

The Baron
of
Diamond Tail

By
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THE BARON OF DIAMOND TAIL



Only the outstretched legs of his horse separated him from the oncoming rustler when he rose to his knees and fired.

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GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

Made in the United States of America

VIRGINIA STATE
AND TO
YEARLY

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George Washington Ogden
1922 - 1923

Published September, 1923

Copyrighted in Great Britain

Printed in the United States of America

The Baron of Diamond Tail

CHAPTER I

ADVICE ON HOMICIDE

THERE was a good deal of loose skin on Charley Thomson's neck, dry wrinkled skin, which caused one to wonder how he stretched it to shave. That he managed it somehow, day by day, was as evident as the hills around Saunders, for never a hair had grown long enough to interfere with his mouth in all his years in the town.

A great avid mouth, like a cannibal fish, elongated by wrinkles at the corners, which bent it downwards with a sneering cast; a clubbed, fleshy nose, purple, immense; small eyes, squinting from a life-long habit of drawing them to points to increase his look of shrewdness and inscrutability. Not a handsome man in one line of his rascally old face, not a nice man in one habit of his daily life, yet a man with something about him that caught upon the perception like a burr, and argued convincingly for some strength which lay beneath the smoky rind.

As long as he had practiced law in Saunders, and that ran back to the territorial days of Wyoming, and far back into them, at that, Charley Thomson had garbed himself with unvarying sameness. A blue woolen shirt, loose about his lean neck as the folded

skin for which he had no use, nearly always lumpy in the corners of the collar, as a woolen shirt becomes after much washing; a black necktie, pulled almost as tight as the hangman's noose which he had helped so many who deserved it to escape, the ends of it tucked into his bosom; a long black professional coat, glossy on the back from long rubbing against various articles of furniture, even church pews; an old black hat, weathered and rain-beaten, sweated and greasy, deplorable and disgraceful altogether.

Charley Thomson was the only man in Saunders, or perhaps in Wyoming from one end to the other, who could catch fish like an Indian. That is to say, with a hook bound to a long pole, which the artist introduces into the water and slips under the fish as he dozes in depths of pellucid stream or lake, in that country commonly glass-clear. How craftily a man must go about this to land the fish by raking the hook into its keel, requires no very active imagination to understand. Charley Thomson could do it; he could land the fish down to the very last one in the school worth carrying home.

Similarly, he had some undefined adroitness in his practice of the law by which he reached his hook into the very shadow of the gallows and jerked men back to the safety of liberty and life. He had been doing it a long time in that mountain-bound county seat, but, though his fame had grown, his fortunes seemed to run backwards. Thomson drank a quart of whisky a day. Perhaps that had something to do with it.

On the afternoon of this summer day, Thomson was

closeted in his office in consultation with a client. The lawyer's window was open on the street, the acrid smoke of his greasy cob pipe trailed out to assail the nostrils and eyes of those who passed. The client, who sat between the lawyer and the window, turned his head uneasily as the footsteps of passengers in the street sounded in the room. Thomson, hand at the bowl of his pipe, eyes fixed in keen, probing directness on his client's troubled face, nodded toward the open sash. The client rose with alacrity and pulled it down.

This client was a young man, tall, lithe, sinewy; with the pliant grace of a horseman in his sinewy back. He was coatless, his shirt was open at the neck, showing his brown bosom; a pistol was belted about him, leather cuffs protected his wrists. His bearing and trappings proclaimed him cowboy, common among his kind in that country in his day, which was the day of the cattle barons, as they were called both East and West.

There was a shadow of trouble in the young cowboy's face, which was an ingenuous face, and mild, with a cast of unawakened humor about the mouth, an eager alertness in the clear blue eyes. He held his hat respectfully in his hand, although Charley Thomson kept his own on his head, after his manner in the presence of all men, great and small. The young man resumed his chair uneasily after closing the window, the shadow of troubled earnestness deepening on his face.

"Huh!" said Thomson, grunting meditatively around the stem of his pipe.

The client lifted his eyes expectantly. The lawyer

said no more, but sat with frowning eyes fixed in abstract gaze on whatever hypothetical situation he may have conjured up in his crafty mind. Presently he put his pipe on the cluttered table, where the handle of a notarial seal lifted out of the drift of old papers and tattered books like a smothered word of truth appealing its own sad case.

"I don't like for a man to come to me and tell me he's goin' to kill somebody," Thomson said, severely. "It ain't my business to give advice on how a man can be killed with the minimum of risk and the maximum of justification. My business is to get him off after he's done it."

He looked sharply at the young man, who moved his feet uneasily, colored hotly, dropped his eyes.

"Yes sir, Mr. Thomson," said he.

"So the only thing I've got to say to you, Mr. ——"

"Dan Gustin is my name." The young man gave it to him straight in the eyes, with head lifted quickly, as a man delivers something of which he is not ashamed.

"Mr. Dan Gustin, of ——"

"I'm with the Elk Mountain Cattle Company, over on the Big Wind—the Diamond Tail brand."

"Of the Diamond Tail brand, is to go out and kill your man, then come to me. That is——" turning again from the table, as with an afterthought—"if you've got to kill him. I'm not advisin' you to go and do it, but if you've got to work it out of your system, my part in the transaction is after, not before, the fact."

"Yes sir," said Dan Gustin, in the same respectfully perfunctory way as before. He stood a little while

turning his hat in his hands. Then: "Thank you, Mr. Thomson, for puttin' me right. I thought if it wouldn't be too much bother to you to git me off—if I wouldn't have to lose too much time——"

"It would be a lot of bother to get you off, it's gettin' harder every day to get 'em off," Thomson replied crabbedly.

"Yes sir," Dan Gustin said, respectfully confused.

"They might keep you in jail six months before trial, that's a scheme this new prosecutor's got to break a man and make him so weak he'll convict himself. My advice to you is keep out of it. A cow-puncher's got no business to set up as a killer in these degenerate times, Gustin; that's a luxurious distinction only a man with money can afford. Let that feller go. If he deserves killin', somebody'll come along in time and do it, and save you the trouble and expense."

"He sure deserves it, all right!" Gustin declared, twisting his head in great earnestness.

"Who is he?"

"Feller up in our country," the cowboy replied, evasively.

"All right," said Thomson, after boring him with a gimlet look; "you let him live on. How much money have you got?"

"About sixty dollars."

"That wouldn't patch a bullet—that wouldn't patch a bullet! Killin' isn't as cheap in this country as it was five years ago, young man. What do you reckon it costs to get a man off these times?"

"I don't know, sir, but I thought maybe a hundred

dollars or so.”

“A hundred dollars or so wouldn’t grease one hinge of the jail door! If I can get a man off before the trial jury it lets him out for about a thousand; if we have to appeal, it’ll run up to five. It’s not a game for cowpunchers, kid. You keep out of it.”

The young man stood fingering the leather band of his big hat, his weight thrown first on this foot, then on that. He looked up after a spell of cogitation, a sheepish grin clearing the trouble out of his eyes.

“I guess I’ll let him live on,” he said.

Thomson bent that frowning, sharp, half resentful gaze on him again.

“Girl back of it?”

“Well sir, we did have words over a lady.”

“Who? Who’s over there in that God-blasted country you inhabit worth pullin’ a gun for?”

“She’s a lady they call Cattle Kate.”

“What other name?” the lawyer asked, showing a frowning, dark interest.

“Medford’s her old man’s name.”

“Huh! married, is she?”

“I mean her paw.”

“Is he the man you want to kill?” Thomson inquired, looking up in sudden severity.

“No sir!” the cowboy denied frigidly. “I wouldn’t hurt a hair of his head.”

“No, of course you wouldn’t, you young gourd!” said Thomson, turning his grim old eyes to shoot his contemptuous ridicule into the cowboy’s face. “Well, you let Cattle Kate and her daddy do their own killin’.”

"Yes sir," Dan Gustin agreed, with a very foolish look about him. "Much obliged, Mr. Thomson."

"Twenty-five dollars," said Thomson, severely, holding out his hand. "I haven't got any advice to give away."

Dan Gustin got out his money, very red in the face, looking more foolish and chastened than ever, and left twenty-five dollars in the lawyer's not over-clean fingers.

"I'll let him live a good while!" said the cowboy, with a wry grin, stuffing his wallet into his inner vest-pocket.

"It would pay you," Thomson nodded, raising his eyebrows with his eyes to look into the tall young man's face, but not moving his head at all.

"It'd be cheaper for me to throw my stuff into a gunny-sack and hit the breeze out of this country," the cowboy figured, making for the door.

"And wiser," the lawyer shot after him, moved somewhat out of his habitual attitude of contempt for the weaknesses of men by the honest simplicity of the one at present before him. "So you're ridin' the range for old Dale Findlay?"

"I'm makin' a stagger at it."

"Give him my regards," said Thomson, a mocking sarcasm in his tone that won for him another deep-fathoming glance from the cowboy's baffled eyes.

"I'll mention you sent 'em," Gustin agreed, one foot outside the door.

"There's a feller down at Grimmitt's inquiren' the way out to your God-forsaken ranch."

"I guess he's the man I come down here to meet—I've got a wagon to haul him out there in," Gustin confessed, with no small indignation.

"Expectin' him, huh?"

"The big boss, Hal Nearing, sent me. This feller belongs to some high-up lady back East, a pardner in the ranch, or something. He's her only dear child, brung up back of the kitchen stove. She's sent him out here to grow hair on his shins and learn to be a man."

"Well, he's goin' to a heavenly atmosphere!" Thomson said.

"There's worse outfits than the Diamond Tail, mister," Dan said, turning with a bristling attitude of defense that was as good as a threat.

"Yes," the lawyer granted, thoughtfully, "and you wouldn't have to go far to find them, from what you've been tellin' me. So you came down to meet that boy, huh?"

"That was my aim and object, pardner."

"I thought it was for legal advice. Or is the matter of shootin' a man off just incidental with a fresh young blood like you?"

"I thought I'd kill two skunks at the same shot," Dan returned, quite innocent of either intent or expression of offense.

Thomson accepted it as delivered, knowing the breed too well to raise a question.

"I see," said he, his wide mouth clamped for a moment upon its ugly secrets, his eyebrows lifted as he slewed his eyes to look at what now plainly had become

an object of contempt. "And if you hadn't been drivin' down to haul out this greenhorn you'd 'a' gone gunnin' for that feller up there without countin' the cost."

"I sure would, mister!"

"Well, you've paid for my advice; what're you goin' to do with it?"

"I'll let him live on," Dan declared, twisting his head in expression of deep seriousness.

"Stop in and see me when you come to town," Thomson invited, offering his hand with his words.

This unaccountable unbending from what had appeared to Dan a scornful coldness, winded him for a moment, paralyzing all effort of response. He appeared to stand doubting, as if charges were expected to go with this approach to friendliness and well-wishing.

"I sure will, Mr. Thomson," he responded heartily, grasping the lawyer's hand as warmly as if it had dragged him from the gibbet and restored him to the joyous ways of life.

As Dan Gustin went his way down the street, Lawyer Thomson stood in his door looking after him, no line of disdain, amusement, satisfaction, or any emotion that the eye could interpret in his inscrutable face. Presently he turned into his office, where he began to pry dustily into his records contained in a little set of drawers that once had held spool cotton thread. With chair drawn close against this homely little cabinet, which was nailed to the wall and braced by two rough boards on long slant to the floor, Thomson thumbed his untidy papers until he came at last to that which

he sought. This he drew from its sheaf of like frayed and yellowed documents, glanced over it to verify its contents, and then put it in his great flat, gaunt wallet along with Dan Gustin's fee, struck match to his outrageous pipe, and sat glooming in a reverie.

CHAPTER II

THE BLUE-EYED WOLF

GRIMMITT'S hotel stood a hundred yards or thereabout from the lawyer's office which Dan Gustin had just quitted. Between the two places there stretched a plank sidewalk of varying height and width, according to the caprice, liberality or business convenience of the property-holders fronting the street. Here it ran at street level, the débris of crushed tin cans, blowing papers, scattered oats from nose-bags, littered hay, lodged against its plank-ends, even overflowing upon it; along a little way it rose a foot to accord with the foundation of a saloon; again it became a platform in front of the principal store, upon which women could step directly from their wagons when they drove in to trade.

Along this unequal way, where loafers sat on whittled benches, lounged in doorways, leaned against porch props, Dan Gustin went pegging in his high-heeled boots like a mule in a Mexican chain hobble, holding a straight course for the hotel, past the doors of temptation. The marks of his spur straps were polished on his insteps, the chafing of their metal was plain upon his heels, but he had laid those galling instruments aside for this excursion by wagon and, as he walked in review of those of his own calling who idled by the way, he felt like a plucked drake set loose before the flock.

Inwardly he cursed the luck that had singled him out for the business of meeting this stranger from far places who was coming into that country to cut his eye-teeth on the bones of the range. It was beneath the dignity of a proper man to run an ambulance for the transportation of undeveloped or deficient human beings who could not ride a horse.

In the window of the bar at Grimmitt's hotel there stood the mounted skin of a great white wolf, bottles of red and yellow liquor around its feet. It had been there a long time, so long, indeed, that it had become a landmark to the thirsty who came riding from the far-away ranges, mines and military post. Dust had gathered on its back, and blackened the once fiery red of the snarling tongue curved inside the barrier of long, threatening teeth.

All the old-timers knew that Grimmitt had slain the wolf back in the days when he rode like one of its kind on the trail of thief or murderer, never dropping the scent for hardship, boundary of his jurisdiction as sheriff, or any of the common obstacles of nature or the cunning of desperate men. Now Grimmitt's hair was whiter than the wolf's, and he was prouder of that trophy of the chase than the most notable deed of his truly notable past as peace officer in that rough-handed land.

But there was one peculiarity about this wolf that probably marked it apart from all other wolves of whatever hue, living or dead; it was blessed and comforted by a pair of such mild, wide-open, wondering, innocent blue eyes as never graced a vulpine counte-

nance anywhere among that ravening tribe in this world. Grimmitt contended that this wolf had blue eyes when he shot it, and a blue-eyed wolf he would have it, dead and snarling among the whisky bottles in his window.

On this point of fidelity to nature the community was divided, some holding with Grimmitt that a white wolf had blue eyes, although none could be fastened down to the declaration that he ever had met one; others scorning the contention and ridiculing the effigy as a slander against nature, wolf nature in particular. As for Grimmitt, he was ready to fight for the blue eyes of his wolf, and their fidelity to the original. It had blue eyes when alive, and blue eyes he had ordered for it dead. The taxidermist had done the best he could to meet this extraordinary specification, but had succeeded only in supplying blue eyes, not blue eyes of a wolf. Far from it, indeed. Not even human eyes. Doll's eyes, they appeared to be, large and expressionless of all wolfish ferocity, calm and untroubled and wide-staring; blue as asters by the roadside, placid as water in a porridge bowl.

Dan Gustin never had been a resident of Saunders, therefore never had been aligned in the controversy of the white wolf, although he had his own opinion in the matter, as a free rider might have, indeed. Now he went his way to the hotel to meet his charge, a bit uncomfortable, and ashamed of his mission.

Dan brisked up a bit at the sight of two men before the window displaying the white wolf, evidently engaged in a wrangle over the merits of that historic

beast. His hope of seeing a mixup over the question was only secondary, however, to his sudden and keen interest in one of the contestants, which interest and curiosity increased with every step that he took drawing him nearer.

This man was garbed in what appeared to Dan Gustin, cowboy of the inter-mountain plains, the most astonishing garments that ever concealed the nakedness of a fellow-creature. To one of wider range of experience, the stranger would have appeared as nothing more extraordinary than a sailor of the United States navy, dressed as he had stepped from the deck of his ship, wide-flapping trouser legs, tight little blouse with its laced front and open collar, and that little cap which is neither useful nor ornamental, above all.

It was the headgear, especially, that held Dan's amazed attention, striking him with such immeasurable astonishment that his mouth fell open for want of a properly strong word to fill it. To Dan the man seemed some curious freak of overgrown child, for that sort of cap he had seen on the heads of very little boys in the officers' quarters at the post, even that very pattern of a suit, if suit it might properly be called. That any full-grown, man-shouldered male human being could be so poor in dignity as to appear in public and the light of day so trigged up, passed all bounds of credulity. But there he was, his little old fool cap pushed back like a three-year-old boy, his blunderbuss trousers flapping in the wind about his ankles, holding an argument with as much assurance as if he stood equal with any man that ever split the breeze.

Dan Gustin did not know that nations attired their defenders of the seas in that manner; to him the sight of this sailor, a thousand miles and more from the nearest salt sea, brought no association of romance or adventure, or of white cruisers lifting to the placid lap of swelling waters in far-off San Francisco bay. The stranger was an amazing freak, parading with an affrontery that Dan resented. Dan remembered having seen a girl in a show down at Cheyenne one time, dressed in that fashion. Maybe this was the explanation. There must be a show in town.

Quickened by this thought and hope, Dan approached the window where the white wolf stood, its grizzly muzzle wrinkled in a fearful snarl which the serene blue eyes turned into nothing more than a bluff and a false pretense.

"I ketch 'em alive with my bare hands," the man who argued with the one Dan took for a walking advertisement declared, putting it rather roughly, in loud and quarrelsome words. "I'm here to tell you, little feller, I know wolf. I'm kin to 'em."

"I'm not sayin' you don't, mister," the other returned, mild and unruffled, but with a firmness that surprised Dan. "You asked me for my opinion on that beast's eyes, and I gave it to you."

"It ain't worth hell room!" the contentious man declared, glaring in bristling ferocity on the sailor.

This man who claimed kinship with the outlawed tribe was a thin-shouldered, narrow-chested person, standing gangling and tall, but with a roughness about him like a cactus, promising unpleasantness in handling.

His face was long and morose, its mournful cast heightened by the length of his nose, which hung club-ended over a wild red mustache. His upstanding eyebrows were huge and coarse as the bristles of an old boar, the small eyes under them combative and red, like the eyes of a man who had watched at campfires through long and windy nights.

He stood with thumbs hooked in his belt, a chafed and worn scabbard carrying a long pistol dangling against his thigh. His coat was tight across his narrow back, the sleeves of it far up his hairy wrists. He was not a friendly-looking man to meet on the trail, not the kind of a man one would stop in the road and ask for a match. He was that type of frontiersman to whom whisky was as necessary as fire to a stove. Without it he was a dead lump of encumbering material; with it one must touch him carefully. He was such a familiar type to Dan Gustin as to call for no consideration. Dan's eyes were centered on the sailor, whose strange garb and easy carriage began to move in the cowboy a certain admiration.

This sailor, who had wandered like a storm-blown gull so far from his sea, stood a little taller than Dan Gustin, who was no puny specimen himself. He was straight-backed and well-balanced; a compact man about the chest, which was uncommonly broad and deep. His brown face was clear and frank, rather boyish in its glad freshness, inviting confidence by its easy smile. There was a look of high courage in his blue eyes, a promise of good sense in the rather small head that carried so confidently on the short, muscular

neck. His brown hair was cut close; his cap was fixed with a little tilt toward his ear.

"No call to get your bristles up, that I can see," he said to the man who scorned his opinion on the eyes of Grimmitt's wolf. "I'm not an authority on wolves, but it strikes me that a white one ought to have blue eyes, even if it hasn't."

"You ain't got as many brains in your head as a fishin' worm!"

"Maybe you're right," the sailor admitted, placid and undisturbed by the other's scorn. "I never argue about that."

"A feller that'd wear a rig like you've got on don't know enough to scratch a hog!"

"That's all right now, pardner," said the sailor, turning to the brother of the wolf, a quick flush mounting to his face; "you go light on what you've got to say about this uniform!"

The kinsman of the wolf made a scoffing noise in his big nose.

"You look like a bottle in a sock," he said.

"It don't make any difference how I look, stranger. If this uniform's good enough for Uncle Sam, it's good enough for you, and you've got to respect it!"

Dan Gustin moved a little nearer. What was that about a uniform and Uncle Sam? Well, if Uncle Sam and that kid were partners, Dan was on their side from the jump.

The wolf's kin was looking the sailor up and down, contempt in his long nose, wrinkled in a snarl that was fiercer than the beast's behind the glass.

“Down in the Indian Nation, where I used to run wild,” he said, “we slice up little fellers like you and fry ’em in grease. Give me that little purty you’ve got on your head—I want to take it home for my squaw to set a hen in.”

He reached out with a swiping movement of his long arm as he spoke, to knock the offending little cap from its easy, but rather challenging, perch. The sailor ducked. The next moment Dan Gustin saw a blue flash like a kingfisher shooting down at a minnow’s glint. The sailor’s fist sounded as if somebody had struck a stump with an ax. Dan stepped back to let the stranger from the Indian Nation have all the ground that was coming to him when he fell.

The sailor stood where he had delivered his knock-down, crouching a little, alert, hands up for offense or defense as developments might demand. Dan wondered why he didn’t follow up the advantage he had won in that first swift blow, according to the code of the range.

“Pile on to him, kid!” he urged, while the trouble-hunter lay stretched full length for a moment in the dust.

Before the sailor could act on Dan’s charitable urging, if he had any mind for doing so, indeed, the man whom he had knocked down gathered himself and sprang nimbly to his feet. The sailor rushed him, only to run against the long pistol which the fellow jerked from the leather as he came to his feet in a cloud of dust.

“Put it up, pardner!” Dan commanded. “That

kid ain't got no gun."

Dan had stepped into the engagement quite easily and naturally, and well within the rights of a gentleman, according to the custom of the country. He stood holding his own weapon with arm shortened against his side, after the manner of a quick and sure shooting man. There was blood on the quarrelsome stranger's mouth, murder in his sullen eyes. He turned his head to glare on Dan, reading at a glance something in the young man's eyes that would admit no argument. Then he slowly and sulkily returned the pistol to his holster, saying nothing, only opening his mouth to empty it of the blood that was already overflowing down the dusty stubble of his chin.

"If you want to stand up and fight him like a man, I'm willin'," Dan offered cheerfully.

"I'll hang your hide over the fence," the ruffian promised, turning to go.

The sailor, who had stepped back as nimbly as from a redhot iron when he saw the pistol at his breast, offered Dan his hand with a sort of shamefaced grin.

"Thanks, old feller," said he. "He took the wind out of me for a minute—I don't fight that way."

"Sure you don't, kid," said Dan, heartily.

The fight had drawn a good many people from along the street; the noise of their coming and gathering in front of the hotel attracted the customers from Grimmitt's bar. It drew Grimmitt with them; he appeared in the door drying his hands on his apron, just as the wolf hunter turned, his gun reluctantly restored to the scabbard, and went off to mount his horse.

"What's all this gun-slingin' goin' on over?" Grimmitt wanted to know, looking darkly and disfavoringly at Dan, who still kept his iron in his hand, not trusting the stranger's shifty eyes. Dan explained in few words, not mentioning the original controversy between the sailor and the stranger over the wolf.

Grimmitt, a short, tight man, with white hair cut as close to his scalp as scissors could clip it, stepped into the street.

"That feller's been loafin' around here all day tryin' to pick a fight out of somebody he thought he could lick," he said, watching the stranger swing into the saddle and ride away. "Anybody know who he is?"

"He goes by the name of Wells over on Horse Crick," said one. "He's ranchin' over there."

"I thought he looked like he come from that neck of the woods," Grimmitt said. "You know what kind of ranchin' them fellers does up there."

It seemed very well understood what manner of industry men were following on Horse Creek in those days, which was, indeed, a long time ago as time is measured by events in that quick-changing land. They grinned, some of them, but more of them followed the retreating stranger with dark and unfriendly eyes. Out of all this the sailor stood aside, an actor whose small part was played, an incidental factor in a momentary disturbance. Grimmitt turned again within his door; the customers who had put down their drinks hastily at his bar followed to repair their haste at leisure. Dan looked in quizzical comicality at the sailor, who seemed considerably embarrassed.

“What did you say about a uniform and Uncle Sam, kid?” Dan inquired. “I ain’t never seen no soldiers dressed like you over at the post.”

The sailor explained, his bright face lighting up with a smile. Again Dan must shake hands with him, making a regular ceremony of it this time.

“Will you come in and have a drink?” he whispered, delicately covering the invitation from the ears of others, in case regulations of which he never had heard might deny the sailor the freedom of other men, as Indians belonging to Uncle Sam were denied. Dan’s cautious reserve received a pleasant shock in the hearty and ready acceptance of his invitation. The sailor came up to the situation like a man of experience, Dan thought.

“You’re a man clear down to the heels!” said Dan, with ingenuous sincerity, as they started for the door.

Dan was so well pleased with his guest that his generosity, never difficult to move, was at once extended to include all at Grimmitt’s bar, in spite of the heavy drain his savings had suffered at the lawyer’s hands but a few minutes before. As they lounged at the bar waiting for the bottle to come down the class, the sailor flashed a sidelong glance now and then at his companion’s face, and smiled to himself in the way of a man who has heard tidings which bring cheer to his heart.

They put away a few charges of Grimmitt’s worst, the sailor getting it down as if he had been drinking that kind of pain-killer a long time. Dan, a little flushed around the gills, spoke across to Grimmitt.

"I come down here with a wagon to meet a feller that's goin' out to the ranch," he said, something like an apology in his manner of speaking. "Charley Thomson told me he was here."

"There's your man," said Grimmitt, tilting his head toward the sailor.

Dan gulped his amazement, thanking his lucky day that he hadn't made some kind of a crack. A broad feeling of satisfaction brought a sparkle into his eyes and a grin to his face. Once more he had to shake hands.

"I thought you'd met him," said Grimmitt, not intending the least humor.

"Gustin is the name I go by in this man's country. When they want me to come to dinner they call me Dan."

"Barrett's what they write on the tag when they ship me," said the sailor; "the handle's Ed."

They shook hands on it all once more, the sailor standing another dose of Grimmitt's great household remedy all around again.

Since there was nothing to be ashamed of in the company of such a man, even in a wagon, Dan's spirits rose with sudden rebound. He went to fetch the wagon around to get Barrett's trunk, which was still at the depot, making a display of his craft as teamster, for Dan had served his apprenticeship, as all good cowboys before him, as horse wrangler and driver of the chuck wagon in his boyhood days on the range.

It was about eighty miles to the ranch, Dan said. If it didn't rain before they struck the alkali flats they'd

make it in two days.

"If it rains before we git across there we may be hung up a day or two. A wagon'll sink to the hubs in them flats right after a rain."

Barrett was fervent in his hope that they would get across the flats before any water fell, although he had no more notion of what an alkali flat was like than he had of a Mussulman's paradise. He said he was eager to get to the ranch and take up the life of cowboy before the romance was gone out of it.

"I don't know much about any romance business, Ed," said Dan, "but I'm here to tell you it's a mighty good game for a man to git out of while he's young and limber. I can't see no deeper into the ground than the next man, but I can see fur enough to know changes are comin' on the range out here that'll push the cattle business off of the map."

"What changes, Dan?"

Barrett looked at his new friend curiously as he asked the question, with the faltering concern of one who begins to see a dream dissolve.

"Grangers," said Dan with gloomy finality.

"I've heard of them," Barrett nodded knowingly, his face clearing.

"Looks to me like a man could see more high life workin' for Uncle Sam on them navy ships," Dan ventured. "I think if I was startin' out to find romantical times and doin's I'd head for the nearest office and put my name down for a job."

"It isn't so bad, but a man wants a change sometimes," Barrett said.

“You want to be a cowpuncher and I’d like to be a sailor. That’s the way it goes, I guess, every man thinkin’ the other one’s got a better job than him. But I always did want to see the ocean, and waded out in her to my arm-pits and whoop.”

When they had Barrett’s trunk aboard, the sailor enlisted Dan’s help in buying a proper outfit for the range.

“When we get out in the country,” Barrett said, “I’d like for you to stop somewhere long enough for me to go back of a bush and change clothes. They’d kid the life out of me if I went to the ranch in this uniform, wouldn’t they?”

“You might have a purty lively time handin’ it out to all of ’em the way you did that feller down in front of Grimmitt’s,” Dan allowed. “It’s funny you’d come to this country wearin’ them clothes,” he speculated, in a way that was nothing less than a polite inquiry into the reason why.

“I had just thirteen minutes to make the jump from the ship to the train,” Barrett explained. “My trunk followed a day behind me, it didn’t get here till this afternoon.”

“You *must* ’a’ been in a hurry to git here!” Dan whistled, still bidding for more.

“I’ll tell you how it was one of these days,” Barrett laughed, as if pushing the scent too hotly embarrassed him, or as if there might be something to his discredit in making that swift passage from deck to train.

They let it rest at that, for Dan was a true-born gentleman who had secrets of his own. The town was

soon behind them, their way plunging into country at once so bleak, rugged and uninhabited that the wonder rose in the traveler whence Saunders drew the sustenance for its sickly life. Toward sunset Dan took an observation from the top of a hill where he drew up a little while to let the horses catch their wind, announcing thereafter that he didn't think it would rain.

"If it don't, we'll camp on the Diamond Tail tomorrow night," he said.

"I hope there'll be a little romance left lying around for me," Barrett laughed, for the matter of romance-hunting had grown to be a joke between them already.

"No man can tell what's waitin' by the trail," Dan returned, and seriously, much to the surprise of his companion, who began to have little glimpses such as this of more beneath the rind of this young man than his simple bearing might betray.

CHAPTER III

THE DIAMOND TAIL

THE Elk Mountain Cattle Company's brand was the diamond tail, a device like this:



By the name of its brand, rather than its legal title, according to the custom of the range everywhere, the ranch was known throughout the inter-mountain country of the west. The Diamond Tail, and the hard-riding men who made up its muster roll, are only a memory and a tradition now among the alfalfa fields and farms, for this tale is of a time that was, and is no more.

In those days there were many enterprises like the Elk Mountain Cattle Company scattered over the range country of the west and northwest, for cattle-raising was a business with its romantic phases and profitable lures which drew many people into it who had no reasonable foundation for having a hand in any such hazardous game. To make it worse, many of them played it from a distance, frequently with seas intervening. The Elk Mountain Company had its stockholders in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, London, and the farther away from the scene of activities they chanced to be, the higher they were valued by Hal Nearing, organizer and president of the concern.

For the Elk Mountain Cattle Company was not returning the promised dividends to those who had put their money into it. Hal Nearing, once lieutenant governor and United States senator from his state, was resourceful in promises, ready in explanations. Evil days had come upon the cattle business of the intermountain range, he said. Summer droughts for two years running, the encroachments of homesteaders, of sheepmen; the incursions of rustlers, the toll of wolves, bears and mountain lions—all these reasons Nearing advanced with good foundation of argument, to account for the lack of profits.

There was much to his explanation of conditions, so much, in fact, that a deputation of stockholders had returned from an investigation a year before the time you first heard of Hal Nearing and his enterprise through this tale, with a report bearing him out in every particular. While this investigation sufficed to stay the threatened receivership and ousting of President Nearing, it had not quieted doubts and suspicions in all quarters, nor revived the falling hopes of many who had their little fortunes bound up in the company's failure or success.

Among these latter was Edgar Barrett, late seaman in the United States navy, now on his way with Dan Gustin to the headquarters of the Diamond Tail ranch. Barrett's father had been an under secretary of the navy at the period of Nearing's senatorial splurge. In the belief that he was being peculiarly favored, Barrett had put his lifetime winnings into Nearing's cattle company, along with many other friends of the sena-

tor, each of whom was made feel himself to be the last one squeezed in through the narrow door of a rare opportunity by the senator's personal regard.

At that time, some five years before the opening of this story, young Edgar Barrett, glowing with the romance that this new venture seemed to bring to the family's door, was for quitting college, taking train for Wyoming, and setting up in the wildly adventurous life of cowboy, such as it was in those days, and generally is yet, from a distance believed to be.

No, said Barrett senior. Take four years in the navy to make a man of him, then go his way as he might choose. Into the navy the young man went, dutiful as always, cheerful according to his way. In the first year of his enlistment his father died, leaving shares in the Elk Mountain Cattle Company instead of insurance. Sixty shares of the company's stock he left his family, representing an investment of sixty thousand dollars. What percentage of the whole capitalization this was, young Barrett did not know. Whether a thousand or ten thousand shares had been sold, he never had been able to learn. Events of the past two or three years had confirmed him in his growing suspicion that the shares were not worth sixty cents.

Whether the stockholders in Nearing's company had been led deliberately into a shearing, or whether vindictive nature and outlawed man and beast had combined to work the failure of the enterprise, Barrett had journeyed into that land to learn. He was determined to get to the bottom of it, and find out whether there

was any use in looking to the business for future returns, or whether he must wipe the slate clean and set his face about other undertakings. For there were other Barretts besides his mother, young female Barretts numbering three.

Long before the days of his enlistment were done, Ed Barrett had figured out his programme. His mother had secured him the opening he desired, a favor which Nearing could not well refuse, considering the past social relations of the families, especially as the candidate for cowboy honors proposed to serve for the experience to be gained, without pay. His eagerness to take up the trail of the family's vanishing fortunes had been so great that Ed virtually had leaped from deck to train, as has been seen, not considering the sensation he might create by his unusual garb in that mountain-locked land.

To learn exactly how many head of cattle carried the Diamond Tail brand; how many men were employed in herding them, and the extent of the payroll; what the sales in numbers of hoofs and dollars had been during the past three years, where the sales had been made and where the money had gone; the present resources and liabilities, and future prospects—all this young Barrett had set himself the task of learning, expeditiously as might be. Job enough, he realized, to be accomplished under the guise of a greenhorn.

It was difficult to believe Nearing a dishonest man who had lured his friends intentionally into a game to shear them. Barrett's recollections of the senator rose up to refute what, in his heart and conscience, he had

felt growing upon him day by day. The senator, a placid, urbane gray gentleman, slender, quick, hearty; his face tinged by a brown tint of sun and wind from his early years in the saddle, the healthy rose of careful living and much open air glowing under it. A man of studied, deliberate speech, exact, mild, generous. Such Barrett remembered Senator Nearing. Incredible that he could turn out in the end to be a dishonest, a heartlessly dishonest, a ruinously dishonest man.

The nucleus of the great Diamond Tail ranch was the Nearing homestead on the shore of the river, where the commodious ranch-house with its village of out-buildings now stood. This original homestead was owned in fee simple by Nearing, as was the practice of all the cattle barons to own a bit of land in the midst of vast, usurped territory belonging to the public domain. Nearing had reserved this homestead out of the pool into which all the rest had been thrown when he organized the cattle company.

The method among the cattle barons of that time was to first locate on some attractive bit of land, such as this homestead by the river, take title to it, and spread from there over as many miles on every side as cupidity might direct or force could control. Boundaries were fixed by mutual agreement among themselves, by hills, mountains, rivers. As in the instance of the Diamond Tail, the southern boundary of which was the little river upon which the home place stood, the eastern a range of distant mountains, and other natural barriers and monuments serving in like capacity elsewhere.

This ranch contained millions of acres, hundreds of square miles; it was greater in extent than half some of the New England states. And every inch of it, save alone the homestead where the houses stood, belonged to the public domain. No rent was paid for it, no taxes were levied against it. Hal Nearing and his forces reigned over it like a tsar with Cossacks at his back.

It was a common saying among the cattle barons, great and small, that God made that country for cattle. No price was too great to pay, except in taxes after the manner of honest men, to hold it inviolate to their sacred purpose. Many a man paid with his blood for striking a furrow in its sward.

Time had not altered Hal Nearing's appearance greatly. He was sitting on the long porch, smoking his after-supper cigar, when Barrett and Dan drove up. Still slender and graceful, the only evidence left by the passing years against his youth was his blanched mustache and hair. These now were as white as the ashes of time could ever leach them, lending him a distinction which seemed singularly original and peculiar, taken with the healthy brown of his smooth skin, the friendly brightness of his strong eyes.

Time is partial in this manner with some men; it does not record upon their faces the secrets of their living.

The boss of the ranch came down the steps with a quizzical, good-humored smile of recognition for the young man who piled out of the wagon with all his sea nimbleness in his legs.

"In harness already!" Nearing laughed, when the first greetings were over, still holding his young guest warmly by the hand, clasped over in both of his in his fatherly way.

"I'm afraid I'll scare the cows all off the ranch if I look anything like I feel," Barrett said, quite serious in his self-criticism.

"I'll bet the old rig sits easier, but you'll fall into this—why," looking him over approvingly, admiration and approval in tone and expression, "you begin to look like a bronco-buster already."

"I'll be bronco-busted about the first shot out of the box. Ask Dan."

Dan grinned from his perch on the wagon, from which he had not moved to lay a hand to any of the supplies which he had freighted out along with Barrett's trunk. That labor was for wranglers and Mexicans, not a full-blooded cowboy of the aristocracy of his kind, like Dan.

"He'll take to it like a pig to swill, or I miss my guess," said Dan.

"And that's a compliment you may well cross the continent to win!" Nearing declared. "Why," still holding Barrett off at arm's length, shaking hands in his warmest political style, "it's been—how long has it been since I saw you, Ed?"

"I don't just recall the last time, sir, but it must have been shortly before I went to sea."

"No it wasn't—it was on the President's yacht, you were on some kind of special detail—don't you remember?"

“I served there during a cruise, by special favor of the President, but I didn’t know anybody saw me. I’m afraid I wasn’t as proud of that detail then as I am now.”

Dan, still lounging on the wagon, leaned over to hear this talk involving the President as incidentally as cowboys on the ranch would discuss the big boss. His eyes enlarged a little, his mouth fixed itself as if to whistle, and his thoughts were about as plainly expressed in his astonished visage as he could have put them into words.

“Back up to the kitchen porch, Dan, and tell Manuel to get that stuff out,” Nearing directed, speaking as kindly to his retainer as Barrett would have expected, still with his paternal air. “There’s no hurry about beginning your apprenticeship, Ed; I want you to be my guest a little while before you become my employe. Come in and get acquainted with such of the family as you don’t already know.”

Mrs. Nearing appeared on the porch that moment, and hailed Barrett. She was a small, vivacious lady, who had been a famous entertainer in her Washington days. Now she had laid down all contest and contention against time, resigning herself in her graceful way to the white hair that became her so well, and the pink of skin that needed no cosmetic to enliven nor pencil to improve.

Barrett leaped up the steps to grasp her hands, outstretched to him in a pretty entreaty, to be drawn close and kissed, and held off and admired, and exclaimed and wondered over softly as a son returned to

his place at home. Then she turned to the door and called:

“Alma! He’s come!”

She laughed when the one summoned appeared almost instantly in the door, and came forth with sprightly eagerness which she made no dishonest attempt to hide.

Barrett, puzzled to account for this unexpected member of the household—for he knew there never had been a daughter in that family—felt himself suddenly uncouth in his strange garb. He backed off a little on his high-heeled boots as awkwardly as the rawest cowpuncher from the back range.

“My niece, Miss Nearing,” Barrett heard Nearing say.

Barrett bowed, blushing to the ears in the foolish weakness he never could control, overlooking for a moment her frankly-offered hand.

“We’ve been talking about you for days and days,” Alma Nearing said.

“I never hoped to be half that important,” he told her, repairing at once the oversight of her friendly hand.

“I expected to see a sailor from the deep, not a cowboy,” she laughed.

Barrett was still a boy in his way with women, in spite of his five-and-twenty years. He regarded them with deferential awe; to him they still were the holiest handiwork of the Creator, however they might suffer abasement and become defiled. He looked at her now out of his hot confusion, the touch of her hand still

cool as a passing breath upon his own.

"I'm only a masquerader," he said, his courage increasing with his ease, bold enough now to look at her fully, and find her fair.

It seemed to Barrett, in the swift appraisal he made of Alma Nearing, that she was laughing at him with her eyes. Not in derision; more like in the friendly, patronizing, quizzical, knowing fashion of an older and wiser person laughing down at a boy. For laugh out of her eyes she unquestionably did, with a provoking, engaging little gathering of wrinkles about them, a light and brightness in their soft clearness as if her soul had come to the window with its candle to make merry over the mystification of men.

Her hair was dark red, as if touched with a deep oriental dye, the red of sumach berries after frost. Her forehead was low and calm, her features blending with that entrancing softness from girlhood to maturity which is a woman's greatest charm. Across her nose a little track of freckles ran, as if she had gazed up at a flight of wild geese and their shadow had fastened upon her milk-white skin.

Barrett was not a sentimental young man, rather practical and worldly-bent, in truth; but he knew that this girl must have touched depths of life strange to him, felt its poetry as he never had responded to it, gathered beauties out of it which had escaped him, except for a yearning touch here and there, in his cruise up to this point. To know her well would be to walk among the high places, familiar with the best. So he felt, rather than thought in the sequence of

ordered words, as one grasps the great essentials of life in its quick moments without illustration or printed page.

"She's the boss of the ranch, you'll have to take orders from her, all of us do," Nearing was saying.

"That doesn't discourage me a bit," Barrett replied, and sincerely, but afraid the moment the words were out of his mouth that he might appear flippant, or, more to be dreaded, ridiculous or contemptuous in her eyes.

Mrs. Nearing and Alma sat at table with Barrett when the soft-footed Mexican woman had spread his late supper, to bear him company in their hospitable way.

"It isn't good for youth to sit alone and commune with its own soul at meal-time," Mrs. Nearing said. "I've cured more than one case of incipient dyspepsia in diplomats and young secretaries of legation by sitting them down with young ladies and flowers."

And there were flowers here, also, a bowl of roses, for that place was fruitful of the comforts and beauties of life, although eighty miles from the nearest railroad. While Barrett restored himself they talked of many things—his adventures at sea, his unaccountable freak in coming there to rough it as a cowboy after the romance of that larger, happier life. That, at least, was Alma's view of it.

Barrett told her of his early longing to come to the range, an ambition deferred until, as she declared the case, the romance all had been lived and nothing was left to him but the hardships and rough work.

"There never was any romance in this life on the range—it's been highly misrepresented to you. Mr. Barrett," she said.

"What a sour old materialist!" Mrs. Nearing laughed.

"Aunt Hope, I was born here, I ought to know if anybody does. There isn't a bit of romance in cow-punching, Mr. Barrett. You'll find that out the first time it rains your boots full this fall."

"Oh, you weren't born so very long ago, Alma," Mrs. Nearing said, in gentle disputation; "maybe you chanced to arrive after the age of romance, granting there isn't any left for poor Edgar. You haven't seen it all, child, very little of it, in fact, since you were old enough to give romance a thought. She's been away at school the past six years, most of that time, anyway, Ed. Don't shatter his dream before he's had a chance to see for himself, prophet of sorrow."

"Not for half the world," Alma declared, laughing lightly, looking so charming in the soft lamplight that Barrett felt himself to be on the very borderland of romance that hour.

"If I could people the range with wild cowboys, shooting, rollicking; riding incredible distances on errands of gallantry and mercy, I'd put them there for him, every one that ever had 'loped through the pages of romance. But Mr. Barrett will find cowboys to be of quite a different stripe—you know it, Aunt Hope, as well as anybody."

"You've eaten rue out of my garden, young lady," Aunt Hope charged, lifting a solemn finger.

"And what sort are the cowboys?" Barrett inquired, curiously, glad that it wasn't romance, but something very substantial and prosaic, indeed, that had brought him to the range.

"Swearing, unwashed, wicked drunkards, taking them as they come," Alma replied, not halting for a word.

"There are chivalrous men, nature's gentlemen, among them, Alma," Mrs. Nearing corrected. "I've known them, you must have, too."

"I've never been under the necessity of proving their chivalry," Alma returned, without heat, deeply as Barrett could see she felt on the subject of the romance of the range. "I've known them to pick up my hat when it blew off—when I was a little girl riding straddle-legged out to camp to get flapjacks from the cook. I'll grant them a certain rough chivalry, under restraint. Let them go, and they're wolves, ignorant, blasphemous, foul of body and soul."

"I'm afraid I'm at least a generation too late," said Barrett, making out that he did not take her seriously. "Cowboys must have changed scandalously."

"They're all alike," said Alma, "yesterday and today the same. Cowboys live by tradition, their tricks are all handed down, their cuss words, their stories and songs. They all come from Texas and Montana, the real ones. I can tell one of them a mile off. They came up here from Texas with the old drives and established the breed in Montana. No genuine ones are natives of this part of the country at all."

"I wonder if the boy that brought me out is from

Texas?" Barrett speculated.

"Dan Gustin?" said Mrs. Nearing. "Yes, Dan's from San Antone. You'll have to except Dan in your general arraignment, Alma."

"He might rise on occasion," Alma granted, but with no great warmth of faith.

"He struck me as a pretty fair-minded and honest boy," Barrett said, thinking of the way Dan had drawn his iron in that little controversy over the blue-eyed wolf.

"Well, I will except Dan," Alma granted, her native generosity coming to his aid.

"And many another one when you come to think," Aunt Hope added. "Some of them are bad characters, all of them are rough, but there's a lot of good in them when friends are needed."

