

CHEROKEE TRAILS

by GEORGE W. OGDEN



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BY
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THE VALLEY OF ADVENTURE,
SHORT GRASS, ETC.



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CHEROKEE TRAILS

CHAPTER I

OF THE BAR-HEART-BAR

When men went up to Kansas City to market their cows, they rode in what certain stylish conductors called the way-car, cowboys and cattlemen the caboose, or sometimes the calaboose. That is, they rode there to vary riding on top, which they preferred in good weather, and catch a few winks of sleep between proddings-up along the way.

Going home was another thing. Then everybody rode in the smoking-car on one long, blue, much-punched, all-inclusive shipper's pass, with plenty of greasy grub in paper sacks, much bottled cheer, and usually an assortment of prod-poles which they clung to as carefully as if saplings no longer grew, or these seasoned and tried ones had some especial quality which no amount of search through the forests of the earth could replace.

These prod-poles they stood around to tumble down, in the violent agitation of stopping and starting, and crack passengers on the heads, or stowed beneath seats to impede passengers' feet, cluttering things up in a general way to the disgust of trainmen and testy gentlemen who frequented smoking-cars. But trainmen were a wise generation—from experience—in those days, and passengers more tolerant and democratic, perhaps, than now, when prod-poles in day coaches are unknown.

Things went along serenely as a general thing when

an outfit was going home from Kansas City, its fancily labelled bottles passing around without stint from lip to lip. There were outbursts of hilarity and a little shooting now and then; once in a while a bunch went wild and had things its own way, but taken in the main these home-going excursions were comfortable, friendly, full of genial appreciation of what had been seen and keen anticipation of telling about it in cow-camps by and by.

Such a good-natured gang was that of the Bar-Heart-Bar, starting home from escorting a thousand-odd grass-fattened cattle to market. The four of them had gone aboard the minute the train was placed, where they had taken possession of the front end of the smoker, turned two seats to face, stowed their prod-poles and squared off for the practically all-day ride to Wellington, where they would change trains for Drumwell on the Cherokee Nation border, fifty miles from home.

The party was one short, either through desertion or mischance, a matter that gave them some concern. Waco Johnson was the delinquent person. He had strayed in his hobble during the night from the Stockyards Hotel, lured away, perhaps, by the familiar sounds of cattle in the pens close under the windows, and had failed to show up. Now they were due to roll out in fifteen minutes, leaving Mr. Johnson facing the problem of paying his own fare back to the starting-point if he had the desire in his gizzard to keep his job with the Bar-Heart-Bar. It was altogether unlikely, they knew, that he would have enough money to meet that contingency as a gentleman should.

"Well, I guess I'll take another look around for him," Sid Coburn said, more vexed than anxious, hoisting him-

self up on his long legs, which were singularly straight for a saddle-bred man.

“Don’t you git tangled up and not come back with that ticket,” Pete Benson admonished him. “We’d be in a one-hell of a fix if *you* didn’t come back.”

Wallace Ramsey and Joe Lobdell added their solemn asseveration that they sure would be in a one-hell of a fix if the boss got tangled up in the crowd on Union Avenue and lost his points of direction. None of them considered the little old handbag under the boss’ seat, kicked around carelessly, impatiently sometimes, when it got persistently in somebody’s way, which contained thirty-five thousand and odd dollars in currency, the net proceeds of the shipment. It was altogether inconsiderable to them; it wasn’t their money. They’d have piled off the train at the first stop and walked back to Kansas City if the boss had lost his points in the whirl of humanity and missed the train with that long blue ticket, carrying the old handbag and all with them, red-necked and resentful of the imposition.

“Don’t you worry—I’ll be back on the dot,” Sid assured them.

“I wouldn’t resk it for no old booze-skimmin’ muskeeter like Waco,” Wallace protested. “Let him hoof it, dang him.”

No chance of the boss straying off; he scarcely let go the handrail when he gingerly stepped down in his tight new boots with three-inch heels. He stood there so close to the step that one hop would have landed him safely aboard at the first turning of a wheel, combing the confusing stream of people which ran in and out among the

waiting trains with sharp eyes, looking for Waco's familiar brand. Waco was not there, stampeding around as he should have been, trying to locate that train. Let him go, said the boss; dang his old melt, let him bum it back, or walk.

Cowboys were not so much a sight in Kansas City then—or now, for that matter—as they were in some parts of this cultured land. Nobody paid any attention to the thin-featured, anxiously peering, long-shanked man in bronze-topped new boots, black silk shirt, scarlet necktie and gray moleskin vest. The brakeman ignored him with haughty carriage, knowing he was going back to the benighted place he came from on a hog-train ticket, as the élite of railroads spoke of cattlemen's passes.

Sid climbed back into the car after a few minutes, returning rather gloomily to his companions, who were talking animatedly, already beginning to relax from the strain of hopping and dodging out of the track of cable cars and carriages. They wondered again, their vexation growing, over Waco's plight, taking it for granted that he was somewhere involved in the bewildering machinery of that roaring town, dropping him presently to go on with the recounting of experiences from which they were still warm, as a man just rolled out of the blankets on a frosty morning. The boss took the pass from his wallet and sat staring at it in gloomy abstraction.

"Well, sir, as I was sayin', fellers, I never was up agin one of them fancy joints," Wallace went on with his narrative which the boss' return had interrupted, "and I stopped there lookin' in that winder like a horse with its

head over the fence. I says 'Feller, you've got money to burn; go on in and burn it.' "

"Where was that at?" Sid looked across at Wallace with a sort of patronizing, kindly interest in his adventure.

"The caff up at the Coates House."

"Hell! You didn't break in there, did you?" Sid inquired, a big grin working a surprising transformation in his long, solemn face.

"I'm tellin' you," said Wallace, twisting his head in portentous expression of revelations to come.

Wallace paused there with the true dramatist's valuation of suspense. Joe Lobdell laid a slap that measured his appreciation on his friend's rounded shoulders, and Wallace, who was a light-eyed man with large protruding teeth, looked around his little circle with the warm glow of a man who had much to bestow and was going to pass it out with liberal hand.

"You was lucky they didn't pitch you out on your neck," said the boss.

"Maybe I was," Wallace agreed, "but that bouncer was as nice as a come-on man. He tolled me off to a feed-box in one corner of the krel and sent a he-waiter to see what I was eatin'. Well, I thinks I'm in, and I'll go the limit. I looked over that chuck list a minute and I says to him 'Come totin' it all in, son,' I says, and I lent back and hooked my arm over m' cheer like money wasn't no objection to me."

"The hell you did!" said the boss. "Did he fetch you all of it?"

"No, he didn't," Wallace confessed, but without re-

sentment, humor gleaming in his pale eyes. "That feller renigged on me, boss-man; he picked 'em out here and there down the line, thinkin' I didn't have the money to stand it all, I guess. But he started at the top, anyhow. The first thing he fetched me was a horse de over."

"A horse which?" Sid inquired, leaning forward curiously.

"De over." Wallace glanced around in well-simulated manner of surprise. "Mean to tell me none of you fellers ever et a horse de over?"

"I bit a mule's neck one time, though," Joe Lobdell said.

"They start off with 'em in them copper-bottomed caffs," Wallace explained.

"They can keep goin' on with 'em," Pete Benson said, with comfortable superiority.

"What's it made out of?" the boss inquired.

"I'm here to tell you!" Wallace replied fervently. "A horse de over is a plain sardine."

"Sardine?" said everybody, genuine in their surprise that such a familiar article of diet should figure on a fancy bill of fare.

"One sardine," Wallace solemnly averred, "laid out in the middle of a deesh with a olive at his head and a reddish at his tail, and little pieces of pickle all around him. That's a horse de over, men, if anybody asks you."

Wallace politely restrained himself at the climax of his revelation, joining in the big laugh after it was well under way. The boss was so diverted by the explanation of this dish that he took off his hat to give his head air, looking around with the blue pass for five men between his fingers, his big ears red in the heat of his mirth.

Across the aisle a somewhat moody-looking young man was smoking a straight-stemmed pipe, his eyes on the ceiling of the grimy car as if immersed in some problem or contemplation that insulated him against all the laughter loose in the world that day. But he seemed to feel Sid's look, which was in effect an appeal to get in on that rare piece of humor and have his laugh. He turned his head, nodded affably, his face still as solemn as Sid Coburn's own at its worst.

"Very good," said he, with intonation strange to their ears; "very-very good."

He enunciated the "very-very" as one word, a queer little stress on the first part, speaking quickly, a roundness and resonance in his tone as alien to their ears as culture in any form. But there was no more mirth in him than in Wallace's sardine.

"Did you eat him?" Pete wanted to know.

"No, I never," Wallace said, studiously reminiscent. "He looked so much like a corpse laid out for the grave I took some of them little pieces of green stuff from around the aidge of the deesh and I covered him up with 'em, and when that he-waiter come back I says 'You can bury that old feller—he's all ready,' I says."

They whooped louder than before at this, even the young man across the aisle breaking his face in a hard-come little grin that looked as if it hurt.

"Here she goes!" Joe Lobdell announced shrilly, his hat-brim doubled back against the window. "He's givin' 'im the high-sign—here she goes!"

The train started with a jerk, as if the engineer had a spite against it and wanted to snap it in two. Sid Coburn

got up, leaned with hand on the arm of the young man's seat and peered out through his window, that being on the station side.

"Lost one of my men," Sid explained.

"Unfortunate," said the young man.

"Unfortunate for him, the derved fool! And here I've got a goin'-home pass callin' for five men and only four to ride on it."

Sid spoke resentfully, as if he faced the liability, through the defalcation of Waco Johnson, of being called to answer for some grave dereliction.

"At least you're one better off than I am," the young man remarked, very quietly, not greatly interested, it appeared.

"How do you mean better off? For men, do you mean?"

Sid straightened from peering out of the window to throw a glance around at his three cow-valets among their prod-poles, bundles and paper bags, as if to make sure he had no more.

"For tickets," the solemn young man replied. "You have one too many; I have none at all."

"You ort 'a' got you one," Sid told him, interested but unmoved. "They sock you for excess fare if you don't buy a ticket."

"It would be very-very difficult to collect," said the solemn young man.

"Broke, and travellin' on your nerve, heh?"

"Broke, and starting out to travel on my nerve. I don't know how far along I'll get with it."

The young man looked up at the tall cowman, his face

as grave as before, but the glimmer of a smile in his shrewd gray eyes. He moved over: Sid Coburn, suddenly and keenly interested in the traveller's method, accepted the invitation, noting, as he seated himself, that the adventurer was going without sack, satchel or paper bag.

"I reckon you're only goin' a station or two—I see you're travellin' light," Sid ventured.

"I rather expect a station will be as far as I'll get on this train. Luggage would be such a nuisance, you know, when they come to chuck me off."

"Well, you take it purty easy," Coburn said, looking at him with the crude, direct impertinence of his kind, up and down and all over, taking in the details so thoroughly he would be able to describe his marks a year from that day.

Between twenty-five and thirty, Coburn judged him to be, a man who would stand medium height, and weigh about a hundred and fifty-seven. Looked like an out-doors man, and was dressed in a sort of half-and-half style, like a country banker or a brand-inspector, or one of that kind, ready to hop a horse and take a sashay out on business any time. Good-looking, clean-heeled chap, an indefinable air about him that made a man feel he'd had something in his time, or was going to come into it after a while. Black hair, cut short; complexion fair where he wasn't tanned; good-sized nose, thin in the nostrils and flaring, like a blood-horse. A hard-mouthed man, Coburn judged, and a proud one, from the way he lifted his chin and carried it high, like a headstrong horse under a check-rein.

