her rather lean and serious face with such a flash of humor that he felt laughter lift its wings to fly out of his mouth.

She looked at him that way now, her lips pressed in a line that trembled in the travail of a smile.

"Tom, you're the funniest kid!" she said.

"I wasn't aimin' to be," said he, feeling very boyish and immature.

"You never do—don't ever try to be. Just go on being natural and nice. You don't know how much I

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like you that way, so different from these fresh brakeys and firemen."

Tom was so confused, but in a delightful warm confusion that seemed the scented air of paradise, that he was not equal to any sort of immediate reply.

"I'd like to see Maud marry a better man." Louise returned to her subject abruptly. "She's a good girl. By all the ratings of McPacken society she ought to have a conductor, or a fireman, at the very lowest."

"There's Pap," Tom suggested, coming to his senses slowly again. "He seems to consider himself a high premium for any lady."

"I think Pap is training right now to rush the new deputy county treasurer. You can't imagine how my prospects have brightened in this town, Tom."

"Glory is broadenin' over you like sunrise."

Their talk came back to the cattle, after a while, as it nearly always did from whatever lighter matter that might lend them a recess of relief from the vexatious problem. Tom said he had to see the roadmaster the first thing in the morning, and get his time check signed. Then he intended to hire a horse and take a ride out into the country.

"Do you know where your cattle are?" Louise inquired.

"Down somewhere between here and the Nation—you know the line is only forty miles south of McPacken. The sheriff's grazin' them on the land I engaged from that bal' faced old liar to pasture 'em on.

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this summer. I thought I'd take a look at them and see how they're fillin' out."

"It wouldn't be a bad idea," she assented, but as if she had conditions in reserve. Then her hand reached out and fell on his where it lay beside his plate, in that swift, arresting way she had of doing this. "Tom, you're not going to try to pull off anything tomorrow, are you?"

"No, Louise. I'll wait on the law like a gentleman. If it fails to give me my own, then I'll have to see what can be done."

"It will seem hopeless if the case goes against you, Tom. But I don't know; something may happen, it looks impossible that such a plain steal could be put through. When the time comes, I'm going to help you," she declared with sudden assurance, almost enthusiastic fervor. She looked up, her eyes bright. "It's too big a trick for one man."

"Why, Louise, you warm a person's heart when you talk that way!" said Tom, glowing with gratitude. "Your moral support will help me over a mighty high fence when the time comes to jump it."

"Moral support!" She discounted it for just what it would be worth against Cal Withers, and that was not the force of a sparrow's wing. "You'll need something more than moral support to get that herd back if the judge says Withers' claim is good, and I'm going to be right there to help you!"

"I couldn't fail if I had you to help me," he declared, with fervor equal to her own.

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"Have you thought—have you decided, what you're going to do in case you lose in court, Tom?"

"Nothing has come plain to me yet, Louise. I'm like a man in a storm, waitin' to see a clearin'. It will come to me when it's needed, I expect. But whatever is to be done must wait on the law."

"Of course," she assented, gravely. "But there's one thing to remember, when you go down there to look at the cattle tomorrow, and all the time: If you meet Withers, don't start anything. If there's got to be trouble, let him begin it."

"I'll do my best to remember what you've said, Louise, now and at other times, on this subject."

"If you'll wait on Withers to pull his gun first, there'll not be any trouble," she advised him gravely. "I've been finding out a lot about him here lately."

"I'd go away around to keep from havin' open trouble with him, Louise, especially before my case comes off. A fuss might have a bad bearin' on my case."

"And after the case, if you lose it, Tom?"

"A way will be found," Tom answered, his eyebrows drawn, wrinkling his fighting forehead with determined frown.

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CHAPTER X

TRAGEDY AT THE SQUARE

PAP COWGILL was off his run for a few days, pending the healing of one of his feet, on which he had dropped a chunk of coal. The company doctor, no other, in fact, than the father of Angus Valorous, had been over to the Cottonwood Hotel to attend the bruised member, leaving a scent of drugs in the parlor, where Pap had submitted himself to the physician's ministrations. Pap was established in the carpet-covered spring rocker by the window, his bandaged foot on a hassock made of tomato cans, after the thrifty way of pioneer housekeepers, a piece of economy worthy of the great work that Louise Gardner had come to McPacken to put on every center table.

This hassock was covered with carpeting to match the chair, padded with cotton batting and supplied with two little ears for lifting it around. Young ladies sometimes sat on it, especially Goosie, who found it of convenient height for resting her head on Bill Connor's knee. Pap was comfortable. He enjoyed being crippled; he liked the smell of arnica and carbolated salve.

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He sat with elbow on the window sill, waving a languid hand to his friends as they passed.

Pap looked at his watch; nine o'clock. He wished his mother or one of the girls would come along so he could send for a cigar. He was entirely able to go and get it out of the showcase himself, but it would be that much more luxurious and enjoyable to have somebody bring it. Louise, preferably. The poorest cigar in the case would taste sweet from her hand. Pap sighed.

Pap sat with watch in his hand, abstractedly turning the stem, rolling it between thumb and finger as if shaping a pill, thinking of a little house he had seen on the hillside in Argentine on his last run, with a for rent sign in the window. Handy place for a man at the end of his run, nice little home for Louise, who wasn't cut out for a biscuit-shooter, take her at her best. Pap thought her inaptitude in that art was blamable to her feet. A girl needed big feet to rush around all day that way, carrying tray loads of grub. But her feet were big enough for all the work she'd have to do when he got his engine; and that was a cinch. She'd have her hired girl and horse and buggy then; and that was a cinch.

A lot of guys would be hangin' around her when she went on that court house job; and that was a cinch. He'd rather she stayed in the dining-room, only that her health might break, but if any guy got fresh with her up there around the square he'd hear from yours truly; and that was a cinch. There'd be one advantage in her change of work; she wouldn't be around there to

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eat supper every evening with that cow jerry. There was a guy that would have to hit the grit; he'd make that plain to the old lady. He wasn't goin' to stand for that Texas guy, moonin' around there like a soft egg; and that was a cinch.

Pap sat up with a jerk, his ear to the window screen. Sounded like somebody shooting up in the direction of the square. There! three more, as quick—. People were running; there were more shots, so fast and so many Pap could not count them. He was gasping with excitement when he kicked the hassock aside. Where in the hu-hu-hell was that overshoe!

Pap went hobbling to the front door, walking on his heel. Mrs. Cowgill had heard the shooting, and the commotion of running feet on the plank sidewalks. Goosie had heard it; Louise had heard. They came crowding to the door, Mrs. Cowgill putting her head out cautiously, her neck stretched to prodigious length, her arm blocking the door to prevent Goosie rushing out into no telling what danger.

But there was no danger near her hand. Mrs. Cowgill went to the porch, where Pap had gone already. Goosie and Louise followed; some who came running from the direction of the depot stopped there, all of them straining to see what was going on up the street where the public square cut it across with a line of maple trees.

Nothing was to be seen but the outpouring of people, overflowing the sidewalks now, rushing toward the square. The shooting had stopped. Now there was a

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gust of it again, as if somebody was riding away in defiance, or perhaps triumph, his victim lying stretched in the square. Louise felt her breath die away, her heart sag in sickening pause as if it never could gather momentum to carry life forward again.

Tom Laylander had gone to the bank only a few minutes before, to be there when it opened. He wanted to cash his time check, together with a little draft his mother had sent to help along until the cattle were sold. Tom had looked ready to cry when he told her about it at breakfast. Tom had met Cal Withers and his men. That was the answer to the shooting.

Louise felt it come over her coldly, compressing the warmth out of her body, the blood out of her heart. She pictured Tom lying in the dust, his hat close by, his boyish face turned up to the sun. It was such a terrible, such a poignantly cruel sketching of imagination that the actual could have been little less shocking. A sob, that was half a sharp protesting cry, escaped her utmost efforts to choke it down. With her apron around her, just as she had come from work, Louise ran toward the square.

Mrs. Cowgill and Goosie started after her, soon overtook her, and ran with her step for step, the late comers behind them drawing up with great noise over the uneven sidewalk planks. A little way beyond the Racket Store they met Windy Moore, running tight for the hotel.

"Don't stop me! I'm goin' for my gun!" Windy replied to Mrs. Cowgill's wild appeal for news.

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In spite of his great rush, Windy did not appear unwlling to pause for a word or two. No battle that he might fight ever could give him as much pleasure as delivering a piece of news, especially when he was certain his mouth was the first to speak it.

"What's happened—what's happened?" Mrs. Cowgill pressed.

"Robbed the bank—I'm goin' for my gun!" Windy replied, his eyes big in his meddlesome face.

"Who?" they all asked together, closing around Windy, cutting off his way. Goosie grabbed a handful of the little brakeman's vest, determined to hold him until he had given them all he knew.

"Who—who robbed the bank?"

"That cow jerry, that Texas guy! Sent for his gang, cleaned out the bank, killed the city marshal and the cashier—oh, hell! Let me go and git my gun!"

"Killed the cashier and the marshal!" Mrs. Cowgill gasped.

The gathering crowd pressed around them. Goosie shook Windy in her impatience to have it all.

"Who killed them?" she demanded, shaking him as if a grain of truth hid in him somewhere that he was covering wilfully.

"That cow jerry and his gang, I tell you!"

"Who told you?" Louise inquired.

"Told me?" Windy repeated, twisting to break Goosie's hold. "I was there—they took my watch and roll—I tell you I was there!"

Goosie let him go, to stand aghast before Louise, who

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was so shocked and stunned that even coherent thought was impossible. The press around them was so great now Windy did not attempt to go on. Those who crowded to get near him appeared to think he had been the chief actor in whatever had happened, and was coming off victorious from the field.

"Did you say they robbed the bank?" an old man inquired, hand behind his ear.

"Cleaned out every dollar," Windy replied. "I'd just drawed forty dollars, me and three or four others was in the bank, when that cow jerry come in to cash a check. That was a stall, I tell you it was a stall. While the cashier was handin' him out the money his gang rode up and cut loose at everybody in sight, tryin' to drive 'em in. Two of 'em come in the bank and lined us up face to the wall, and while one of 'em held us there the cow jerry and his pardner killed the cashier and put all the money in a sack."

"The marshal got one of 'em!" said a man, pushing in with savage satisfaction.

"But they got him," another added, breathless, panting, dashing away to spread the news.

"Are you sure Tom Laylander was there?" Louise asked, her courage returning with her resentment of the charge.

"I seen him put the money in the sack," Windy declared. "There was four of 'em besides him, two held the horses and two follered him into the bank where he was puttin' up his stall. I saw that cow jerry take the guns off of his pardner the marshal killed, and hop one

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of the horses 'n ride off with the bunch. They went off rairin' and shootin' at everybody they saw."

Louise went on, not convinced that Windy Moore had seen all the things of which he talked. She hoped to get the straight of it from somebody around the bank.

"Ain't it awful!" Mrs. Cowgill gasped. "And him such a soft-spoken man."

"There's some mistake," Louise declared.

They were obliged to stop at the corner, some distance from the bank, held back by the crowd that stood in front of that building and extended into the street.

"They're pickin' up the marshal!" Mrs. Cowgill whispered. "That's Doc Wilson, the coroner. Oh, ain't it—"

"There's another one in the wagon!" said Goosie, clutching Louise's arm. "Look at his feet—he's got on cowboy boots! Do you suppose it's the cow—it's *him!*"

"No," said Louise, coldly.

"They look like his spurs!" Goosie insisted, with what seemed malicious avidity.

Maud Kelly came pushing her way through the crowd like a man, nearly upsetting some of the ancient citizens who were too absorbed in the proceedings to get out of her fairway. Maud was bareheaded and excited. She came straight to Louise, perhaps not insensible, through all her own perturbation, of the pleading appeal in the girl's white face.

"It'll be all right, honey," said Maud, with futile,

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cheerless assurance, as one speaks when condoling an irremediable loss. She put her arm around Louise and hugged her in a sort of affectionate fierceness, as if she defied somebody who had dared her to express such sympathy.

"Ain't it awful? Mr. Crowley and the marshal killed!" Mrs. Cowgill said.

"Mr. Crowley? Who said he was killed?" Maud inquired.

"We heard they shot him dead."

"There he stands, in the door," said Maud. "Honey, you'd better come on home with me."

Louise faced her with desperate courage, cool now, and controlled, as if she presented herself to the surgeon's knife for an operation that balanced life and death.

"Maud, do you know what really happened?" she asked.

"Yes, I was in the bank."

"You *was!*" Mrs. Cowgill exploded.

Crowley, the bank cashier, was explaining to his eager patrons the particulars of the robbery. The crowd was divided between him and the melancholy business going forward under the coroner's direction; the four women were left alone at the street corner, where they stood in the dusty roadway of the public square.

"I'd gone to the bank for some silver to make change for the day," Maud said. "Windy Moore and two or three others were there—Tom Laylander at the cash-

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ier's window. I don't know just how it happened, it was done so quick, only that two men with guns came bustin' in the bank and lined all of us but Tom Laylander up with faces to the wall. I don't know what happened next, they were shootin' things up so in front of the bank. I looked around to see if they'd killed Mr. Crowley. Two men were in his cage, throwin' everything out of the safe into a sack."

"Was one of them Tom Laylander?" Louise asked, with the breath of what seemed her last hope.

"Honey, I'm afraid it was."

"Puttin' the money in a sack! And him such an honest lookin' boy!"

"Mr. Crowley played dead, layin' flat on the floor, huggin' the wall of the cage," Maud continued, as the surgeon in this desperate case who must push on in excruciating mercy to the end. "They didn't touch him."

"Wasn't that robber holding a gun on Tom Laylander, Maud?" Louise inquired, with the slow, calm surety in her words of a lawyer who has come to the turning-point of his case.

"Honey, I couldn't see from where I stood, and I only had a glance. The one that had us lined up took a shot at me when he saw me look around."

"Took a *shot* at you!" Goosie exclaimed, with such appreciation that it amounted almost to delight.

"Heaven above!" Mrs. Cowgill said.

"It was just a bluff, I guess," said Maud. "It hit

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the wall a foot or two over my head—my hair's all full of plaster."

She shook her fair crimped hair, leaning over to allow the particles of lime to shower down, and laughed a little, although there was no more mirth in the sound than there was in Louise Gardner's downcast heart that moment.

"Do the bank people believe Tom Laylander had a hand in it?" Louise inquired.

"Mr. Crowley thinks it was arranged by somebody on the spot," Maud replied, her head turned, not able to bear the pain her disclosure brought into her friend's strained face.

"And him such a soft-spoken, mild young man!" Mrs. Cowgill said, unable to fit Tom Laylander in the part of bank robber, let circumstances brand him as they might.

"How much money did he take?" Goosie asked.

"I didn't hear," Maud replied, distantly.

"This shows banks ain't safe—I always said they wasn't safe," Mrs. Cowgill seemed to exult in the vindication of her years'-long contention. "I didn't have any money in it, and I'm glad I didn't. I'll take chances keepin' it in my own safe, any day."

"You'd better come home with me," Maud pressed kindly, taking Louise by the hand.

"Yes, go on home with Maud and lie down and rest and read a book," Mrs. Cowgill urged. "We can make out the rest of the day without you."

"Why should I take a day off, any more than any-

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body else?" Louise inquired, affecting a cold indifference, as if the complicity of one man more or less in this affair was nothing to her. "I'm not going to shirk on you my last day."

Mrs. Cowgill looked at her curiously, not understanding her in the least. Goosie turned her back, tossing her head a little, the sound of a sniff coming out of her stubby, musical nose. That's what one got for associating with jerries, her unsympathetic attitude seemed to say.

Two little spots of color came into Louise's pale cheeks, a flash into her sorrowful, shocked eyes, lighting her face up defiantly, at this pantomime on the part of Miss Goosie. Yet Goosie's attitude was only a concrete expression of the public belief, as Louise was soon to learn. As the crowd dissolved from the square, scattering in close-talking groups, she heard the term "cow jerry" pass from lip to lip.

Tom Laylander was gone, on a horse brought there by the raiders for him, it was said. And the sheriff, a chicken-faced man with a shallow, slanting forehead and a big mustache that seemed to drag him down to anemic lankness, was gathering a posse to pursue him.

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CHAPTER XI

NEWS FROM THE TRAIL

THE McPacken Daily Gazette, a little five-column curio such as could not be found throughout the length of newspaper-plastered Kansas today, had much to tell about the raid on the bank that evening. Windy Moore was quoted at length, with embellishments of vocabulary and refinements of diction as surprising to himself as to everybody who knew him; Maud Kelly was quoted, but not to such great length, her plain statement lacking in the picturesque touches which Windy Moore knew how to lay on with artistic hand.

Cashier Crowley was given a chance to explain why he had not grabbed a gun and defended the public's money instead of playing the undignified part of a dead man in this, McPacken's greatest drama. The president of the bank made a statement bearing on the amount carried off by the robbers, which was the vital and important part of the whole story to McPacken.

The banker said the loss would run between forty and fifty thousand dollars; the exact amount would not be known for a day or two, when everything had been

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checked. A large part of the loss was county funds. There was no insurance. Although the president did not say so, the paper made it plain that things looked rather cloudy for the bank.

Forty men were out, raking the country for trace of the robbers, of whom there were believed to be five, including the one who joined them at McPacken. These searchers were spreading the news at every ranch and cow camp, their numbers increasing as they rode. The gang had an hour, or more, start of the posse at the beginning, their audacious blow had so completely stunned and disorganized the town.

While the Gazette was loud in praise of the sheriff's valor and competency, it was low in its hope of results. The robbers had headed south, making for No Man's Land, as the panhandle of what was then the Indian Territory was called. For many years neither territorial nor federal jurisdiction had been exercised over that narrow neck of country. An outlaw who could gain the cover of No Man's Land was safe from the reach of those on the outside, no matter what his perils from more desperate refugees within.

The editor of the paper was a careful man, yet he wanted to give all the news and put it as plainly as he could within the limits of libel in case circumstances might clear up and show public report to be wrong. He did not mention Tom Laylander by name, therefore, but referred to him as "a young Texas cowman who has been around here the past four or five weeks, lately employed on the section as a common laborer."

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This young man was defendant in an action to recover on a debt, brought by one of the county's most prominent citizens. It was the general public belief that this young man from Texas, resentful of this lawful reckoning demanded of him, had summoned his outlawed comrades from his notoriously vicious country, and carried out the robbery as a vindictive stroke of retaliation.

It was certain that the outlaw who had fallen by the city marshal's hand was a Texan. Letters and other evidence in his possession established that. It was also established beyond question that the young cowman before alluded to was the man who took the money from the bank's safe and threw it into a grain sack, which grain sack he carried out and flung across the saddle of one of the waiting horses, and rode away with it before him toward the fastness of No Man's Land.

All this, and much more, Louise Gardner read after she had borne her part in serving supper as usual, sitting in her little corner room with one window opening to the west, another to the south. Out of this south window she looked as night fell over the prairie, the confusion of this tragic event upon her. A soft little wind was coming up from No Man's Land, a lonesome, home-yearning touch in it, like a plea from Tom Laylander for an abeyance of judgment.

No Man's Land was not more than sixty miles away, in a southwesterly direction, lying west of the Cherokee Strip. Range horses could cover that distance in a few hours, Louise knew. She felt a little lifting of gladness

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with the thought that Tom Laylander would have reached and crossed the border of that dark, wild country by now, only to repudiate the feeling the next moment as a traitorous acceptation of his guilt. For she said, and repeated it with obstinate disregard of all argument, proof, circumstance and reason, Tom Laylander was not a guilty man.

Perhaps he had put the money in the robbers' sack; it seemed to be unquestionable that he had gone away with them, as the paper charged. Why he had done this, what circumstance had conspired to force him to do what he had done, she could not understand. It was a shocking tangle which her frantic seeking to penetrate only confused the more. There seemed to be no beginning of reason or motive; there was no end of any sort at all.

She thought the robbers must have taken him as a hostage, unreasonable, unheard of as such hypothesis was. Windy Moore's testimony she wiped out with indignant scorn. The whole experience was like the suffocating black struggle of a dream in which a climax never is reached.

Tom had gone away with the robbers, but Tom was not one of them. How she was to establish his innocence in her own reason, how he was to make it clear against public challenge in his own time, she did not know. Only that Tom had gone toward No Man's Land with the robbers, and that he was an innocent man.

She sat looking out of the south window, the south

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wind in her face, turning it over and over with distracting, heart-wearying, fevered persistence. He was not guilty. And her faith was the only faith that supported Tom Laylander in all McPacken that night.

The posse comitatus came straggling back next day, to be followed along toward evening by the sheriff, who looked as downcast as if he had come from a funeral. It amounted to about that, indeed, for the sheriff's hopes of re-election. It was disappointing business, being a sheriff in those times, so close to the border of No Man's Land.

Still, the sheriff had not returned without news, although it was not news of his own making. Some cowboys in his posse had found the body of a man a few miles north of the sanctuary of outlawed men. He was a stranger, unknown and unidentified by the cattlemen and herders who used in that part of the country. There was a crumpled letter from a woman in a small town of the Brazos country of Texas, entreating him to return home, or send her money. This seemed, to the sheriff, to supply about all that was wanting in his history. Some said he was one of the cowboys who had come to Kansas with Tom Laylander.

The sheriff brought the letter to McPacken; the man they buried where he lay. He had died of a bullet wound, given him by the marshal of McPacken in the battle before the bank door, it was believed.

The other members of the robber gang had not been sighted by the sheriff, who had turned back at the bor-

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der. He did not believe in pushing his jurisdiction into the rough hills and scrubby forests of No Man's Land. Any man was as good as a sheriff there, where all men stood together to turn back the arm of the law. Other sheriffs of border counties had not been so wise as this man of McPacken. They had followed trails over the border, and they never had returned.

Two days later a cattleman rode into McPacken with the report of a dead man found a few miles over the line by some of his herders. The fellow had nothing in his possession but a dollar watch, some matches, tobacco and cigarette papers, with the exception of a rough map of McPacken and the roads leading into it. The situation of the bank on the public square was accurately marked. There were two bullet wounds in the man's breast.

The people of McPacken glowed with admiration for their city marshal, who had fallen in vain defense of their money. With the same breath they marvelled over the tenacity of life shown by these Texas men. This second bandit was found fully seventy miles from McPacken. The annals of that country did not record an instance where a man had lived to travel that far with two big bullets through his gizzards and his lights. They lived hard in Texas, and they died hard. And that was a cinch. So everybody said.

The sheriff alone expressed doubt, disbelief. He had been willing to yield the first man to the glory of the dead officer, but he would not go so far with the second one, found away across the line of No Man's

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Land. He pulled his long mustache, gloom in his eye over the prospect of re-election, speaking his mind freely on this sowing of dead men along the raiders' trail.

In his opinion it was due to a quarrel among the thieves. That cow jerry's hand was the one scattering this woeful sowing of death, the sheriff said. He had been told, by those who had seen him in action, that he was quicker than any man's eye when it came to slinging out his gun. He had been weeding out the undesirables from his gang, likely with the ultimate purpose of killing them all, leaving no division of the stolen money necessary. It had been done before in the sheriff's time; it was a well-known Texas trick.

Louise Gardner heard all these reports and theories, for the daily paper was supporting the sheriff and picked up every word that he broadcast in the square. Her own conviction of Laylander's innocence had become settled and serene. She had arrived at a theory in the case, which she kept to herself. She did not even repose her confidence in Maud Kelly, with whom she was serving her few days of apprenticeship in the county treasurer's office.

Louise knew that the sheriff's uncharitable hypothesis was true in part. Tom Laylander's hand was the one, indeed, that was dotting the fleeing bandits' trail with dead men.

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CHAPTER XII

WINDY MOORE'S WATCH

WINDY MOORE was the herald of adventure. He had been born to announce, rather than to share, the adventures of other men's lives. Added to this distinguishing favor of the gods was a sharp-nosed, gossiping, wide awake disposition for prying into the troubles of other people and spreading them abroad with colors retouched by a reckless imagination. Windy was always on the lookout for a sensation; forever standing sentinel at the outpost of scandal; ceaselessly applying his ear to the window-shutter in sly-footed eavesdropping, his eye to the pane in despicable spying.

Following close on Tom Laylander's prank at Windy's expense, the little brakeman had been promoted from the local run to a high-ball freight. He had made his first run on the new assignment, and was back in McPacken for his layover. He had come in about breakfast-time that morning, which was the sixth day after the bank robbery in which Windy had lost his watch and roll.

Windy was so full of importance over his upward

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step in the calendar of railroad nobility that he could not hide his new brilliance in bed very long, no matter for having been awake all the way from Argentine to McPacken the night before. Eleven o'clock saw him out of bed and shaved, and down to the front sidewalk-porch with a pair of blue suspenders, blue sleeve-holders to match, enough pomatum on his sleek, short-cut black hair for two bigger men, and perfume in excess for a dozen.

His nellygee shirt, as he called it, making two words of it, like the name and initial of a lady friend, was pink-striped. Windy wore it without a necktie, the soft collar open on his classical throat, the sleeves turned back midway of his forearms, in the accepted railroad style. He was very satisfactorily arrayed, and altogether irresistible.

Banjo Gibson was not gracing a bench in front of the hotel that morning; Angus Valorous was still pounding his ear in dreams of conductorial eminence. Windy had the whole thing to himself, a little pink spot against a big green background of hotel, like a chigger on a leaf. It was a fine arrangement for the vanity of Windy Moore, suitable to his new importance.

Windy had a cigarette plastered to the corner of his sneering, disdainful mouth. What little of the world was not his a man could have put into a gunny sack and carried away. He was ready for the noon whistle, all set and waiting to pass out patronizing nods, high-signs and greetings by word of mouth to the un-

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fortunates tied down to earth in shops and round-house when they came in for dinner. For dinner fell at noon in that part of Kansas then; it keeps the same cycle now.

It wanted a quarter to twelve when Pap Cowgill came limping out of the dining-room, walking with a piece of broom handle to ease the weight from his crippled foot, heading for the cigar case to help himself to the best. Pap was still in the door, his mother and the new biscuit-shooter crossing and recrossing each other in the background like botflies circling a horse's ear, when Windy Moore came in from the porch with a slam of the screen door at his heels. Windy was white to the gills; there was a look about him of a man who had been bitten by a rattlesnake and was racing for the jug.

Pap was as uncertain of Windy's intentions as he was ignorant of the cause of his panic. He thought maybe Windy had swallowed something and was coming for water, or had cut himself and was running for help. Pap side-stepped to let him go by, meeting him at the foot of the stairs, which came down, indeed, just at the side of the dining-room door. Windy jumped in the same direction that Pap sidled, and then, in the foolish way that people do in such sudden and embarrassing situations, they sawed and balanced like partners in a clumsy dance.

"Let me by!" said Windy frantically. "I tell you, let me by!"

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"What in the hu-hu-hell's a bitin' you? G-g-go by!" said Pap.

At the same time he stepped this way; Windy sprang in the same direction, nimble as a bee.

"Let me up them stairs!" Windy demanded, sweat on his face, desperation in his breath. "I tell you that cow jerry just rode by—I'm goin' after my gun!"

"The hu-hu-hell you say!" said Pap. He dropped his broom-stick cane and made for the front door in a jump.

Mrs. Cowgill appeared in the dining-room door, a wisp of hair dangling down her face, as usual when she was undergoing the labor of breaking in a new girl. Windy Moore stood with one foot advanced to the first tread of the stairs, but appeared to be in no great rush now to push his way to the top.

"Is he—did you say—"

"Just rode by," said Windy, still as white as suds. "I'm goin' after my gun!"

He went on, bounding up the stairs like a valiant and determined man. Mrs. Cowgill stood as if stricken; opened her mouth wide, her eyes wider, raising her hands as if she surrendered everything. If facial expression and manual signs spoke truly, Mrs. Cowgill did not reserve one little gasp of astonishment for future use.

She followed Pap to the door, Goosie coming running from the dining-room. A cowhand-looking man was riding up the street toward the square, sight common enough, to be sure. Whether he was Tom Lay-

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lander, none of them could say. Pap said he'd go on up to the square and find out, but he thought Windy Moore had got something crossways in him. Mrs. Cowgill sought to restrain her son, who put her hand away with scorn.

Windy Moore was a good while about getting his gun. Pap was half way to the square, where the rider had disappeared, when Windy came down the stairs with a sideways trip to him that was very neat and elegant.

"Where's he at?" Windy asked, gun in hand, caution restraining him in any headlong dash.

"Gone around the corner," said Goosie, pointing.

"He'll go around another one!" said Windy, a big threat in his voice. He followed Pap, still with a cautious casting around him, an unaccountable deliberation in his pace for an avenger going out with his bull-dog in his hip pocket, looking for a man to slay.

Mrs. Cowgill lifted her hands again, opened her mouth and her eyes in repetition of her former silent surrendering up of every emotion of surprise, turned and hurried back to her dining-room to see if the new girl had put on the pickles.