"I've seen them roll in the dirt like dogs and bite each other's noses off!" said Alma, not greatly horrified in the recounting of it.

"Good-bye, romance!" said Barrett, waving his hand as to an evanishing dream.

They had their laugh at that, and felt better acquainted, at least the two young ones. Mrs. Nearing only smiled, her eyes on the bowl of roses, as if she knew deep in her heart that romance was indeed gone out of the world, but it was better for men to practice on them the deceit that they might live it yet.

"The leading ambition of every cowboy's life is to kill a man, or several men," said Alma, returning to her indictment of the craft. "Every one of them is a potential Billy The Kid. I hope you haven't come

here with any such sanguinary designs, Mr. Barrett?"

"Alma!" Aunt Hope chided, in shocked protest.

"No," said Barrett, "my present intentions are pastoral and peaceful."

He looked at her with puzzled eyes, unable to determine whether her drawing of the cowboy character was founded on her long experience, or grew out of revulsion with certain exceptional cases.

"It will come on you if you stick to the range long enough," Alma predicted. "It seems to be in the breed of men to want to kill."

She did not say this lightly, nor with derision or accusation for the inherited curse of mankind; rather, with a sadness that gloomed over her fair face as a cloud.

"Your Uncle Hal never killed a man, and he's been on the range more than thirty years," Aunt Hope said, in prideful refutation of this all-including charge.

"He hasn't been a cowboy since I've known him, either," the girl whimsically returned.

"He was in his young days, he rode on the long drive from Texas to Montana more than once, and made his start right here on this range in the saddle at forty dollars a month."

"I know, Aunt Hope; I've heard about it. I'll let Uncle Hal out of my generalization, I'll give him a clean bill. But he's a man with a different vision, not just a common cowboy's little squint."

"You're not very complimentary to Mr. Barrett, intimating that he'll turn out a short-sighted cowboy with a passion for killing off his kind!"

“I didn’t mean to be complimentary. What six-foot man with the world before him wants or needs the unction of compliments, Aunt Hope, Mr. Barrett?”

“Not this pilgrim,” said Barrett, trying to be at ease, but feeling a strange smallness and inadequacy, for all his six feet, in this strange, out-spoken girl’s eyes.

“And there’s Uncle Hal, striding up and down the porch like a tiger in a cage,” said Alma, nodding toward the door through which the sound of footfalls came as Nearing walked back and forth. “He’s waiting to have a talk with you; I know the symptoms.”

CHAPTER IV

DISARMED

"I'S entirely natural that you should come out here to investigate things for yourself, Edgar; it's a sensible business move. You're not the only one that's uneasy over the failure of this company to live up to expectations, and mine is the most uneasy head of all."

Nearing spared all fencing, feeling about and circuitous approach. He drove straight into the matter with those words inside of five minutes after Edgar Barrett joined him on the porch. Barrett, winded for a moment by this straight-out reading of his purpose, which he foolishly believed had been sufficiently masked under his pretense, could not make any immediate reply. He felt a certain smallness in being thus suddenly uncovered, a guilt as if he had been faced with proof of a meanness beneath the consideration of an honest man.

"That was only incidental," he said at last, speaking slowly, thoughtfully, as if he had no desire to evade or conceal, which was in fact the truth, now that his intentions had been guessed. "As you say, I thought it was prudent to investigate for myself. You must know that about all the family has is tied up in the Elk Mountain Cattle Company."

"I didn't know just what resources there were in the family, Edgar."

"A few thousand and the house, enough that mother could live with what I could send her out of my pay."

"You can't afford to work without wages here, then," rather gruffly, as if the discovery carried offense.

Barrett was disturbed by Nearing's tone. He felt that this puerile attempt at investigating the secret affairs of the company had put him in such disfavor that nothing would come of his long planning and ardent hopes. Nearing had seen through him so easily as to make his scheme appear foolish. He found himself wondering how he ever could have taken hold of it with such sincerity.

"I'll put you on the payroll at sixty dollars a month, but keep it under your hat," Nearing said. "That's a little above the wages of a beginner."

"I wouldn't want to do anything to get me in bad with the boys," Barrett protested, glad for the darkness which covered his outer confusion.

"That will rest with you, Ed," Nearing reminded him, back in a word to his paternal form.

"It's mighty fine and generous of you, Senator Nearing, but I'd rather you'd make it about forty, or whatever it is that greenhorns pull down. I don't want to be a load on the company just because my family owns stock in it."

"All right, Ed, we'll say forty-five and found, all except clothes, of course. And in the morning I want you to go through the books and satisfy yourself that everything is being done, and always has been done, open and above board."

"Thank you for the offer, Senator Nearing." Bar-

rett felt the wind dying out of his sails with every word, leaving the craft of his brave intentions, which had begun to sail with graceful headway, as he believed, entirely becalmed. "I'm certain you could tell me more in ten minutes than I could grub out of the books in ten hours. I'm not much of a hand at accounts."

"It's possible that I could, but I want my word verified. You'd be helping yourself and me at the one operation. But we'll come to that later. What you're anxious to have explained to you is the failure of the company, and its organizer and president, to live up to their obligations to the stockholders."

Nearing was not humble, in the manner of a man who had failed through a weakness of his own, nor whining, as one defeated who seeks to mitigate his downfall. He had made mistakes, he had erred in judgment; this he frankly admitted. Circumstances which he should have taken into account for more than the threat of their development years ago seemed to warrant, had combined against the enterprise and held it back, he said. But he said it like a man who had nothing to cover up or fear, stripping Barrett of his offensive armament before he had more than opened the door.

"You understand, Ed, that profits in the cattle business are slow in coming, for one thing. Take a herd of twenty-seven thousand head, such as we started with, and it'll not pay interest on the investment, except in a cumulative way, for nearly three years. The increase of the first year isn't ready for market before then. We started out with a hard winter that took a heavy toll of calves and weaklings, only to run into

a drouth next summer that parched up the range and dried up the water holes. Why, the river along here was nothing but a trickle for miles.

“Our loss was woeful that summer, the bones of nine thousand cattle are spread around this range right now from that visitation—you’ll see them when you get to riding around. That was a discouraging beginning, but a thing to be expected, although not foreseen in the order of its coming.”

“That would be too much to expect of anybody but a prophet,” said Barrett, beginning to see hazards in this mighty game that he never had dreamed of being so great.

“A cattleman on the range must gamble against the universe,” said Nearing.

“It takes a prince, instead of a baron, to play the game, I think,” Barrett said, speaking more to himself than to his host.

Nearing smoked on a little while, saying nothing to this. He sat with his feet on the low railing of the porch, his strong face lifted to the stars, strewn thicker than his cattle ever stood upon his grassy hills.

Presently Nearing went on to tell of minor troubles with sheepmen and homesteaders, or nesters, as they were called in the cattle country, treating these as small pests, more annoying than menacing.

“The boys have kept the sheepmen pretty well on the jump, and we’ve smoked the nesters out along the river on the Diamond Tail, although others have allowed them to lodge above and below us.”

“Smoked them out?” said Barrett.

“Burned their damned shacks over their heads!” said Nearing, dispassionately, nodding in confirmation.

To him the destruction and terror carried by his men to these humble lodgments of the poor involved no deeper question of right and justice than smoking wolves from their dens among the rocks.

“Wasn’t it a little rough on the poor devils?” Barrett ventured.

“They can hitch up and go on,” Nearing explained. “We always leave them their teams. They’re a bad outfit; most of them ought to be shot.”

“Where do they go?” Barrett inquired, unable to put aside out of his mind the picture of poignant desolation which the cattleman’s few unfeeling words had conjured up.

“We don’t bother with them as long as they don’t light again on the Diamond Tail.”

Nearing took his feet from the railing, turned to face his young guest with slow, impressive movement, portentous of some important disclosure.

“We’d have been on our feet, paying dividends as expected, and rightly expected of us, Ed, in spite of the calamity of drouth and hard winters, if it hadn’t been for the infernal damned thieves — rustlers, we call them out here.”

“I’ve heard of them,” Barrett said.

“It’s become a business up here in the Northwest, as systematically organized, I tell you, Barrett, as any business in the country. The increase of our herd, that ought to go to pay dividends, melts away like snow on the mountains. We couldn’t pay more than sixty cents

on the dollar if every beef on the ranch was sold today. That infernal damned gang of rustlers keeps us robbed to the bone!"

"That is one phase of it that I can't understand," Barrett frankly admitted.

"Understand!" bitterly. "I tell you it's an organized industry, with ramifications in every big market in the middle-west."

"How they can keep it up, in such volume as to cut the revenues of a big enterprise like this, I mean. I can see well enough how they might pick up a few dozen head a year, even a hundred or two, but——"

Nearing laid his hand on the young man's knee, leaned forward a little to impress his words.

"Take one little sheriff, and him not an overly honest one, always, to a county that's as big as New Hampshire, with thousands of cattle spread on its plains and mountains, and figure to yourself where he's going to begin to patrol it."

"Yes, and at the same time take the hundreds of cowboys and ranchers—what are they doing to let this thing grow and sap their herds?"

"No man knows who's a thief in this country," said Nearing, with the desperation of a man honestly and entirely baffled. "I've got as trustworthy a bunch on the Diamond Tail as ever rode leather, I think, but the leak goes on in spite of our vigilance."

"The loss must run into hundreds in the course of a year, to cut——"

"Between three and four thousand head the last two years!"

“What?” said Barrett, springing to his feet in the shock of this revelation. “And you cattlemen let it go on! What kind of stuff——”

“Better reserve your judgment till you understand conditions, boy,” Nearing interrupted, frigidly censorious.

“I beg your pardon, Senator Nearing,” Barrett said, contritely, his flash of angry indignation gone as quickly as it had gleamed. “You are right; I’m not the one to come here and judge hot-foot. Only I’m mystified; the figures stagger me.”

“If any man had told me five years ago that such wholesale thievery and safe, undetected marketing of the stolen product could ever be done, I’d have called him a fool,” Nearing said. “The only way I can account for it is by inside leaks, thieves among the cattlemen themselves, I mean.”

“But the brand—how do they manage——”

“There’s nothing easier changed than a brand. There’s a Diamond Tail Cross north of us, a Diamond T in Texas, and various diamond devices all over the western and southwestern range. A bar here, a burn there, and three months for the scar to heal and look old, and the animal’s ready for market. A seller doesn’t have to show a bill of sale for every head of cattle carrying a different brand from his own in any of the markets, Kansas City, Omaha, Chicago. It’ll be different one of these days, but right now the cattle a man offers on the market are supposed to be his own.”

“I see,” said Barrett, thoughtfully.

“It’s hell!” said Nearing. “If I could stop this

infernal drain on my herd for three years I could clean up and pay off every stockholder dollar for dollar—I never hope to be able to do anything more now. Yes, I'll do damned well if I come out with clean hands!"

"And the sheriffs are not always straight? That makes it harder."

"Oh, they round a few of them up sometimes, and once in a while we do get a fairly honest man in office in some of the counties around here. But even at that, the combination they have to fight is too big. It's international, it laps over the Canadian line north, and Mexico on the south. A sheriff is a mighty little man to buck a thing like that."

"Are your neighbors standing losses in proportion to yours?" Barrett inquired, hardly willing yet to credit his ears in the report of this amazing robbery.

"No, I've suffered heavier than any of them, five or ten to one. That's due to the peculiar isolation of this range, cut off on two sides by hills, peculiarly favorable to rustlers. There's another trap up the river a few miles below the military post, a settlement of those outcast parasites that always hang on the flanks of military reservations. My men fall into the lure of those joints too often, led away by the decoys that are a part of the system. A gang of them will stay away on a bender up there for days at a time, frequently before we know their cattle are roaming unprotected. I've fired them so often I've had a procession of cow-punchers trailin' across this ranch like a Frontier Day parade, but it don't do any good. There's a lot to contend with here that an outsider never would dream of,

Barrett."

"I see there is," Barrett agreed, fully convinced that it was true. "It looks to me that the wise thing to do would be to close out the property and quit before they ruin you."

"I'm not ready to quit," Nearing returned grimly; "I never quit yet in my life."

They were silent while a man could have ridden a mile, Nearing looking at the stars again in that way of his that seemed to tell of far-ranging thoughts, projected over mighty spaces to bright-glittering promises which drew on at his approach.

"It's hell!" said he.

"I was wondering," Barrett began, tentatively, as one tries doubtful ice with cautious foot.

"Yes?"

"Whether I couldn't be of more service to the company and myself, coming in here a stranger——"

"A stranger?"

"By turning detective, I mean, trying to get a lead on this big thieving gang."

Nearing jumped to his feet as if springing to answer a shout for help. He stood half leaning over Barrett, hand on his shoulder, fingers so tense they pressed into the flesh.

"Keep out of it! Keep out of it!" he said, his utterance thick, his whole manner that of a man suddenly and completely out of self-control.

"Why, Senator Nearing!"

Barrett stood facing him, cold in the surprise of such unaccountable excitement.

"I owe your mother too much already to permit you to run your head into a danger like that," Nearing said, regaining hold of himself by a great effort, his voice shaken, the sound of it unnatural and dry.

"It just occurred to me to make the suggestion, I wouldn't want to put my foot into something I might make worse," Barrett said, his thoughts leaping and scurrying like a dog that has dropped the scent.

"That's it, that's the very point," Nearing was regaining his poise with every word, "it's strangers they suspect. I can do more, I am doing more. I'm on track of something right now, big developments are due to break any hour. A slip, a new suspicion—don't you see how it would be?"

"Naturally, being on the ground, you——"

"Certainly. Then I owe it to your mother to keep you out of a thing that could have only one ending for you. Sit down; don't let this detective folly run away with you. You don't know these wolves of the range, Ed. You could no more track down evidence that would nail one of them than you could scale the heavens!"

"I don't suppose I could," said Barrett, resuming his chair.

He was disturbed by a strange, shaken feeling, as if he had escaped some great peril which had developed in a moment where no danger was dreamed to lurk. It was as if a gun had burst on the deck of his ship, scattering woe and desolation.

"No, it would be like settin' a puppy dog to run down a mountain lion," Nearing said, but with such seriousness that the comparison carried no offense.

Contrarily, it only emphasized the feeling of foolish rashness and inadequacy that oppressed Barrett in hot, overwhelming conviction.

"A man must know the range like a book," said Nearing, "not for a matter of a few square miles, but hundreds of square miles; every arroyo, every wooded canyon, every cave in the hills. It would take a hundred sheriffs, every one of them up on the country like a range man, to cover this county alone. You can begin to guess, then, what kind of a job is cut out for me with forty-five cowboys that have to divide their attention between cattle and rustlers."

"I'm beginning to see," Barrett humbly confessed.

"You'd have to ride the range a year, maybe two years, all depending on how you took to it, before you'd be safe alone five miles away from camp. You'd think it an easy matter to track a bunch of cattle run off by rustlers, I expect that's running through your head right now. But they don't drive them off in bunches, they split them up in threes, fives, seldom more than tens, assemble them miles away in the mountains where a coyote couldn't pick up a week-old trail. They drive them over to the Black Hills and split 'em up again. The ingenuity of the devil's in them! If they applied as much thought and craft to business out in the open, they'd skin the world."

Nearing had regained his usual calm, the whirlwind of his perturbation seemed stilled, outwardly at least. What turmoil surged within his breast no man might read in the steady, low-modulated voice, the easy bearing, the carefree laugh with which he now and then

illuminated his conversation, even though his theme still was that of thievery and loss.

Barrett had no such outward calm, for inwardly he was boiling with resentment of the heavy toll such uncurbed outlawry drew from him and his. Nearing might be able to hold his feeling under the lid; Barrett, young and impetuous, resentful of oppression, burned to say what was on his tongue to speak.

And that would have been nothing reassuring or sedative to the senator's jangled nerves. Barrett held himself in, answering disjointedly, speaking fragmentarily, a poor listener now and a poor talk-maker. His thoughts were sweeping the range like a free wind, searching for a lead on many perplexing things, and first and greatest among them, this: Why was the Diamond Tail ranch, its disadvantages of location and all considered, the peculiar prey of this outlawed gentry? Why should the losses of that company run so much heavier than the losses of neighboring cattlemen?

There seemed to be a seacock open somewhere in the craft; a careless hand must be remiss in some vital duty. Could a greenhorn do anything to shut off this perilous opening? In his heart Barrett was convinced that a greenhorn could do it, and do it better than an old hand. But he would have to begin by tracking back, back to the heart of things on that ranch itself, and not go roaming strange wilds after elusive men who skulked like gaunt gray wolves among the solemn sage.

There sounded the tinkle of a harp in the dark house, its trilling notes had swelled and fallen away from time

to time during the hour or more he had been talking with Nearing on the porch. A fitting instrument, Barrett thought, for expressing the capricious wilfulness which must lie in that young lady's heart. Something wild there was in it, such as this barbarian instrument might relieve, and comfort with its mellow cadence, its treasured secrets and heroic memories of its thousand years.

His thought trailed off on this new and more pleasant speculation. There was one, with her Grecian hair, who would rise to heroic heights if there was any more romance in this dun world to live, indeed. It might never come to her to sacrifice for love and honor and the dear and precious things such as the women of old days gave their all for before their gods. Should romance ever dawn again, and involve her in its tragedies and loves and recompenses, there was one to rise to its heights like a young eagle in the glad morning sun.

"So, a few days around the ranch," said Nearing—Barrett noted that all of them spoke of the home place invariably as the ranch, the rest of it usually as the Diamond Tail—"to get your bearings and harden a little to the saddle, then you can go out and take up your duties at Eagle Rock camp."

"There is so much to learn," said Barrett, "that I'd like to begin as soon as I can. Don't think I'm ungrateful for the hospitality of this house, sir, when I say I'd like to go on the job tomorrow."

"I suppose it's just as well, Ed. The quicker you begin the sooner you'll get enough of it," Nearing laughed.

“You think I’ll not be able to stick, senator?”

“You can, you can, but—will you? There aren’t many compensations, and darn little poetry, in the rough life of a cow camp.”

Mrs. Nearing came to the porch, cutting off by her appearance whatever protest or declaration of intentions Barrett might have made. Alma came after her shortly, to say good night. Senator Nearing told them of their guest’s desire to take up life in the sadde next day, at which both ladies protested, and argued volubly against it. Barrett remained firm, in spite of the comically dismal picture Alma drew of such adventuring.

“Well, sleep late in the morning, then,” she advised, as she gave him her hand in good night. “It will be a blanket among the ants for you after this, and up at the streak o’ day.”

“Raven!” laughed Nearing, waving her away. “Off to roost with you!”

*Up in the morning’s no for me,
Up in the morning early,*

quoted Alma from the door.

Barrett, in his room a good while later, sat by the window watching the moonlight whiten in the patio where the roses bloomed, and aspen trees whispered like prophets of things that have been and are to be again. Disarmed by Nearing’s frank statement of conditions, his offer to throw the books open and uncover all transactions to the root, Barrett was doubtful, nevertheless.

There was something that books would not show nor receipts account for, in the very heart and secret core

of this enterprise. That Nearing's alarm over his suggestion that he attempt to uncover the working of the rustlers' organization was founded solely on a consideration of his guest's safety, Barrett was not at all convinced. Was Nearing afraid that investigation might reveal something to his own incrimination and disgrace?

Nearing did not seem sincere. There was a superficiality, a certain straining to make a case, that was not convincing to Barrett. What secrets did this suave man carry in his heart, what fear under his bravely assuring exterior?

Guilty or not guilty must be determined in the course of the adventure that was to begin tomorrow, Barrett resolved. But, fortified as Nearing was, it was going to be a difficult task to undermine the man; a hard task, and distasteful in some ways, especially one. There seemed to be an echo of the harp in the tinkle of the little fountain in the patio, with roses growing close to its rim.

CHAPTER V

A WORD AT PARTING

THERE chanced to be nobody working out of headquarters at the time of Barrett's arrival on the range. The long, shed-like bunkhouse stood untenanted, the big corrals were empty of horses. Only old Manuel, the Mexican man of all work, and his fat wife Teresa, were to be seen of all the retainers of that great enterprise when Barrett walked abroad before sunrise that morning. Even Dan Gustin had disappeared. The dusty wagon that had carried them from Saunders to the ranch Barrett saw standing lonely and deserted before the barn. Dan had taken horse and gone off silently the night before to join his detail.

Barrett grinned as he thought he saw a reason behind this silent departure. Dan did not want to be nurse to this beginner. Let somebody else take the greenhorn by the hand and lead him into the rough and rugged trails of adventure which he sought.

The greenhorn did not blame Dan for this. He knew very well what a task it was to break another into the routine that has become second nature to one's self. He was rather relieved than disappointed over Dan's going, knowing that a certain humiliation attaches to the one encumbered by a rookie in any of these hard-handling jobs, such as soldiering and sailing the seas, and riding the range in a Mexican saddle.

Viewed by the light of a new day, and from another

angle than his first sight of it, this oasis in the gray plain beside the narrow river revealed wonders and surprises. The ranch-house itself was a commodious, long, low building of pine logs artfully joined at corners, a very buttress against the storms of that unsheltered land. It was built in the Spanish fashion, such as spread eastward from the old civilization of Santa Fe over the range country in those days, two wings running out from the main structure.

In this middle space between the wings of the building was the patio, or court, where the fountain played among the flowers, and trees brought from the distant mountains grew in grateful security. Water was supplied from a huge tank in the barnyard, where a battery of three windmills was already astir in the waking breeze, which blew as unfailingly as the northwest trades.

A row of tall, thick-boughed cedars stood just outside the wire fence in front of the house, a screen against the summer glare of the plain, a barrier between the dwelling and the northern blasts of winter. Within this line of protecting cedars a long, deep lawn spread bedewed and cool. The great veranda, with broad, white-painted steps, was embowered in honeysuckle and wistaria. The wonder that this place could hold youth against the lure of the world dissolved out of Barrett's mind. It was a place to call one back from wandering, weary seeking, far following after futile dreams. It was home.

Probably not so isolated as it might appear when one looked from the porch into the limitless gray-green

world that swept in gentle undulations northward, rising horizonward as the sea seems to lift, denying at last by a sharp-drawn line the further projection of human vision. Dan had spoken of a military post not far away, probably twenty or thirty miles. No doubt the broad hall, with its great fireplace at the end, had heard the jingle of military spurs many a time; had echoed laughter and the swing of dancing feet.

Barrett could picture slim-waisted, brown-skinned cavalry officers dismounting at the gate. He knew the type, eager for life's next moment, let it bring dance or death. He sighed. Even the interest on sixty thousand dollars —.

"I told you to sleep late," said Alma, appearing in the door, fresh-washed by the morning, serene in her youthful comeliness as the placid repose of her natal plain.

"I'm used to getting up early," Barrett returned.

"I don't see why you didn't stay in the navy," she said, a bit fretfully he thought, as if she had considered his foolish adventure into that country all night and had risen confirmed in her opinion that it was no place for him. Barrett did not attempt an immediate reply. He watched her as she fastened a white rosebud in her hair just over her ear.

"Maybe," said he at last, detached, his mind a long distance from the navy.

"Just think of the disadvantage a red-head's under!" she laughed. "No flower that grows but a white one will do for such hair, while a blonde or a brunette has the whole garden to choose from."

"What a calamity! But I wouldn't call it red."

"You're the one exception in a long experience, and I doubt if you're sincere. What, then?"

"Come out in the light," he invited, beckoning her away from the door.

She stood turning, arms outstretched as if she balanced on a pivot, in model-like pose of mock seriousness, for him to judge her hair.

"Red," she nodded, with unshaken conviction.

"Not just red," he protested, baffled for another description.

"Not the red that's in the flag, of course, nor the red of a cow," she said; "but the red of a wicked, sullen, revengeful soul. Was that what you wanted to say?"

"You must have been eating some more of your aunt's what-do-you-call-it? bittersweet, or wild parsnip, or something."

"Wait till you know me better," she challenged, a little too serious, he thought, for a matter so banteringly light.

"Why do you dislike cowboys so much, and you born on the range?" he asked her, as if he, too, had been turning something in his mind overnight.

They went down the steps as by common consent, although no such thing had been proposed, and walked toward the wide, double front gate which swung on two immense tree trunks set deeply in the earth.

"I thought I made it plain last night," she replied after a little seeming deliberation, lifting surprised brows as she turned to meet his inquisitorial eyes.

"Not here in this house—you weren't born here?"

“Right here. Why? doesn't it look old enough for that?”

“You'll not joke about your age when it's great enough to concern you, my lady,” he corrected her, with a grave way he had over trifles at times.

“Well, it was longer ago than yesterday,” said she.

They stood at the gate, as children of the dawn who had reached the barrier of their fair land and must not venture beyond it. The top bar was shoulder-high to her; she crossed her arms, bare to the elbows in her loose-fitting blouse, and looked away over the range. The blue of its distances was dissolving into gray before the sun, like a veil in a flame. Soon it would lie harsh and unbeautified under the blaze of day.

“I don't suppose you ever want to leave it,” he said, in a conviction founded on his reflections of a little while before.

“Leave it!” she echoed, her chin on her folded arms, her eyes fixed on the treeless sweep of sparse grass and low, melancholy, sapless gray sage. “There are times when I could run in my bare feet over rocks and thorns for a thousand miles, and put it behind me forever!”

“I was wrong,” said he, confessing to himself, his voice soft, low; “I missed my guess.”

“We used to go away, we were more away than here, but we're too poor now to take a trip, the post is the boundary of my world. My father used to be superintendent of this ranch,” she explained, lifting her head, arms dropped to her sides. “The rustlers killed him five years ago, out there on that—that—damned, *dammed* range!”

"You've got reason enough for hating it," he said, startled not so much by her revelation as her dramatic way of making it. "I never heard of that tragedy."

"No, it was only an everyday incident, a pebble dropped into this big bowl where we're immersed. A little news like that doesn't make noise enough to sound out of this country."

"I didn't suppose the immensity of it, the vast emptiness like the sea, would be felt by a person born to it," he speculated, a mental picture forming of the dead man lying face to the sky, dust of retreating horsemen on the horizon.

"It's echoless," said she, her searching eyes set on its distances; "there's nothing to hurl back remorse for a cruel deed upon the guilty one. It goes out from a man like the passing wind, and troubles him no more. It's a land without an echo to strike back on the conscience and the heart."

"That makes sinning easy," he said, understanding her. "But why shouldn't it make a good man better, hold him up to himself, I mean, and steady him with a new nobility?"

"It does seem to work out that way now and then, but not often. Mainly its—its—mere boundlessness"—lifting her hands to support the impotency of her words—"enlarges the passions of men. Their appetites become grosser, their hates, their lusts, their wild, mad loves. All is intensified in them here out of proportion with the rest of the world. Passions seem to enlarge in men to fill the immensity of this thing without conscious boundary, this cruel thing that makes

them a part of itself."

It seemed to Barrett that this bitter indictment from the lips of youth and beauty who had suffered the cruelties of that land, cast a gloom over the morning. It was as if he had turned from the contemplation of a fair garden to see a black storm-cloud rising in silent portent of destruction, of lashing fury of wind, fierce shrapnel of driven hail. Yet he felt as if he should speak, to persuade her away from that brooding bitterness, so destructive to the soul of youth.

"Maybe all things grow big in men here," he said, "and out of bounds as we set them in our more conventional lives, because their tasks are bigger, their daily contact with immensity——"

"You could have killed a man anywhere, you didn't need to come here to do it!"

The words burst from her as a charge laid at his door of a thing already done, bitterly reproving, dramatically severe.

"I didn't come here to kill anybody," Barrett returned, not even indignant over her implication of his intentions, his frank face lighting with his ready smile. "A man isn't under any obligation, it isn't a part of the cowboy curricula, is it?"

"As much a part of it as Latin to your alma mater," she insisted, still too grave even to reflect his smile. "If you ever expect to amount to anything in the judgment of men out here, you'll have to kill a man."

"Then I'll never be a master cowboy," he declared.

He felt that her judgment was prejudiced, due to what she had suffered in the tragedy that had clouded

her life. He did not believe that she meant to have him accept her reading of range life and range men literally. But it was strange that revulsion against that life had struck with roots so tenacious and deep into her young heart. The shadow of its somber days had clouded out all memory of its delights. He could not believe, even so, that she was quite sincere.

"But you like it here, you'd be lonesome for it and wish you were back if you went away," he said.

"Yes," she owned, with unexpected frankness, "I'd grieve my heart out for it if I had to go away and never come back."

So she was only another woman after the original, the universal pattern, he thought, not smiling now as he looked with feeling sympathy into her quickly averted eyes. Not only a woman after the universal pattern, but a human being after the mold of the best and the worst, in all of whom there is the flaw of impatience and unrest with the best that today can give, and grief and heartbreak when they have thrown it away to speed to world's end after the fatuous promises which rise green and beckoning out of the desert places of despair.

"How far is it to the post?" he asked her, seeing again with his quick imagery, perhaps with a tinge of jealous envy—considering what lay before him of rough life in a blanket among the ants— young cavalry officers dismounting at the gate.

"Eighteen miles, due north over the military road. That's it," indicating the trail that passed the gate; "you came over it from Saunders."

“You have dances here sometimes, the folks coming over from the post?”

“Oh, plenty of them. I wish I could have delayed your eager plunge into the romance of the range—I intended to have them over. After you go, you know——”

“After I go?”

“The officers and cowboys don’t mix socially,” she said, with some reluctance, expressing a great deal more in her repression than her words.

“Oh, I see.”

More mental pictures of officers, waltzing officers, a succession of waltzing officers, but only one lady, as if the world contained but one. Cowboy life had its disadvantages, not hithertofore seen.

“There’s Uncle Hal in the door looking for you. I think he’s going to introduce you to romance after breakfast—he’s got on his fighting clothes.”

CHAPTER VI

BROTHER OF THE WOLF

ROMANCE was to be encountered at Eagle Rock camp; that was the very nearest point to the ranch-house which the elusive fay would approach for several weeks. So Hal Nearing declared at breakfast, which he presided over like a campaigner in the field, booted and belted, his pistols hanging on the back of his chair.

Barrett protested that he could find the camp, in spite of its forty-odd miles distance, if given directions; that it was unnecessary for his employer to go to the length of riding there with him. Nearing replied that he had no doubt that a sailor of the main would be able to keep his course over that unmarked expanse of land, but the superintendent of the working forces must be approached and handled.

“He’s a little bit shy of green men,” Nearing explained.

That revealed why he had not been turned over to Dan Gustin, Barrett understood. No less hand than the big boss’ own could place a greenhorn in the acceptance of that mighty man, mightier than Barrett, in the speculations of that light moment, ever dreamed.

Barrett expected Alma to say something more in disparagement of range life and the men who followed it. Whether out of deference to her uncle, or due to a change in her mood, she did not attempt further dis-

couragement of the novice. Her gloomy spell of dissatisfaction appeared to have passed quite away; she chatted lightly through the meal, her clouded spirits seeming to have been transferred, like a Brahman's sickness, to her aunt.

The elder woman was downcast, nervous, distrait. Barrett saw that she looked often across at her husband with what he read as an unspoken appeal in her face, a fear in her eyes. That he had read her uneasiness perfectly was disclosed when it came to mounting and riding away. She came then to the porch and clung to her husband, a pain of great anxiety and distress evident in her bearing, as if he rode on a mission ambuscaded by perils, and not a simple journey across some forty miles of prairie and foothill plains.

What Nearing said to her, Barrett did not hear, for he withdrew apart out of delicacy. But he saw the rancher stroke her hair and caress her hand assuringly as he held it with a cavalier's gallant tenderness a moment before he kissed her and came down the steps to mount.

Alma went with Barrett to where the horses stood, to wish him well of his venture. But neither she nor Mrs. Nearing invited him to return to the house. He felt, as he swung into the saddle, that their silence told him he was riding out from his state of equality with them into a lower plane, from which he must come purged by advancements and success before he might stand in their presence again.

Out of regard for his strangeness to the saddle, the rancher set Barrett an easy pace, for which the sailor

was duly appreciative. He had not mounted a horse in years before that morning, not since his early college days, in fact, when he had been considered a daring horseman among his polo-playing kind.

This was going to be different from playing polo on a level field, an hour or so at a stretch. The truth of this was shot through him from every aching joint, every saddle gall, as that forty-mile ride stretched out to seemingly endless distance. But he would take it as it came; his training through the past four years had built him up to that, let them pile it on as heavy as they might.

More than once that day he noted Nearing sizing him up to see how he was taking it, turning eyes which had more of contempt, he was certain, than faith in them, eyes that sneered for the figure the sailor cut, with his lifting in the saddle with the horse's stride.

Nearing advised him, kindly enough, that it would be well to sit down in the saddle, even going to some length to explain and illustrate how it was to be accomplished. Barrett did the best he could to catch the theory, if nothing more, and theory was about all he managed to get out of it. It was something like learning to write with simplified spelling when a man has been schooled in the accepted way. Many costly lessons under a fashionable riding-master had fastened the lifting habit upon this candidate for range proficiency. It was going to be equal to pulling teeth to get over it and learn a strange, new style.

The rifle slung in saddle holster, the barrel of it coming under the hollow of the rider's knee, did not

add anything to Barrett's comfort. He had found the rifle there when he mounted, accepting it without question or comment as part of his equipment.

Nearing had said nothing about side arms, neither had Barrett ventured to reveal the entirely dependable, many-times proved pistol of man-size caliber concealed in his blanket roll. Perhaps pistols were not permitted recruits; maybe a man must progress to them, as to the tools belonging to advanced knowledge of the craft.

Nearing's easy-going pace held the travelers long on their way. While they were still several miles from Eagle Rock camp the sun dipped behind the near-by hills, purple shadows came reaching across the plain like an incoming tide. They were mounting to this ridge which hid the sun, a long, grassy upheaval, gray ledges breaking from its sides like the bones of a famine-dead range beast. Gray-boled, stunted cedars grew along its summit, a thousand years of torture by drouth, fire and storm recorded in their twisted trunks and knotted branches.

"This is winter pasture, we keep the cattle out of here after the spring months to let the grass grow and cure where it stands," Nearing explained. He halted on the eminence, sweeping his hand to include the merely incidental hundreds of square miles which stretched brokenly into the west.

"It's a better looking country than any we've crossed, it looks better to me, anyway," Barrett commented, scanning the grazing lands with a certain proprietary interest which perhaps was out of place, he thought, considering his subordinate state.

"Nothing equal to it in the northwest," Nearing said.

But he did not speak with the proud confidence of overlordship that his position among the mighty cattle barons warranted, Barrett felt. There was more in his manner of regretful melancholy, as of a landowner who views with bitter regret his possessions, incumbered by debts which soon must wrest them from beneath his hand.

Unschoolled as he was in the resources of this country, Barrett saw as readily as a pioneer scout seeking a settlement for a Mormon colony would have seen, the shelter from winter storms that the broken nature of the land offered. Numerous small valleys were rank with cottonwood and willow, telling from a distance of water there, making, through their rapid summer growth, winter browsing for cattle when snow lay deep over the cured grasses on the range. Shelter was there among the wind-barriers of the promiscuous hills, with their low forests of cedar; nature had made a vast pasture to care for its herb-eating beasts in the days when it set the seal of winter over this rigorous land.

"That's Eagle Rock canyon, that one where you see the tall cottonwoods," Nearing pointed. "There's water there the year 'round, runs so swift in places it never freezes. Our camp's at the head of the canyon, not more than three miles on."

"I thought we must be pretty close," said Barrett, cheered by the assurance, "I saw a couple of men down there driving up the cows."

"Cows?" said Nearing, turning quickly. "Who?"

What cows?"

"Down there among the trees — you'll see them come out in the open place in a minute."

"They don't drive up any cows in this country, bud; the only milk you'll ever get here will be out of a tin can. It's some of the boys driving out a few strays that have got in here — they will slip through, especially the cows with calves."

"Well, I don't blame 'em for that," said Barrett, feeling as cheap, very likely, as Nearing meant to make him feel, taking the sneering patronage of his tone.

Nearing said no more. He started down the slope to come into the little valley on a long angle, Barrett following painfully, for the gait was quicker now, as if the cattleman had become impatient of lagging to accommodate the saddle softness of his charge.

They were within a quarter of a mile of the bottom when the two men whom Barrett had noted reappeared from behind the screen of willows. Nearing stopped suddenly, putting out his hand to stay his companion.

The rancher drew cautiously behind a clump of cedars, Barrett following. A little while Nearing watched the two men below, who were swearing volubly at a cow and calf which persisted in galloping after the ten or twelve other cattle they were urging ahead of them.

"Who are they?" Barrett asked, a pretty well defined feeling growing on him that it wasn't honest business going on below.

"I'm not certain," Nearing replied, leaning to peer through the cedar boughs.

“Are they rustlers?”

“Keep still — till we see what they’re up to,” Nearing returned, cautiously, with lowered voice.

Barrett was no longer conscious of his weariness and saddle soreness. He was tingling with a resurgence of the indignant feeling that had swept him last night over the unchecked robbery of these pirates of the plains, only now it came upon him intensified, hot as fire in his eyes.

“They’re driving away our cattle, whoever they are,” said Barrett.

In his eagerness to watch their movements he rode from the cover of the cedar clump. Scarcely a hundred yards below him one of the men was pursuing a head of the little herd which appeared bent on remaining behind with the rejected cow and calf.

This man, so intent on his business, which he pursued with the noise and confidence of security, did not see Barrett standing out in the open above him. He headed the rebellious animal back to join the little herd, not once looking about to see whether his movements were watched. Judging from their demeanor, the men were honest cowboys following their duty. Yet Barrett had a very good reason for believing they were not.

“Does that man work for us?” he inquired rather sharply, riding back to Nearing, who still kept his place of concealment behind the thick branches of the low cedars.

“He don’t work for the Diamond Tail,” Nearing returned, with emphasis that seemed to rebuke this assumption of partnership.

"I don't understand your indifference, Senator Nearing!" Barrett hotly gave it back to him. "That man's a thief, I had a run-in with him down at Saunders—Grimmitt and all of them said he was a thief. They're running off our cattle—*our* cattle—I don't care a damn how you like the sound of it!"

"Take it easy, Eddie, boy," Nearing placated, coming down at once from his high horse. "Maybe Findlay put those fellows to work, he's got the right to hire and fire without consulting me. I can't inquire into the character of every scab-leg cowboy that rides the range—I told you half of them were thieves."

"We've got a right to stop them and find out whether they belong to this outfit or not," Barrett insisted, starting as if he intended to go into the matter on his own account. Nearing checked him with a sharp word.

"It's all right, they're working them over the hill," he said.

"Why are they leaving the cow and calf?"

"They'll follow along," Nearing replied.

"So will I!" Barrett declared, with sudden outbreak again.

"They might be thieves, but I don't think so, from the noise they make," Nearing said. "Go straight along the ridge and head them off—I'll cut in behind them. We'll hold them up and find out where they're going with that bunch."

Barrett rode on as directed, pulling the rifle from the holster as he galloped. He shaped a course to bear down on the two men, who were now driving the little

bunch of cattle along at a lively trot. He hailed them in his good sea voice as he drew in after them, his horse sliding down the shale of the hillside in a cloud of dust.

The man who had rounded the straying beast back to the herd was the nearer of the two. As he turned, drawing sudden rein at the challenge, startled in every line of his pose, Barrett's identification of him was complete. It was the long-nosed man from the Indian Nation who claimed to be blood relation to the wolf.

If ever a man looked the justification of such a contention, this cattle-thief looked it then. He threw a shot across the sailor's bows, so close to him it nicked the steel pommel of his saddle. Quicker than the eye could mark his movements the fellow acted, and almost as quickly threw himself over the saddle, hanging to his horse Indian fashion, its body hiding all of him but one hand on the saddle horn, one foot hooked by its spur in the cantle.

Barrett threw up his rifle for a crack at the horse, hoping to pin the scoundrel down like a bug under a stone. The hammer clicked; the lever ejected nothing at Barrett's impatient jerk. The magazine was empty.

Cooled by this discovery to a sudden realization of his danger, Barrett drew up his headlong chase after the thief, who rode the farther side of his horse with as much facility as he sat the saddle. The cattle-thief threw another shot across his saddle; it struck Barrett's stirrup, making his horse wince and jump with a start that almost unseated him.

The other thief, who had ridden madly off at the first sight of this unknown challenger, evidently in the

belief that it was some misguided officer of the law, now came back to take a hand in the easy finish. Sheriff or no sheriff, the stranger was a greenhorn with an empty gun, for only a greenhorn would run into trouble with an empty gun. So the fellow doubtless reasoned, returning to his partner's help with a shrill, barking whoop.

Barrett jammed the useless rifle into the scabbard, wheeled and rode for the brush, heading in the direction Nearing said he would take to come up behind the thieves. But not in the hope of Nearing's aid, for Nearing was not in sight, his gun was not talking as it should have been doing in a crisis like that when it stood behind a friend. Not for Nearing's help, nor the hope of any man's help; only for a few seconds' time to get that blanket roll off and his hand on the weapon inside it.

Barrett worked at the fastening of his bed roll with one hand, reining up for a precious moment when he looked back and saw the thieves waving arms and shouting to each other. The unknown of the pair turned back toward the cattle, which were standing bunched and panting, untroubled by human hunt and defense of life so long as it left them free to breathe in peace a little while.

The rustlers required but a moment to reach this understanding. No need in two of them chasing a defenseless man down and losing time and labor picking up the scattered cattle again, when one man could do the job in safety. So Barrett knew they argued, fumbling at the cords of his roll.

The fellow in pursuit began to shoot again. Fifty yards from the cover of willows along the little stream, Barrett's horse stumbled to its knees, falling with a catch of its breath that sounded like a sigh.

Barrett went on over the wounded creature's head, falling full length, clutching the reins as if life depended on the retention of his hold. When he lifted himself to his hand, dazed and breathless from the hard fall, he expected to meet the crash of the bullet that would end that first adventure of his upon the range.

The rustler had checked his pursuit, stopping perhaps not more than twenty yards from the place where Barrett had fallen. There he sat leaning forward, the high horn of his saddle against his lean gizzard, gun raised to throw the last shot. He seemed to be peering to see whether Barrett might be so badly wounded that another shot would be wasted on him.

Barrett's wounded horse lay between the men, the dust of the overthrow still hanging above the scene. And there on the ground beside it, not three yards from where he braced himself in his sick confusion, lay Barrett's broken blanket roll, the grip of his own pistol offering to his hand.

Moved by the hope this sight inspired, quickened out of his daze by the chance of giving the ruffian an equal fight, Barrett lunged toward the gun. At the same moment the rustler shifted his position to get a better view. At Barrett's start, he fired. The shot set Barrett's crippled horse thrashing and struggling to rise. In uprearing it received the rustler's second shot, which otherwise would have closed the day for Barrett,

with nothing more to be said.

The horse snorted blood, which spattered Barrett in a hot baptism as it sank down to struggle no more. Barrett had reached the shelter of the animal's body, his pistol was in his hand with one wrench from the encumbering folds of the blanket, when the rustler rode forward to pitch in his concluding shot at close range.

It seemed to Barrett that only the outstretched legs of his horse separated him from the oncoming rustler when he rose to his knees and fired. In a quickening dash of hoofs the thief's horse went past; the dust of its going was before his eyes, in his nostrils, with the scent of earth long dry. On the ground a little way off the rider lay, his arms flung out as men who die by violence most commonly fling them when they fall, as if in protest against the blind turning of fortune which will not give them always the way of their own wilful hearts.

"You could have killed a man anywhere, you didn't have to come to this country to do it!"

Barrett heard those words again, heard them rise from the well of his conscience as plainly as he had heard them that morning from Alma Nearing's lips. But he had come to that country, and he had killed a man. There he lay, unworthy of life as he had been, violent, dishonest, aggressive toward the end that had overtaken him. Dead, his outstretched arms lifted above his head. But he had been a man, and the golden bowl that held the essence of his immortal soul was broken.

Nearing came galloping up, dust on his clothing as

if he, too, had suffered the humiliation of a fall.

"I tried to jump an arroyo, the damn horse fell and rolled me," he explained, more vexed on account of his mishap, it seemed, than interested in what had gone forward without his help.

Barrett jerked the rifle from beneath the carcass of his horse, offering it for his employer's inspection with severe countenance.

"That was one hell of a gun to hang on a man!" he said, opening the magazine to show that it was unloaded.

Nearing took the gun, a curious look of cheapness on his face.

"I didn't intend for you to use it, just to carry it out to camp, Ed. It's Dale Findlay's gun; he sent it over to town to have a new breech block put in. I didn't know we'd run into anything like this, any more than you did."

"You knew there was a possibility of it," Barrett returned shortly.

"Well, you seemed to have a gun of your own stuck around on you somewhere, from the look of things, kid."

"It was tied up in my blankets, I had to run from that lizard like a rabbit."

"Roll him over," Nearing ordered.