"Conductor'll be along in a minute," Coburn said, having got no answer to his last remark.

"I'm rather expecting him," the imperturbable adventurer replied.

"Where you headin' for?"

"Panhandle."

"That's a long ways to try to make it without a ticket," Sid reflected. "Why don't you take a freight? they're easier to bum."

"Out on the line a freight has its advantages," the young man said, nodding confirmation gravely, "But not when you're starting from a town like this. They arrest a chap here if he swings on to a freight."

"I git your scheme," Sid beamed on him admiringly. "You figger they'll not stop this train to put you off between here and Argentine, and you don't give a cuss if they do chuck you off there."

"It's so much more pleasant than walking it," the self-possessed deadbeat explained, diffidently, so diffidently, indeed, that he seemed almost apologetic.

Coburn sat ruminating this extraordinary traveller's case, the blue pass for five men rolled around his finger. He had the cowman's caution about asking or offering favors, and he naturally was a deliberative person in a business deal as well. Before the conductor made his appearance Sid had reached the conclusion that he didn't stand to lose anything by taking this man on the pass in Waco Johnson's place. A man was a man when no names were mentioned; they couldn't hold him for the fare even if they should discover the deceit.

"I could help you along as far as Wellington if you

want to pass as one of my men," Coburn finally proposed. "I've got a pass for five men, and only four of us in the bunch since we lost Waco Johnson."

The young man accepted the offer with dignity, quietly grateful, no effusion of thanks in his mouth. He wasn't any man's greenhorn, whatever his line might be; Coburn was certain of that. He introduced himself as Thomas Simpson, shaking hands solemnly all around when Coburn presented him to the gang, explaining that, as far as the pass was concerned, he was as much one of them as the lost Waco Johnson ever had been.

Coburn sat by his substitute for Johnson and politely inquired into his past activities in a business way, calling him Tom with the fraternal equality of a man who is unaware of any superior among his kind. For one man was as good as another as long as he behaved himself, as they used to say on the range. It developed that Tom's last contact with a money-making job had been as a mine guard in Colorado. Before that time he had skirmished around some, he said, without going into details.

It came out finally that Tom's skirmishing had been among various cow-camps and outfits in Wyoming and Colorado; that he had been over from England about seven years, having come with high ambitions toward learning the cattle business as conducted on the western ranges, with a view of going into it himself if fortune should roll his number out of the box. It hadn't rolled out yet, it seemed, and Tom laughed over it when he made the confession, a short little laugh, somewhat hard and cynical, Coburn thought, saying a good deal more of disap-

pointment and hard times than his high pride ever would permit his tongue to utter in words.

How he came to be so entirely strapped at that time, and what had led up to the condition, Simpson did not explain. Coburn let that alone, not out of delicacy or sympathy, but because he knew quite well how far a man ought to go in certain affairs without laying himself open to being told where to get off. Tom Simpson was a man who would not hesitate to put an impertinent fellow in his place; Coburn could see that without any kind of glasses at all.

Coburn had his measure, at any rate, and was satisfied with the result. Young Englishmen of that type were not scarce on the range in those days, when a great deal of British capital was invested in the big cattle companies. Young fellows who had been wild, most of them, sent over to the cattle range where they might blow off their spirits without further compromising the folks at home. It was a long distance between the cattle ranges and England, and what would be naughty, naughty conduct in the standards of the older land was accepted as only the natural expression of lively young manhood in the new.

They got money from home every three months, most of these young chaps, burned a big red streak with it while it lasted, and took their hardships between remittances like the real men they were at foundation. Some of them made good to sensational degree; Coburn knew of some in the Panhandle country of Texas, where he had got his own start as a cowpuncher, who had enough silver dishes on their tables to found a mint. Quiet-spoken men, too, like this Tom Simpson; educated men from old col-

leges, wise in the accumulated knowledge of mankind.

So it was thought, at any rate. There never was a place where education was more venerated than in the cow-camps of the west. College men, from England and from home places, were not rare in those times; it was a sort of catch-all for college men, indeed, that wide-open country west of the Arkansas. No matter for their dissipations and utter worthlessness of character—and some of them were about as bad as men ever get to be—they always were more or less hallowed by that glamour of a college education.

“That man’s got a college education,” was at once the palliation and the absolution for his excesses and follies. His comrades boasted it in pride of reflected consequence and superiority. It seemed to be the general belief among the unlettered that a college education gave a man some kind of subtle advantage over all men less fortunate, which he had only to exercise to elevate himself into riches and power. That he did not employ this talisman to his own profit usually was taken as proof of his humane and generous spirit. His associates were hopelessly trammelled by ignorance: why should he desire to rise above them? So his friends and companions believed, in the face of all evidence that an educated sot is the most depraved and disgusting creature that shames the shape of man.

Tom Simpson rode along with his new companions that day, playing poker with them, winning a few dollars of their money, to which they unreservedly felt that he was welcome, considering his financial state, eating out of their paper sacks, taking a nip with the rest when the

bottle went round, to all appearances entirely comfortable and in his proper place. Sid Coburn studied him from this angle and from that, finally making the proposal that, if Tom had nothing definite at the end of the trail in the Panhandle, he go on to Drumwell with them and take a job on the Bar-Heart-Bar in case Waco Johnson did not stray back in due time.

Of course there was not anything certain about it, Coburn said. Waco might ramble in on the next train, in which case Tom would be pretty sure to hook up with somebody else. He could stick around in Drumwell a few days, and Coburn would let him know.

Simpson accepted the proposal calmly, as if it made little difference to him where the railroad ended, Panhandle or on the southern Kansas border, which probably was the case. Coburn liked him better for his undemonstrative way, no glib talk on his tongue, nothing at all that a man could read in his inscrutable poker face. The cowman thought more and more as he studied that mouth clamped on its secrets—rather grimly for a young man's mouth—that here was a lad for a particular job, chance it that a respectable cowman like himself had something of the kind to be done.

CHAPTER II

RAILROAD LEAVINGS

That was the best word one could say for Drumwell: it was railroad leavings. In those days the accretions which settled down after the flood of railroad building had passed and quieted, were not the choicest screenings of the earth. They were graduates of one of the roughest schools of experience that men and women ever attended, but a university whose doors closed long ago, its advantages no longer offering to the unsophisticated of the world.

Drumwell flourished in the days of the Cherokee leases, when Kansas and Texas cattlemen first began to feel keenly the encroachment of agriculture upon the range in their own states, a condition which the pioneers of the industry never believed would curtail the unrestricted exercise of their ancient privileges. But that condition had come to pass, squeezing many an old-timer to face the alternative of either quitting business or paying out hard money for the use of grazing-lands, to them an imposition that seemed as unjust as it was unprecedented.

A branch railroad had been built southward from one of the big lines crossing Kansas east and west, down to the Cherokee Nation line. Like a nodule on the root of a legume, Drumwell formed at the end of this crooked line of hastily built railroad, and rose to a peculiarly notorious eminence in its day.

A local fame, to be sure; never so wide-spread as the notoriety of Abilene, Dodge City and Wichita in their formative rawness, nor approaching in any measure the far-spreading fame that came to the town, years and years after the last cowboy had gone his way into the mists, when it elected a woman mayor to rule over it.

The railroad had reached down there after cattle, pausing at the line only because it could not secure a franchise to pass through the Indian lands. It required more of a pull than this particular railroad had, even in those free and easy days, to obtain a grant through the Indian country, so the little branch line sprangled down to the very edge of the forbidden territory and stopped, waiting its day, which came, duly, but not until the fires of adventure had dulled and deadened out of Drumwell's window-panes.

The railroad finished, the construction-gangs went on to other conquests, leaving certain of the camp-followers behind. These people, dropped there like foul settlings out of the turgid, hurrying stream of railroad life, saw prospect of good picking that had begun to pour in from the south even before the loading-pens were completed. It was a big saving in time, and wear and tear, to the cattlemen, that little branch line wandering down to the Nation's edge. There was not much grazing along the trails to the old shipping-points in Kansas; farmers were fencing the country, leaving only dusty streaks.

So it came about that Drumwell's importance descended upon it in a single day, bringing a prosperity to the railroad leavings such as they never had fattened on before. This easy fortune made them arrogant, even though it

did not appease the long hunger of their lean years in shifting railroad camps. He was a wise man who left his money behind him when he visited Drumwell, but wise men were few in that time where vice displayed its glittering lure, as they are wanting under the same conditions in this.

At the time of these doings Drumwell was an unlovely hamlet of one street, and that not a long one, which took its beginning from the railroad station, as such towns always have their beginning at the railroad and their ending where unrealized expectations desert them and leave them empty, like an eggshell dropped by a crow when he has sucked it dry. There was always the noise of cattle in it, the smell of cattle, the drift of dust from moving herds.

Drumwell had been fulfilling its primarily useful mission as a loading point for cattle five or six years when the events to be recorded here were shaken out of the handbag of adventure. Its little houses, mainly unpainted, were beginning by this time to appear pitch-drawn, gray; their vertical planking warped by the sun. A few rods back from the railroad the town presented its front, which was assuring to a stranger, the Windsor Hotel on one hand, the Drumwell State Bank on the other.

The hotel was one of the painted exceptions in the town. To be exact, it had been primed for painting, the work stopping there, whether through lack of paint or loss of painter nobody of record ever was curious enough to inquire. This white priming had a streaked appearance where it had been absorbed in places by the softer wood, giving the effect of antiquity so much strived after in

these sophisticated times of ours. It was a two-storied structure; large, loose-jointed, altogether unlovely.

On the other hand, the bank was thoroughly, even lavishly, painted, although it needed paint less than any structure in town, being built of sheetiron nailed to studding, flat, squat, with a swaggering square front where the character of the institution was announced in broad letters which could be read half a mile away. The material of which its exterior shell was formed was pressed to resemble solid masonry laid in regular courses. The painter had treated it a granite-gray to further credit this illusion, pencilling in the joints between the hardware stones with white. The pretense was not convincing. It was a bank that would have tempted a burglar with a can-opener. That pleasantry was often directed against its doubly pretentious walls, indeed. For all the present historian knows, the joke may have had its beginning there.

Along the street between its beginning at bank and hotel and its gradual dwindling out to sod huts, tents and open prairie, small business undertakings were established, such as are to be found in any raw little town to-day, except that eating-places outnumbered all the rest. Range men were a hungry tribe; they required flapjacks and oyster stews at all hours of the day and night.

In every town such as Drumwell was at that time, there always was a dominating figure. Here it was not the banker, as one might assume from the prominence of his sign and the meticulous humbug of his tin walls, but Eddie Kane, proprietor of the Windsor Hotel. Kane had come to Drumwell with the other railroad camp-followers.

In those days he was a young man in his early thirties, engaged in the innocuous business of running a game known as a baby board. It was an arrangement of black-faced figures on hinges, familiar even to this day at country fairs, which the player endeavored to knock over with baseballs for a prize, as well as a price. The award was a cigar or cigars, according to the player's success, the price a dime, the number of chances three. And that was the beginning of Eddie Kane's consequence in that place.