Goosie remained outside a little while, looking up the street, listening, to see and hear if anything broke loose. There was no excitement in town. If the cow jerry had passed, he had gone by unrecognized by anybody but Windy Moore. Goosie believed Windy had been mistaken, having rather a low regard for his reliability at the best.

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Cow jerry, or plain cowhand as the rider might prove to be, the hungry railroaders would break across the yards in a few minutes, coming like a flock of chickens when they hear the dishpan on the fence. Dinner must be laid out on the long table, let even Gabriel come riding his white horse up the main street of McPacken.

Crowley, the bank cashier, felt a skittishness come over him every time he saw a big hat come in the door. Yet a man could not very well greet every wearer of a big hat with a gun presented between the bars of the cage, in a country where some of the biggest hats had the biggest accounts. A man had to sweat it out and run his chances. Crowley got the jump of his life as he was arranging things in his cage after the morning rush of business that day.

He had turned to look at the clock—it was ten minutes to twelve—and did not see the man enter the door, which stood open to the breeze, a brick holding it back against the wall. The fellow was half way between the door and Cashier Crowley's window when first seen, coming in softly, as if he walked on his toes. Crowley did not hesitate. He grabbed his gun and leveled it between the shining brass bars.

It was not an unknown face under the big white hat; a good-humored, round, ruddy young face, but with a certain weariness and strain in it, especially around the frank blue eyes. A growth of virile sandy beard, several days old, added a comical roughness to the otherwise ingenuous face. The cashier knew it was not a strange face, but he could not remember where

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he had seen it before, nor call up a name to fit it. But he didn't like that silent tip-toeing across the floor. It wasn't his day to take another chance.

The visitor did not appear at all impressed by the cashier's gun, nor the desperate look in the man's scared white face. He held up one hand in a gesture of indulgent admonition, grinning a little, the disturbance in his dusty whisker stubs running up to his eyes, making them seem to laugh. The young man was carrying a grain sack, about half full of some lumpy matter; the horse that had brought him there stood before the door.

The president was sitting in his little railed-off place beside the cashier's cage, perplexities marshalled before him in long lines of figures, and short groups of fat figures, showing sums in addition and subtraction. There was plenty for the president of a bank that had stood a loss of over forty thousand dollars, cash, to think about in a town like McPacken, where the directors were not any too brisk about coming up with an assessment to cover it.

There was a little tin sign with gilt letters tacked on the gate opening into the president's pen, labelling him as neatly as a jar of jam. The man with the grain sack on his shoulder turned from the cashier's hostile embrasure as he read this word PRESIDENT. He turned his back to the cashier's gun with the nonchalance or ignorance of innocence.

That moment the cashier called a sharp warning to his superior, who raised his weary head, and sprang to his feet like a man aroused to flee for his life. He stood

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with hand on the pistol that lay on the flat desk before him, seeming to wait his moment, rather than to rush to meet it. He was a different sort of man from the one in the cage; a man who would not lift his weapon until he was ready to shoot. So the visitor with the sack on his shoulder said to himself, feeling a warm admiration for the lean, harassed-looking president of the bank.

"What do you want?" the president demanded, as the young man, a stranger to him, approached the rail.

"I just want to turn this money over to you," the stranger replied wearily, as if worn by a thankless vigil over something in which he claimed no share.

"Money? Whose money? What money?"

"That's one of them! That's one of them!" the cashier warned. He came out of his cage, gun in hand.

"Put up that gun, Crowley!" the president ordered, his command sharp as a blow in the cashier's broad flat face.

"They forced me to assist them that morning, sir," the young man said, his voice low in what seemed a shameful confession, the blood of humiliation rising in high tide to his face.

"I see," said the president, but, far from seeing, puzzled to get the drift of this extraordinary young man's words.

"It's one of that gang!" the cashier whispered, holding his gun ready to use at the first wink.

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"Oh, I see," the president repeated, really beginning to see.

"They got the swing on me and took my gun away from me while I was standin' there cashin' two little checks," the stranger went on. "The amount was a hundred and ten dollars. When you come to it, just lay it to one side for me, please sir."

The visitor put his sack on the rail near the president's hand, and turned to go his way in the manner of a man whose task was finished.

"You must be Tom Laylander?" said the president, opening the little gate, his hand extended to check the stranger's going.

Tom Laylander stopped, turned again in dignity, his weary body drawn up to the last fraction of an inch that it would stretch.

"Sir, that is my name," he replied.

"Wait a second," the bank official requested, with a little gesture of attention toward the door.

Tom had not noticed before that the beginning of a crowd had collected in front of the bank. He saw Pap Cowgill there, close by the open door, and a man with a badge on his vest, and Windy Moore coming pushing among the others, who seemed to be blowing there like leaves on a sudden gust of wind. Windy had his hand on his hip pocket; he was puffing as if he had run a mile. Tom understood the president's gesture. It seemed to say: "I believe you, but they want to see the proof before you leave."

The president had taken his knife from his pocket,

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the sack from the rail, as cool and steady as if about to open a sack of wheat. He cut the string, carried the sack to the middle of the floor and emptied it, full in the sight of such of McPacken as had assembled there, and were coming every second as fast as their shanks could carry them.

"By cripes! There's my watch!" said Windy Moore.

A heap of money, such as few in the crowd ever had seen before, lay on the bank floor. There were bundles of currency, loose bills of currency flooding them like the sauce of some delectable pudding; several little bags which everybody knew contained gold, a few gleams of white where silver dollars had got mixed in the hasty harvest.

The president stood looking at the heap of money, the empty sack in his hand, his head bent as if overwhelmed by some emotion that he dared not allow the world to see in a bank official's face.

"I think it's all there," said Tom, turning again to go.

"How in God Almighty's world did you do it, Laylander?" the banker asked, wonder so great in him that it was almost awe.

"You'll excuse me for hurryin' off," said Tom, that painful flood of crimson in his face again, "but I think this is the day I've got a case comin' up in court."

The crowd was flooding into the bank, filling the room, gorging the door. The new city marshal, the butt-end of a billiard cue in his hand, pistol by his side, appeared to think this was the proper moment for him to push into the bank and take a hand. Windy Moore

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and others had been giving him an earful as they stood outside. Following the custom in filling the office of city marshal, the job had been given by the mayor to the next most worthless citizen in town. This fellow was a barber. He had a soapy, sloppy shop next door to the county jail.

This officious person now planted himself in front of Laylander, barring his way to the door, hand laid to his gun.

"You want me to take him up?" he asked the banker.

"Let that man pass!" the banker ordered, something more than authority in his tone.

The city marshal subsided; others drew out of the way. Tom Laylander, his own pistol again in the leather against his leg, hurried out to the court house to see about his case.

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CHAPTER XIII

THE ESSENTIAL EVIDENCE

LOUISE GARDNER had asked the clerk of the court to send word to her in the county treasurer's office when Laylander's case came up for hearing. She understood that his counsel had withdrawn, in the light of Tom's apparent complicity in the bank robbery, leaving him undefended against Cal Withers's claim. She had come to the decision, after giving it much thought, to make a plea of continuance for Laylander, a bold intention which she kept to herself. For she believed that Tom would come back.

Whether through oversight or indifference, the clerk did not send for Louise. When she left her work with Maud Kelly at noon, they stopped at the court room to make inquiry about the case. It was in progress that moment, Withers's lawyer on his feet making an argument for judgment, against which the judge seemed to be standing out stubbornly, as his low, precise denials of the points raised expressed.

Louise told Maud that she intended to stop there and hear the end of it. Maud, always savagely hungry, and little interested in Tom Laylander's loss or gain, went

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on to lunch, while Louise slipped into the court room and down to the front, where she sat, far more conspicuously than she desired, among the empty benches.

It was not an interesting case; everybody in McPacken knew, or believed they knew, how it would end from the first. Besides, it takes something more than a civil suit, even involving a supposed fugitive from justice, to hold people when dinner is ready.

"But that is not the point, Mr. McSweeny," said the judge, patient in the repetition of a thing the wilful attorney was determined to have his way, justice or injustice, law or no law. "You have not made your case, you cannot make your case, without the essential evidence."

"We are unable to produce it, as your honor knows," the attorney returned pettishly. "If we had the note, we certainly would introduce it. We're not holding it out just to give us a chance to stand up here and talk."

"You haven't introduced any evidence, except the testimony of the plaintiff, to prove that the note ever was in existence," said the court.

"It was our opinion that the testimony of a man of my client's standing in this community would be sufficient," the lawyer returned, bitterly sarcastic.

"The court regrets to say that it is not."

"We can summon witnesses to prove the existence of this note, and that it is lost beyond the power of mortal man to produce."

"You should have done so," said the court.

"This defendant, Laylander, is a fugitive from jus-

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tice. He never had any standing in this community, he wouldn't have any standing in this court if he was here. It is preposterous of your honor, if you will permit me to say so—"

"It seems you have said it without permission, Mr. McSweeny," spaid the court, undisturbed.

"To ask us to produce proof of the existence of this note."

"It is quite reasonable, Mr. McSweeny," the court corrected him, with some show of rising temper. "The note itself is the essential evidence in an action of this character."

"It is a fact just as well established, your honor, that the loss of a note does not release the maker of it from payment."

"That is very true. All the court requires is proof, in the absence of the essential document itself, that such a note existed; that it was a valid note at the time this action was brought. The court will give you—three days, Mr. McSweeny, to produce such evidence. I make the time short on account of the heavy expense accruing against the attached property. Will that be long enough for you?"

Here the judge looked across the bench with a frown, displeased by the sudden invasion of his quiet room by what seemed a holiday crowd of people, male and female. The city marshal was among them, the president of the bank was there. Maud Kelly had been caught in the sudden current and carried back.

The case of Withers against Laylander seemed to

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have assumed a sudden importance in the public regard. It was as if the gate of a pasture had been opened, letting out a herd of famished cattle to water. The judge withheld the proceedings while the benches filled speedily with excited, whispering people. The attorney for the plaintiff stood with a frown of annoyance on his face.

"Mr. Sheriff," said the judge, looking around for that dignitary, "Mr. Sheriff,"—a little louder—"let us have quiet."

The sheriff had been dozing at a table near the clerk, his long body slid downward in his chair to bring his head to easy rest on the back of it, his long legs under the table. He came up like a man from a dive, amazement, bewilderment, in his simple face. He rose, rapping the table with his fist. He did not call for order; just looked around with a threat that seemed to command it, and sat down again, well satisfied with himself and the result.

"If your honor please," said a soft, deferential voice up the aisle about midway of the room.

"What is it?" asked the judge, very severe, very much displeased.

The speaker advanced toward the bench, walking on tiptoes, hat under his arm, a big pistol flapping against his thigh. The sheriff rose, leaning forward with hands on the table, the color running out of his face. He was in the aisle with a bound, confronting Tom Laylander, gun thrown down on him, desperate intention in his face.

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"Put 'em up!" he commanded.

Laylander raised his hands, dropping his hat. The sheriff leaned far, and drew Tom's pistol out of the holster, breathing easier when he had it clear. He edged around behind Tom, indicating that he was to advance toward the amazed judge.

"Your honor, this is that feller Laylander," the sheriff explained.

People in the room made a stirring among the benches, some of them rising from crouching behind them, standing now, stretching to see.

"We must have order here!" the judge commanded.

Louise started forward as if to protest against this outrageous action on the sheriff's part, as she felt it to be. She did not know where Tom Laylander had been, or what perils he had passed, but the look of weariness in his face told her that it had been far, his dangers many and grave. Her heart seemed to rise and exult for him, walking in the boldness of innocence among those who had accused and slandered him.

She remained standing, unaware of her conspicuous situation, until she saw that attention was being divided between her and the sheriff's prisoner. She believed Tom had not seen her when he passed down the aisle, yet hoped that he had. She wanted him to know that in the face of public distrust and hostility as expressed by Withers's lawyer and the sheriff's action, one in McPacken believed in him and held his interest at heart.

Cal Withers was whispering to his attorney, who leaned over the table to hear. The cowman's spirit

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seemed uneasy within him; he threw his hand to the place where his gun usually hung, feeling stripped and exposed to the danger of sudden death when he thought of the weapon outside in the sheriff's office. The judge indicated by a movement of his hand that the sheriff was to stand aside.

"You started to address the court; is there something you want to say? Are you Thomas Laylander, defendant in the case now being heard?"

"Yes sir, your honor, I am. I didn't know it was an offense to come into court with a gun on me—I didn't even remember I had it," said Tom, unable to account for his reception in any other way.

"I guess you can put that pistol down, Mr. Sheriff," the judge suggested, rather than ordered.

"I was some distance away," Tom explained. "I got here as soon as I could."

Judson Weaver, president of the bank, came down the aisle, stopped at the sacred little enclosure in which the attorneys' tables stood, standing as if he had something that he desired to say. The court did not appear to notice him, due, perhaps, to the swirl of surprising conjectures revolving on this defendant's remarkable and unlooked for appearance.

"Your attorney has withdrawn from the case," said the judge. "He turned over your retainer to the clerk of this court, who holds it at your order."

"I guess maybe I can get along without a lawyer of that kind, and be better off," said Tom.

"Your case," said the judge, cold and stern, "is at

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this point: The plaintiff is unable to produce the note upon which the action for recovery rests. As you perhaps understand, the note itself is the best evidence in such an action, but judgment may be allowed on the presentation of evidence to establish the existence of such note, and proof of its validity at the time the suit was instituted. The court has granted the plaintiff three days' time to gather and present such evidence. There the matter for the present rests."

"Yes sir, your honor. I came in just when this lawyer was argin', makin' mention of me in a slanderous way I'll have to call on him to explain. I understood from your reply to that rascal, sir, that the note was lost. I wanted to speak to the court, sir, to state that I've got the note, right here, your honor, sir. There's no use delayin' the case on account of the note bein' missin'. Here it is."

Tom handed the note to the astounded judge. The equally astonished crowd rustled and shifted, creaking the benches in the strain of bringing eyes and ears a few inches closer to the scene of these remarkable proceedings. Louise sprang up, tense, surging hot with protest against Tom's apparent folly in thus surrendering himself into his enemies' hands. Withers's lawyer was up, hand flung out in protesting gesture.

"If that is the note, and it may well be our note, this—this—*person* having had access to it lately, we protest against alterations and erasures, cancellations or other marks whatever, that would tend to show payment."

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"There are no marks on it, Mr. McSweeny, except some notations on the back which may indicate interest payments," said the judge.

The judge sat holding the note before him, looking curiously at Tom Laylander, who had gone back to take his hat from a man and thank him for picking it up. Presently he passed the note, abstractedly, without following the act with his eyes, to Withers's lawyer. Those two immediately went into conference over it, whispering, passing it from hand to hand. Satisfaction settled into their countenances with the quieting of their fears.

Louise sat down again, throbbing and indignant, half scornful of Laylander in spite of her admiration. Why had he been so foolish? Why had he given the note to them? Or perhaps not so foolish, after all. This thought came up to plead for Tom, out of her deep knowledge of his worthiness. Maybe the note was valueless; perhaps it was all the evidence Tom needed to win his case. Withers's lawyer was standing again, the note in his hand.

"Since the defendant is in court, and the note is in evidence, with notations of interest payments by my client, showing that interest was paid on it within the past five years, establishing its validity beyond any and all question; since all these matters and facts are before the court, we ask that the case proceed. Mr. Withers will resume the stand and make formal identification of this note."

"Court is adjourned till two o'clock," said the judge,

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passing over the lawyer as if he was not, never had been nor ever was expected to be.

The sheriff didn't know just what his own next move was to be in the case of Laylander. He was trying to get the prosecuting attorney's eye, with a view to a warrant. The judge came down from the bench, Banker Weaver went forward to meet him. The crowd pressed Louise along the aisle to the lawyers' enclosure, space sacred no longer to only licensed feet.

"How is this, Laylander? How did you come to have possession of that note?" the judge asked, now in his capacity of perplexed citizen, a state none the less vexing than that of perplexed judge.

"It was among some papers thrown away by the scoundrels that held us up here the other day, sir."

"I see," said the judge. You've been following that gang of bank robbers, have you? You're the man that's been picking them off along the road. I see."

Tom said nothing. He stood hanging his head as if he had been rebuked, his fair hair rumpled, dust gray in his stubble of beard, confusion over him. Louise stood behind him, a yearning in her to call his name, to give him her hands, to say something endearing that would have been incongruously out of place, and made the crowd laugh.

Judson Weaver told the judge of Tom's arrival at the bank with the money. He spared nothing of the obligation that he, and his institution, stood under to Tom Laylander. It was an obligation, he said, that every man in McPacken shared.

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The judge listened to the story with growing amazement. The sheriff stood leaning his hands on the table, looking like a giraffe with its feet on a rock, his long neck stretched, his eyes crowded out by the wonder that was so big inside of him that atmospheric pressure seemed insufficient to prevent him from bursting on the spot. He was the most astonished sheriff that ever lived.

"He took the guns off of the one that fell in front of the bank, hopped his horse and rode after them, all so quick we thought he was one of the gang," the banker said.

Tom looked up quickly. Louise strained a little nearer, leaning as if to compel him to feel her presence there.

"There was just a rifle, sir," Tom corrected the banker. "It's down there with his horse. It's a slow horse, sir, but it's an endurin' one."

"It was a remarkable thing for one man to strike out after that gang alone and come back alive," the judge marvelled. "Why didn't you wait for the rest?"

"I was so mortified over them takin' my gun away from me and makin' me help pick up the money I couldn't hardly see," said Tom. His tone and manner seemed an apology to the sheriff, and everybody in McPacken, for rushing off that way ahead of the posse.

"How he got the money away from them before they split it and scattered, how he ever came back at all, God only knows!" the banker said.

"You've been a pretty badly slandered man in this

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community, Tom Laylander," the judge said. "There wasn't a soul in this town with brains enough to understand."

"I think there was one—or two," said Tom, attaching the amendment as if to divide public conjecture, it seemed.

Tom spoke softly, as if a deep, a dear and cherished thought had taken wings and escaped out of his mouth in words that he had not meant McPacken to hear. He turned his head a little, with a quick, searching movement, and there was Louise. There was Louise, just at his shoulder, all looking out of her eyes that her tongue could not frame one little word to say.

"Yes," said the wise judge, turning away to leave them a little more alone, "there was one."

Tom was holding her hands, having trouble to force a smile, seeing her twitching lips, the stricken whiteness of her face, the joyful admiration of her eyes, her pride so great that it struggled in her bosom with the constraint of pain.

"Why, Miss Louise!" said Tom. "Why, lambie! Don't you cry!"

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CHAPTER XIV

AN OLD AXIOM EXPLODES

IT was honesty, but a foolish piece of honesty. That was what McPacken said. It cost Tom Laylander his case. If he had burned that note when he found it beside the bandits' campfire along with other discarded notes, bonds and papers, he'd have won back his cattle. Any sensible man would have burned it, said the public of McPacken. There was such a thing as carrying this honesty game too far.

There was nothing for the judge to do, under the law, but decide the case against Tom. There was the note in evidence, notations on the back of it in indelible pencil made by the hand of Cal Withers, recording payment of interest within five years, thus keeping it from becoming invalid by limitation. The judgment was entered accordingly, and the herd ordered sold at public auction by the sheriff.

Withers's lawyer passed Tom as he was leaving the courtroom in a slow, dazed way. The lawyer carried books under his arm, as lawyers of his calibre always do. He looked at Laylander with a sort of baffled

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curiosity, glowing with pride in his good fee and easy victory.

"Why didn't you tear that note up, Laylander?" he asked loudly. "Then you'd 'a' had us."

"No gentleman would have thought of it, sir," Tom replied, with dignity and severity alike lost on a conscience that never had been big enough to give its owner any trouble.

Louise was not in court to hear the case go against Tom, it being a Saturday afternoon, with many ranchers in to pay their taxes. Besides, it was Maud Kelly's last day in the office. She was closing up her affairs preparatory to taking her two weeks' vacation, at the end of which time Louise was to succeed her. Tom was rather glad than sorry that she had not been present to witness his defeat. He returned to the hotel with a smile for Mrs. Cowgill on the bench beside her door, the void of his great disappointment and loss hidden under his cougar-skin vest.

"Well, Tom, did you beat him?" Mrs. Cowgill inquired, lively interest in her thin face.

"No ma'am, I didn't beat him yet."

Tom stopped before her, hat off in his respectful way that Mrs. Cowgill admired so greatly, and prized all the more highly when she was the object of it, so few marks of deference falling in her barren life.

"Didn't the judge decide it yet?"

"Yes, he decided it, ma'am. Colonel Withers won this throw. The judge ordered the sheriff to put my herd up for sale at public auction ten days from today."

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Mrs. Cowgill looked at Tom with consternation making her gaunt eyes wide. It appeared as if he had brought her news of a personal loss, her perturbation and concern so far outweighed any outward indication of his own.

"Can't you stop them? Are you goin' to let that old rascal beat you out of your cattle that way?"

"I can stop the sale for a while if I appeal. But Mr. Weaver, over at the bank, says he don't believe it would do a bit of good to appeal the case. It looks like I'm knocked out for a little while."

"Well, you take it mighty easy!" she said. "They say them cattle's worth twenty thousand dollars, if a cent. I guess if I was to lose twenty dollars you could hear me from here to the court house."

"Ladies are a little different, I reckon, ma'am," Tom allowed.

"You ought 'a' called for a jury—that's what Myron said at dinner, and he reads the papers, he knows that, if he don't know much else. It oughtn't never 'a' been left to the judge. If you'd 'a' had a jury you'd 'a' sure beat him, with folks in this town knowin' what you've done for them, bringin' back all that money—my-y-y Lord! They say every dollar of it was there. Windy Moore got his back, and his watch. Here he comes now."

Tom had taken a seat beside Mrs. Cowgill at her signalled invitation, where he sat in a tentative, uncomfortable way, well forward on the bench, hat in hand, as if he expected to jump up the next minute and run

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away. Windy Moore approached in all the refinement and elegance of his pink-striped nellygee, to which he had added a blue-and-white polkadot necktie, done in a Byronial bow with long flowing ends, and a straw hat with brim three fingers wide, hard enough to drive nails.

"Well, Tom," said Windy, coming up in breezy justification of his name, hand out in extreme affability, "I'm not like the feller that can't overlook a joke. Glad to see you back—much obliged to you for bringin' me my watch and roll."

Tom got up, beaming with pleasure. He grasped the little brakeman's hand with the grip of genuine cordiality and joy, clinging to it as if somebody who had strayed away had come back again, redeeming the desolation of his life.

"I'm sure glad to see you, Mr. Moore," he declared, clinging to Windy's hand like a politician, "I sure am mighty glad!"

"Much obliged to you for bringin' me my watch and roll," Windy repeated, bound to pay his debt in an open and public manner, and have done with it there and then, nothing left hanging over to disquiet him in days to come. He was a little superior in spite of his down-bending, a little bit lofty and off-handed, as became a brakeman on a high-ball freight.

Windy sat down on the bench, with Tom between him and Mrs. Cowgill, got out his store cigarettes, which Tom could not refuse for fear of offending him, although he bore a scornful prejudice against any but

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the kind a man poured and rolled for himself. Mrs. Cowgill's surprise was as great when Tom asked her permission to smoke as if her man Myron had gone to work without being told. Windy Moore looked at him curiously, too, somewhat in contempt for his airs and his weakness.

"They tell me they beat you on that cattle case," said Windy, his trousers pulled up at the knees so high that he looked like a poodle dog about the legs.

"Yes, I lost on this throw," said Tom, speaking as if he had something in reserve, as he had spoken to Mrs. Cowgill a little while before.

"It's a darn stinkin' shame!" said Windy, whose diction was not so elegant out of the newspaper as it was in it. "I'd fight it to the supreme court if it was my case; I wouldn't throw down my hand for no decision like that. If you want money to carry it up, us fellers here in McPacken we'll see that you get it, and that ain't no lie!"

"I appreciate what you say, Mr. Moore; I appreciate it past all words. But I'm told I wouldn't gain anything but delay by makin' an appeal. The higher court couldn't do a thing to help me."

"Where you made your mistake," said Windy, with the largeness of extraordinary sophistication looking down on weakness almost to be despised, "was when you handed that note over to them fellers. If you'd 'a' put a match to it that would 'a' been the end of it. You'd 'a' had your cows, right now."

"That's what I said when I heard of it," Mrs. Cow-

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gill hastened to throw her stone of condemnation on this poor, bruised, pitiful little act of honor and honesty. "Let me get my hands on a note I've given anybody, and see what'll happen to it!"

Tom looked at her with a grin, which was a weak attempt to discredit her declaration, trying to tell her that he knew very well she'd hand it back to the owner and pay him like a little man, although he felt under the skin that she wouldn't do anything of the sort.

"Maybe I was kind of foolish," he admitted, "but I always was that way."

Tom wanted to get away from them, and the discussion of his loss. Their regretful condemnation of what, to him, was merely a simple act of honesty, was hard to bear in silence. Yet he knew that any attempt to defend his ethical code would only subject him to further pitying correction. According to the view of Mrs. Cowgill and Windy Moore, which might be accepted as the view in epitome of all McPacken, a man who lacked the sense to be dishonest to his own profit ought to be looked after and taken in hand.

Mrs. Cowgill relieved him of her presence and her comments after a while, but Windy Moore stuck. To Tom's great satisfaction Windy turned the talk to himself and his new consequence as soon as Mrs. Cowgill left them, keeping it up until the shops' whistle sounded the close of the working day. He advised Tom to get out of the cattle business, now that mischance seemed to have put him out, and get a job as brakeman. He

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offered to go with him to the superintendent and boost for him from the eminence of his influence.

Tom was grateful for the suggestion and offer of friendly service. After a while, when the law got through with his cattle, he'd be glad to consider it, he said. Right now he was not going to try for any kind of a job. Maybe, after all, he'd have to go to the range, for he didn't seem to have the railroading streak in his blood.

All of which Windy Moore argued down and out, enlarging on the respectability, the manliness, the importance to the national welfare, of a railroad job. Meaning by a railroad job, a job of no lower grade than brakeman, to be sure.

Windy had played his hand to hold Tom there beside him for the swelling satisfaction of being seen in his company by the shop mechanics and roundhouse men when they came in for supper. The news of the cow jerry's return with the money stolen from the bank had found its way into every ear in McPacken long before the whistle blew. Nearly everybody felt a personal interest in the event, for the question of the ability of the bank to make good the depositors' loss had been an open one, with a doubtful issue. The recovery of the money made everybody secure. It was a happy day.

The railroaders were frank in their praise, hearty in their handshakes, from all of which Tom would have escaped if he could. But Windy Moore had him on exhibition at the hotel door, presiding over the affair with a bearing of proprietorship. One might have con-

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cluded that Windy had been the leading spirit in that long and perilous pursuit, concerning which no man was able at that time, nor ever after, to draw one word out of Tom Laylander's mouth.

Tom got away from them at last, for gratitude is quickly expressed and done with, but hunger in the gizzard of a railroad man requires steak and onions to appease. He was going toward the court house in quest of Louise when he met her. They returned together to the hotel.

"I'm sorry, Tom," she said.

"I knew you would be, dovie," he replied.

"This ends it, I suppose?" she ventured. "They say up at the court house an appeal wouldn't do any good."

"It only begins it, Louise. He's won the first hand; that's all."

"Why, Tom,"—eagerly, a big hope lighting in her eyes, her hand on his arm—"what are you going to do? What is there you can do?"

Tom looked down into her eyes with a great tenderness in his pink, boyish face.

"I'm goin' to wait till the law gets through with my herd, Louise," he replied, so much more unsaid than said, yet altogether clouded in his mysterious reticence.

"We'll talk it over at supper," she said, flitting off upstairs as light on her feet as Banjo Gibson had calculated her when he first saw her on McPacken's street.

Several railroad men collected quickly about Tom, many of them familiar with his name whom he never had seen before, or had forgotten as incidentals in the

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general railroad pattern of the town. Some whom he knew to be conductors and engineers, who never had tipped him as much as a nod when he served on the section under Orrin Smith, greeted him like a member of the brotherhood now. That they were sincere about it Tom did not doubt, and would have been wrong if he had admitted such a thought into his ingenuous head.

He was a man who had been in bad company through innocence, rather than depravity, their attitude seemed to say, when he had labored on the section. That was all past and forgiven. The taint of jerry was no longer on his hands.

They repeated, with great earnestness and the pulling out of wallets, the declaration of Windy Moore that all the funds he might need to appeal his case were ready to his hand. More than that; if he wanted to organize a crowd to raid Cal Withers and shoot him off the face of the earth, they were with him; or to ride out and take his cattle away from the sheriff, load them and ship them out of the state, they were ready to get their guns and go. That they meant it, was as plain as the buttons on their coats.

Louise came down while they stood around Tom, their wallets and their rolls in their hands. And that was the interesting juncture at which Banjo Gibson emerged from the dining-room, the shine of chicken gravy on his chin.

"Why, hel-l-l-o, Tom!" Banjo greeted him, nearly bursting the buttons off his stiff-bosomed shirt with

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his swelling. He came forward offering his hand, his resonant voice loud in the office.