Barrett moved the body of the slain thief to reveal his face. Nearing rode nearer, and peered down into the dusty features.

"He's an outsider, I've never seen him on the range. See if he's got any papers on him."

The only thing the fellow carried about him but his guns and ammunition was a patent medicine memorandum book, such as cowboys of that day generally kept a record of their time in to be presented in case of argument with the boss. This contained nothing; not even a mark. But Nearing took possession of it, along with the few dollars the range wolf owned, saying they must be turned over to the coroner.

"I heard a man at Saunders say he went by the name of Wells, and that he lived on Horse Creek," Barrett said.

"You can't go much on what you hear in this country. Where's his partner gone?"

"He stayed back with the cattle, I don't know where he is now."

"Well, it don't matter, I guess. Wait—I'll catch this one's horse for you."

Nearing said nothing more of the fight and its bitter ending, dismissing it as a mere incidental of the day. He did not congratulate Barrett on his victory, nor express any satisfaction over the recovery of the four or five hundred dollars' worth of stock. All of which appeared to Barrett very strange and unusual.

To Barrett the adventure was painfully exciting; its termination had left him shaken and weak. Spectres of remorse, fear, accusation, rose thick in his troubled mind. He had killed a human being, and this serene, unmoved, indifferent man beside him had not a word of comfort, condemnation or justification to utter.

Perhaps it was the way of the range to pass over tragedies such as this in silence; maybe it was no more

and no less than was expected of every man, any man, in the course of the day's duty. If Nearing had blamed him, rebuked him, found fault, cursed, railed—anything would have been better than that serene, unperurbed indifference.

There was nothing exhilarating in this business of shooting a man down, even in the unquestioned defense of one's own life. It was a fearful thing, a thing that clung to the heart like mould of the grave. Shadows of vengeance reached out after a man who slayed; the fires of remorse leaped within him and seared his soul.

"Feels like rain," said Nearing, as they rode on up the canyon, Barrett on the dead rustler's horse.

Barrett was not conscious of any atmospheric change that might denote the approach of rain. He would not have been conscious of it if flakes of snow had begun to drift against his face. All he could bring himself to think of, to turn with the ebullitions of a tortured and conscience-stricken mind, was that he had slain a man.

Night fell gray upon the two riders before they came to Eagle Rock camp.

CHAPTER VII

THE WRANGLER

DALE FINDLAY, superintendent of the Diamond Tail, came riding in with five of his men shortly after the arrival of Barrett and Nearing at the cow camp. Seven more cowboys came straggling along an hour or two later, keeping the cook rattling his pots to serve their famished demands.

Barrett looked for his friend, Dan Gustin, among each group of arrivals, to meet disappointment in every case. The cook, a one-legged Mexican, Alvino by name, said Dan was working out of Eagle Rock camp. He supposed he was too far away to make it in that night.

Barrett regretted this, for in Dan he felt that he had a passport to the toleration, if nothing more, of these saddle-weary men, who accepted his presence in camp with supreme indifference. Nearing had not gone to the trouble to introduce his charge to anybody but Findlay.

Findlay had not granted him so much as the grace of a word; his friendly hand had been overlooked with a cold aloofness that was more than disdain. One glance the superintendent had spared him, as he might have looked casually at a rock. There was no acknowledgment of even the kinship of kind in his indifferent eyes.

The cowboys were little behind their boss. Barrett felt the barrier that stood between him and them as palpably as if it were a hedge. He caught some of them

looking at him with curious contempt now and then, and one or two spoke casually to him, as if to find out what sort of a noise he would make.

Barrett thought that he understood the attitude of the men. His position among them was similar to that of a boy who has been led into the schoolroom by his mother, and formally presented to the teacher. He had felt all along that it was a mistake for Nearing to lead him out that way, and pass him on from hand to hand.

The more Barrett reflected on this, and looked back in review of Nearing's conduct of his case from the beginning, the more resentful of it he grew. It was a case of meditated coddling, a plan of Nearing's to belittle him and make life intolerable for him on the range. There was a reason, and a big one, somewhere in the secrets of that tottering enterprise, for Nearing's keenness to discourage him, sicken him with humiliation, drive him away. What was it? Was Nearing robbing the stockholders himself and pocketing the proceeds? Was all this plaint of rustlers but a pretense?

The outstanding event of the day would seem to answer this question with positive denial. There were rustlers, bold, contemptuous of the keepers of the herds, who came to the very door of this outpost and drove away cattle. Even now the horse wrangler was coming up the canyon with the body of the dead thief in his wagon. Nearing had dispatched this camp menial on the scavenging errand shortly after their arrival. The man had gone under protest, reluctantly, afraid, a lantern swung on the end of his wagon tongue.

On the arrival of the wrangler with his freight of death covered under a tentcloth, the cowboys left off their chaffing and chatter and small talk among themselves to stiffen up with a new interest in the greenhorn. Only then, indeed, the news went around that a man had been killed down in the canyon, and this kid was the one to credit for it.

They looked at Barrett with renewed curiosity, with something like approach to terms of, if not equality, recognition as a sort of man. It seemed incredible, their bearing said, that he should pop a man over that way; some strange freak of chance must have favored him, indeed. It was about the same as if a cat had whipped a bear.

Findlay, whose word in camp appeared to be supreme notwithstanding the presence of his employer, gave a few sharp directions on the arrival of the wagon, and stood watching while his men unloaded the melancholy freight and laid it under a tree some distance from the cabin.

The superintendent seemed to resent even this little part in the off-bearing of the wreckage of another hand. He walked about when the job was done, hands at his back, pipe in mouth, beyond the circle of the fire around which the men gathered presently for a cigarette before their blankets.

This Dale Findlay was a lean and sinewy man, thin of flanks, light-framed, tall. His countenance was dark and morose, as of a man whom cares had harassed and the laughter of life passed over. He was a severe, short-spoken man, thin-lipped, brown; a handsome man

in a stern, cold-hearted way, inscrutable as a stone; a man such as women like for the romance they suggest, but seldom know. His voice was the most disagreeable attribute of the man, according to Barrett's appraisal of him, surly and insulting as his demeanor toward the greenhorn had been. It was a feline growl, delivered through lips scarcely open, a nasal note in it most jarring and disturbing.

At the first sound of Findlay's voice Barrett groped back in his memory for the chamber that stored a record of it, confident that he had seen this man before. Not until he heard his louder, sharper, more snarling tones when he directed the unloading of the body, could memory open the door to that long-locked compartment.

Not this man, but the mate of a South Seas trading schooner in the port of San Francisco. Barrett could see him again, warping his small vessel up to the dock, singing his orders in his high, feline voice through thin lips scarcely open; see the bare-shouldered Kanaka seamen leap to their labor with white-rolling eyes of fear. It was the same voice in two different men, both of them tigers at heart.

Nearing and Findlay went inside the long low cabin, built of cedar logs, where they sat at a table, a lamp between them, in deep conference. Nearing did most of the talking, Barrett could see, forceful talking at times, judged from his manual emphasis. Findlay wore his pistol strapped about his gaunt waist; Nearing was unarmed.

Findlay sat low in his chair, sliding forward like a

weary or indifferent man, one arm on the table, his straight-stemmed briar pipe in his close-clamped mouth. Now and again he nodded, shook his head, or said some stingy word around his pipestem. And through it all Barrett had the impression that power sat on the side of the table with the silent man.

Barrett made no attempt to mingle with the men around the fire, although the blaze would have been welcome, for the night wind is cold in those high altitudes where frost is not unknown in the latter days of August. He stretched with elbow on the saddle taken from his dead horse, smoking his pipe, its stem so short the warmth of its bowl was felt on his face. Around the fire they were talking of the dead man, but none came over to question Barrett on his part in the tragedy. Perhaps because they were not certain of his status in camp, whether guest and equal of the big boss, or greenhorn come to bungle and stall around on the range.

The horse wrangler, last man to supper, owing to his unwelcome task, came over to where Barrett stretched, and squatted near. Barrett could hear the rustle of his paper as he rolled a cigarette, and the full breathing of his repletion as he sat there in the dark on his heels.

"Got a match, pardner?" the wrangler requested presently, after feeling himself over with muttered curses of disappointment.

Barrett supplied the need silently, knowing nothing of the etiquette of cow camps. He did not know whether it was his turn to speak; he was not going to court the contempt of any other man in that bunch by

being friendly out of his place.

"Ugly lookin' cuss, mean a mug as I ever seen on a man," the wrangler said.

Barrett supposed he referred to the husk of a man that he had hauled up the canyon. The wrangler had stated the fact very neatly; Barrett did not see where it called for comment or supporting testimony. He held his peace. There was a scuffing of bootheels as the wrangler adjusted himself more comfortably. Barrett could see that he was arranging himself upon his crossed legs.

"You took him square between the eyes," he said, not discouraged in the least by the other's silence. "Purty good shootin' for a man that's down with a horse on top of him, I'm here to tell you, kid! Come fur?"

"Saunders," Barrett replied.

"Sheriff's office?"

"No."

The wrangler smoked his cigarette out in a long inhalation, crumbled the stub between his hard fingers, showering down a little rain of sparks.

"Thought maybe you was," said he.

Barrett did not feel that the conversational wedge had opened a very great chink of communication between them yet. He waited for the wrangler to make the move.

"Friend of the old man's?"

"No."

"Thought maybe you was."

Silence again. The wrangler was rustling another paper; Barrett struck a match, offering the light with-

out words.

"Much obliged, kid. Passin' through?"

"I've hired to Nearing."

"Hired out to him, heh?" the wrangler said, speculatively, his tone forecasting his next question. "What do you aim to do out here on the range, kid?"

"I had some thought of learning the cowpunchin' trade," Barrett replied, leaving it to be surmised that doubts had entered his mind on the wisdom of pursuing that ambition.

"Oh, cowpunchin'. I see. You shoot like a man that's had experience, but you don't ride like erry one. What you been workin' at, kid?"

"I followed the sea."

"Which?"

"Followed the sea."

"Where to, kid?" the wrangler asked, in kindly, rather consoling voice, as if he pitied a folly so ingenuously confessed.

"I was a sailor in the navy, at sea, on a ship, a battleship, with a flag on it, you know, and guns, cannon, torpedoes."

Barrett felt that the fellow was kidding him, and knew that a dozen pairs of ears at the fire were turned his way, listening to all they could catch.

"The—hell—you—was!" said the wrangler.

His amazement, his admiration, his altogether and unmistakable satisfaction, was so plain in the wrangler's voice that the compliment was greater than Barrett could have asked. The wrangler smoked a while, full of his sensation of surprise as he was of supper. Pres-

ently there was a sound of scuffing boots, and the wrangler rose to his feet. Barrett saw that he was offering his hand.

“Grubb is my name. Call me Fred,” said the wrangler.

“Barrett is mine; call me Ed,” the greenhorn returned, rising with alacrity to meet this friendly advance.

There was some turning and craning around the fire; two or three made a pretense of getting up for something else to see what was going forward between the wrangler and the greenhorn. The wrangler held to Barrett’s hand with a paw as big, and almost as hard, as a horse’s hoof. The glow of his cigarette showed that he was looking earnestly into the young stranger’s face.

*Said Fred to Ed when they first met;
We’ll pull together when you’re all set.
I ain’t much to see and I ain’t much to hear,
But I stick to my friend like grease on a cheer,
And we’ll pull together when you’re all set,
Said Fred to Ed when they first met.*

The wrangler delivered this in an earnest, low voice, giving Barrett’s hand a mighty clamp at the end of his impromptu verse.

“Fine, old feller, fine!” Barrett praised him, forgetting for a moment the disquieting thing lying wrapped in tentcloth under the cedar tree.

“If you hear anybody speak of the poet of the Popo Agie, that’s me. I’m the original and only cowboy,

poet, even if I ain't nothing but a horse wrangler."

Barrett said he was certain that Fred graced whatever calling he laid his hand to, and that the profession of wrangling was ennobled by numbering him among its practitioners. Fred modestly admitted that he had felt his mind running to the same opinion many a time. The poet wrangler sucked in the last of his cigarette, standing in pose of self concentration while he ground the stump of it between finger and thumb, as many poets scatter the fire of their hearts to see it flicker for a brief moment and die away in the unresponsive dark.

The men began to leave the fire for the bunks in that part of the long cabin set apart for them. Fred Grubb inquired of his new friend what equipment he had, and, on learning that he was provided with blankets, took him to the plank lean-to at the cabin's end.

"Them saddle-gallded hyeners is liable to throw boots at a man if he don't wake up first in the morning," the wrangler explained, with the bitterness of a man who had unpleasant recollections. "I'll bunk you in here with Alvino and me—we're gentlemen, even if our pay is low."

Barrett passed an unrestful night, in a fever of excitement, harassed by a thousand demons which rose in his imagination to plague him for the thing necessity had forced upon him. Short as the night was, he had found it already too long when the camp began to stir before perceptible dawn.

Some subtly developed trait, some sense that stands watchful in his subconscious mind, tells the cowboy

when to wake. He scents the oncoming dawn in his sleep as the humming bird scents honeysuckle miles beyond the range of its eye. No alarm clock is needed by the true ranger, no shouted summons to stir him from his bed while the stars are still brilliant and the "bowl of night" seems yet untroubled by the approach of day. But by the time he has his boots on, his first cigarette rolled, and stands to breathe the deep breath of another eighteen-hour day, there is a gray-fading on the edge of the eastern horizon, and presently the world is over-spread with dawn.

Neither Nearing nor Findlay was present at breakfast; nothing had been said to Barrett concerning his duties. While vexed on this point, he was relieved to note that the thing rolled in tentcloth was gone from beneath the cedar tree. Fred Grubb had brought the horses in, but the rustler's animal upon which Barrett had completed his journey, was not among them.

There was a little more friendly spirit among the men this morning; several of them spoke to Barrett, two or three of the more decent looking ones introduced themselves and shook hands. This was cheering; the feeling of an outcast which had added to the gloom of his soul began to depart away from the sailor, who more than once during the night had regretted this long flight away from his sea. But none of them said anything about his riding away with them. As they finished breakfast they went to the corral, roped the horse selected for the morning's work and, by pairs and fours, rode about their distant duties.

Grubb relieved the uncertainty when he came in for

breakfast. He said the boss, meaning Findlay, had instructed him to take Barrett on as assistant day wrangler, and keep him at Eagle Rock camp until further notice. The boss and the big boss had ridden away together at the first streak of morning. It was Grubb's opinion that they were going to the ranch.

There it was, under Fred Grubb's kindly hand, that Barrett learned that steps of progression lead up to the calling of cowpuncher, as in almost any calling worthy the name. He learned that a greenhorn could not at once ride with the elect, except in cases of extraordinary favor from those in charge. His beginning must be in a menial capacity, a subject of humiliating orders, a butt of broad jokes, coarse, often cruel.

He further learned what he had begun to suspect already; that a horse wrangler was not one who held argument with a horse. He was nothing more dignified than a groom who herded the animals out at night, if he happened to be a night wrangler, some of them with hobbles on their legs to prevent them running off, and herded them back to the corral at early morning for the lords of the range to select their mounts. Being a day wrangler, such as Fred Grubb, was a somewhat easier, if no more dignified, job.

There were a large number of horses at Eagle Rock camp in proportion to the men, as there were, and probably continue to be, in every cow camp. Fred said this was because every man on the Diamond Tail had from six to eight horses at his command, one of his own, the rest supplied by the company. In the busy days of the branding and roundup, a cowboy often used up four

horses a day, but in such quiet times as these, when there was nothing but straight riding to do, with a little dash after rustlers now and then, one horse a day was all a man needed.

Barrett gathered, also, not from direct revelation, but from Fred's manner of resentment, that the station of wrangler was a low one, that a man so engaged was scarcely counted a man, in truth. But one might rise from it, he was glad to learn; the best of them had traveled that road, although Fred himself never had been able to work upward to a saddle and a cowboy's pay.

It wasn't in him to do that kind of work, he said; the Poet Lariat, according to Fred's pronunciation, of the universe had designed him for nobler things. Temporarily he was engaged in this humble station—he had been filling it for more than twenty years, in fact—but it was only a makeshift. He'd walk on the heads of men who had jeered and despised him into his kingdom one of these days.

"Ain't much to do these days, not enough for half a man, let alone two able-bodied fellers like me and you," said Fred. "Just set around on the hills and think up poetry. I've thought up half a gunnysack of it this summer, I'm goin' to put it in a book some day. I don't see what the boss was aimin' at when he put you over here, but me and Alvino we're glad to have you, Ed. I tell you, boy, it ain't every horse wrangler that's killed a man!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE AVENGER COMES

BARRETT believed that he understood the reason for his sequestration there in Eagle Rock cow camp. It was only a part of Nearing's plan to humiliate and discourage him, isolate him, cut him off by reason of his duties and subordinate position from any chance of coming at the facts upon which the disastrous conduct of the business rested. Nearing's attitude plainly told him that, if he didn't like what they had given him, the road was open to him to return whence he came.

In their long talk the night of Barrett's arrival at the ranch, Nearing had covered the ground pretty thoroughly as far as his way of explanation went. All lines led back to the main point of the beginning: that he, Nearing, was the one and only man who could save the company from complete wreckage and the loss of all involved. He had even taken up the question of a receivership, opening on that theme when it lay just under the surface of Barrett's mind, with almost disconcerting penetration.

Receiverships in the cattle business were even more expensive and destructive than elsewhere, Nearing had said. Certain stockholders lately had threatened such proceedings. He had thrown his cards before them and told them to plunge into it if they thought they could save their money that way. Put the Elk Moun-

tain Cattle Company into a receivership for three years and there wouldn't be enough left of it to cut a shoestring out of. That's what he had made plain to them. The one thing to do was give him, Hal Nearing, ex-senator and man of reputation from sea to sea, time to develop his plans, to curb this drain of outlawry, and at least end the whole matter where it had begun.

Every hour's developments confirmed Barrett in his belief that there was something crooked in the inside office. Nearing seemed, through all his indifference over the affair, to resent the killing of the cattle thief.

Barrett knew that Nearing had not turned a hand to help him in that fight; he knew as well as if he had been there, that Nearing's horse had not fallen short in the jump over the arroyo, for the horse hadn't a spot of dust on him, the saddle was clean.

Through that idle, lonesome day, and the idle, lonesome days following it, Barrett pondered these things. The leak that drained the increase of twenty-odd thousand cattle was wide; surely not so easily hidden as to be undiscoverable.

Sticking there at the camp would not accomplish anything. Barrett was seriously considering quitting the job after ten days of it, drawing off a distance, say to Saunders, and quietly taking up his investigation from the outside. He was singularly confirmed in his belief that this was the wisest and best course by no less person than the "poet lariat" of the plains.

It happened while they were playing seven-up under a quaking asp in a little mountain valley not far from camp one morning. Fred Grubb, who was a dry, beetle

sort of man, small and light, with a great iron-gray mustache of which he was unjustly proud, was shuffling the cards with thoughtful, distracted air.

"You ain't errey detective, are you, Ed?" he asked, in a curiously apologetic, half-sneaking way.

"Detective? Holy mackerel! What put that in your head?"

"Some of the boys was sayin' you was."

"Wise bunch, ain't they?"

"They say you're up here on the range after somebody, and every guilty, saddle-gallded crook amongst 'em thinks he's the one. I'm the only man in this outfit that's got a clear conscience and can step out and look the world in the eye. Even that poor old cuss of a Alvino killed a man down in Santa Fe and had to gallop. But he had a case; the skunk took both of his wives away from him."

"I should say he had a case! Well, if I were a detective I wouldn't be after Alvino. You can put his mind easy on that."

Fred offered the deck for the cut, abstracted from the game, mind-wandering, ill at ease.

"I thought maybe some of them fellers that put money in this company sent you out to track it down," he said.

"I'm here on my own hook, Fred."

Fred studied his hand, according to his rule, led an ace, fishing for the ten.

"You ain't related to one of them English lords, Ed?"

"No more than you are, Fred."

"I thought maybe you was."

Fred played out his hand, counted his points, gathered up his cards with deliberation, still thinking.

"One of them come over here about two years ago."

"A lord?"

"No, he wasn't no lord. I don't suppose he was any more than a low-class angel in that nobility across the water."

"A kind of a wrangler," Barrett suggested.

"I guess that's about where he'd 'a' classed. Somebody with money in the company, his daddy or aunt or somebody, got him a job, like they did you. He wore a red flannel shirt and back-east boots, black and shiny. Looked like a feller I saw actin' he was a minin' man in a play one time. I never saw a feller with so much laugh in him as that boy—he wasn't nothing but a big, applefaced kid, harmless as a pup, it seemed to me."

"What became of him, Fred?"

"They found him dead one morning down there about a mile the other side of where you shot that rustler."

"The hell you say!"

"Shot through the gizzard. They say he was a detective tryin' to find out who's gittin' the money out of this ranch. I don't know. Fellers'll say things like that."

"Well! Did they ever find out who killed him?"

"They never nailed it on anybody. His mother come over here, took the poor feller up and buried him in Cheyenne. If you ever go up there, take a walk around the graveyard, it's the purtiest place in town."

You'll see that boy's grave. 'Murdered May 14, 1886.' That's what it says on his tombstone. His mother had it put there. She was around here a month or two tryin' to find out who shot him, had detectives from Denver smellin' around. But I tell you, Ed, private and confidential, and I don't give a damn who knows it, when two certain men on the Diamond Tail don't want things found out, things ain't *found* out."

Barrett thumbed the cards, head bent in thought. Presently he looked up into his partner's face, his own very grave.

"I'd begun to think the same way myself, old feller," he said.

A moment the two pairs of eyes met in a deep, understanding gaze, much as solemnly and meaningly as men shake hands over a matter when they have come to a point in their mutual understanding where words are no longer necessary.

"I guess it's your deal," said Fred.

The game went on, an interminable relay in a game that had been stretching out for many days. Several hands were played, each man keeping a careful score for the final casting up when the series should close.

"What became of that rustler's body, Fred?" Barrett asked, quietly, between plays, his eyes on the cards.

"You can search me, kid. I've been wonderin'. It was gone when I got up that morning. If I was guessin', but I ain't, kid—put that down in your little red pill book, I ain't—I'd say he must 'a' had friends not very far off."

"It looks that way," Barrett said, feeling rise in

him the same dark disquietude that had troubled him almost without cessation since the tragedy, the whisper of some far-reaching warning that the incident was not yet closed.

This feeling had been with him, cold in his heart as a sickness that would not yield to change, sunshine nor medicaments, in spite of the fact that, on the outward appearance of things, the killing of the rustler was completely erased from the minds of men. The coroner never had come to make inquest into the matter, the men in camp seldom spoke of it, and when they did so it was only casually, as of a minor event to fix something else in dispute definitely.

The rustler's body had vanished like a spirit; no wagon had come to carry it away. Barrett had slept little that first night, but he had not heard even the trampling of horses in the direction of the cedar where the body lay.

"If I was a man with money tied up in the Diamond Tail," said Fred, breaking in upon this train of disturbing thought, his voice that of a wholly disinterested man, "I wouldn't monkey around wranglin' horses away back of the line of battle, as the feller said. I wouldn't hire out to Hal Nearing in no kind of a job and let him plant me off where I'd be the most seen and the littlest heard man on the range."

"Fred, if you were a man in that fix, what would you do?" Barrett inquired, his outward manner as disinterested as the poet's own.

"I'd go down to Bonita and make a stall like I was a feller hidin' out from the law, and I'd warm up like

a Dutch uncle to Cattle Kate.”

“Dan Gustin mentioned her,” Barrett said.

“Cowpunchers mostly do.”

“What do you suppose she could tell a man that had money tied up in the Diamond Tail, Fred?”

“She could tell him who’s rakin’ in the chips, and why, if he could come up on the blind side of her.”

“Cattle Kate,” said Barrett, thoughtfully, as a man turning a trifling reminiscence in his mind.

“She knows who’s ridin’ the range for a hundred and fifty miles, when they come, where they go. Some say she’s a spy for the rustlers—that’s what these cattle barons say—but I don’t know. Wouldn’t be surprised if she was. All I know is a man’s welcome to her door any hour of the day or night if he’s hidin’ out from the law.”

“Bonita. That’s the town I’ve heard the boys speak of, over by the post,” said Barrett, in his reflective way.

“Twelve miles up the river from the ranch, squattin’ on the edge of the military reservation like a louse.”

They allowed the subject to close there, played out their hands, and went about the duties of the day. It was toward noon, when Fred Grubb, coming back to join his companion from an excursion into some far canyon for wild blackberries, reported that two men were approaching camp.

“One of ’em looks like old Manuel from the ranch,” he said. “The other one’s a stranger to me. You wasn’t expectin’ nobody, was you, kid?”

“Not a soul.”

“Set down in your saddle, set down in your saddle!”

Fred scolded, his long patience with his friend's weakness breaking fretfully. "Whenever you git in a hurry to go some place you begin gittin' up and settin' down like you had a bee under you."

"I know I do, Fred. But I'm workin' hard to get over it."

"You're comin' on all right, too, you're doin' fine — only when you git a little excited. You stick around with me three or four months and you'll ride like a man with the bark on."

"I hope so, Fred."

"Yes, I'll bet a dime that's old Manuel, and I ain't seen that old feller since Peter Nearing was superintendent of this ranch. He rides with his wings out, like an Indian. The one that's with him's a cowpuncher. He's a stranger to me."

Fred was right in his identification of Manuel, the Mexican from the ranch. He was unsaddling the two horses at the corral when the two wranglers rode into camp, the companion of his journey being nowhere in sight. Manuel returned Fred's rather patronizing greeting with low-spoken word, and dignity that wore the mask of meekness, according to his kind.

Manuel immediately produced a letter from the pocket of his shirt and delivered it to Barrett, following it by opening his saddle pouch and discovering several more. But his manner of delivering the one that he carried close to his person bore with it an unspoken injunction to mark its importance above all the rest.

This letter bore no stamp; it was addressed only with Barrett's name. Manuel paused, the other letters

in his hand, as if waiting for Barrett to acquaint himself with the contents of the first before other matters might come between him and it for even a moment. Barrett stood with reins over his arm, his horse familiarly nosing his shoulder, and opened the letter.

Mr. Barrett:

Come to the ranch at once—I must see you on a matter of the first importance.

ALMA NEARING.

Barrett read it again to certify to his surprised senses that he had made no mistake. There was something in the old Mexican's eyes when he looked up that interrogated him. He nodded; the old man offered the remaining letters.

"Give me your horse, kid; I'll skin the saddle off while you read your mail," said Fred.

"Thanks, old feller, but never mind. I'll leave him saddled, I'll be needin' him right after dinner."

Manuel drew a step nearer as Fred went off with his own animal.

"The man with one thumb, *señor*. He has come to kill you." Manuel whispered this amazing information, at once walking away, his face as innocent of any secret as a brown and wrinkled leaf.

CHAPTER IX

WEANGLER, BUT A MAN

CLOSE by the kitchen door where Alvino cooked and spread his salted foods, there stood a rude bench made of half a cedar log, the altar of ablution where the cowboys lined up and snorted like drowning horses over tin wash pans morning and night. As Barrett approached the cabin, a man rose from rinsing the dust of a long ride from his face and neck, calling loudly for a towel.

Alvino tossed the article demanded through the door, whence issued a stream of blue smoke from the burning grease of the midday bacon. This towel was half a grain sack, stiff with the accumulated dirt of weeks, the standing joke of the camp. The stranger turned it in his hands as if in the hope of finding a clear spot, cast it from him with a curse, drew a handkerchief half as big as a tablecloth from his pocket and began wiping his face. As he worked he leaned toward the kitchen door and poured a stream of Mexican upon Alvino, who could be seen dimly going about in his smoke.

At the sound of Barrett's coming the fellow turned from his abuse of the cook with a quick, wheeling start that crunched the gravel under his pivoted heel. The handkerchief he clutched in one hand, the other he dropped to his dangling pistol.

He was a tall, harshly built man of coarse, heavy, negroid features. There was a glow of ruddiness in his

yellow-brown skin, such as marks the Mexican *mestizo*, or person of mixed breed. It is as if these mixtures fire in resentment always at the world's knowledge of their baseness, which nature stamps upon them in its uncompromising way. Barrett saw that the thumb of the man's left hand was gone.

He looked at the fellow curiously, feigning a surprise that he did not feel, to see a guest in camp display such nervous hostility. He nodded, with a short word of greeting, passing over the fellow's act as if he had not noted it, but careful to leave his gun hand free as he reached for a basin. The half-breed grinned, rolling back his thick, blue lips from great yellow, horse-like teeth. But there was no friendly approach in his greasy, congested small eyes, padded in the puffed flesh of excesses and debaucheries.

A diversion in the arrival of Dale Findlay and two cowboys relieved the strain of the situation for Barrett, who was at the last stand of desperation, in truth, to know what tack to take. Manuel's warning, taken with the stranger's nervous, hostile watchfulness, convinced him that he was about to be called upon to pay for the rustler's death. What to do save watch and wait he did not know. He welcomed the arrival of the superintendent, little as he liked him, greatly as he resented the fellow's insolent behavior at their first meeting.

Findlay had not been at Eagle Rock camp since the morning he rode away with Nearing, a matter of ten days past. Now, as he dismounted before the cabin, his two companions having stopped at the corral, the stranger went to meet him, a certain respect in his bear-

ing, a half-cringing gladness, as a dog goes to meet a harsh master. Greetings in that labial, mouthy speech to which the Castilian has degenerated among the Mexicans of the low caste, passed between them.

Barrett, not quitting his watchfulness, went on with his preparations to wash. His hand was on the water pail when Findlay turned to him, face black with displeasure, a curse on his thin lips.

“Put that horse away!” he ordered sharply.

Perhaps out of habit of long discipline Barrett did not hesitate, much as he resented the manner of the command. He sprang with the nimbleness of his years on deck to take Findlay’s horse, his quick response, his very willingness, at once an apology for his apparent neglect of duty. Not that it was in fact a neglect of duty, for his service as wrangler did not include the unsaddling and turning out of any man’s horse, let him be high or low. But Barrett did not want the enmity of this dark man to deepen against him for any act of his own.

The one-thumbed *mestizo* stood talking with Findlay a little while. The superintendent seemed to hear him with indifference as he turned up his sleeves and opened his collar to wash, dismissing him presently as he would a fawning dog. All this Barrett marked as he stripped the saddle from the hard-ridden horse. The *mestizo* withdrew a little way, where he stood smoking, something indomitable in his way of standing immobile, unruffled, villainously serene, as one appointed by fate waiting with certitude his hour.

Fred Grubb was not around the corral, nor at the

spring among the willows at the canyon head, where he commonly went to wash in the little stream that contended impatiently with the stones it could not wear out of its bed. The old Mexican, Manuel, sat with his back against the lean-to, hat over his eyes, his bearded face in shadow, hands hooked in front of his updrawn knees. He seemed also one appointed by destiny for a place in the drama of life which he had not yet come to play.

Barrett looked further for Fred, wanting a word with him, for he had it in mind to linger there, busying himself about the corral, until Findlay, the two men with him and this sinister half-breed should go in for dinner, then taking horse for the ranch. Not finding Fred anywhere, Barrett put the best face over his inward uneasiness that he could assume, and went back to the cabin.

Manuel still sat in the sun, motionless as a man asleep, although Barrett could see the turning of his eyes as he passed. The others were at the table, making a fierce assault on bacon and beans.

Barrett washed, prolonging the operation while he beat about for a straight path out of the perplexities which surrounded him. He must ask Findlay, now that he had come, for permission to ride one of the horses down to the ranch, not being provided, as the cowboys were, even as Fred Grubb was, with a horse of his own. In case of refusal, he would try to borrow Fred's horse, if it could be done without prejudicing the poet's job.

That was one question. But it stood behind the other, the more serious one. If the one-thumbed mon-

grel came from the rustlers' camp to avenge the death of their fellow—and there was no motive for a movement against Barrett's life in any other quarter—how did it come that he rode so openly and unafraid into the cowmen's stronghold? It seemed to affirm the suspicion that had come up continually in Barrett's mind since his arrival at the cow camp: that Dale Findlay had an interest in running off the cattle, and that some shameful partnership stood between him and Nearing, in which Findlay held the upper hand.

All pointed back to this suspicion with redoubled force. Nearing had shunned contact with the thieves that fateful day. He had appeared troubled, displeased, with the tragic climax of Barrett's interference. Findlay's resentment had been all too plain in his reception of the greenhorn, whose weak pretense in coming there did not cover his true purpose from even the humblest wrangler on the range.

Findlay's arrival with his two handy men had been timed to make conjunction with the Mexican half-breed. It was planned and concluded that Barrett should not leave that camp alive, and Dale Findlay was the directing hand behind the cowardly plot. Nearing, if bent to a kindlier desire, was powerless or afraid to interpose. Barrett knew this as well as if the heavens had opened and revealed it to him, each act in the plot spread before his eyes.

To ride away without permission would be only to invite a speedy and more shameful end. They would hang him then, having the pretense to justify them that he was making off with a horse. The best course was

to get into it and out of it, if fortune might show him a knothole in a plank somewhere through which he might escape.

Alvino had spread the simple meal on one end of the long table, covered with oilcloth to which the dishes stuck to the spilling of much grease and semi-liquid foods, and profanity to season it all. The two cowboys sat across the table from the door, Findlay at the end, the mongrel Mexican alone, back to the entrance. Two plates were there beside him for the wranglers, the one farthest from him in the place where Barrett commonly sat. Barrett took his place, no greetings passing between him and any at the board.

Alvino always turned the plates bottom-side up to protect them from flies, that being his one nicety, and it is a poor man who cannot put forth one. As Barrett turned the dish over to receive bacon and beans, one of the cowpunchers across the table—he was a hound-faced fellow, with dark lopping hair about his ears—reached to the floor and picked up something, which he tossed directly into Barrett's plate. It was the towel which the half-breed had found too foul for even his greasy skin.

"There's a napkin for you, bud. They tell me you fellers from the east just *got* to have 'em when you eat."

Barrett accepted the jest, quarrel-making as it was meant to be, in good part. He dropped the foul rag to the floor, wiped his plate on the sleeve of his shirt, and grinned.

"I can make out this meal without one, thank you," he said.

The Mexican at Barrett's right hand, his cheek puffed like a gopher's with the greasy food which he gorged as one famishing, turned his head with watchful, rolling eyes. He said nothing; he did not even grin when the two jokers across the table roared over this trick at the wrangler's expense. Only he turned his head that way, red eyes rolling, like a dog guarding against the incursion of one of his tribe while he gobbles up what he has found.

"I can make out, thank you, ma'am," the hound-faced man mocked, pitching his voice to imitate a woman or a child, or some weak and despicable thing far beneath the status of a man.

The pair of them laughed again at that, nudging each other with elbows as if to call attention to the confusion of the person whom they sought to humble and bring lower than his already small consequence in the world of cattle and the noble beings who rode at their tails, honestly or otherwise. But no smile broke the severe cast of Dale Findlay's face, no echo of the merriment, forced and derisive, issued from the thick lips of the *mestizo*, cramming fuel to feed the fires of his gross body.

Alvino was sitting near the stove, smoking his pipe after his invariable custom when he had cooked and spread out a meal. He was a man upward of sixty, thin and wiry, more Indian than Spanish blood in his veins. He always wore his hat, a black, broken-brimmed sombrero, under which he seemed to scowl with disfavor and contempt on those who came to lap up the greasy comestibles from his board. Now he sat there doubly

displeased and sour because of the rating the half-breed had given him, impotent by reason of his wooden leg and years to exact satisfaction from the ruffian after the manner of his kind.

In a lull of the forced merriment, Alvino rose and picked up the towel. As he straightened up with it in his hand, his wooden leg slipped on the greasy floor, making him clutch at the nearest support to save himself a fall. The nearest object chanced to be the *mestizo*, upon whose shoulder the old man's hand fell heavily.

The *mestizo*, purple in sudden rage, quickly turned this harmless touch into a deadly pretext for working his murderous purpose against Barrett.

"Keep your hands off of me!" he roared, slewing to face Barrett, befouling him with a discharge of abuse.

Before Barrett could even protest the unjustness of the charge, the half-breed leaped to his feet, upsetting his chair, his pistol jerked out in such reckless haste or blind fury that it struck the table edge, delaying for one fortuitous moment the shot that must have ended the wrangler's career.

Barrett had not counted on such a sudden outburst, watchful as he was, and strained to a hair's edge. He felt now that his movements were encumbered by some subtle, unseen force, as a man in a dream, when he laid hand to his own gun and drew it with what speed he might. But he must have fallen dead, with more than one bullet through him, if it had not been for the interference of Alvino as the half-breed swung his pistol clear of the table to fire.

What had been the old man's intention when he came across the room to pick up the towel, whether to provoke the great ruffian to some further insult upon his humble head and take the vengeance which the weak sometimes exact upon the strong, Barrett never knew. But now, as the half-breed's arm swung around to bring his gun to bear, Alvino struck him in the back with a butcher knife which he had up to that moment concealed about him.

The long blade, driven by the righteous fury of the old man's avenging arm, struck entirely through the half-breed's deep chest. As he stood there, his eyes grown great in terrible understanding of what had overtaken him, Barrett saw the point of the knife protruding. It must have cleaved his heart.

The shot that would have found lodgment in Barrett's body with a foot further swing of the weapon, broke the sugar bowl in the middle of the table as the half-breed's finger pressed the trigger when death ripped out his foul soul by the roots.

"*Cuidado, keed!*"

Alvino shouted his warning, at the same time motioning Barrett to the door.

Before Barrett could jump for it, the fallen ruffian's body barring his way, Findlay sprang up, cutting off his retreat, slinging out his gun as he leaped. Barrett stood for a moment, frantic as some wild thing cornered beyond escape.

There was a window behind the two men facing him across the table. But they were on their feet, guns out, looking to Findlay as if to ask him whose lead it was

going to be in the last hand of this unequal game.

"All set! Drop them guns!"

Fred Grubb was issuing commands from the door, where he stood with a double-barreled shotgun thrown down to cover generally Findlay and the two on a line with him on the other side of the table.

Much as he had been despised, little as his courage had been counted, if ever reckoned at all; low as his position, abused as he had been with impunity all the years of his service as wrangler, there was something in Grubb's voice and manner that would not admit parley or delay. Findlay was first to grasp the amazing truth. He dropped his gun within the margin of that second that would have counted his last if he had demurred. The others, gaping in amazement, cowed and wilted in front of that weapon with which a blind man could scatter death, opened their nerveless fingers and let their pistols fall.

"Come on out, kid!" Grubb called.

Barrett lost no time backing from the room, Findlay drawing aside out of the door before the added menace of his gun, to let him pass.

"Prance out of there, you fellers, all of you!" was Grubb's next command.

They came, Findlay first, the two cowpunchers with hands held high to show the entire honesty of their present intentions, even though it did not vouch for the future.

"Boss man, I hate to have to take a gun to you," said Grubb, "but I ain't the man to stand by and see my pardner done up in cold blood. Don't tell me

I'm fired, for I ain't; I resigned when I loaded up this gun with buckshot a minute ago. Waltz over there to that krel, and line up agin the fence!"

As the three marched at Grubb's orders, the poet, who had so unexpectedly developed the qualities of a first-class fighting man, whispered to Barrett:

"Our horses're back of the house—all set—I turned every head but them out on the range. Bolt for 'em kid! I'm with you."

CHAPTER X

MARSH MEADOWS

IT MAKES me sweat vinegar when I think how near I come to bunglin' that job," Fred Grubb said.

"I'm the fellow that bungled, walked right into their hands when I knew," Barrett said. "If you hadn't come when you did, I was goin' to make a break for the stove, but I suppose they'd 'a' got me before I'd ever made it."

"They sure would, kid."

The pair had ridden an hour or more in flight from Eagle Rock camp, saving breath to cool a hotter bowl of porridge than they had left, as they expected they would be called on to do before going many miles. But whether Findlay did not hold them worth pursuit, or whether the start had been so great that it was hopeless before those at camp could catch horses and set out, they did not know. Nobody had lifted the hills behind them as the miles reeled out. Grubb was coming to the opinion now that no start after them had been made.

"Findlay's bankin' on you leavin' the range after this, I guess. He thinks you've got a craw full by now. Well, we might as well take it easy now; we'll need all our plugs's got in 'em if they do take a notion to come."

"How did you know they were going to gang me,

Fred?" Barrett inquired, not able to account for the poet's opportune appearance with his shotgun.

"Manuel tipped it off to me. He helped me run them horses off. But I wasn't lookin' for 'em to start anything at the table, Findlay likes to eat when he's eatin' and fight when he's fightin'. That's why I kind of took my time. And I nearly bungled the job!"

"Did that Mexican Alvino stuck work for the Diamond Tail?"

Fred rode on a little way, looking very serious and sober. Presently he shook his head.

"No, that feller never worked here. Ed, that feller was side-pardner of the rustler you shot, I saw him sneakin' around down there when the boss sent me to pick up them remains and haul 'em in. Is there any needessity for me to say more?"

"Not a bit."

Several miles again without words, Barrett with thoughts enough crowding his mind to make him oblivious to whatever danger might be behind them, Fred watching unremittingly for the first hat to show above the hill and grow suddenly into a man. The poet carried his shotgun across his shoulder, rather clumsily and uncomfortably.

"Well, I'm out of a job, Ed."

"It looks like I'm with you."

"What do you aim to do, kid?"

"They sent for me to come to the ranch."

To himself Barrett had answered the same question as he rode away from Eagle Rock camp. He was not going to stand around any longer and allow Nearing

and his partners in this open robbery to load anything more on him. Here was where he struck out to start something of his own. Just what his next definite move would be, he did not know, but he did know that he had evidence enough of crooked dealing and collusion with thieves and murderers to smoke somebody out of his hole.

He reasoned and planned along this intention as he rode, reaching the conclusion that his first work would be to go to Nearing and demand the discharge of Dale Findlay, and the complete clearing out of the gang that worked under him. It made no difference what the superintendent might hold over Nearing, the cattleman would have to face it and set that scoundrel adrift. That would be the first business ahead of him at the end of that ride.

"Well sir, I'll tell you what me and you could do, and be right where you could keep counters on matters and things around this ranch, as the feller said."

Fred spoke as if he had been talking all along at a pace with his speculations and thoughts. He was then, as he had been from the first moment of his appearance with his unromantic but effective weapon, entirely cool and undisturbed by the adventure in which he had played a small hero's part.

"What's that, Fred?"

"Well sir, I know of a place where a couple of fellers out of a job could light and clean up some money between now and winter, if they had the grit and the sand to face the music."

"You do? Where is it, what's the scheme?"

“Place up the river about seven miles from the ranch where a couple of brothers from Iowa took up claims side by side, built their house so it stood half way over the line on each end. They could live together that way and each one of ’em hold down their claim accordin’ to law at the same time. Finest track of hay land in this country, them two claims.”

“Well, we couldn’t buy ’em out, Fred. You don’t mean to chase ’em off, do you?”

“They’re already chased, the Diamond Tail boys chased ’em. That land I’m speakin’ of is on the Diamond Tail.”

“You mean we’d turn grangers, Fred?”

“Somebody’ll take up them claims again one of these days. Might as well be me and you. That’s a kind of a marshy land in spots, I’ve seen elks by the hundred there, right now you can see ’em sometimes, mixin’ with the cattle as tame as anything on the Diamond Tail.”

“You don’t mean that, Fred. Who ever heard——”

“Wait till you see with your own eyes; that’s all I got to say.”

Fred seemed offended that his friend should doubt his word, incredible as it seemed to one not accustomed to that country. Barrett hastened to set it right by acknowledging his hasty judgment, and Fred went on with his talk about the chance that lay out there for the taking.

“Them two boys from Iowa put a bob-wire fence all around them two claims. They got a contract from the quartermaster at the post to sell him hay, and

Nearing let 'em go ahead till they had it all mowed and stacked, then he sent Dale Findlay over there and set their tails afire. Them two boys never looked back from that day to this, I'll bet you."

"How much hay could a couple of fellers out of a job cut and sell up there, do you suppose?"

"Well, I ain't no hay man, Ed, but one of them boys from Iowa told me they aimed to sell a couple of hundred tons. Nearing's kep' them fences up, he's saved that hay and cut it two seasons now. It's about ready for some enterprisin' fellers that'll pull together and stand by each other to step in and take up that land and enjoy life a little on their own hook. Them claims went back to the gover'ment when them two fellers let Findlay and the boys bluff 'em off. I know an old lawyer over at Saunders, Charley Thomson—maybe you've heard of him?"

"Never did."

"Charley Thomson could fix up the papers and head us right with the land agent over at Saunders. We'd be headed right then, we'd have our papers to show for it, and Uncle Sam he'd be back of us if we had to put up a fight to hold our own."