The diminutive name which his popularity in the days of his small beginning had won for him, stuck to Kane in the state of his new importance, perhaps because his power was without dignity. He was familiarly addressed by it, spoken of by no other, from the Red River to the Kaw.

Kane was a middle-size, lithe man, suffering from a deformity of some unknown origin—it looked as if from strong acid—that had all but put out his eyes and wried his neck until his head almost rested on his left shoulder. But such sight as there was left to his red-lidded, lashless eyes appeared to be sharpened and concentrated. He could see more devious ways to a dollar than the crookedest cattleman that ever beat the Cherokee chiefs on a lease.

He kept his face cleanly shaved, a thin-featured face, cheeks flaccid against his teeth, outstanding, straining tendons in his stocky strong neck. He was a fair-skinned man, although his hair was black as concentrated pigmentation could make it. He wore it cut short, except for a combing forelock which he parted low over his left eyebrow with carefully turned ends, vain adornment in a

countenance as crafty as mischance and inborn disposition ever set upon a man.

All the time the baby board was bringing him in dimes, a jug under his counter was bringing Kane dollars. The laws of the state prohibited the sale of intoxicants, but the law blended out weakly, and fell away to little force, before it reached the Cherokee border. By the time the first herd was driven into the new pens for loading, Kane had a regular bar in the little plank building from which his hotel presently grew.

Kane had married a railroad woman, daughter of a tent-boarding-house keeper, a work-worn gaunt woman who also had prospered on the jug. This boarding-tent daughter was no finer in any particular than her mother, and no better than she should have been, without a doubt. But she was no worse than Kane in her frailest particular, a big-eyed woman, roughly handsome, much loud, raucous laughter in her big Irish mouth. Josie Meehan her name had been. The old hen that brooded her had given up her railroading way and taken root in Drumwell, where she ran a short-order house to catch as many as she might who missed her son-in-law's more thorough mill.

At this historic period of Drumwell's day, the Windsor Hotel was the casino of the town. All of its amusements were centered there, for Eddie Kane was a man who would not countenance competition as long as there was any way of cutting it off, and he was singularly proficient in his ways. There was in his place a long bar of dark polished wood, brass-fitted, mirror-backed, equal to anything to be found between Kansas City and Fort Worth, at which two deft men, aided by Kane himself in a rush,

served the nightly throngs. Faro and keno were to be met there, and poker without end.

This bar, with the gambling furniture, occupied one end of the ground floor, the dining-room the other. Between them the entrance hall extended, the front door at one end of it, the staircase at the other. Near this chute of a staircase there was a stubby little counter where the clerk shared duty with Mrs. Kane in receiving and dispatching guests. Capacious folding doors opened from bar to hallway, from hallway to dining-room. At night these were thrown open, tables were removed to the edges of the dining-room floor, and the place became a dance-hall, where a gent might sit down with a lady when he felt leg weary, and sop up as many drinks as his money could pay for and his skin would hold.

This was a spacious room, a row of stocky posts down its center upholding the overhead structure in security against the vibrations set moving by hard-pounding range heels. There were splintered corners on some of them, where the bullets of old rows renewed, and fresh ones springing out of rivalries and jealousies had struck. Human gore is not difficult to remove from the planks of a floor; its dye is not fast and everlasting, in spite of traditions which fix it as unfading. If that had been true, Eddie Kane's floor would have shown its blots from end to end.

Kane held his customers down to a decorum far greater than appeared possible, taking into account the character of these border herdsmen. He was on the watch always, his cocked head over on his shoulder as if he tried to listen to his own heart in the suspicion that it was plotting

something against him, his slit-eyes leering through the smoke.

Wildcat never was bred that was quicker on the spring than Eddie Kane; few men came his way who were anything near a match for him in strength. He was his own bouncer, his methods were bare-handed, his execution swift. He went around always in a stiff-breasted white shirt, collarless, without a coat, his vest open, a heavy gold watch-chain swinging in a loop.

A spider of a man, Eddie Kane. He would throw himself into a fracas, grab an aggressor by the neck and waistband of his trousers, rush him to the door and slam him out, contemptuous of his wild-swinging gun. His fame was far-reaching, the respect that it brought him not the least valuable asset in a business where a tough repute was worth more to a man than capital.

The livestock industry was being rapidly pushed off the map in that part of Kansas by the encroachment of the plow, although a few drovers were still holding out in the neighborhood of Drumwell. Westward from that point to the Colorado line things were pretty much as they had been for years. Right around Drumwell homesteaders were filling in rapidly; school and railroad lands, and such of the government domain as remained open between these two divisions, were being bought up, that being a region of deep soil, abundant rain, excellent agricultural possibilities.

Not from these incoming settlers Kane's long bar and boisterous dance-hall drew their support. The big cattle companies and individual drovers holding Cherokee leases, and lying to the west of the little line of railroad that

struck southward from the main trunk to end at Drumwell, employed hundreds of riders to care for their herds. There always was a good representation of them in town during the months of cattle activity, either with cattle to load or from long rides after payday with their little wads to squander in one brief riot which exemplified the highest ambition of their barren lives.

These were not the kind of cowboys that are to be met, for example, on the streets of Hollywood to-day, or seen frisking through chivalrous adventures in that romantic shadowland where beauty is ever in distress and virtue continually on the perilous edge of despair. They were slouchy, rancid, unwashed, foul-mouthed, lewd, lascivious, unlettered men. They came to Drumwell as they had come to Abilene, Wichita, McPherson and other Kansas frontier towns in their day, to drink whiskey and dawdle around with parasitical females until they had been parted from their money in the good old way of separating fools from that encumbrance.

There were good men among them, and chivalrous spirits, but taking them as they came they were light chaff of humanity, serving well enough in their time and place. They were no more the intelligence of the cattle business of the old range days than the men who drove the spikes and tamped the ties were the brains of railroad building. Mainly they were men of obscene tongues and shameful lusts, served by despicable panderers among whom Eddie Kane was not notable except in his own little sphere.

On this patronage the little town, which had its beginning in railroad leavings, grew into a lively, flourishing

place within a few months of its start. With the coming of a stable population in that vicinity, other business besides that of refreshment took hold in Drumwell until several concerns were thriving, but it is quite safe to say that the combined daily revenues of these establishments did not equal the sum spent over Eddie Kane's bar, and through the solicitation of the "ladies" attached to his house, and in fatuous bets placed on his gambling tables.

Drumwell was a mean place, and proud of its hard distinction. If not everybody in it was jealous of its reputation and tried to live to uphold its peculiar standard, then the exceptions were few. It was a place that timid people shunned unless driven to it through necessity, far away from the seat of the county's authority, a dot on the rim of the map.

The sheriff of the county was under a handicap of many miles, there being scarcely one mile between Drumwell and the line of the Cherokee Nation, where federal jurisdiction, only, was recognized. Thieves and murderers always had the bulge on the sheriff; they could get safely down into the Indian country before he could throw a leg over a horse to go after them. It must be admitted that he never was in much of a sweat about making a start.

The official policy with Drumwell, as it had been with other Kansas towns of its kind, was to leave its affairs to the town marshal and itself, to boil out its own wickedness and simmer down to respectability at last. They knew how to handle such towns in Kansas in the good old days.

So it was toward this place that the Bar-Heart-Bar contingent was travelling on the train that day, certain of a good warm welcome when they got to rails' end. And Tom

Simpson was sitting with them, smoking his straight-stemmed briar pipe, chin up and sufficient for emergencies, his past behind him, and that nobody's business but his own.

CHAPTER III

TOUCHING OFFICIAL DIGNITY

It was long after dark when the Bar-Heart-Bar party reached Drumwell along with a miscellaneous assortment of cow-country travellers, some bound for the Nation, others to ride westward into the grazing lands of Kansas bordering thereon. That extension of railroad down to the line was such a luxury to the cattle country that everybody was taking advantage of it to go somewhere all the time. Cowboys took trips to Wellington and back for no other purpose than standing on the end of the train and looking off. It had become the vogue to stand on the end.

There was no disposition in the Bar-Heart-Bar party, from the boss downward, to move any farther along on the journey home that night. To them Drumwell was the kind of a place for having a good time in; it suited their limitations of enjoyment far better than Kansas City, which was big and bewildering, and full of wiles for taking a man's money away from him in strange and uncompensative ways. A man was pretty certain to be parted from his roll in Drumwell, but he usually got a comfortable skinful first.

So they clumped off the train and into Eddie Kane's place for a snort all around before supper, toward which they had been yearning with ravenous anticipation. While the Bar-Heart-Bar men feasted happily on roast pork, a delicacy seldom enjoyed in their long rounds of beef

and bacon, Sid Coburn told Tom Simpson a little, and a very little, about the ranch.

It lay a matter of fifty-odd miles west of Drumwell, on the Medicine Lodge River, which was not much of a river, when all was said, Coburn informed his provisional herdsman, as if to spare him in advance any disappointment the promise of such a romantic name might carry. The Bar-Heart-Bar wasn't a very big outfit, nothing like as big as the Bar-Heart-J of Texas, with which it was sometimes confused. He was hiring about twelve men that season, and would be able to get along with fewer next, as the encroachment of homesteaders was cutting down the range year by year.

Their main job, Coburn said, was to keep the cattle from crossing into the Cherokee Nation, or Cherokee Strip as it was called locally. There were a good many brand-burners down there, put out of open rustling by the cattlemen's association, who did business in strays that way, changing brands or not changing them, as the purchaser might desire, and selling to the Indians. Not much of a business, but the leak was considerable in the course of a year.

No, there was no more cattle rustling, in the old sense, down that way. The association had so perfected its organization that a man on the outside of it stood marked for just about what he was. They had brand-inspectors at all the big markets, and if one man's cattle got mixed with another's and shipped, the inspector asked for a bill of sale covering them. If such a bill of sale was not forthcoming, the odd cattle were told off, collection made for the sale, and the check sent to the rightful owner.

No chance for rustlers to get by with the goods any more. Oh, there *were* a few onery little fellers that butchered stolen cattle and sold the beef to the meat markets in Drumwell and such towns, but they were so low-down and entirely onery they were not worth spending the time on to run down and shoot.

But there were a lot of horsethieves roaming around down in the Strip. They raided over into Kansas, driving away whole herds of horses at a time, which they sold among the cowboys on the Cherokee leases. Horses were not the same as cattle when it came to stealing and selling them down there in the cow-camps of the lessees of the Indian pastures. They kept them down there and used them. A brand made mighty little difference on a horse among the cattlemen and punchers in the Strip.

Well, it was a pretty hard matter to stop that sort of traffic, seeing there were so many brands among horses, the present owners, in more than half the cases, ignorant of their animals' former ownership and caring nothing about it. Take the cowboys of the Bar-Heart-Bar, for example: they'd always risk a bargain horse, passing over the particular of a bill of sale. Coburn said he'd nearly gamble there were no two brands alike among his cowboys' mounts.

On the subject of horses, if Waco Johnson did not come back Simpson would be free to use Waco's until he could buy some of his own. Waco probably was in jail on account of some devilment he'd got into, and he could stay there for all Coburn would turn a hair to get him out. One of his horses was in the livery barn with the others of the outfit. Coburn said he'd leave it there and let it

eat its dang head off. If Waco didn't show up in a reasonable time, Simpson could buy it for its board bill. A horse was about as much one man's as another's, anyhow, in those uncertain times.