Laylander met his friendly advance with a peculiar kindling of humor and affront in his ruddy countenance. Banjo was before him, full of voluble expostulations of his unbounded joy, his notable banjo-picking right hand offered in jubilant salute. Laylander reached into the pocket of his cougar-skin vest, and bestowed some trifle in the hand of Banjo Gibson with as much indifference as he would throw a base coin to an aggressive beggar. He turned then with a soft word of excuse to the new friends, and genuine, who had come forward in his hour of need, held the dining-room door open to Louise, and left Banjo Gibson looking foolishly at a dime in the palm of his famous banjo-picking palm.

"The presence of that ornery little man, wantin' to shake hands with me!" said Tom. "Only a little while ago he snubbed me like I was a nigger when I come in from work on the section."

Banjo Gibson's loud, resounding, merriment-contagious laugh seemed to answer from the office. He was not to be humbled, not to be outdone. He was passing it off before the engineers and conductors as a rare and mighty joke.

The new girl, heavy as a plow-horse, came to wait on Louise and Tom as they sat at his old table in the far corner by the window. Myron was engaged with a scythe among the tall weeds on the back of the hotel lot;

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a smell of fresh-cut jimson and cockleburr came in on the breeze.

The court decision weighed heavier on Louise than Tom. She was downcast and sad; tears were at the brim of her eyes. But indignation against the injustice of the matter was stronger in her breast than grief. She flushed to a fighting heat as they talked it over, Tom glad that she was too generous to arraign him for his weakness, as McPacken in general considered it, in surrendering the note.

"They say Withers will be the only bidder when the cattle are put up under the judgment for sale," she said.

"That's generally the case," Tom told her, having seen many such judgments satisfied in his day. "It would be foolish for me to bid on my own property, and nobody else would want to speculate ten thousand dollars and costs on that herd right now. Withers will pay the costs and take the herd over. That's the way they work it."

"But what are you going to do, Tom?"

"I'm goin' to wait till the law gets through, Louise," he replied, and would reveal no more of his intention than that.

"Ye-es-s," sighed Louise, mournfully regretful, "if you hadn't given up that note!"

Tom felt his heart go down like a bucket in a well; down until it struck the cold water, chilling the little flower of gratitude that had sprung in him for her avoidance of that subject. It struck him harder than the loss of his cattle, sharper than the biggest disap-

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pointment he ever had suffered in his life. He had thought her too generous to mention that, at least in that long-drawn cadence of regret and blame. He had hoped that if she spoke of it, she would do so with commendation and a little praise.

"I'm sorry, Miss Louise," he said.

"It doesn't do any good now, Tom. It's always better to be safe than sorry, they say."

"I mean I'm sorry you don't approve what I did, Miss Louise. I'm not sorry for handin' the note to the judge. There wasn't anything else for an honorable man to do."

"You're too easy, Tom; you'll have to get over it."

"Yes, Miss Louise."

"Please don't 'Miss Louise' me, Tom."

"No, ma'am."

"You could have torn the note up, you could have left it there—you could have done anything but bring it back and turn it over to them."

"I could," Tom granted, his eyes downcast, his thin-lined light eyebrows drawn in his troubled way of fixing his whole soul upon a thing. "Yes, I could, Miss Louise—ma'am."

"You wouldn't have been dishonest, you'd only have been wise. It would have been different if it had been a good note, belonging to an honest man. Who knows when Withers wrote those dates on the back of that note? Well, I'll bet it wasn't more than a month ago, maybe not that long. The scheme for working you out of your remnant of cattle struck him when he was down

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there in Texas buying up stuff, and not a minute before."

"I expect that's so."

"That note was outlawed years ago, even if it never was paid."

"I haven't got a bit of doubt of it, Miss Louise."

"I wanted to yell at you when you handed the note to the judge, but it happened so unexpectedly, and was done so quickly, I couldn't get my breath to say a word."

"You knew it wouldn't have been right to try to turn me from a little act of plain honesty," Tom said, looking into her eyes with as much tender admiration as if she had done something to deserve it. "It was Colonel Withers's property; it wasn't cancelled, it wasn't crossed out and marked paid. It was as much his, in the face of any proof I could bring to show it had been paid off, as the money in that sack belonged to the bank. What would you have thought of me if I'd headed on south with that, in place of comin' back?"

"That's something different, altogether different," she insisted.

"It's just the same to me," said Tom.

Tom looked out at Myron, hacking away at the big weeds with his scythe, leaving a green confusion behind him. There was a cloud of sadness in Tom's face, as if he felt himself suddenly bereft, and left without consolation in an unfriendly land.

Louise reached over and touched his arm. The heat of indignation had subsided out of her face. She was

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white, and sorry, and penitent for the pain she had given him by her adherence to this worldly interpretation between right and wrong.

"You are right, Tom; it would have been just the same," she said.

The sun was out again in a burst of gladness for Tom Laylander, the earth was made a bright and happy place. A word is so much when a man needs it; so much more, indeed, than the nearest of his all can always understand

Mrs. Cowgill came through the swinging door from the office, showing in Judson Weaver. Instead of putting him down at one of the tables reserved for guests of such consequence, she headed straight for the obscure corner where Tom and Louise were finishing their custard pie. There Mrs. Cowgill stopped, spreading her hands in a gesture of delivery, her eyes lively with expectancy, her smile as broad as it would go.

"Sit still, sit still," Banker Weaver protested, as Tom started to rise. "I'm not going to stop, I just ran in on my way home for a word with you."

"Yes, sir," said Tom, standing half up and half down, about as awkward and embarrassed a young man as ever came off the Texas range.

"Our directors voted you a little expression of our appreciation this afternoon, Tom, which it is my great pleasure to put into your hand," the banker said.

It was a check for a thousand dollars. The banker put it on the corner of the table, seeing that Tom seemed to have no hand under control to reach out and

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take it. Mrs. Cowgill leaned over and looked at it, lifted her hands in her gesture of absolute surrender, opened her mouth in soundless astonishment, and stood posed that way, waiting for Tom to pick it up.

"Why, sir, I couldn't *begin* to accept of it!" said Tom.

"My-y-y lands!" Mrs. Cowgill said.

"We realize that money can't pay you for the service you've done us," the banker continued, trying to make it easier for Tom, it seemed. "Our appreciation goes with the check, our unbounded admiration and respect."

"That's worth more to me than any amount of money, sir," Tom replied, with simple dignity, simple sincerity. "Please hand this check back to the directors with my thanks. I couldn't *think* of accepting of it, sir."

"My-y-y lands! but you're easy!" Mrs. Cowgill said.

Louise took up the check, seeing the banker's embarrassment, and handed it back to him with a smile.

"Please put it on deposit to his account, Mr. Weaver," Louise requested, such a red rush of blood rising to her face that the last tear in her eyes must have been evaporated as if dropped on Mrs. Cowgill's range.

"Good!" said the banker. "Endorse it for him," offering his pen with a broad smile. "Now, that settles it."

"I couldn't begin to think of ever drawin' on it," Tom protested.

"Keep still," the banker advised, "and let your man-

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ager do the talking when there's any to be done. You need one as bad as anybody I ever saw, and I'm glad you've got a good one."

He gave Tom a slap on the shoulder, and Louise a knowing look, going his way with a grin, deaf to Tom's protestations that he never would touch a cent of it.

"Well, you *are* easy!" Mrs. Cowgill said, hurrying off after the banker as if the thousand dollar check in his pocket were a magnet that would draw her to the end of the world and over the edge.

Tom knew that she meant he was a bigger fool than she had thought any man of his size could possibly be. Louise looked at him tenderly. Tom felt that it was just as Judson Weaver had said. He was entirely in her hands.

"Get your hat," Louise directed him. "Let's take a walk down toward the river."

"Yes, Miss Louise."

"Oh, *don't* 'Miss Louise' me, Tom," she corrected, but with such great tenderness for his lubberly ways that it was almost a caress.

"No, ma'am," said Tom, contritely, coming up very red with his hat.

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CHAPTER XV

A PRAIRIE MANSION

THIRTY-ODD miles to her brother's ranch down near the line of the Nation was nothing to Maud Kelly. She appeared at the hotel on Sunday morning in a buckboard with her valise lashed to its slatted deck, a spunky span of young horses fretting at the stop, to pick up Louise and carry her away into the cowboy-infested wilds.

Maud wanted Tom Laylander to go along, insisting that the seat was plenty wide enough for three. When Tom expressed doubt of the comfort they would have with him crowding in, Maud suggested that she and Louise could take turn about sitting on his lap, to ease the crowding and give them elbow room.

If anything had been lacking to keep Tom out of the expedition, Maud's ingenuous proposal settled it for him. He backed off, fairly crippled by confusion. Louise had better success. She suggested a ride down to visit them at the ranch, to which Tom agreed. He said he would be going down in that direction to look over his cattle and see how they were filling out in a

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day or two. He'd be proud to ride on down to the ranch.

As the girls drove away, Tom waving them farewell from the hotel corner with his hat, they talked of the way he still claimed ownership of the cattle, neither of them able to account for his apparent stupidity in clinging to something that was already hopelessly lost. He seemed just as much interested in the cattle as if nothing had happened. Whether it was his simplicity, sustained by some glamorous hope, or some deep intention of an act of reprisal against Withers, they could not understand.

"I'd like to help the kid out," said Maud, who was cattle-wise, as well as worldly-wise.

"It looks hopeless," Louise declared. "He's so touchy about taking anything from anybody, even help. If anybody ever helps Tom Laylander they'll have to put it over on him in the dark."

"He'd just as well go on down there and kiss them cows good-by, they're the same as Cal Withers's now But say; I wonder!"

"You wonder what, Maud?"

"I was just thinkin'. I believe I know where the sheriff's got that herd—it must be down a few miles from Jim's ranch. Jim could be trusted to go in on anything that would soak old Cal Withers; he owes that old boy one that he's been itchin' a long time to pay."

"What's your scheme, Maud?"

"I'm not sayin' much about it right now, kid," Maud

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said, but with a grin on her big honest mouth as she turned a roguish eye to Louise. "Somebody's got to help that red-headed boy out of his troubles."

"It isn't just what you could call red, Maud," Louise corrected, knowing very well that her face was positively so.

"Near enough to pass. He'll be down tomorrow."

"I don't know."

"Sure he will. He can take a hand—no, he can't, but he can sit in the hammock and hold yours. That'll leave me alone to work out my desperate scheme."

"How about Mr. Cook?"

"Mr. Cook?" Maud repeated blankly. "Who's Mr. Cook?"

"Why, the man you're going to marry! the baggage—"

"Oh, you mean Sam. He'll not be down; he's got his orders, straight from headquarters, to give me a rest for two solid weeks."

There was not much more of a road going down to Jim Kelly's ranch than a ship leaves after it on the sea. Every driver struck a course to suit his own pleasure in the vastness of that untrammeled country. Sometimes Maud followed where somebody else had gone, again she drove for miles where a wheel seemed never to have pressed before.

It was a broken prairie, thrown in easy-rising long ridges, gently heaving, like nothing so much as an ocean whose swells had been fixed by some strange caprice of nature in these grassy undulations. At a distance the

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prairie appeared level to the eye, the farthest bound of the vision defined sharply, as the horizon comes down upon the sea. The ridges were bare of all growth except short buffalo grass, grayish-green in this summer season, brighter in the swales, where clumps of wild briars and fire-stunted shrubs huddled as if hiding away out of the incessant wind.

They passed a few sod ranch-houses, out of which children came running to pile up against the wire fences and stare, like tumble-weeds rolled up and lodged by the wind. Women sometimes appeared in the dark doors to wave greeting to Maud. Distant herds were spread wide over the gray pasture lands. It was a melancholy country, a lonely and depressing ride. At least Louise found it so. To Maud it was home, with nothing more remarkable nor peculiar about it than home has for anybody, anywhere.

Toward evening, the whole day being consumed in the leisurely drive, they struck Tom Laylander's herd, watched over by two young men who came galloping when Maud pulled up and waved her hat. They were lonesome and tired of their job, neither of them being a range man. As a regular business, one was employed in the livery stable at McPacken, the other as office deputy by the sheriff. They had a chuck-wagon and a negro cook over on a little creek among the trees, they said.

Maud expressed surprise that they two were alone with the cattle, the report in McPacken being that no fewer than ten men were holding them. There had

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been more, the herders said; the sheriff had called them off to chase the bank robbers, and they never had come back. Sick of the job, just like themselves, the office man said; glad to get back to town, and stay there. Nothing to it down there on the edge of nowhere watching a lot of fool cows at two dollars a day. A man could make more than that shootin' pool up in town.

"Just as well not have us here, they go where they darn please anyhow," the youth complained.

"That's right," Maud agreed. "There's no more need for a man along with a bunch of cattle this time of the year, especially a little bunch like this, than I've got for a nurse. How's the grub?"

"Bum!" said the office man, with explosive disgust. "I'd give six dollars for a dish of steak and onions like you used to bring us up at the hotel, Louise."

"That's one of the luxuries of your past that you'll never enjoy from my fine Italian hand again," Louise told him. "There's another lady on that job now."

"You don't mean to tell me you've quit the hotel, Louise?"

"Yes, I'm a tax-eater now, the same as you."

"Court house job, you mean, Louise?"

"Sure," said Maud. "She's got my job."

The young man was voluble in his congratulations. He was also somewhat astonished by the sudden and spectacular rise of a biscuit-shooter to a position at the public manger. But he was shrewd enough to run the mystery of her rise quickly to its source. That source was old man Kelly. He was still a dictator in the party

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councils of that county. So there was nothing extraordinary about it after all, except that a girl whom he had counted in as just a common sort with an uncommonly handsome figure and face, should spring at a bound from the bottom of the social ladder in McPacken to the very top. She would be worth cultivating when he went back to his clean and easy job. The young man made a large and impressive note of that.

"We're going to be down at Jim's for a week or so. Maybe we can cheer you up a little until the cattle are sold," Maud suggested.

The deputy sheriffs had not heard of the court decision, although they had expected it would go that way. It cheered them greatly to learn that their unremunerative and unromantic employment was nearly at an end.

"We're going to have a little dance over at Jim's tomorrow night," Maud announced, although it was news to Louise. "Round up your cows so the cook can keep his eye on 'em and come over."

Sure they would, they promised. The fool cows didn't need any watching, not at night, anyhow. Nobody ever watched them at night—what was the sense? When they got ready to bunk, they bunked, and when they wanted to get up and snort around they didn't wait for no little cowboy to come and call them. Sure they'd come. They'd wear the girls' feet off up to their knees dancin', and that wasn't no lie.

"You know where Jim's ranch is? down here about four miles," said Maud.

Sure they knew where it was. Them fool cows had

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roamed off down there a day or two ago, and stood with their necks over Jim's fence like they'd come home and found the door locked. They'd hung around there till Jim's wife had come out with the broom and run 'em off. Sure they'd come. Ten to one them darn cows would foller them, and line up along the fence.

"That's a good looking bunch of cattle, surprising good," said Maud, as they drove along the edge of the scattered herd. "It's a darn shame that kid's got to lose 'em, they'd sell for forty to forty-five a head right now."

"Tom said he believed they'd net twenty thousand dollars on the Kansas City market," Louise sighed. "It's a lot of money to be swindled out of."

"Ye-es," Maud drawled, her eyes fixed on a point miles ahead, as if making a far-off calculation of her own.

"I never heard anything about a dance tomorrow night," said Louise.

"Neither did I," Maud replied. "But you heard what I said."

"Where are you going to scare up enough people for a dance in this country?"

"There'll be you and I and Jinny, Jim's wife, for a starter, right on the spot. We'll shoot around tomorrow and spread the alarm. It'll surprise you how many girls will jump up out of the short grass down here."

"But what's the scheme, Maud?"

"Entertainment, my darling; entertainment for two

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poor little cowboys far away from the pool hall at McPacken."

Jim Kelly's house was built of straight up-and-down planks, stripped with battens, like a barn. It was not as comfortable as a sod house, and nothing could have been more unattractive, its raw planks stark and unpainted against the harmony of gray prairie and blue sky in that treeless immensity. But it was a mark of affluence and superiority to live in a plank house where sod houses were the rule. Comfort and aesthetics have been sacrificed to the same vanity in other places at other times.

Kelly's house was a notable one on the old cattle trail leading from Texas through the Cherokee Outlet; there was nothing as grand or as costly within many a day's travel to the south. The material had been freighted from McPacken, in itself not much of a task, the house knocked together like a huge box without foundation or previous leveling of the land. There were irregular pillars of rock under one end of it to lift it to a level, making a convenient place beneath the floor for chickens and dogs.

It was a long quadrangular building, with five doors opening in its front. It looked like a barracks, or a bunk-house, with all these exits ready to the necessity of men in a hurry, but it was devoted solely to the use of Jim's family, which comprised himself and his wife Jinny, a little Jim and a littler Jinny.

There was no doubt which was the main door among all the doors. It was easily picked out by the grease

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where little Jim and Jinny had pushed it, and the abrasions where their copper-toed shoes had kicked it, with numerous marks of dogs' claws between.

There was only the width of a township, six miles, between Jim's ranch and the Indian Territory line. The Indian country to the south of them was spoken of by everybody in that part of Kansas as the Nation, the possessions of the Cherokee Nation lying along there. The Cherokees leased a great deal of their land to Kansas cattlemen, among whom Jim Kelly was one.

Jim was a man of importance in the cattle industry, prosperous and shrewd, well on the way to independence. Jinny was figuring seriously on a house in McPacken, with cupolas and bay windows, stained glass side-lights in the front entrance, a design in stained glass in the transom over the front door. That was cattleman luxury in those days. Beyond the achievement of such a house, in such a town as McPacken, the world had nothing more to give.

A barbed wire fence enclosed Jim's house, his weak looking garden and such structures for the shelter of poultry and livestock as he possessed. These latter were inconsiderable, the cattleman's last thought being for the comfort or welfare of the beasts that served him, or from which his profits were drawn. Altogether the premises had a temporary, homeless, cheerless, bare, uninviting appearance. Louise was surprised to find the place so bleak. She had expected better things of anybody belonging to Maud.

Jim was at home, on account of it being Sunday and

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company expected. He was at the gap in the wire fence, the cut strands unhooked to let them drive in, shaved to a rather raw look about the chin, which was several shades lighter than the upper part of his face. Louise concluded a considerable growth of whiskers had fallen to Jim's razor that day, a long-deferred sacrifice, doubtless due to pressure afield.

Jim was a tall flat man, with a large red mustache, having a gaunt look about the eyes such as seemed to be the Kelly brand. He was an affable and loquacious man, loud and familiar in his way.

Jinny came out, her little Kellys running before, looking rather Teutonic and robust, her long and abundant yellowish hair wound in a shining braid around her head. It was plain at a glance that she was quite content in her long flimsy house with many doors, just about the sort of woman one would expect to come out of it, indeed. She had many years ahead of her to enjoy the cupolas and stained glass windows, as well as the groundwork for the flesh that would accumulate with idleness and grandeur.

Jinny had a piano in her parlor, a wonder and delight in a land where pianos afterwards became as common as toadstools. Jinny could not play it, but Jim could do enough for all the rest of the family and the neighborhood for sixty miles around, if volume of sound could be taken as a measure of his musical proficiency. His repertory was not large, yet it was sufficient for the needs and understanding of those who

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stopped to hear him slam his tunes off with such forceful pedaling that shook the house.

Maud was something better at the piano than Jim. Her selections covered a wider range, including the latest songs. She was obliged to play them all after supper for Jim and Jinny, and an ancient cowboy with harsh white hair that stood erect, giving his countenance a constant expression of mild astonishment.

This old-timer sat with his chair reared back against the wall, his feet on the forward rungs, holding an unlit cigarette plastered to his under lip. He put out his tongue frequently and shifted it a little, working his mouth afterwards as if tasting it. Louise grew nervous waiting for him to light it, which he did not do, although he held a match ready all the time. It was not delicacy that restrained him, she was certain, for Jim was smoking a cigar that brought recollections of Pap Cowgill.

The cowboy, or the cow grandfather, as Louise thought suited his years better, was greatly interested in the dance proposed by Maud for the next night. Jim consulted him gravely on the prospect of this one and that one being able to come, and whether so-and-so could be rounded up to fiddle, and somebody else, who must have been a notable person from their glowing enthusiasm in speaking of him, might be roped in to call off. Frank, the shock-haired veteran, believed he could reach this accomplished person by setting out at once, to which Jim agreed.

Louise was not surprised by the eagerness with which

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Jim and Jinny took up the arrangements for the dance. It was plain to see that any sort of diversion in their cattle-hedged existence was welcome, both of them young and full of healthful enjoyment in association with their kind. Jinny took stock of her canned oysters, to make sure whether there would be enough for soup, Jim standing ready to despatch one of his men to McPacken at once to replenish the supply.

Jim did not seem relieved nor greatly concerned when Jinny reported sufficient oysters for the occasion on hand. A little ride of sixty miles for a dollar's worth of cove oysters would have been only a trifling incident in Jim's daily habit of encompassing wide spaces, nothing at all to interfere with the success of a dance in his house, famous for its hospitality.

Maud said it would be her farewell to the range, and she was going to throw a leg over the moon. This pleased Frank so greatly that he struck his match as he stood in the door taking his leave, and lifted it to within a few inches of his cigarette, where he seemed to remember something, and blew it out. They heard him galloping away presently on his quest of the man whose calling off was so essential to the happiness of everybody.

"It's too bad Mr. Cook can't be here," said Louise.

"Mr. Cook?" said Jim, staring at her. "Who's Mr. Cook?"

"Maud's beau, the baggage—"

"Oh, Sam. I guess he'll have dancin' enough when

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he marries Maud—dancin' around to make a livin'. He'd better take all the rest he can beforehand."

Maud was at the piano. She slewed her head to make a big grin at her humorous brother, who poked his comfortable wife in the side. Jinny jumped, squealing like a mare.

> I draid the day you'll forget me Mog-o-reet,
> And steel I know it soon weel come—

sang Maud, her wild, rich voice flooding out into the prairie through the five doors of the long, low house.

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CHAPTER XVI

MISSING CATTLE

IT turned out that the man of accomplishment so indispensable to the gaiety of the occasion was a saturnine, dark-faced, sinewy hillbilly, originally from the Ozarks of Missouri. He called off the figures of the dances through a small aperture in the corner of his twisted mouth, running the rest of the sound out of his nose.

This man was foreman on a ranch forty of fifty miles distant from Jim Kelly's. He had come at Frank's long-carried invitation, though what pleasure he got out of the dance himself was beyond Louise Gardner's speculative realm. Glum and ill-favored, he appeared to look on it all as a trifling piece of folly in which circumstances had forced him to play a part. He grinned a little at rare intervals, a sort of beginning and ending of a grin, with none of the full-spread humor, but as a caller he was eminent in the land. He danced but seldom, and then with Louise. He said he was acquainted with her; she had served him breakfast once at the hotel.

True to Maud's prediction, Tom Laylander arrived

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at the ranch toward evening. He came riding the outlaw's horse, with the long-carrying rifle that he had wrenched from the dead robber's hand as he lay before the bank door. He told Louise he had spent the afternoon looking over his cattle. They had filled out surprisingly, he said; many of the younger ones could be marketed in a pinch just as they stood.

Tom was not in the mood for dancing that night, he said. He jigged through a set with Jinny, discharging his obligation of respect; one with Maud, because she asked him to, and another with Louise, to keep her away from the ranch foreman who called off through his nose, and wore a black shirt without coat or vest, with a necktie as red as a flame. The rest of the time he stood around talking with Jim and his guests in his soft, drawling speech, so much in contrast with the loud, harsh, wide-open-mouthed delivery of the Kansas tongue. Jinny said he sounded as if he mashed the words in the roof of his mouth.

The two deputy sheriffs on guard over what once had been Tom Laylander's herd were there, going it strong on oyster soup, and something that was not soup, which Jim Kelly had in a jug behind the chicken house. They were taking compensation in a lump for their desolate days on the range.

Tom Laylander was the star of the occasion, in spite of his modest withdrawal from its activities in his attempt to eliminate himself from public notice. Jim wanted the story of Tom's ride in pursuit of the bank robbers; how he had picked them off with the dead ban-

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dit's rifle, until he had reduced their numbers, and then closed in; whether the last of them had put up much of a fight, and how Tom had managed to come through without a scratch. Jim drew the guests around him by his loud and insistent interrogation, which was not intended for anything but lively, admiring, friendly interest, no matter for its rudeness.

Tom tried to back out of it, as if they had cornered him with some shameful accusation, levelling the matter down with his expressive hands, smoothing it to a thing of utmost simplicity, so small and unworthy that it did not merit a word. He said it really amounted to nothing at all; that it was all over, anyhow, and they must excuse him from discussing it, or any phase of it, now.

Louise understood how hard it was for him, generous, modest, truly valiant as she knew him to be. She thought that if Jim Kelly, and some of the others who looked at Tom with their uncomprehending, bold stare of curiosity, could see as deeply into his heart as she had seen, they never would say again that he had come through that experience without a scratch.

Laylander had left something out of his youth and the redundant joy of his life on that hard ride into No Man's Land. There was a wound in the plastic soul of his young manhood that gaped wide and deep. Time would cicatrize it into a harsh, rought scar; memory would touch it in after years with a shudder. A gentleman does not live through an experience such as that and come away unmarked.

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Anyway, it was a triumph for Jim and Jinny to have a man so notable on display before their guests. The men all came up and shook hands with Tom, and said they were proud to know him, which was sincere and true. They were outspoken in their denunciation of Cal Withers, almost to a man. If Tom had put his case before a jury of twelve cattlemen, they said, Cal Withers would have been looking around by now for somebody else to skin; he never would have got judgment on that note.

When they talked among themselves, however, they turned queer glances around at Tom, and spoke with voices lowered. He seemed to be such a simple kind of a feller, they said. Maybe he hadn't understood what a dangerous thing he was foolin' with when he took out after them bank robbers that way, hot-foot and alone. It was something like a baby hackin' at a rattle-snake with a hatchet, they guessed; a lucky lick or two had saved him where a wiser man might have been killed.

That was about the size of it, judgin' from the looks of him, a young strawberry-complected feller like him. He didn't know what he was up to when he grabbed that rifle and rode off after them fellers. Luck had carried him through, but it was luck that darn few men ever enjoyed. The way he handed that note over in court proved he had a screw loose. No sensible man would have done a thing like that. It was well known that simple people could go through great perils and come out whole. That had happened so often in fron-

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tier experience that no man would dispute it. It was one of the mysterious laws of luck.

Frank, the dean of the range, was flinging a high heel that night. He was smoothed up for the event quite a bit, except his hair. That seemed to stand up straighter, as if alert for the pleasure of the dance. Frank fixed his favors on Maud, dancing with her at every opening, swinging her as if he felt that duty constrained him to assist her in the acrobatic feat she had set for herself in this farewell she was taking of the range.

At midnight the company began to thin out; an hour later there were only ladies enough for a set, counting the three in the house. They danced this farewell measure to Jim's playing, after which everybody took horse and galloped off as if a penalty for being abroad approached with the dawn.

The two deputy sheriffs were the last to go, owing to some difficulty they had getting on their horses. They had been the most devoted patrons of Jim's jug, which was not a cider jug as he solemnly protested to Jinny. Between the efforts of Jim and Laylander, they were hoisted up and set on their way.

"I guess if their horses don't take 'em to camp they'll go to McPacken," Jim said.

"Maybe I'd better go with 'em and see they don't wander off," Tom suggested.

"No, let 'em go. Nothing's goin' to hurt 'em."

Tom was for setting out for McPacken himself, but Jim and Jinny would not hear of it. Maud said she

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would be offended forever unless he remained over a day or two. Louise could not add her word, but she did all that a girl could do with her eyes, and Tom yielded, without any great expenditure of persuasion. Jim opened one of the five doors and told him to make himself at home.

The household was astir early next morning, even to little Jinny and Jim, for a little indulgence will not break a habit that necessity has fixed upon a man. Tom was out with the first gleam of sun, feeling more at home than he had since coming to Kansas. It was like old times to see the sun come up that way at the level edge of the world.

Maud and Louise were a little late coming to breakfast, at which they finally appeared in riding habits, looking as fresh as buttermilk, Jim said.

"Where do you two intend to go straddlin' off to this morning?" he inquired. "Them town ridin' bloomers of yours 're liable to scare all the cows on the range."

"You'll have to take the chance, then," said Maud, with her wide-spreading grin. "I'm going over to the Nation with Louise to show her some squaws and squawks."

"Great sight," said Jinny, contemptuous of the lowly creatures.

"We'll have Tom along. He's a cowman; he can head off any stampede we start," Maud explained.

"You'll go, won't you Tom?" Louise appealed.

"I'd just love to," Tom replied.

"Somebody a ridin' up," Jinny announced. She

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leaned to look out of the open door, a platter of ham and eggs raised high to balance her.

"It's them two deputy sheriffs," said Jim, curious speculation in his voice. "Wonder what they're back here after?"

"More cider," said Jinny, scornful of man's weakness.