Barrett heard this man, whom he had judged to be subjugated and poor in spirit before the developments of that day, with thrilling admiration. He thought it must be the wine of emancipation in the poet's heart, the new-sprung courage of one who had declared his independence from a long bondage and staked all recklessly on the adventure. Confidence seemed to have come to him when he threw his gun down on the boss.

“It sounds good, Fred, and I don’t doubt we’d be in our rights, but it would mean a fight to hold the land, we’d be outcast and branded, the hand of every cowman on the range would be against us.”

“Let ’em come, damn ’em all! I’ve saved up wrath enough in the days of my life to last me a long time with them cattle barons! They’re spraddlin’ out over this country like they’re bigger’n the Almighty, bluffin’ out honest men that’d make homes here and plow up the land and turn it into something. Killin’ ’em off sometimes, burnin’ ’em out and drivin’ ’em on. I think one of the lowest tricks a man ever done was to let them two boys from Iowa put up that house and fence their land, and spend all that money and do work worth hundreds of any man’s money the way Hal Nearing did, and then run ’em off.”

“That was a kind of a low-down trick.”

“Of course, a feller with money in the Diamond Tail might hang back on goin’ into a thing that’d look like cuttin’ off his own nose, for if two nesters stuck it out in that valley more of ’em would come. It’s the best grazin’ on this range, and a man with money in the Diamond Tail——”

“It’s already gone to hell!” said Barrett, with the bitterness of a man robbed by a friend.

Fred Grubb rode a little while again in his reflective way of silence. Then:

“If a man with money in the Diamond Tail was right on the spot to watch the last jackpot he might step up with his gun in his hand and git some of it back when the crooks went to cash in, Ed.”

"Something to that," Barrett admitted, in humor grim enough to go any length, spare nobody in the reckoning he was determined to force. "But we'd need horses and machinery, and money to buy grub. We can't reach up and pull that stuff out of the air."

"I've got some salted down"—Fred patted his girdle to signify where he carried it—"and I know a man the gover'ment's got up here teachin' them sneakin' Arapahoes to farm, that'll lend us some mowers and rakes. I know he will, for them dam' Indians won't no more make hay than they'll eat it. He told me I could have 'em last year when I was figgerin' on breakin' out on this move, but I didn't have erry pardner I could bank on that time. He got cold chisels down to the end of the spine of his backbone when it come to takin' possession of the land."

"I don't guarantee this one to stand without hitchin', Fred."

"We might ride past and take a look at that land," Fred suggested. "It's right on the gover'ment road, a little ways from Bonita."

"All right."

"Springs bust up out of the ground around there, like the weight of the mountains gushed 'em up, makin' little lakes as clear as lookin' glasses. Irrigated all from underneath, never need a ditch to grow all the stuff a man could plant. I call it Marsh Meadows."

"You must have been spying out the land a long time, to know it the way you do."

"Yes, I've had my eye on it ever since that little Alma Nearing was a kid. But I never thought of nestin'

there while Peter Nearing, her paw, was alive. He was the one white cowman I've ever knew."

No pursuit developed to trouble the friends as they rode their way, jogging at considerably sharper pace than Barrett and Nearing had covered the same ground but a few days before. Fred Grubb was as light in the saddle as a leaf, as much a part of his horse as the best cowboy on the range. Barrett often had wondered why he never had advanced from wrangler to the better paid, more respected pursuit. He felt that he knew the poet well enough now, considering the latter's confidences, to ask him as they rode through the waning day.

"Well sir," said Fred, in his oratorical manner of prefacing even the most trivial matters, "it was because I never had the guts in me to sock a redhot iron up agin the silk-soft hide of a little calf."

"That would be an ordeal for a poet," Barrett agreed, wondering how he, himself, would have come up to this trial if his education on the range had progressed that far.

"A man hardens to it gradual, they say," Fred went on, "seein' it done, seein' it done, smellin' the burnt hair and fried livin' flesh, but it never was in me to set like cement to the sufferin's of any creature the Poet Lariat of this here universe ever turned loose in the world."

"I believe you, old feller."

"I will take my gun and kill a bird or beast I want to eat, end 'em sudden and humane, and that's all right; I'll straddle the wildest outlaw bronco that ever busted the lights out of a man, and I'm here to tell you,

kid, without any blowin', it takes a purty frisky horse to slam me. I can throw a rope with any man that ever rode between the Rio Grande and the Little Missouri, but it ain't in me to take an iron from the fire and hold it on a roped calf till the meat sizzles. I wouldn't do it for all the gold of Gopher!"

Sunset was over the valley that had called to Fred Grubb's heart through so many years with the appeal of home, when the two riders drew rein on the brow of the last hill to look down into its peace, all glorified as if nature had set a halo upon it. Behind it some five or six miles the mountains stood, green of deciduous forest trees in the canyons, dark green of pine and cedar on the slopes. Far away one tall peak, wrapped in a wimple of snow, flashed in the sun; on either hand the valley, green with sweet grasses, parked here and there with clumped trees, spread into the trailing blue which came down like fold on fold of impalpable soft curtains to deny the exploring eye.

Barrett gasped in astonishment, moved by the serene beauty of it as he never had felt his emotions stir when confronting some of the mightiest spectacles in nature that the world offers. There was the quality of appeal in this blue-curtained stage, mountains guarding it against the rigors of the north, that struck at once the desire to step upon it and begin the play.

The low-walled log house built by the unfortunate brothers on their claims stood in the foreground, its shadow reaching out toward the travelers. There stretched the lines of posts encircling the half section of rich meadow lands, the protected grass lush and tall.

A little way beyond the house a small lake pictured its border of tall sedge, clear and still as a mirror, just as Fred Grubb had said. Cattle stood in the ease of repletion all about the valley, far-spread, numerous. Barrett wondered if they belonged to the Diamond Tail, and put the question to his friend.

"Yes, them mountains is the line of the Diamond Tail," Fred replied. "Them's your cattle down there, Ed; looks like they're comin' up home, don't it?"

"I'm afraid I haven't got enough left in them to make a pair of shoestrings from their hides," Barrett told him, already accepting as having come to pass Nearings' prophecy of the condition meddling would bring.

"Well, what do you think of the lay of the land?"

"It's the finest sight I ever saw, Fred. It feels to me like home."

"I always think I'm the heir of the Almighty and this is the estate that's come down to me when I look over that valley," said Fred. "Do you think we could buckle on our guns and hold them crooks off like a couple of men?"

"We can try it like a couple of men," Barrett said.

And that was all there was to the compact. The two adventurers turned their horses and resumed their journey to the ranch, this detour to view the seat of their future hopes having delayed them somewhat. Only Fred Grubb said, by way of settling all details:

"I've got to go to the ranch to get my time, then we'll rack on over to Saunders and see Charley Thomson. When we come back with our shootin' papers we'll go on over and take possession."

CHAPTER XI

POOR STUFF FOR A HERO

ALMA was at the gate like a vigilant warden when the two fugitives from the distant cow camp rode up in the twilight. She was surprised to see Fred Grubb, who was in buoyant humor, exalted in spirit by his new freedom, his manly independence, the prospect of coming at last into the green paradise of his dreams. He swung from the saddle lightly, the shotgun in his hand, and made her a gracious, if not too graceful, bow.

*My heart and my hand is yours for to take,
My lady fair which I lay them at your feet,
As I have told you so oft many times before,
My lady fair and sweet.*

Fred delivered this rather crippled, though gallant tribute with all outward evidence of entire spontaneity, although Barrett was very well able to account now for the poet's silence during the last two or three miles of the ride. Alma, carrying out her part of what appeared to be a set ceremony between them, sank low in a slow curtsy, grave as if her troubadour, in fact, had come to her castle hall with his lute beneath his arm.

"That's a new one, Fred, you precious old humbug!" she said, laughing now, giving each of them a hand in warm welcome.

If troubles hung over her, thought Barrett, they made no shadow.

She told Barrett that Nearing had gone to Saunders two days ago, and was not expected home before tomorrow. Manuel had not returned from Eagle Rock camp. Teresa, his wife, was worried. Had they any news of him?

"He delivered the letters you sent," Barrett explained, halting at the disagreeable news that lay behind the messenger's detention in camp.

"The horses was all out on the range," Fred explained. "I expect he had some trouble ropin' one to fetch him back. He'll be along."

Taking his cue from Fred's diplomatic avoidance of any explanation, Barrett seconded this opinion. Fred doubtless had his own delicate reasons for leaving it to the old Mexican to break the news of what had happened at camp. It was a commendable modesty in the hero of that cowardly plot against his life, Barrett thought; Fred Grubb's stock rose in his appraisal a sharp advance, although it stood pretty well near the top at that.

Mrs. Nearing came to the porch, where Barrett saw her leaning and listening.

"Who's there, Alma?" she inquired, her voice strained, impatient.

"Mr. Barrett and Fred, from Eagle Rock camp."

"Have they brought any word of your Uncle Hal?"

"No, Auntie Hope, they came from Eagle Rock camp," Alma returned, gently patient with the elder woman's querulous anxiety.

"Tell Teresa to give them some supper in the kitchen," Mrs. Nearing instructed, turning again into the house.

"You must excuse Aunt Hope's appearance of inhospitality, Mr. Barrett—both of you. She's been half crazy with neuralgia."

"It's plain that she isn't herself, no apology is necessary," Barrett assured her.

"Don't bother about supper for a couple of ex-wranglers like us, Alma; we'll rustle up something down in the cook-house, we'll open a can of salmon—I know right where to lay my hand on it."

"Ex-wranglers, Fred?" said Alma, surprise big in her voice. "You're not fired, are you?"

"No, I had the honor of resignin' one time in my life. Here comes Manuel now, he'll give you all the accoutrements of the case. Me and Ed we'll go on down to the bunk-house and rustle around——"

"I'll fix you some supper myself," Alma stopped him with sweet hospitality. "Mr. Barrett, you are my guest, you are here on——"

"Orders," Barrett supplied, quick to express his willingness to serve.

"My orders," she amended. "Put your horses away and come right back to supper, both of you."

"Orders! her orders!" said Fred, as they went together to unsaddle their horses. "Was she the one that sent for you, Ed?"

"You heard what she said."

"I thought it was Hal Nearing wanted to see you when you said they sent for you to come to the ranch."

Fred whistled to himself in expression of astonishment from time to time as he put his horse in the barn and gave it a charge of the hay cut, as he well knew, from the very land he expected soon to take possession of as his own.

“You go on up to the house and see her, Ed,” he insisted, gravely. “I’ll nose up a can of salmon and root me up some crackers—that’s good enough for a feller like me.”

“She wants you, too. Didn’t you hear her ask you?”

“She asked me, but she don’t want me,” the wise poet returned. “Three’s a crowd, as it used to say on the candy hearts. You go on up.”

Fred was not to be shaken from his can of salmon and crackers, hard as Barrett tried to bend him.

“No, you go on up there by your lonesome and have it out with her,” he said. “Maybe she wants to marry you, Ed. I’d be a purty lookin’ feller hangin’ around in a case of that kind, wouldn’t I now?”

“Come on, you old fool!”

“Not for all the gold of Gopher!” Fred declared, with great solemnity, only to break out the next breath with a loud, unpoetic laugh, slap his young friend on the back and push him off toward the house.

There was no supper spread for him when Barrett returned to the house. Alma had forgotten her obligation of hospitality while listening to Manuel’s recital of what had taken place at Eagle Rock camp.

They stood outside the kitchen door, Alma, Teresa and Manuel, the old man’s horse close by. Manuel was making his report in Spanish, a language strange to

Barrett, Alma questioning him briefly, breathlessly, in the same tongue from time to time. They did not hear Barrett's approach, although the weary horse started at his step. He paused near them, outside the beam of light that reached out into the shrubbery through the open door.

Teresa stood just in the edge of this diffused beam, her figure sharp in contrast with the other two, holding her hands clasped before her bosom in pose of supplication. Now and again she moaned and shook her head, whether in sympathy for the man who had fallen, or for his own peril, Barrett had no way of knowing.

Whatever the old man was saying, Barrett knew that he could make him out only a pale sort of hero in that plot. He did not know, even, whether there was much sympathy or consideration for him in any bosom there, for he had reduced himself to an infinitesimal point in his own contempt for the way he had conducted himself at Eagle Rock camp that day.

A man would have slung his gun and cleaned them up before Fred Grubb ever appeared at the door; a man would have come out of it with a feeling of sufficiency in himself, and not as a boy led out of trouble by the hand.

A lame figure of a hero, indeed, standing there in the dark like a spy. He had the thought of sneaking back to Fred and sharing with him the salmon and crackers. He remembered in time to stop this retreat that he was there under orders; he advanced into the beam of light, and approached the door.

Alma turned at the sound of his step, Manuel start-

ing as if to draw and defend. The girl's face was pale, her eyes were great with the horror of the thing she had heard.

"Oh, Mr. Barrett!" she said, a shocked note of lamentation in her tone. "You must not think—I can't bear to have you think—that anybody here—that it was with the knowledge of anybody here——"

"Not at all," said Barrett, lying only with his lips, his heart cold in its charity toward another member of that house.

"You would be almost justified, it was so diabolically conceived. If that's Dale Findlay's notion of a joke, I think it's time he practiced his pleasantries on another range!"

"Joke?" Barrett repeated, feeling his heart sink to his heels.

He knew something of the lengths to which men of that calling would go to have their jokes. Could this carefully worked out scheme, carried to a head with so much hard riding and planning in distant parts, have been nothing more in the beginning than a cowpuncher jest? He recalled Manuel's warning, and turned to him sharply.

"Was it a joke—did you know it was a joke?" he demanded.

"No-o-o, *señor!*" said Manuel, forcefully, solemnly, shaking his head slowly. "It was not a joke!"

"Dale told Manuel it was nothing but a joke—that's what he told you, Manuel?"

"He told me, Mees Alma."

"They didn't expect it to end that way, they only

thought they'd throw a scare into you. They didn't count Alvino in, the wicked old devil!"

"No, they didn't count Alvino in," said Barrett, slowly, seeing again the knife-point protruding through the half-breed's breast. "Nor Fred Grubb—they didn't count him in, either."

"Poor old Fred! He's been the victim of so many of their pleasantries he couldn't tell a joke the length of his arm away in broad daylight," said Alma.

"It cost a man his life," Barrett reminded her. "However unworthy, he was a man. You knew—" to Manuel, facing him sharply—"that man came to camp to make trouble?"

"To keel you, *señor*."

"Did he tell you that, Manuel?" Alma challenged him, almost craftily, it seemed to Barrett, in her sudden desire to establish the whole affair as a pleasantly designed thing with an unfortunate ending in tragedy. She had recovered quickly from her shocked, horrified concern. She was of the blood of the cattle barons, in whom she could see no wrong.

"Did he tell you that?" she demanded again, in growing severity.

"He did not tell me," Manuel replied.

"Well, don't you know it's dangerous to go around guessing such things?"

"He did not tell me, but I knew. Before I—*señorita*, I knew."

"How did you know? Who told you?" she insisted, with the bullying severity of one accustomed to breaking down obstacles to her will.

Manuel turned away without a word, with that same silent dignity over him that Barrett had marked when Fred Grubb addressed him on terms of inequality at the corral gate. It appeared to lift the silent old man now far above the impatient, overbearing young woman who sought to make a case for those whom she defended out of her inborn disposition to oppose all who stood against the institutions of the barons' range.

"*Señor* Nearing will get it out of you!" she threatened.

Manuel was not shaken by the threat. He led his horse away, and Teresa, his wife, returned to the kitchen with the speed of panic, as if she recalled that moment she had left some dish on the fire.

"I ask you to withhold judgment on them, Mr. Barrett, till Uncle Hal gets the straight of it," Alma said. "I was all rattled myself when Manuel told me about it, but I can see now where he could overdraw things in his imaginative Mexican way. Dale Findlay isn't the man, not counting the other two, whom I don't know, to let a poor old chump like Fred Grubb get the drop on him if he's playing a serious game. Don't you see that, Mr. Barrett?"

"I hadn't thought of it in that light," Barrett confessed, but still unshaken in his profound belief that Findlay had meant that noonday hour to be his last.

"He'd have taken the gun away from poor old Fred and bent it around his gourd if he'd been in earnest," she declared. "I'm sorry for the poor *mestizo*—he must have insulted Alvino terribly to drive him to that deed."

“We’ll call it a joke, then, and let it drop,” said Barrett.

He was uncomfortable in this discussion with her, hot-headed and biased as she was in her defense of the very men she had arraigned with so much bitterness a few days before. Still it wasn’t the cowboys, it was not Dale Findlay, that she labored to prove blameless of any sinister attempt on his life, Barrett very well understood. She was standing in defense of the institution she had been bred to consider vested with over-riding and incontestable right on the range.

Teresa was setting his supper out on the kitchen table, the mistress of the house evidently having given direct orders. Alma, seeing this, excused herself on the plea that she must see to the needs of her ailing aunt.

“When you’re through supper, go out to the gate,” she directed, rather than asked. “I’ll come out in a little while—I want to have a talk with you, Mr. Barrett.”

Teresa waited on Barrett with assiduous hand, smiling fatly as she brooded close by to anticipate his slightest need. As she poured his second cup of coffee she said, her voice cautious and low:

“When you are boss of this house, Meester Barrett, remember Manuel and me, to keep us here and let us work for you.”

Barrett looked up into her face to see if he could head off another of those jokes for which that vicinity was so notable. Her countenance was serene, all save a little eagerness of expression, an unquestionable sincerity in her eyes.

"Why, I haven't got anything to do with it! I'll never be boss here," he said, amazed to see her so set on what she evidently believed to be true.

"It will come," said Teresa, confidently, nodding her sleek black head. "Manuel read it in the cards."

"He'd better shuffle them again," said Barrett, laughing.

But Teresa only shook her head, undisturbed in her faith in an event unerringly foretold.

CHAPTER XII

AT THE FRONT GATE

DURING the ride down to the ranch, after the probability of pursuit had passed and given place to a feeling of security, the question of why Alma Nearing had summoned him rose constantly in Barrett's mind. The answer evaded him still as he walked a little beat outside the gate with his pipe, waiting for her to come.

Something had happened to jangle woefully the serenity of that household between the day of his departure for Eagle Rock camp and the day of his return, Barrett could feel, rather than see. Mrs. Nearing was not herself; the fact that he was a horse wrangler in her husband's employ could not alone justify her strange behavior toward him when she knew he stood at her door. She was as one distracted by a great grief, a racking calamity. Her anxious inquiry for news of Nearing seemed to give an insight into the cause of her troubled state.

Had the thieves fallen out? Had Nearing gone on some expedition not countenanced by his partners in those dark transactions, for which his life might be forfeit? Or was it that his wife had become cognizant of his dishonesty at last? Even so, what could Alma —

Alma, coming softly to keep her rendezvous, was almost beside him when he turned, wrapped in his brooding thoughts as though he walked in a fog. The long

dark cloak that shrouded her dress made her as part of the moonless night; she must be wearing moccasins to approach so noiselessly, he thought. She came upon him so unexpectedly, although waited for, confronting him so close when he turned at the end of his beat, head down in troubled concentration, that he felt hot blood rush into his face as if she had surprised him of his meditations.

"Aunt Hope is asleep," she said, "but I'm afraid it will not be for long. We'd just as well sit on the porch, where I can hear her when she wakes."

"She must have suffered a great deal to change her so in this short time," said he. "She didn't appear to recognize me."

"She's always worried so about Uncle Hal when he's away," Alma excused, leading the way to the house. "Can you expect her, or any of us, to feel the same toward you, Mr. Barrett, when you come here under false pretenses to humiliate and trouble us, and drive us out of house and home if you can!"

"My intention has been greatly abused by somebody," Barrett quietly returned. "Under the indictment I'd better not go any nearer the house; I'd feel better a little distance away. We can talk here?"

"Anywhere. Maybe you're right about going any nearer."

She remained silent a little while, arms on the gate as he had been fond of recalling her in memory during the days of his short apprenticeship on the range. She was looking away, he knew, with that far-seeing gaze into the mysteries of a land he had not yet come to

understand. He could not see her eyes, but he could feel the struggle that lay in them, as he had felt it that calm morning when they first stood together at the gate.

“Look what you’ve done!” she said, facing him again in her sudden, unexpected way, hand thrown out as if discovering the material damage laid to his charge.

“Done?” he repeated, amazed by her vehemence.

“Come here whining for your money back, like a tin-horn that’s got into a game too big for him. You’ve got to have your precious money, no matter if it wrecks the company, breaks my uncle and drives us out on the prairie. Before you came here you were writing around to certain stockholders to get their proxies, hoping to throw Uncle Hal out!”

“Yes, that’s true,” Barrett admitted, neither shaken nor ashamed. “I’d do it tomorrow if I could.”

“Why didn’t you come here like a man, then, and fight for control in the open, if you think you’re the appointed savior of this company?”

“There wasn’t anything secret in my attempt to get enough proxies to put in another president at the next election, Miss Nearing. I knew some of the stockholders would make inquiry about it here. Senator Nearing knew what I came here to find out, he told me so the first night; why didn’t he send me away?”

“I didn’t mean to get out of patience with you, Mr. Barrett,” she said, not attempting to answer him, seemingly oblivious to his question, indeed, her mind running back on her hot, ungenerous speech of a moment before. “I’ve seen them suffer so, Uncle Hal

and Aunt Hope, worrying over the thought of disgrace the son of an old friend might bring, was trying to bring, on them in their old days. For the failure of this company, the ousting of Uncle Hal, would be a disgrace to them that they could never bear."

"There's no disgrace in honest failure, Miss Nearing. The business world, heartless as it is said to be, never looks on it in that light."

"Uncle Hal only wants time, time to catch up on his losses, to pay every stockholder his original investment, if not a profit," she urged, knowing her lesson very well, Barrett thought. "I sent for you to come while Uncle Hal was away to ask you, as a gentleman and a friend of the family, to leave here, Mr. Barrett, drop this silly little attempt of yours to investigate something that's away too much of a big man's problem for a boy of your experience to handle, or even understand."

"He could have refused to put me to work; that would have been the better way," said Barrett, seeming to answer his own question of a little while before, the question she had passed over and ignored. "But I have not done anything, Miss Nearing, nor found out anything, to give an honest man one moment's uneasiness."

"He was more afraid of what you'd tell around when you went back home than what you'd find out, I'm sure, if he sent you away without giving you a chance to try your hand at this despicable, sneaking detective business," she told him, scornfully.

"But it would have been wiser," he persisted, thinking of the three guns that had leaped to work the

vengeance of cowards and thieves, "wiser and better than the other way."

"What other way?" she asked, in sharp severity. "What do you mean?"

"I was thinking of the jokes of certain merry gentlemen," said he, grimly.

"You're even more of a green boy than I thought you were!" she declared.

"I am very green," he owned with a kindly toleration of her scornful abuse, "and I hope I'm still something of a boy. Maybe I'll outgrow both faults in time."

"You've seen how Aunt Hope has broken already under the worry and anxiety," she said, passing over him in her manner of noting only what it suited the baronial fashion of her argument to note. "I've heard them talking nearly all night time and again since you came. What do you suspect, Mr. Barrett? What do you want to know?"

"Maybe it was just a tin-horn's uneasiness for his little stake," said he.

"You knew before you came here, as all the stockholders know, why this business hasn't paid, but you don't know how the rustlers work, you folks back East; you can't realize how they can get away with so many cattle and not get caught or killed. I only wish you could run into a bunch of them, just to give you a taste of what it means!"

Evidently she had not heard of his fight with Wells and his companion his first day on the range, as she had not heard of many things which Nearing locked in

his secret places. Barrett knew that it was not his place to inform her. He hoped, in truth, that she might never know.

“The manly thing, the kind and friendly thing, would be to go away from here,” she said, her manner softer, her voice gentle and pleading. “Give Uncle Hal the chance you’d ask for yourself in his place; believe me when I tell you he hasn’t deceived anybody, doesn’t want a cent of anybody’s money; that he would rather put a bullet through his own heart than wrong the most unworthy person that ever trusted him.”

“I hope it will all clear up for him, then, and come out right,” he said.

“It will all come out right, Mr. Barrett, if you’ll go away and stop worrying him by your suspicions of crookedness, or whatever it was induced you to come. Your money’s safe; Uncle Hal’s got the rustlers on the run, and things are going to take a turn for the good from now on. Will you take my word for it, Mr. Barrett, if you’re not willing to take his?”

“I’ve cut all my connections with the Diamond Tail, as far as they relate to employer and employed,” he told her, his voice slow and grave. “My foolish, small, sneaking investigations have come to an end.”

“Have you found out anything?” she challenged, in the defiance of perfect confidence.

“Nothing to give an honest man one moment of uneasiness, as I said before, Miss Nearing.”

“Then you’re going away?”

“Not very far. I like this country, I’m going to settle here.”

“Going into the cattle business?”

“I hardly think so. I don’t see my way to anything very clearly yet, but when Senator Nearing comes home I’ll give him my resignation — I’ve already quit. Does that assurance quiet your mind any?”

“If I’ve been hasty and harsh, and maybe I have, forgive me, Mr. Barrett,” she appealed, more like herself, not overriding in the egotism of a cattle baron’s sacred rights, he thought. She offered her hand, white-gleaming in the dark. Barrett took it, encased it a moment between both his own, and thus gave her absolution without words.

Barrett made allowance for her breeding, readily forgiving much, but his pride was hurt, as the pride of youth must suffer before it bends down in meekness, or strikes to the by-ways in craft. It hurt him to have her give him such a low rating among men. Without undue egotism he felt this to be untrue.

Barrett believed, he knew, in fact, that he could stand up in a man’s place and give and take with the roughest of them on equal terms. It was in this coward’s game of gun slinging that he lacked the speed and recklessness of consequences to class as a fighting man. He visualized the men she meant when she spoke of the big ones. Dale Findlay rose in the foreground of the picture; other figures grew distinct in the camp-fire, pressing behind him. And cattle barons rode into the picture, broad men of lordly bearing, insolent to look upon the weak, ready with fire and shot to drive onward all who trespassed upon their undeeded estates.

Such as these this girl knew, such as these were to

her the nobility of the earth. Whatever she had seen of life in her schooling and travels beyond the range, her heart had been molded there in that land; its ideals were her own, its free interpretations of right composed her own moral code.

"So you think you'll stay here on the range," she said, curious to the core to learn what he meant to do for a livelihood there. "If you don't go into the cattle business there's nothing for you but sheep, unless you turn nester."

The last choice she added with an outflung word, as one names a thing outlawed by common contempt, impossible by reason of its very baseness. Barrett did not reply at once. There was so much of forecast of the standing he would assume in her opinion if he should proceed in the hay-making venture with Fred Grubb, that his mind veered from that business.

"There's somebody coming," said he, catching the sound of an approaching horse.

"You've got a good ear if you hear anybody," she said, discounting the news in that superior way of one who resents being beaten at his own trade by an outsider.

"Yes," he admitted, "a man's ears sharpen at sea."

"You're right, I beg your pardon; there is somebody coming. But it doesn't ride like Uncle Hal."

Barrett thought it must be Findlay, or a man sent from Eagle Rock camp by him, arriving with the news of the half-breed's death, and other particulars of the failure of their plot, for Nearing's ear. For he could not get it out of his thought that the *mestizo* had been

Nearing's agent, sent there to work the rustlers' vengeance and his own.

"One of the boys," said Alma, indifferent now, as the rider halted at the high gate opening into the stable yard.

Barrett could see him, plainly outlined against the sky, reach up to pull the lever which opened the gate to riders without dismounting. There seemed to be something familiar in the carriage of the man, but he was certain it was not Findlay.

Barrett thought of going to join Fred Grubb, feeling that nothing remained to be said between this lady of the cattle lands and himself that would advance either of them toward the desired end. For he intended to go ahead with his demands on Nearing, and his investigation of him. The charge of being a man too small to play that game of the cattle country, which she had laid with so much contempt against him, would be refuted in her eyes very soon.

"I'm rather glad you're going to stay, after all, Mr. Barrett," she said, returning unexpectedly to that theme. "I've been considering it; maybe it's better that way. Stand off and take an outsider's view, even if it can't be a friendly and unprejudiced one. You'll see then how things are run in this country, and what the cattlemen have to face. Stay one winter, just one winter, and I'll promise you that you'll never question a cowman's word again when he tells you of losing thousands of his cattle in one blizzard, and thousands more when the snow covers up the grass for weeks at a time."

"Strange as it may seem to you, Miss Nearing, that's one part of it I never have questioned," Barrett told

her. "I've seen a few things in the way of storms——"

He broke off suddenly, the flame of conscious shame coming again hotly into his face. It began to sound like a boast, a bolstering up of the manhood in him that she had sneered upon and found without weight in the rude balance of that land.

But what could a cowman know of storm or hardship, who never had clung his watch to the ice-sheathed deck of a struggling ship! Incredible as it might seem to them, to her, other parts of the world than the cattle lands contained men. But deeds, not words, must prove him in her eyes.

"Yes, but there's a shelter on a ship," she said, unimpressed by his halted speech.

"What are the men doing while the cattle are dying of cold and starvation?" he inquired.

"What can they do?" she countered, resentful of the implied criticism. "There's nothing to be done but wait till it blows over."

"And then go out and count the dead," said he, keeping to himself the thought that it was all very noble and humane.

"They skin 'em if the wolves haven't torn the hides, but it hardly ever pays," she said, no compassion in her for that great suffering, that slow death in unvoiced misery upon those bitter wilds. "But you wait here through one winter—that will be the best medicine for you, after all. You'll understand the hazards of this business then."

When Barrett parted with her she made apology for not offering the hospitality of the house. She seemed

herself again, for the first time since the moment of his arrival, when she had given him her hand in welcome that could not have been feigned. Barrett believed the news brought by Manuel from Eagle Rock camp must have worked something in her mind to his prejudice, deepening her resentment against him for coming there to guard his family's interests.

He went his way through the dark to the bunkhouse to find a bed, there to meet Dan Gustin, who proved to be the rider who had arrived a little while before. It was their first sight of each other since the evening of Barrett's arrival at the ranch, Dan having been on duty many miles from the scene of Barrett's humble start as wrangler.

Dan reported that he was out of a job. It had come to the point where he either had to kill a man or quit, he said.

"I'm too poor to kill a man," he said soberly, "so I had to quit my job. I was talkin' to old Charley Thomson about it the day I met you in Saunders, Ed. He said a cowpuncher couldn't afford to kill nobody these days, it come too high; so I just let the feller live on."

"I was tellin' him about me and you goin' to start grangerin', Ed," Fred Grubb disclosed.

"What do you think of it, Dan?" Barrett asked, anxious to have the clean young fellow's opinion on the bold departure.

"I was just tellin' this old hidebound wrangler if you fellers 'd let me, I'd take up a claim by the side of yours and settle down to stretch my hands and face and rest," said Dan.

CHAPTER XIII

A MAN MUST DIE

THE three friends' conference at the bunkhouse door, where they worked out the details of their proposed defiance of the cattle barons by turning granger in the forbidden bounds, was interrupted by the arrival of Nearing. Manuel was in bed by then, the house was dark, for the three conspirators against the dignity of the cattle barons had prolonged their talk far into the night. Nearing rode into the barnyard, pulling up short when he smelled their smoke.

"Who's there?" he hailed.

The three men answered, each for himself. Nearing did not speak again, and Fred Grubb, out of his long habit of caring for the horses of other men, went to take off the saddle.

"I've got to strike him for my time," Dan said, "but I believe I'll let it go till morning. I don't know, though; he may go off before daylight, he's roamin' the range like a wolf these days. I saw him away over on the other side of Eagle Rock canyon this morning."

"I've got some business with him tonight," Barrett said, getting to his feet.

Nearing had started toward the house, but walked slowly, for he was saddle-stiff and weary. He turned quickly when he heard Barrett hurrying after him.

"I'm surprised to find you here, Ed," he said.

"I know you are," Barrett returned with significant stress.

"What's wrong up at Eagle Rock camp that both of you fellows come down here? Who's looking after the horses?"

"Senator Nearing, I left Eagle Rock camp at noon with Fred Grubb, after he'd saved my life in that trap you and Findlay laid for me."

"What's the matter with you?" Nearing demanded, as if half way between vexation and anger. "I don't like that kind of a joke."

"After you left Findlay over west of Eagle Rock canyon this morning, Senator Nearing, he came to camp with two men, hot-foot on the arrival of a Mexican half-breed with one thumb—the fellow you delegated to come there and put out my humble light. He's over there at camp with a butcher knife through his heart, and the show-down has come between you and me."

"I don't know what you mean—damned if I know what you mean!"

"Fred Grubb can substantiate what I've said. The Mexican is dead, Alvino killed him as he was slinging his gun to shoot me. That part of it wasn't on the books, Alvino's part; I thought you'd like to know."

Nearing stood as if trying to read in the dark in Barrett's face whether he might be demented. He made a poor pretense of it, as his unsteady voice betrayed.

"Come over here—let me get down to the bottom of this thing you're telling me. There's some mistake, Ed. I don't know anything about a Mexican with one

thumb.”

Nearing led the way to the front gate, plainly anxious that neither the men at the bunkhouse nor those inside his own dwelling should hear any part of what was to pass. There, in the shadow of the cedars where Alma and Barrett had stood three hours before, the cattleman put his hand on the young man's shoulder and peered again into his face.

“For God's sake, Ed, you don't mean to tell me you suspect me of a plot to murder you!”

“The Mexican was the man who got away that evening in the canyon,” Barrett said, stern as judgment, backing out from under Nearing's hand. “You were more interested that day in seeing the thieves get away than stopped. Now this one comes openly into camp today with the avowed intention of killing me. What kind of a compact have you got with these rustlers, Senator Nearing? What hold has that fellow Findlay got over you that makes you step up and lick your bran out of his hand?”

“This is foolish talk from a man of your experience, Barrett—talk that I'd answer in just one way from any other man! Now, let me get at the bottom of your delirium. You say a Mexican was killed by Alvino, just as he was pulling his gun to shoot you. What had you done to provoke the man?”

Patiently, coolly as he was able to command his words, Barrett recounted the morning's experience, not forgetting the warning Manuel had given, nor Fred Grubb's positive identification of the slain man as the second thief.

"This is an ugly sort of charge to bring against a man, Barrett," said Nearing, almost convincingly grave and severe. "What motive can you supply out of your insane imagination; why should I want you taken off in this plotted, melodramatic way?"

"There's an old piratical axiom that covers the case," Barrett replied, unmoved by Nearing's sarcasm.

"If you mean that dead men tell no tales, why, in the name of God, should I want to stop your little tongue? Consider that I've dealt openly with you from the start, offered to show you the books, go into the business with you in every detail, which you refused. I sent you to the range knowing very well your purpose was to spy on me. If I'd been afraid of you getting anything on me, Barrett, wouldn't I have refused to put you to work?"

"You didn't expect me to find out anything. When we ran into those two thieves, and I broke the code by removing one of them from his profitable activities, I found out too much. Findlay wanted to pay me off for that from the very first minute. Neither of you expected a greenhorn to stumble into your secrets as headlong as I was pitched."

"Your imagination would be worth a fortune to you in fiction, Barrett, but it's a dangerous gift to let have free rein on the range. What advantage would there be to me in this compact of thieves you've framed? Why should any man rob himself?"

"I don't know, Senator Nearing. But I do know Findlay is the directing hand in the rustling that's making such wholesale raids on the herds of this com-

pany. Maybe you got involved with him in some way and can't pull out. He's got a lead on you some way that you don't seem to be able to break. I saw that the night he made you leave your gun off before he'd talk with you in the cabin up at Eagle Rock camp."

"Barrett——"

Nearing stopped, stood silent a while. Barrett heard the latch of his throat click drily as he swallowed at the anxiety the darkness hid in his face. And again:

"Barrett——"

"Senator Nearing, if you're involved with that crook and can't cut loose—if there's anything in this world I can do to help you, talk to me like a man!"

"There's nothing to all this nonsense, Barrett," Nearing gathered himself in the admirable strength that was his in hiding his emotions, holding his voice steady. "What can I do to satisfy you that everything's straight on the inside of this ranch?"

"Fire Dale Findlay, clean out his gang."

"That's an unreasonable demand, Barrett."

"From your side of it, Senator Nearing. You're in the boat with him; you're afraid, you can't fire him!"

"By God! Barrett!"

"It's a nasty dose, but you'll have to swallow it. You can either come clear with me, sir, fire that scoundrel and his men, or I'll report the facts as I know them to every stockholder in this company!"

"You'll never leave here to spread your damned slanders!"

Nearing spoke in choked, smothered voice; Barrett heard his pistol scrape the leather as he jerked it from

the sheath.

Barrett had read the cattleman's desperate intention in his first word; it was as plainly revealed to him as if daylight had discovered the movement of his hand to his weapon. Barrett bent low, sprang forward, caught Nearing's arm as he threw the pistol down to fire.

They struggled breast to breast for a moment, Nearing making no sound save a low one in his throat like a strangled sob. In that brief struggle the pistol was discharged; its report broke fearfully upon the quiet of the night. The flash revealed Nearing's face close to Barrett's own, white, frightful in its passion and fear. By a wrench of Nearing's arm Barrett sent the weapon flying among the cedars near the gate.

Gustin and Grubb came running, the sound of their feet heavy in the stillness which fell again as suddenly as night closed after the momentary flash of Nearing's gun. In the house a woman's voice was raised in the clamor of alarm. Nearing and Barrett stood submerged in the deeper darkness of the cedars; near the corral gate the running men had stopped, listening, cautious of rushing into something they could not see. Before they started forward again the front door opened, and Alma came speeding to the spot where the actors in the averted tragedy stood.

"Uncle Hal! I heard Uncle Hal's voice!" she said, pausing a little way from the gate, a fearful tremor in her tone.

"I'm here," Nearing answered, shaken, hoarse, the dying flash of his passion and his fear that drove him to attempt Barrett's life, leaving him weak.

Alma was beside him in a bound, clinging to him, pleading to know what had happened. Barrett could see her face, dim and nebulous as a mist-hidden star, lifted to him in wild appeal.

"It was only—it was just—" Nearing groped, lost for a word to cover his cowardly attempt.

"I fired at something I imagined," Barrett said. "I was nervous after what happened today. I ought to have had more sense."

Grubb and Gustin came up, stumbling in the dark. They heard Barrett's explanation, and spoke to each other in low words. A white-clad figure stood in the door, the dim light of a lamp in an inner room reaching faintly into the hall.

"It's all right, Aunt Hope—it was Mr. Barrett, shooting at nothing," Alma explained, a tilt of contempt in her words.

"Nothing, nothing at all," said Nearing, catching quickly at the absolution offered, a comforting lightness in his relieved tone.

Manuel came around the house with a lantern, holding it high to peer under it. He stood so a moment, flooding the group with sudden light. Alma had thrown a cloak over her nightdress; her hair was in confusion. She stood clinging to her uncle's arm, the arm so lately lifted in murderous intent. A moment her great eyes swept Barrett, who stood a little distance farther along toward the gate; quick, searching, questioning eyes. From Barrett back to Nearing, and to the cattleman's empty holster. A wild light of revelation leaped into her face; she searched the ground in a fearful, sweep-

ing glance. Manuel lowered the light and came forward.

"Go to your aunt, child," Nearing directed the girl.

Alma turned obediently back to the porch, where Mrs. Nearing stood exclaiming and moaning. Nearing spoke in Spanish to Manuel, who retreated with his light.

"I'll see you two in the morning," Nearing said to Gustin and Grubb, by way of dismissal for them. "Yes, yes — I'll come in a minute" — to his wife, who stood at the porch railing calling his name.

Alma took her aunt into the house, closing the door as if to say that she knew very well that something remained unfinished between the two principals in the mysterious midnight conference that had been broken by such a dramatic interference. When Nearing and Barrett again stood alone, the cattleman unbuckled his belt and holster, and threw them on the ground near Barrett's feet.

"If you can find that fool gun of mine, Barrett, hang it on the porch," he said. "You ought to throw it in the river — I'm not to be trusted with it any more!"

Barrett did not speak. Trouble had multiplied upon him in these few minutes until he felt its sombre weight. Nearing turned toward the house; stopped, came back.

"Barrett, you're right about it. Findlay's got me where he could ruin me with a word. I can't discharge him, I can't discharge the lowest of his gang."

"Is there anything I can do to help you?" Barrett asked, moved with pity by the hopelessness of the man's word and bearing.

“Help!” Nearing repeated, infinitely bitter. “There is no help when a man like me can’t help himself!”

He came a step nearer, leaned forward in his earnestness, speaking almost in Barrett’s face.

“Can you think it a trivial matter, a compact between thieves, when I’d lift my hand against you to keep it locked a little longer with its damned consuming fire in my heart? Help! By God, Barrett! I tell you I’ve been riding the range like a madman for two days, hoping to rid myself of that wolf. But he’s never alone; they’re always with him, close to him as his shadow.”

“But how long is this thing going to keep on?”

“Till one of us is dead!”

“He doesn’t appear to be after you very hard,” said Barrett, unable yet, for all the cattleman’s dramatic earnestness, his half confession, to absolve him of some scoundrelly partnership in a criminal business that had grown out of his control.

“No; he wants to suck the last drop of my living blood!”

“But your friends, Senator Nearing——”

“They can only destroy me if they interfere. I’ve suffered alone, I’ve burned, to avoid the disgrace and pain this scoundrel could bring to those who love me.”

“I don’t suppose it matters who—who—clears the atmosphere of that scoundrel, as long as it’s done,” Barrett said.

“Who can reach him if I fail? Barrett, you can’t bring down a shadow with your gun. I’ve tried for two days to head off what they’d set to spring on you,

but the wind is as vulnerable as that cat. He leads me on to my just vengeance only to laugh at me. But my hour will come!"

Barrett could feel the spirit of baffled vengeance, of hollow weariness, that bore on Nearing, making him old far beyond his years. The days since he had seen Nearing at Eagle Rock camp must have been filled with extraordinary cares and troubles to wear away his spirit so.

"Fire him, you say, turn him out. It's been my problem to get rid of him for, I don't know how long — years, years! How in the hell to do it, how in the hell to do it! There's only one way, by God! one way."

"Things must go on then, the way they've been going, till the clock strikes? We must keep on contributing our gain, and more, to this thief to keep his mouth shut and save you from the fire of your own kindling. Senator Nearing, it isn't square, it isn't right. It's got to stop, you've got to cut loose from that man, and do it at once. If you can't, deputize the power to me, some way, any way. I'll tell him he's fired, I'll rid the range of him!"

"Don't you understand, don't you understand?" Nearing repeated it slowly, dully, hopelessly, as one might appeal to the dead. "It can't be done, Barrett; I'm a ruined man the day he speaks, no matter who's in power for the company. To save myself, my name, my honor, my dearer than life, I've got to hold my place as president of this company till he's out of the way. After that — anybody — I don't care who."

Again he turned to the house; again he came back.

“I’ve told you more than any living soul besides myself and Findlay knows, Barrett. I’ve done this to square myself a little with you, to show you the provocation for my flare-up a little while ago. Consider my worried mind, consider—everything, and let it pass, will you, Ed?”

“I ought to have more sense than to go shooting at shadows,” said Barrett, with regret as simply expressed as if it had been that way.

Nearing’s gait was that of an old man as he mounted the steps and entered the house. Barrett groped about beneath the cedars until he found the pistol. He loaded the empty chamber, hung the weapon in its holster on the gate, and stood there revolving in his mind the confession he had heard from this man, in whom there seemed to be neither contrition nor remorse; only fear for the consequences of exposure. It seemed a strange moral bias for a man to adjust himself to, yet quite in keeping with the baronial ethics of the range.

Whatever it might be that Findlay held over him, it was not so grave that the president of the Elk Mountain Cattle Company could be justified in his treason to those who had trusted him, in one instance, at least, with their all. A man must be a coward in his soul who would go on living the life of a felon against his will, to shield himself from some rash, hot-headed deed.

Perhaps Nearing had pulled his gun on some other man as he had slung it on Barrett there at the gate. Murder might be the hold that Findlay held over him. But one man’s word against another man’s would not convict, especially when men held the relative positions

in society of Nearing and the superintendent of the Diamond Tail.

Outside the crime of murder there were few in the code of the range to give a man concern, cattle stealing alone excepted. In the cattle barons' law that offense transcended all others. That was a crime which called for no trial. Condemnation went with the very discovery; sentence was outstanding against every member of that accursed and driven tribe.

So it came down at last in Barrett's conclusion that Nearing had been a rustler in his day, involved with Findlay, perhaps. Should Findlay betray him, Nearing might swing as the most despicable of outlaws on some bleak-limbed cottonwood at the river side. It must be that. There was not room for any other fear so great in the heart of a man who had faced so long the perils and hardships of the range.