To all of which Tom Simpson nodded when a nod was coming, and kept a tight tongue. He didn't feel like a man with a job ahead of him, when all was simmered down, for he had more faith in the return of Waco Johnson than the boss. He hoped Waco would come back. There was something in his name that appeared promising.

After supper they went to the big barroom for a game of cards, everybody feeling fine and at peace with the world. The boss was carrying the little handbag around with him, standing it down casually when he stopped to chat with some friend of the range. Tom Simpson, certainly, had no more notion of what it contained than the brakeman on the train, who had kicked it contemptuously, if not vindictively, every time he passed through the car.

It was a common practice for cattlemen to lug money around with them that way in those days. The custom came down from the old time when cattlemen lived in the isolation of vast uninhabited places, where checks were as useless as they were unknown. Nothing but money went on the range then, and a cattleman always had considerable loose change kicking about, or none at all.

Even when banks came into the cattle country along with the railroads and other business, cowmen for a long time stuck to the old habit of cashing in on their sales and

carrying the proceeds home in currency. They usually trusted it to their home banks after getting there, although there were some who never had any use for banks except when they wanted a loan.

Sid Colburn had carried the cash instead of a draft partly because he was old-style, principally because he enjoyed the feeling of opulence attending the possession of much currency. There was a sense of wealth in a gripsack full of bills, that no draft, no matter how well engraved, could impart. In the morning Sid would deposit most of the money in the Drumwell bank, with a large feeling of satisfaction as he stacked the bills in the teller's window, thousand by thousand, with calculative deliberation, each packet bound by the little strip of paper as it had come from the big institution at the stockyards in Kansas City.

There were several men in the barroom when the Bar-Heart-Bar gang strolled in picking pork out of their teeth in genteel and comfortable style; more were arriving from near and far, promising a merry night and a long one, for it was raining, one of those drizzling autumn rains which might hold on for two or three days. One could pretty well judge the distance each new arrival had come by the state of his humidity, which ranged from damp to dripping.

Coburn said, as he viewed the slickers of the newcomers glistening under the lights, that they were in a good place for a night like that. The rest of them concurred to the boss' opinion, unanimously, for once, and paired off for a game of old sledge. Wallace Ramsey declined to disconcert the balance of the table, preferring

to circulate around and see who he could bump into, his acquaintance on the range running far.

Wallace was a sort of self-appointed comedian, a harmless, unaggressive man as humorists of that type usually are. He had bought a bright nickeled badge at a pawnshop in Kansas City, with the word **DETECTIVE** engraved on it, picking it out from a wide selection covering the various executive branches of civil government—constable, police, sheriff—grinning his big horse teeth with inward satisfaction as he pinned it on his shirt and buttoned it out of sight under his vest.

There promised to be more fun in a detective badge than any other. Going on a long and wide experience, Wallace knew that the simple word "detective" would raise more hair in the general run of cow-camps than anything ever put up in bottles.

Not that anybody in the Bar-Heart-Bar outfit was hiding out as far as Wallace knew. He hadn't a thought of probing any man's conscience when he polished up the badge and hid it away under his vest, only of flashing it and playing mysterious until the time for the big laugh came. He had pulled the trick on his comrades coming down on the train, even nonchalantly exposing the badge to the brakeman's eye and leaving that eminent railroad official swinging between wonder and doubt to the parting.

Now Wallace went circulating around, grinning away to himself like a beaver, planning to expose his badge in a sort of accidental, unthinking way when he had a bunch of the boys around him, and get his laugh out of the various expressions of alarm, consternation and curi-

osity that would sweep across their old leather faces when that potent word flashed in their eyes. It would be worth more drinks than unlimited credit at Eddie Kane's bar.

Kane was in high feather that night, bustling around clearing the tables out of the dining-room, slapping shoulders, shaking hands, passing jokes and laughing in his thigh-slapping loud raucous way, stretching his big flexible fish mouth to let his merriment out, bending and contorting himself as if it gave him a twisting internal agony. He knew Wallace for a harmless good spender, and one of the best callers on the range. It looked like a big night for Eddie Kane. He had them there, and the weather wouldn't let them get away.

There were a lot of strangers in town that night, Wallace remarked as he went pegging around the big room from group to group looking for familiar faces and not finding any. It didn't look as if it was going to be a very good night for the badge, after all.

There were four glum felows standing around the bar, never circulating very far away from it, who drew Wallace's attention and speculation from the first, giving him a little uneasiness and clouding the natural gayety of his spirits. What troubled him was that he couldn't seem to place the tall slab-sided man with a nine-inch mustache under his long mean nose that seemed to have melted and run down. He was herding the bunch, whoever he was. They must be from the Nation, although Wallace felt sure he had known that crane-shanked man somewhere. The cloud of that perplexing doubt followed Wallace as he went over to the faro table and stood watching the game.

Wallace had recollections of twenty-two dollars won on that game once, on one of his rare excursions into the realm of chance. A man might risk a few bucks on it and not be much poorer. If he never risked anything he never won anything; that was a cinch. He stood teetering in his mind, on the verge of going after his wad and trying his luck, watching a fellow whom he astutely took to be a come-on man raking in a handsome profit on his bets.

Others were drawn into the game, some of them winning, as it always runs, Wallace edging a little nearer, the itch of adventure tingling in his fingers. Almost unconsciously he unbuttoned his vest to come to the money in his shirt pocket, and stood that way, hand on his wad, in a sort of trance of indecision, his shining badge laid bare to the bright light of the overhanging lamp.

In that intense moment Wallace had forgotten all about the badge. He stood there with his left thumb hooked in his belt, right hand on the comfortable little roll in his shirt pocket, nothing at all dramatic about his pose, yet something in it that seemed an intentional display, as a real officer, jealous of his importance, might thrust himself into the notice of indifferent strangers.

Wallace was brought out of his trance by the slab-sided man whose identity had troubled him, whom he had forgotten in the deep concentration of trying to make up his mind whether to bet or keep his money to hole up on next winter. Now the fellow was so close to him he nearly shoved that long-horn mustache in Wallace's eye when he craned his mean old buzzard neck to look at the badge.

"Tin-can detective!" he said, his voice sounding as

mean and sullen as he looked. "You couldn't detect a skunk under the house, you dam' snake-feeder!"

"I ain't no detective," Wallace said, trying to speak lightly, although he felt trouble as plainly as a caterpillar down his neck. "I'm just a wearin' it to have some fun with the boys."

"You couldn't 'rest a rabbit!"

"Sure I couldn't," Wallace admitted cheerfully.

"I'll take it off of you and make you chaw it, you dough-faced purp!"

"I ain't out for trouble, pardner," Wallace said, backing away from the aggressive citizen whose dignity he seemed to have offended by inadvertently displaying the badge.

It might have been better for Wallace if he had made a front of it, for with each little pulling in of his horns the fellow's insolence increased. Everything had come to a pause while everybody looked on, this pass between the cowpuncher wearing a detective's badge and the man whose feelings seemed so deeply hurt by the sight of it promising a rare piece of entertainment.

Wallace backed off a little farther, the injured party, as he appeared to hold himself, glaring after him in savage threat. Wallace wished he had stuck to the gang, and not gone projec'in' around that way; he wished he never had bought that dang badge, and he wished he was fourteen miles out on the range that minute instead of there in Eddie Kane's saloon facing that red-eyed old horse-thief who looked mean enough to eat baled hay.

"I ain't out for no trouble, pardner," Wallace repeated, trying to make it sound like he'd set his claws in its boot-

heels if it crowded him and give it the best he had, but only succeeding in giving the other fellow greater confidence to push his trick.

“Any man wearin’ one of them things meets trouble when he meets me,” the stranger declared.

Wallace never had pulled a gun on a man in his life, but he had a half-made feeling that the time had come when the inviolability of person and the defense of dignity called for such a move. He looked around to see if the boss or any of the boys was rising to his support, an appealing, questioning, doubtful look in his simple eyes.

Joe Lobdell started up as if to come over and take a hand, but the boss restrained him.

“It’s that damn fool badge,” Coburn said. “I told him it’d git him in trouble. Let him hoe his own row out of it—maybe it’ll learn him some sense.”

Wallace was well enough acquainted with the habits of dogs to know that, if a man turned his back and acted as if he intended to run when confronted by a hesitating mean one, he’d have to hit it up pretty lively to save damage to his raiment and his hide, yet he didn’t calculate with this man as he would have managed with a dog. While he turned his face toward the boss and the boys that moment, the rangy cuss jumped him. The next thing old Wallace knew he was, hopelessly overwhelmed by the sensitive gentleman’s companions, the leader twisting a bony grip in his shirt collar, his other hand busy with the offending badge.

Wallace kicked and scrambled and clawed for his gun, but he was as helpless as a hogtied calf under the branding iron. Over at the card table Tom Simpson jumped

up, all set to pile in and take a hand, unarmed as he was. Coburn laid hold of him and told him to keep hands off.

“The damn’ fool run into it—let him——”

A howl from Wallace in the middle of the struggling bunch broke the boss’s words off short. There was a heave away from Wallace, a kick by the mustached man that sent him spinning, a roar of laughter out of those nearest the scene, Eddie Kane dancing and doubling with merriment, slapping his thigh as if a hornet had gone up his leg.

The kicker had faced Wallace toward his friends before applying his foot. The simple cowpuncher almost pitched over the table around which the Bar-Heart-Bar gang stood before he got control of his legs, then he straightened up, one hand to his ear, the other raking for his gun. The gun wasn’t there, but the detective badge was pinned to the gristle of Wallace’s ear, blood from the puncture running down his neck. A little way in front of the Bar-Heart-Bar gang the four jokers who had carried the little pleasantries to such hilarious finish stood lined up as if inviting trouble. Wallace’s gun was lying on the floor.

Tom Simpson jumped for the gun, his legs like springs, his movement so unexpected and quick that even Eddie Kane was caught by surprise. Joe Lobdell and Pete Benson pulled out their weapons to cover their nimble friend’s designs, while Sid Coburn turned white around the gills and yelled:

“Put up them guns, I tell you! Put up——”

Guns were pulled on the other side, and it looked to the crowd like a pretty good time to hunt the air. There was a surge for the doors, one of which let out directly

into the street, at the end of the bar farthest from the table where Coburn and his men stood. Simpson bobbed up with Wallace's gun out of the scramble of feet and legs which had tried to defeat his intention. He returned it to Wallace, then faced round to the tall bony humorist who had pinned the badge on Wallace's ear.

"If you'll put up that gun I'll trim you!" Simpson proposed. He was bristling with indignation over the affront that had been put upon his friend.

Wallace had the badge off, handkerchief to his bleeding ear, but the boss had taken possession of his gun. Wallace came boring in, reckless in his fury, wild-eyed and frothing.

"Let me at him—damn his gun!" he said.

The boss jumped out and grabbed him, cinching him with his long arms, holding him in spite of his earnest and valiant struggles to rush up against the long man's gun.

Tom Simpson stood looking the fellow through and through, plenty of floor space around them for whatever operations his contemptuous challenge might set going.

"You're a rotten damned coward!" said Simpson. "You're a dirty sneak!"

The challenged man raised his long black pistol and wavered the muzzle of it back and forth before Simpson's face, not four inches from his nose.

"Smell that! It'll clabber your blood," he said.