"Hello, boys!" Jim hailed from the door, too much interested in breakfast to go very far away from it. "Light and look at your saddles. Come on in and get some breakfast."

Jinny had anticipated this shouted invitation. She was at the cupboard after more plates and cups, and Maud, knowing the rule of hospitality in that country, was closing little Jim and Jinny up, making room for the visitors at the end of the table. Louise heard the crunch on the gravel path leading from gate to door.

"Say, Jim, you ain't seen them darn cows of ours around here this morning, have you?" one of the deputies inquired, considerably troubled.

"No. What's the matter of 'em?"

"Gone," another voice replied. "We left 'em there, all bunked down when we come over here last night. There wasn't a hide or hair of 'em in sight when we got up this morning."

"Have you looked around over there?" Jim asked.

"Sure we have. They're gone as clean as if the wind had blowed 'em away."

Louise looked at Tom, who turned toward the door, listening to what was being reported. She wondered

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what new trouble was coming now. Tom excused himself and went to the door.

"I guess they're around somewhere, they couldn't go very far in that time," Jim said, more amused than concerned. He held the screen door open. "Come in and get some breakfast, then me and Tom we'll ride over with you and see if we can't find 'em."

"We'd sure be obliged to you if you would," said the livery stable cowboy, his foot in the door. "What us fellers don't know about cows 'd surprise you."

"And that ain't no lie," the other one seconded. He came in after his companion, both of them grinning at the girls and giving everybody greeting.

"No use to worry," Jinny assured them; "they're right around there some place. Cattle don't stampede off this kind of weather very often."

"Well, it does happen sometimes," Jim seemed to soliloquize, engaged again with his ham and eggs. "They might 'a' got a scare at something and bucked off, but they wouldn't go far."

"We'll be in a one h—, we'll be in a d—, we'll be in one grand fix," said the livery stable cowboy, hitting a polite exposition of their situation at last, pronouncing it with desperate earnestness, "if we can't find them cows in time for the sale. What do you suppose they'll do to us, Jim?"

"Send us up for about forty-nine years!" said the other cowboy, gloomily.

"We'll find 'em, all right," Jim declared.

The two deputies appeared to be quite sober, although

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they had no craving for ham and eggs. They drank coffee from their saucers, sitting uneasily, ready to jump and go.

"What did that nigger cook say happened to the herd?" Tom inquired.

"He didn't know nothing about it till he looked out of his wagon this morning," the clerk cowboy replied. "We made a mistake leavin' them darn cattle alone last night."

"It sure looks like it," Tom agreed.

"We'll get about fifty-five years apiece if we don't find 'em in time for the sale."

Maud began to talk then, and Jinny, seeing what a scare the two young men had got thrown into them. Louise kept her peace, not being a cow authority. But she was passing through a curious fluctuation of hope and dread; a glow as of some undefined joy rising in her one moment, sinking away to the cold depression of despair the next. What had become of the cattle? Who had driven them off? Who was there to gain anything by their removal from the sheriff's custody but Tom? And Tom would no more have thought of doing it than he would have thought of robbing Jim Kelly of the horses in his corral.

"They're right around there in a holler somewhere," said Jim. "You boys overlooked 'em, easy enough to do unless you're used to cattle. Five or six hundred head's nothing but a speck on the range, 'specially when they bunch up and lay down somewhere in a holler."

Tom was silent. If he had any theories he kept them

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to himself, as Louise expected of him. But she looked at him appealingly, as if asking him to say something that would assure and quiet her uneasy perplexity. He only shook his head.

"Let's go with them, Louise," Maud proposed, all animation for the adventure. "I want to see the hole that swallowed five hundred head of cattle while the cute little shepherd boys were asleep."

Louise hesitated, glancing at Tom for his opinion.

"I'd love to have you come," he said.

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CHAPTER XVII

A YARD OF BACKBONE

TOM LAYLANDER reined up on the trail the herd had left on the prairie, which was broad and plain enough for the most inexperienced person to follow, it seemed. He sat light and straight in the saddle, the outlaw's rifle in its scabbard under the joint of his knee, his pistol at his side, looking like a Texas ranger on the track of contraband. He held his reins high over the horn of his saddle as he sat looking into the south, the direction the cattle had gone.

Jim Kelly reared back and laughed, sweeping his hand to call attention to the trail.

"Tom, your cows have headed for home!" he said. "They're ten miles over in the Nation by now."

"Sa-ay, do you think that's so?" the livery cowboy asked, his mouth open in dismay.

"Surest thing *you* know," Jim replied, rocking again with laughter.

Maud was in little more decorous state than her hilarious brother. She was chuckling over the two deputies' humiliation over the ungenerous behavior of their cattle.

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"Texas cattle always get homesick that way," she explained to Louise, but for the benefit of the two worried young men from town.

"When the wind's in the south you've got to hold 'em," said Jim. "They can smell home, they always begin to mill around and hold their heads high. They'll buck off on a stampede as quick as you can drop your hat sometimes when the wind's in the south. Didn't the sheriff tell you that?"

"He never told us nothin'!" the clerk cowboy said. "Now they'll send us up for about seventy years."

"Yes, they will stampede when the wind's in the south," Jim said. He beat his horse's neck with his hat, doubling over his saddle-horn in a new seizure of risibility.

Louise began to see the humor of the situation, and more. She looked into Maud's audacious eyes, which laughter had pinched to little slits, understanding now that this was the result of the shrewd girl's planning, into which her equally clever brother had entered with all his keen desire to throw a trick against Cal Withers.

"It's the funniest thing!" said Louise, gratitude, and laughter, and a great uplifting of exultation and relief, setting a glow in her face like the chafing of a wintry wind.

"Ain't it?" said Maud, letting out a whoop equal to the highest-keyed cowboy on the range, riding a hilarious circle around the little group.

Tom rode slowly along the herd's trail a little way, and to the side of it, coming back with serious face.

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He was far from seeing, or even suspecting the trick that had been turned on them as the two green hands from town.

"You'll have to trot after 'em Tom," said Jim. "They'll cut diagonal across the Nation, only ninety or a hundred miles to home. That was a lucky little stampede for you, old son."

"Do you reckon that old scoundrel drove that herd off?" Tom put it to Jim, eye to eye.

"Cal Withers, you mean? No-o-o. They stampeded. You never had a herd of Texas cattle up here in Kansas before, you don't know their tricks."

"Three or four men drove 'em off," said Tom, going right on with it in spite of Louise's hand put up to silence him, and Maud's shrill whistle to head him off.

"That's where these boys have been ridin' around," said Jim.

"We've got to go after 'em and drive 'em back," one of the deputies declared.

"If we don't," his companion said, "old Judge Burns he'll soak us for about a hundred years apiece. Will you give us a hand with 'em, Jim?"

"I guess we might as well all go along," said Jim. "I'm kind of curious to see how far they went."

Jim looked at Laylander curiously, almost reproachfully. Tom seemed sorry, judging from the look of his glum face, that the cattle had been put by chance or design—a generous man never would question how—where he could reach out and take them, and go on to

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Texas with them. No court would recognize Cal Withers's judgment there.

They swung off on the trail of the cattle, Tom pretty well in the lead. He rode with his head up, his eyes and thoughts fixed far ahead of him, it seemed. Little was said as they covered the few miles to the Indian Territory line. Four or five miles on the other side they found the herd. It was spread out in good grazing order, picketed by four men.

"Well, there's your cows," said Jim, turning to the deputy sheriffs, waving his hand toward the herd.

Tom halted, as if indecisive; the deputies rode forward in eager haste. Maud and Louise drew up beside Tom, Jim lounging in his saddle a little to one side, greatly interested in the movement of the deputy sheriffs, and the man who rode out from the herd to meet them.

"You're not going to let them drive the cattle back, are you, Tom?" Louise inquired. She leaned and touched his arm, as if to call him from his abstraction, anxiety in her voice.

"There's nothing else to *be* done," Tom replied.

"Why, after all they've—after all that's been—after —after *everything*—surely you'll not do that, Tom?"

Jim and Maud were talking apart a little way, throwing quick glances at Tom now and then.

"It's not Colonel Withers's gang," said Tom.

"Of course it isn't!" Louise returned sharply, out of patience with his stupidity.

Jim and Maud rode on; the others followed, nothing

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more said. Louise looked at Tom reproachfully, indignantly, now and then, a flash in her eyes, a lift to her chin that seemed little short of disdain. Couldn't the man understand, or wouldn't he understand? Was it density, rising out of his fine notions of honor, that kept him from seeing the hands behind this bold stroke for the restoration of his property? He seemed even incapable of thinking his friends would do a thing like that, instead of whooping it up and thanking them, as a natural man ought to do.

An Indian cowboy rode up with the two deputies, who looked very deeply troubled, and exceedingly wild about the eyes.

"This feller says they stopped them cows when they come rairin' and stampedin' through here last night," the livery stable wrangler, whom they called Hank, explained. "He's tryin' to hold us up for a dollar a head charges before he'll let us drive 'em back to Kansas."

"What do you think of that for a chunk of gall? A dollar a head!" said the other deputy, familiarly called Perry by Maud and her brother.

"That's the customary charge for stock"—Jim pronounced it stalk—"that stampedes off down here." Jim took it very easily, as a thing that fell in every day usage, although he could not have cited a precedent in all his years on the border range.

"Well, I ain't got no dollar a head to pay for nobody's cows," Perry declared.

"Here too," voted Hank.

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"How many have you got in that herd?" Jim asked the Indian.

"Around five hundred and fifty head."

"Five hundred and fifty plunks!" said Hank, despairingly, as if he had seen a fortune swept away.

"Say, if you'll call it a dime a head we'll try to raise the money," Perry proposed.

The Indian was not concerned in the offer enough to reject it. He sat black, silent and sulky, hat pulled down to his eyebrows, his horse snatching a little doze as it stood in the warm morning sun.

"What 're we goin' to do about it?" Hank asked his partner.

"I guess we just as well ride on south till we drop off of the earth," Perry replied, full of disgust with himself for allowing the cattle to get away, and gloom for his future peace in the ribald city of McPacken.

"You talk to him, Jim. Maybe he'll let 'em go for you," Hank appealed.

"I'm willin' to do you a friendly turn any way I can, boys, but this ain't a case for me to horn in. These boys stopped your stalk; custom of the country and the law of the land allows 'em to collect services and damages."

"Damages?" Perry repeated. "They never stepped on nothing down here but the earth."

"You've got to pay fifty cents a head for drivin' through the Cherokee Strip," said Jim.

"Well, we never drove through," Hank denied, with intense feeling.

"And that ain't no dream!" said Perry.

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"It's between you and them," Jim told them, his hands out of it completely. He rode off to one side to better express his complete severance and division from the affairs of the two Kansas deputies.

"This feller says no kind of a badge but one with U.S. on it goes on this side of the line," said Hank. "Is that right, Jim?"

"Sure it's right," Jim replied. "Perry ought to know that—he's been hangin' around the sheriff's office long enough."

"We ain't got no jurisdiction here," Perry admitted, shaking his doleful head.

The two drew off to discuss the matter between them, Tom watching them curiously, with a sort of impatient disdain.

"I wouldn't give five hundred bucks for them darned cows and take 'em to keep," Hank declared. He looked spitefully at the animals which had played him such a false and treacherous turn while he stole his hour of pleasure. They were browsing serenely, spread out over considerable ground, some of them so near the crisp, ripping sound of the grass could be heard as they gathered it with out-licking tongues.

"Well boys, if you want to know from me what I think about it," said Jim, assuming a judicial gravity, "I'd say go on back to town and report to the sheriff that the herd stampeded off in the night. That's all you can do, unless you pay these boys their price and take 'em."

"Not on your life!" said Hank.

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"It was an act of providence," said Jim. "No judge in the world can lay hands on a man for an act of providence. Go up there and tell 'em that."

"Right here's where I resign!" said Perry, as with sudden inspiration that cleared all his difficulties away in a breath.

"Act of providence or no act of providence, I'm with you!" Hank declared.

"If you see anybody lookin' for us, tell 'em we've gone to McPacken," Perry requested.

"As far as we're concerned, pardner, you can keep them cows," Hank addressed the Indian with lofty relief. "Providence drove 'em down here, and we ain't a goin' to run agin providence drivin' 'em back."

They galloped for the line, their interest all ahead of them. The Indian cowboy grinned.

"Well, there's your stalk, Tom," said Jim Kelly, his enthusiasm and humor rising again. "It's not goin' to cost you any dollar a head to take 'em, neither. Them's my men holdin' 'em."

"Yes, sir. It occurred to me they must be," said Tom.

"I'll let you have a couple of 'em to help you across the river; you can make the drive in eight or ten days. Hold 'em a little north of southwest and you'll hit the old crossin'. You can walk 'em over this time of the year."

"Yes sir, I don't doubt it could be done," said Tom.

"They're on my grass now; I lease down here," Jim

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explained. "That ain't goin' to cost you anything, either."

"You're very kind, Mr. Kelly, I sure do appreciate all you've done for me. I could run 'em off home, as you say, and be safe there. I don't want you to think I'm ungrateful when I fail to take advantage of the openin' to do it."

"What?" said Kelly in amazement. "You mean you'll not drive 'em on, now they're out of the Kansas court's jurisdiction? Say! what kind of a man are you? Let me take a look at the color of your eyes."

Tom swung his horse around and rode forward, halting his animal neck to neck with Jim's, giving Kelly as direct and open a chance for investigation into the color of his eyes, and spirit that lay behind them, as any man ever had. What Jim Kelly saw made his tanned face turn a smoky white, and his breath catch in the middle of his throat.

"Mr. Kelly, you've befriended me, you've done me as noble a service as one man ever set his hand to do for another. Say no more."

"All right," Jim returned, distant and cold. "They're down there; take 'em or leave 'em. Call them boys off," he directed his man, "and go on back to work."

Maud pressed forward between her brother and Laylander, fighting mad over this apparent flouting of friendship, as well as what she took to be a cowardly surrender of an opportunity that daring service had put into the unworthy Texan's hands.

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"Mr. Laylander, may I ask you what you intend to do with them cattle?" Maud demanded.

"I'm goin' to deliver them back into the sheriff's hands, Miss Maud."

"The hell you are!" said Jim.

"I thought I was helpin' a man!" said Maud, her fury mounting. She rode nearer, shaking her quirt so near Laylander's face that he drew back, blinking his white-lashed eyes. "You're not a man, you're nothing but a big, empty bluff. You've not got sense enough to shut your fist on a stick of candy when somebody puts it in your hand!"

"There they are," said Jim, stretching out his long arm toward the cattle. "Take 'em and go to hell!"

Jim rode away to join his men, leaving Maud in her fury and Louise in her shame, to confront Laylander and arraign him as Jim felt that he deserved.

"Surely you're not in earnest, Tom. You're not going to drive them back to Kansas?" Louise pleaded.

"You wouldn't ask me to go on with them, Miss Louise," Tom replied, more of surprise than reproach in his soft voice.

"What else? I don't want to see you misled by a mistaken sense of honor to play into Cal Withers's hand again."

"Oh, let the darn fool go!" said Maud. Come on—let's get out of here."

She started her horse with a sharp lash, galloping off a little way, hauling up to wait for Louise.

"Don't you see how you've offended Mr. Kelly and

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Maud?" Louise pressed him. "They'll never forgive you, spurning their help, insulting them this way. You as much as say they stole the cattle when they tried to help you."

"I take it for all they meant it to be," Tom said seriously. "It was different with them, the law hadn't laid a hand on their property and told them to stand off. But if I go on with the cattle I'll be stealin' them. There's no two ways about that, Miss Louise."

"It would be all right for you to go on with them," she insisted, "since they strayed off this way into your hands. Or for all that anybody ever will know, need know, they strayed. Nobody in Texas will ask you how you came to get hold of them, I'll bet you, Tom."

"They'd think it was a pretty smooth trick, I expect," Tom admitted, obliged to grin a little in appreciation of it himself.

"They'd tell you in Texas you did right to drive the cattle on from here."

"I expect likely some of them would," Tom agreed.

"Wouldn't everybody?" she insisted, convinced that she was right.

"I expect most everybody would, Miss Louise."

"Then go on."

"A man's got to begin, and end, standin' right with himself, Miss Louise. There's so many things all along the road that he does, that nobody but his ownself knows anything about. When a man begins to cheat himself he'll turn out the biggest scoundrel that ever was. I told you once I was goin' to wait on the law

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like a gentleman. That's what I'm bound by honor to do."

"Oh, your honor, your honor!" Louise said, scornfully impatient. "All I hear about is your honor. I'll tell you now, Tom Laylander, you'd be better off without the kind of honor that makes you turn every trick right into the hands of the people that are skinning you. You've got it wrong; it's sentiment, not honor. What you need right now is about three feet of new backbone."

"I expect you're right, Miss Louise."

She turned on him furiously, her face passionately hot.

"Oh, haven't you even got spirit enough to argue?" she cut him. "I'd rather hear you call me a liar, I'd rather you'd slap me, than go leading along that way like a calf!"

Tom hung his head, the color gone out of his face. He shifted his holster a little, as if it hung uncomfortably; put his hand to his hat and adjusted it, as if everything about him was out of gear.

"You're going to drive them on, aren't you, Tom?" Softly, a little note of cajolery in her tone, a little note of tenderness, as if she had repented her scornfulness and laid a soothing hand on his hurt.

"No, ma'am."

"Won't you do it for me—because I ask you—Tom?"

"There's mighty little I wouldn't do for you, Miss

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Louise. I'd do anything in the bounds of honor that a man could do, ma'am."

"But you'll not go on to Texas with that herd. Is that what you mean?"

"That's what I mean, Miss Louise."

"Then you can cross me off!"

"Ma'am?" said Tom, starting as if he had been struck.

"I tell you, if that kind of honor means more to you than I do, it's all off between you and me. Do you understand?"

"I hope I don't, Miss Louise."

"What will Cal Withers think of you? What will the sheriff think? What will everybody in McPacken say? They'll all say you're a fool, like they did when you gave up that note. Don't do a fool thing twice, Tom. I tell you again, you can go on to Texas with these cattle, or you can say good-by."

Tom appeared to wilt as if the backbone that Louise had disparaged had suffered a sudden necrosis and crumbled in his skin. He dropped his reins, took hold of the saddle-horn with both hands, clinging as Louise had seen cowboys hold when loaded on their horses in front of the saloon in McPacken.

Tom Laylander was about the sickest looking lad she ever had seen. She did not fully understand until that moment just how much the little chats over their late suppers had done for him. She saw it with exultation, a glow of pride coming into her face. She was going to save this unsophisticated, old-fashioned boy from him-

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self. It was between her and that peculiar standard of honor that he had set up for his guide. Let him choose. She did not doubt for a moment as she looked at him sitting there nerveless and white, holding to the saddle like a sick and stricken man, what the decision finally would be. She was saving Tom Laylander from his greatest enemy—himself.

Tom straightened his back presently, sweating from the wrench her cruel condition had given him. He fumbled for the reins like a blind man, drew them taut, lifting them high above the saddle-horn. He lifted his hand to his hat, touching it in respectful salute, faced her for a moment, youth dead in his bright blue eyes.

"Farewell, Miss Louise," he said.

He touched spurs to his horse, giving it rein, and rode away and left her, never turning his head to see whether she laughed or cried.

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CHAPTER XVIII

A PROP OF THE LAW

TOM Laylander rode back to the camp which the two deputy sheriffs had visited to pick up their belongings on their way to McPacken. He found the negro cook hitched up and ready to follow Hank and Perry to town. This man, who enjoyed the euphoniously alliterative name of Russius Ransom, was an old-time range cook, a bony little black man with a wide showing of teeth and a high-pitched voice. He was greatly diverted by the account of the stampede which the two cowboys had given him, too old a hand to be fooled by any such tale.

The surprise of Russius was little less than his evident disappointment and disgust when Laylander came seeking his aid in working the herd back to Kansas.

"My soul, you Texas man! You mean to tell me you didn't steal them cattle yo-self? Go on, boy! Don't lose your nerve when you got 'em safe in the Nation. Go on, go on home."

Russius waved him away with a swimming motion,

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backing off, refusing to have a hand in any such folly as restoring well-stolen property.

Tom finally convinced him of his mistake, and his determination to have his help whether it suited his notion of proper procedure or not. It was no one-man job getting the scattered herd together and started back across the line. Russius saddled one of his team and went along, protesting that it beat his time, and that he never would have believed any Texas man capable of such enormous folly.

By sunset they had worked the cattle back to the vicinity of the wagon, when Tom dismissed Russius to get supper, himself standing by the cattle until they had settled down for the night.

They were too near the line to suit Laylander; he didn't want them straying over there singly and in bunches, as they were pretty sure to do, still thinking of them as his own. His feeling was that they were simply in pawn, soon to be relieved of their obligation under judgment of the law. He did not consider Cal Withers as a factor in the case at all. If it had stood solely between him and Withers, it would have been settled long ago.

Next day Laylander worked the cattle northward, moving them five or six miles. He had expected the sheriff down to relieve him of his charge long before noon, but neither sheriff nor anybody representing him had appeared at dusk. Tom left the contented cattle to their repose, expecting to be roused during the night

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by the coming of somebody to relieve him of his responsibility to his personal honor and the law.

Four days passed in this way, Tom edging the herd all the time a little nearer the river and McPacken. The cattle were still in the territory that he had bargained to lease from Cal Withers, but near the northern limit of it now, he believed. There would be danger of getting them mixed with other herds if he pushed them farther. Still the sheriff had not come; nobody had crossed his peaceful way.

Laylander knew that Withers had not learned of the herd's so-called stampede into the Nation, or he would have been down there hot-foot to get them back to Kansas. What Tom could not understand was the absence of the sheriff. He concluded at last that the two deputies had been ashamed to return to town. The sheriff thought they were still standing guard over the cattle, and all was well. Neither the sheriff nor Withers knew anything about the cattle having passed into his hands.

There was but one thing for him to do: go to McPacken and inform the sheriff. He knew that wise and worldly McPacken would laugh at his simplicity, that he would be the joke of cow camps for a hundred miles around. But he never could have gone back to Texas with the cattle, good start on the way that Jim Kelly had made for him in his mistaken generosity. He never could have held up his head among his neighbors, even though many would have admired him and given him credit for a mighty shrewd trick. As for

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Louise, she had closed the door. It seemed impossible that it ever could be opened again.

It was a time of inactivity in the county seat. The judge of the district court was away on vacation, only the clerk there to represent the judicial machinery until his return. Many of the heads of county offices were out on their ranches or farms; the court house, and the square in which it stood, the most uninteresting place for loafers in the town.

The sheriff was improving this lull in court business to push his campaign for re-election. He was at work in his large bare office, his desk slewed around out of its accustomed place, the incrustations of years on the floor marking the spot where it had stood, to bring it in line of the draft between the windows. There was a pile of mussy mimeographed letters before the sweating official, to which he was signing his name to give them the personal and intimate appeal.

It was a job for the sheriff, this going through twelve or fifteen hundred letters and attaching his name with a flourish at the end. At times he rather enjoyed taking his stub pen between his fingers and putting his signature to subpoenas, attachments, warrants; liked to see the impressive length of his name stretch out that way, swelling up with the thought that the papers wouldn't be worth a cent without that name, and the thought that it meant so much to the peace and dignity of the state. This was a different job; he regretted that he hadn't ordered a rubber stamp.

It was a hot, dry, hay-making day. Tom Laylander's

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boots were white with dust when he came in the door; dust was marked in the sweated wrinkles of his sleeves. He stood just inside the door, hesitating, apologetic, afraid of stepping on somebody's toes, or somebody's rights, or somebody's floor, as he always seemed. The sheriff put down his pen, slowly, in a dazed and astounded way, his chicken face as expressive of surprise as it ever depicted any emotion in his life.

"Well, I'll be damned!" said the sheriff.

"Yes, sir," said Tom, respectfully, all rattled and embarrassed, his face as red as if the sheriff had damned him, rather than his official and private self.

"I thought you was back on the Brazos by this time," said the sheriff, frowning on his visitor, greatly displeased, to all appearances, that he was not.

"No, sir," said Tom.

"I see you ain't. Well, where have you been? What're you doin' here?"

"I come up to tell you about them cows of mine."

"I don't want to hear nothin' about your damn cows," the sheriff declared. "If you've got 'em down in Texas, keep 'em there. I don't never want to see the color of their hides agin."

"They're not down in Texas. They're just down here a little ways, six or seven miles southwest of town."

The sheriff got up, leaned forward across his desk, his weight on his rigid arms. He seemed to be an injured and much wronged man, and that injury and that wrong imposed on him by a friend.

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"You mean you drove them cows back from the Nation and brought 'em up here to the edge of town?" he demanded. "Well, what in the hell made you drive 'em down there in the first place if you didn't have nerve enough to go on?"

"I never drove 'em down there," Tom denied, with a stiffening of dignity and pride. "If I had 'a' done it, sir, I'd 'a' went right on. I wouldn't reach out my hand to take the most worthless trash in the world, sir, if the law had a claim on it. I've waited five days for you to come and take them cows off of my hands. I thought maybe the two boys that let 'em get away never come back to tell you."

"They come back, all right," said the sheriff, still pretty well up on the pinnacle of his astonishment. "Now, look a-here, kid: if you didn't drive them cattle off, who done it? Was it Maud Kelly and that other girl?"

"I think they just took it into their heads to move, the way cattle will do sometimes," said Tom.

"Only you know a dang sight better. Yes, them two boys come back and told me you was down there. What I can't see is what made *you* come back. Why in the devil didn't you go on home?"

The sheriff spaced the words of this question widely, speaking them in the slow, impressive, argumentative manner of a man who is trying to show another the enormity of his fault.

"I'm not a robber and a thief," Tom replied.

"You can't rob yourself, you darned fool! Every-

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body here, even Judge Burns, believes them cattle belong to you by rights. That note you brought into court fixed you—the judge had to decide for Withers on that. But this time—oh, hell!"

"I didn't expect many people up here to look at it the way I do."

"If there's anybody with as much sense as a rabbit that will, I'd like to see the color of his hair."

"If you'll be so kind as to send somebody down and take 'em off of my hands, I'll be obliged."

"You've lost for good this time," the sheriff said, entirely disgusted with such a simpleton. "Twice the cards turned your way, but you didn't have sense enough to go the limit either time. They'll never come up for you again, kid. Yes, I'll send somebody down—I'll have to send somebody, now you've got them damn cows up here under my nose."

"Thank you, sir," said Tom, turning to go.

"Say, hold on a minute," the sheriff hailed, jerking his head as if to pull Laylander back. "I'll tell you what I'm goin' to do; I'm goin' to deputize you to guard them cattle yourself till they're sold and delivered to the buyer on my bill of sale."

"Well, I don't know," Tom demurred. "If there's anybody else—"

"There ain't nobody else. This town's full of bums you couldn't pry off of them saloon chairs with a red-hot crowbar. You might as well be makin' two dollars a day as hangin' around here doin' nothing. Your cows

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're gone now, anyhow. You might 'a'—oh, hell! what's the use! Hold up your hand and be sworn."

Tom thought it was just as well, perhaps better, for him to look after the cattle until they should pass out of the law's hands into Cal Withers's, when he would be free to act in the matter after his own way. He lifted his hand and was made a deputy sheriff in few words.

"When Withers—or whoever buys 'em, and it'll be him—comes down there with a bill of sale signed by me—here, this is my signature, take one of these along so you can identify it—you deliver the cattle to him, and then you step out. Your commission expires that minute, your official duty will be over. Come up here and get your pay."

Tom was not as keenly conscious of the ridiculous, ironical humor of the situation as the sheriff. While he recognized his unusual position as custodian of his own property waiting sheriff's sale, he was utterly blind to the opportunities which a less scrupulous, and perhaps wiser man, might have jumped to profit by. He did not even suspect that the sheriff hoped he might wake up to a realization of his own interest in the matter at last, and head the cattle back across the line.

They were his cows; his interest lay in seeing them put on as much meat as possible in the shortest time. Yet perhaps he was not quite as simple as the sheriff thought him. He grinned a little as he rode out of town, thinking that it was a kind of a joke on him sure enough.

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But it was a joke with two sides to it, Tom realized. He could see one side, the sheriff could see the other. He rode past the Cottonwood Hotel, where he saw Banjo Gibson in his accustomed place. Banjo wondered what business that darn fool feller had with the station agent that time of the day when he saw Laylander dismount and go into the depot, leaving his horse beside the platform. Presently he came out and rode on, passing again within fifty feet of Banjo Gibson but not giving him as much as the favor of a glance.

Out the dusty country road toward the river, Tom went, crossed the shallow stream and followed its meandering way to the place where his cattle were grazing on the rich grass of the valley. As he rode he thought not of the cattle, nor of his new duty in connection with them, but of Louise.

Poor little lamb! he thought. Led away by her great desire to see him in possession of his own again, she had not considered the right or the wrong of the action she had urged him to take. By this time she would be sorry, he expected. She might come riding along almost any day to tell him she was sorry, and give him her little hand in contrition. Poor little lamb!