Findlay alone must share this secret with Nearing, or it would not be a weapon of such force in his hands. Divide it between three men, or five, and it would grow correspondingly weaker. Nearing had not said the secret was Findlay's alone, but his manner had justified that conclusion. He was ready, anxious, to do murder to free himself of the driving hand; he plotted against Findlay's life with the craft of a man seeking to destroy a cattle-killing beast, notorious for a hundred miles.

Barrett could picture that grim chase, that stalking, that tireless riding, that wait and watch for an unguarded moment. He could see the dark sneer of the hunted man's face, who rode in confidence, defiant, without fear, hedged around by watchful eyes. Nearing

must be preserved, he must be kept alive to wear away his heart in vengeful, fatuous gnawing. Dead, the shadow under which Findlay pursued his wholesale robbery would be lifted; other hands would take up the direction of the company's business, Findlay would be forced to flee for his life. While Nearing lived this shameful robbery must go on. Unless, unless——

There would be no such ending, though, to Nearing's disgraceful bondage. Findlay would not lay himself open to the peril of the cattleman's long-burning vengeance. It seemed logical that Findlay had confined his stealing to the Diamond Tail ranch for the past several years, at least. It would have been folly to extend his operations, Barrett reasoned, and run risks, when he could work his deviltry in safety there. And to put an end to the loss that was ruining the company, eating up the little patrimony that was so much to the Barretts; to end this tragic, shameful, disastrous conspiracy, Dale Findlay must die. There seemed to be no other way.

Barrett forgot his companions who waited for him anxiously at the bunkhouse door; forgot the lapse of time, for a little while the place. He stood in the black shadow of the cedars, his thoughts projected over the range like a sweeping searchlight beam, seeking to compass the fall of this dark robber, who held the soul of a man, no matter how weak and guilty a man, in his hand and crushed it, little by little, day by day.

A soft sound in the path behind him drew him back from this thought-winged search. Alma. She had struck a match to look under the cedars for her uncle's

gun, missed from his holster when she stood beside him there a little while ago, the truth half guessed.

She bent low, holding the branches aside, the light of her match strong on her face. Barrett was not more than twenty feet from her, but unseen. She applied another match to the flickering spark of the first, pushing her search with little rustlings among the branches. Barrett hoped she would pass without discovering him.

A little while in that spot, and she gave over the search, turning to the cedars on the other side of the gate, close against which Barrett stood. When her next match flashed, held in the cup of her hand against the low breath of wind, she discovered him, and the weapon she sought hanging beside him on the fastenings of the gate.

Alma started, exclaiming softly in surprise. Her little flame, caught for a moment unshielded, was whipped out by the wind.

"I didn't know anybody was here," she said, in the senseless speech of confusion.

"I should not have been," Barrett returned, in confusion scarcely less than her own. "I guess I was moonstruck—on a cloudy night."

"You know what I came to look for."

"It's here," he said. "Senator Nearing asked me to hang it on the porch. He was tired carrying the weight of it."

She touched his arm when she reached to take the heavy belt and pistol; she ran her fingers along it, as one blind, until she found his hand. Firm and warm, friendly and assuring, was the pressure of her fingers

for the moment before she relieved him of his charge.

“I slandered you tonight, Mr. Barrett,” she owned in contrition. “You are a man among men!”

She sped away to the house again as silently as she had come. Perhaps Barrett might be forgiven if, at that moment, he felt himself very nearly a hero, after all.

CHAPTER XIV

CATTLE KATE

NEARING surprised the three adventurers next morning by a full endorsement of their plan for taking up homesteads in the valley above the ranch. The country was coming to it, he said; all around the Diamond Tail farmers were beginning to cut up the land. There was no wisdom in the cattlemen's further contention with them, for the farmers would win in the end, the day of vast herds on the public domain was fast coming to a close.

Further than that, he offered them the use of his teams and hay-making machinery, the latter already stored in a shed on the fenced land from which the Iowa grangers had been driven. Give him a few tons of hay if they felt like it in return for the use of the machinery; that was as much as he asked. He advised them to get at their hay-making at once, as the time between then and frost was short.

Speechless in amazement as they were over this generous offer, Gustin and Grubb still had suspicion of something behind it that would not be so comfortable. They had expected to fight for the land. They believed now that Nearing had some scheme of his own of which they were designed to be the victims.

Barrett did not share this distrust. To him there appeared to be in the cattleman's concession the thought and deed of a man who felt his consequence

departing from him, the uselessness of further struggle against inevitable defeat. For, light as he tried to make his spirits appear that morning, Nearing was a changed man. His doom seemed over him, the shadow of it at his feet.

Grubb was not to be cheated out of his security by the unstable assurance of a cowman's word. He insisted on going to Saunders to consult his shrewd friend, Charley Thomson, interview the government land agent, and make entry in due and legal form for himself, at least. The others could go down when the hay-cutting was over and get their papers.

So it was agreed. Barrett and Dan were to go that morning and take possession of the fenced lands, tinker up the machinery and start cutting hay.

Dan Gustin was gay as he made ready for the start after Fred had swallowed his breakfast like a snake and gone his way to Saunders. Barrett enjoyed no such lightness of heart. The threat of tragedy that hung over that peaceful-seeming home reached out to him as one numbered in the climax of accumulated secrets, troubles and deceits, soon to fall as a thunderbolt among them.

Nearing had not been called upon before to play his part in the eyes of one to whom his duplicity was known. Bravely as he had carried concealed under his mantle, the fox that had gnawed away his vitals, he was breaking under fear of discovery at last. This morning he was haggard and gray, thin of cheek, restless of eye; a man baffled in his wild desire to rid himself of the thing that stood between him and his peace. He

did not refer to the preceding night's scene between him and Barrett as he drew the young man aside while Dan was hitching the team.

"To all appearances you men will be working for me," Nearing said. "Nobody's likely to bother you this fall under that arrangement, but I can't answer for what may happen to you next spring when you begin to plow, if you stick to it that long. You're pretty close to the edge of our range up there, somebody from the outside may come along and take a shot at you, even the Diamond Tail boys may cut loose when they find you're not hired by me. They resent the coming of the grangers more than the cattlemen themselves. It means cutting them loose from the only trade they know."

Barrett said that, for himself, he did not know that the experiment would extend beyond the hay-making. From what he had heard of the winters in that country, the prospect was not alluring.

So they parted, Barrett taking along his saddle-horse at Nearing's generous urging. Not a word was said between them of the past; not a hint of the future which that gray, half-defeated, baffled man must face and fight in his own way alone.

Dan found himself out of tobacco that evening, and Barrett was little better stocked. On Dan's suggestion that they ride to Bonita and replenish supplies for the busy days ahead of them, they saddled and set out.

Not much had been accomplished that day, for neither of them ever had been introduced to a mowing machine before. Barrett was the one who finally solved

the question of getting the sickle bar down to engage the grass, and getting it up again to pass over an obstruction.

Dan had turned the machine over to him with that, as a tribute to his mechanical genius, saying that the simple, skeleton construction of a rake was nearer his understanding. They had haggled off a few acres of grass by sunset, but such labor as that was little more than play to them, tough as both of them were.

"I want to introduce you to a friend of mine," Dan proposed. "You've heard me speak of her—Cattle Kate."

Barrett expressed more delight over the prospect than he felt, although he had a well defined curiosity to see this queen of the range, whose name was familiar in every cowpuncher's mouth for a hundred miles or more, he had been told. Thus, with the anticipation of delight on one hand, of a rather commonplace adventure on the other, the two friends rode into Bonita, the place that Fred Grubb had described as a louse clinging to the border of the military reservation.

Bonita was a place of few houses ranged along the road that divided the military reservation from the unrestricted part of that country. It had drawn as close to the source of its sustenance as it was geographically possible for it to do, and there it lay waiting with its doors open like gaping mouths, to swallow such victims as came its way.

It was a place proscribed, a pitfall of iniquities, where enlisted men from the post came to revel away their pay; to which cowpunchers and wranglers rode incred-

ible distances to break the lonely monotony of their lives. The place was no better and no worse than scores of its kind that have flourished and passed away. A small tributary of the river ran down behind it, the highroad before its door, and there Cattle Kate Medford kept the hotel, her father the saloon that was an important part of it.

Barrett and Dan arrived in Bonita long after nightfall, when the limited round of its entertainment was well under way. Several horses were ranged along the hitching rack before the hotel, many saddles lay on the porch to show that guests had come to stay the night out, and other nights out, until their money was done.

In spite of Dan's enlargement upon the attractions of Cattle Kate, Barrett was not thinking of her as he swung to the ground before her door. He was wondering, with a heaviness in his heart and gloom depressing him, whether Nearing had caught Dale Findlay off his guard that day, and balanced his shameful account.

Cattle Kate kept a small general store in the reception room, or office, of the hotel. There one might buy candy, kerchiefs for the neck; ammunition, clothing, peanuts, spurs; all the gauds and necessities in demand among the buckos of the range. In this little store, with the hotel counter on one side, chairs for loungers all around, Cattle Kate met Dan Gustin and his friend.

Cattle Kate, as Barrett had been given to understand by Dan as they journeyed to meet her, had gained her name and fame as a range rider in the days when her father was in the cattle business. His business, it

appeared, had been chiefly with the cattle of other men, to such extent that he had been mewed up a certain number of years in the state's corral to break him of the habit.

This had left a bitterness and vengeful spirit in his daughter, Cattle Kate, who was now the avowed enemy of every cattle baron between the Elk Mountains and the Black Hills. So much Dan thought necessary to tell his friend, to post him against any eccentricities of the young lady which were pretty sure to spring from her hot and handy tongue.

For all cowpunchers and grangers Cattle Kate had the hand of hospitality always extended. There was nothing in her stock a cowpuncher couldn't have, money or no money; his word was as good as a baron's bond. But if a crook tried to beat her, Cattle Kate was better than a lawyer at collecting. She had a little brass-bound code of her own. Dan declared with all solemnity that she could clip a man's ear at forty feet and never muss his hair.

From this picturesque preparation Barrett expected to meet something more she-devilish than appeared in a little white apron at the partition door behind which the tables of the dining-room were to be seen. Cattle Kate was a stocky young woman of perhaps twenty-eight, with a buffalo-like look about her head and shoulders. Her face was broad and masculine, her skin fair and freckled; her heavy black hair, ringletted like shavings from a carpenter's plane, was cut to fall to the nape of her neck. It was held back from her forehead by a long, curved comb, called a roach-comb in

that time.

Her formidable bill-collector was not in sight, nothing more repellent than the broad, starched strings of her little apron was about her ample waist. She smiled as she shook hands with Dan, greeting him with quick, glad word; and smiled, a different smile altogether, when she gave Barrett her hand.

One would not expect to find phases in this woman, Barrett thought, but there was as much difference between smile and smile as wind and calm. His was a tentative smile, an acceptance on condition, an arms'-length-off smile. Dan Gustin's went to him warm out of the middle of her partial heart.

Here was a girl known to hundreds of wild devils, honest man and thief, soldier and civilian, addressed familiarly by all of them, yet a good girl, as Barrett knew by that unfathomable something that stands in an honest woman's eyes. He felt an unaccountable gratification over this discovery; it seemed to him that he had found something precious in an unexpected place.

And she knew, as well as he knew, that he was not of the kind that commonly came to her door. Fred Grubb had said she knew the secrets of the range, that she could tell a man many things. Barrett wondered if she could tell him what it was Dale Findlay knew. If she did know this, she would have to think tenderly of a man before he could get the key of the secret from her hand.

"You boys had supper?" she asked. Finding they had not, she at once disappeared to provide it.

There was one other belated guest eating supper

when Cattle Kate summoned the two waiting customers into the dining-room. This man sat across the room from the table to which the hostess escorted Barrett and Dan, the light of the swinging lamp strong over him. As they took their places Dan leaned over the table and whispered:

“That’s Charley Thomson, the big lawyer.”

Not much outward indication of greatness about the man, Barrett thought, viewing him with renewed interest. Thomson was arrayed as usual, his rusty black coat over an untidy woolen shirt, but his gray-streaked black hair was combed to a smoothness that scarcely would have given a fly a footing. He seemed to carry his attitude of sarcastic contempt to the table with him, eating as though he scorned the operation, and bent to it only as one of the contemptible conventions of the world which custom bound him to serve.

“Must have some big case he’s up here lookin’ after, gettin’ witnesses or something,” said Dan. “Fred’ll miss him; he’ll have to go to somebody else.”

“It don’t look to me like he’d missed much,” Barrett said, offhand and unimpressed.

“They never hang a man that’s got Charley Thomson for a lawyer,” Dan whispered, cautious as if eulogy were a thing distasteful to the great lawyer’s ears. Dan watched him with admiration as he forked large pieces of steak into his fish-like mouth. “What do you suppose he charges for gittin’ a man off for a shootin’, Ed?”

“Not much, I’d say.”

“Three to five thousand!” said Dan, delivering it

triumphantly.

"You'd think he'd blow himself for a new shirt and collar, then," said Barrett.

"He wouldn't be the same man in a stiff collar, Ed. I don't believe he could pull the same in any other rig."

Dan himself was not the same with that impressive legal magnate so near at hand. His mind was so full of him, his eyes so fastened on him, that he had to seek the familiar road to his mouth with slow hand. Barrett looked to see him jab out his eye with his fork. A man had achieved fame, indeed, thought Barrett, when he could move by his mere presence such a vast feeling of respect and awe.

When Thomson finished his meal he took the greasy old flop-brimmed black hat from a corner of the table, put it on as if to announce that his service of convention was at an end, looked savagely about his immediate vicinity to make sure that no valuables were being left behind, and went out. He went with considerable haste, one hand in his trousers pocket, the skirt of his long coat pushed back from his rusty leg, as if pressed by the obligation of immediate payment for what he had consumed.

"He's headin' for the bar," Dan said. "Takes a drink before eatin' and after eatin', and every little while between. If you was to shut his whisky off he'd die in a day."

"If I had him against me I'd send him a barrel," Barrett said.

"Wouldn't make a bit of difference to Charley; he'd only drink so much in a day. You can't get him drunk,

Ed, no more than you can drownd a frog. I went to see him about killin' a feller the day I met you in Saunders."

"The devil you did!" Looking up in astonishment at the confession so frankly and casually made.

"Charley wouldn't take the case. Said to kill him first and then come to see him. But he said it wasn't no game for a cowpuncher like me, and I tell you, Ed, I believed him when he told me what it cost. So that's why that man's a livin' now."

"Was it another man, or——"

"Same one, Ed. Foreman of my bunch, little pock-marked, tow-headed devil with his front teeth slantin' out like a roof from pullin' on dried beef they used to feed him and bring him up on when he was a kid down in Texas. Wasn't worth it, Ed. I wouldn't give three to five thousand dollars to shoot that man if I had as much money as Hal Nearing."

"I don't believe you'd get that much fun out of it," Barrett returned, his own conscience still unquiet, still under the melancholy cloud of the deed necessity had set to his hand.

"I'd like to know what old Charley's up here in Bonita for," Dan ran on, unable to get away from the remarkable event. "Nobody ain't been killed up here lately that'd be worth his time to fool with."

The question of the lawyer's presence in Bonita appeared to be answered in part, at least, when the two friends left the dining-room. Dale Findlay and Thomson were lighting cigars from the box of the best brand Cattle Kate sold. Shoulder to shoulder, Thomson talk-

ing in his low droning voice, the pair left the hotel, walking away together in the dark.

Dan's mystification, astonishment, curiosity, combined in his face in a speechless stare. He turned from Kate to Barrett; from Barrett back again to Kate. She smiled, understanding him better than if he had expressed his thoughts with his lips.

"I wouldn't like to be the man that's got to pay the bill," said Dan, turning from the door, where he had stood a little while looking after the illustrious pair.

Barrett left his friend leaning over the cigar case, Cattle Kate with elbows on it across from him, their heads rather close together. It seemed to be Dan's night, there being no immediate competition. Barrett wondered if there could be a man for every horse, to say nothing of every saddle on Cattle Kate's porch, in town. He concluded presently that there was, basing the conclusion entirely on the burst of noise that issued from the little dance hall at the farther end of the one-sided street.

In this a band of three Italians supplied the music that was only incidental to the beating of boot-heels, and loud calling of the figures of the quadrille. Barrett looked a moment through the open door upon a scene such as he had witnessed with variations, and no elaborate ones at that, in many quarters of the globe.

Long ago this sort of diversion had lost its novelty for him, seasoned veteran in spite of his years. He turned back toward the peace and quiet of the white-painted plank hotel, thinking of the two men who had walked from its door a little while before.

A pair to draw to, Dale Findlay and that man. What sort of an evil scheme might hatch under their joint brooding no man could tell, but it would be a heavy bill for somebody, as Dan had said. The harried, gaunt-growing face of Hal Nearing presented itself with the thought. Barrett began to feel a great pity for the man, a great desire to take hold of the tangle of his life with him and help clear away the encumbering wreckage.

Back to the hotel, to find Dan and Cattle Kate still in their close conference across the showcase glass. Barrett sat on the steps, the light from the door dimly on the heap of saddles close at hand, to wait for his friend to conclude this pleasant interlude in his too barren life.

As always, the question of what next in the affairs of the Diamond Tail presented itself to Barrett. Plainly, things could not be allowed to run on as they were going, Nearing seeking in his insane way to end by violence the evil charm of this secret in his life which no man could share; Findlay elusive as the wind before him, hedged about by guards at every turn. Even tonight the hound-faced man and his partner were in Bonita, dancing with the poor scarecrow drabs in the dive up the road.

Barrett chafed under the inactivity of a single hour. Nearing had refused his offer of cooperation, fearful of discovery; in the desperation of his fear he had drawn his weapon to slay him in his own dooryard. What next? Where to take hold of this repellent tangle of Nearing's life without bringing down the disgrace

which the cattleman bartered his soul to avert? For spare the man, small of soul, cowardly, treacherous and dishonest as Barrett knew him to be, this robbed stockholder desired now above all.

Not for Nearing's sake. For the memory of a swift hand fleeting softly down his arm to clasp his fingers; for the memory of wrong generously admitted, and made right in a quick word out of the heart.

Dan was obliged to yield his monopoly of Cattle Kate presently by the arrival of more customers to swell the tide of business in Bonita. These were cowboys from a ranch some fifty or sixty miles distant, some of them known to Dan. They greeted him hilariously, and carried him off to the saloon which was part of Cattle Kate's establishment run by her father. Barrett dodged them by sneaking off in the dark.

It appeared that Dan was in for a night of it now, for presently Barrett saw him making for the dance hall with the others. In that place of diversion another saloon was maintained, with games of chance to comb up whatever loose change might escape the rest. Barrett knew that Dan would come home like a roaming dog in his own time. He had no inclination to join him in his revelries.

As Barrett rode back to the squat log cabin in the hay meadows, his gloomy forebodings of failure attended him. Numerous schemes for taking up his purpose from a new angle presented, only to dissolve in the test of application. There seemed to be but one way to save the investors in the Elk Mountain Cattle Company, himself in particular, from complete loss

without bringing Nearing down to a fearful and unknown disgrace. Foolish as it appeared to him, senseless, unbelievable, this could be accomplished only in the killing of a man.

Barrett rebelled against the weakness of this argument. To him it seemed so insanely unreasonable that no man should have either the effrontery to advance it or the credulity to accept it. Yet he had accepted it, he did accept it. Dale Findlay must die. To save Nearing's honor, from what blotch of horrible stain only two men knew, that close-mouthed, dark-souled man must be shot like a wolf.

Imagine the situation, said Barrett, fuming and fevered in his rebellious, indignant mind. A hireling thief must be kept in a position where he could go on robbing with impunity, because one man had transgressed in some monstrous deed, the secret of which was Findlay's. And a man could not be shot out of hand, without excuse or justification, without strong provocation of some kind. True, Findlay had attempted Barrett's life. On that score Findlay's life was forfeit to him; for his future security he might shoot Findlay on sight and probably walk clear in the law. But there was no desire in him to do this, unmanly as such an attitude might seem.

Barrett felt himself to be in a blind lane, against the barriers of which he would wear himself out lunging to find an opening. Better to sleep on it, he reasoned; let it rest until tomorrow. He put it aside from his contrivings and speculations, and spread his blankets on new hay, and slept.

CHAPTER XV

FINDLAY THROWS HOT LEAD

DAN had not returned when Barrett woke before sunrise next morning. It was not to be expected, Barrett considered, until Dan's money was gone; nothing for him to worry about, much as he liked the young chap and wished him better companions. Dan would resent it if he should go for him and fetch him back to the hay-making. Let him alone and he would return shame-faced and repentant in a day or two.

Barrett raked into windrows the hay cut the day before, and then spent considerable time working out which end of the hayrack was the bow. He got it straight after several experiments in fitting it to the wagon, and put on what he considered a tremendous load of hay, with the intention of driving it over to Nearing's barn after dinner.

It wasn't so much of a load, but it was fresh and fragrant, a fit offering on the altar of gratitude, Barrett believed, such as was due for the favors shown and the help extended in this venture. Nearing should have, by all courtesy and right, the first fruits of their labor there.

He drove this imposing load of hay around to the front of the cabin, and left it standing in the fairway of the harbor, as he thought of the grass-grown road letting through the gate into the highway. He was returning from feeding the team to prepare his own

dinner, when his attention was arrested by two horsemen approaching from the direction of the ranch.

There seemed to be something familiar in the pose of one of them. Barrett went on past the house, stopping near the wire fence at the roadside to wait the rise of the riders out of a little swale, thinking it might be some of the boys of the Diamond Tail whom he would not want to let pass without a friendly hail.

At the first sight of the riders as they came up out of the hollow, Barrett's heart fluttered and seemed to drop. Dale Findlay was the rider whose carriage seemed familiar, fixed but transitorily in his memory from the day he had seen the superintendent ride into Eagle Rock camp.

Barrett was unarmed; his revolver hung in the house, a hundred feet or more behind him, where he had left it that morning before going to work. It had seemed such an unfitting implement to drag around in the peaceful occupation of hay-making. Besides, the weight of it was considerable around the body of a sweating man.

Too late now he realized his over-confidence in his situation and pursuit. Dale Findlay, not a hundred yards away, had his gun out, carrying it raised high to throw down for a shot that he should not mean to cripple.

Barrett made a dash for the load of hay a few rods to the right of where he stood, hoping desperately to make that shelter before Findlay could throw a telling shot. As he ran he heard the crack of their guns, but he made it to the wagon untouched. There he waited

until they should ride past a little way, as he knew they would do, in their purpose of driving him into the open again.

Findlay rode by in a moment, his speed checked. He leaned over his saddle-horn, looking sharply along the load of hay, into which Barrett pressed himself until only his legs and feet were visible on the ground. Evidently Findlay could not see that much of him, for he threw a shot at the top of the load, calling to his companion some directions which Barrett could not catch.

Hoping, against all reason as he knew, that he could keep the hay between him and the two scoundrels who sought his life as coolly and systematically as they would brand a calf, Barrett broke from his hiding and ran for the house. He ran a quartering course, in such manner that Findlay's companion would see him first.

There was no ground, certainly, for Barrett's thought that this man would not be so deeply, so personally, concerned in killing him as Findlay. But this was the thing that flashed into his mind as he ran toward the cabin, holding a course that, if followed, must compel him to veer sharply to reach the door.

Barrett heard the first shot that followed his break from shelter strike the logs of the house. Others close after it snipped through the tall grass at his feet. Findlay was not firing those shots; he knew that as well as if he had turned to see. Findlay had not seen him yet; every foot was a precious gain. It was the hound-faced man, companion of Findlay on all his rides, who was throwing those wild shots. Findlay's aim would be more deadly.

What wild-rising thoughts press into the compass of a breath when a man flees the outreaching hand of death! In a yard Barrett reviewed the affairs of the Elk Mountain Cattle Company from its beginning to that day; reviewed his own life, its mistakes, its hidden things, its hopes and ambitions now so far away. Alma Nearing, Dan Gustin, Fred Grubb, all leaped up and whirled in the fast-spinning reel of panoramic review, the hot, burning urge of life speeding him on toward the open door.

It seemed as though his breast must burst in the pressure of that perilous flight, all life concentrated there, big, pulse-quickenened, ready to leap away from the broken citadel which it warmed and sanctified. Dale Findlay was firing now, and Barrett was still a rod from the door.

At the very threshold the pang of a bullet smote him. The pain of it was as if a redhot bayonet had been plunged into his breast. Barrett sank to his knees, the day suddenly darkening, a hand thrown out to the doorpost; he fell within the door, arms spread as if to embrace the shelter his striving could not win in time.

But the life, the soul, that mysterious essence that quickens brain and heart, had fled for only a moment, as swallows fly in consternation at evening from a familiar resting-place at the fall of a bit of mortar, a fragment of soot. Death had not won dominion yet; the pale soul came fluttering back to its seat.

At the sound of a horse galloping into the dooryard, Barrett drew himself into the cabin, staggered to his

feet, closed and barred the heavy batten door.

A bullet splintered the oak near him, bursting through the thick plank as he drew the bar into the upright forks fitted rudely to support it. Blood was rising to his mouth as he turned to snatch his pistol from the nail beside the door. He knew a lung had been pierced; the thought of death was upon him.

The one small window in the cabin, its glass long since shot out by passing cowboys, had been boarded up with sawmill slabs spiked to the logs. It would need a crowbar to pry them loose. These slabs were bullet-pitted outside, indicating that they had been put there by the former occupants of the place after the shining mark of their window panes had been dimmed. The room was dark, save only for the light that leaked in about the crevices of the door, a gloomy place for a trapped, wounded man to defend the failing shred of his life as he might.

Barrett believed he had but a few minutes to live. His hurt was in the right breast, a little way below the collar bone. With every inspiration of breath he could feel the blood bubble out of the wound; where it escaped into the pleural cavity there was a burning as if a stream of living fire wasted from his veins. And, strangely enough, inconsistent with his peril as it might be, Barrett's dominating thought was that he must die unavenged, unable to drag even one of his murderers down with him into the dark.

Findlay and the other man evidently believed him already dead; near the door they were talking of him as one accounted for and done. Barrett knew they

were still sitting in their saddles, not thinking it worth while to dismount over such a trivial affair.

Sick as he was, dizzy as the world and dark before his vision; racked by such agony as no man endures twice, the desire for revenge leaped as high in Barrett's heart as if life bloomed full behind it. For of all the human passions, vengeance is the first, the strongest, and the last.

Light came in between the logs at a place near the door where the earth plaster had fallen away. The hole was small, about a foot from the floor. Barrett pulled himself along the floor to the opening and squinted out. He could see the legs of a horse a little way from the cabin wall. The rider he could not see.

With pistol barrel he pushed cautiously against the hard adobe which filled the four-inch crack between the logs. The two men rode nearer; one tried the door with his foot from the saddle. Barrett heard Findlay order his man to inspect the window and, in his haste to improve the little time he believed to be his, he pushed incautiously against the blocking earth, dislodging a large piece which fell near Findlay's horse, startling the beast to a warning snort.

Findlay dashed away from the door. Peering through his chink, Barrett saw him, leaning and looking in his cautious way, lift his pistol and fire several quick shots into the door. Although he could see Findlay plainly, Barrett discovered that he could not train his pistol through the chink for a shot. At the best he could do little more than cripple the horse, but he fired, gripping, clinging, holding in reeling desperation

to the fast-running line of life.

Findlay's answering shot knocked dirt into Barrett's eyes. Blindly the wounded man fired again. To his surprise, no shot replied. He steadied himself with hand against the wall, and looked out, wondering dimly if his wild chance shot had hit.

But no; they had another plan for putting out the embers of life which they had discovered still warming their victim's heart. They were backing the load of hay toward the cabin; the smoke that blew ahead of it told that they had set it afire. They intended to block up the door with the burning load of hay and roast him like a grub in a nut.

Barrett believed it would be better to die in the open, fighting with his last breath, the trembling thread quickly cut by a bullet, than to lie huddled there in torture multiplied. He got to his knees, pistol in his left hand, his right arm numb from the wound in a numbness that seemed spreading, involving all his members.

He groped with his pistol barrel until he found the bar across the door; pushed it, dislodged it. A moment so, weaving upon his knees, he stood, like a seasick man upon a rolling ship. Then a darkness rose, and swept upward and over him, obscuring all the world.

Yet not insensible he lay there, smothered in this incomparable blackness, face to the floor. Some finer sense, some independent, projectible attribute, it seemed, stood sentinel outside that threatened door. Barrett saw, as a man in a dream, every turn of the wheels that brought the bulging end of the load of hay

nearer; saw the gray-green smoke rising in growing volume above the red flame that mounted and wavered and whipped in the wind; saw the scuffing feet of Findlay and his man as they pushed at the thick wagon-tongue, peering through the smoke and flame to guide the load precisely.

All this he saw, although his eyes were blinded in the obscuration of a blackness deeper than the deepest night, and his limbs lay heavy, helpless, immovable as if weighted with chains.

Perhaps the spirit, apart from his body save by some thin filament that soon must dissolve, hovered there cognizant of all this striving, this cruel determination, to have an insignificant human life. Whatever it was, Edgar Barrett saw without eyes, heard without ears, but did not feel again the pain of his wound or the dread of death.

Then away from this immediate scene the sentinel seemed to speed, discovering one riding swiftly, a coiled rope swinging at the saddle-horn, dust of the fleet horse gray in the green plain.

Nearer the rider came, yet there seemed a mist before his face. Barrett was conscious of a struggle to identify the rider, as a man rebels and fights to break through the inconsistencies of a dream, knowing that it is nothing more than a dream, and turns in relief, though still asleep, when he has thrown off the overriding terror of its shadow.

Dan Gustin, said that living sense that struggled in the wounded man's soul to pierce the mist before the rider's face; Dan Gustin, the man logically to be ex-

pected. Still the rider's face was obscured by the mist. Only the pistol was plainly evident in his hand, and the coiled rope swinging at the saddle-horn.

There was a soundless burst of flame from the rider's pistol; another, another. Quick mounting, frantic riding away, that leaping, soundless flame reaching after the murderous scoundrels. And then peace; profound, silent, sweet.

The mysterious sentinel returned again to report to Barrett's numb body the contact of cold water on his face. And there was the sound of a woman crying, piteous and low.

Barrett opened his conscious eyes again upon the day. Not far away from where he lay stood the burning load of hay, a saddled horse still straining on the rope that ran from saddle-horn to end of the iron-looped wagon tongue. The cabin he could not see, but the sky was over him, the breath of life was in his throat, the sound of a woman's low, choked sobbing in his ears.

Alma Nearing bent over him, her weeping changed at sight of his revival into a glad, a boundlessly thankful, cry.

It was as though death had yielded him one flash of consciousness that he might impress upon the records of human gratitude, scroll so sacred and so scant, the credit he must have been uneasy in his grave to have left ungiven. Then the door was closed again, and Barrett lay as the dead.

CHAPTER XVI

A PACT OF INNOCENTS

AUTUMN colors were coming into the sugar maples and quaking aspen in the patio where the fountain tinkled among the roses. As Barrett sat there in the afternoon sun with Alma Nearing, recovering from his weakness and his wound, the first fall of leaves, already touched by frost, showered at their feet.

A strong patient, fit to take the road; a rebellious patient against the soft restraint of his lovely nurse, who denied him his pipe with stern prohibition. Barrett argued that a man was well when the yearning to smoke came over him with such insistent and healthy urge.

"Tomorrow," she yielded. "But if the smoke gets into that tender spot in your lung and irritates it, and you take consumption, don't blame me."

"It's as sound as it ever was, Alma," he insisted, thumping his chest to prove his contention.

"Tomorrow; not one minute sooner."

Barrett looked moodily at the whirling shower of leaves that came down the wind from the maple tree. Alma, mischief in her eyes, reached behind her and produced his friendly little pipe.

"I can't bear your sufferings any longer," she said, laughing at his simple joy. "Smoke, even if it does make you sick."

"Somebody's always saving my life — this is the sec-

ond time for you," he told her, so gravely that the joy seemed to have departed from him.

"Are you sorry?" she asked.

"Only that I owe so much I'll never have lives enough to go around and pay my debts. First it was Dan, down at Saunders, then——"

"Dan? Down at Saunders? When did you get into a scrape at Saunders, Ed?"

"It was that rustling gent, you know, the fellow from the Indian Nation, the one that—lost his life up in the canyon the evening I went to Eagle Rock camp with your Uncle Hal."

"Manuel told me about *that* one," she said, speaking as if she resented the conspiracy of secrecy that had kept this news from her in other sources.

Barrett had got the impression, as such sick fancies creep in and establish themselves sometimes, that he had told Alma all about meeting and fighting the rustler as he lay stretched out under Dale Findlay's bullet. He had the impression, moreover, that he had revealed a great many things which had been better kept to himself. This was a revelation to him now. He felt that he must not have emptied himself of quite all he knew.

"It was a sad and unfortunate thing for me," he said, leaving no room for doubt of his entire sincerity. "That thing kept bothering me all the time while I was laid up, coming up to haunt me like a mistake a man makes that costs somebody his life."

"He got just what was coming to him, all right!" she said, with strong indorsement of his deed. "I'd shoot one of those range wolves in a second if I caught

him running off our cattle. You remember I told you there's a never-dying feud between me and that tribe?"

"I remember. And the next time it was old Fred Grubb," hurrying on from the question of feuds and vengeance, not pleased to hear her talk of that. "The time that Mexican and Findlay played the joke on me, you know."

"What a fool I was to try to make you believe, even myself believe, it was a joke!"

"No; I don't see that you were," he said, after a philosophical pause. "It might have been; I could have been convinced that it was if Findlay hadn't followed it up so rough."

"The cowardly sneak!"

"You saved my precious remnant of a life that day. But you never told me, Alma, how you knew. You didn't just happen along; I thought I saw you coming, away down the road, while I was lying there where I kicked over in front of the door."

"But of course you didn't, you couldn't," she said, looking at him curiously.

Barrett shook his head, sunk in a solemn cloud of thought. He lived again that experience when all that was sentient in him had crossed the borderland of death, prone upon the cabin floor, the burning load of hay against the door.

"Findlay and that shadow of his, Worthy Glass——"

"Worthy! Heaven help the rest of us!" said he.

"That's his name, the name on the payroll, anyway."

"Is it still there?"

"Yes," said she, sadly. "Findlay and that man came here that morning with an old slinking scoundrel named Thomson, a lawyer of evil repute. Dale and Uncle Hal were shut up with that old snake an hour or more. What they were trying to get out of him I don't know. I happened to be at the barn, saddling up to go to the post, when Dale and Glass came in for their horses. I heard Dale say they'd go on up to the hay ranch while they were at it, and clean that bunch out. I rushed to Uncle Hal, but he refused to take it seriously. At least he pretended to make light of it. I never have been able to understand, Ed, why he didn't go out and call them off."

Alma made this revelation reluctantly, shame for the confession in her low, sad voice. Barrett shook his head, slowly, as if he, too, had pondered it long, yet could not answer it.

"It was because he thought Dan and I ought to be able to take care of ourselves," he said, willing to manufacture an excuse for Nearing for her sake.

"Findlay knew you were alone; he knew very well that charmer of his was holding Dan in Bonita!"

"Cattle Kate?"

"Who else? Dan's been here a dozen times to see you and try to square himself for failing you when he was needed. Poor fool! he doesn't know himself that she was only stringing him along to help Findlay. She'd kill a man to help Findlay."

"She didn't impress me as a bad one," Barrett reflected.

"Not that way, not bad in the way the other ones in Bonita are bad. Only she's blind over Dale Findlay, poor soul. I know her well, I often stop and see her when I go through Bonita to visit the post."

She seemed to have dropped the thread of her recital. Barrett waited a little while for her to take it up again, then reminded her.

"When Senator Nearing refused to interfere with their innocent diversion, you saddled and rode after them yourself."

"They were about a mile up the road when I started. But they never looked back, they knew there wasn't a man on this ranch that would follow them!"

She said this bitterly, the scorn that she could so well express in the mere modulation of a word, the lifting of a brow, the toss of her head, was wanting there. There was much of sadness, something of shame.

Barrett took her hand in the frankness of the understanding that had grown up between them. He held it in firm and sincere clasp while he looked into her eyes.

"Alma, I'd rather it was you that came than a regiment of cattlemen," he said.

She smiled, reached with her free hand and patted his, with the comforting, assuring caress of one much older and wiser than he.

"And then what?" he asked, holding very tightly to her hand.

"They rode off, and I snaked the wagon away from the door," she replied.

"And that was all?"

"That was all, Ed."

Barrett was not satisfied. He wanted to confirm or dismiss the impression he had that shots had been fired, that Findlay and Glass had retreated, dropping their devilish scheme to have his life by fire, only upon the argument of force. But this must wait a closer understanding, a more intimate footing between them, granting the hope that grew within him that it would come.

"Why didn't you let Dan in to see me, when you never denied old Fred?" he asked.

"I was sore at him, Ed. I wanted to punish him. And I wanted to tell you, before you saw him again, how Cattle Kate fooled the poor dunce, and honied him out of being there to help you. I thought you ought to know what a weak stick he is to lean on."

"It was my fault, as much as Dan's, I guess. I might have waited for him, or hunted him up and brought him home."

"You're all alike," she declared in mock contempt, flinging his hand away. "You'll stand together in that great fraternity of manly weakness, in spite of everything."

"Dan's a good boy," Barrett said, so simply serious that she nodded in agreement.

"Good, but weak."

"Well, it wouldn't do to turn the hose on many men's feet," said he.

"All clay," she nodded, that spark of humor which lit her face like a candle at a window growing in her soft dark eyes. "But I believe some of them are baked; they stand up better than others."

Barrett had no rejoinder for her pleasantry. 'Awhile

they sat in silence, Alma stretching her hand abstractedly to catch the falling leaves. Barrett looked at her covertly, as if to undertake something he might not be permitted to do, as he filled his pipe the second time and tried to suppress the crackle of the match. She was so engrossed by her thoughts that she did not interpose, nor put out a hand to deny him this solace so long suspended.

"Ed," she began presently, her gaze on the ground, "I asked Uncle Hal to discharge Findlay after that shooting. I never was so surprised and humiliated in my life as I was when he refused. The worst of it is, Ed, he can't."

"Yes, I know it," he replied.

"What do you suppose that man Findlay is, Ed?" she asked, turning to him suddenly.

"I believe he's the biggest crook on this range."

"He's the king-pin of the cattle rustlers in this part of the country," she said, her voice lowered to a fearful whisper, her face white. She sat a moment leaning toward him, as she had bent to impart her disturbing secret, her breath laboring, her manner painfully agitated. "Manuel knows, he knows more than anybody suspects. They wouldn't let him live an hour if they knew."

"I've suspected something of the kind," Barrett told her, no surprise quickening in him at her revelation.

"I've thought for a long time he's got some kind of a grip on Uncle Hal, he's changed so in the last three or four years. I knew it when he refused to discharge Findlay, yes, I knew it that night—that night he—"

he — pulled his gun on you out there by the gate."

"Alma!"

"I knew it! You took the blame, Edgar Barrett, to spare us the shame of his unspeakable deed. He tried to kill you that night because you knew too much. Tell me what it is."

"I provoked him, I didn't go at it right," Barrett excused, seeing that it would be useless to deny what she knew too well.

"There was something more than sudden irritation behind his attempt," she declared in great earnestness. "Uncle Hal never has been a man to shy at a shadow. You found out something between him and Findlay. What was it, Ed?"

"I was impatient, impertinent, maybe; but I was sore over that affair at Eagle Rock camp that day. I made the same demand that you did later—I said he had to fire Findlay and all his rustlin' gang. I didn't go at it right, you see."

"What did you say you'd do if he refused?" she asked him, shrewdly.

"Well, that's where I stumbled again, Alma. I made the blow that I'd take it up with the stockholders, tell what I knew, and try to oust him from the head of the company."

"And he would have killed you to keep you still!"

"He was tired that night, he'd been in the saddle two days, he told me. I had no right to bully him; maybe I got about what was comin' to me. Oh well, it was only a bluff, I think, anyway. His heart wasn't in it."

"Only you know better," she said, sadly. "He used

to be such a good man, such a frank, kind, generous man. I can't believe he's intentionally involved with Findlay, he must have been drawn into it by some subtle plotting to get him into it. Will you be honest with me, Ed, and tell me what you've found out?"

"Very little, Alma. I only know that Findlay's holding a club over him, driving him to stand by and see the company robbed in broad daylight. He told me himself that Findlay could drag him down to disgrace, ruin him, with a word. More than that he wouldn't tell. He refused my offer to help him on any terms. It seemed to scare him."

"Then it must go on, and on!" said she, despairingly.

"It can't be very long now," he comforted her, with the portentous calmness of one certain of his hour.

Alma shook her head, the shadow of a great sadness in her eyes.

"It's natural for you to think of squaring your account with Findlay, you'd be a coward if you didn't. But you can't get at him, Ed."

"We'll not talk about it," he said, with gentle finality.

"We must. It's been growing in your heart to kill him all the time, you talked of that, and nothing else, while you had fever. Manuel said you got up one night and went looking for your gun when you heard Findlay talking in the house. Do you remember?"

"I don't remember, Alma," he said, in the same gentle, calming voice.

"He owes it to you, the law would uphold you if

you shot him on sight. But you can't touch him; he's never alone, not for a minute, except when he comes into this house. All feuds end at the door; he knows he's safe here."

"I saw him alone at Bonita one night. Well, Charley Thomson was with him."

"Where were they?"

"Just leaving Cattle Kate's hotel."

"Of course. And I'll bet anything Kate was hanging around behind him with a gun under her apron. She'd have killed you, or any man that made a break to pull a gun."

"Yes, she was right there," he admitted, not having counted that circumstance before. "But I didn't want to go after him then; I was willing to let that little joke of his pass."

"And the minute he got from under Kate's eye, Glass or another one of the three that always hang around him, stepped in behind. You'd have seen if you'd watched."

"I didn't watch. But Glass was in town, I saw him in the dance hall."

"You'll always see one of them right at hand, Ed. Another man's been after him a long time, I know it as well as you do, no matter how I found it out. If he can't get him, how can you?"

"I might have him arrested, in spite of my promise to Senator Nearing that I wouldn't," Barrett suggested, speaking of that course as one mentions a contemptible thing.

"You know why he asked you not to interfere."

"But you'd think a drowning man would want help, no matter what kind of water he's in."

"It must be that Findlay's got him mixed up in his cattle-stealing from other ranches besides this," she said. "I don't see what else Uncle Hal would fear so desperately. Nothing would ruin or disgrace him quicker than the discovery of that. They hung a cattleman for stealing when I was a little girl, took him from his house at night and left him strung to a pine."

"It may be that, Alma, but I hardly think it is."

Barrett thought of the young Englishman who had come there on a mission similar to his own, and of the inscription on his tombstone as quoted by Fred Grubb. All through the illness from his wound this thought had obtruded. He had come to the belief that Nearing had shot the stranger as he had attempted Barrett's own life, perhaps in a burst of passion and fear; that Findlay had witnessed the act, and held it over the cattleman with oppression that increased day by day.

Alma turned to him, a great earnestness in her eyes.

"We can find out what this secret power of Findlay's is," she said. "Will you help me do it? When we know what it is, we can break his cinch on poor old Uncle Hal."

"I'll help you find out what we can, Alma," he told her, not with dramatic emphasis, just in simple earnestness that had a far more convincing effect of sincerity.

"Where to begin, where to turn, without pulling the house down on our heads," said she.

"Cattle Kate," said Barrett, in the same assured, calm tone.

“Kate knows, if any living third person knows,” Alma admitted, thoughtfully. “Or that old lawyer, Charley Thomson; I believe he knows.”

“It would take money to get it out of him, and Findlay already has him roped. We’ll have to count him out.”

“Kate would know,” said she, in her soft, thoughtful way. “But she’d never tell anything that would hurt Dale Findlay.”

“If she got sore at him she would.”

“That’s a long shot, Ed.”

“I believe we could cripple him, anyhow. But you might have to do something disagreeable to put it through.”

“Count on me for anything, Ed.”

“We’d have to make Kate jealous, that would be the easiest way. You can see the fire in that woman’s eye that would burn a man up if she thought he’d double-crossed her.”

“Kate’s that kind of a girl,” Alma agreed, looking at him sharply. “You seem to know her pretty well.”

“I’ve only seen her once,” he said.

“Oh, only once. And it would be my job to make her jealous?”

“Not unless you’re game to go the limit, Alma. You might have to humble your pride and self-respect to the extent of talking to him once in a while——”

“Oh, just talking to him wouldn’t do it, Ed.”

“Ride out with him, maybe, or go to a dance or two. Do they ever have any dances around at the ranches? The kind the cowboys are invited to, I mean.”

"They don't invite to such affairs, just spread the news and they come. Yes, the open season for such rags will soon be on. Yes, I could go to a dance with Dale, and make love to him a little."

"No, no! no love-making anywhere! we'll draw the line at that."