Simpson was about a foot shorter than the fellow, but Sid Coburn saw in the way Tom gathered himself that he was getting ready to climb him like a tree, gun or no gun. Eddie Kane was struck with the same intelligence at

that moment. He interfered between the two, pushing Tom back with one arm, the lengthy citizen with the other.

“Can’t you take a joke?” said Kane, contemptuously severe, turning his malevolent red-edged eyes on Simpson. “Damn fool! can’t you take a joke?”

“No, you bloody little crab, not if that’s what you call a joke,” Simpson replied.

Kane’s anger was up in a flash. He ducked and rushed, grabbing Simpson by his effective, if not entirely original, bouncer hold, rushing him toward the door. But there was where Eddie Kane made one of the greatest miscalculations of his career.

Simpson slipped the hold with a wrench. He side-stepped and crouched, and shot out a fist that clipped Kane at the hinge of the jaw, flooring him as if he had been tapped with a bung-starter, that famous weapon once in such wide favor among bartenders up and down this undoubtedly cultured land.

Kane was a tough man, and a rough and ready man. He was floored flatter than he had been stretched in many a day, but he came out of it with steel-legged spring, white in his fury, and his friends moved back to give him room. Simpson took him on as he came, so nimble on his feet, so bewildering in his movements that Kane rushed from one stiff punch to another, roaring and cursing, every blow baffled, every trick of his railroad strategy vain.

The lookout at the faro game came down from his high seat, the bartenders edged each around his end of the counter, but they kept hands off, knowing Kane too well

to interfere as long as he could stand on his pins. That was not long. At about the time of one round Simpson made an end of it. He drove a straight clincher to Kane's windpipe and put him down for good.

The town marshal was coming in through the latticed half-doors at the end of the bar at that moment. He quickened out of the cautious, curious, peering attitude that was his habit when putting his nose into trouble—for he was an indifferently valiant marshal, to say the best—and ran forward, yanking out his gun.

"You the feller that's been 'personatin' a officer around here?" he demanded, coming up short in front of Simpson, gun wavering around like the wits of a waking man, to sort of include the whole Bar-Heart-Bar party.

The marshal was a little bow-legged cowpuncher-looking man, with a shallow chin and milky blue eyes. Simpson looked at him curiously, as he might have regarded some extraordinary insect flying in out of the night.

"It's about time somebody was doing it," he said.

"I can 'personate all the damn officers that's needed in this damn town!" the marshal blustered, feeling his dignity touched by Simpson's cool and contemptuous rating. "You come along with me, pardner; you're arrested."

"Oh, very well," Simpson agreed, carelessly, giving the "oh" a queer little stress with rising inflection. His way of saying the word, the nonchalant ease of his bearing, the quick lifting of his chin, all contributed to that expression of superiority that got through the marshal's hide like a cocklebur under a saddle blanket.

"I'll take you down, and I'll take you down *right*, 'per-

sonatin' a officer in this man's town!" the marshal threatened.

"He never done it, Mr. City Marshal," Wallace interposed. "I'm the feller that done the 'personatin' if they was any 'personatin' 'personated."

Wallace pulled the dectective badge out of his pocket and offered it as evidence of his guilt.

"Seein' you're itchin' to be locked up, come along," the marshal ordered, shifting his heels and his gun to include Wallace in the net of the law.

"Now, look a here, marshal; them boys belong to my outfit, and neither one of them's to——"

"Make your speech in court, cowman," the marshal cut Coburn off.

"You'll have to let 'em out on bail, and I'm ready to put up any amount," Coburn insisted.

Kane had recovered his wind, together with the pouring of water over his head by his wife, who had come running in, white-faced, big-eyed and silent, from her place at the desk in the hall, and the pouring down of something stronger by the bartender. Kane was leaning weakly against the bar, where his astonished and dumbfounded men had assisted him, his head lopping sickly, his face gashed and bruised. He brisked up at the mention of bail.

"He slugged me with knucks!" he charged. "Lock him up for murder!"

The marshal waved his two prisoners out ahead of him with his gun, opening a way through the crowd that had come back almost as quickly as it had dispersed. Sid Coburn and his two cowboys backed into a corner where

they gravely considered the plight of Wallace and Simpson. They were full of indignation at Kane's charge, which they knew to be nothing but malicious lying in an attempt to save his reputation.

Coburn said he'd hunt up the judge—he was nothing more than a justice of the peace—and try to get them out on bail. He wouldn't put it past that weak-stomached marshal, he declared, to fish up a pair of knucks and swear he took them off Simpson. Joe and Pete were for cracking the calaboose and delivering the prisoners, which would not have been much of a job, as it was only a little board box with bars made of old wagon tires over the window and door.

The boss was against any more kicking up, saying they had started enough trouble for one outfit that night. They were milling it over, and getting nowhere, when Wallace stuck his face cautiously in between the leaves of the swinging doors through which he so lately had disappeared under the disgrace of arrest. A big grunt of relief went up from the chests of the Bar-Heart-Bar at sight of Wallace's homely inquiring face. He spotted them, and beckoned them out.

"Well, he turned you loose, did he?" the boss inquired, peering around in the gloom of the drizzling night for Simpson.

"No, he changed places with us for the time bein'," Wallace chuckled. "Tom slammed him in his own private little jail and locked him up. His keys is on the roof."

"The hell he did!" said the boss. "Where's Tom?"

"Waitin' down at the barn."

The boss made a noise similar to a ruminating cow. The Bar-Heart-Bar gang, who had been with him a long time, knew he was swallowing his surprise.

“Time we was hittin’ the breeze out of this man’s town,” he said.

CHAPTER IV

ADRIFT IN THE NIGHT

Coburn learned on arriving at the livery stable that the chuck wagon and three men who had helped over with the cattle had gone back to the ranch in due form, according to orders, taking all extra horses along. The boss said Simpson would have to go on to the ranch with them that night if he expected to go on wearing a hide that would hold water. He could use Waco Johnson's horse.

Trouble would pop in that town, the boss said, as soon as Eddie Kane heard of Simpson's escape. Kane had two or three handy gun artists to supplement the city marshal, who was as mean as a warthog himself when he got going right. They'd turn over every blanket in town looking for Simpson. It was time to saddle and ride.

The boss put his little handbag in a sack, along with several packages which he had brought from Kansas City, wrapped his slicker around it and tied it to the back of his saddle, working fast. He was more concerned about protecting the contents of the sack from the weather than his own back. The liveryman, seeing him about to ride off in the rain, said hold on a minute: he had a slicker back in the barn somewhere that had belonged to a man they hung down on the Salt Fork last spring. If Coburn didn't mind a little thing like that, he was welcome to the coat.

Coburn said he didn't have any delicate feelings in such

things, but he was pushed for time and thought they'd better go. It would only take a minute, the liveryman said, going off to rummage around for the coat. Coburn sent Simpson out with the two horses to wait in the dark beside the barn along with the three cowboys, who were already in the saddle, all set to go.

There was a dim light in the broad barn door, coming from a lantern in the office; beyond it black night and the rain, and the three cowboys around the corner of the building waiting for the boss to come.

As Simpson crossed this little dim beam from the office window and hit the cool damp air outside, somebody across the street took a shot at him. The bullet slapped hard against the planks, pretty close to his head. Others rattled after it as Simpson crouched between the horses and ran along the front of the barn toward the corner where the cowboys waited.

A bullet struck the steel horn of the saddle on his right, glancing with a mean whang so close to the animal's ears that it lost its nerve and attempted to bolt. In a moment the other horse was involved in the stampede, giving Simpson all he could do to hold them. He was whirled and twisted until he didn't know horse from horse in the dark, in peril of being trampled as well as shot.

Coburn burst out of a side door, which was a man door and not a horse door, just as his men, burning under the imposition, began to give the shooting crowd back the same hot brand of lead they were delivering. The boss jumped into the tangle of horses and Simpson, yelling unheard, or at least unheeded, orders to his men to stop shooting and go. Simpson hopped what he took to be

Waco Johnson's horse and streaked out after the gang, who set off with a whoop, shooting defiance as they rode.

Waco Johnson was a good judge of a horse, Simpson thought, whatever his failings in other directions might be. That certainly was a hummer. Not knowing east from west in the obscuration of night and rain, Simpson gave the animal its head.

It seemed to Simpson that in five jumps and a snort his horse was past the bunch of three cowboys, and he was happy enough to have it split the wind that way, for some of the outraged friends of the city marshal evidently had taken horse in pursuit. One of them appeared to have a keen eye or a sharp scent, for he had singled Simpson out and was pushing him hard, yelling between shots for him to stop.

Stopping was the farthest thing from Tom Simpson's thoughts just then. He made himself as little as he could in the saddle and let the long-necked racer go. It would head for home, he reasoned, not greatly concerned over his separation from the Bar-Heart-Bar men, whose shots and whoops he could no longer hear.

Tight after him that persistent reprobate came, banging away with deadly intention but poor aim. None of his shots came near enough to be heard or, if so, their whine was drowned in the whistling wind of his speed. The horse was following a road, from its even gait, and a pretty good one at that. It was so dark there was no skyline, yet not a shade darker than Simpson would have ordered it if he had been arranging the night for the occasion. There was a little grayness in the clouds now and then; on the earth not a thing but the dungeon black-

ness into which the horse bored with the confidence of a well-known way.

The whooping behind Simpson stopped, the shooting popped for a little while thereafter, when that also ceased. Whoever it was that made the spurt after him, Simpson thought, had charged with the bristling courage of a housedog, which a little effort and a dash of rough weather quickly cools.

He pulled up to listen. The world seemed as empty as it was black. There was not a sound. The lights of Drumwell were lost; his late companions seemed to have ridden into the black mouth of that silent mystery and disappeared.

Granted that his horse had taken the right road, it was not likely that the others would follow. They would have jumped off some other way when the gang rode out after them and began to shoot; it would be useless to draw to one side and wait in the hope of their passing. The horse would go home, according to the sagacity of its kind. He gave it the reins again.

It was a good while later, perhaps an hour or more, when Simpson, considerably cooled from the excitement and strain of his dramatic dash and escape, realized that he was drenched. He had been too much centered in getting out of that town to think about putting on a slicker, and if he had thought of it his hands were so full of horses it couldn't have been done.

A slicker would not do him much good now, except to keep the steam in and warm him up a little. He didn't even recall whether he had seen a slicker behind Waco

Johnson's saddle when he slung it on the horse. He put his hand back to explore.

There was a roll, and a pretty good chunk of a roll, behind the saddle, done up in a slicker, to be sure. But it was not Waco Johnson's slicker; it was not Waco Johnson's roll. In the tangle of things while that shooting was going on, he had jumped the boss's horse and the boss had taken Waco Johnson's.

Not that it mattered, Simpson thought, since they were all heading for the same place. Only he remembered a package which the boss had handled tenderly all day, and put it into the sack with careful bestowal. It looked like a five-pound box of candy, going home to the missus. Simpson hoped he hadn't made a mess of it, which was about what had happened in that jouncing ride if they chanced to be chocolate creams. That was about what Sid Coburn would buy, at a dollar a pound, judging from the domestic look that lay back in his eyes.

Let it rain; the slicker should stay right where it was. He was neither sugar nor salt, nor chocolate creams; it was a cinch he wouldn't melt. Even though most of them must be squashed, some would come through whole, and as long as they were dry they'd be welcome at the ranch-house on the Medicine Lodge River, where the kids would lick the paper and save every smack of the oozing delicacy.