Russius Ransom was delighted to learn that Tom had been promoted, as he called it, to the job of deputy sheriff. He said he reckoned they would start for Texas in the morning, a conjecture which Tom corrected with unusual harshness. But Russius felt his hopes of seeing what kind of a country Texas was, and what sort of colored persons were down there, rise

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again the next day when he saw Tom looking off to the south every little while.

It was drawing him on, Russius said. He thought that Texas man would begin to show a streak of sense after a while and use the authority of his official position. A sheriff could take anything he wanted and go anywhere he pleased. Nobody could stop a sheriff; he was a man who could bust right through.

Tom was not thinking of Texas, his eyes on the south, but of Louise. Her conscience must be troubling her greatly by this time, he believed, remembering her earnest avowal that she was going to be right there to help him when he needed help to square his account with the man who had tried to rob him under the law. Tried to; Tom never would admit to himself that it had yet been done.

Conscience would burn in Louise when she thought of that vow, and urge her to strike out and find him, poor little dove! He did not want to drive the cattle any farther from McPacken; right about here was where he wanted to be when Cal Withers came to take them over on the sheriff's bill of sale. But he would keep them ranging along close to the old trail, so he would see Louise when she came in her sorrow. Then, when she came, half blinded by her tears, he would go to meet her, his heart in his hand.

In McPacken the sheriff was keeping his own counsel concerning the men in charge of the herd. He had not told anybody of Tom Laylander's appointment; he didn't want it to get to Cal Withers's ears. Withers

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would kick up a row over it. He couldn't be expected to appreciate the joke as the sheriff did.

Meantime, the days marched off. The day of the sale arrived, finding Tom ranging the cattle along the Arkansas River, a few miles from McPacken, by the side of the old Texas trail. His heart was in his hand, feeling as if it must wither away and perish of loneliness and despair. Louise had not come.

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CHAPTER XIX

A BILL OF SALE

IN keeping with precedent, that ancestor worship of courts and lawyers, and all attendant upon the ponderous machinery which they revolve, the sale of Tom Laylander's cattle was held at noon, from the west steps of the county court house, on the appointed day. Cal Withers was the only bidder. The sheriff gave him the required evidence of ownership, and sent him off to claim his own.

Before holding the sale the sheriff had taken a private scout to the range to find whether Tom Laylander had come to his senses and gone off to Texas with the herd. He found Tom a few miles out of town, faithful to his trust, the cattle beginning to look sleek and fit, the biggest bargain for a judgment of ten thousand dollars and costs that a man was likely to run across in a lifetime.

The sheriff pretended to be greatly relieved to find the cattle still within his jurisdiction.

"I've been so busy I couldn't run out to locate you before," he explained, "but I had a wild feelin' in me

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you'd drove them cows down to the Nation. If you had 'a', Withers he'd 'a' sued me on my bond."

Tom had not made any reply to this. He was weary of insinuations and suggestions, disgusted with the warped and dishonest grain of Kansas people in general, if those around McPacken were to be taken as a fair sample of the whole. The sheriff went back to town, feeling safe, knowing that Tom could not get the cattle out of Kansas now before the sale, even if he should experience a change of heart.

The sheriff knew Laylander was a bigger fool than he ever had thought him. This had settled it beyond any doubt. Neither bravery nor cunning, sagacity nor reason, had brought that kid through his adventure with the bank robbers; nothing but that inscrutable supervision, that divine insurance, of fools.

Withers did not wait to get his dinner. With two men at his back he galloped off to the place where the sheriff said he would find the herd. He kept a sharp watch for Tom Laylander while in town, knowing very well that the lanky young Texan had not said his last word in that controversy. Withers wanted to get the cattle away from McPacken, his brand put on them, his ownership made complete. There was something like a cold chill of impending disaster at his back, urging him away from town, making it a torture to resist the impulse to twist in the saddle every little while and look behind.

That look of uneasiness grew in the cattleman's face as he rode, that strange coldness of threat at his back

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like an indefinable terror of night. His broad red suspenders were sweated and dusty over his gray shirt; the beard of a week was ash-gray over his cheeks and chin. He looked like a man pursued by many cares, his eyes fretted around by fine wrinkles, his big shaggy mustache dropping over his thick-lipped mouth.

The two cowboys along with him were not touched by the shadow of his cares, nor concerned in them to the least degree. They had taken a few shots of whisky while waiting for the sale, their mouths were full of loose laughter as they came on in their employer's dust.

Tom Laylander looked like any other cowhand from a distance. Cal Withers, not expecting to encounter him in that direction, approached him with confidence where he stood watch on the flank of the herd, the wagon a mile or so beyond him under some cottonwoods on the river bank. Withers was within ten rods of Tom before he recognized him. He jerked his horse up, veering off a little as if dodging a shot, throwing his followers into disorder of sudden surprise.

"Watch that man!" Withers warned them, hand thrown to his gun.

Laylander was sitting straight and alert, rifle raised in attitude of confident defense. He was as cool and easy as a man who had both might and right upholding his hand. Cal Withers must have felt the cold shadow of his impalpable fear suddenly materialized before his eyes, and understood that he never would be able to snap

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out his gun in time. He held up a hand in token of pacific intention.

"If you've got any business with me, Colonel Withers, approach and state it," Tom requested.

"That's the cow jerry!" said one of the men.

"Sa-ay *man!*" the other marvelled, blowing the words out on a big breath, as for the close-cutting to the edge of some peril that had left him with his life.

Withers threw a quick glance over his shoulder to see what his men were doing, motioned them up, and rode forward, keeping his hand pretty close to his gun.

"Where's the man in charge of these cattle?" Withers demanded, scowling and gruff, his voice considerably bigger than his confidence that everything stood the way he'd like to have it there.

"Right here," Tom replied.

"I mean the deputy sheriff. Where's he at?"

"You're lookin' at him," said Tom.

"Laylander, I don't want none of your damn jokin', if that's what you call a joke."

"It's just about as serious a piece of business as you ever was up against, Colonel Withers. Didn't the sheriff tell you he deputized me several days ago when the men he had watchin' my cattle quit?"

"Not on your life he never, the damn thief! Well, I've got a bill of sale for 'em. I'm here to take charge of these cattle as owner."

The two cowboys had come up. They sat looking at Tom in stupid wonder, leaving Cal Withers to figure

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out for himself how he was to enforce and defend his claim of ownership to the herd. All they could think about was that they were face to face with the cow jerry, the man who had followed four bank robbers into No Man's Land and come back with the sack of money. That was the gun—that gun he had right there in his hands! Withers could not have produced money enough, if he had thrown down all he possessed, to induce one of them to lay a hand to his gun.

"You three gentlemen ride ahead of me over to the wagon," Tom directed. "I'll look at your paper over there, and take your receipt."

Withers seemed assured by Laylander's manner, which was far from that naturally expected of a man called upon to surrender twenty thousand dollars' worth of property to one who had cheated him out of it, as he believed. Tom was mild-spoken and steady, no flurry of resentment or enmity about him. He rode a little way behind the three, the only indication that he was master of the situation being the rifle, which he held as one holds his piece when waiting for the game to break cover.

Cal Withers knew, and the two cowboys with him knew, that Laylander would fire if he had to do it without lifting the gun to his shoulder, loose-jointed and limber-armed, putting his shots about where he wanted them to go. That was Texas Ranger style, a fashion of shooting from the saddle well know to men of the southwestern range.

Russius Ransom had prepared the noonday meal.

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Several times he had blown the conch shell until he could feel his ears stretch, to summon Tom to his refreshment. Russius couldn't understand why he lingered out there on the edge of the herd. He was about to take horse and go after him when he saw the three riders approach. From their order of advance toward the wagon, the cook understood that Tom had not received them as a friendly delegation. He was quite ready to take a hand in anything that was to come off on the side of that Texas man.

Cal Withers and his men halted under the tree, close to the cook's dinner spread on the tailboard of the wagon. Withers drew a paper from his shirt pocket, offering it with a sudden lurch, reaching across his own body clumsily, presenting it with his left hand.

"Here's the sheriff's bill of sale. I suppose you're authorized to receive it," he said.

"I don't like a man that does business with his left hand while he's reachin' for his gun with his right," Tom said. "Russius, take these gentlemen's guns and put 'em in the wagon. Don't touch nothing but the leather, gentlemen."

"Keep your guns on you, boys," Withers said, in the calm, advisory way of a man in authority. "Nobody's got the right to take your guns off of you as long as you're inside of the law."

"It's too hot a day to have any argument over it, Colonel Withers," Tom said, in gentle, regretful way. He appeared entirely friendly, almost conciliatory. Only the rifle in his hands seemed to balance and poise.

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The two cowboys stripped off their belts and guns in as many seconds, handing them down to Russius, who kept his eyes rolling for fear that Withers was going to shoot him in the back.

"All right, Tom," Withers agreed, cheerfullly, yielding as if he was the gainer in the dispute. "We can do business without guns, as far as I'm concerned."

Tom slipped the rifle into the scabbard under his leg, changing it for his pistol, giving him one free hand for business. He took the paper from Withers and read it; brought out the signature the sheriff had given him and compared it with the one on the bill of sale.

"It looks all right, I guess it is all right," he said. He gave it back to Withers. "I'll ask you to write a little notation on the back of it, if you please. Step over to the endgate of the wagon and use it for a table —here, you'd better write with this self-inkin' pen. I don't want any more pencil writin' on papers of mine."

"If you want a receipt, I'll write it on something else," Withers said, sitting half in the saddle, one thigh across the seat. "I'll just keep this bill of sale myself."

"Step down and write on the back of that paper what I tell you to write," Tom ordered.

Withers was not as calm as his bearing indicated, nor as friendly as his speech seemed. If he could have got a moment's edge at any time since his arrival, he would have shot Laylander without parley. The situation had developed so quickly that his usual resourcefulness and trickery in a tight pinch failed him and left

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him flat. Tom Laylander was the last man he had expected to see in front of him that day.

"All right, Tom," Withers yielded, swinging to the ground, where he stood turning a sly eye to see where Russius had put the guns, and to calculate the chance of putting the wagon between him and Laylander in a bold jump.

Russius was close by, breaking the pistols, ejecting the shells. He threw the belts and holsters under the wagon, and went around to the front to put the guns in another place.

Tom rode a little nearer to the tail of the wagon, handing down his fountain pen. He was watchful and cautious, ready for any kind of a trick Withers might try to throw.

"Put the day and the date on the back of that bill, and write what I tell you to," he directed. He took a silver dollar from his vest pocket and gave it to Withers, who looked at it with unfeigned surprise.

"What in the hell's that for?" Withers asked, flushing and affronted as if he had been made the object of some vulgar jest.

"Put down the day and the date," Tom directed again. "Now, go ahead and write this: For value received—"

"I'll be damned if I do!" said Withers.

"Colonel Withers, if you've got any word to leave, you can step off to one side and give it to one of these men," Tom said.

There was no bluster in Laylander's manner of say-

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ing this, not an inflection of rudeness or threat. But Withers had lived a good while and learned something. He knew it was his sentence of death unless he resumed the pen and wrote what he was told to write. Withers's face was pale when he turned to write; the tremor of his body made a little rattling among the tin dishes near his hand.

"For value received," Tom repeated, pausing until he saw the words take shape on the paper, "I hereby assign and deliver to Tom Laylander"—slowly, waiting for the crudely-formed words to grow under the cowman's thick fingers—"all of my right, title and interest in the cattle herein described."

Tom took the paper from Withers and read it.

"That's all right, and there's your dollar," he said. "Sign it and give it to me."

"I'll write you anything, Tom; I'll sign anything you want," Withers said, regaining his poise again, now that he saw through what he believed to be the trick of a simpleton. "Where'll you take 'em to?" he asked, handing back the signed paper.

"I reckon I'll manage," Tom replied.

"Do you think I'll be settin' around while you're drivin' my cattle down to the Nation? Do you think you'll walk away with this piece of highway robbery? If you don't kick air between now and tomorrow night I miss my guess!"

"Colonel Withers, you're goin' to back up to that wagon wheel and straddle it, and stand there spread

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out and roped, so tight you can't bat your eye, till I've done what I aim to do. Say no more."

"You can't walk away with a trick like that," Withers declared, heedless of the injunction of silence. "You're in a civilized country now; I tell you these cattlemen up here in Kansas 'll hang a man for a trick like that as quick as they can lay hands on him. If you think you can put through a steal on me this way, go ahead and try it."

"I aim to, Colonel Withers."

Withers protested that he'd die before he'd turn his back to the wagon wheel, and that any man who tried to put a rope on him would come to an abrupt end. He blustered and cursed, threatening with one breath, arguing with a shrewd persuasiveness the next. He offered to ride away and stay away any limit Tom might set, allowing him to carry out his plans for removing the cattle without interference.

"When I pass my word it's as good as my note," he declared.

"Every bit," Tom agreed. "Light down there and rope him—knock him cold if you have to—and don't monkey away any more time."

Withers's cowboys were not keen for the job, for he threatened them with a terrible hour of reckoning if they desecrated him by laying on a violent hand. Russius Ransom put an end to the cowman's defiance by roping him from behind and dragging him off his feet.

"Somebody will come along tomorrow and turn you loose," Tom told Withers when they had him duly

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spread and bound to the hind wheel of the wagon. "I'm not goin' to gag you, Colonel Withers. You can stand here and talk to yourself. The more you holler the drier you'll be. Come on with me, you men."

Withers's two men took orders with alert ears, and stepped fast to carry them out, for the ordinary cowboy was no more a ranting, roaring fellow than the hireling of small intelligence in any walk of life. These two men were fair samples of their craft, slim and sinewy, their cunning all in their hands. There was no more material in either of them than would have made a brakeman of Windy Moore's calibre, or a street car motorman of the present day.

They were awed by a vast respect and fear, for the cow jerry's adventure was the talk of cow camps far and near. They would have jumped just as lively with their guns on as they did without them. Tom's way of handling the situation with Withers had contributed greatly to this feeling of respect. When a man was smart enough to play a hand that way, they said, nothing could beat him. There was a good deal of spontaneous ginger in their movements and sharp cries as they helped Russius range the cow jerry's herd in a long line and start off on a slow drive toward McPacken.

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CHAPTER XX

THE COOK'S BUTCHER KNIFE

LOUISE found time dragging along like an impeding weight. Ranch life in the open places was not all that she had heard of it; the romance of range cattle, and the men who rode after them, drew away as one approached, and stood a dissolving mirage in the distance. She was ready to return to McPacken after a few days of it in Jim Kelly's notable mansion beside the Cherokee Trail.

Cattle raising was merely a business, she found, like any other, with the owner of the herd; cattle grazing a primitive trade to those who threw the ropes and handled the branding-irons. These latter were simple, ordinary men, no more noble, daring nor chivalrous as a class, than the jerries in Orrin Smith's gang. There was a certain careless independence about some of the younger ones, such as flares in youth everywhere and spurs it on to better its condition. Yet in most of them this spirit was not, and never had been.

Taking them as a class, cowhands were depressing associates, their lean vocabularies reduced by the restrictions of polite society when they came to Jim's, to

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such extent that they hadn't words enough left to express much of anything but yes and no.

Maud had grown away from this small mental confinement of the range. She said cow handling was a greatly overrated business; cowhands, like the brigands and pirates of romance, nothing but dirty, vulgar, swearing fellows elevated by popular glamour to a nobility not their right. The guns they carried, said Maud, were responsible for that. Hang a gun on any common man and you make a hero of him. It hints of perils faced which he never meets, of combats fought which never take place in his narrow, monotonous life. There was not one cowhand in fifty, Maud declared, who could hit a horse with a pistol-shot at a hundred feet.

Jim hung around the ranch for a day or two, until he got his ears full of Maud's latest songs, then rode off on a tour of inspection of his various outfits afield. Cowhands came in from the nearer camps of an evening, sprightly bucks with brightly colored kerchiefs around their necks, dollar watches in their pockets dangling leather straps, combed and perfumed outrageously, and fairly clean above their necks.

Old Frank, who seemed to be a sort of adjutant, was around most of the time. He was likely to appear at any hour, lean his chair against the wall and sit tasting his unlighted cigarette, heels hooked over the chair rung, nothing at all to say. He appeared to have about the same status in Jinny's household as a chicken or a dog.

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It was Maud who proposed going back to town. The notion seemed to hatch suddenly about noon on a certain day that was not distinguishable, except for this event, from the run of monotonous days that had gone before. Louise agreed. Within half an hour they were on their way, expecting to make it to McPacken by six or seven o'clock.

Maud explored the country as they drove, looking with keen and curious interest for trace of Laylander's cattle.

"The sheriff was to auction them off at noon today," Louise reminded her. "I suppose they're up at McPacken now."

"No, they don't drive 'em up to the court house steps and sell 'em, like you would a wagon and team. They're out on the range somewhere. I was just wonderin' what that darn fool did about it. Jim says he got 'em out of the Nation and went rangin' 'em off toward the river."

"I think maybe he was right about it, after all, Maud," Louise said, in the hard way of confession that a stubborn mind will yield when convinced at last. "It was about all a strictly honorable man could do."

"He's no more strictly honorable than anybody else," Maud declared. "Jim wouldn't steal cattle, but he certainly would grab his own away from somebody that was beatin' him out of them if he could. So would I; so would anybody with sense enough to crack an egg."

"I wonder what he intended to do after Withers

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bought the cattle in, and whether he's done it?" Louise speculated.

"What could he do?" Maud asked with bitter emphasis. "He threw down the strongest hand a man ever held, and I'm here to tell you there ain't anybody around here that would go the limit Jim went to help a man he never saw before. Everything was all set here for a get-away; it couldn't shape up that lucky way once in a thousand times."

"I saw it that way at the time, too, but I seem to get a different slant on it, as the railroad men say, the more I turn it over in my mind. It was all right for Jim to have his men run them over the line, just as Tom said. They didn't belong to him. I expect Tom would have done as much for a friend.

"Yes, he might; I don't say he wouldn't. But there's something wrong with a man that won't take his own away from a thief."

"He did, Maud. You know very well—"

"Oh, that was different."

"It was because he'd be going against the law, and not an individual who had wronged him, that Tom wouldn't drive the cattle on to Texas, Maud."

"That kind of reason, or religion, or whatever it is, passes away high over my head, kid," said Maud, with the unfeeling rudeness of the range that sometimes came into her manner and speech.

"Let it go," said Louise, dismissing Laylander, his troubles, mistakes and morals, with the words.

It was hot and wearisome riding in the uncovered

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buckboard, which pitched and twisted in bone-racking way over the little hummocks of bunch grass, wheeled traffic not being frequent enough over that road to wear them down. That was one disadvantage of a country that did not confine travellers to a marked and designated road. Every driver could choose his own road, shaping his course according to the judgment of his eye for smoothness.

This apparent smoothness of the prairie surface was most deceptive. A short distance away it seemed as if one could drive over it in comfort at a smart clip, that the roughness lay only a little way on every side. In that manner it seemed to lead the traveller on always, with the hope and expectation of coming into smooth country at last, yet never reaching it to his journey's end.

Louise begged Maud to spare the horses, asking for pity where pity never had been bred. Maud laughed, in the unmerciful range way of disregarding the suffering of any creature that went on four legs, but when Louise complained that the terrific heat of the sun had given her an excruciating headache, which every twist and bump of the vehicle intensified, Maud slowed down.

Maud was sympathetic. She said she knew what a sun-pain on the prairie was; she used to get it when she rode the range. It would beat and sprangle in fiery prongs through the brain, threatening to blow the head to pieces, until the sun went down. Then it would ease away like heat going out of iron.

Louise said nothing about an ache of loneliness and

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regret that had been the forerunner of the other. But that ache had been growing in her conscience day by day since she flared up and burned with the wicked little flame of her unjust anger the silver cord that had bound her interests to Tom Laylander's. She was ashamed that she had urged him to do wrong, herself put up as the reward for his infidelity to his life's most sacred principles. Not much of a temptation, she reflected bitterly. Tom had done well to say farewell, and turn his back and ride away, his faith to his simple ideals unbroken.

"There's been cattle here within a day or two," said Maud, pointing to the ground with her whip, calling attention to the trampled tall grass in the broad river bottom, which they were crossing. "I guess here's where St. Thomas of Texas had his lovely little cows."

"They don't seem to he here now," said Louise, clinging desperately to the pitching buckboard as she looked around.

"Gee! it's nearly sundown, and us only comin' to the river," said Maud. "We'll have to crack it up a little, Louise, or we'll never get there. We're two miles above the crossin' now, I've dodged around so much to find soft places for you. How's your sun-pain?"

"Better, I think."

"Sure. It'll leave you as soon as the sun sets."

"There's a wagon over by the river," said Louise.

Maud pulled up, slowly, leaning back to take up the slack of the lines, looking sharply ahead.

"That's right. Looks like a chuck wagon. Withers

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sent it in, I suppose, to feed the crew that's goin' to take charge of that simple-minded kid's cows."

"Listen! Isn't that somebody yelling?"

"You've got good ears, kid," said Maud, looking at her curiously. "Has that pain struck—"

"There! don't you hear him? It's somebody in trouble, I tell you, Maud."

"It's the camp cook singin'. They generally sound like they're in deep trouble when they sing," Maud said.

"Drive over a little nearer, let's listen again," Louise suggested.

"What's the use goin' any further out of our way just to hear—"

"Please, Maud. We've got plenty of time."

"I don't want to go buttin' into one of old Withers's cow camps," said Maud. She drove toward the wagon, in spite of her undoubted reluctance, approaching it within two or three hundred yards, where she stopped.

"Nobody around," she said.

Cal Withers, spread out on the wagon wheel, was on the opposite side, his head hidden by the canvas top. He heard them, and raised his high, cowboy note, which much whooping throughout the afternoon had not dulled.

"Does sound like somebody in trouble," said Maud, still half doubtful, entirely suspicious. "But you never can tell."

Maud was not moved by any great compassion when she drove around the wagon and discovered the cow-

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man in his undignified plight. A prank like this was accounted the rarest humor in the gentle relaxations of the range; Maud had been familiar with such jokes all her life. There was no point in a joke, in the humor of the old-time cowboy, that did not give the victim of it pain. The greater the suffering, the funnier the situation.

"It's Withers!" Louise whispered.

"It sure does favor him," said Maud, her grin spreading so big it seemed to push her ears back.

Withers had not been expecting women, and least of all women these two. It was just about the same to him in his extremity as if Tom Laylander had come back to taunt him in his agony of thirst and raging passion against the ropes that held him. He stood panting, lopping forward in exhaustion as far as the slack of the ropes would let him go, as miserable an object as pity ever looked upon.

Withers lifted his head after a few moments of shamed silence. It was evident that he was suffering more from his own rage than from the galling of the ropes. To sun and thirst he was hardened; he could have stood against them with any man that ever rode the range. But he was unused to humiliation, unaccustomed to having his rough-shod will bent for even a few hours from its way of going where it would.

Louise was moved by the cruelty practiced against him, unworthy of all compassion as she knew him to be. He appeared so entirely abject and ashamed, and

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still too proud to appeal to women to help him in his helplessness.

"I guess we'll drive on," said Maud.

She pulled up the slack of the dangling lines, turning a look full of appreciation for his comical fix on Colonel Withers.

"No, no!" Louise checked her. "I'm going to turn him loose."

"I don't believe we'd better butt in on anybody's joke," Maud advised.

"I wouldn't ask the favor of you, young lady," said Withers, directing his appeal to Louise, "if there was a chance of anybody else comin' along. I may have to hang here a week if you go by."

"We can tell somebody in town, they can come over," Maud said, speaking for the benefit of Louise, upon whom the old rascal's appeal was not lost.

"It would be a shame to leave him suffering here," Louise declared. She jumped out of the buckboard as she spoke, starting to Withers's relief.

"You'd better think it over a minute, kid," Maud counseled, with a shrewd intimation behind her words, a more knowing gleam in her humorous eyes. It was the fine point of the joke that passed over Louise.

"There ought to be a knife in that box at the end of the wagon," Withers suggested. "You could work faster with that."

The cook's butcher knife was there, a prodigious instrument with the shin-bone of an ox for a handle. Maud Kelly sat laughing until the buckboard shook

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while Louise sawed at the ropes with eager compassion and set the cowman free.

Withers broke for the water keg slung to the side of the wagon as the last rope fell from his leg, not stopping for even a glance of gratitude or thanks for his deliverer. When he had poured down several pints he scrambled under the wagon for his belt, then rummaged around with head under the canvas until he had found his gun.

"Thanks, awfully!" said Maud, with mocking sarcasm.

Withers was buckling on his cartridge belt with vicious haste, his eyes exploring the immediate vicinity for trace of his horse. Maud's taunt reminded him of his duty, which selfishness had pushed aside. Louise was putting the butcher knife back in the cook's kit. Withers turned to her, his eyes red, his thick gray hair tumbling down to his heavy, scowling brows.

"I'll remember this favor, young lady, and I hope I may be able to do as much for you some day," he said.

"Well, I hope not," said Louise, laughing a little at the thought of herself tied in that undignified fashion to a wagon wheel. "Who did it, Colonel Withers?"

"Crowd of fellers held me up and robbed me."

"Do you know who they were?"

"I could identify 'em," Withers replied, portentously.

Maud Kelly leaned back and laughed; a loud and strident laugh, the sound of it echoing among the wil-

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lows at the river side. Louise looked at her reproachfully.

"It was a barbarous thing to do—tie a man that way and leave him to die!" Louise said. "I hope you catch the scoundrels that did it."

Maud hit a high note on the keyboard of her laughter there. It was almost a shriek of merriment. She rolled against the high-backed seat, drumming the buckboard with her hilarious heels.

Withers was beating the dust out of his trampled hat against the very wheel which had held him inglorious prisoner. He did not appear to hear Maud's unaccountable merriment.

"My horse seems to wandered off," Withers said, turning to Louise. "Could you give me a ride over to McPacken?"

"Not on your life!" said Maud, suddenly sober, exceedingly emphatic and severe. "Come on, kid. I guess you've done about all the damage you can do."

"Why not let him go with us, Maud? He could sit on the back."

"Come on here, I tell you, and shut up!" said Maud.

Louise was startled by the peremptory harshness of Maud's voice. She understood there was an old enmity between the houses of Kelly and Withers. She attributed Maud's hostility to that, and did not stand to make any further plea.

Withers did not press his appeal. As Louise took her place in the buckboard he turned away as if looking for his horse, his gratitude as short as his manner. At

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least it was not sufficient to impel him to lift his hand in any further expression of it, although Louise turned and looked back as if expecting it, wondering that he could let it pass so lightly.

"You've played hell now!" said Maud.

"Why, Maud! What have I done?"

"Who do you suppose put Withers on that wagon wheel, you poor little goose? Who was the rough wild feller that robbed the innocent colonel and fixed him so he couldn't follow?"

"Why, how should I know?" said Louise. "He could identify them, he said."

"I'll bet he could," said Maud, her face expressive of anything but mirth now.

She drove on, regardless of bumps, slashing pretty freely with her whip, the humor apparently gone out of the situation for her.

"I looked for him to sling his gun on me and take the team," Maud said, with something very close to a fearful look over her shoulder. "You darned little fool! standin' there pleadin' for that old robber after you'd cut him loose. You cuttin' him loose—of all the people on earth—*you!*"

"Well, why not? I don't see anything strange or funny about it."

"No, of course not. That's what made it so funny to me and dear old innocent Colonel Withers. What do you suppose Tom Laylander 'll say when he hears of it?"

"Tom Laylander?"

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"Yes, honey," said Maud, with provoking, scornful mockery. "He's the one that tied that innocent old gentleman up to the wagon wheel."

Light began to break and spread over Louise's understanding. Her heart sank, her spirits swooned, leaving her so suddenly weak that her words were little more than a whisper on her dry lips.

"Do you—do you—suppose it was, Maud?"

Maud gave her a withering, contemptuous look, lashed the horses and drove on.

"I guess that red-headed kid had more in him than I gave him credit for," Maud said, after a while. "Well, whatever his scheme was, you've certainly put a kink in it now!"

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CHAPTER XXI

WINDY MOORE ARMS

TOM LAYLANDER found no cars on the siding at the loading pens when he arrived at McPacken with his sweating herd that evening. As soon as he had the cattle safe in the pens he struck off as hot as a hornet for an interview with the station agent, who saw him coming and retreated behind his office door, which he closed and locked. He was a very bloodless and stammering agent when he faced Tom at the ticket window.

"Where's them thirty-five cars I ordered for today?" Tom demanded.

"Well, I tell you, Tom, I thought you was jokin' when you ordered them cars. That's right—I thought you was jokin'. I knew you didn't have any cattle, I didn't know you—"

"If you know your head's on your neck, you ornery little warthog of a man, you jerk some lightnin' to headquarters and order them cars! You have 'em on that sidin', with an engine to butt 'em around, before nine o'clock, or you and me we'll have a little side-talk."

"I guess I can pick 'em up right here in the yards,

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Tom. I'll have 'em for you—I'll put the order through right now."