Barrett discovered considerable alarm. At which Alma, looking very demure, nodded sagely.

"You'll make love to Cattle Kate," she said.

"Not on your life!" in great fervor of denial. "I'm not out to have any lady cuttin' notches in my ears with a gun."

"Oh well, then," said she.

"I know it wouldn't be a very pleasant thing for you, Alma, but all you've got to do is give Cattle Kate the slightest excuse to nail him for his frivolity. She'll do the rest."

"Dale used to want me to go to the dances with him, but he hasn't asked me lately. He used to be very mushy over me, it was a regular programme of his to ask me to marry him every two weeks."

"The devil it was!" said Barrett, looking so miserable that Alma laughed to cheer him up a bit.

"But nothing ever came of it," she sighed.

"I should hope not!" said he.

"I haven't been to one of the ranch dances for a long time, three or four years," she said, dropping her teasing and going back to the serious business in hand. "That was over at Four Corners, seven or eight miles back of where you boys are cutting hay."

"I've heard Dan mention it. Sort of community

dance house, isn't it?"

"Built where two main roads cross, just like they build schoolhouses in places where they need them. People drive as far as sixty miles to attend the dances there, the belles and *beaux sabreurs* of the range. I wouldn't mind going once more."

"I think I'd kind of like it myself."

"You might take Cattle Kate," she suggested.

"I beg to be excused. I suppose," doubtfully, "it would be all right for you to go over there with that man?"

"Of course. He couldn't very well carry me off on the horn of his saddle—he wouldn't ever think of it, anyway—there isn't romance enough in Dale Findlay for that. No, seriously, Ed, I believe it's a great scheme. If we can get Kate after him like a hornet, she'll skin him alive."

"Yes, but we're overlooking something, Alma. Findlay isn't likely to feel very friendly to you after taking that shot at him up there at the hay-ranch."

"Don't worry over that—Dale isn't one of your onion-skinned men. He's been friendlier than in a long time, I seem to have advanced in his estimation considerably. The provoking part of it is, the wretch persists in it that I only interrupted another of his little jokes."

"If that man gets any funnier somebody will have to speak to him about it," said Barrett. "Has he been around here very much since then?"

"Nearly every day. But not to see me, just. That old sneak Thomson is nearly always with him now. There's some new scheme they're working out between

them, pressing Uncle Hal, driving him to the wall. We've got to work fast, Ed, or it will be too late."

There in the sunny patio, the red and amber leaves falling around them, they worked out the best, the most promising plan they could devise for coming at Hal Nearing's secret, in all kindness and fidelity to him. But Barrett suspected, although he did not know, that in baring the secret which Nearing covered so jealously in his breast, they might multiply his sorrows and their own. Yet it were better that the patient die in the quick agony of the operation, than linger on in the sapping torture of an incurable disease.

CHAPTER XVII

ON THE BONITA ROAD

DURING the three weeks that Barrett had lain a forced recipient of Hal Nearing's hospitality, he had seen but little of the cattle baron, scarcely more of his wife. But such as he saw of them only set deeper an opinion formed on the night of Nearing's attempt upon his life: that Mrs. Nearing was fully cognizant of her husband's vassalage to Findlay, and of his wild desire to rid himself of the scoundrel's oppression. She knew that Nearing rode day by day like a man pursuing a phantom, hoping to lodge a shot that would set him free.

The marvel of it was that Findlay came and went at the ranch-house with such freedom and apparent unconcern. But Glass always attended the superintendent, Alma had said; very often three men rode with him. The man must have a pleasure in plaguing Nearing, or held the cattleman's desire to have his life in almost admirable contempt.

Nearing was not at home the morning following the formation of the working partnership between Alma and Barrett, when Barrett, confident of his complete recovery, took horse to return to his friends at the hay-ranch. Mrs. Nearing came to the porch to bid him adieu and wish him well, which she did with all the genial grace that gave her such a charm.

Barrett saw in her a woman much changed since his

arrival at the ranch to go adventuring upon discoveries which began to show such dangerous development. Her hair was no whiter, for few unfrosted strands remained, but her face was lined deeper, her figure seemed thinner, a sadness had settled in her eyes. It would be merciful to her to put an end to the suspense that swung over her hour by hour. No revelation, no attendant disgrace that might come to Nearing, could rack and torture her more than this.

Dan and Fred Grubb welcomed Barrett back again with loud acclaim. Dan attempted to say something in the contrition of his soul for having failed his friend, only to be shut up by Barrett with the assurance that it was all perfectly understood, and nothing ever had been figured up against him to be discharged.

Dan was greatly relieved by this, for admission of fault goes hard with youth, great as the sense of duty may be that impels its utterance. He had many humorous experiences to relate of himself and Fred, their adventures in breaking the mowing machine and rake. That they had succeeded in the end was plain in the denuded appearance of the meadows, where many ricks of hay rose in imposing mounds.

The cabin had suffered no damage in the fire that destroyed the wagon, hay-rack and load of hay. Alma had appeared before the ruffians had backed the blazing load quite against the door, hitched a cow rope to the tongue and pulled the wagon a safe distance away. When Dan and Fred spoke of her work that day, they lowered their voices in the compelling immensity of their respect.

The hay was all cut, nearly all stacked. Barrett told his partners in the enterprise that he was to be counted out of it, but that he wanted to live with them if they would allow. To this renunciation of interest they would not hear. They returned lofty and contemptuous words in discount of it, and swore at him, threatening great bodily damage if he ever spoke of it again. As to living there, if he ever attempted to live anywhere else as long as there remained a shingle on the roof or a log in the walls, he'd have to stand up and make explanation of his infidelity. So the matter was put out of all minds, and closed.

Fred had entered one piece of land, which he found was all he could contrive. The others would have to go to Saunders in their own time and attend to this for themselves. Barrett pressed Dan to go at once, refusing to compromise on the remaining claim under fence. He would take up the piece immediately adjoining Dan's claim, and fence it in the spring, he said.

Fred Grubb praised this course. It was a wise thing for a man to make a home for himself while he was young, he said. Ten years would see that country all specked over with farm houses; the ones that got in first and had the pick of the land would be fixed for life.

"For as fur as your money in the Diamond Tail goes, Ed, you'd just as well stand on a hill somewheres and wave it a long farewell. It's gone. I thought maybe you might head off some of it at first, but since old Charley Thomson's got in the game no man's dollar'll ever come back home to set and hatch out dimes."

They were sitting with backs against the logs of the cabin wall, outside the door, facing the road, when Fred delivered this opinion in finance. In a row the three of them sat, legs stretched out before them, as if they had been stood against the wall earlier in the day and shot, and had collapsed in that position. They were taking no chance on surprise; each man had his gun on him, and Fred Grubb was further fortified by his shotgun, which lay along his leg.

Dan twisted his head in profound expression of assent to his partner's opinion of the Diamond Tail affairs. His hat was on the ground beside him, his fair hair, freshly barbered by the versatile poet, was combed down in a cow-lick over his left eye in the approved cow-puncher style.

"Them two fellers they're ridin' Hal Nearing like a witch horse," Fred declared, "break-neck for the jumpin' off place. Yes, and they'll come to it before long, the way it looks to a man up a tree."

"I believe you're right, Fred," Barrett agreed. "That lawyer and Findlay are hanging around the ranch like a couple of buzzards."

"Nearing's gambled the money off, my opinion, and they've got him in a hole," said Dan. "Wall Street; that's what hits these cattle barons between the eyes."

"Something's hit him between the eyes, he's got the blind staggers worse than any man I ever saw," Barrett said. "He's put on twenty years since you brought me out to the ranch, Dan."

"They're honin' him away, them two; there won't be nothing left of him but the handle in a month, and

it'll be too short to pull him back out of the fire by," said Dan.

Fred Grubb sat smoking his thin cigarette, which he crooked to bind the paper, after the Mexican fashion, instead of licking it with his tongue. He seemed to be leading off by himself on some intricate branch of the matter, his brow gathered in deep meditation.

The other two said no more. Together the trio sat, their weapons beside them, as if waiting some event that fate plotted against them in the hovering dusk. Fred Grubb shifted his back against the logs presently, and still keeping his cast of meditation, rolled and crushed the fire out of the low-burned stub of his cigarette.

"Of course, a man's got to be sound, his gun arm's got to be studdy, before he goes out to check up his business with any two-legged wolf that roams the range," he said.

It appeared to be an observation entirely irrelevant to anything under discussion, as indeed it was. Yet it bore acutely on the thing that ran through the minds of all of them: the vengeance that Barrett must go out to claim, as a man among men, from Dale Findlay very soon. Barrett was thinking of it, as he had thought of little else, since he came out of the delirium of fever. His pact with Alma Nearing, as he looked back on it that evening, was but an incidental subterfuge to put her aside and quiet her fears. Nothing could come of a scheme like that. Before they could stage their little interlude of jealousy, some new tragedy would develop to darken that melancholy house.

More than that, and first of all, he did not want

Alma to talk with Dale Findlay; he didn't want her to go to a dance with him at Four Corners, or any corner of the earth at all, far or near. It was too much to pay for anything they might learn. He knew a shorter cut to the desired end. He had come to the hay-ranch that day for no other purpose than to lay his plans and follow them to a speedy conclusion.

Now Fred Grubb had put the key into the lock, opening the subject that brooded in his breast.

"It doesn't take a man long to harden," Barrett said.

"You don't want to show up too soon, old feller," Dan advised. "Let that shoulder of yours limber up, practice up on your shootin' a little. A man gets off mighty fast when he's laid up in bed a while."

"He sure does," said Fred.

"Take a week or two, and lay low," Dan counseled. "When you're ready we'll all go over to Bonita some night and clean 'em up. You can lay hands on him over at Cattle Kate's any Saturday night."

"When me and Dan goes anywhere we go together these times," said Fred. "We ain't a takin' no chances. After this we'll make it three."

"I sure appreciate it," Barrett said.

"If we happen to run into 'm on the road, it'll be three to four," Dan figured, "not such long chances for us. They run in fours now, right along."

"It's generous of you boys to come into this scrap with me, but I've got no right to let you do it. It's my fight, boys; he was only after me."

"Your fight!" Dan discounted, cutting Barrett's

share of it off to a very small corner, indeed. "Didn't they shoot nine holes through that door? Didn't they burn a load of this company's hay?"

"And a wagon, and a pair of double-trees, and a hay-rack we've got to pay for?" Fred came in with his bill.

"Didn't they try to burn this company's house, and didn't they shoot a member of this firm through the lights?" Dan demanded, glaring severely at the member in question.

"They sure did!" said Fred, a solemn and impressive chorus.

Barrett did not attempt to deny any of the particulars in this bill of indictment against Findlay and his followers. But he made no reply at once, only looked away into the dusky distances, as he had seen Alma Nearing gaze when things rose in her soul that words could not express. Then:

"We'll go to Bonita next Saturday night," he said.

They smoked in silence a little spell after that, the slow night creeping into the world around them. Dan got up after a little, beat his hat against his leg to knock the dust out of it, put it on exactly, to avoid disarranging his hair.

"The quicker the sooner," he said.

Fred started, leaped to his feet with a suddenness rather alarming.

"I clean forgot about goin' down to the ranch this evenin'," he said. "Manuel was goin' to fetch my things down from Eagle Rock camp, my wardrobe and my face powder, and curlin' irons and things."

"What did you do with that gunnysack full of

poetry you used to have?" Dan inquired.

"That's what I want more than anything," Fred admitted. "If them works gits lost I'm in a hell of a fix! I've been savin' up them poems for twenty-seven years. Suppose that fat old Teresa took 'em to start her fire with!"

Without wasting any further time in words, the three of them saddled and set out on the rescue of the poems. Dan protested mildly when Fred mounted with the shotgun in his hand.

"Yes, I'm goin' to take it," said Fred, with admirable firmness for a poet, "and I'm a goin' to use it if we meet a pack of wolves. I'm a granger, I ain't no fightin' man; the rules don't bind me. Maybe a shotgun ain't regular, but it's purty dam' sure."

"Oh well, if it's wolves you're lookin' for," Dan yielded.

The moon came up, yellow as a candle flame, its benignant face suffused in the mists which hovered on the horizon edge. It was two or three days past the full, its under edge beginning to show a break in the circle. From the way Fred Grubb gazed at it as he rode, Barrett expected some tribute in verse to spill at any moment.

"That there moon makes me think of an old flat grindin' stone I used to have to turn when I was a boy," said Fred. "Every time it come around to the flat place with my paw bearin' down on the scythe-blade, it made me hump my back and grunt."

This was so unexpected, and at such ridiculous distance from what he had primed his ear to hear, that

Barrett laughed.

"What a break about the moon to come from a poet!" he said.

Fred laughed with him, seeing the incongruity of the simile, enjoying it fully, for he was one of the most practical of poets that ever lived. That little pleasantry, and the ramifications of banter and chaffing that grew out of it, cleared the brooding thought of vengeance out of Barrett's mind for a little while. The three rode as merrily as cavaliers bound for some gay rout, the moonlight whitening over the gray sageland, through which the road ran as straight as the surveyor's transit could draw it.

They were within two miles of the ranch when Dan announced that somebody was riding to meet them. Fred made immediate examination of his shotgun. Not satisfied with that alone, he exchanged the cartridges in the breech for others from his pocket. The levity and light words were hushed in a breath.

"Two of 'em," said Fred. "It ain't him."

"We'll wait for 'em here," said Dan, halting in a little dip in the land, from which the two approaching figures were not visible, and would not be again till they made the top of the little rise beyond. "I think one of 'em's him."

"Spread out," said Barrett. "Let them start it."

The two riders appeared at the top of the hill, not more than a hundred yards away.

"They don't see us, they must be ridin' in their sleep," said Dan.

"Must be," said Fred.

The poet took his post in the middle of the road, his gun held ready. The other two drew off to the roadside into the low sage and soap-weed clumps which grew sparsely there, a space of three or four yards between them. The riders were approaching leisurely, not in the suspicious, watchful manner of those who travel the road at night in guilty conscience, or bound upon deeds of violence and treachery. Now they discovered the three posted across the road ahead of them, and drew sudden rein.

"Let them start it," Barrett admonished again.

Barrett heard low voices exchange quick words; the click of bridle trappings when one of the horses shook its head impatiently.

"Don't shoot, Fred!"

Fred Grubb started, seemed to grow a foot taller as he stiffened with surprise. He leaned to look, his gun-barrel between his horse's ears.

"That you, Alma?" he hailed in suspicious voice.

"Yes. May we come on?"

"Pass by!" said Fred, drawing out of the road.

The two came on. Dan was right in his identification; the man was Findlay. He rode with his head up, passing the three at the roadside as if unaware of their presence, although Alma hailed them with friendly salutation, calling each by name.

"Fine night for a ride," she said, turning to call back to them.

"Yes, and fine company to be ridin' in!" said Fred, but in a low muttered voice of disapproval that could not reach her ears.

“Say!” said Dan, too greatly astonished for another word.

Barrett’s sensation was far apart from surprise. It was more of a sinking of the heart such as weakens a man when he hears of a sore and heavy loss. He had not believed Alma would do this, readily as he had gone into the planning of it with her only a day before. It seemed to Barrett, sitting there on his horse stupidly gazing after her, that Alma was not alone riding away with Dale Findlay, but that she was riding away from him. What if she cared for the man, what if she had jumped at this pretext—absurd, foolish, he said, abusing himself for harboring the thought. Alma was doing only what she believed to be the best, but they had played with fire in a haystack, like the two foolish children they were, when they plotted that thing.

“Say!” said Dan Gustin again, “he’s lookin’ up in the world, ain’t he? I never thought she’d be caught dead with that man.”

“That little lady of mine!” Fred Grubb lamented. “Do you reckon they’re workin’ her into their sink-hole that’s suckin’ Hal Nearing down to hell and damnation?”

“No!” Barrett declared sharply. “She’s only ridin’ with him, just as any lady rides out with a groom.”

“That’s what they call a horse wrangler in high society. I’ve heard of them groomers,” said Fred.

“Sure,” Barrett returned, lighter in word than in heart.

The three of them had turned as if to follow the pair they had given passage through their line. They sat

silently looking after them now as they rode on in the whitening moonlight.

"Well, he's ridin' safe, anyway," said Dan.

"But how about her?" Fred wanted to know. "Well, if she was my girl, or if I was a young feller that maybe's held her hand and kissed her a time or two, I wouldn't let her ride a mile in that man's company — not for all the gold of Gopher!"

"We'd better go on to the ranch," said Barrett, a little crossly. "She can take care of herself."

They rode on. The buildings of the ranch were in sight, the cedars by the roadside a dark line denying the trespass of the desert. Dan was the first to speak, breaking a long silence. He burst out suddenly, one hand on the high cantle of his Mexican saddle, to look back along the white road, upon which the two riders long since had disappeared.

"I'd give a purty if they went to Bonita and Cattle Kate saw 'em!" he said.

There was an eagerness in his voice as of a hope expressed with all the fervency of his heart.

"Shucks!" said Fred Grubb, covering whatever his sentiments were in that rather meaningless word.

CHAPTER XVIII

A BATTLE IN THE DARK

DAN GUSTIN objected again, loudly and in picturesque terms, against Fred Grubb carrying his shotgun to Bonita when they saddled up for that excursion on Saturday evening. He employed sarcasm, even ridicule, in his good-natured way, but was unable to shake the poet the width of a hair.

"You can tell 'em I'm a granger, I ain't no fightin' man," Fred said. "If them fellers don't like my tools, let 'em walk wide when they see me in the road."

Dan was a little ashamed of his company, but Fred had his way. They planned to get supper at Cattle Kate's, but there was very little anticipation, very little said among them, each man busy with his own thoughts as they rode away from the squat little cabin in the meadows.

Barrett had not seen Alma since the evening she rode abroad with Findlay. He knew that if she had anything to communicate she would seek him at the hay-ranch. He was better pleased that she had not come. This grim business upon which he was setting forth had wrapped about him as bindweed enfolds and smothers the life of growing grain.

He was eager to be about the work of ridding the world of a man so envenomed with villainy and spite, a treacherous scoundrel who held a coward's advantage and played it to insatiable ends. There was no doubt

in the young adventurer's mind of the issue between him and Findlay; he could admit no possibility of disastrous conclusion to himself. This doubtless was only desire, stressed so long and passionately as to assume the deceptive face of truth, a phantom that has led many a brave man to a bitter end.

There was considerable activity at Cattle Kate's hotel when they arrived shortly after dusk, that being the biggest night of the week for the institutions of Bonita. Fred Grubb marched into the dining-room with his shotgun under his arm, easy and unconcerned, but his quick eye explored the face of every man in the room before he had gone a dozen feet. Cattle Kate looked on the strange weapon with unfriendly eye as she waited the coming of the three men at the table she had chosen for them.

Kate seemed to be out of humor. She had only a ghost of a smile for Dan when she shook hands with him. To Barrett her face appeared whiter than before, with a wan worriment about her mouth.

"You been rabbit-huntin', Fred?" she inquired, as the poet disposed the gun carefully beside his chair on the floor.

"Wolves," Fred replied shortly, his eye on the door.

Kate employed an Indian girl from the mission school to help her serve her guests, but she elected to wait on the three friends herself. It was the custom of that country in those times to serve everything at once, the pie coming on with the potatoes. Kate was silent as she spread the dishes of food, shaking her head or nodding in reply to Dan's attempts at conversation.

When she placed Fred Grubb's pie over on the corner of the table at his left hand, her foot struck the shotgun. She shot its owner a hot, contemptuous look.

"Wolves!" she said, with acrid scorn.

Fred was unmoved. He was lifting a forkful of boiled ham to his mouth, and would not have checked the maneuver to answer a queen. He rolled his eyes at her and nodded. Presently he said:

"Sure. They're eatin' a terrible bunch of our hay."

"I'm goin' to make a rule that guests 'll have to leave all guns in the office," Kate announced severely.

"Be a good scheme," Fred agreed.

Dan contrived to get through before the other two, and Kate about the same time found her presence in the office necessary. Fred winked at seeing this handy little turn of events.

"Guess Dale Findlay ain't goin' to be in town to-night," he said.

"Maybe not," Barrett replied. He had pushed back from the table, having eaten lightly, and was waiting for Fred to complete his abundant feeding.

"I don't know how it is with a man that's goin' to be hung," said Fred, "but you two fellers must have the same kind of a feelin'. I tell you, boy, it takes something more than the chance of a fight to make my gizzard weak."

"I see it does," Barrett said, grinning with true good feeling and admiration of the poet's appetite in the face of unknown perils. "Go right on; eat down to the bottom of the bin and lick the boards. I like to see you do it."

“Me, if I was goin’ to be hung, I don’t reckon I’d go very heavy on the ham and eggs that morning. I always thought it was mean and onery of a sheriff to go and set out fried chicken and pie before a man that’s got to step out on the galleries in the morning, the way you read about ’em doin’. Seems to me it’s bad enough to be hung, without bein’ reminded before goin’ of all the good eatin’ a feller’s got to leave behind him in this world.”

“That’s the hard part of being hung, Fred,” Barrett said.

He felt every day his feeling of friendship bind closer about this homely, hard-shelled little man. Here was a philosopher who could see so much in life that many other people with supposedly broader visions missed, and got so much more out of it than nine wiser men in every ten wise ones that could be chosen in the world’s traveled ways.

“Dan’s pourin’ honey in her ear,” said Fred, looking through the door into the office, where their partner and Cattle Kate hung over the cigar case, one on either side. “Give that boy rope and he’ll wind it around Dale Findlay’s legs so tight he’ll lose the race. Women can’t back away from a boy like Dan. He’s got a clean feelin’ about him, like a pine tree.”

“You’ve said it like a true poet, Fred. If Cattle Kate’s half as wise as she looks to me, she’ll know which way to jump.”

“Yes, but you never can tell about them women. Sometimes it looks like a man’s got one of ’em tamed so she won’t stray, and then when he leaves the hobble

off some night he wakes up in the morning and finds she's gone off with some other feller. Well, it never happened to me, and it ain't never goin' to happen."

"I should hope not, Fred. Done?"

"All set."

Fred picked up his gun and walked ahead of Barrett as they left the room. After they had adjusted the damage, as Fred called it, Cattle Kate rushed back to the dining-room in her quick come and go way, skirmishing around from table to table to see that the Indian girl was doing all possible to maintain the reputation of the house. She brought up at a table where two cowpunchers sat who had the look of greenhorns on the range, and remained talking with them.

"Kate's red-headed, hoppin' mad!" said Dan, full of glee that he could not hide.

"You don't seem to be much worried over it," Barrett remarked.

"Me? I'm shoutin', I'm settin' on a log pattin' juber. Dale and Alma rode clean over here the other evenin' — to buy two spools of thread!"

"The—hell—you—say!" said Fred, drawing a longer interval between words as they left his astonished mouth.

"Twenty-four miles for two spools of thread!" Dan chuckled. "Say, do you fellers know they're goin' to have a dance at Four Corners next Tuesday night?"

Neither of them had heard of it. But Fred said he thought it was about time for the fall festivities to begin on the range.

"Alma told Cattle Kate Dale's goin' to take her to

the dance," Dan announced, so full of excitement and good feeling that he fairly panted.

It was Barrett's turn to explode now. He came out with it like a veteran.

"The hell she did!" he said.

"Cattle Kate said to tell you, Ed; she thought you might be interested to hear about it."

Dan winked with crafty humor, as much as to say he knew it wasn't through any desire of Kate's to stir a feeling of jealousy in other quarters and maybe head off the excursion.

Barrett was upset by a turmoil in which he floundered with a feeling of panic. When he had suggested the programme to Alma, which she was pursuing with such speed, he had very little notion that she would attempt it, or that she ever would have the opportunity of doing so if inclined to take the hazard. His thought at the time had been that Findlay would be well out of the world before Alma could begin plotting his confusion through the jealousy of Cattle Kate.

He didn't want her going about in Findlay's company, no matter if she might possess herself of all the secrets he had concealed in his black heart. The man breathed villainy; there was pestilence in his presence.

Fred was the only one of the three not so absorbed in this news as to forget that he had come there on a hostile mission. He kept watch on the front door, one eager ear open for the gossip in the room.

"A girl that can stay good in Bonita like Cattle Kate's done is too good a girl for Dale Findlay," said Fred.

He went to the door and looked up and down the one-sided street. Some soldiers were hitching their horses in front of the hotel, talking noisily. Fred went out to survey the land beyond.

Cattle Kate's front entrance was built with regard to a horseback-riding country. A platform, or porch, not roofed, projected in front of the door, steps leading to it on either end. This platform was the height of one's foot in the stirrup, and was handy for officers from the post in muddy weather, as well as for inebriate cowpunchers who found difficulty in getting into the saddle from the ground. Once in, no amount of liquor could reel them out.

A woman might dismount upon this platform with ease, and tie her horse to one of the ringbolts set along its outer edge, as the ranch wives and daughters commonly did when business brought them to Cattle Kate's store. These hitching places were dedicated solely to feminine use; this was understood far and near. Let any cowpuncher, cattle baron, or officer from the post transgress at peril of a dressing-down from Cattle Kate that he would not soon forget.

Fred stood on this little vantage point, running his eyes around the town. All of it lay on the side of the road where the hotel stood, as has been explained, due to governmental regulations. The center of the road was the deadline; there the sacred boundary of government property stretched. The moon was well up over this scene, every house in the town plainly revealed to Fred's eyes. He did not discover anything of hostile appearance, nor any familiar horses along the nearby

racks.

Near him on the porch there was the usual Saturday night pile of saddles; he looked over as many as were exposed to examination, finding none that he knew. The poet concluded that they had picked on a poor night for collecting their debt from Findlay and Glass. He turned to rejoin his partners in the office, to find Glass facing him at the other end of the porch, not more than twenty feet between them.

Glass was alone. Whether he had been creeping up from some back way to spy out their numbers, or whether he had been sitting on the steps all the time and had got to his feet only that moment, Grubb did not know. But there he stood, and as Fred waited a moment to gather his intentions, he started to pull his gun.

Grubb's shot brought Barrett and Dan to the door on the jump. Fred had cut loose with both barrels, not a second's interval between. The roar of his big-bore gun startled the dozing horses; they were trampling and snorting in great confusion and dust when Barrett and Dan made their spectacular entry upon what was truly the stage of action.

"What the devil?" Dan asked, bringing up suddenly, gun in his hand, puzzled for an answer.

"I got him, damn him!" Fred cut in, the breech of his gun open, fresh cartridges in his fingers.

"Who? Where's he at?"

Dan peered around as he asked, unmindful of the fact that they stood in the light of the door.

"Down there," Fred pointed.

They moved forward cautiously, guns ready. Behind them there was the noise of a stampede from the dining-room forward, to see what was going on, for curiosity always is greater than the sense of danger in those who are not principals in a fight. The three friends stood at the head of the steps and looked at the unoccupied ground at the bottom.

"He was right there!" Fred declared. "He was pul-
lin' his gun on me—right there!"

"Well, he ain't there now," said Dan, a bit sarcastically.

"I must 'a'——"

"Get away from here to do your shootin'!"

Cattle Kate spoke from the door. She held her bill-collector in her hand to enforce the order. Up the street there sounded a loud, mocking laugh, followed by a shot.

The three friends, feeling rather foolish, but not so foolish as to abandon caution altogether, rushed out into the cover of darkness in the road.

"That was him! I must 'a'——"

Two quick shots from the corner of the saloon, which stood a lean-to against the hotel, left no doubt that Fred had fired at something more than the ghost of a man. Barrett saw Cattle Kate fanning out the lights in the hotel office with a hat; heard the front door shut with a sound of substantiality that promised security for those behind it.

"Scatter out!" Dan called, a note of warning in his voice.

"I must 'a'——" Fred began his explanation that

seemed destined to lie on his tongue uncompleted. Dan and Barrett began firing; others came running from the dance hall to the assistance of Glass, summoned by his whooping, shooting as they ran.

The three friends had taken the open side of the road at Cattle Kate's command to get away from the hotel. There was no shelter on that side bigger than a bunch of grass, and the moon, already above the housetops, revealed them sharply against the gray broken ground beyond.

Up the road a hundred yards or more somebody had left a wagon. It looked to Barrett from that distance like a government freight wagon, canvas-topped, heavy. There were no horses near it, apparently it was deserted by whoever owned or drove it. Calling to his comrades, Barrett cut out for this shelter, pegging away at the flashes from the shadows and corners of buildings across the road.

Fred Grubb was first to reach the wagon, passing Barrett on the way almost as if he stood still. Not by fright were these wings lent to the poet's heels, for he no sooner passed behind the wagon than he jumped out into the moonlight again to deliver both barrels of his shotgun toward a bunch of four or five men in front of the dance hall, who were firing on Barrett and Dan.

Fred's unexpected broadside drove them to shelter. The door of the dance hall closed after them, the lights went out.

But from other buildings activities began. It seemed to be the attitude of Bonita to mix whether it was its fight or not; the desire to shoot seemed to be irresistible.

Windows were raised, streaks of fire blazed forth. Most of these snipers fired across the road, going on the theory that whoever stood outside of the town and fired at anybody or anything in it must be enemies, therefore to be repulsed and overwhelmed.

In this way Bonita was pretty generally involved in the affray inside of two minutes after its beginning. Bullets slapped the dust in the road, plugged through the canvas cover of the wagon, rattled in the woodwork of the wheels.

Men were seen coming out of the darkened dance hall. Barrett gathered from this that the lights had been put out for no other reason than to allow them to slip out in comparative safety. He turned his attention to these reinforcements, which began to cut loose at the wagon from the corner of the house they had left.

"They're comin'!" Dan announced from his station at the rear of the wagon.

Barrett turned, to see a band of men come charging up the road, yelling as they broke from the shadow of the saloon into the moonlight. They were shooting wildly, as most of the old school cowpunchers shot when out of the saddle hobbling along on high-heeled boots. The unseen auxiliaries brisked up their assault from windows and side doors, and Barrett, calling Dan and Grubb to his side, suggested that they hold fire until the rush came within good shotgun range.

Fred either misunderstood the suggestion or was unable to contain himself in face of this defiant charge. He jumped from behind the wagon, ran a rod or two down the road to meet the oncoming whooping, shoot-

ing gang, and gave them both barrels. Barrett and Dan went out to cover Fred's retreat, only to see the poet, standing calmly in his tracks, break his gun and start reloading.

Fred's charge of buckshot stopped the rush, Barrett and Dan turned it into immediate and precipitate flight. One man in the fleeing bunch stumbled, fell; the others ran on. Under the urge of lead behind them they made for their horses, mounted and rode out of town.

Fred Grubb stood in the road putting buckshot into windows and doors from which the townspeople were having their safe little part in the noisy fray. Barrett and Gustin left him engaged in this manner while they went to see who had fallen in the road, and whether he was in need of, or beyond, help. At their approach the fellow sprang to his feet like a fish breaking water, and ran as if a bullet never had been within a mile of him. He was so eager to make a good beginning in this race, doubtless mistaking the intention of the two men advancing, that he ran face to face with a five-wire fence surrounding the hotel corral. He saw it in time to gather himself for a jump, and cleared it like a deer. As he went over, his hat flew off. Dan went on and picked it up.

The shooting from windows and dark places of safety stopped suddenly when Grubb began to pour his argument against this method of dealing. The poet stood in the road, a fair mark for anybody that had hand steady enough, and gun with carrying capacity to reach him, loading and shooting with calm regularity. The sound of his gun was the only one that rose out of the sudden

quiet of the town.

Dan hurried to him, took him by the arm as he was lifting his piece to fire again.

"It's all over, Fred," he said.

The poet's two friends had a laugh at his bloodthirsty eagerness to clean up the town, and a laugh at themselves when it came to take stock of the results of the battle. None of them had a scratch; so far as they knew, none of the other side was hit. Judging from the way that man got up out of the road and jumped the fence, Dan said he must have dropped down there to take a rock out of his boot.

"Whose hat is it, do you know?" Barrett inquired.

Fred Grubb went behind the wagon, out of caution, to strike a match and look over the one trophy of the noisy battle.

"Yes, it's his'n," he said.

"Findlay's?"

"No," disgustedly, "that darn rattlesnake of a Glass!"

There was little said between the three as they mounted and started home. They must have gone three miles when Dan spoke.

"Great shootin'!" he said.

"Finest a bunch of men ever pulled off," Barrett agreed.

On again, a mile or two more, nothing said. Then Fred:

"Well, I must 'a' missed him," he sighed.

CHAPTER XIX

MANUEL BIDES WITH NEWS

AT THE Four Corners community dance house, the rule was that every man must leave his arms, both shooting and cutting, at the door. All feuds stopped at the threshold of that place of pleasure; a man might enter there among his blood enemies and enjoy himself in peace. Of course, there was no guaranty against what might happen to him on the way home.

The dance house at Four Corners was a house, not a hall. That distinction maintained everywhere when it was mentioned, for in that word lay the difference, understood and expressed, between a place of the highest respectability and one of low diversions.

The building was made of short-length pine logs, pegged together into a solid wall. It was a large structure, larger than a schoolhouse in that country would have been in those days, for there were far more inhabitants of the dancing age than the student age. It was a sort of primitive recognition of the need of social diversion in a socially barren land, a first step toward meeting the question of how to keep the girls on the ranch.

One dance house in all that immense empty country did not go far toward making life attractive to youth, but it broke the long stretches of lonesome days, and perhaps held more than one girl on the ranch against

the lure of becoming waitresses in the railroad eating-houses, simply by anticipation of its long-spaced pleasures. Once a girl was held on the range until she was married, she was anchored there for life.

There was no church in the range country where the Diamond Tail ranch spread its far boundaries, no ministers to cure the souls of any, no matter how spiritually sick. But there was a notable fiddler who went about from ranch to ranch like a troubadour of old, and who, with his lone hand, supplied the music for the dances at Four Corners, as well as other social gatherings in public and private places where his skill might be required.

This fiddler, known all over the inter-mountain range country as Banjo Gibson, because of his proficiency with that merry instrument, was making the night joyous at Four Corners dance house on the night of the first ball of the season. For one lone fiddler he was making considerable noise, as one fiddler must make who worked against the competition of Fred Grubb calling the numbers of the quadrille.

Fred stood on the little rostrum, lifted about a foot above the ballroom floor, where the fiddler sat, singing the tune as Banjo Gibson played it, singing the figures of the dance to it, changing tunes with as much facility as the fiddler himself. Fred was as famous for his calling-off as he was for his jewsharp playing, two accomplishments which carried him farther on the range than all the poetry he ever hatched.

The tune was *The Girl I Left Behind Me*, and Fred's adaptation of it to the occasion was like this:

*O, swing that girl, that purty little girl,
 The girl you left behind you,
 O—o—o, swing that girl, that purty little girl,
 The girl you left behind you!
 She's purty in the face and slim around the wais',
 That girl you left behind you,
 O—o—o—, swing that gal, that purty little gal——*

and so on, with such swinging as made the girls' skirts stand out as if they wore hoops, and left the world reeling when they came at last to the triumphant, high-flung "Promenade you-all, to your seats!"

The dancers were so greatly pleased by Fred's originality and long-drawn performance that they cheered him heartily, touching the poet in his tender spot. He knew what they wanted, and forthwith produced his jewsharp, which he carried in his hip pocket tied to a little block of wood. Slowly, and with that artistic whetting of the expectation Fred knew so well how to manage, the poet began to unwind the great length of string from his little steel-tongued instrument.

At last the jewsharp was free. Cheers greeted its appearance from the mesh of protecting cord. Fred deliberately rewound the string about the block, holding the treat at arm's length, it might be said, and Banjo Gibson, knowing just when his part came in, reached behind him for his banjo. This auxiliary was also cheered.

Fixing the jewsharp to his lips, Fred threw his weight on his left leg, his right thrust forward a little in truly musical pose, his foot free to pat time. Those

who knew of the founts of something more than music which welled in Fred's mouth when he whanged this little lyre, moved back.

Dan Gustin, standing his turn as gun-taker at the door, cheered his old comrade louder than anybody in the house when he finished his selection, Banjo Gibson coming along softly with the second. Dan was in high spirits; he felt as if he could fold up his feet and soar. Music never had sounded so good to him, girls never had looked so pretty, married women so refined and graceful, in spite of their rough red cheeks and large necks. It was his night of all nights; Cattle Kate had come with him to the dance.

Even that moment Cattle Kate stood beside him, like a bride at the door with her beloved welcoming guests to her marriage feast. Only she was helping the women with their hats, stacking them on a table which stood next to the gun repository; and she was not as merry as a bride should be, nor flushed over with a glow of sweet confusion. Her smile was not wanting, in truth, but it was slow to break and quick to vanish, as a weak light one strikes on a wet night, which glows for a moment in the protecting palm, and sinks and dies away.

During the encore which the dancers demanded of Fred, while Dan, engrossed in the captivating drone of the jewsharp, was patting time with his foot, Cattle Kate went to the door, where she stood looking out into the dark. The moon was not up; in the north-west the Great Dipper reached down to the hills, as if it swept to scoop the river that ran beyond them into

its bowl. Cattle Kate looked long into the night, and turned away from it with a sigh.

“Somebody comin’?” Dan inquired.

He hoped it might be Dale Findlay, from whom he would have the pleasure of taking his gun; who would see Cattle Kate there beside him, and then might draw conclusions as to where his own chances stood.

For the three partners expected Findlay to bring Alma Nearing to the dance. Cattle Kate expected it; other people who had heard that Alma was coming, expected it. They had not come. Banjo Gibson was tuning his fiddle; he struck the notes of *The Waltz*.

That was the way people on the range covered by Banjo Gibson’s orbit always spoke of that tune: *The Waltz*. It was the only waltz that Banjo Gibson knew; the only waltz, of a consequence, that any of them knew. Likewise *The Schottische*. Banjo knew just one schottische, and everybody knew that it was *The Captain with His Whiskers*; but when they spoke of it they said *The Schottische*. Some of the older ones always hummed it, the words almost under their breath, when Banjo played it:

*O, the captain with his whiskers took a sly glance at me,
Took a sly glance at me, took a sly glance at me——*

You will remember how it goes.

Ed Barrett approached the table bearing the banquet of arms, and waved Cattle Kate and Dan away into the dance.

“They said for me to keep the door,” he explained,

and smiled, well pleased to see Dan so happy as they whirled into The Waltz.

Cattle Kate's gipsy ringlets brushed Dan's shoulder as they skated through the throng, pretty good dancers for that long-forgotten place; her pale cheek was near his, which was far from pale. But Barrett could see that her soul was away under the stars somewhere, seeking along a trail for a figure that her heart missed as the blood that visited it. For her the dance house was empty; for her the music did not sound.

Kate begged off from the next dance, which was The Schottische, on some plea that Barrett did not hear, although she stood near him. She smiled as she sent Dan off with another girl, and turned softly again, with a little guilty look back, to peer out into the night.

Barrett watched the door almost as anxiously as Cattle Kate, but with a different feeling in his breast. The hour was growing late, even the stragglers had stopped coming, the last of the distant riders was already there. But Alma had not come.

Barrett believed she had been wiser at the last moment and decided not to venture it. He knew, and Alma must have realized by this, that they could not get anything out of Cattle Kate, granting that she knew anything to tell. As she stood at the door now, eyes searching in that pathetic longing, Barrett knew that she would die for Dale Findlay, and the secrets which she shared with him. He felt lighter in heart than he had felt for days. Alma was not coming. Perhaps Cattle Kate would have her wish; Findlay might come alone.

Kate left the door at the sound of somebody approaching. Barrett wondered what bucko could be arriving so late as he moved a hat or two to make room for the expected weapons. In a moment his question was answered; old Manuel, wrangler and man of all tasks from the ranch, was blinking in the light of the door.

The old man leaned, one bony hand braced against the doorpost, the thong of his dangling quirt about his wrist. His thin dark face wore a troubled look as he drew his eyes small to focus them to the light. When he discovered Barrett he lifted a finger in expressive signal, and disappeared in the dark.

Barrett followed immediately, stepping aside quickly out of the beam of light that fell a little way outside the door from the hanging lamp that swung with the dancers' tread.

"Manuel!" he called softly.

"Here," the old man answered from the corner of the house.

"Did you want to see me?" Barrett asked as he went toward the shadowy figure.

"Come this way a little," the old man requested. He went around the corner of the house; Barrett followed.

At that moment Cattle Kate, scarcely breathing as she stood in the door listening, stepped quietly out after Barrett, and followed silently, guiding herself in the sudden blindness of the dark with one hand against the wall.

"What's the matter, Manuel?" Barrett inquired, a cold sense of looming trouble over him. "Did Miss

Nearing——”

“I went to your house; you were not there,” the old man said, something severely chiding in his tone. “While you dance, they rob you.”

“They rob me whether I dance or stand still,” Barrett replied testily, losing patience with the old man’s reticent, roundabout way. “If you’ve got anything to say, say it. What’s the matter?”

“They rob you not alone of your cattle, but of your bride,” said Manuel, slowly, solemnly, giving Barrett time to weigh every word as it was spoken.

“My bride? Hell! I never had a bride,” said Barrett in the explosive way of the range. “What do you mean—my bride?”

“They will marry her; maybe by this time she is married to another man.”

“Alma?” Barrett demanded, pricking with a thousand points of fire.

He stepped close to Manuel in his eagerness to have the instant truth, and laid hold roughly of his arm.

“Alma,” Manuel repeated, with expressive accent of confirmation.

“Who’s going to marry her, Manuel? They can’t marry her unless she’s willing, man!”

“It is the price Nearing pays for silence. I heard them when my ear was on the grass.”

“Findlay? You mean Findlay?”

“It is his price.”

“When? You don’t mean tonight?”

“Tonight. They are waiting for the old lawyer. When he comes. But maybe if you ride fast——”

Barrett jumped for the door to get his hat and gun. Cattle Kate stood just outside, as if she had come out for a breath of fresh air. Another quadrille was under way, Fred Grubb singing the figures in his musical high voice.

"You're not leavin', Ed?" said Cattle Kate, as Barrett came out again, buckling on his gun.

"Yes. Will you please tell Dan?"

Manuel was already in the saddle, holding Barrett's horse. It was then past nine o'clock; fifteen miles lay between them and the ranch. In his eagerness to cover the distance Barrett stood in his stirrups, forgetting the drilling of Fred Grubb, the gentle sarcasm of Dan Gustin.

It seemed an impossibly melodramatic situation, almost a foolish one to spend so much care and anxiety upon, Barrett thought as he rode beside Manuel swiftly through the night. If there had not been the probability of Nearing's cowardly appeal, perhaps command, to save his own precious honor, Barrett would have dismissed Manuel's news at a word. It might be that Findlay and Nearing, with the dark connivance of Thomson, had reached some agreement in which Alma was to be the price of the cattleman's future immunity. With Findlay in the family, the cattle baron would be safe from the sting of his tongue.

Even in the light of this probability it seemed incredible that a high-blooded girl like Alma would consent to any such disgraceful compact. There must be force behind Nearing's act. Alma might throw her youth, happiness, life, away on Findlay to save that white-

haired woman, who had been mother to her all those years, the pangs of disgrace; Barrett hardly believed she would go that far for Nearing.

The fact that Thomson, that lugubrious old fox, was mixed in the affair was another consideration to arouse the keenest anxiety. For weeks that rogue had been putting his head to Findlay's, two brands of iniquity which could produce no other result than an unholy fire. What his interest in the affairs of Nearing and Findlay could be, Barrett never had been able to even guess. That he was sharing the spoils of the Diamond Tail herds, at some angle of the steal, was certain; that he was an ally of Findlay seemed to go without a doubt.

Now they were waiting for this morose, conscienceless scoundrel at the ranch, with what sweat of cowardly fear, what cold hopelessness and sinking of the soul, no man could measure who had not felt the terror of on-creeping disgrace, the misery of overhanging shame.

How was he to prevent this sacrifice of youth and comeliness? Barrett asked of himself. Perhaps his interference might be resented. Alma might be the last one to countenance his interposition, in the great fear they must have roused in her, or the great compassion that had led her to such step. He stopped suddenly, shot by a thought that had not troubled him before.

"Did Alma send you?" he asked.

"No, I did not wait. My Teresa heard them through the window in the patio. I came to call the master of the house to guard his own."

Barrett spurred on again, settling down in the saddle, remembering Fred Grubb's admonition to sit tight

and spare the horse when a long ride lay ahead. He clasped the galloping beast's sides hard with his knees, as if he would lift it and soar in pace with his onrushing, turbulent desire.

CHAPTER XX

TO CLOSE A VILLAIN'S MOUTH

NEARING had come home after dark that evening, harassed as Alma never had seen him before. He labored under a wild constraint that bordered on insanity, his courage completely crushed. Supper had been waiting for him; Alma was already dressed for the ball at Four Corners, to which she intended to ride with Findlay, according to her promise.