Simpson did not give the little brown bag which he had seen the boss carrying around much thought. He knew it was in the sack, and he had not a spark of curiosity about what it contained. Certainly if he had been put to it to

guess the contents, money would have been the last thing he would have chanced. Nothing would have been farther from his own habits, or from the procedure of the well-regulated society in which those habits were formed, than the carrying of money around in any such loose and hazardous way. He was no more cognizant of the fact that he was adrift in the night with a fortune of thirty-five thousand dollars at his back, than he was that Sid Coburn was riding that hour in the frenzy of his loss, raising a posse comitatus to hasten in pursuit.

Whatever it was the brown bag contained—presents for missus and kids, or only the boss's extra shirt, shaving mug, razor and strop—Tom Simpson had no other thought in his entirely honest head than delivering it dry and safe into the hands to which it belonged. He believed the horse was a sensible creature; he was relying, with faith founded on experience, on its homing sense to carry him safely through that adventure which, to Tom Simpson, was rather a mild one, to be sure, and nothing to worry about at all.

Things with and appertaining to Tom Simpson were pretty much as Sid Coburn had guessed. It did not call for an expert in the national characteristics of men to classify him as he belonged. That he was an Englishman was as plain as apples in a schoolboy's pocket. As Coburn had reflected, the western cattle ranges were very well acquainted with Tom Simpson's type. Many young fellows came over in those times to try it out in the rough, some for the experience upon which they expected to build later, others for the adventure of it, but good sports

mainly, whatever their motive, and mainly good, sound men.

There were plenty of wild fellows among them, at least wild in the old home standards of conduct, if not so very boisterous according to the morals of the range. Most of them received money from home, and were known as remittance men on the range, as they were similarly designated elsewhere, and the majority of them blew it in one big spree when it came, taking the thick and thin of a cowpuncher's life between checks without a sigh. If they did not always win to close comradeship and understanding with the natives of the range, they invariably achieved a certain standing of respect in the rough ethics of that life.

Simpson rode on through the impenetrable night, surrendering full guidance to the horse, which appeared to be confident of its way. From the footing which was becoming muddy, Simpson knew the horse was following a road bearing traffic enough to keep the grass down. That it would lead him duly to the Bar-Heart-Bar ranch he had no doubt. His one concern was the length of time it would take to get there, as the travelling was heavy and slippery, and wearing on a horse.

The rain was increasing, bearing out of the quarter he was facing, driving on a dreary wind that chilled him to the bone. It would be wise to turn in at the first shelter offering, he decided, keeping a sharp lookout for a light. But there was no light. It seemed as if he had ridden beyond the bounds of civilization when he left town.

At a creekside, where there was a windbreak of cotton-

wood trees and undergrowth, which he sensed, rather than saw, for it continued black as vengeance, the cold clouds fairly raking the earth, Simpson dismounted to blow his horse. He got his pipe going without difficulty, and considered a fire to warm his shins, giving it up after groping around among the wet branches and soaked twigs.

It was going to be a long pull—he reckoned it only about midnight then—in the saddle until morning, and he'd have to stick to the saddle to give the horse its way. When a man took to his feet and led his horse, the horse yielded guidance to the hand on the bridle. Sit in the saddle and give him his head, as before. That was all a stranger abroad in an unknown land could do.

Meanwhile, Sid Coburn was stretching leather to overhaul the man who had grabbed his horse and made off with his money. At least he thought he was riding in the most likely direction to either overtake or get ahead of him, close in and trap him when daylight came.

There was but one direction a thief would take with refuge so close at hand: south, into the Indian country, where the chances would be ten to one in his favor of getting clean away. That was the direction Tom Simpson had taken, Sid Coburn tight after him on Waco Johnson's horse, banging away with his cannon, yelping himself raw with impotent commands and curses. When the chase became hopeless, Coburn returned to town to report his loss, gather a band among his friends of the range who happened to be in Drumwell that night, to comb the country in the slim hope of ever feeling the heft of that thirty-five thousand dollars again.

The three cowboys, separated from their boss in the get-away, came back to look for him, hearing the shooting, making a cautious exploration, Wallace keeping well back in the dark, close to his horse, fearing somebody would identify him if he rode in with his companions and start everything all over again. Pete and Joe ran into Coburn, who was in a froth of rage and desperation.

To think he had been played for a sucker that way, Coburn belittled himself. It was a put-up job, from the very start, that damn Waco Johnson at the bottom of it. That accounted for Waco's absence; he'd arranged it with his side-partner to get on the train and play broke, work himself in with them and grab the money.

It looked reasonable to the gang. Waco Johnson was a new man, unknown to them. He had been around the Bar-Heart-Bar only a month or two, coming from nobody knew where. It was an easy matter for them to work themselves up to a hot state of bitter denunciation, and cook up a plot that had no more foundation than public denunciations generally have.

Simpson would hit for the Nation, of course, where Waco would join him and split the easiest piece of money that ever fell into crooked hands. On that reasoning, Coburn telegraphed the federal authorities in the Indian country a description of Simpson, and sent Pete Benson to the county seat to inform the sheriff and enlist his help. Then Coburn rode off in a blind pursuit with Wallace and Joe Lobdell, his friends taking other roads, all agreeing to make for a certain point of rendezvous the next day, where they would report on anything seen or heard.

Coburn was in a wild state of desperation. The loss of that money meant dishonor and ruination. More than half of it was owing to a Wichita bank, the mortgagor having such faith in his honor as to permit him to ship his cattle and make his own collection, something unusual in range procedure. The general program was for a representative of the mortgagor to accompany the shipment, collect the returns, take his cut and hand the remainder, if any, to the cattleman.

Sid had been gloating over the pleasure and dignity that would be his when he deposited that money in the morning, wrote a check for twenty-one thousand dollars, scratched a brief line and mailed it to the Wichita banker who had trusted him to the limit because he had trusted his father before him in the days when the old man speculated in cattle driven up the Chisholm Trail from Texas. In his gloomy rage Coburn overlooked everything that had gone before the moment of excitement and peril at the livery stable which would tend to disprove his sudden and vindictive opinion of Tom Simpson. He even believed the row in the saloon, and Simpson's arrest and escape from the marshal, all a part of the plot. That wall-eyed little lizard of a marshal was in on it, he easily convinced himself, making a mental reservation of a day of reckoning in that quarter.

All night they rode southward, following the cattle trail most used by cattlemen in that section of the Cherokee leases, stopping at cow-camps to roust out sleepy punchers, who became alert and avid for the news with the first eager inquiry; clamoring at the doors of Indian and negro cabins to demand information of a wild rider who

might have stopped to refresh himself or enforce a change of horses.

With every mile of the hard-pressed journey, every passing hour of the long, dragging, blank-dark night, Sid Coburn's hope sank lower. His courage died in him and his heart turned cold, but he held on southward to the appointed place of meeting, not dreaming, certainly, that Tom Simpson's horse had circled back when given the rein, and was heading at the same time in a direction almost exactly opposite that of the supposed pursuit.

CHAPTER V

WRECKAGE

Romance is not here: it is over the river, it lies beyond the hills. No person is conscious of living it in his own life; its iridescence always sparkles on some distant shore. The world across youth's eyes are lifted in the straining, heart-drawing hunger to be away on the always-beginning, never-ending, roaming quest for romance. For romance is not here: it is far away along world-old trails which the feet of men have worn in their search after it, a treasure that no man is conscious of when he holds it in his hand.

Eudora Ellison, for example, could not understand why people came to that part of Kansas seeking the romance of adventure, the romance of fortune—which amounts to the same thing, fortune being the ultimate in any case—when she knew neither was to be encountered there. If they found adventure, it was the cutting and shooting kind, the sordid, brawling kind, to be encountered at Drumwell; or fortune, it could be only the commonplace, colorless kind that rose from cattle. A man must follow such a barbaric life in the open, facing all winds and weather, to come to prosperity in the livestock business that he had all the faculty of enjoying it blown out, and frozen out, and washed out of him by the rain, long before it came.

No, that was not the place for romance, give it the best

color loyalty might paint. It was only a land of false promises, although it seemed fair as the heart could desire that bright October morning, its blue distances renewed by last night's rain, giving them a fresh allure-ment, a sad, on-drawing beauty of their own. No romance there, in spite of golden-rod at the roadside, and purple gentian and blue asters growing tall; or billowing sod-land yet untouched by the plow stretching away until the eye faltered in its gray-green immensity.

It was all a deceitful lure, this girl thought bitterly, to draw men on to greater hazards and break them unmerci-fully as in the past. There was a lonely emptiness in the green grazing lands as the girl looked over them which made her heart drag with the hopeless lagging of de-feat. Where the Ellison herds once had fed the pastures lay empty, the thousands of acres, once her father's baronial pride, only a tax burden now. For all the beauty of that land, once their hope of affluence and consequence, it was nothing but an impoverishing weight, ten sections of it in unbroken continuity, but only a small patch in the leagues-bounded range over which their sovereignty once fell.

If only she had been left in ignorance of any other life, she reflected, more sad than resentful, she might have taken the heartbreak of it with better grace. If she never had been sent away to graze in other pastures, and return almost an alien, in sympathy at least, the adjustment to this downfall would not have been so hard.

Poverty and ignorance consorted best together. It was a well-intended, but mistaken policy for people like her parents to educate their daughters on the hazards of the

cattle business. Better to keep them at home, marry them to some range cavalier and harden them early in the disappointments which almost certainly would overwhelm them in the end.

So Eudora Ellison thought that bright October morning as she flung bones out of her wagon where it stood by a great heap of bones in the spacious barnyard beside the house. She was dressed in blue overalls and cowboy boots, neither fitting her with any particular grace; a gray woolen shirt not cut for any maidenly form, the extra length of its sleeves taken up in several turns from the wrists, and a broad-brimmed brown hat that had seen service on the range for many a year. She had pinned up the lopping brim of this headgear on one side, which gave both hat and wearer a kind of battered, brave jauntiness. Her hair was short, its unconfined curls brushing her cheek when she stooped.

Gathering a pitiful profit out of the wreckage of their past consequence, as many another was doing on the Kansas range that year, Eudora had driven in from her scavaging of bones too late last night to unload. It always made her sad to handle the bones of her old friends who had perished in the great winter kill of three years past. But sentiment could not be permitted to stand in the way of common sense, especially when much-needed money was involved. The bone market was active; more trainloads of bones had gone out of that range the past summer than live cattle. They were grinding them and using them to fertilize their fields in the east, she had heard, the market price at Drumwell being a little more

for a ton than one hide of the lost thousands would have brought.

Eudora had not been at home the winter of the disastrous kill on the Kansas range, but she had heard the story so often, she knew the savage harshness of those winter storms so well, the picture of the great tragedy was as plain in her vision as if she had witnessed it.

For weeks the range had been buried under snow. Cattle had been held in such shelter as ravines and creeks offered in that peculiarly unsheltered country until the urge of starvation drove them to break restraint and drift before the bitter wind. Slowly they had marched in their misery, devouring every shrub that protruded above the drifts, lean and staggering, shaggy with icicles, the hollows of their gaunt bodies filled with snow.