"While you're orderin', order an engine and crew to be ready by midnight to start with that train for Kansas City. Just put that in your order while you're orderin'. I'll wait here till you're through, you're such a forgetful feller."

Windy Moore's train was down in the yards, changing engines and crews. The business had proceeded to that stage where it could be carried to completion without Windy's presence, which very likely was not altogether as essential as he believed it to be, and Windy himself was coming up the station platform with his rubber coat across his arm, his lantern in his hand. He was grimy and dusty from the long run, and proud of his state. He saw Tom standing at the ticket window as he passed, and turned to get the news.

"Ain't leavin' town, are you Tom?" he inquired.

"No, I'm just shippin' out a little bunch of cows," Tom replied, easy and friendly in his way, yet with something different about him, as Windy Moore sensed; something of sureness, largeness, it might be said, as of a man who had come back to his own proper estate after reverses.

Windy's eyes enlarged; he looked Tom over, not doubting his word, but unable to get it just in the spot where his head would take it in.

"You been buyin' up some stock, Tom?"

"No, not precisely buyin', Mr. Moore. I've been re-

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coverin' a few. I thought I'd better ship before they slip away from me once more."

"Is them them?" Windy jerked his head toward the pens, where Russius Ransom and the two impressed cowhands were roosting on the fence above the cattle, waiting Tom's return and further orders.

"Yes, sir. I'm disappointed in my cars. I ordered them several days ago, but this man failed to send my order in."

"It's all right," the agent announced, turning, hand on his telegraph key. "They'll be set right away for you, Tom."

Windy couldn't get a good breath, the wonder of the situation was so big inside his vest. He pegged along beside Tom down the platform toward the loading pens.

"Well, where's that feller Withers, the one that had a judgment on the note? I thought he was goin' to take them cattle over on the supposed-to-be debt?"

"Yes, sir; Colonel Withers bought my cattle in at the sheriff's sale today. Possession has passed back to me again, however."

"The-e-e hell! Say, where is Withers? Won't he be bustin' along here with a gang of men to take 'em away from you?"

"I don't look for him," said Tom with quiet confidence.

It was from that reply Windy Moore drew his material for the story he began to spread in a few minutes with eager tongue. Tom Laylander, the cow jerry, had killed Cal Withers, and taken possession of

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his cattle again. Withers was lying dead on the prairie, and Tom was there in town, cool as ice, waiting for cars to be set on the loading track.

Windy went on embellishing the story as he talked, stirring up no end of excitement, enthusiasm and admiration for the cow jerry. Windy said Withers's cowboys were gathering at the dead cowman's ranch, to come to McPacken, avenge their employer and take the cattle away to the range.

It was the duty of every man in McPacken, Windy said, to put his gun in his pocket and stand up for the cow jerry's rights. They owed it to him; he was the man that brought back the coin and saved the bank, and a good many of their rolls along with it. For one, Windy was going to throw lead if any sheriff or gang of cowboys, or anybody else, tried to take that cow jerry's cattle out of his hands.

Tom offered to pay Withers's two cowboys for their afternoon's work and let them go, confident that they would not be eager to turn their boss loose to visit his threatened vengeance on their heads. They said they believed they'd try to get a job in the stockyards in Kansas City, where pay was better and life easier than on the range. Wouldn't Tom give them a job helping him prod up the cattle on the train?

Tom would, and glad to have them. He went to supper very well pleased with the day's progress, leaving Russius and the two cowboys on guard at the pens. A switching crew was assembling his cars on a long track in the yard; through the dusk Tom could see the

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growing string. The four of them could make short work of loading; by midnight, at the latest, they ought to be hitting the high spots for Kansas City.

For two reasons Tom avoided the Cottonwood Hotel. First, he knew supper would be over, and Goosie would scowl and grumble and serve him scraps; second, because he didn't want to make any explanations about a job only begun, and still doubtful of its determination. For there always was a chance of something coming up to block him, smoothly as things had gone up to that hour. He went to the Lone Star Cafe, hoping it was too dark for Mrs. Cowgill to recognize him across the street and take offense.

The two cowboys were gone when Tom returned. Russius Ransom came down from the fence in a state of excitement unusual for a calm and experienced man such as he was, to report that Cal Withers had arrived in town, and that the station agent had been down there wanting to see Tom, leaving word for him to come to the office as soon as he returned.

The news gave Tom quite a jerk. Somebody had blundered along and set Withers loose, a chance that he had not calculated as likely to turn up in that secluded spot by the river. He looked to the loading track for his cars; they were not there. Down in the yards the noise and swinging lantern signals had subsided. He guessed pretty close to what it meant.

"I'm sorry we couldn't spot them cars for you, Tom," the agent explained, appearing at the window without his over-sleeves, which was equal to public

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proclamation that he was off duty. "Colonel Withers was here a few minutes ago threatenin' suit against the company if we furnished you cars to move them cattle. He says you stood him up under your gun and drove 'em off. I'm not here to judge, you understand, but that's what he said."

"Read this," said Tom, placing the bill of sale under the agent's eyes.

"It looks all right, but I can't do a thing," the nervous, worried agent said, hand on the window to pull it down. "The super says you'll have to settle the question of ownership between you before he'll furnish cars for anybody."

The agent shut the window, the panes of which were made opaque by an uneven coat of white paint, that had turned a yellowish tint. It seemed to Laylander that it was the curtain dropped between him and his hopes. Somebody had happened along, where nobody had passed in all the days he had ranged the cattle there, and turned Cal Withers loose. It must have been somebody appointed from the beginning, Tom thought in bitter reflection, to pull down the plans of his life, or he never would have appeared at that unfortunate conjunction. It was somebody born to make trouble. He'd like to see the color of his hair.

If the agent had done his duty in the first place and ordered the cars; if he, himself, had started toward the Nation with the cattle instead of trying to do the thing this way; if this had happened and that had been done, it would not have come to this, Tom thought. But

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it wasn't to be any other way. It had been arranged when the map of his life was drawn, for that person to cut his trail that afternoon and set Cal Withers free. It was the order of life, and nobody could alter that. But he sure would like to see the color of that man's hair!

Russius Ransom had yielded to the pressure of conscience, or some other equally insistent call, and merged into the night. Tom sat on the running-board laid along the top of the high white fence, considering his situation. The cattle were lying down, as happy in one place as another, puffing out big sighs after their comfortable way as they switched cuds.

Sitting there in the dark, the subdued noises of the town familiar in his ears, Tom confessed he had made a bad business of this undertaking. It would have been better to have worked to his original plan of confronting Withers when the law got through with the case, and settling it between them in his own way. He could have gone back to Texas then and related to them how he had been tolled up into Kansas and sheared like a sheep, for he would have done the least that his neighbors down there expected of a man in such case. If the law will not give a man justice, it rests with himself to get something on account, at least. That was the way they looked at it in Texas.

Now, what was there to be done? It looked as if things had been framed to make a public spectacle out of him, first getting himself in as deputy sheriff to watch his own cattle, next putting into his mind what

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he had considered this shrewd trick for forcing Withers to assign him the bill of sale. It would have been all right, with that bill of sale in his pocket, to have headed the cattle into the Nation, the thing he should have done. No arraignment is as severe as conscience; no contempt as bitter as one's own. If Tom Laylander had been as small as he felt himself that night, Cal Withers and the sheriff never would have found him in the dark.

Windy Moore, and several other railroaders, who saw Withers and the sheriff pass the hotel, followed them to the cattle pens to see what was going to happen.

"How's this, Laylander?" the sheriff inquired, coming to a stop a little way from Tom's perch on the fence. "Withers charges you took his cattle away from him and drove 'em here. I'd like to hear your explanation."

"If you'll step up to the depot where there's a light, I'll give you a full and satisfactory answer to your question," Tom replied, thinking that a poor bluff would be better than no bluff at all.

Withers kept in the shade of the sheriff's protection, not half as keen to pull out his gun as he was the day he attached Tom's cattle. Several more railroaders, and a few scattering cowhands from the saloon, added to the little crowd that gathered around the three principals as they drew near the bay window of the depot, where the operator's light was bright.

"Here's a bill of sale from Colonel Withers for the cattle," said Tom, placing it in the sheriff's hand.

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"I told you he'd spring it!" said Withers. "Pass it over to me—that's mine."

The sheriff backed up to the window, running his eye over both sides of the bill of sale.

"It looks straight enough," he said. "That's your writin', ain't it, Withers?"

"I told you how I come to write it," Withers said, holding himself in with difficulty. "I demand that paper!"

"This seems to be your night for demandin' things and not gittin' 'em," the sheriff said. "You acknowledge you wrote the bill of sale, and signed it, and took value received. Nothing for me to do, that I can see."

The railroad men applauded the sheriff's decision.

"I didn't come to you to be made a damn fool of!" Withers blustered. "Are you goin' to act, or ain't you?"

"It's a civil case," the sheriff declared, with judicial equanimity, handing the bill of sale back to Laylander, whose hopes leaped up in a new flame as if somebody had dashed a cup of kerosene over their paling embers.

"If there's a question of ownership over these cattle," the sheriff continued, "it's a civil case. Bring a suit against Laylander and prove his bill of sale ain't genuine. That's all you can do."

"I'll lay this before the prosecutin' attorney, I'll demand a warrant!"

"Well, colonel, you'll have to go down in the Nation somewhere if you do. He's gone off on a fishin' trip with Judge Burns."

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The sheriff gave this information with evident satisfaction. He could see that every word was making him a vote.

"I demand that you arrest this man without a warrant, then."

"I'd nearly bust a belly-band to oblige you, Colonel, but I couldn't do that."

"The law gives you power to arrest anybody caught in the commission of a crime," Withers insisted. "Do your duty, sheriff—I demand you to do your duty!"

"Yes, and I'll do it without you or anybody else tellin' me," the sheriff replied, with corrective severity.

"You're in on the steal, you long-hungry office hyenar! I'll sue you on your bond!"

"You're beginnin' to talk foolish," the sheriff said.

"Puttin' that man in deputy to guard them cattle, playin' into his hand from the jump. I'll sue you on your bond!"

"If you want to do anything, swear out a writ of replevy," the sheriff advised, undisturbed by the cowman's threats. "There's Judge Coleman over there—take it up with him. I can't do nothing for you."

Judge Coleman came forward with the suggestion, as if to offer his services in the matter of the writ of replevin. He was a short, spare man with a grayish-red beard, a lathe machinist in the shops, the only justice of the peace in McPacken. There was a knowing Scottish twinkle in his sharp little blue eyes as he stood in the light gravely shaking his head.

"I couldn't give you a writ of replevin, Mr. Withers,"

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he said; "on no account could I give you a writ. The law limits my jurisdiction to matters not exceeding ninety-nine dollars."

"You can go straight to hell—both of you!"

Withers threw it in their faces hot, hand on his gun as if he stood ready to begin operations on his own account, seeing that the law offered him no relief. The sheriff hitched around, twisting his lean, coatless shoulders as if his back itched, the rather vulgar contortion bringing his hand to the butt of his gun with surprising facility. Withers blasted him with a scowl, turned his back and walked off into the dark.

The railroaders pressed up to shake hands with Tom, hearty in their appreciation of the admirable trick he had turned on Withers. The sheriff, well pleased with himself and the votes he had made by his diplomatic refusal to meddle in the case, shouldered his way out of them and went off to his own affairs. Bill Pinkerton, foreman of the night switching crew, who had long arms like a gorilla and a great deal of black hair around his eyes, reached over and gave Tom his hand.

"I'd spotted them cyars for y' if been allowed," he explained. "There's not a man of us in McPacken wouldn't go the limit to help y' win back and howld your own."

Windy Moore said they'd see to it that Tom got his cars in the morning, it would be too late to get hold of anybody at headquarters tonight. A conductor, in his long split-tailed coat with brass buttons, looking only half official on account of wearing trousers of another

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cloth and color, and hat instead of cap, declared Tom would have to do no more than show the superintendent his bill of sale to satisfy him of ownership. Then he'd get his cars without any more talk.

Meantime, somebody suggested, what if Withers came back with a gang and drove the cattle to the range? There had been something threatening in the old rascal's defiant way of going, with his curse flung at the law and the representatives of it.

The railroad men wanted to stand guard over the cattle with Tom, a hardship that he would not on any account put them to, he said. If they should hear a disturbance in that quarter during the night, they might come and give him a hand, which would be gladly accepted. They arranged it with Baldy Evans, night watchman at the shops, whose main job was keeping steam up in the boilers, to blow the whistle if he heard shooting break out at the cattle pens.

Windy Moore had his bulldog in his pocket that minute, ready for any trouble that might come along, and keen to meet it. There always was a great feeling of security in the pressure of the bulldog against his ham. It seemed to Windy that he was enforced by that stubby weapon to the equal of any man that carried one more conspicuously. It made him so brave he would have stood up before seven cowboys, confident that he was impervious as well as invincible with the bulldog in his hand.

A gun in the pocket gives a certain stripe of man that confident security and foolish self deceit that he

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is brave. He believes he cannot possibly be harmed, while he sows damage as thick as the seeds of plague. A little piece of shooting-iron has given many a coward quite a respectable length of backbone.

Windy sat on the fence with Tom Laylander a long time after the other railroaders had gone off to their night's entertainment or repose. Windy had a feeling of guardianship over this boy, of responsibility as the leader in his defense. He determined to be right there in case anything happened; right where the public could see him for what he believed himself to be—a general in the conflict of life. It is not unusual that self-appointed officials are the most meticulous, not so much out of loyalty to the cause they serve, as in fear of being supplanted by someone more worthy if they turn their backs for a single breath.

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CHAPTER XXII

PAP COWGILL HAS A WORD

BANJO GIBSON said he had seen too much fighting and shooting in his time to go out hunting for any more. He remained at the hotel, comfortable in his wide shirt-sleeves, a little beeswax rubbed on his mustache to hold the points up and give him that touch of debonnaire romanticism which the small routine of his daily life did not entirely justify. Mrs. Cowgill and Goosie were taking the cool of the evening with him on the green benches beside the door.

Angus Valorous was on duty with his usual prominence, his black whiskers shaved as close as razor could press the skin, but springing again like a pest of the fields. Angus was pretty well keyed up by the prospect of a fight in town. He came out every few minutes, with a quick start and a sharp slam of the screen door behind him, as if he had heard a shot, to stand on the edge of the sidewalk and listen. Presently he would turn back to his desk again, laughing his little grunting horse-laugh in the very pleasure of his excited state.

Angus came out as Banjo Gibson was making his

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speech about the troubles he had passed through and the bullets he had escaped. Burning as Angus was to tear off into the dark and find out what had happened or was going to happen to the cow jerry, nothing short of a raging battle could have drawn him away from his duty at the hotel.

Not so much that Angus was exceedingly loyal, as that he was inordinately egotistical. He believed the establishment depended on his clerkly services, which were mainly looking at the Police Gazette and waiting, behind the little counter at night. It was a poor, lame, tottering establishment which must be shored up by his dignity. The withdrawal of his effulgent presence for an hour during the night watches would throw it into chaos and hopeless ruin.

Banjo Gibson was not a favored person in the sight of Angus Valorous. Indeed, he despised the little musician for many reasons, most of them good enough reasons, too, for many a true bill would have lain against the care-free, laughing drone. Now, hearing him say he would not move a foot to learn what was going on around the depot, when he was free to go any minute without disaster smashing down behind him like a falling wall, Angus could not restrain a contemptuous snort. The sound nettled Banjo. He resented it as sharply as he would a clumsy foot on one of his brightly polished shoes.

"What're you gruntin' about? you big-headed chessie cat!" Banjo asked, with a sound like a fighting edge

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on his voice, which Angus Valorous knew was nothing but the noise of a swelling bluff.

"All the fightin' you ever was in! You wouldn't fight a cracker!"

Goosie cackled suddenly, shrilly, over this witty taunt. Mrs. Cowgill's sense of humor was not as keen as her daughter's; she rebuked Angus for his impertinence.

"I'll not have you around here insultin' the guests," she declared.

Angus turned to her, his jaw slewed, his naturally contemptuous and lofty expression obscured by a snarl.

"Aw, what's it *to* you!" he said. "Let him stop insultin' me if he don't want to git his head knocked off!"

"If that kid gits any fresher," said Banjo discursively, as if he spoke in an aside for the public in general, "they'll have to split him and salt him down."

Goosie had another laugh, for she was an impartial young lady, to whom the refinements of wit from any source were irresistible.

"I don't want to hear any more of you insultin' the guests," Mrs. Cowgill corrected Angus again, in her sharp, hard manner of warning and threat. It was a sound so familiar in the ears of Angus that it did not cause the slightest fear for his important job.

Angus snorted, expressive of his disdain for both employer and guest, made one of his quick dashes indoors as if he had heard some kind of alarm. Presently Pap Cowgill came sauntering in his rolling, indolent gait out of the dark from the direction of the depot.

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"What're they doin' down there, Windy Moore and the rest of them?" Goosie inquired.

"Shootin' off wind," said Pap, with the lofty derogation of a consciously superior man.

"That's about all 'll be shot off, too," said Banjo.

Pap slouched down beside Goosie, who pressed him for particulars. Mrs. Cowgill added her solicitations, but Pap was not to be moved out of his own time and pace. He grunted, a sound expressive of disparagement and slight, indicative of something that could be said by him to the unmasking of much human folly, took a cigar from his vest pocket and began to smoke.

"Herby, I wish you'd go easy on that Tulip Rose brand," his mother said fretfully. "That stock costs me twenty dollars a thousand."

"Guess all I smoke of 'em won't break you," said Pap.

"You can mighty soon smoke off the profit," she reproved him.

"Ain't I payin' my board?" Pap demanded of her with manly insolence.

"It don't include cigars. I'll have to add fifty cents a week extry if you keep on smokin' the way you do. Between you and your daddy I'll be smoked and eat out of house and home one of these days."

As if the mention of him had called him up like a beneficent genius, Myron set foot on the porch that moment. He would have gone in, according to his habit of withdrawing from the family presence, only that his wife hailed him in her sharp, up-catching way.

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He sat on the bench near her, out of the light from the door.

"What did Cal Withers and the sheriff do about them cattle?" Mrs. Cowgill demanded.

There was a gritting sound coming from Myron's vicinity, together with a disquieting smell of concentrated nicotine. He was reaming the carbon out of his cob pipe, according to the custom of people whose tastes confine them to that humble vessel. Tardiness of reaction to any force was the outstanding peculiarity of Myron Cowgill, slowness of response being his most vexing weakness. He ground away on the cavity of his pipe, making no reply.

Whatever Myron's failures, fear of his wife was not among them. He was a calm man; no amount of tongue-lashing could whip him to a trot, no sharp-barbed burr of ridicule or censure under his saddle could make him rear and buck. He was not the kind of a man to be hung on his own testimony, if deliberation could save a man in that extremity.

"Did the sheriff make Tom give them cattle up to Withers, I asked you?" Mrs. Cowgill demanded.

Myron made a blowing in his pipe, a gurgling and distressing sound.

"Not that I heard of," he replied.

Louise Gardner was standing just inside the door, her hand put out to push it open, her attitude one of hesitant timidity, as if she might turn and fly at a word. She was dressed in white lawn with pink flowers sprayed through it, the skirt long and voluminous after

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the fashion of that modest day. Angus Valorous thought she was pretty fair, although he liked them bulging a little more in places, his preference having been shaped by an intimate study of the Police Gazette.

Pap Cowgill must have felt the radiation of his adored through the screen door. He twisted on the bench and looked around, waved her a greeting with his Tulip Rose, and pushed Goosie along the bench to make room for her.

"Hello, Louise!" he hailed, a deferential eagerness in his slow voice. "Come on out and rest your hu-hu-hands and face."

Louise went out, laughing a little over Pap's pleasantry, as polite railroad society required in such case.

"Well, Louise, did you get rested up from your trip?" Mrs. Cowgill inquired, with the kindly note that softened her voice when she spoke to some people, notably Tom Laylander and Louise.

"I was so used up I took a sleep after supper," Louise replied.

"Folks always have to rest up and recover after a vacation," Myron said. "I knew a man back in Illinois—"

"You must 'a' took a vacation the same time he did, you've been restin' up ever since," Mrs. Cowgill interrupted him, quick to grasp this opportunity to slam Myron before the boarders.

There was a laugh, in which Banjo Gibson's gay and care-free voice rose loud, for nobody in the world appreciates a joke against a loafer like one of the craft.

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Myron smoked on placidly, the reminiscence involving the man in Illinois unfinished, nobody enough interested in him to inquire of his adventure.

"We was just talkin' about Tom Laylander and them cattle," Mrs. Cowgill told Louise. "Did you hear Cal Withers was down there at the stock yards with the sheriff, tryin' to make him give 'em up?"

"No; I just came down-stairs a minute ago," Louise said. "What did the sheriff do about it?"

"I've been tryin' to make these muck-heads tell me," Mrs. Cowgill said impatiently.

"He didn't do nothin'," said Pap, willing and eager to talk to Louise. "The cow jerry pulled out a bill of sale he said Withers give him for the cattle. Withers said he made him write it with a gun throwed down on him. The cow jerry tied him to a wagon wheel, Withers said, but somebody come along and turned him loose in time for him to throw the switch and head that feller in. It's a hu-hu-hell of a note if a feller can take a man's property away from him that way and never be touched."

"You say the sheriff wouldn't do anything?" Louise asked, glad for the shadow that concealed, in part at least, her trembling eagerness.

"Said it wasn't his kind of a case; said Withers he'd have to bring a lawsuit and take it into court."

"I wonder why he brought the cattle here to town?" said Louise, feeling very small and foolish for the part she had taken in assisting Withers to come there and

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head Laylander in, as Pap had put it, in railroad parlance.

"He was goin' to ship," Pap explained. "He'd 'a' been half loaded by now if somebody hadn't chanced along and let Withers go."

Banjo Gibson laughed. He was a little windmill that turned with every shifting breeze. He believed now that Pap's unfriendly feeling for Laylander indicated the current of railroad sentiment.

"Somebody sure put emery in his cylinders," he chuckled. "What's old man Withers goin' to do?"

"They say he's gone to pick up a gang and take the cattle away from the cow jerry," Pap replied indifferently. He stretched his arms, gaping prodigiously, to show how insignificant the thing was to him, and how greatly he was bored.

"I wonder where all the men are tonight?" Mrs. Cowgill speculated. "It's as quiet around here as the grave."

The row of chairs that stood in the street, that jury box from which the public and private affairs of McPacken were viewed and discussed, was empty. Those whose business or pleasure carried them past the Cottonwood Hotel walked in security.

"They're waitin' round to see if Withers comes back with his men," Myron said.

"Well, I wouldn't throw a hand to my gun in no squabble like that," Banjo declared.

"Me neither," said Pap.

"That cow jerry's got the name and fame of a

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fightin' man," said Banjo, "but it don't look to me like it takes much nerve to stand off a mile and do your fightin'."

"Huh!" Angus Valorous snorted, turning from the door where he had been listening.

"There'll be bloodshed if he does come back," Myron said, pursuing his thought as calmly and evenly as if there had been no interruption. "The boys here in town they'll stand behind Laylander for all that's in 'em. They'll never see them cattle taken away from him, by law or personal individuals."

"Do you think so, Mr. Cowgill?" Louise inquired, leaning in her appealing way to look at him, just as she had leaned, on that same bench, to look into Banjo Gibson's face when she came trying to sell the Thousand Ways.

"There'll be bloodshed," Myron repeated, rolling the word out as if he enjoyed the strange feeling of it on his tongue.

"I'm cert'nly glad Bill's out on his run," said Goosie.

"Nobody'd hurt the big stiff," said Pap.

"Hurt him!" Goosie scorned the thought. "He'd clean up the whole gang in about two minutes."

"Which gang? What side'd he be on?" Banjo asked, a laugh in his words, a teasing sort of flattery about him that made his way with the girls an easy one.

"It'd be the right one, whichever one it was," Goosie retorted, rather haughtily.

Goosie left them, carrying the thought of Bill, his valor and his might, into the parlor, where she played

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on the ornamented organ and sang her ballads. It was easy, alone in the dark room, to imagine herself on a bleak and rainy street, deserted by the Tempter, spurned by Bill. Her greatest pleasure always was in imagining herself sundered hopelessly from Bill's home, where the chenille curtains hung behind the ornamental lamp on the center table with its corded mat. It was a far happier arrangement to contemplate than domestic felicity and a roomful of kids. It was romantic; it was sweetened melancholy by the cup.

She sang Ma-ha-goreet, and We Never Speak As We Pass By, with a moving vision of Bill coming along in his diamond and prosperous checked suit, drifting by her where she stood in the drizzle with a shawl over her head, looking at him with sorrowful, penitent appeal. Bill would not pass by without speaking under such circumstances, she knew right well. He would say something, and say it hard.

Goosie had an enjoyable hour alone in the parlor, tears on her nose, inside her nose, creating a general dampness all around that stubby member, falling at times from the end of it down to the organ keys.

Louise slipped away to her room presently, where she sat in the dark by the open window, considering her culpability with bitterness and shame. She had shown humanity and tenderness where it was least deserved. At that very minute Withers would be gathering his men to come riding to McPacken, open the gates and drive the cattle away again to the range. Any man

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who stood between him and his design would be overwhelmed by numbers and slain. If Tom Laylander should fall in defense of his property, as he would surely fall, his death would be on her own hands.

She had little faith in any help coming from the railroaders. She knew them by this time for a heady, impulsive class of men, easily moved to hot resentment, as quickly cooled by a little lapse of time. Only Windy Moore was down at the stock yards watching with Laylander, she knew; poor old Windy, who very likely would break and run at the first shot. It was a great scheme they had for blowing the whistle, but it would need more than a whistle sounded at an unseasonable hour to rouse a crowd of sleepy railroaders from their beds to take up their guns in defense of a man whom they so lately had contemned and mocked.

Louise was quartered on the side of the hotel that overlooked the road leading into town, the depot and the stock yards, as the loading pens were generally called. The pens were too far away to be seen through the dark; she could only imagine Tom Laylander sitting on the fence as she had seen him at dusk, voluble, vain Windy Moore beside him, doubtless more of a bore than a comfort in this hour of uncertainty.

There was nothing she could do to help him; there was no certainty that he would accept her help, if she could summon forty gun-clever men. Tom believed her a sort of minor crook, a person whose standard of rectitude was very ignoble and low. Her impatience

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with him rose again, hot and indignant, with the thought. There was a queer moral bias in the man when he could refuse to take his cattle after they had been removed from the Kansas jurisdiction by a clever trick, but would pull his gun out and take them from Withers in a manner of open violence. Where the moral justification was stronger in one case than the other, she could not see.

Louise understood that Laylander believed, sincerely and honestly, that he had done the honorable thing in refusing to touch the cattle while the law's hand was upon them, and that he had moved only in accordance with his peculiar code in taking them from Withers. It was an audaciously admirable thing for one man to do, she admitted, not without pride in his partly successful stroke. Partly successful only on account of her meddling. She hoped Laylander did not know, and never would find out, who turned Cal Withers loose.

There was nothing she could do now to repair her misapplied kindness, nothing she could do to help Laylander out of the confusion she had made in his plan. She was as helpless as the night wind in holding back the force of destruction that was forming out there somewhere in the dark, vast, appalling, shudderful prairie.

She sat at the window while the night activities of McPacken subsided, until the cowboys quit their greedy swilling, took horse and rode away in noisy little bunches to their distant camps. She sat there until

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the chill of the dewy hours before dawn made her shiver, .and her face grow wan as a watcher beside a deathbed for whom there is no sleep.

Every hour that passed was a respite toward the hope of final escape for Tom Laylander, standing guard over his resting herd. For there is hope in the day; there is always hope in the day.

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CHAPTER XXIII

WHEN A BRAVE MAN DREAMS

ANGUS VALOROUS always remained alert and bristling, like a night-prowling spider, ready to seize upon any customer who might come his way, until the last cowboy's horse was gone from the hitching-rack in front of the saloon. Frequently one or two of the late stayers were too limber to be lifted to their saddles, in which case they were supported by their more sober comrades across to the hotel, to be given in charge of Angus Valorous, who received them with proper scorn.

Angus never gave a hand to hoisting these paralyzed specimens of the Creator's noblest work upstairs, although he usually followed along to block the plunging descent if the nerveless animals, which seemed to have no more bones than a sack of wheat, slipped through the hands of their guardians. This happened so often that Angus went along after the wavering figures with his sturdy arms and legs at tension, his keen eyes on every move. He was not so greatly interested in preventing damage to the patrons as to the property of the

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hotel, in which he seemed to feel something even more lofty than a proprietary interest.

The cowboys cleared out fairly early this night, the last of them being three who raised considerable disturbance when it came to leaving. This was due to the state of one of them, who gave his companions much labor getting him aboard his horse. It was accomplished in time, with great swearing and grave counselling. The fellow was able to ride, although his head wabbled about like a chicken that had suffered a wrung neck in the carpenterly grip of Myron Cowgill.