Ordinarily, Nearing had a cheerful word, even a bantering passage or two, for his niece, who watched for him and sprang to greet his coming always as eagerly as a daughter might have done. But this evening he had no cheer in his gloomy heart, no welcome, no gladness, in his wild, fearful eyes. He had gone at once to his room, whence the issue of voices presently told that his wife had joined him.

Alma heard the drone of his distressed voice, and wailing exclamations of despair from her Aunt Hope, such anguished sounds as if their souls had been thrown into the mill of the inexorable gods and were being shredded from their living hearts.

It had come the time of the year when the herds were being shifted down from the higher mesas to the fattening grass in the valleys, many cattle being now on the range near the ranch. As a consequence of this activity, men were quartered again in the long bunkhouse,

their singing and laughter at night making the place lively after its summer months of quiet.

Tonight several men were going to the dance, from which they would ride in the waning hours of the night only to change into their working clothes and to the backs of other horses. The memory of the night's pleasures would refresh them as no amount of sleep could do.

Now, as Nearing groaned under the load that galled his heart, pouring forth Alma knew not what story to bring fresh trouble to his already burdened wife, these carefree cowpunchers were singing in the bunkhouse as they went about shaving and slicking up for the dance. There were honest young fellows among Findlay's crew, to whom the indictment laid by Alma before Barrett on the evening of his first arrival at the ranch did not reach. Not all of them were reckless, drinking, swearing social outlaws, although it must be admitted that, taking them the range over, from the Rio Grande to the Little Missouri, they were an unholy band.

But some of them were as clean of thought and deed as the best of men, and the lives they led in the open places gave them graces of body and heart lacking in large measure in those more fortunately assigned. Alma had looked forward with anticipation of pleasure to the dance, where she expected to renew old acquaintances and foot off many a quadrille with these supple, simple men.

This consideration was not all that lay behind her desire to go to the dance, although she confessed a plain, girlish, human desire for a dash of unusual pleasure, a bit wilder and rougher than she was accus-

tomed to. She had given up the hope of getting at Findlay's secret by the strategy of jealousy; she was sorry for Cattle Kate, regretful of the pain she had given her already by appearing before her in Findlay's company, but she had another plan.

More than that, she had seen at one glance on that occasion, when the riving pang of jealousy tore poor, simple Kate's breast, that Kate's rage was not likely to be vented on Findlay if it should be goaded to the breaking point. Kate would take her gun and shoot whoever stood in her way, perhaps; but she would die, if necessity ever called for that sacrifice, before she would betray that evil, dark-hearted man by a word.

Alma had meant to ride to the hay-ranch to tell Barrett that they could not hope to do anything through Kate's jealousy, but had deferred it from day to day. Not so much out of consideration of convention, as a timid shrinking from seeking one whom her heart had begun to hunger after with a disturbing unrest. It is but a foolish, shallow woman, let her be never so good, who discovers to the author of her heart's disquietude the sickness that he alone can cure.

Alma was not of that shallow kind in whom a passion flares and falls like the caprice of a day. Her regard for Barrett had grown slowly, against her own conviction, from a rather indifferent liking, a wholly indifferent attitude of caring not at all whether he remained on the range or went his way. She had not taken the trouble at the beginning to sound him, and find whether he was molded around a hollow core, or contained the substance of a true man.

The revelation had come, after her arraignment of him, her fiery scorn, on the night Nearing drew his weapon to shoot Barrett down at the gate. Following that revelation of the young sailor's true manliness, Findlay's attempt on his life had supplied the opportunity of closer association. She had found him neither simple nor saintly as she went on exploring during the days of his convalescence; but she had found in him the admirable balance of an amiable spirit and an honest heart. Where men were to be counted, there he would be found.

There was an unusual coming and going of people about the place that evening, of passing and repassing through the patio, all of which could not be due, Alma knew, to the activities of Manuel and Teresa. She resented this trespass upon what always had been held peculiarly her private ground, even as she wondered if her uncle's unusual perturbation could have any connection with the stir. She wondered if something had happened; if Nearing at last had accomplished the thing he rode the range like a baffled avenger to do, and if it had brought down the tottering arch of that house's fortunes in some unexpected way.

Findlay had not appeared to take her to the dance, although it was past the hour set for them to start. Even though he still rode in his arrogance, safe in the unremitting watchfulness of his friends, she felt that she could not go with him now, and leave those two broken people alone with their shame and sorrow that night.

This Alma regretted, for it had been her great hope,

a hope that had come to her like an inspiration, that she might soften Findlay on that long ride and influence him to lift his oppressive hand. This had been her great hope when she promised Findlay to go to the dance with him; all consideration of pleasure was secondary and small.

She had meant to try if this cattle thief, who masked his widespread operations under the cover of a respectable, responsible connection, had any pity left alive in his breast, and, if she could discover never so small a grain, to water it with the softening plea of mercy until it might expand and fill his heart.

She had determined to plead with him to quit the range, go away with whatever gain had been his from the long and extensive plundering of the Diamond Tail properties, carrying his dread secret with him. She would not ask him to disclose that secret; she felt now that she did not want to know. Let the two old people — for they were old, the past few weeks had aged them cruelly — close their days in such peace as they might gather out of the ruin of their hopes that he had made.

Findlay was not a common man who never had known the refinements of living. It was said he came of a good family, and that he had been university bred. In such a man there must remain some chord that the plea of simple justice, or compassion, if justice should prove too stern, could reach and waken, as her fingers caressed to melody her harpstrings in the dark.

The dining table was spread, late roses, which bloomed abundantly until frost in the warm patio, giving it a cheerful, even festive air. Teresa, soft of tread

as a panther, came anxiously from the kitchen to survey the setting, a troubled look in her dark face, and went dolefully back to her carefully cooked dishes again.

Alma went to her room, which looked out on the patio opposite the one in which Barrett had been imprisoned by his wound but a little while past. There was no ray of moonlight among the foliage of the little court, where the fountain tinkled in its basin, overflowing among the ferns. And in the girl's heart there was a gathering of darkness as deep and oppressive, in which there was not even the cheer of one sweet sound of hope.

She heard somebody cross the patio softly, the sound retreating from her window, as she entered the room. She went to the open window, leaned out and called, softly:

“Manuel!”

There was no reply, but the smoke of a cigarette came blowing on the wind, as if the trespasser insolently challenged her to discover him if she could.

Alma felt that she was being drawn into this heart-crushing trouble that hung over her uncle's house. By what means of involution she was being hurried on to participation in the sombre tragedy that was coming rapidly to its climax, she did not know; but she could feel it with every nerve of her body. That step in the patio, that whiff of defiant, insolent smoke, had some part in the shaping event, the shadow of which fell cold upon her heart.

She sat on the low stool beside her harp, drew the instrument down to her shoulder, ran her fingers over

the strings. There seemed to rush into her heart with the sound a great sorrow, a vast, poignant longing for some precious thing taken away forever. It was as if night had brought a sorrow which day could not again purge away. Tears burst from her eyes in copious overflowing; a sob rose clamoring for utterance, like a wail for the dead.

Nearing was knocking at her door. In wheedling, ingratiating, humble tones of one who had given offense and craved forgiveness which he neither merited nor expected, he asked to see her. She sprang up, shocked by the strange quality of his voice, and opened the door.

"Uncle Hal! For heaven's sake tell me what has happened!" she appealed.

"Now, now! It's all right, it's all right," he said, with fatuous soothing. "It's nothing but a little matter of business, Alma."

He seemed weak, unsteady on his feet, which he shuffled like a very old man. She took his arm, smitten to the heart with a feeling of compassion that outweighed all the blame she could find in her conscience to charge to this wreck of the strong, handsome man she once knew.

"Wait till I make a light, Uncle Hal, it's so dark tonight."

"Dark tonight—God! Dark!" he muttered. Then, rousing as a drowning man plucks resolution to fight the current that is sweeping him away: "No, don't make a light, we'll not need a light. Just a little matter of business we can discuss in the dark."

His hand trembled on her arm; it was damp with the sweat of an agony she could not fathom as she took it to guide him to a chair.

"Sit by the window—it seems close in here to-night."

"I feel an oppression in the air," said he. "It seems heavy, as if a storm might be gathering."

He sat by the open window, silent for a little while, as a weary man come home to his repose. A gust of wind, little more than a breath, rustled the leaves, and shook down a shower of them from the maple and aspen boughs with sound as melancholy as his own sighs.

"The business is going badly, Alma," Nearing said at last, catching himself in his drifting, it seemed, coming back by sheer force to the subject he had sought her to discuss.

"But that's not news, Uncle Hal. The business has been going badly a long time, hasn't it?"

"A long time. Now it's rushing to a fall, I'll be overwhelmed, buried in the ruins that will drag all of us down. You are the only one that can stop this avalanche—I've come to appeal to you."

"I stop it?" she asked, amazed. "Why, Uncle Hal——"

"Your interest as a stockholder——"

"Oh!" she stopped him impatiently. "I forgot, long ago, that I was a stockholder, I threw my chips in with yours, I count my little inheritance swallowed up in the loss you've stood. You've repaid me, a thousand times over, Uncle Hal. As a stockholder, don't count me in."

"It can't be done that way," he said, wearily insistent, "I'm honor-bound to account to you for every dollar of your patrimony, as well as every dollar the other stockholders have in the business. But I'm on the edge of the precipice now. Tomorrow morning will see me drawn over, dashed to ruin—unless you put out your hand to save me."

"Why, Uncle Hal," she said, her voice trembling with generous emotion, tears rushing into her eyes, "I'll do anything humanly possible to help you. Don't you know that without asking me?"

"I thought I knew," he said, seeking her hand, pressing it with warm gratitude, a lifting of eager hope in his voice. "But love, even, is slow to sacrifice. I have found human support a vain and fickle thing in my day, Alma. So I hesitate."

"We can't get anywhere by beating around the bush," she said.

"No, Alma." Then, suddenly, eagerly, driving himself headlong, it seemed: "Dale wants to marry you."

"What a strange digression, Uncle Hal!" Alma chided him, shocked more by that unaccountable turn in his talk than by the revelation made, it seemed.

"It's the only way," he said, with the stress of utmost gravity, not taking into account, it seemed, that he had overleaped the most vital portion of his explanation. But he was not to be spared.

"The only way?" Alma repeated, incredulous, baffled. "Why, you haven't even given me any insight into Dale's connection with your business crisis. What's he got to do with it? A hired man on this ranch!"

“Everything!” with bitter emphasis. “At least much,” floundering to retrieve the admission, “much that I can’t explain now, that is really beside the main question. Dale is a man of character, a man——”

“You don’t say what kind of character! Well, I know all about Dale Findlay, the man that’s been robbing us for years and nobody able to stop him. What is it this man holds over you, Uncle Hal? Is he threatening a foreclosure on his security unless I pay the price?”

“Whatever there is between him and me, if anything at all, is between him and me,” Nearing returned, with an attempt at the dignity and severity once so fittingly his own. He seemed to forget that he had come a suppliant.

“All right,” said Alma, scorning the poor attempt. “Let him go to the devil to cash in on his secrets, whatever they are! I’m not paying that kind of debts for this family!”

“Will it be enough to tell you, then, that this man can ruin me with a word?” Nearing demanded, his voice steady and severe.

He rose from his chair as he spoke, standing outlined against the dim light of the window. Alma could see that he leaned toward her, as if in menace for her defiance.

“No, it is not enough,” she told him, with cold bluntness.

There rose in her a feeling of immeasurable contempt for this man, who had, by some rash deed of his past, betrayed himself so completely into another’s hands.

"Where are your guns? what has become of your manhood?" she asked him. "There's a man's way out of a thing like this, without coming to a woman to drag you out!"

"Will it be enough, if that much doesn't suffice you, to tell you that he can bring sorrow and disgrace to us all? Woe and desolation he can bring upon us, and you, least of all, can escape it! Is that enough?"

Nearing came toward her as she drew away from him, so passionate in his half confession of some terrible thing, some crime, some transgression, she knew not what name to give it, that had bound him in such despicable servitude.

"No," she said; "no, no!"

"If duty, if compassion, if the thought of me and mine, my name, my honorable past——"

"Honorable past!" she mocked him, like a taunting echo.

"If the misery of your Aunt Hope, if the earnest appeal that I make to you, I, a man that has stood equal to and above princes and potentates—if all this is not enough——"

"It is not enough! Until you're man enough to tell me what it is this thief knows, and leave me to judge for myself, I'll——"

"I can't tell you!" Nearing groaned, sinking again to his chair. "Alma, I can't tell you!" Then, stiffening in a moment, shored by the memory of his past consequence, "You are not my confessor, I'm under no obligation to reveal my—business affairs to you!"

"No, you are under no obligation to me at all,"

coldly, leaving her chair, starting toward the door.

"Alma!" he appealed.

"There's no more to be said between us, Uncle Hal. When you come to yourself, when you're a man again——"

"I can't tell you, I can't tell you!" he said, frantic from the barbs which were galling him from every side. "Sit down again, Alma, hear me for a little while. You don't seem to understand the seriousness of this situation."

"Serious for you alone. You've forgotten how to talk to a man—where are your guns? You didn't have them on when you came home. Has he stripped them from you along with your honor?"

"You do Findlay an injustice to blame him for everything," Nearing made a weak defense. "He loves you, tenderly, passionately. He has told you so a hundred times."

"He's had his answer a hundred times. And what he couldn't win honestly for himself, he drives a bargain for through you! Where are your guns?"

"You raised the poor fellow's hopes lately, you renewed——"

"I renewed nothing. There never was anything between us but contempt on my side, whatever was on his. I've talked with him lately, I've taken two or three little rides; I was going to Four Corners with him tonight to the dance, but not because I wanted to marry him. Uncle Hal, I was only working on a plan to help to free you."

"Free me? You can do it with a word!" Nearing

spoke eagerly as a thirsty man hastens to water.

"We—I was scheming to find out what that thief's hold over you is, and break it."

"You and that young pup! You and that young pup!"

"It must be a dreadful thing when you'd kill a man at your own door to cover it up," she said.

"He's a liar!" Nearing sprang to his feet, striding menacingly toward her, his foot striking the pedestal of her harp, making the strings groan.

"He lied like the gentleman that he is—only to conceal the truth," she said.

"Trouble increased a hundred-fold the day he came to this range. Would to God his ship had gone down in the sea!"

"If you would be frank with him, with me!" she appealed, standing near him, her white arms outstretched in beseeching.

"Whatever it is I'm keeping from you, Alma, I am doing so for your own peace," he assured her, his voice sombre, steady. "And whatever this—this—hold, as you have called it, may be, it will be broken, I will be free to go on with my business plans and the redemption of my word to my trusting friends, the moment you marry Dale. It isn't—it isn't—a—a hard fate. Dale's a gentleman by birth and breeding, he's a man among——"

"Thieves! No. If I can't have your confidence, you can't have mine. In the morning I'll leave this house, Uncle Hal. You and Dale Findlay can stand or fall together, as you deserve. Oh, poor old Uncle Hal!

What a hole you must be in!"

"By God! I am in a hole!" he said, so fiercely desperate that she drew away from him as if she had seen him lift his hand to strike her. "I'm in such a hole, by God! that you're not going to stand in the light of my only way out. Will you, or will you not, do as I command you?"

"Command me!" She shrank from him to the corner beside the door, her heart sinking, her cheeks cold. "Command me!" she repeated, the words slow and fearful on her numb lips.

"Marry him tonight! I have given my word."

"No!" she answered, a sudden fire fusing the ice of her fear. "Not if he can drag you — all of us — down to worse than ruin!"

"Since you choose to fight, then we'll fight," he returned, cold and unfeeling in his desperation. "Marrying him isn't a matter of living with him. I'll carry out my part of the agreement; I'll give you to him. It's for you to decide afterwards whether you'll live with him or not. His mouth will be shut."

"You contemptible coward!" she assailed him, too furious to give utterance to all that rose in her.

"Charley Thomson will be here in an hour or two, he is on his way. He is a notarial officer, empowered in extraordinary cases to perform the marriage rite. Be ready to come when you're wanted."

Nearing turned after opening the door, closed it again, drew close to where Alma sat overwhelmed by humiliation and shame, yet on fire with a dangerous resentment.

"There'll be no use in your trying to leave us, Alma," he informed her. "You'd be stopped, humiliated, I expect, and carried back. You'd better stay quietly here and see it through."

"You can't force me into a marriage!" she defied him.

"It might not stand the test of law," he admitted. "But I'll do my part."

"The part of a scoundrel!"

"It's only a form; you don't need to let it go any farther."

"It never will go that far!" she told him, vibrant in her rage.

Nearing had become indifferent to her scorn. It touched him no deeper than her angry arraignment and rebellious rage.

"Dale is a man who will know how to take care of you, anyhow," he said.

"He's robbed you of everything, even your manhood. Even if I were fool enough to let you force me into such a disgraceful thing, what do you suppose you'd gain in honor by it before the world?"

"It is not for you to pass judgment on my acts and purposes—only to do as you are commanded. His mouth will be shut, I tell you, *his mouth will be shut!*"

Nearing left her, closing the door after him gently, as if he shut it on one who had fallen asleep in a sickness, after a long struggle with a delirium that racked the foundations of life.

CHAPTER XXI

TIME TO SAY A PRAYER

IT SEEMED to Alma that some appalling cataclysm had overwhelmed the world. An hour ago she could not have been convinced that Nearing was a man so base as he had shown himself in that room, where his words seemed to sound still in repetition of his craven, unmanly demand. His attempt on Barrett's life had done no more than weaken in a slight degree her belief in the man who had stood in her veneration equal to a father for so many years.

She always had excused Nearing in her conscience; she always had held him the innocent victim of crafty contriving. She even could have justified him in taking a man's life, under stress of desperation, weariness and goading, to protect his name from the public disgrace that might grow out of some ill-advised act of the past. But his cruel cowardice of this night convicted him. He stood revealed, loathsome in his degradation.

Whatever he had done must have been independent of any connection with Findlay, to give that saturnine devil such a grip upon him. The crimes of the range were not so diversified as those of more civilized places; theft, arson, murder, covered them, as far as men counted them grave enough for punishment. It had come to the point now where passive submission to robbery no longer satisfied the master demon of this ridden coward's mind.

It seemed incredible that Findlay would be so foolish as to believe a marriage by violence could be consummated, no matter for the ruffians he had stationed around the house. They might easily break down her door, drag her from the room and stand her beside Findlay, but they could not compel her tongue.

Alma stood at the open window, flaming and throbbing with resentful fire. And through it all there rose, slowly, the cold spectre of fear.

She began to realize her danger. Men as desperate as those who surrounded her would find a way to work their will. What would it matter to Findlay whether she spoke the marriage vows, whether her lips remained silent or assented?

One thought, one name, had leaped into her heart at Nearing's broaching of his shameful scheme — Barrett. She must get word to Barrett; by some means she must summon him. This necessity now clamored in her heart again, urging, intensified. Barrett, Barrett — she must get word to Barrett!

She thought of stealing from the house, but dismissed it in a breath. Men were on guard at the farther end of the patio, not fifty feet from where she stood. Others were in the kitchen, rough cattle thieves who would stop at nothing. She had heard Teresa ordering them out, and their loud laughter at her rage. As the realization of the danger that encompassed and drew in upon her spread its chill, Alma sat down in her weakness, her eyes staring wildly in the dark.

Findlay did not mean for her to escape from that house before they could carry out their plot against

her; he did not intend that she should steal away afterwards. He would carry her off to some lonely camp, after which, he knew, she would be only too thankful for the desolation of nature, in which she could hide her shame.

Then a succession of confidence, lighting her dark moment like the dawn. Aunt Hope would not be a party to this outrage! Weak as she was in her sickness, her spirit broken by anxiety and straining, she could not remain passive while such a barbarous thing was being done in her house. Alma hastened to her, to implore her protection and help.

In the hall she paused at the sound of Nearing's voice. He appeared to be moving about the dining-room. It seemed a one-sided conversation, such as always went on with a certain man who confined himself generally to monosyllables, and spoke in low voice, as one speaks who has the fear in him that the sound may discover the villainy of his heart.

Mrs. Nearing lay on her bed, asleep. A lamp burned low in the room; the poor, broken creature's white hair was spread in disorder over the pillow, as if she had tossed in pain before sleep relieved her. Alma paused a terrified moment in the door, aware that appeal for protection would be hopeless there.

Of late she had seen Mrs. Nearing in this state before; for weeks she had been drugging a persistent headache and general nervous discord with laudanum. Whatever Nearing had told her of his plans for that night must have aggravated her suffering to such unbearable degree that she had taken almost a lethal dose

of the drug.

Alma stole softly along the hall and looked into the dining-room. Nearing was standing at his place, hand on the back of his chair; at his left hand Dale Findlay stood, darkly handsome in his black coat. Teresa was leaving the room, tray in hand.

"Tell Miss Nearing that dinner is waiting."

Teresa started at her master's word and hurried from the room. Alma retreated hurriedly along the hall ahead of her, waiting in her door. Teresa came breathlessly, noiseless as a shadow.

"Manuel has gone for him!" she whispered.

"Gone for him?" Alma repeated, her heart jumping with a high, glad leap.

"Meester Barrett. Don't be afraid, my poor little dove!"

"How long has he been gone, Teresa?"

"Five-ten minutes."

"Good old Manuel!" Alma blessed him, tears of gratitude, of hope, rising hot to her eyes.

"What must I tell him?" Teresa asked, moving her head toward the dining-room door.

"Tell them," Alma answered, a swelling triumph in her heart, "that Miss Nearing is fasting for her soul."

Teresa returned to Alma's door in a little while, her breath audible from excitement as if she had run around the leaguered house.

"Nobody can be married without a priest!" she said, exulting in her disclosure as if it might be original. "There is no priest here, and there can be no marriage without a priest!"

“Manuel must be half way there by now,” said Alma, counting off the time as if the thread of it were being drawn through her heart.

“Without a priest, I tell you—oh, I’d laugh in their faces without a priest!”

“It will take him thirty minutes, at the fastest he can ride, to come here from the hay-ranch,” Alma said.

“He will strike them down like the thunder!” Teresa said. “Five men are in my kitchen, five thieves. Wait till the hot water hits them when I begin to throw it out of the boiler—when Meester Barrett comes!”

“Teresa!” Alma drew her into the room, whispering, eager.

“Teresa, I’m going to take my gun and walk out of this house! If I can’t get a horse I’ll run down the road till I meet him. I’ll not let him come here to be murdered by this gang!”

“No, no!” Teresa protested. “You couldn’t go, unless you had the wings of a dove you couldn’t go. They’re out there like dogs under the feet, thieves everywhere. But what are they to Meester Barrett? No-thing!”

“He can’t fight twenty of them! I must go and meet him—I must go!”

“Manuel will bring him into the house like a spirit that comes through the door when it is shut. No, *palomita*, you must not go.”

Alma clutched the fat Teresa’s arm, clinging to her in a new sweep of terror.

“Oh! What if they stopped Manuel? What if he doesn’t come?”

“Manuel is on his way, *palomita*. There! they call me. Oh, if I had poison to put in the coffee! If I had a spider, a dried spider, crushed in fine powder, to sprinkle on their cake!”

Teresa went to answer the summons of the bell in the dining-room, expressing her vain desire with hissing breath. Alma gasped at the wish as if it were her own, only that she would apply but half of it. Nearing she would spare, to repent in such contrition as he might be capable of, for the cowardly tyranny of that hour. But if some subtle force could reach that dark scoundrel by his side, she would launch it at his heart.

And there was a way! It came to her in a flash, as an inspiration descends to some hopeless tangle of human striving when all seems lost. If she must sacrifice this night, then sacrifice with heroic hand.

She closed the window, and drew the shades against prying eyes and ears in the patio. How simple, how strange that she had not thought of it before!

The thought of running away from the impending deed of violence was dismissed, her fears were calmed in a moment. Even though the stratagem of Manuel should fail to bring Barrett into the house in time, the cattle thief would not ride away from there with a bride beside him that night. She went softly through the dark to her closet, and ran her hand along the wall to the place where her revolver hung.

Strange, that she had mislaid it. Disturbed now, her heart sinking from its high leaping, she felt among the dresses hanging thick upon the walls. It must have

been hung carelessly, and fallen to the floor. Quickly she made a light, scarcely breathing in the suffocation of a great, new fear. The revolver was gone.

"It is the old lawyer with a nose like a mule," said Teresa, coming in softly, closing the door after her with careful hand. "I gave him——"

Alma turned from her fruitless search of the closet, her face white, fright in her eyes.

"Did you see my gun when you were straightening up my room, Teresa?"

"Gun? Yes, it was there where it always hangs. Oh, *palomita mia*, you are not going——"

"It's gone! Teresa, it's gone!"

"Oh, *palomita*, you must have missed it!" Teresa rushed to the closet, pushing things aside to search every spot. "My God! they have robbed it!" she said, turning with wide, scared eyes.

"Some of them sneaked in while I was waiting for Uncle Hal!"

"No, I remember! While they talked, just after he came home, bent and white like a man out of the rain, I heard him command the *señora* to go quick to your room."

"My aunt? he sent her——"

"It is a true word, God save us!"

"Teresa"—eagerly, taking the great, kind creature by the hand, speaking fast—"can you find me another one, out in the hall, anywhere? Any kind of one, just so it's a gun!"

"You have seen a way!" said Teresa.

"I have seen a way. Hurry!"

Alma waited at the door, holding it open a little way to admit Teresa when she should come stealing back. She glanced at the little clock on the tall bureau. Manuel would have arrived; Barrett would be running, faithful old Fred Grubb, impetuous Dan Gustin, hastening with him, to saddle and ride.

"There is no gun in the house!" Teresa reported, coming back breathlessly.

"Teresa!"

"Big and little—gone! In the hall where they hung—empty!"

"Teresa! What am I going to do?"

"Wait. Meester Barrett will be on the way by now."

"But they'll not wait. They'll come for me soon, and I haven't got a thing—my hands are empty—I haven't got a thing!"

"They call me! it will be to bring away the meat."

Teresa started to go, duty being slow in her serving mind to come forward with an excuse.

"Go on," Alma urged when she paused and turned as for permission. "Hurry back and tell me what they're saying."

Teresa was gone a long time. Listening at the door, Alma heard her make several trips between kitchen and dining-room, heard Lawyer Thomson's gruff voice and Hal Nearing's cultured one; heard the sounds of laughter from the kitchen where the five thieves waited, and the movement of the sentries who guarded the patio beneath her very windows. Her heart fell in deeper hopelessness with every sound. Let Manuel come even

as a moonbeam through the window pane, he could not enter there unseen. They would rush out like hounds, and kill Barrett at the door.

Teresa returned sweating, panting, exclaiming under her breath. The ruffians in the kitchen had tried to kiss her; she had been forced to use the hot water before its intended time.

“Come in, Teresa!” Alma pulled her by the arm, frantically. “He’s coming—he’s coming for me!”

Nearing was in the hall. He came slowly to Alma’s door, behind which the two women stood in fearful expectancy.

“Alma!” he called, knocking softly.

“Yes, Uncle Hal,” she answered, opening immediately.

Teresa hid in the closet among the dresses, where she quaked in fear of discovery, even through the closed door.

“We’re ready to proceed, Alma,” Nearing announced, with such briskness as he could assume.

“Give me a few minutes, Uncle Hal,” she asked, her voice steadier than his own. “I have reconsidered it; I’ll do what you ask of me to spare you the ruin and disgrace that you fear more than you value your manhood and humanity.”

“I knew when you reflected, I knew when you thought it over!”

“Go back to him, then, and tell him I’ll do what you ask me. Tell him to consider me, in this unexpected situation, and be patient a little while.”

“Ten minutes?” he suggested, watch in hand.

"I'll try to be ready then."

Alma closed the door, dismissing him with that. Teresa came sweating from the closet, lifted her skirt, drew a carving-knife from her garter.

"I slipped it from the dish, for there is no gun!" she said.

Teresa's eyes glittered brighter than the steel; her bosom rose in exultant swell.

Alma started back, shocked, it seemed, by the brutality of the suggestion of that barbarous instrument. Then she took it, and laid it on the bureau close beside the little gilt clock.

"Can we hold them off till Barrett comes?" she wondered, speaking softly, eyes on the little clock.

"I will stand at the door," Teresa said hopefully, "I will say 'She is not dressed yet; in five minutes.' Or, 'She is at her prayers. For the sake of Our *Señor*, master, let her empty her poor heart!' And then, if all fails, and you must go—the knife!"

"The knife!" said Alma, her eyes still on the clock.

"When he takes your hand, draw the knife from your bosom, where I will hide it as the women of my country know how. He may lean a little, the devil in his eyes, and you must draw him and turn him, gently by the hand, so you can see the buttons of his vest. Count to the third button—it is there that the heart lies in a man—and strike! Drive it through him like the seven swords of Our Mother of Sorrows! Strike for your virginity!"

Teresa struck the blow in the fervency of her passion, sweeping her strong arm at an imaginary bride-

groom by her side.

“Put out the light!” Alma whispered fearfully.
“Let me say a prayer!”

CHAPTER XXII

A MAN IN THE DOOR

THEY'VE stopped him, they've killed him on the road!" said Alma, still on her knees beside her bed.

"Oh, Holy Mary! Oh, sweet Virgin Mary!" said Teresa, clasping her hands in agony.

"He would have been here by this time, Teresa—more than half an hour since Manuel got there. They've killed him, Teresa!"

"Oh, sweet Virgin Mary! Oh, Holy Mother of God!" Teresa implored, her clasped hands lifted, her stricken face upturned.

Outside the ruffians were beginning to clamor and curse, and beat on the windows in their impatience to have the thing over and their vigil done. They shouted ribald suggestions through the kitchen door, humorously proposing to come in and help dress the bride. Presently the two trembling women heard a deputation enter by way of the kitchen, and stamp noisily into the library, whither Nearing and the unwelcome guests his galloping fate had thrust upon him had retired to wait the little while Findlay had granted the bride.

Teresa put out the light in the room and went to the door to listen. Alma could hear them cursing, insubordinate wretches that they were even under Findlay's hard, quick-shooting hand. They were willing to go any reasonable length for a friend, they said, but

this was a little too much. Here were men enough to watch a herd, keeping windows to prevent the escape of one heifer. Marry, and have it over with, and call them in to kiss the bride, according to their ancient right.

Findlay's answer neither Alma nor Teresa could hear, though he came along the passage toward the kitchen door with his villains. Whatever it was, it seemed to suffice them for the time. They retreated with laughter, spirits high.

"Oh, my little dove!" said Teresa, in new burst of trouble, turning again into the room, closing the door. "The ball at Four Corners! He is at the ball!"

Her confidence in the cunning of Manuel, her senior by thirty years, was so great that she could not admit for more than a passing moment the thought that he had failed. She embraced Alma now in the fervency of this new hope.

"Then we must put them off half an hour longer, and they'll never wait," Alma said.

"You must change your dress," said Teresa. "Put on your riding habit, as if you expected to go away with him when the wedding is over. The shirt is loose; it will hide the knife."

Teresa made the light again. She brought a gray wool shirt from the closet, such as cowboys commonly wore, a corduroy riding-skirt, and leather belt. As she stood with them in her hands a step sounded in the hall, a knock on the door.

"Alma!"

It was Nearing again. Alma, crouching in white ter-

ror at the foot of her bed, did not answer.

"She is dressing, *señor*," Teresa answered for her.

"Alma!" Suspiciously, sharply, knocking again.

"Yes, Uncle Hal."

"Come! we can't wait any longer. Mr. Thomson is ready."

"As soon as I change my dress," Alma promised.

"Five minutes?" he said.

"I'll do the best I can, Uncle Hal."

Alma held the tremor of fear out of her voice by a struggle, but with the best she could do it was wild and unnatural. For in the light of the lamp the long knife gleamed on the bureau beside the little clock.

Nearing went away, to come again, and not alone, in less than the allotted time. Teresa answered the knock, opening the door a little way. Alma sat with her abundant hair falling over her shoulders, and down beside her white face like a sorrowing madonna.

"When I fix her hair—I am parting it down the middle like a married woman's," Teresa said.

It was plain to Nearing, and to Findlay, who stood at his shoulder, that this was true. They could see Alma there beside her white bed, seated on a low rocking chair, her dark-red hair around her shoulders. She was dressed as if she meant to mount and ride. Findlay whispered in Nearing's ear.

"Be quick about it, we can't have any more of this delay," Nearing said, plainly repeating an order.

"For the love of Our *Señor*, give her a little time!" Teresa pleaded.

She closed the door to all but a narrow crack, fear-

ing they might see the fearful instrument with which her *palomita*, her little dove, would strike for her chastity and honor if they must crowd forward the terrible moment.

“We’ll wait here. Quick! do it up any way.”

Nearing gave the order more to Alma than Teresa, Dale Findlay, like a prompting demon, close behind him.

“You can hurry neither a corpse nor a bride, *señor*,” Teresa answered him, to all outward appearances quite composed. But what a tumult was in her pained bosom, what a straining for the sound of hoofbeats in the night!

“It’s almost ten, Alma,” Nearing said.

“I’ll be only a little while longer, Uncle Hal.”

“We’ll wait here,” he said.

Teresa closed and locked the door. Then she began to plait her dear one’s hair, gathering it into a great braid as thick as a ship’s hawser.

“They’ll break the door down!” Alma whispered.

Teresa let the great rope of hair fall dangling, the ungathered ends of it almost sweeping the floor.

“Here—the knife!” she whispered, bringing it quickly. “We must be ready!”

“Your hair will do, Alma,” Nearing called, impatiently. “You can finish it afterwards. Open the door!”

“Here—a little slip of the hand into the bosom, and you are saved!” Teresa whispered, hiding the knife quickly. “One moment, *señor*—one little moment to say a prayer!”

"Open this door!" Nearing commanded, foot set harshly against the panel.

"Oh, Mother of God! Oh, sweet Virgin Mary!" Teresa murmured, turning her distracted eyes upon Alma.

"Open it," Alma said.

She drew the unfinished braid of hair over her shoulder, and stood while she completed what Teresa had begun. Teresa flung the door wide, as if discovering a triumph to mock them. Alma stood before the glass, winding the braid of hair crown-like around her head. She fastened it with tortoise-shell pins, deliberately, with steady hand, and turned to face them where they stood in the door.

"Go on; I'll come with Teresa," she said.

"With me," Nearing declared, determined to have done with delay.

He motioned Findlay ahead. Alma followed beside her uncle, slowly along the narrow hall.

Charley Thomson was walking back and forth before the library fireplace, hands under the tails of his long black coat, smoking a cigar. The long oaken table bearing the shaded lamp was between him and the door that opened into the broad front hall, through which the strange wedding party entered. Thomson drew up abruptly in his studious pacing to and fro, and stood a moment, hands still under his coat, frowning heavily upon them as if they might be culprits come for sentence before his grim and uncompromising bar.

Findlay arranged himself beside Alma, Nearing falling back to give place to him just within the door.

Teresa, her eyes so great they seemed all white, stopped in the door, her hands clasped, her lips silently forming the words of her appeal.

Alma felt as if her bones had turned to marrow, her flesh to snow. She saw everything in the keenest sense of detail, even to the slender stream of blue smoke that rose from the end of Thomson's cigar, and thought that it burned avidly, as if in a hurry to be reduced to ashes and done with his vile mouth. She noted how the books lay on the table, and that certain ones were not where they had been when she waited in that room after Nearing's arrival home, while he talked with Aunt Hope.

She felt her thoughts leap and surge like a confined blaze as she crossed the narrow room at Findlay's side; it seemed as if her soul had taken fire and sought in frantic haste the exit to freedom that it could not find. She did not know, now that the moment had come, whether her heart and hand would fail in the horrible deed she had set for herself to do; she did not know whether it were better to smirch her soul with a thing so foul, or smirch her body in the passive purchase of immunity for the craven man who drove her to this pass.

She was weak, she was cold; her limbs trembled, her heart beat low as in one from whom life stands at the door ready to flee away. Findlay had not spoken a word to her. Perhaps if he would speak, the straining doubt of this moment might resolve into some definite thing.

Must she strike, holding his hand as Teresa had said,

or yield like a thing offered and sold? She was to have little time to turn it in the fiery tumult of her thoughts.

Thomson took his bitten, flat cigar from his huge hungry mouth; he disposed it carefully on the metal base of the lamp, and leaned over the table slightly, thumbs hooked under it, fingers spread on the dark wood.

“It is the presumption, when two people appear before a properly authorized person, seeking to be legally married, that they do so of their own free will and accord. I take it that such is the case in the present instance, and without further——”

“No!” said Alma, her voice rising strongly over the old scoundrel’s droning. “You know I’m forced to do it! You could stop it——”

“Without further preliminaries, dismissing the usual formula, we will presume, we do presume,” Thomson went on, not heeding her, “that you accept each other as man and wife. Take hands. Take her by the hand, Findlay, damn it! Take her hand!”

Findlay turned to face his unwilling bride, offering his right hand. Coldly she laid her left hand in it, clasping it suddenly, with a force that caused Findlay to fix his eyes on her face in questioning surprise.

“I pronounce——”

Thomson’s words lingered in his vile mouth as Alma, drawing with the strength of her despair on Findlay’s hand, snatched at the hidden knife in her bosom.

“Watch her!” Thomson shouted, falling back from the table as if his own life stood in peril.

The guard of the knife caught her shirt as Alma

drew it, impeding the swift movement of her hand.

“Strike!” Nearing shouted, his loud, hoarse voice vibrant with eagerness.

Findlay caught her wrist, holding her hopelessly in his invincible grip. The knife fell to the floor. Alma sobbed as she struggled to tear away, writhing and fighting in the great strength of her baffled rage.

Nearing plunged in to reach the knife; Findlay drove a terrific kick into his stomach, stretching him on the floor.

“Go on—marry us!” Findlay ordered, scowling across at Thomson, who stood well behind his barrier of table, out of the sudden fight.

Findlay held Alma’s wrists, one crossed over the other, his fingers hard as oak, it seemed, and hopeless to unclasp. Thomson came forward, lifting his eyebrows as he peered over his glasses, to see that Nearing was not rising with the knife.

“Go on! Marry us, damn you!” Findlay repeated.

In the kitchen a great turmoil of shots and shouting suddenly rose. Teresa rushed into the room as Findlay, still holding his grip on Alma’s wrists, turned to see who came so rudely upon his wedding hour.

“Sweet Mother of God!” Teresa cried, spreading her arms to receive her dove, restored to her heart unsullied.

Barrett stood in the door.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LIGHT IS BLOWN OUT

FINDLAY had approached this defiled and mocked marriage altar unarmed. Whether he had been prompted to this by some feeling of delicacy and fitness which his years of selfish living had not entirely erased, or whether from sense of security growing out of the fact that he had taken possession of all the fire-arms in the house and set a strong guard outside it, no man could have told. But the startling fact rose up to confront him in that moment that he had no weapon within reach of his hand except the carving-knife that lay between him and Alma on the floor.

He fell back a step on Barrett's sudden appearance, throwing his hand out of habit to his hip where his holster would have hung if he had been provided according to his usual caution. He looked swiftly about the room with the quick calculation of a man who could not understand nor accept any possibility of defeat.

"Back into that corner!" Barrett commanded him, indicating the place with his gun.

Findlay had looked into the eyes of men too long to stand on the order of his going. He backed away from Barrett, who seemed unaware of anybody in the room except the man under his eyes. In the kitchen the turmoil had ceased, but in the dooryard there rose shouts of excitement and warning cries, and the quick clatter of spurred horses, and frantic riding away.

One rode to the library window, broke the glass with a crash that seemed the note of crisis in that overburdened hour, tore down the windows-shade and shouted to his chief. Barrett threw a quick shot at him. The weapon the fellow had broken the pane with fell into the room as the horse bounded away in the dark.

Teresa stood clasping Alma, exclaiming and exulting over her, although Alma was not in need of the support of any arm. She sprang away from Teresa's happy embrace, snatched up the pistol the rider had dropped from his wounded or dead hand, and turned it upon Charley Thomson.

"Get over with him, you old devil!" she said, driving him along.

Thomson retreated before the fury gathering in her face, holding up his hands before his own precious countenance as if to shield his legal front from any disfigurement through an accidental discharge of the menacing gun.

Nearing had risen sickly to his knees, where he stood unsteadily, not fully conscious of all that had taken place. Findlay, backed into the corner, shot his quick eyes from figure to figure in the group before him, but there was no fear in them, only the sharp, eager seeking for some weapon with which he might strike and vent the passion that raged in him and darkened in his face.

Barrett jerked the silk handkerchief from his neck, tossed it to Teresa.

"Tie that man's hands!"

"Keep off!" Findlay warned, cursing her vilely. He

leaned as if he arched his back like a cougar, and settled himself to leap.

"Turn around, hold them out behind you!"

Barrett went a step nearer as he gave the order. Findlay, flashing a look again into the younger man's eyes, turned and put out his hands.

Teresa was beginning her triumphant task when Manuel appeared in the door, a pistol in each hand. Calmly shoving his weapons under his belt, as a man who sees his day's work done puts away his tools, the old man relieved Teresa of her duty, undoing what she had begun, to make the rustler secure beyond a doubt.

"The other one," Barrett directed, nodding to the lawyer.

Thomson began to protest, to threaten proceedings at law, to visit terrible penalties for the outrage against his sacred person. Barrett stopped him.

"You can tell that to the sheriff when he comes for both of you," he said. "You'll stay tied till he comes."

Nearing got to his feet, his eyes staring wildly, his face white with something more than the pain he had suffered from Findlay's cruel kick.

"No, no! For God's sake, Barrett, let them go!" he begged.

"Senator Nearing, your family and friends are through sacrificing for you. You must stand or fall by what you've done. These men are going to jail, if there's any power in this state can put them there."

"Barrett, you don't understand," Nearing argued, falling back on his weak stand of intricacies in his complex life too great for the common mind.

"Time will reveal many things that none of us understand," Barrett replied.

"Alma! I'm asking only a little favor of you now. Let them go!"

"No!" said Alma, her face aflame in the thought of the shame this broken coward had brought so near her but a few moments past.

"Send me to jail if you think you've got to, Alma," Findlay said, turning from Barrett as if he scorned him too greatly to spare him even a word of defiance. "And I'll send Hal Nearing to hell on a hangman's rope!"

"Damn you! You'll never speak!" said Nearing, his weakness gone from him as he turned to snatch the pistol from Alma.

"Not here!" she cried, as she struggled against him to retain the weapon.

They were near the window. Before either Barrett or Manuel could reach them, Alma tossed the gun through the broken pane.

"Not here!" she said again, panting and white. "We've been spared blood in this house by almost a miracle tonight. Let it—let it—" she panted, "remain clean, one spot without that curse!"

"Who sounds on the door?" asked Teresa, shrinking in the fear of some new violence.

Whoever it was that made such a loud summons on the front door did not wait to be admitted. They heard the door open as Manuel, drawing both his guns, started to inquire.

Cattle Kate rushed into the room, her head bare, her

wild curls flying. She stopped abruptly just inside the door, turning her white face from one to the other of them, as if to account for them all. Then she crossed swiftly to Alma, and caught her sternly by the arm.

"Are you married to him?" she demanded.

"No, Kate—thank God!"

Kate turned to Findlay, a cold white fury in her face.

"You tried to throw me, Dale!" she said, her voice trembling with something that was not all hate. "I played you even—I threw you. The cattlemen are after you! They're not two miles away!"

Findlay's dark face grew pale when the news of Cattle Kate's betrayal struck its terror to his vengeful, wicked heart. The approach of those armed riders, who had left the dance to come swiftly on this errand of justice, meant but one thing to Dale Findlay, safe so long in his place of respectability and trust. Death rode with them. There was no appeal from the decision of that stern court; no connivance of delay. All the craft of old Charley Thomson would avail him nothing there.

"You tried to throw me!" Kate repeated, standing before the silent man, in whom there seemed no faculty of either contrition, tenderness, or shame.

"Throw you hell!" he said. "It was only a joke!"

Cattle Kate turned her head slowly, and looked around the room. Her face was whiter than the bodice under her dark coat, her thin nostrils dilated as she drew her panting breath.

"Well, it was a damn poor one, Dale!" she said.

“Nearing, I’ve got to get out of here!”

Findlay spoke imperiously, his voice pitched to his accustomed hard note of uncompromising command. Nearing turned to Barrett, putting out his hands in wordless appeal.

“He’ll have to take his medicine,” Barrett said.

Cattle Kate whipped her gun from beneath her long coat and threw it down on Alma.

“I’ll kill her if any of you bats an eye!” she threatened. “Cut him loose,” she ordered Manuel, keeping her threat over Alma to enforce her will upon them all.

Still the old man hesitated, until Barrett nodded permission for him to obey. There was such a desperate eagerness in Cattle Kate’s eyes to serve this cruel master of her heart that hesitation surely would end in tragedy.