Southward the great drift of starving cattle had moved, herd merged with herd, out of all human bounds; wind-lashed, snow-harried, dim, gaunt figures in the greatest tragedy that ever had devastated the Kansas range. They lodged against railroad fences and died, heaped like tumbleweed that scurries before the autumn wind; staggered against wire fences of homesteads and died; plodded grimly, despairingly, silently, into villages, where they stood in the shelter of houses and died, their carcasses so attenuated, so fleshless and dry, that even the wolves refused the banquet which the elements spread abroad with such cruel prodigality.

Matt Ellison had lost above forty-five hundred head. By heroic effort he had hauled hay to a few hundred head which his cowboys held in the valley of the little river

that ran through the home place. These he had saved for a new beginning, but the exposure of his efforts to rescue his cattle cost his own life, leaving his wife and daughter in worse case than they would have been if the last head had perished in the storm.

Neither of the women—Eudora was nineteen then—knew anything about cattle, and they soon were to find that indifference working for ignorance is a wasteful combination. The seed saved from the wreckage at such great cost did not increase as it should have done. There were leaks somewhere which kept the herd down, and Mrs. Ellison, after two years of disappointment, wisely decided to sell what cattle remained before all of them leaked away.

She cleaned them out, to the last living hoof, and put the money aside for taxes and living expenses, Ellison having been a thrifty man and leaving no debts. But that fund from the sale of the remainder of the herd could not last a great while with nothing coming in to help. The fields which Ellison had tilled, growing his own corn, lay fallow, the encroaching prairie sod around their borders closing in on them like growing ice upon a lake.

Now the bone market had opened, and Eudora was gathering the dried skeletons, heaping a vast mound of them in the barnyard, her intention being to collect several carloads and then have them hauled to Drumwell, the nearest railroad point, some forty miles away. It was a melancholy business at the best, doubly so when every horned skull was a counter in the tale of their ruinous loss. If she had been picking up the bones of somebody else's cattle it would not have been so bad, even though

sympathy must have clouded the hope of gain in any case.

Eudora had posted notices warning homesteaders and roaming bone pickers to keep clear of their property. Such bones as were scattered along the little river and its tributary creeks and washes were her bones, no matter whose cattle had carried them around under happier conditions, and she intended to have them all. Surely there were bones enough for everybody if they would spread out over the country and find them.

So Eudora Ellison was unloading her bones that bright October morning after the rain, thinking, in the way of youth, that life is mainly hard and useless, and full of disappointment and defeat; thinking that it was a hopeless groping in a maze of difficulties out of which they never would find their way, and that it was an isolated and lonely land in which youth and romance would never meet. She looked up quickly at the neigh of a horse at the gate, and jumped down out of the wagon, running forward as eagerly as if romance had come riding, against all expectation, and she must hasten to tie it up to the hitching-rack before it changed its mind and galloped away.

The horse whinnied again when it saw her coming, stretching its neck, its ears set forward in eagerness, as plainly a hail of joyful greeting as horse ever uttered in this world. The girl's long legs twinkled like the spokes of a wagon wheel, she ran so fast. She bounded to the gate, her brown face flushed, where the horse thrust its head over to greet her with a little squeal almost like a sob of joyful relief. She threw the gate open and flung

her arms around the animal's neck, drawing its head to her bosom, fondling it, murmuring and exclaiming, as she might have caressed a lost child.

"You've got your nerve," she flashed up at the mud-spattered rider, "coming here on my horse!"

"It would seem so," Tom Simpson replied. "But my intentions are honorable, miss, in spite of my appearance. I got separated from Mr. Coburn and the others during a little—a little *mêlée* in Drumwell last night. By inadvertence I took his horse. I am a stranger in this country, miss; I trusted the horse to come home, which he appears to have done."

The girl looked at him, the color fading out of her face, her eyes widening, her mouth standing open, amazement on every feature, as he calmly told this little story. She was holding the horse by the bit, so firmly her knuckles were white in their grip, and her breath was coming fast.

"Yes, he came home all right," she said, so coldly, so severely, so accusingly, that Tom Simpson began to think something had gone wrong.

"Then this *is* the Bar-Heart-Bar ranch?" Simpson said hopefully, more hopefully than he felt, throwing his stiff leg over, coming down out of the saddle like a wooden man.

"This is the Block E," she put him right with cold contumely.

"It's the horse's mistake, ma'am—miss—, not mine," said Simpson, feeling very much like the thief she doubtless took him for, or at least an accessory after the fact.

"It's no mistake—he's my horse, this is his home. I raised him from a colt, he's my horse!"

"I don't understand a bit of it," Simpson declared in honest bewilderment, "but I thought he was blood—bloomin' keen for a tired nag the last two or three miles."

"He's no nag!" she corrected him indignantly. "He's a blood-horse, he's a Hambletonian. I raised him from a colt and they stole him—they stole him!"

"The devil!" said Simpson. "Does he carry your brand?"

"I never would have him branded, except on the hoof, and that's grown out. Oh, but *they* did!" she said, following Simpson's eyes to the animal's left shoulder, a pang in her tone as if the iron had touched her own flesh.

"I noticed it," he said, "but didn't look for another brand. How long since you lost him?"

"About four months."

"Yes, that's a new brand," he said thoughtfully. "No doubt Coburn was an innocent purchaser?"

"Innocent! He knew it was my horse."

"Awkward for me," Simpson cogitated.

The girl was busy with the throatlatch of the bridle, which she stripped from the horse's head and threw to the ground.

"Get that saddle off, and be quick about it, mister!" she ordered him harshly.

"*Dev*-lish awkward for me!" Simpson muttered, making no start to carry out her command. "How far is it to Coburn's place, if you don't mind?"

"Twenty-five or thirty miles southwest of here," she

told him ungraciously, bristling with suspicion, watching him sharply, having already satisfied herself, as he could see, that he was unarmed.

"*Oh*, very well," said he, with a light stress on the "oh," giving it a care-free, indifferent, although somewhat lofty sound, as if to say such trifles as horses and their ownership were beneath him, and that he would not stoop to question a lady's word, let her be right or wrong.

Which was very much his mental state that moment. It was Coburn's business to prove his title to the horse, and no disinterested person would say the girl hadn't made her case so far. At least the horse had made it. The animal was looking at her with as loving expression as creature ever put into its eyes, following every movement she made, sticking to her as if it feared another separation. The horse had belonged there, no matter how it came to leave, and subsequent owners, honest or otherwise, would have to establish their claims and get possession of it without any help from him.

Simpson unsaddled the horse, his studious, serious face revealing nothing of his thoughts, which were galloping along at a pretty fair rate, in fact. While his chin was up in the soldierly way Sid Coburn had liked, his gray eyes had a shadow of perplexity in them, due to the double problem before him of getting Coburn's saddle, and the articles in the sack behind it, to the ranch and explaining the loss of the horse when he got there.

The relieved horse shook himself and began trampling around looking for a place to roll. Simpson stood just inside the gate holding the heavy saddle, wondering what next, running his eye over the place.

He saw a neat homestead, for Ellison had been as good farmer as range cattleman. The original part of the house was built of barked cottonwood logs which had gathered lint and turned a soft gray. It was low, long, comfortable and solid, with a good shingle roof. Flanking this older unit was an extension at right angle built of weatherboards, gray-painted to conform with the weathered logs, single-storied, with a wide porch running its entire length. The whole structure, old and new, was topped by a row of lightning rods with bright metal balls which gleamed in the sun, conspicuous enough to tempt any bolt, it would appear, that might be looking for a shining mark.

A thriving, but neglected, orchard grew up to the doorway, which was a tangle of uncut bluegrass. A white picket fence fronted the house and ran along the side, dividing it from the shed-like barn and numerous corrals.

It was plain to Simpson's quick perception that Ellison had chosen his location as an agriculturist rather than stockman. The homestead lay in a fair valley through which a little river flowed, the land broadening out with the course of the stream toward the south, in which direction fenced and fallow fields were to be seen. These lands, once cultivated, were weed-grown now and desolate, further evidence of the slack-handed management in everything about the place.

While Simpson was making this quick, unobtrusive survey of a few seconds, the girl in her mannish attire stood watching the horse, which was kicking its heels to the blue sky as it rolled in the luxury of soft earth. It scrambled up, shook itself, and headed for the barn. The girl laughed, well pleased to see it had not forgotten the

usage of other days. She turned to Simpson, triumphant over him as if this last piece of evidence had put the rope around his neck.

"Now you see!" she said.

Simpson was spared the embarrassment of trying to answer with any kind of defense by the appearance of a woman on the sunny porch.

"Why, that looks like Frank!" she said.

"It is Frank, mother," Eudora assured her, that pitch of triumph still in her voice, her suspicious, accusing eyes resting a moment on Simpson where he stood encumbered with his load as if he intended to saddle himself and go.

"Well, of all things!" the elder woman marvelled. She came through the gate in the side picket fence and joined them, shading her eyes against the sun as she looked after the horse. "Did this man bring him home?"

"No, he brought this *man* home," Eudora replied, too indignant to grin over the undignified situation of the man, standing there with a muddy wet saddle under his arm.

"Of *all* things!" Mrs. Ellison wondered, looking now at Tom Simpson, an unfriendly question in her eyes.

Simpson touched his hat with his disengaged hand.

"Quite remarkable," he said.

"Who is he, Eudora?" Mrs. Ellison inquired, speaking over Simpson's head as completely as if he did not stand in plain sight.

"He's a green man belonging to Coburn's outfit, he says, mother. They got into some kind of a row down at Drumwell last night—what *was* it you got into down there?"

Simpson put down the saddle and told the story, beginning with his encountering Coburn on the train and accepting the provisional offer of a job, and ending with the adventure of Wallace Ramsey and his detective badge in Eddie Kane's saloon. He did not recount that story in detail, telling only as much as he did not figure in, and as he fancied would be agreeable to their ears. It had ended up with the row responsible for their hasty exit, and the confusion in horses, he explained.

"Why, it sounds reasonable, Eudora," Mrs. Ellison declared. "I believe he's telling the truth. So Sid Coburn had Frank all the time, did he?"

"I don't know whether he's had him all the time, but he had him," the girl replied, still sour and suspicious.

"And you've been ridin' all night in the rain, and without a slicker, as I live!" Mrs. Ellison said, looking Simpson over with motherly concern. "You come right in and get your breakfast—I'll rummage around and find you a change of clothes. Why, you're so soaked you wouldn't dry out all day!"

Eudora joined her mother, but somewhat coldly, in this offer of hospitality, a concession for which Simpson was not as grateful to her as he might have been under happier conditions. He was a bit scuffed in his tenderest place—that thin skin overlying his honor—by the girl's silly persistence, implied if not outright spoken, that he had borne a hand in the sequestration of her horse. Just as if a thief would ride a horse up to its owner's gate. Silly little hobble-de-hoy that she looked like, strutting around that way in man's pants, damn it all!

"Put your saddle over there on the end of the porch in the sun," Mrs. Ellison directed, "and I'll look you up some dry clothes."

"I'll be grateful for the breakfast, madam," Simpson said, rather high-horse and formal in his manner, "but the present clothing will serve me very-very well. I'm rather used to being rained on, you know,—I'll dry out in a little while. If you don't mind, I'll stand in the sun until you're ready for me."

"It wouldn't be any trouble, and you'd be welcome," Mrs. Ellison said, regarding him with puzzled eyes. "You don't talk like a cowboy," she blurted out what was in her mind, "any more than you look like one. Why, I haven't seen a pair of shoes on a man's feet before in I don't know when."