Angus watched them go their way, standing a little while on the porch after the soft plash of their horses' feet in the thick dust had passed beyond his hearing. He looked toward the stock yards, his pleasurably excited state of the earlier hours having given place to a feeling of sullen ill humor against Cal Withers for delaying his attack until the taste for a fight was crowded out of a man's mouth by the gaping desire for sleep.

Angus was arranging his folding cot in its usual place, having put out all lights except a small lamp, with curved tin reflector through which the top of the chimney extended, a convenient handle on the back of it for picking it up and turning it upon the faces of late arriving guests. This lamp Angus stood on the cigar case, its beam bearing on the window, leaving the rest of the office in reposeful shadow. He spread his canvas cot across the passage leading to the stairs, in such a way that none could enter or depart without stepping

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over him, a feat that he believed the most cautious prowler that ever slinked through the night could not accomplish without rousing him from the deepest slumber.

Windy Moore came in as Angus was taking off his shoes, having eased himself of his official collar already, and placed it bottomside up on the end of the counter, where he could reach it as a man doubtful of his security might reach his gun. Windy stepped over the cot with some difficulty, for there was no great compass to his short legs, swearing a little as he passed on. A few treads up the stairs he switched his bulldog from one hip pocket to the other, thus giving Angus Valorous a glimpse of the kind of a man he was, as well as a hint of the serious business that had kept him abroad to this unseasonable hour.

Angus Valorous was not much impressed. He had seen too much bluffing in his crowded young day to have any counterfeit valor passed on him by the shifting of a stocky, big-bore gun from one pocket to another. Disdain rose in him; scorn lifted his expressive lip. He grunted in his most contemptuous stress, a deep grunt, and a manly one.

Relieved of his contempt for Windy Moore, Angus Valorous stood his shoes down with the circumspection of a father setting the feet of his son on the highway of life, their toes pointing exactly toward the door, and stretched himself on his back to take his repose. Myron, husband of the house, was under standing orders to appear at 5 o'clock in the morning, at which

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time Angus would take up his shoes and his collar and go upstairs to continue his refreshment until noon.

Windy Moore had a little room in the back of the house, the cheapest one that he could get. This was not so much due to penury or thrift as the necessity that Windy, like many other railroaders, was under of maintaining quarters at both ends of his run. A man could not afford to put all he made into the rent of rooms, neither of which he could call home, being here today and away tomorrow, with no knowing what greasy stiff sleeping in his bed, to the landlady's double profit, while he was out on his run. The sun hit hard on the one window of that room all afternoon, turning it into an oven fit to render down any little brakeman who might venture into it for hours after the last ardent beam had been withdrawn.

Windy found it very hot there, even at 2 o'clock in the morning, on this night that was comfortable out of doors. It was about that hour when he came in from his vigil with Tom Laylander, yielding to Tom's urgent solicitation to spare himself fatigue, and on no account lose any more sleep over his insignificant and unworthy affairs. Windy took off his shoes and his nellygee shirt, pulled the spindle-backed rocking chair up to the window and sat down to wait an abatement of the temperature, leaving the door open to create a draft.

He regretted that he had made himself so prominent as Tom's champion, so outspoken in his cause. Withers had measured him up—he had seen the old guy running his eye over him—and got wise. That was the answer

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to the delay in his coming back with a gang of cow-hands. Withers was not going to come. If he had not been certain in his own mind of that, Windy never would have left that boy alone down at the stock yards.

That was the way the whole situation sized up, said Windy. Withers was too wise a guy to run against him. He had seen that this poor simple cow jerry was standing in the shadow of a friend who would pitch a little hot lead around if anybody tried to take them cows away from him. And that wasn't no dream. Withers had seen enough to know the business was blocked for him, and he had thrown down his hand. Might as well go to sleep, all McPacken might as well go to sleep and put up its guns. Cal Withers was buffaloed; he never would come back.

It was a noisomely repellant shame, said Windy, in his usual elegant diction, that he hadn't been given a chance to use that old bulldog, which he believed to be a most faithful and efficient weapon, although neither its loyalty nor its efficiency ever had been tested, except in shooting at a telegraph pole. He took the gun out of his pocket, for it was not comfortable there when a man was sitting in a chair, and fondled it, holding it at half-cock, turning the cylinder caressingly with his thumb.

It was a double-action weapon, short, like a water moccasin, its parts oiled and limber, needing only a little pressure on the trigger with the finger to make it lift its head like the uncomely reptile after which it seemed patterned, and blow out its venom with a roar. Windy

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was sorry, indeed, that he had looked so determined and menacing while Withers was stalling around at the depot with the sheriff that evening. He had queered the whole show by uncovering his hand.

Windy rocked gently, leaning back at ease, refreshed by the cool wind that was coming by little starts through his window. He had the large and comfortable feeling of a man who has made the pleasurable discovery that his fame is wider than he had known. With these pleasant fancies over him, the ease of virtue in his valiant limbs, Windy went to sleep, the pistol in his hand, and drifted into a disturbing and tumultuous dream.

Baldy Evans, the shops watchman, was a sleek, tight-skinned large man, dark, unctuous, slow. He looked as if he had come out of black oil, and was on the point of going back into it, uncomfortable as a lobster every minute that he was constrained by duty from laving in its refreshing balm. Baldy was standing in the door of the engine room, consulting his oily watch, a little impatient of the slow-coming dawn, which was beginning to melt away the ground-darkness and show the switch-stands in the yards. Somebody was up, already, frying ham; the smell of it was pleasantly provoking to a hungry man, who had more than two hours yet to wait for his relief.

Baldy stood caressing his fat, sleek watch, running his thumb with circular motion over the glass, leaving an oily dimness. He was trying to correlate that pan of frying ham on somebody's early fire with the habits

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of various railroaders, running them over lazily in his mind with slow, easy effort in keeping with the movement of his thumb on the crystal of his watch. It was an elusive question; he could not conjoin anybody in railroad circles with that aromatic dish.

Was there any ham on the pantry shelf at home? Baldy wondered, swallowing the anticipatory juices which gushed from his digestive springs with the desire for a plate of that pink delicacy. If there was not, and his wife hadn't already hammered a steak for his breakfast, one of the children could run down to Schauffler's market and get a layer or two of ham.

From that point Baldy began to reflect, according to the philosophical habit that had grown on him during his many years of solitary nights, that nothing among all the appetizing delights a woman could stand on a stove reached out and took hold of a man with such a pull as ham. Coffee and cabbage had their sensuous beguilements; onions and liver quickened a man's feet as he drew near home on a frosty autumn morning. Yet all these were only mild stimulants compared to the irresistible desire that laid hold of a hungry man with the first sniff of ham.

Baldy thought he should like to have a farm, where he would raise nothing but hams, although he had little notion whether each ham was a corporeal entity, or merely an adjunct of some creature that must be provided with corn and hay. He did not trouble over any question of biology or anatomy when he thought of ham; only that he had an insatiable appetite for it, and

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that a state of ease and affluence would be one in which he could freely indulge it without having to think of the price.

It was curious, he thought, how long it took daylight to get up a head of steam when a man was hungry. He had stood in that door other mornings and watched it grow from a little gray mingling with the night, enlarging before his eyes until things shaped out of it, sometimes as suddenly as if they came toward him. But he never had seen the beginning of it, he never had caught it at the trick, so to speak. That was curious, also, Baldy reflected. He wondered if anybody ever had seen the start of day, the very beginning, when its invasion struck over the edge of the world and pried like a lever under the rim of night. Or was the process too gradual for the human eye, too subtle for the human sense?

Baldy could not answer; he did not try. He switched off from that track to the junction of his main line of thought concerning the slowness of this particular day. He had been standing there seven minutes, conscious of breaking day, yet unconscious of any increase in the slow-spreading light. It would be a funny situation for a night watchman, Baldy thought, if things should go this far some morning, and no farther; if night and day should balance, neither able to get the bulge and flop the other over. That would be a funny situation for a night watchman, as sure as nails, not knowing whether to leave or stick, the day men—.

It was at that minute, that very second, that Windy

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Moore was floundering in the distracting durance of a sanguinary dream; it was at that very second that he, in his vision, rose to his elbow, shot through in forty places by Cal Withers and his men, to lift his faithful bulldog and send a bullet into the cowman's mocking face. The roar of his big-bore gun snapped Baldy Evans's fantastic speculations as the sudden lunge of an engine breaks a coupling-link on a frosty morning.

Baldy had forgotten his arrangement with the shops and roundhouse men for blowing the whistle when the shooting began. This sudden roar of a gun in the gray of early morning reminded him of it with a sharpness so much like an accusation of neglect of duty that it was almoset tragic. Baldy jumped for the whistle, and pulled it wide open, jarring the windows of McPacken with the sound.

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CHAPTER XXIV

RANGE AND RAILROAD MEET

FEW people are endowed with that exquisite balance of the faculties which restores full consciousness at once when a profound sleep is broken by some rude dissonance, such as a shot in a room upstairs. Angus Valorous was not one of them. When the crash, or smash—it was not by any license of descriptive fancy a crack—of Windy Moore's gun struck his sleeping senses, Angus sat up on his canvas cot with the stiffness and celerity of machinery, his mind straddling, it might be said, over the chasm between consciousness and sleep.

Angus sat that way a moment, wildly dishevelled, staring, mouth open; sprang from his bed, dashed to the middle of the office, where he turned round and round as if unwinding himself from the trammelling coils of some insidious thing that held his senses prisoner. He brought up presently with his shins against the cot, his balance in some measure restored, where he stood looking and listening, in posture of ludicrous strain, up the stairs.

"Wha's yat?" said Angus, thick with sleep and that

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indefinable anxiety of fuddled intelligence which is the exaggeration of fear and alarm: "Wha's yat?"

"Who's that shootin'?" Mrs. Cowgill inquired, in fear-shaken, querulous loud voice.

Angus bounded up the stairs just as the big whistle in the shops began to blow. the sound of it thrilling him with an instant understanding of the crisis that had come in the hour of McPacken's deepest sleep. He stopped, thinking to go down and put on his shoes, bristling with little chills of excitement that ran along the marrow of his spine. Mrs. Cowgill called again, demanding who was shooting, her voice now sounding in the hall outside her bedroom door. Angus dashed on and swung into the hall, using the newel post for his pivot, after his own distinctive and original way.

Mrs. Cowgill stood at her door, the light of the hall lamp with its tin reflector—a brother of the one in the window down-stairs—strong on her dishabille. She was holding a skirt around her waist, the upper part of her insufficiently draped in a low-cut nightgown which discovered too much neck and collar-bone. Her hair was down, her eyes were big with the stare of wild astonishment that was too common to her countenance to be alarming now.

Louise Gardner was in the front end of the hall, her door open behind her. Angus was surprised and disappointed to see her fully dressed. She came running toward him, as if to shelter herself behind the fortification of his strength.

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Windy Moore was at the farther end of the hall, his shirt off, his shoes off, his bulldog pistol in his hand.

"They took a shot at me!" he panted: "they took a shot at me through the winder!"

"My God! the whistle's a blowin'!" Mrs. Cowgill gasped.

"Who was it?" Angus demanded in rough, hoarse challenge.

"Feller on a horse—I saw him lopin' off!" Windy replied.

"I smell powder," said Angus, sniffing, alert as a hound.

"I was settin' by the winder—he rode right up," said Windy.

The railroaders were waking; deep voices were growling in the rooms. Windy ran back for his shoes; Angus swung around the newel post with admirable agility, disappearing down the stairs.

"My God! listen to that whistle!" Mrs. Cowgill appealed.

Myron appeared in the door behind her, his simple toilet of overalls and shirt complete. He leaned against the wall to slip his feet into his congress gaiters, when he stood ready to observe from a discreet and neutral safety all that might come to pass.

"There's goin' to be bloodshed," he announced calmly, as if he spoke of rain.

Louise was unable to say anything at all. She stood staring as if she looked on the wreckage of some frightful disaster that her own meddlesome folly had caused.

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It was as if she had set off dynamite in ignorance of its properties, or turned a switch and ditched a train.

Windy Moore passed her, bareheaded, suspenders over his undershirt, pistol in his hand; railroaders opened doors along the hall and came out buttoning their garments, sleep and alarm making wild confusion in their faces. They hurried away after Windy Moore, the call of the whistle urging them as Baldy Evans pulled it now in short, excited jerks.

Myron took the bowl of his pipe from his hip pocket, the stem from the ruler slip along his leg, fitting the parts together as he went deliberately downstairs. Mrs. Cowgill turned to her room with startled quickness, as if a screen had been pulled down revealing her incomplete array to the boarders' eyes. Louise went down to the office, dumbly frantic in her despair.

Angus Valorous was sittng on the end of his cot, slewed around to give a clear passage, lacing his shoes. Myron had gone to the sidewalk; Windy Moore and the others had passed out of sight. Louise went to the edge of the walk and stood near Myron, who was filling his pipe with unshaken hand.

In the little while since Windy Moore's shot had brought this precipitate alarm over sleeping McPacken, daylight had increased rapidly. Louise could see the stock yards dimly, and the piles of railroad ties which lay at the corner of the pens. The cattle were moving about, uneasy in their confinement, lifting their high-strained, lonesome plaint of impatience and hunger. Louise could not see whether Laylander was on guard.

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The whistle stopped blowing, rounding out the long alarm in one swelling, roaring, jarring blast, leaving a silence like the subsidence of a storm.

"Look at 'em come!" said Myron, thumb over the bowl of his pipe, match-head against his leg.

The railroaders were far more in earnest than Louise had believed them to be. She saw them running across the railroad yards, heard them clattering along the plank sidewalks, quick to leap at the summons of the whistle and rush to the defense of the cow jerry, who held their note of gratitude, payable on demand.

There was no insincerity, no bluff nor idle show in this quick response. They were assembling in the sober intention of killing somebody, not counting the cost of being killed themselves if it should turn out that way.

Angus Valorous came to the edge of the sidewalk, drawn between duty to the hotel and desire to be away. He was at such a high emotional strain that it seemed he would have given off sparks, like a cat, if touched even with the finger's end. Presently he dashed back into the office, to appear immediately with a small rifle. He laughed as he ran off to join the gathering forces, his deep, snorting noise of pleasure that sounded like nothing else in the world but the grunt of a little stallion.

Myron lit his pipe and stood smoking, Louise near him, both watching and listening. A few straggling railroad men were running toward the stock pens, which grew plainer momentarily as daylight spread.

Meantime, those who had gathered at the alarm for

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which Windy Moore's dream was responsible, found nobody lined up to fight. They questioned each other, wondering how it started. Windy told his story again, enlarging a bit with his repetition according to his way, and the way of mankind in general.

Windy knew very well that he had pulled the trigger of his pistol in his dream, and that the bullet had gone through the open window instead of his leg, or the wall, or anywhere that would have left a mark of evidence that would have been difficult to deny. There is no knowing whether he would have been so quick to rush to the front if his alarm had been genuine, his activity not prompted by the necessity of saving his face.

As it was, Windy did not believe Cal Withers was within twenty miles of McPacken. He could tell his story, and blow it up as big as it would go without popping, and come off a hero almost as grand as he was in the frustrated vision.

"He was right under my winder," Windy declared, "so clost to me my room was full of smoke. Baldy heard the gun and turned the whistle loose."

Nobody questioned that a gun had been shot off, but some of the men who knew Windy better than most of the rest did express doubt that it had been shot off at him. If it had been, where did the bullet strike?

Windy said he hadn't waited to examine the walls of his room, but he was sure they'd find it there somewhere.

Well, what did anybody want to kill him for? they wanted to know. It was Laylander they would be

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after, not Windy Moore. The doubters appealed to Laylander. Didn't he think it was some fool cowboy leaving town late, who had fired a parting shot as he passed the hotel?

Laylander was saved the necessity of replying to this question by the arrival of Angus Valorous, who burst among them with his rabbit rifle in his hand, snorting as if he was one of Pharaoh's horses broken out of the picture on Mrs. Cowgill's parlor wall.

"They're comin'!" Angus announced. "They was just leavin' the square a minute ago!"

Angus's alarm was a true and valid one. Cal Withers was hauling up in front of the saloon that moment, with eight men at his back, having made a hard ride of it from his nearest camp to arrive at that slack hour of dawn, when most men would rather sleep than get up and fight.

Withers had felt the hostility of the railroaders the evening before. He believed there was some kind of a scheme on foot to stand behind the cow jerry, who had become such an admirable figure in the railroad eye. Withers did not want to have any trouble with the railroad men. He knew that a feud once established would take a long time to quiet; that every excursion of his men into town would be attended by brawls and jailings, which would react on him in appeals for bond, and lawyers' costs, and all kinds of trouble in getting cars when he wanted them. The best thing to do was hang back on that move to get his cattle by force until the railroaders had gone to bed.

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But he was determined to have his cattle, if he had to fight the whole town. If any railroaders were foolish enough to stand in his way, they'd have to take the medicine he was in town that morning to dispense. He got down at the saloon for a bracer all around, and to find out what the whistle had blown for so early in the morning.

There were between thirty and forty railroad men assembled at the stock yards, most of them young fellows about Laylander's age. The conductor who had been prominent the evening before in his official coat and unofficial trousers, was present, unofficial throughout; and Bill Pinkerton, foreman of the night switching crew; together with three young engineers and a few firemen, a clinker-puller from the roundhouse, some wipers and shopmen. Orrin Smith's gang of jerries was not represented.

Laylander seemed embarrassed and reluctant, standing among them with his rifle. He wanted to say something that stood so big in his mind the dumbest of them could see it. They pressed around him, waiting for him to speak.

"Gentlemen," Laylander began, slowly, as if it hurt, "I beg of you to leave this little matter of personal business to me. I can't expect, I can't ask you, to take up my troubles in this generous way."

"If that's all you've got to say, you'd better go down to that gate and stand there with your gun," the conductor suggested kindly. "That 'll be the point they'll break for to let the cattle out."

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"I can't tell you, gentlemen, how much I appreciate your kind and noble spirit," said Laylander, warming up to his argument, which was a grave and earnest one to him, "but I can't allow you to put yourselves in danger for this little fool business of mine. You don't owe me anything, gentlemen; you don't owe me a thing."

"Get around behind that pile of ties, men," the conductor ordered, in calm, authoritative voice, assuming command by a sort of natural selection. "Duck so you can't be seen, and wait till I say go."

Laylander followed the crowd behind the long pile of oak ties, where no more than the top of his old white hat could have been seen by Withers if he had come charging down on the pens that moment.

Withers and his men were still in the saloon, trying to get out of the bartender, but with little success, the reason for the early morning alarm. Withers knew it could not have been to warn of his coming, for it had started to blow while he was a mile from town. The bartender said he hadn't been able to learn what the whistle had blown for, although he knew well enough. He was considering that there would be plenty of railroaders left to buy beer after the last cowman was gone from the Arkansas Valley range.

Almost two score bulldogs were out of pockets behind the pile of ties. There was a clicking of triggers, a whispering and loading. Ammunition was being passed from hand to hand with very serious and business-like intent; there was a constrained eagerness

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over the young men, who would sooner have a crack at somebody than not. Tom Laylander tried to make his case again.

"Colonel Withers has come here to take these cattle away from me if he can, boys," he began.

"Sure thing—if he can," said a cheerful voice. This brought a laugh. It was quite an early morning lark for the railroad men.

"He's not the kind of a man that stops for anything in the road," said Tom, trying to impress them with the gravity of the situation, which they seemed to underrate in their confidence. Perhaps the sight of so many bulldogs had much to do with Tom's earnest solicitation. He shuddered at the innocent confidence of a man who would go into a fight with such an implement in his hand.

"He'll stop, all right all right," the conductor said, with bland assurance.

"If we can't stop him, what're you goin' to do alone?" one of the young engineers inquired, with a sort of friendly tenderness as if he considered a younger brother's plight.

"I'll do the best I can," Tom replied, "but I don't want you gentlemen to run any risk on account of me."

The conductor put his hand on Tom's shoulder and turned him to look him squarely in the eyes. He was a big man, with a little gray showing in his beard, old enough to be Laylander's elder brother, and wise in the experience of many a frontier fray.

"This has passed out of your hands, son," he said.

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"It's McPacken's business, and McPacken is out here to take care of it. If you want to help, we don't mind. Go on down to that gate, and stand behind the post. If any of them get by us, you can have what's left."

Tom saw that their gay determination was inflexible. There was nothing to do but go to the gate, and he went. Instead of getting behind the thick post upon which the heavy gate was swung, he climbed up and sat on top of it, his rifle across his thighs. He was the most prominent object in the landscape, yet quite undisturbed by any thought for his own peril.

Laylander was profoundly concerned, however, over what might happen when Withers and his crowd came charging down the road. They'd come at a gallop, determined to have it over quickly. Part of them would cut in behind the pile of ties at the first shot from that quarter, and clean out those generous, but foolishly mistaken boys.

"They're comin' out!" Angus Valorous announced.

Windy Moore was feeling himself over, with the look of consternation in his face of a man who had lost his all.

"I left my catridges in my room—my gun's empty!" he said. He showed his bulldog to prove it, looking like a man undone.

"Is it a thirty-eight?" somebody inquired.

"I'll bust over to the hotel and git 'em," said Windy, with desperate eagerness, "I'll only be a minute."

"Is your gun a thirty-eight?" the young man who had spoken inquired again, with a sharp challenge, a

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sharper look into Windy Moore's pale, cowardly eyes.

"It's a special make, special size; I had it made to order," Windy said.

The young man laid hold of the gun with unexpected start, twisted it out of Windy's reluctant hand, broke it and peered into the chambers.

"It's a forty-four," he announced. "Special! You're a special! Who's got some forty-fours?"

The need was supplied immediately, the gun loaded and put back into Windy Moore's nerveless hand.

Windy was white to the gills. His legs were so weak he had to sit down on the protruding end of a tie, his hand shaking so he could not have hit anything more than the ground under him. The piquant flavor of life was gone out of his dry mouth; there was no desire in him any longer to be seen as a general of men.

"Here they come!" said Angus Valorous, who had climbed up the pile of ties to see over it. He came down with the report, his quick, grunting, hoarse little stallion laugh snorted out through his nose.

To have it over in a second; that was Withers's plan. If the law wouldn't help a man, damn the law. Laylander's fame, reputation, notoriety—according to the way one esteemed him—was nothing to Withers. He was confident in numbers. It was his way, always, to do his fighting with somebody flanking him, somebody at his back. There was a feeling of security in force that made him audaciously brave.

Withers came on at a gallop, a man on each side of him, six of them spread across the road behind him.

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He rode with his gun in his hand, swinging it up and down, up and down with a little movement of his bent arm, as if he held himself calculatively in reserve.

On the hotel sidewalk Louise Gardner and Myron stood watching the riders charge the cattle pens, the dust their horses flung up cutting them off for a moment now and then in a cloud. Myron turned to the door.

"There's goin' to be bullets flyin' around here in a minute; you'd better come in," he said.

Myron went in, pausing at the door to knock the ashes out of his pipe on the arm of the green bench. He was not concerned that Louise did not follow him. She heard the screen door slam, dimly conscious that Myron had gone.

Withers gathered speed as he rode, his dust rising thicker behind him. There was nobody in sight but that fool Tom Laylander, sitting like a crow on the fence, lifted up a fair mark, a contemptuous defiance in his attitude, it seemed. This got under Withers's hide. The sight of Laylander sitting on the gatepost, his rifle across his thighs in a restful posture of security, just as if he had no need for it that moment, nor expected to have for some peaceful time to come, roiled the old man up to such a pitch of anger that he forgot his lifelong rule, threw down his gun and fired the first shot. It was too long a shot to do him any good, or Laylander any harm, but it tumbled Withers into the trap that the crafty conductor-general of McPacken's bulldog forces had set for him.

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McPacken had the law on its side, as far as grand juries, and petit juries, and coroner's juries were concerned. Nothing else in or about the law concerned McPacken. If a man could get past those barriers, he was safe. Withers had fired the first shot; he was outlawed.

At that moment Withers was not yet quite abreast the long pile of ties which concealed the force of which he knew nothing. The conductor lifted his hand in a high-sign.

"Go!" he shouted.

They went. They did not stop to breathe, or think, or look, until their guns were empty and the dust and smoke began to lift and clear. It was only a few seconds in passing, that storm of fire and lead, with its trampling and confusion, its wild yells of terror and triumph, its mad galloping away.

When the railroaders paused to reload, Angus Valorous was discovered standing on top of the breastworks, putting a cartridge in his rabbit gun. There was a man down in the road. A little way beyond him, where it had dropped at it turned to follow the retreating cowboys, the fallen rider's horse lay motionless. That was all.

The sound of the retreat passing through the town was drawing rapidly on towards the square. Fathers of families, and other cautious men who had sprung out of bed and armed, but were restrained by prudence or wives from joining the combat, took shots at the wild-riding cowboys as they galloped by. Windy Moore

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climbed to the top near Angus Valorous, and fired off his bulldog into the dust the flying men had raised, putting a period by this defiant deed to the battle between railroad and range that had been hovering in dark imminence over the head of McPacken for so many years.

Cal Withers was the man whom retribution had laid hold of and thrown down in the dust. There was a black wound in his forehead, much blood on his face. They bent over him, lifted his arms, moved his head, and pronounced him dead. Tom Laylander came from his place on the gatepost. He knew more about men who met the mischance of fight. He said Withers was alive.

They picked him up and carried him to the hotel, and laid him on the sofa in the parlor. He was dusty, grisly, senseless and limp; a shudderful and fearful thing to see.

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CHAPTER XXV

MYRON ASSUMES THE PEN

NOBODY else had fallen in that outpouring of lead and fire; nobody else was hurt. One hundred yards away from the scene of the battle, in a direct line, with nothing intervening but space, the Cottonwood Hotel stood. There was not a bullet in it. Where all that lead went, nobody knew; nobody knows to this day.

But nobody was thinking about this extraordinary feature of the fight just then. The railroaders were crowding into the office and parlor of the hotel, intent on knowing whether Cal Withers was dead or alive, or whether he would live or die. Angus Valorous had dashed off for the doctor, there being but one doctor in his rating, in McPacken, and that one his estimable father, who was a bearded, a slow and ponderous man. Angus would have waited for him to come back if he had been a hundred miles away, rather than summon a rival. As it was he waited until the doctor got out of bed and made his deliberate toilet, and drank a cup of coffee to clear his head of sleep.

While Angus was gone on this merciful errand,

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somebody thought of whisky. It was neither a very long wait nor a very long reach to that. Myron, who took a great cheer out of mortuary matters, and enjoyed an intimate connection with all the grim business attendent and antecedent thereto, poured a little liquor into Cal Withers's mouth, and lifted his head so it would run down to the spot where life was lingering in him like a covered coal.

There was virtue in the remedy. Cal Withers presently opened his eyes and looked around him with a dull dawning of perception. Myron applied a little more of the liquor, with growing result.

"Can you speak, Cal?" Myron asked with the officious solicitude of one in charge. "Do you want to leave any word?"

"Where am I shot?" Withers asked, his voice weak and low.

"Right in the center of the brain," Myron replied.

"I'm a dead man!" Withers groaned, falling back, closing his eyes.

Myron let his head down to the pillow, taking his arm away.

"Yes, Cal, I'm afraid you are," he replied.

Those who stood around, looking with the curious impertinence on the wounded man that healthy and unhurt people invariably are guilty of, even in the presence of death, began to be sorry for Withers. Mrs. Cowgill, who had thought mainly of the sofa up to that moment, began to sob and cry, her emotions lying very shallow, indeed.

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"I want somebody to take it down," said Withers, red-eyed and wildly disturbed.

"Take what down, Cal?"

"My dyin' statement. I want it put in writin', I want to sign it before I go."

Myron, being facile with the pen and the use of words, brought some hotel stationery and the register, and sat near the wounded cowman's head to make a record of his last word.

"Put down," Withers directed, his eyes closed, his breath coming short, "that this is my dyin' statement. Put down I said that note of old Tom Laylander's that I sued and got judgment on was paid when it come due. Put down I said it is my dyin' wish and directions that young Tom Laylander take them cattle and keep them, as they belong to him and are his rightful property. Put down I say this because I want to go clear and clean, and not have this fraud brought up against me on the last day. That's all."

When Myron had finished the writing, and had read it over for verification, they held Withers up until he signed it. Six men witnessed it; four times that many heard the dictation and stood as legal witnesses to the cowman's confession of fraud.

"He'll never live till the doctor comes," said Myron. "It got him span in the middle of the brain."

The doctor came as Myron was putting the cowman's statement in the hotel safe. He cleared the onlookers out of the parlor, but considerately left the door open so some of them, at least, might observe and hear. It

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would have been equal to shutting up his most profitable channel of income to have closed that door.

The sheriff arrived close on the heels of the doctor. He had heard that Withers was shot, and had come to see if there was anything in the incident of which he should take official cognizance. The city marshal had not appeared in the morning's activities at all.

Myron produced the record he had made of Withers's confession.

"Here, you represent the law, you take care of this," he said, his importance over him in great solemnity.

The sheriff read it quickly, Myron's writing being in a large and carpenterly hand.