Besides, Barrett did not believe it possible for Findlay to escape the cattlemen, to whom his villainies, long suspected but never established before that night, called so insistently for immediate adjustment. Cattle Kate would put her life down there at Findlay’s feet, and do it gladly. Having found him unexpectedly free, she had repented her treason as impetuously as she had uttered his betrayal. She hoped now to regain her place in his unworthy breast.

“Hurry, Dale! Take my horse — there, at the front door!” she urged him.

Findlay had his eager eyes on Kate’s pistol. Barrett saw him stiffen to spring and snatch it, and called a warning word. Kate had interposed her body to protect Findlay the moment she drew her gun. Barrett

could not fire at him without killing the girl.

"You can't have it, Dale," Kate denied him, putting back her free hand to hold him off. "If there's any shootin' done here, I'll do it. You go!"

"I'll go on my own horse, Kate, when I get good and ready," Findlay told her.

"They're comin', I tell you, Dale! Do you think it's a bluff?"

"No, but let 'em come!"

Kate was pushing him toward the door, shielding him with her body from the two armed people in the room, watching Barrett especially, knowing that he had reason to take Findlay's life where he stood. But Kate held her unfaltering aim on Alma. That she would shoot at the first start, none of them doubted.

Barrett was not keen to take the chance. On the other hand, he lowered his gun, hoping to convince Cattle Kate of his willingness to allow her gallant to pass out to such safety as he could find.

It was Barrett's belief that Findlay was passing out of that house, and withdrawing his evil shadow from it, forever. Even though he might escape the cattlemen, who would throw out scores of riders to comb the range for him before daylight, he would not dare come back. Peace would sit in his place; Nearing would be free of his oppressive hand, to repair the loss and shame of the past. So, Barrett was well enough content to let him go.

That some similar thought agitated Findlay's mind seemed certain from his reluctance to go, to release in one moment the grasp over his victim which he had

counted upon not two minutes past to endow him so richly. He paused in the door, Cattle Kate stretching her arm before him, fending him like an eagle her young. It seemed that he would not go and leave that house standing upon a single hope.

"Alma, you and Barrett have been nosin' around to find out something. You wanted to know what I had on Nearing, you thought you could get it out of Kate. It'll be a sweet pill for you to chew on till I come back. I'll tell you."

"Findlay!" Nearing shouted, his voice hoarse in the appeal of terror.

"There's your senator, there's your honorable man!" Findlay mocked, pointing over Kate's shoulder.

"Hurry! don't you hear them comin'?" Kate implored.

"Even if I don't happen to come back, I pass you my word that Nearing swings for the——"

"Findlay!" Nearing shouted again, in terrible voice of warning and appeal.

In his vindictive eagerness to make a complete ruin of the man in whose misery he could profit no longer, Findlay came a little from behind Kate's sheltering body to lean and look into the room. Nearing, standing close to Manuel, snatched a pistol from the old man's belt and fired.

Cattle Kate seemed to rise a little from the floor with the flash of Nearing's shot, and reel backward, as if struck a mighty blow. Findlay threw out his arm to stay her fall, and the girl, her face set hard in the grimace of her death-pang, lifted her drooping arm

and fired, just as Charley Thomson, his bound arms at his back, leaned and blew out the lamp.

There was a confusion of screams from Alma and Teresa, and the rush of arriving horsemen drawing a line around the house. Barrett called sharply to Manuel to make a light. The old man, answering softly, unshaken in his fateful acceptance of things as they fell, struck a match.

Barrett had a glimpse of Cattle Kate lying crumpled in the door, and of Alma, for whom he feared with a greater terror than he ever had known, standing with horror in her eyes, gazing at something in the shadows beyond the table. Old Manuel deliberately took his handkerchief from his pocket to lift the hot lamp chimney, his body hovering over the match in his hand, cutting off the light.

When the lamp flared again, it discovered armed men crowding into the hall. Findlay was gone; Thomson was gone. But Cattle Kate lay dead in the doorway, and over beyond the long table Senator Nearing stretched straight as if his limbs had been arranged to keep his dignity. His blood was wasting down upon the hearthstones, in the place where a man should be safe, if there is any safety for him against violence and sudden death, amidst the perils of this world.

CHAPTER XXIV

FUNERAL POETRY

THE strand of Nearing's life hung only by a shred. Dan Gustin and Fred Grubb, who had come hot-riding with the cattlemen, helped Barrett carry him to his bed. One pair of hands could do as much as a hundred to stay the parting of this almost severed thread; Barrett saw this at a glance. He waited no longer than to give Manuel some hurried instructions, when he mounted and rode with the cattlemen in what promised to be the greatest roundup of rustlers that ever took place on that range.

So it was that after thirty hours in the saddle the three friends had rounded back to Eagle Rock camp. The posse comitatus was still sweeping the range in search of Findlay.

Worthy Glass, alone of the number who had worked under Findlay's direction in robbing not only the Diamond Tail, but the herds of adjoining ranches, the cattlemen had taken alive. He was lame from a bullet wound in the heel, result of the noisy fight a few days before in Bonita. They hung him to a piñon pine barely tall enough to clear his feet from the ground.

Three other members of Findlay's crew, all of whom had drawn wages as herdsmen on the Diamond Tail, the cattlemen shot from their saddles as they fled. But Findlay they did not find. The cunning rascal

had left no more trail behind him when he fled from Nearing's house than if he had walked on water.

After a few hours' sleep Barrett was up again at dawn, eager to resume the hunt. Fred Grubb joined him before he had his boots on; together they had breakfast, Alvino setting it out on the end of the oil-cloth-covered table, Barrett's plate laid, either by chance or design, in the boss' place where Dale Findlay commonly sat.

Dan came in, his face fresh from the washpan, the forelock of his fair hair over his eye. Habit of rising before the stars began to fade out of the sky was too strong on him to let him rest in his bunk ten minutes past the usual time. He stood at the glass, which was not big enough to show all of his face at once, arranging his hair with the steel comb that Alvino had anchored beside it on a string.

"Boss man, you're in the right place," he said, combing with one hand, holding down his hair with the other, as particularly as if he prepared to ride to another dance.

"I just happened to light here," Barrett said.

"Manuel told me he saw it in the cards that you'd be the big boss of the Diamond Tail," said Fred, nodding very solemnly.

Barrett said nothing more. The fact was, it had been running through his head all night, awake and asleep, that somebody must step temporarily into Nearing's place. The property of the company, his own property, which he had faced no small peril to salvage, must be guarded. New men must be employed to fill

the places of the fifteen or twenty rustlers driven off or removed from the reckoning in other ways. Fred began to talk along this line.

"The old Diamond Tail's short-handed today," he said, "shorter than it's ever been since this company was organized. But them cattle's safer than they've been in many a day. If you was to leave 'em on the range without a man to watch 'em for the next year, Ed, you'd have more in the end than you would if Dale Findlay and that gang was steppin' around."

"I bet you," Barrett assented.

Dan came and sat with them, drumming boyishly on his plate for flapjacks, to which Alvino was treating them as a special favor that morning. The tragedies in other men's lives did not affect Dan's spirits, no matter how near to him the shadows fell.

"What're you goin' to do about puttin' somebody in Nearing's place?" Dan inquired.

"I don't know, Dan. That will have to be taken up with the stockholders; it will take time. I guess you and Fred and the rest of us that are not hung, will have to make a stagger at runnin' things till we get word from the men whose money is in the game."

"Well, ain't you one of 'em?" said Fred.

"I've only got a few chips, boys."

"I thought my wranglin' days was over, but if you need me, Ed," Fred offered.

"We need you, all right. What do you say, Dan?"

"I'm in. And you won't even have to fire that foreman to get me back—they laid him out over on the mesa yesterday. Say, there was a hole through that

feller's head you could 'a' strung him on a wire by."

"All right," said Barrett, suddenly determined on his course, "as self-elected representative of the stockholders in this company, I appoint you, Dan, superintendent of this ranch. You'll begin work this morning, and keep it up till further notice. Hire what men you need and can get, fire any you don't want."

"Hell!" said Dan, staring at Barrett in amazement.

"Fred, I want you to go to the ranch with me to see how Nearing is. If Manuel hasn't got the doctor from the post, as I told him to, we'll have to attend to that."

"If I'm goin' to be horse wrangler, Ed——"

"You're promoted from horse wrangler. It's a job beneath your dignity."

"Well, what in the seven snakes *am* I?"

"Guide; my private and personal guide. I couldn't any more get around this range alone than a one-legged duck."

"We'll go ahead short-handed till spring," Dan announced, looking up like a man from his calculations, his way clear before him.

"Give us five years and we'll put fur collars on them stockholders," Fred declared.

There was not a man in Eagle Rock camp for Dan to superintend, save Alvino, the cook. All the honest ones working on the Diamond Tail had joined the pursuit of the thieves, and probably a few of the thieves who hoped to pass in this extremity for honest men until they might slip safely away. Dan, who took his honors soberly and seriously, appeared to have put down the lightness of his youth when he rose from the

breakfast table to ride forth on his new duties. Barrett knew that he had not made a blunder in this appointment, no matter for the many others which seemed to strew his way on the range like the bones of famine-killed cattle.

Dan announced that his first work would be to take a census of the Diamond Tail cattle, roughly, as such counts are made on the range, yet generally found remarkably exact when it comes to checking them off head by head. This move Barrett applauded. An inventory would be the first thing asked by the other stockholders, and he would gain their confidence by forestalling the request. Barrett shook hands with Dan as he stood by his horse ready to ride away in an importance greater than the simple-hearted, honest lad ever had dreamed of as being his.

The sun was just reddening on the crags and stunted cedars of Eagle Rock canyon when Barrett and Fred set out for the ranch. They rode silently down the dewy, shadowed canyon, where quail whistled in the tall grass, for there were unhappy memories for both of them within the rocky walls. As the canyon broadened, and the place where Barrett had fought the rustler, leaving his body for Fred Grubb to come and cart away, was passed and left behind, the sun struck over the lower rampart and cheered them on their way. Fred Grubb found his tongue.

"I never did have no funeral poertry in me," he sighed.

"Funeral poetry, Fred? We're not going to a funeral."

"It'll turn out to be one," Fred declared. "I wish I could think up a verse or two so I could leave it on Hal Nearing's grave."

"Time enough to think of that when he's dead, old feller."

"He's as good as dead, if he ain't dead already. No man never gits over it when he's shot through the silo that way."

"I was shot through the lung," Barrett reminded him, an inflection of censure in his voice for the poet's gloomy view.

"Yes, but there ain't so much to leak out of a man up there, Ed. You take and shoot a man through the *di*-gestion that way, and he'd just as well send 'em out to dig his grave. Hal Nearing was a dead man the minute that bullet got him in the waistband of his britches."

They talked of Nearing's chances as they rode up to the mesa out of the canyon, their shadows grotesquely long before them. Unconsciously they passed into speaking of him as a man who had been and was no more.

"And I don't believe I've got erry piece of funeral poetry in that sack," Fred regretted.

"I guess the other poets have written enough of it to last a while," Barrett suggested. "I never could see where a verse on a man's tombstone comforted him very much, anyhow."

"No. I always thought the wind up here on these peraries could sing a man's requisition better 'n me. But it was a disgraceful way for a man to go."

"Tough luck, to be shot down in his own home."

"Yes, and by a woman. It wouldn't 'a' been so disgraceful if Dale'd 'a' done it, but to think of that little Cattle Kate drillin' him through the gizzard when she was drawin' her last breath! That girl was a queen, Ed; she was the queen of trumps."

Barrett did not dispute poor Cattle Kate's right to this lowly royalty, nor speak any word of the sad and gloomy things which freighted his heart. However his going might be classed, disgraceful or merely unfortunate, it was best that Nearing should go, and that he should take with him the secret so nearly revealed. So nearly revealed, indeed, that all who had heard Dale Findlay's unfinished accusation could guess the rest. The rest, all but the name. There was no doubt what Nearing's crime had been.

It was as if some subtle current carried Barrett's thought to Fred, who spoke thoughtfully, in the voice of a man moving out of his meditations.

"It was the Englishman," he said.

"It must have been," Barrett agreed.

"I never said so before, but I always had my notion who it was plugged that poor feller down there in the canyon when he was ridin' off singin', I'll bet a dime, the way he always went."

"Poor cuss!" said Barrett, the picture rising before him.

It must have been in the dusk of day, he thought, for in the dusk the tragedies of Eagle Rock canyon commonly fell.

"Well, Hal Nearing had his good points," Fred al-

lowed, still speaking as of a man who had finished his allotment of troubles in this life.

“Yes; the same as every man.”

“But they was further apart than owl’s eyes, Ed. If they’d ‘a’ been feathers, he’d ‘a’ been a mighty cold bird.”

“I expect he’ll need all the good that can be figured for him, the same as you and me.”

“Yes, but the Poet Lariat may let him down easy, seein’ he was drove by the devil so long. Maybe I can make up a little poertry on him. If I can I’ll lay it on his grave like a posy of flowers. Maybe it’d help him out a little.”

“They say every good thought helps a man, living or dead. But I don’t know; you can search me, Fred.”

Fred saved further comment on the mercies which Hal Nearing might stand in need of, whatever his situation might be at that hour. He lapsed into a long silence, from which he started abruptly to inquire:

“What made you rush off so sudden the other night?”

“Rush off?”

“After the shootin’ at the ranch. I looked to see you stay a little while and comfort Alma, and pat her hand.”

“I haven’t got any more right to pat her hand than you have!”

“You ain’t?” Fred looked at him in blank surprise, which quickly softened into knowing incredulity. “Who has?”

“You can search me.”

Fred jogged along a little way, throwing a sly look across at his companion now and then.

"Well, who's goin' to marry her, then?" he wanted to know.

"I expect somebody will step up to fill the bill. She wouldn't consider a feller that muddles and messes everything he touches."

"Oh, you ain't done so bad for a green man on the range," Fred encouraged him.

"Bad! I let that scrub Findlay insult me the first time I met him without knockin' his teeth through the back of his neck. And then I let him shoot me through the bellows, and go and lie around on the sunny side of a haystack instead of goin' right after him and cuttin' his eyelids off."

"Didn't we go after him as soon as you was able to sling a gun? Yes, and before you was able, by rights. It wasn't your fault that he didn't happen to be in Bonita that night we cleaned things up."

"Cleaned things up! Fred, we shot one poor, gangle-shanked cattle rustler in the heel."

"Well, we might 'a' missed him," said Fred, not at all ashamed of the record of that noisy night.

"Yes, and Findlay was at the ranch the other night, and I had him where I wanted him, but I didn't have the nerve to give it to him then. I guess I was afraid I'd spoil the carpet."

"No man wants to shoot a feller before a lady, 'specially a feller that ain't got no gun on him. You done right; you done what any man that is a man would 'a' done in the same compunction. Don't grieve

over that, Ed.”

“And I’ll bet that thief has stood right here laughin’ at us all the time—I’ll bet any man money he’s within forty miles of the ranch right now.”

“I wouldn’t take you up.” Fred admitted. “I’ve had the same kind of a eachin’ in me myself.”

“He intends to hide around here till this excitement dies down, then slip out. This business broke too soon for him, away sooner than he expected. He wasn’t ready to leave, he wasn’t done suckin’ Nearing’s blood. It’s my opinion, Fred, he’s got money cached up there in Eagle Rock canyon somewhere.”

“I don’t know, Ed. Don’t you think he’s too bright for that? I’d say he’s got it salted down in a bank in Denver or Omaha, or some of them towns back East.”

“No; he’d want it where he could put his hand on it when it came time for him to hit the trail out of here. He’d never risk his neck in any of the big towns after the cattlemen got after him.”

“Maybe he has got a stache up there in the canyon, Ed. Maybe we’d better take a bunch of fellers up there and see if we can tree him.”

“It’s a one-man game from now on; it’s between him and me. I’ll go alone.”

Fred protested in pantomime, too full of emotions to speak at once.

“*You* can’t go up there after him alone, Ed!” he finally found tongue to say.

“You’ve got a right to think that of me, after what you’ve seen,” Barrett said, bitter against himself for his touching and passing, and overturning nothing com-

pletely, since he came to the range.

“He ain’t alone, Ed. He’s got three or four fellers with him, maybe more. Boy, they’d eat you up like a redish.”

Barrett rode on, his face solemn and determined, thinking it over.

“No, he’s alone,” he declared. “Findlay’s not the man to stick to his friends in trouble—he’ll throw them and go his way alone. And he’s not a man to split with anybody else, either. What he’s got cached he’s going to carry away in his own jeans, if he can.”

“I think you’re right about that, but you’re wrong about goin’ alone. I’m goin’ with you. You’d be like a blind colt on this range without a guide—you said so yourself.”

Barrett was kind, but sternly firm. He would see what could be done for Nearing if he still lived, bury him if dead, and then turn his face to the range.

“I’ll make one complete job of it, one way or another,” he declared. “Can’t you see it’s cut out for me alone, Fred?”

“No, I can’t see it any whichaway,” said Fred.

He argued, he begged, he swore softly under his breath at such behavior, which he declared beat his time. And he kept up his argument and soft swearing, all to no purpose, until Barrett pulled up suddenly and pointed ahead.

A single horseman was cutting the trail two miles or more ahead of them, coming from the shelter of an arroyo. [When he struck the trail, he bore straight onward.

"Let me take your spy-glass," Barrett requested.

Fred produced the instrument, a small brass telescope such as was in common use on the range among cowboys of that day. Barrett fixed it on the fast-riding horseman, and handed it back without a word.

"You was right, he's ridin' alone," said Fred, lowering the glass from his eye. "What do you suppose his game is now, headin' towards the ranch?"

"He's makin' for the railroad, the back door's open for him," Barrett replied.

"Yes, I guess we're the only ones on this part of the range, the others 're all up north. He's headin' for the ranch after a fresh horse."

"That's about it."

They paused there on top of a little high ground, looking after Findlay as he drew off rapidly, a handful of dust rising behind him.

"Maybe we can git there before he leaves," said Fred.

Barrett did not speak. He leaned forward in his saddle as he gave rein to his horse, urging it onward as he had ridden that night at the summons of Manuel, pressed by what he felt now to be even a greater and graver need.

CHAPTER XXV

THE RUSTLER SPEAKS

ALMA was alone at a late breakfast, having risen unrefreshed from a few hours' sleep after two nights' vigil at Nearing's side. It was near noonday now; Mrs. Nearing, to whom this crisis in a long suspense seemed less terrible than the waiting for it to fall, was with her husband.

A quiet was over the house and premises, as if death already had fallen upon the master of that princely domain. The corrals were empty; old Manuel was the only man about the place.

The pursuit of Findlay and his rustlers had drawn the far-scattered neighbors away. Save for the doctor from the post, nobody had visited the ranch in two days. Alma never had felt the isolation and loneliness of it so sharply as now, separated, as they seemed to be, by this tragedy from all the world.

She knew that Nearing, wounded and at death's door as he lay, was under a shadow of suspicion which would formulate into definite challenges should he ever walk forth in the sun again. She knew it would be far better for him to die, in the disgrace that was only partly known, partly guessed, than live to answer to something she shuddered to think upon.

The front door, never locked in her recollection, closed softly. Thinking it was the doctor come from the post, Alma rose to receive him. Dale Findlay con-

fronted her in the hall, where he had hesitated as if to listen, pistol in his hand.

Alma started back, her very life seeming to sink out of her in a cold and devastating fear. Desperation was lined deep in Findlay's gaunt, dark face; fear of the fate that waited him stood in his harried eyes.

"Who's here?" he whispered, his pistol thrust almost against her bosom.

"You've come in your proper character, like a house-breaker and sneaking thief!" she said, scorning him above her fear.

"Who's here?" he asked again, coming nearer, bending to whisper close to her ear.

"Two women and a dying man—fit subjects for your noble wrath, Mr. Findlay."

"Don't talk so loud!" he cautioned her. "Where's Nearing?"

"In his room. Have you come to kill him?"

Her scorn of him grew as her fear dissolved, although man nor woman ever had reason to fear Dale Findlay more than in that hour.

"You must hide me here till night," said Findlay, sharply. "Tell Manuel to put my horse away and hide my saddle."

"Do it yourself!" said she.

"You've got to hide me——"

"I'll yell from the door you're here if anybody passes!"

"They'll never get me!" he declared.

"Is that the doctor, Alma?"

Mrs. Nearing appeared in the sufferer's door, speak-

ing eagerly. She leaned into the hall, unable for a moment to grasp what was going forward.

“It’s Mr. Findlay come back, begging us to hide him,” Alma said.

“Hush!” Findlay commanded harshly.

“Oh, Dale, Dale! are you here again?” Mrs. Nearing hastened forward, confronting him without a tremor. “After all the sorrow and trouble you’ve brought on this house, do you dare come back to it again?”

“I just want to stay here till night, then I’ll go. I promise you I’ll never come back.”

“Till night—stay till night? You—after you—you murderer!”

“Hide me!” he ordered, roughly, desperate now over the delay. “They may come any minute! Put me in Nearing’s room—they’ll not search it. Hurry, I tell you—take me to Nearing’s room!”

“No!” Mrs. Nearing answered him, coldly, placing herself before him as if to dispute his passage along the hall. “There’s no place where you can hide in this house. The long-suffering walls themselves would shout murder.”

Findlay was at far greater disadvantage in the presence of these two women, who scorned and despised him, and seemed to fear him not at all, than he would have been if confronted by three armed men. He hesitated, in spite of his desperate need, not knowing which foot to advance.

“I look like the big black devil now,” he said bitterly, “but I’ve never done any more than Hal Nearing would have done, has done, many a time in his honorable

career. I skinned a man when I had him down. He could do it and go to the senate; I do it, and I'm a thief!"

"You were merciless, you drove him out of himself," Alma said.

"I only went after what I wanted," Findlay defended, ready to argue his justification even in his peril.

"Go!" Mrs. Nearing faced him, imperious in her old manner of stateliness—"or even a defenseless old woman may strike you down!"

"All right, by God! I'll go. But they'll never get me—I tell you now they'll never get me!"

"Hope! Who's there? Hope!"

Nearing's voice sounded from his room, weakly, but recognizable. Findlay started at the sound of it, seeming to set his ears like a listening horse. Mrs. Nearing hastened away, answering her husband's call softly as she went.

"The honorable senator!" Findlay sneered. "He seems a long way from dead yet." He reached suddenly, caught Alma by the wrist, and bent to speak his hot, savage words into her ear. "Go on—go to his room!" he ordered her. "I'm not going to hurt you—go on, I say!"

He enforced his command by the thrust of his pistol against her neck, twisting her arm roughly. Looking up into his face one moment, Alma saw that any appeal to humanity or honor would be wasted against the armor of his vindictive heart. She went ahead of him to Nearing's door.

"You've not got even the decency to die, you woman-

killer!" Findlay said, looking down on Nearing from the door.

Mrs. Nearing attempted to close the door against this invasion, so terrifying to the wounded man. Findlay put his free hand against it, advancing his foot into the room. Alma moved to stand in front of him, and shield if she could at least the sight of his persecutor from the eyes of the dying man.

Findlay hung in the door like a wary beast before a pitfall. Mrs. Nearing was at the bedside, bending over her husband, trying to assure and calm him, when no assurance could comfort nor human effort bring serenity. It was evident in the terror of Nearing's face that he believed Findlay had come to kill him. He tried to shrink into his pillows, his face gray in the agony of his tortured soul.

Findlay motioned Alma aside with his pistol. She stood defiantly facing him, refusing to move.

"What do you owe him, to stand between him and me?" Findlay asked. "I'm not here to hurt him—nothing would suit me better than to see him get well. Stand out of the way!"

Mrs. Nearing rose from bending over her husband, her white, haggard face heartbreaking in its pathetic appeal.

"Dale, for humanity's sake, if there's any humanity in you, go away and let us have these last few hours together in peace!" she implored.

There was no sound from Nearing, not a groan, not the laboring of his slow breath. He lay with fixed eyes staring at Findlay, who leaned now to look past Alma,

whom he pushed aside with his pistol.

"I ought to kill you, for poor old Kate," Findlay said slowly, a peculiar dragging softness in his voice, "but the worst thing I can wish you is to live."

Findlay looked with quick turning of the head, like a watchful eagle, into Alma's face, holding her eyes a moment with his compelling glance so long accustomed to beating down the wills of men.

"For pity's sake, Dale, let him die in peace!" Mrs. Nearing pleaded, putting out her hands in supplication, no more tears, it seemed, left in the fount of her misery to soften his unfeeling heart.

"You women cussed me out for a thief and a murderer a little while ago," Findlay said, looking earnestly into Alma's face, "and you stand here begging a chance for this man to die in honor and peace. When I leave here I'll go with a pack of men after me, with a long chance against me of swingin' somewhere on a cow-rope, but before I go I want to tell you something, Alma, and leave you to judge between that man and me."

Nearing lay gazing with bulging eyes already glazing over with the misty film of death. His breath came panting in him like a lizard's; one hand clenched the covers as if he held there in his painful desperation upon the margin of life, and only waited Findlay's last word to loose his hold and plunge into the abyss which the soul must cleave like a meteor in its hour, and wake on mortal ears no sound of its passing.

"Whatever he says will be a lie, Alma, out of his black, murderous heart!" Mrs. Nearing declared in

sudden passion, rising from the wreckage of her life to this one last defense.

"There's the man," said Findlay, pointing with his pistol, "that sent me out to steal my first unbranded calf."

"What a cruel lie!" said Mrs. Nearing, her pale face suddenly aflame.

"There is the man," Findlay went on with his arraignment unmoved, "who would have betrayed me and double-crossed me, years after my cattle rustlin' under his able direction had made him rich, if I hadn't got something on him that put a padlock on his jaw."

Nearing was lifting himself up in his bed, his arms behind him, weak props in the current fast cutting away the sands of his life. Terrible he leaned there, like a convicted man come before the bar to hear the sentence of his death. His wife, waiting Findlay's words, did not see him; Alma, in helpless anguish between the force of condemnation and the slow-moving, merciless stroke of death, stared with horror on the grisly man who rose slowly and leaned so, waiting, waiting, in the shadow of the disgrace he had stayed so long.

"I promised him then I'd make him pay for his treason, for his attempt to sacrifice me to make himself safe. I promised him I'd cut him to the bone, I'd take the best he had, and then I'd put my heel down on him and mash him like a centipede. I lost the one thing I wanted most—if that damn' monkey-legged sailor had been a minute later—but that's all off. It wasn't the young Englishman up in Eagle Rock Can-

yon, Alma, like you and that tar-heeled Barrett think. I'll put you right. It was——”

A hand fell sharply on Findlay's shoulder. He started, wheeling like a hawk on the wing. Barrett caught his pistol-arm as it swung round, holding the weapon pointed to the floor.

“Drop it, Findlay!”

“Drop it!” said Fred Grubb, pushing his shotgun against the rustler's ribs.

“Shoot! By God! I'll never swing!” Findlay defied them, struggling with Barrett to free his hand.

“There's nobody else; it's the showdown between you and me, Findlay. Outside!”

“Outside!” Fred Grubb echoed, reaching to draw Findlay's other pistol from the holster.

Nearing sank slowly back to his pillow, a relief in his face as in that of a man whose pardon comes as he stands under the gallows tree.

Barrett took charge of the rustler's guns. Findlay was reluctant to proceed toward the front door, evidently distrustful of Barrett's word.

“Go on!” Barrett ordered. “You'll get a man's chance—more than you gave me, more than you ought to have, around here bluffing a dying man!”

Findlay hesitated no longer. With the muzzle of Grubb's gun in his back he walked beside Barrett to the door. There Barrett passed out ahead of him, going on to the gate.

Findlay's horse stood in the shade of the cedar hedge, for the day was hot and the animal was weary and worn, sweat-caked and dust-coated from its long flight.

Barrett took the animal and started away with it, leading it by the bridle, his intention unknown and unguessed by the rustler and Fred Grubb, who followed into the road.

"Stop!" Fred ordered his prisoner when they stood in the middle of the highway.

Findlay obeyed, turning around slowly, with what indifference he could assume, to look sharply at the man who held him under his gun. There was a glitter in Findlay's dark eyes, a calculative desperation in his thin face, as he marked the distance growing between his captors.

Barrett led the horse across the road, out fifty yards or more into the open range, where he dropped the reins to the ground. He hung Findlay's double holster to the saddle horn, put one of the rustler's guns in it, and turned to leave, carrying Findlay's other pistol in his hand. His action said as plainly as words: "If you can do it, you're free to mount and ride."

Findlay was standing in the middle of the road, looking keenly in the direction of the hay-ranch. Suddenly he lifted his hand and exclaimed:

"Here they come!"

Fred Grubb jumped, turned his head quickly, like a horse startled from its grazing. Findlay seized the gun-barrel as Fred gathered his surprised wits and cut loose with both charges. The buckshot spent their force impotently upon the air, and the next moment Findlay, lithe and strong as a panther, wrenched the gun out of the wrangler's hands.

"Give me the shells!" he demanded, menacing Fred's

head with the clubbed gun.

“Go to hell and git ’em!” said Fred, jumping back as Findlay swung the gun.

Barrett came running, shouting something to Findlay that neither of them seemed to understand. Fred had his pistol out, and was holding Findlay off with it, that in his eyes which told the rustler the once-despised wrangler had grown to be a man.

“You ain’t my meat, but I’ll kill you if you turn a hair!” said Fred. “There’s your man! Go and meet him if you’ve got the guts in you!”

Barrett had reached the road, coming back to it some twenty yards or more from the point where Grubb and Findlay were playing their little preliminary scene in the greater tragedy to come. He tossed Findlay’s gun that he had carried back with him into the road, and backed away, plainly laying down the terms of his challenge by his act.

“Look at that, you woman-bluffer!” said Fred. “He told you he’d give you a man’s chance! If you’re a man, go and take him up!”

Findlay threw down the shotgun and started on the run for his pistol in the road. Barrett backed off as he came, hand on his own gun. He did not draw it, it being his determination to take no advantage that might be charged to his discredit, should chance favor him in that fight. Not more than fifty feet lay between the two men when Findlay stopped to pick up his gun.

As Findlay stooped to pick up the gun, he scraped his left hand violently through the dust which padded the road thickly, raising a sudden and confusing cloud.

Through this he fired, crouching low, his outline blurred to Barrett's sight. As he fired he scraped his hand through the dust again, adding to the obscuration of his position.

While this impalpable barrier answered for the moment the purpose for which Findlay designed it in his crafty mind, it confused his own vision and aim as well. Barrett's first shots missed Findlay, and Findlay's shots went wildly down the road. Now Findlay, breaking from his cover of dust, dashed for his horse, firing back as he ran.

The man's admirable audacity and cunning moved in Barrett a feeling almost of admiration, but he did not spare his shots. Findlay fell within ten yards of his horse, his pistol whirling far out of his hand.

He lay a moment, face downward, as if dead. Barrett paused to reload, his last cartridge having been the one that told. As he was slipping a fresh charge into his cylinder, Findlay rose to his hands and knees and struggled on.

Barrett raised his pistol, held his aim for a moment, lowered it. He could not bring himself to slay a wounded, unarmed man, no matter how vicious, vengeful and unprincipled he might be.

Findlay crawled on, slower, slower; he weaved and staggered as if wounded in a vital spot. Barrett followed slowly. A little way from the horse Findlay sank down, his breast against the ground, his dark head lifted weakly, half turned, as if he expected the shot that would put a period to his pain. When he saw it did not come, he gathered his last strength, lifted him-

self again to his knees, and staggered on.

When he reached the horse, which had not moved farther than to lift its ears at the sound of the firing, Findlay tried to reach up and grasp a stirrup. He felt for it weakly, his efforts failing; rose to his knees, groping as if his sight failed him, and reached for it again.

Watching him from a distance, Barrett felt a compassion for the man that swept away all further thought of vengeance or requital for the indignities and perils he had suffered at his hands. As for himself, the balance between them had been struck; Findlay was free to go his way. With this thought, which brightened over him like a burst of sunlight, Barrett put away his weapon, picked up Findlay's hat and pistol, and went on to where he struggled weakly, one hand grasping the stirrup, the other steadying him on the ground.

As Barrett approached him, Findlay's hold on the stirrup broke. His head drooped, his arms fell limply at his sides. He stood in that posture, upright on his knees. Barrett laid a hand on his shoulder to support him. Findlay rallied a moment, and looked up with failing eyes.

"His own brother, damn him!" he said, as if completing something a moment before unfinished on his tongue.

Barrett eased him to the ground, where, in his last agony, he turned his face to the noonday sky.

Fred Grubb came up, a hushed manner over him, walking on his toes, his pistol in his hand.

"He died game, he went his way like a man!" he said.

"You said the word," Barrett solemnly assented, bending to cover Findlay's face from the glare of heaven with his hat.

Barrett turned away, feeling that the past few minutes had aged him by twenty years. The day was bright around him, yet there seemed a mistiness in it, a gloom and solemn hush.

Alma was speeding toward him across the road. She was as hope and life coming where death had trampled but a few moments past. And she came straight to him, unfalteringly as a dove homing to its refuge out of the storm, and bent her head upon his breast, and clung to him and cried.

He led her away from that scene of desolation — for death is desolate, always, its atmosphere despairing and dark — to the gate beside the cedars, where he consoled and assured her and calmed her fears away. It was revealed to him then that he had not failed; that a strong man must wait for his hour, and strike; that it is the fool who hurls himself against the barbican of fate, to perish in the evil of his day.

"He's askin' for you, Ed," Fred Grubb said, coming softly to the porch, the awe of death still over him.

Nearing was propped against his pillows; the sweat of death was on his brow. He tried to lift his hand, as if to offer it to Barrett, as the young man came into the room. Barrett stopped just inside the door, and the trembling hand fell to the cover, where it lay opening and closing weakly, as if it struggled faintly to grasp again the slipping cable of life.

A moment Nearing fixed Barrett with his harassed

eyes, in which the concentrated spark of his failing life seemed centered.

“Barrett, did he speak?” he asked, his voice hoarse and unfamiliar.

“No, Senator Nearing,” Barrett answered, bowing his head as if he stood at prayer.

CHAPTER XXVI

TWO WORDS IN THE DUST

HE WAS a vindictive and unprincipled man," said Barrett. "Nobody will ever know what was true and what was false in the charges he laid at Senator Nearing's door."

"But what do you suppose it was, Ed, that he tried twice to tell—that night, that first terrible night, and here again when Uncle Hal was dying? What was it he knew that was so terrifying it could turn Uncle Hal's blood to water, and drive him to such a desperate and cowardly length that he would have sacrificed me to Findlay to protect himself?"

Alma's eyes were clouded again with the shadow of old troubles, which Barrett had hoped were gone forever from her skies. She looked at him appealingly, as if the thought that he could tell what Findlay knew dwelt with her and would not let her rest.

"The only man that might have answered that question is dead," Barrett returned.

"Dale Findlay? Yes, I know. But surely——"

"Old Charley Thomson. They found him yesterday up in the canyon, shot through the heart."

"Findlay must have done it, he left here with Findlay that night. But I thought they were friends."

"I believe Thomson was holding something over Findlay, Alma, just as Findlay held his secret over your Uncle Hal. I think the old rascal rode Findlay a little

too hard in his extremity, and Findlay cut the rope."

"Money. Thomson must have pushed him for a share of what he had hidden up there. He was afraid Dale would skip, leaving him holding the sack."

"That's a reasonable conclusion, considering both of them. The world's a better place for the vacancy that old scoundrel left in it. He was a worse man, any day, than Findlay."

They had buried Hal Nearing in the spot he had dedicated to that purpose, a grassy hill near the ranch-house, and heaped stones above his grave according to his wish. The two young people now sat in the sunny patio, where the little golden argosies of the air came sailing down from gaunt-growing trees. Soon this nook that gladdened in green refreshment around the fountain all the summer days would be bare, and stripped of its dignity as that stricken house was stripped.

Barrett had been so engrossed with the matters attendant upon the tragedies at the ranch that he had not had an hour to himself before this afternoon. Mrs. Nearing, fatigued by her vigil beside her dying husband, broken by the sorrow that came as the culmination of her long fear, was resting in her room. She was gentler under this burden of grief than she had been when haunted by the fear that it might come. Barrett found her again her gracious self, for peace had descended upon her, in spite of the turmoil through which it had come.

Only a few hours ago they had laid Nearing in his grave. Alma had stopped Barrett as he was saddling to ride away to Eagle Rock camp. Hospitality had a

greater claim than duty, she said; he must stop at the ranch one night to refresh himself before riding to the range. Besides, she had matters of importance to disclose.

But it seemed difficult for her to bring herself to tell what she had held him there to communicate. She was serene after the storm that had shaken her like a young pine on the mountain-side, refined and sweet, Barrett thought, as a violet after rain. Now that the great understanding had come between them, in the greatest matter of business that ever arises in the lives of maids and men, all other affairs could wait her pleasure while she drank deeply in the blissful peace of this.

At last she came to it, like a truant to her tasks. She turned a little on the bench where she sat at Barrett's side, so that she faced him, and regarded him in such a long silence that he began to fear some new trouble had shown itself in her course.

"I've been slow to speak of it, Ed, because I'm afraid it doesn't reflect much credit on Uncle Hal," she said. "Of course I don't hold the mad tyranny of that night against him now, for I know he had been driven out of his mind. He was insane."

Barrett took her hand and held it tenderly between his, as if he warmed a nestling picked up from the sodden, storm-beaten ground.

"I'm afraid that is a defense too common to be accepted at the bar where Hal Nearing stands to plead this day," he said. "You can forgive him, for it is a woman's office to forgive. But he was a poor, weak, cowardly human vessel, full of the vile frailties that

curse our kind."

"He is dead," she said softly. "It is easier to forgive when the transgressor is dead."

"Much easier," he granted, thinking of his own compassion for Dale Findlay, creeping in the gathering blindness of death toward his horse.

Alma was silent again. Tears suffused the brightness of her eyes when she lifted her head and looked into his face, and smiled. He knew that Hal Nearing's sin against her had been washed away, and that no pang of it remained to trouble the serenity of her heart.

"This happened while you and Fred were taking Findlay's body to Bonita," she explained, prefacing what she had to disclose. "Uncle Hal called for me just a little while before he died and turned over my shares in the Elk Mountain Cattle Company, or rather my father's shares which came to me from him. Ed, I never dreamed that I owned a little more than a third of the company's stock."

"I don't believe you're even listed as a stockholder," he said.

"No; Uncle Hal used my stock as his own. He was my guardian until I came of age."

"And never made any settlement afterwards," said Barrett conclusively.

"No. He continued to vote my stock as his own. Together with what he and Aunt Hope held, he could do everything he wanted to do. That's how he always kept himself elected president, and Aunt Hope secretary and treasurer. She is still, you know."

"I know," said Barrett, thinking a good deal faster

than he spoke.

"It isn't really a company at all," she explained, "only a loose sort of copartnership. Few of the stockholders except you and me have more than five or six thousand dollars invested. The Englishman, the poor boy who was killed up in Eagle Rock Canyon, you remember—had twenty thousand dollars in it. It must have been a whole lot of money to him; I hope we can make it good to his family, Ed."

"We're going to make a good, strong try, *palomita mia*."

She smiled in his eyes at the sound of this endearing term, which had quite a different meaning on his lips than simple Teresa's.

"We held a sort of stockholders' meeting there at Uncle Hal's bedside," she said. "He resigned the presidency, formally, and Aunt Hope put it in the records. We voted together on a new president, three hundred shares of the outstanding five hundred being represented. You are the president, Ed."

"No!" said he, genuinely amazed by the swift revelation of his new consequence.

"It was all regular and legal, nobody can question it. For the good of the company Aunt Hope and I have agreed to stand together and keep you in office. It never would do to have a stranger in here mussing things up."

"Mussing things up!" said he, hearing her words like an echo of his own in the frequent charges he had lodged in bitterness and contempt against himself. "That's all I've done since I came here."

"If you'll look back from the top, Ed, you'll see a pretty direct line that you cut to your objective," she said, in gentle correction. "You came into the tangle like a blindfolded and shackled man, but you struck to the knot of it with a penetration that was admirable, I think."

"I happened on to a few things," he admitted, "but I didn't push ahead, I didn't force anybody's hand."

"I know Uncle Hal was afraid of you from the first hour. He begged you to keep hands off, hoping to free himself in his own desperate way. He never could have done it; all the time he was sinking deeper in the mire."

"It was a degrading situation for a man of Senator Nearing's mettle, the man I always thought him to be when I was a boy."

"It was a degrading situation for all of us, that black monster master over this house. It is to you we owe our redemption, for there's no telling what the end would have been if you hadn't come here to the range and forced Findlay's hand—for you did force his hand, no matter what you say."

"Maybe for the last trick or two," Barrett admitted, mightily comforted and exalted in his own opinion of himself by her praise.

"What would have happened if you hadn't come the other night?" she asked, censuring him with her eyes for his disparagement of his own fitness and valor.

"We'd better not think of that," said he, drawing her away from it by the almost sharp, commanding sternness of his voice, as one covers from a child the sight of some fearful thing.

"You came, you saved me when my hand was not quick and strong enough to meet my resolution to save myself. We must think of it; the thought of it will bind us closer in the bitter trials and dark days we must meet along the way, *querido mio*."

"Yes, we must think of it," he granted, his head bent, his voice low.

In the silence that fell they seemed to be thinking of it, of what a few moments' mischance along the way, a minute's delay in starting at the summons of old Manuel, would have brought in sorrow to them both. When Alma looked into his face at last, tears trembled in her eyes. She put out her hand to seek his, blindly through the veiling shower, as a child seeks to touch and clasp, and express in its fondling a greater trust and confidence than its tongue has mastered words to speak.

"You came," she said, simply and sufficiently.

There was still such an unsettled air of turmoil about the place that neither of them could turn from the past troubles and put them behind at once, no matter for the apparent security and peace of the present hour. Barrett was first to break upon their musing.

"I'm puzzled over what Findlay did with his money," he said. "I hoped to recover some of it and turn it into the treasury. He had only a few hundred dollars, enough to pay his and Cattle Kate's funeral expenses, when he — died."

"Teresa told me," Alma said. "Some way, I don't believe he had much, Ed. Manuel says he'd been buying the sheriff of this county off a long time, and I expect that came high. Then he had so many hangers-on that

he had to split with."

"Even at that, he ought to have had a pretty good pile, considering the number of cattle he stole from this ranch alone."

"He had the name of being a wild gambler. Manuel says he always tried to break the bank when he went to Cheyenne. It's a surprise, the number of things that quiet old Mexican knows."

"I think Thomson could have told something. As it is, there are a good many things that will never be answered in this mystery. Let's put *The End* to the last page of it, and close the book."

"I wish we could," said she, wistfully.

She sat gazing toward the far hills, where the sun was going down, something again in her eyes of deep-reading romance that Barrett had seen there when they stood that first morning at the gate. And still gazing away as if pursuing a dream that fled always before her, she sought his hand again.

"Ed?"

"Yes, *palomita mia*."

"Did Findlay say anything before he died?"

"He muttered something just as I got to him. His voice was indistinct."

She nestled a little closer to his side, to warm and coax the secret from him, with the beguiling softness that is world-old in a woman's way.

"Ed, Fred Grubb said he lifted his head up and spoke clearly, but he was too far away to make out the words. What did he say, Edgar? Won't you tell me, *querido mio*?"

She leaned her soft cheek upon his shoulder, caressing his forehead with her hand. Barrett caught the fluttering tempter, and held it imprisoned against his breast, as if to put in it the key to all his heart's secrets and treasured hopes. But he remained silent. And she:

“What did he say, Edgar? Won't you tell me, dear?”

Barrett drew a long breath, as a man breathes before he dashes into a fire, or when he poises himself to dive from a great and dangerous height.

“He tried to speak; he muttered something,” he said.

“I know, I know”—eagerly—“*but what did he say?*”

Barrett raised her head, his hand on the rich treasure of her dark red hair. A moment he gazed gravely into her eyes, putting back the hair from her forehead and holding it so, hard under his hand, as if not willing that one tiny strand or blowing stress should intervene.

“No man will ever know,” he said, with a gravity and depth of earnestness that shook her to the soul.

She bowed her head as if under a rebuke, and remained so, silent and humbled from her warm beguilement, at his side.

There was the whisper of falling leaves around them, and the sun was red through the blue curtain that softened the crags and riven pines of the far hills into romance, and made them holy as an altar clouded in incense where men bow down to pray.

Out of the bunkhouse there came a sound as of a bee

imprisoned in a flower, and the beat of a foot that measured the time of a melody. Fred Grubb was playing upon his jewsharp his evening song. The sound of it soothed away their melancholy; they looked toward the place of the poet's concealment, and smiled.

"And so the book of our tragedies is finished," said Alma.

And stooping, she wrote with her finger in the dust,
The End.

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