"Where's Laylander?" he inquired. "Does he know about this?"

"I don't think he was here; I didn't see him," Myron replied.

"He went back to watch them cows," a railroader said.

In the parlor the doctor was feeling around the black spot in Cal Withers's forehead, an inch below the rim of his hair.

"They got me this time," Withers whispered.

"Um-m-m?" said the doctor. He turned the sufferer's head to get the light on it more directly, a hand on either side of his face; held it so a little while, looking as if he debated whether it was worth while to attempt anything in such an extreme case. Presently he turned Withers's head back to align with his body, as if he composed him for the rigor of death.

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"Get me a pan of hot water," he directed Mrs. Cowgill.

While waiting for the water the doctor leaned back, hands in his trousers pockets, legs extended, eyes fixed with studious contemplation on the wounded man's face.

"I can't last long now, can I, Doc?" Withers inquired, his voice scarcely carrying to the door.

"Um-m-m-m," said the doctor, in a soothing, noncommittal humming sound.

Mrs. Cowgill returned like the ewer bearer in a procession, the basin held in both hands. The doctor washed the wound, Cal Withers lying white and still, eyes closed, as good as dead already, everybody said. The doctor put something on the wound with a piece of gauze, and leaned back in that waiting, thoughtful way again, hands in his pockets, legs stretched out as if he might slip from the chair.

Presently the doctor woke to activity from his apparent trance. He got an instrument out of his case, the favored ones in the door stretching to see; leaned over Withers and introduced the shining metal into the wound that should have led, by all true calculation, into the frontal chambers of the cowman's brain.

The doctor was only a few moments in his exploration, which seemed to satisfy him. He was busy again with the water, with more stuff on gauze. He got out his scissors and cut off some of the cowman's grizzly coarse forelock, and strapped a dressing over the

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wound, just as if he had hope of a man with a bullet hole in the center of his brain.

"Al-l-l right, Cal," said the doctor, cheerfully, comfortably. "You'd better come in about Monday, I guess, and let me have a look at it."

He put the little instrument in his case, snapped it shut, picked it up, took his hat to go.

The doctor's amazing nonchalance, his more astonishing dismissal of Withers's hurt in that off-hand, careless way, removed the bar from the door that had held the onlookers respectfully back. They poured into the parlor now, packing it in a moment, pressing around the doctor, who stood smiling blandly; around Withers, who lurched up suddenly, with the ungainly quickness of a frightened cow.

"Do you mean I ain't goin' to die?" Withers demanded with something like resentful challenge.

"Not this time, Cal," the doctor replied. He held out his hand, revealing a little piece of mashed and flattened lead. "It'll take something bigger than a twenty-two slammed up against that old cast-iron pot of yours to put you out of business, Cal."

"Wait a minute," said Withers, getting to his feet, the color coming back into his face; "wait a minute, now. Wasn't somebody writin' a paper here a little while ago and gittin' me to sign my name to it?"

"You dictated a dyin' statement to me, Cal, and signed it of your own free will and motion," Myron replied.

"It don't go, it don't go!" Withers declared, glaring

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around in red-eyed renunciation. "I was out of my head—it don't go. Give that paper back to me! I demand that paper!"

"I'm kind of used to hearin' your demands by now," said the sheriff, pushing forward, his chicken face with its long pale mustache looking like a face being offered on the end of a pole, his neck was stretched to such uncommon length. "I've got that paper, and I'm goin' to keep it."

"I demand that paper!" Withers repeated, unabashed by the peculiar turn of events that had placed him in a situation so ridiculous.

"I'm goin' to hand it in to the court, to be made a part of the record of this case," the sheriff informed him. "If you want it, go to court for it."

"It don't stand," Withers protested. "I'll law you to the limit!"

"Next time you make a dyin' statement, you danged old crook, go on and die," the sheriff advised.

The situation appealed to the railroad sense of humor.

"This is my dyin' statement!" somebody groaned.

"Go on and put it down!" another pleaded, in the exaggeration of mortal agony and remorse.

"I'm goin' down there and take them cows of mine," Withers announced.

He set his dusty, trampled old hat on the back of his head, glared around in defiance, sliding his belt to bring his gun in place for a quick draw. But there was not

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any gun in his holster; that was lying on the shelf back of the hotel desk, beside the box of plug tobacco.

"You'll pull your freight out of this town," said the sheriff, pushing a little nearer, "or I'll lock you up for assault to commit murder."

"I believe if I was you I'd go, Cal," the doctor advised him kindly.

Withers bluffed around a little while, the hilarity of the railroaders rising and increasing around him. He finally gave it up, seeing that public opinion was against him so unanimously that the recovery of the cattle, either by force or by law, was beyond all hope. The sheriff walked on one side of him, the doctor on the other, as the defeated but not humiliated cowman went to the livery stable to hire a rig to drive him home.

There was a good deal of discussion and speculation among the railroaders before they dispersed to go to breakfast, and from breakfast to work, over that twenty-two calibre bullet the doctor had picked from Cal Withers's head. Nobody would admit owning a pistol of such diminutive and despised bore, although its efficiency was generally admitted in this case, and as generally admired.

Angus Valorous, his rabbit rifle put away behind the counter, kept his own counsel, although he was in such a state of bristling exultation that he did not go to bed for his rightful portion of repose. His black beard was rough as sandpaper on his cheeks and chin; his rough little laugh, in keeping with that manly adorn-

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ment, seemed to fill him so completely that it spilled over with every move.

Windy Moore had not been a participant in the discussion of the mysterious twenty-two. He did not know, in truth. whether it was a twenty-two or a forty-four that had stopped the cowman in his galloping charge. When Windy mounted to the pile of ties to fire the last shot in the battle, the sight of Withers lying in the road a few feet away, that frightful black hole in his forehead, had been too much for him. He never had seen a man struck down in the vigor of life in that summary way before. It shook him to the foundation with a revulsion that made him sick.

The romance was gone out of gun-handling for Windy Moore. His strength was spent with his courage; he was white, weak in the legs, dizzy and upset. He went ahead of the men who were carrying the cowman to the hotel, his brave bulldog forgotten in his cold and nerveless hand; he struck for the stairs with weaving and uncertain legs, like a man staggering across the deck of a ship, blind in the great sickness that makes the world a heaving, horrible, hateful place.

Windy Moore did not wait for the verdict of life or death in Cal Withers's case. A man hiding a mortal wound could not have gone with more uncertain step, with more frozen fixity of glazed eye, or sickness of every atom of his body than Windy Moore as he dragged his heavy feet up the stairs. He got to his room at last, where the sweat of his great terror burst from him in relief. He shut the door behind him, and

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with that act shut himself out of this story, as a man goes down to the grave from the great serial of life, his consequence upon him, his little part in the drama done.

Mrs. Cowgill went upstairs to take off her nightgown after Cal Withers left. She had put her clothes on over that garment of privacy, not with such happy effect as might have been desired. It was a gown with a flounce, and very long, Mrs. Cowgill being a discreet and modest dame. This flounce came down below the hem of her serge skirt at least four inches. It was not contributive to the dignity of the house.

Louise Gardner was at her door, in such a bloodless, frightened and woeful plight that Mrs. Cowgill hastened to her to offer support and cheer.

"Is he dead?" Louise whispered, her eyes big with fright of the sight she had fled from, her heart heavy with the thought that it was Tom Laylander's sure hand that had brought the cowman down.

Mrs. Cowgill related the amazing recovery, with more contempt for a man who would not die when he was expected by everybody to do so, than appreciation of the betrayal of his own rascality that Withers had made. She never was so much astonished in her life as she was when Louise turned her face to the wall, bowed her head against her arm and cried, sobbing as if she had suffered a bereavement for which there was no consolation in the world.

Mrs. Cowgill did not attempt any consolation; consolation was not in her line. It was beyond her to understand emotion of that kind, and whatever was in-

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explicable to Mrs. Cowgill was vexing, something to move resentment, rather than sympathy. She looked back sharply at the weeping girl as she stopped before Goosie's door, and looked back again, with increasing disfavor, as she opened it to enter and call that sleeping beauty, whom the noise of conflict and the tumult of victory had not disturbed.

Tom Laylander shipped his cattle that afternoon, contrary to the advice of the sheriff and the banker, the liveryman and the railroaders, who all urged him to put them on the range for two or three months longer, now that the question of ownership was decided for good. The banker offered a loan on the herd if Laylander wanted it to carry the expense of grazing. Tom refused it, with grateful thanks. He had seen too much trouble in Kansas, he said. He preferred to accept the loss on his cattle to running the risk of becoming involved in any further unpleasantness.

The railroaders ordered tons of hay from the livery barn, protesting that it was their treat. The cattle had a good stuffing before they were loaded, and went on their way to market happy, if hay could make them so.

Louise Gardner sat at her window and watched the long train pull out, Tom Laylander and the two cowboys, who had run away at Withers's arrival the night before, on top of the cars, prod-poles ready for the merciless goading up of such weak cattle as might fall, or lie down, on the way. Tom had not come to the hotel; she had not spoken a word to him since the day they parted on the range.

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McPacken would be a desolate place for her from that hour she knew; a silent and savorless place, indeed. The world had withdrawn from McPacken and her life with that long extra cattle train, leaving nothing but railroaders, walking about in a hateful void. Tom might have come, for just one little minute, she thought, with resentment that tried to be spiteful, only to melt away in tears. He might have come for one little minute, if only to say good-by.

But he said good-by that day when she had tried to set up a law for him that was older, indeed, than any written statutes, but not older than the code that bound him to his straight and inflexible way. Tom had said farewell that day, and farewell for him once was farewell forever. So it seemed, in sad and sombre truth.

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CHAPTER XXVI

GENIUS GETS A JOB

GOOSIE had picked up that song from hearing Maud Kelly sing it. The melody, as well as the words, had suffered somewhat in the transposition, Goosie's version beginning like this:

> Take back the heart that thou gav-ust,
> What is my language to thee—

Goosie was unfamiliar with the word *anguish,* as she was with the emotion. But *language* was something of which she had no doubt. Bill Connor was proficient in language; he employed it in moments of jealousy, when he sometimes wrung her ear. If Goosie had to offer back a heart, Bill Connor's heart, or anybody's heart, the surrender certainly would be accompanied by language. So the word, according to Goosie's understanding, was entirely appropriate in its place.

Louise wanted to get beyond range of both Goosie's organ and her organs. She pressed her nose against the screen trying to sight along the wall to see if Pap was holding down the end of a bench according to his after-supper habit when off his run. She could not see from the parlor window, yet dreaded to make an

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exploration from the office door. Pap would be certain to take her appearance as a hint that she wanted to go for a walk. Which she did, but not with Pap.

Pap was not there; the way was clear. Louise hurried out, bareheaded as she was, according to the informal fashion of McPacken ladies when they took the air. This gave them the appearance of having just stepped out of doors, and being on the point of stepping back in again. It was a custom that had the stamp of domesticity about it, and restrained forward young sprigs from getting too fresh.

A certain amount of freshness a lady of McPacken expected and tolerated; but there was a line of safety which both sides usually were careful to respect. Being bareheaded on the streets of McPacken at evening was a woman's safeguard. It was her proclamation that she was one of them, under the guardianship of some hard-knuckled champion who would make times smoky for any fresh guy that might step up and pinch her arm.

Pap was getting to be very troublesome to Louise. He was taking on a proprietary air, just as if things were settled between them, proceeding on the assumption that a man who would cross over to the right-hand side of the engine cab within two years was irresistible to the female desire.

He often came to the court house when he was off his run, to hang around in his leaning, somnolent way of patience, common to people who are not so very brisk of intellect, until her hour for leaving came. Taxpayers had to push in beside his leaning bulk at the

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window, where Pap smoked Tulip Roses, turning now and then to spit, with the perfection of loftiness, on the splintery floor.

During these watches at the wicket Pap was not voluble. He seldom spoke at all, just stood there leaning on his arms, his watch-chain hooked high up in his black sateen shirt, his watch in the pocket of that favored garment of railroad men of the period. He was like a slow old cat waiting at a hole for a goper to come out, not much concerned whether it ever would appear, but serenely easy in the waiting. It was a sort of public adulation extremely distasteful to the object. It seemed to admit some sort of arrangement, which McPacken was quick to accept and respect.

This progression in Pap's courtship, for it was nothing less romantic, had been made during the two weeks since Tom Laylander went away from McPacken with his cattle. It might go on, Louise thought, smiling whimsically at the absurdity of it, until Pap would take possession of her in due course, unless she began to develop cruelty, and got herself despised by McPacken for her airs, or made a retreat before the slow pressure of Pap's affections, which were about as quick and warm as a glacier.

Seriously, she would leave McPacken. That was all there remained to be done. Tom Laylander never was coming back; the place grew more desolate every day. Her situation at the court house was pleasant, but uncertain. Election would take place in a few weeks; the county treasurer might not be retained in office, in

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which case the incoming man's friends and relatives would get the subordinate jobs. The tenure of her foothold at the political feed-box in McPacken was extremely insecure. The longer she held on, the more money she would have to begin the world with again, to be sure. But there would be more of Pap, also.

Another week was as long as she could endure Pap, to say nothing of the barren loneliness of that town. One more week, she resolved, in her firm, final way, and then good-by McPacken and the gray-green prairie swells. She would go back to the places where trees circumscribed the view, making the world seem smaller, less formidable to assault. Here the immensity of it was appalling. The heart quailed before it; the courage faltered and shrank away. It was a bleak land to be alone in; a weary land, with no cheer in its vast monotony; a land to break the heart, if it were a heart alone.

There was unusual life in the square tonight, a sound of music, a pressing of people around the center of attraction, which seemed to be a man standing in the town's one hack, which vehicle had its top down, giving it a bold and impertinent, if not a sporty and immoral, air. No less illustrious person than Banjo Gibson was seated in the hack behind the standing man. Banjo was playing them up, the standing man measuring them as they came.

Louise concluded, from Banjo's connection with the stranger, that he was one of those medicine adventurers who commonly appeared in that theatrical manner. In

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those days it was considered a mark of affluence and high-handed liberality to hire a hack by the hour. McPacken's one vehicle of this sort was anything but a luxurious or costly coach. It had been working gradually westward from Kansas City for twenty years. From its decreasing activity in McPacken's streets it must go to the weed-plot beside the blacksmith shop, among the wrecks of irreparable wagons, old plows, old buggies.

Tonight, with its top turned back, the old hack looked unfamiliar and frivolous, like an elderly country belle who had thrown her sunbonnet off to take part in some unseemly revel. The man who stood in it, with a black coat coming to the joints of his knees, was tall and meagre. He looked like a member of the southern bar, his black hair long and glossy, combed back from a professorial forehead, held down by pomatum which streamed its scents upon the breeze.

This man had a severe and judicial appearance, with his white vest, his black coat held back by a hand thrust in his trousers pocket. From his close, severe scrutiny of the people before him, it seemed as if he had come to try McPacken on some serious charge. Banjo Gibson, in the background of this dignified presence, did not carry out the impression of austere and solemn purpose. Along with Banjo, it was rather a ludicrous combination, indeed, for the mustached little musician lifted up his voice and sang, in far-carrying, deep-throated baritone, this being the burden of his song:

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O-o-o, I took my gal to a resterunt,
The best one in the street,
She said she wasn't hungry
But this is what she eat:

O-o-o, a dozen raw, a plate of slaw,
A chickun and a roast,
A plate of stew, some oysters too,
And soft crabs served on toast—

and something else, and something else, all down the menu, which was a long one, and exceedingly humorous in the ears of McPacken.

The climax of this long singing was that this fine blade had but fifty cents in his pocket to meet the bill. That was the point McPacken appreciated. It could understand the exquisite humor of a situation such as that. No matter what was coming—pills, plasters, bitter draughts or sweet—McPacken was content to stand and listen, and perhaps buy a little, only to have more music of that diverting kind.

Banjo finished, his last note carried out on appreciative applause. The man in professional attire began to talk. Not of medicine, although it might lead up to medicine in time; but of consequence and power, and the desire in the breasts of people to enjoy and exercise these blessings. It might be something for the breath, thought Louise, or for the hair; it might be something for the liver, or something for the teeth. Whatever he was laying his approach to, he was an easy talking man, sure of his words, sure of himself. It was as if he had come into both consequence and power early in life, and was quite accustomed to them now.

The man talked briskly and refreshingly, getting his

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words into everybody's ears, putting them just about where he wanted them to go, as it appeared from the silence, the leaning expectancy. Just when he had come to the point where it seemed he was about to uncover his hand, he stopped.

"We'll have some more music," he said.

He continued standing while Banjo sang another song, keeping the thread of expectation in his hands, not relaxing it for a moment. Banjo's song was another one continuing his adventures with his gal, this time in a place that he called "the big cook-quarium," which was devoted to the display of fishes, gentle and monstrous. That done, with greater applause than before, the speaker resumed.

It was not medicine. The key to power was not something to sweeten the breath and enable a common, catarrhal man to marry a fortune; not something for the hair, to furnish a forlorn and plucked bachelor with a brush equal to any fox in a single night. It was nothing in this world of surprises and disappointments but a book.

The man stooped and came up with one of the inestimable volumes in his hand. It was a chunky, thick little book, with a most familiar appearance in the eyes of Louise Gardner; a tight, fat little book in a red cover with large black letters on the back. In truth, surprising, almost comical truth, it was the familiar Thousand Ways.

This man did not follow printed instructions, he did not recite the argument prepared by somebody in

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the publishing house, and sent out on yellow-tinted paper, for the guidance of agents in the field. He was his own authority, and amazingly sufficient unto his day. He transcended all bounds of book agents; he brought imagination into a business that had not known it before his time.

There was nobody in a publishing office anywhere who could advise, direct or instruct that man in ways for bringing his books before the public ear—the public eye would engage them only after purchasing—or add one word that he had not thought of and employed. Before him other book agents were only as dumb beginners; beyond him there was nothing. In the business of being a book agent, he was supreme.

Louise knew she hadn't any claim on the territory this capably voluble man had invaded. Under the terms of her contract with the general agent she was obliged to report every two weeks, a certain number of lapses in this particular amounting to forfeiture of territory exclusively assigned. She never had made any report. This stranger was welcome to the whole world. If he could prosper in it, as he appeared to have done, Kansas was his by the sovereignty of genius. Louise drew a little nearer, to hear more of his methods, and watch the result.

Nobody in that eager crowd of McPacken's best appeared to remember that Louise Gardner had come to town on a certain hot day two months before, offering that same priceless treasure in her appealing, timid, unconvincing way. There was no appeal in this man's

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business, no uncertainty. He seemed to believe in that book as thoroughly as man ever accepted written word in this world. He seemed even to believe, as he talked on, that the book was a bit too good for McPacken, and to hesitate over allowing them to have it at all.

That was an amazing method, thought Louise. Here he had led them up to what seemed the very approach of his climax, to the point of desire, when hands were already in pockets, and now he was putting the book away. He had only a few copies left, he said; it would seem unfair to place these invaluable formulae for compounding quick and easy fortune into the hands of a small number of people, when there were so many in this world of hardship and poverty who might need them more.

He seemed to be thinking over the situation, with regret for having brought them up to this pitch of desire, as he put the sample volume away in the large valise that stood on the seat before him. It seemed to sadden him to deny them this great secret of the way to wealth, this philosopher's stone bound in red with black letters on the back.

Presently he brightened, looking over the crowd with a little eloquent gesture illustrating his inability to refuse humanity this blessing. But there were only a few, he reminded them; they must not hold it against him if there were not enough to go around. He stood like a philanthropist handing down loaves to the starving. Jake Smolinsky, of the Racket Store, was the first one to step up and buy.

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Tom Laylander was a little in advance of her when Louise first saw him. The sight of him gave her a shock, but not an unpleasant one. It was more of an uprising of some hot, flooding emotion between gladness and surprise, with an eagerness to call to him, to crowd through and touch his arm, as one feels when seeing a familiar figure in a strange and lonely place. Tom was wearing the same old white hat, the same old gray shirt. If he had sold his cattle to advantage, he had not yielded to the dominating human vanity to make a show of his prosperity in his dress.

Louise pushed forward, disturbing the calculations of some who were making up sums of money in their palms, to have the price ready if fortune should favor them by allowing them to get up to the hack before the books were gone. She yielded to the impelling, warm feeling of glad friendship, joyful relief, and touched Laylander's shoulder.

"Were you intending to buy a book, Mr. Laylander?" she inquired.

Tom turned as if a bullet had given him a fiery nip in the shoulder. He had a new necktie, of color somewhat too warm; otherwise his appearance was unchanged. He was as fresh and pink as a new potato, and as confused and stammering as if Louise had caught him with his hand in the book agent's pocket.

"Why, Miss Louise!" he said. He seemed amazed, incredulous, but he managed to get his hat off with one hand, and held out the other in greeting.

Tom held her hand with such an ardent clasp, looked

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at her with so much leaping, sparkling joy in his blue eyes, that Louise felt ashamed to take advantage of his forgiving innocence. She had wronged him doubly, but there was not a shadow of such memories on his ingenuous soul. She drew on his hand to pull him out of the crowd.

"You don't need to buy one of those books," she said.

"Why, Miss Louise!" Tom repeated, in that same amazed, glad way.

There was a bench under the maple trees in the square, close by a cement fountain that never had thrown a jet of water in its day. Not a very secluded place, for seclusion in affairs between people was not encouraged by McPacken, which liked above everything to know what was going on.

A big electric light hung over them, just a little way to one side, around which a cloud of hard-backed, fascinated June-bugs blundered to their doom, to fall in a constant showering, attended by little sounds of sizzling, to the grass. Others had sat on the same bench under like conditions, with similar business before them; others would come after them in their order and sit there, where all McPacken that crossed the square might see.

"Did you do well with your cattle, Tom?" she asked. She was sitting on his lee side, his shadow falling over her like a protecting cloak.

"Yes, Miss Louise, I did right well with them."

"When did you come back?"

"Just this evening, Miss Louise."

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"I didn't see you at the hotel."

"No, ma'am. I didn't feel like goin' to the *ho*-tel, somehow, Miss Louise."

"Oh, please don't 'Miss Louise' and 'ma'am' me, Tom. You know me too well for that."

"Yes, lambie," said Tom.

He got hold of her hand, and held it in the light, openly and boldly, as something that belonged to him.

"Tom, you kept away from the hotel because you didn't want to see me."

She didn't believe it, but it is a woman's way to lay charges, especially a guilty woman when she contrives to make a case against the one in whose censure she soon is to stand. It is a poor subterfuge of filing a cross-bill, of which the best of women are guilty in their shifty little lives.

"I had doubts and fears," said Tom, in his simple, honest way. "But I know they were foolish. I know it as well as anything, now."

"But you don't know what a great wrong I did you, Tom."

She looked up at him with that pleading, large-eyed appeal, as she used to look at hard-hearted citizens who would not buy the Thousand Ways; as she had leaned that first day in McPacken to look at Banjo Gibson, and quicken his sophisticated heart.

"You never wronged a butterfly in your life, you poor little dove," he said.

"But I did—I did something that was simply aw-

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ful!" She leaned a little, her voice lowered to a whisper. *"I turned Cal Withers loose that time!"*

"Why," said Tom, in surprise to hear her make such a tragedy of her confession," I knew that all the time. I was glad you let him go; I was beginnin' to feel kind of sorry for the old feller, tied up there without a drink of water to moisten his tongue."

Louise forgot McPacken; she forgot the bright electric light, fantastic lure of destruction in the June-bug world. She leaned her forehead against Tom Laylander's shoulder, as she had leaned it against the wall on the day of Withers's downfall, and cried. He spoke to her endearingly, stroking her hair with gentle consolation. McPacken had set this stage for such events; let it come and see if it would.

"Well, I declare!" said Tom, after a while, cheerfully, briskly, simulating a great surprise. "That man's closed out his gripful of books—my last chance is gone!"

Louise was feeling much better. She laughed.

"Seriously, Tom, did you want one of them?"

"I wouldn't take one of 'em as a gift," he replied. "That many ways to make money would confuse me so I wouldn't know where to start. I didn't come back to McPacken lookin' for any receipt to make money by; I come back longin' for a receipt that would make me happy."

* * * * * *

Angus Valorous was returning to the hotel with the baggage wheelbarrow at something after nine o'clock

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that night. He met Pap Cowgill in his overalls and cap, on his way to take an extra run for which he had been called.

"Who's leavin'?" Pap asked.

"Louise," said Angus, letting down the shafts.

"Louise?" Pap repeated, his heart hitting the bottom of the pit. "Where's she goin' to?"

"Goin' east on Eight," said Angus, enjoying the situation keenly on account of his dislike for Pap, who was too free with his orders, and his full understanding of that young man's intentions with regard to Louise.

"What's she leavin' for?" Pap wondered, dazed by the news.

"It'd pay you to keep posted," said Angus Valorous, with great contempt. "The cow jerry come back to town this evening; him and her was married a little while ago."

"The hu-hu-hu—," said Pap.

If Pap ever was able to complete it, Angus Valorous did not hear the end. He left Pap standing in the road as cruelly winded as if the hardest hitter in McPacken had given him a jolt in that seat of his soul where his pie went home.

Angus Valorous went on toward the hotel with the wheelbarrow, in little starts, little haltings. He was a freight engine, pulling out of the McPacken yards on a wet night, his drivers spinning on the slippery rails. He puffed now in deep, laboring exhaust, going with slow step in measure with it; now in quick, explosive racing, as the drivers spun on the wet rails, his feet

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chuffing the dust to a cloud as he stood in his tracks, the rails fairly burning under the friction of his wheels.

Over in the Cottonwood Hotel, in the corner of the room where Louise Gardner had made her hasty preparations to depart not half an hour before, there lay a little pile of fat red books with black lettering on their backs, which anybody could have had for the carrying away.

THE END

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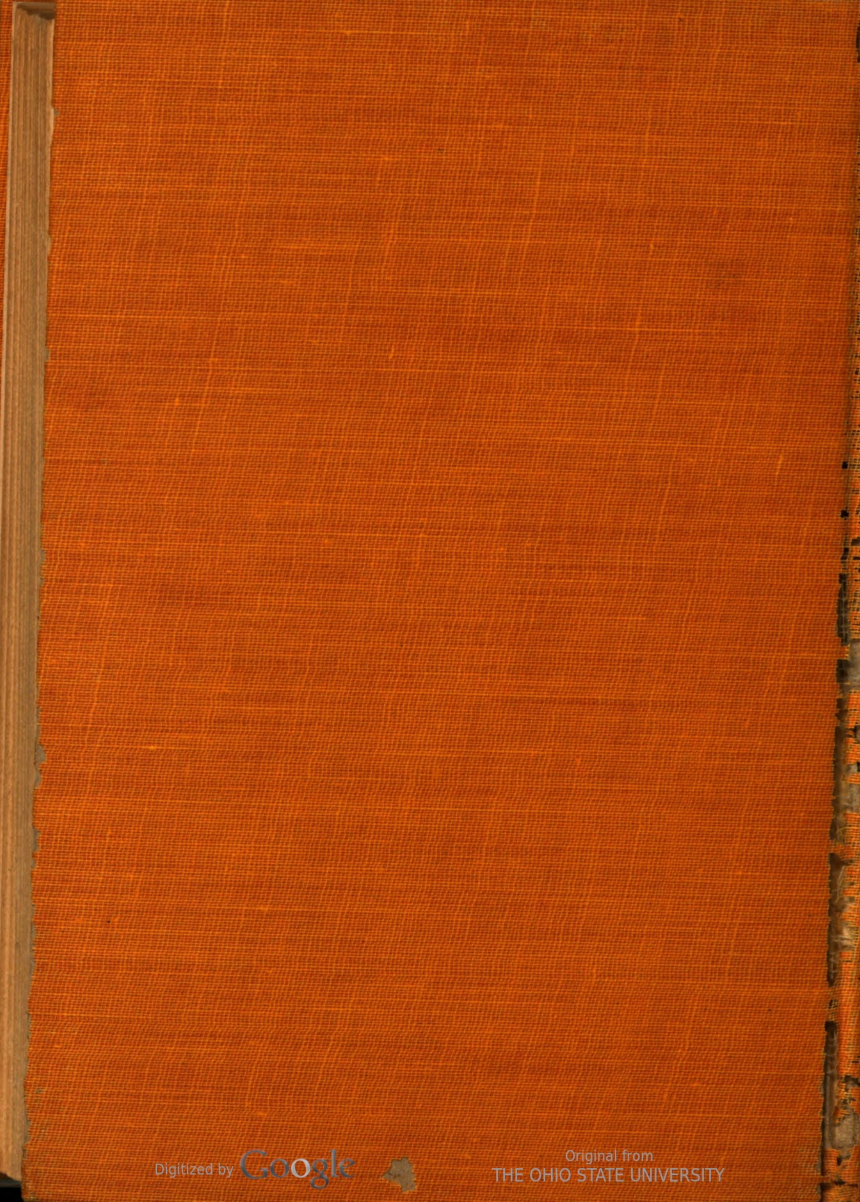
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