"Perhaps it's because I'm only an occasional cowboy," Simpson replied, not very much to the point of her plain bid for information, certainly, but sufficient for the moment, it seemed to all.

"Yes, go on in and eat," Eudora said, with something nearer the warmth of genuine welcome. "I've got to go back to my bones."

CHAPTER VI

FOUR ROGUES

Eudora did not go back directly to her bones. She ran off instead to serve the horse Frank a generous breakfast of oats, which she put in one of the feed boxes in the corral near the house. Then she got a gunny sack and rubbed him down, touching the brand, not yet calloused, on the animal's left shoulder with tender fingers, moaning over it, growing hot with resentment against the Bar-Heart-Bar and its owner, and all it represented.

The Bar-Heart-Bar brand was a device like this:



The brand was fully two hands' height, heavy in its outline, an easy one to read. It was a popular device in the southwest, and registered by various owners in several states, as was the case with many others. Ellison's brand, the Block E, did not signify a block letter, such as college athletes prize so highly on sweaters in these times, but a simple arrangement in this manner:



While Eudora never had suffered any pangs at seeing the family brand on cattle, she had stood flat-footed against it for her pet colt. The breed of the animal was its own identification, there being no other like it on that range. It was a present from an uncle in Missouri, a breeder of fine horses. To meet the requirements of custom on the range, which was equal to law, Ellison had made with his own hands a tiny replica of his brand, which he burned into the colt's hoof, close down toward the toe where it wouldn't hurt, renewing it from time to time as the hoof grew.

Without a brand or clipping mark, or crop, as it usually was called, in the ear it was next to impossible to establish a claim of ownership in those times. This rule extended even to hogs, and is still in full observance in the Ozark mountain regions of Missouri and Arkansas, and perhaps elsewhere in the south where hogs run wild.

Now Eudora's pet, stolen early in the summer from the fenced pasture where the household cattle grazed, had come home bearing their neighbor's brand, and it would be a hard matter for her, she fully realized, to prove the horse ever had belonged to her if Coburn should take it to law. She could prove easily enough that she had owned a similar horse, but without her brand on it, not that particular one.

But Coburn must have known when he bought it from the thief—she did not believe for a moment he had come by it any other way—that it was her horse. She had paid for posters the sheriff had put up and mailed around, and distributed over the range. Everybody on that range knew she had lost her pet Hambletonian.

Coburn likely would say he never had heard of her loss, as he lived in another county, and his word would go as far as her own. He had the reputation of an honest man, but cattle honesty and bank honesty stood in different sections of the range moral code from horse honesty, she knew too well. Now her horse bore Coburn's brand. If he wanted to be mean about it, she didn't know where she'd come out. Maybe he'd replevin the horse, standing on his brand, with perhaps a bill of sale from the thief, whom nobody ever would see again.

But any honest observer would say the actions of the horse proved its ownership. That stranger with the queer, quick, deep-sounding voice could speak for Frank. Lost in the night, he had given Frank the reins, and Frank had come home, put his head over the gate and called her, as he used to call her on a hot day when he came up, thirsty and fly-plagued, asking her to put him away from his pestering little enemies in the cool dark barn.

So Eudora reflected, the unloaded bones put out of mind while she rubbed the mud from her pet's long slender legs. She had fed him in a corral manger where her father used to finish off his picked cattle on corn, wanting him out in the light so she could look him over for other marks of cruelty he must have suffered aside from the resented brand.

Meantime, Tom Simpson had been called in to breakfast by Mrs. Ellison, who sat at the table with him, as much through her desire to learn something about him, it must be owned, as through a sense of hospitality. Simpson had washed the mud off and combed his hair at the bench on the kitchen porch where many a cowboy before

him had sloshed and snorted in his ablutions, and his wet clothes were steaming on his back when he sat down to his meal.

At Mrs. Ellison's suggestion he had hung his coat in the sun and come to breakfast in shirt sleeves, as he had done in more or less notable company before that day. It was a conventional gray woolen shirt, such as range men wore from the Nueces to the Little Missouri, adorned by a narrow blue necktie, the ends of it tucked into his bosom.

Mrs. Ellison looked him over swiftly, keenly, with an eye to his good points, having come from a horse-breeding family. She noted his small, well-set head, his thin nostrils, his nose somewhat out of proportion in the general meagerness of his face and, withal, the somber, self-communing look of him which seemed to tell of hardships and penances which had refined him down from something of different type and made him a man.

That he was a man, in the range sense of the word, she was sure. However Sid Coburn had picked him up, she was certain he had not done it to give him sanctuary from the consequence of any misdeed by which man or woman had suffered. Plainly he was beneath his capabilities in a hired man's capacity on the range. That any man lost dignity in such pursuit she hardly would have admitted, not having the enlarged outlook upon life that her daughter had gained by broader contact with the world. Due to this narrowness of outlook, Mrs. Ellison was entirely satisfied with her lot.

She was a placid, deliberate woman of fifty, who bore her years well, with much of the grace of youth still on

her. She was slender, tall, with a certain aristocratic refinement of features, not too pronounced, but traceable, which told of good lineage. Her hair, rippled and dark like her daughter's, was slightly touched with gray.

"So you picked Sid Coburn up on the train, did you?" she said, the inquiry sharpened by her curiosity to know something of what had gone before that chance meeting.

Tom Simpson seemed to read her desire, which required no sharp intellect to reach, indeed.

"I was on my way to the Panhandle, where I have friends," he replied. "But I had nothing definite ahead of me, so I considered one chance as good as another. Coburn had lost one of his men in Kansas City, Waco Johnson by name. On the condition that the said Waco didn't show up in due time, I was to have his job. It was just a chance shot, you see."

"I don't know much about Coburn," she said, speaking in a manner of reserve; "he hasn't been down in this part of the country long—eight or ten years. Came from up around Wichita somewhere, I believe. Are you from the east?"

"Wyoming, and out that way, madam."

"The reason I asked you if you were from the east was we had a man workin' for us some years ago who came from Boston. He had the same twang to his voice you have, only he was a little mushy and nosey. He was Harvard educated, he claimed, always blowin' about it like it was something big. I never could see where it had done *him* any good, anyhow. He was out here for experience, and he got it, all right, a little more of it than he could pack. They shot him in the leg up at Wellington."

"Experience is a queer sort of thing that way," Tom Simpson said reflectively. "It flies up and hits a chap when he isn't looking, oftener than not."

"It sure does," she agreed, looking at him shrewdly, not at all surprised to hear him talk that way. "Was you born out there in Wyoming?"

"Far from it. I was born in Manchester, England. My father is a tanner there, a very good tanner as tanners go, madam."

"Is *that* so? Well, you don't tell me! And you didn't like the tannin' business, I guess. I don't blame you—I don't blame you. I used to pass a tanyard on my way to school back in Lexington, Missouri. I don't blame you a bit."

This piece of confidence about his beginning, which Mrs. Ellison did not question or doubt in any particular, put her on almost a confidential footing with Tom Simpson at once. It wasn't everybody in that country who would tell where he came from with the undoubted sincerity of that young man. He was far from home and kindred, and she began to have a motherly feeling for him, especially since his folks had something to do with a by-product of the livestock industry.

She went at once into a lively history of the Ellison ranch, its past prosperity and recent losses, to all of which he listened with genuine interest. Mainly on account of that extraordinary girl in man's pants. He had met plenty of cattle-ranch ladies in his wide roaming, but never one like her. There was something in the shading of her speech, there was something in her eyes—a

look of impatience, of a spirit curbed—that set a man's fancy moving.

Simpson stole a look out of the window to see if the girl was at her bones, and started, coming to his feet with that springy movement of the legs that had been Eddie Kane's undoing the night before. The girl was standing with one hand on the horse's withers, half straightened from her grooming, looking with every indication of alarm at four men who had ridden into the enclosure and were swinging from their travel-splashed mounts.

“My lands!” said Mrs. Ellison, getting quickly to her feet, peering anxiously through the uncurtained window, “somebody's come. I wonder what in the world them men are after, comin' in here that way.”

Before Simpson could answer three of the men came running toward the kitchen door, stiff-legged and heavy from their saddles, guns out, with grim and hostile demonstration.

“They're after you!” Mrs. Ellison said. “What have you done?”

“You're as wise as I am, madam,” Simpson replied.

Which was true as far as it went. There was no time to explain that these were the four rascals who had mistreated the innocent joker in Kane's place last night, for the long man with the big mustache was at the porch, his feet on the step. Simpson started for the door, but Mrs. Ellison interposed, being nearer, stretching her arm to bar him. The fourth man was coming along after his companions, leading the horse Frank, the girl protesting vehemently.

"What do you want rushin' around here with them fool guns that way?" Mrs. Ellison inquired, indignantly severe, entirely cool, taking in every detail of the rude trespass.

"We're the sheriff's posse, we're after the horse that man in there behind you stole from Sid Coburn last night," the lanky leader replied.

One of them already had grabbed up the saddle and was cutting loose the bulky roll done up in the slicker. He dumped the contents of the sack on the porch as Eudora came running ahead of the fellow who was leading her horse.

"Look-a here!" said the man who had dumped the sack's contents. He was holding up the little handbag that Simpson had seen the cowman carrying around.

Simpson pushed past Mrs. Ellison, deliberate and unflurried, although he was raging inwardly at the high-handed robbery he knew it to be, still as innocent of the little brown bag's contents as Mrs. Ellison.

"What're you up to, you bloomin' pirates?" he asked, head up, chin out, eyes as steady as if he challenged a pack of thieving boys instead of four night-riding scoundrels with guns in their fists.

"Back up, and stay backed, little feller," the chief of the party said, boring the muzzle of his gun against that part of Simpson's anatomy which lately had become the receptacle of ham and eggs.

One of the others stopped Eudora on the steps; another edged around behind Mrs. Ellison and cut her off from the door.

"Stay right where you're at, children," the tall fellow

said with sardonic gentleness. "Open the damn thing and see if it's there, Noahy."

"You'll not take that horse!" Eudora panted, flushed and furious, making a start to break away.

Her guard intercepted the break, catching her arm, shaking her correctively.

"Won't we, britches? You just wait and see," he laughed. "If you don't behave yourself I'll turn you up and spank you!"

Simpson stiffened like a pointer in scent of the game. Mrs. Ellison, watching everything with cool, calculative eyes, read his intention of springing to the girl's defense and laid a detaining hand on his arm. The man addressed as Noahy was fussing with the lock of the little hand-bag, swearing not altogether under his breath.

"Oh, cut the damn thing open—cut it open!" the leader chafed impatiently. "See if it's there!"

The fellow called Noahy got the bag open just then. He gave a little whoop, and snapped the jaws of the bag shut again.

"It's there, all right!" he said.

"Then saddle up that horse," the leader directed. "Take a look inside there—" jerking his head to the one at the door—"and see if anybody's hangin' around. Step out there to the krel, you folks," with a directive motion of his gun.

Simpson knew words would be useless. Any protest, any argument, would only make his situation worse in the eyes of the two women, and perhaps provoke the rogues to violence. Any dealing that gang ever had with a sheriff was at as long range as they could make it. They

were thieves who had heard of Coburn's loss, and it must be considerably more than the horse, he knew, to set them so keenly on his trail.

It flashed to him that it was Coburn himself who had raced after him shooting last night. The damn fool must have been carrying money in that battered old brown bag.

This he summed up as two of the gunmen marched him with mother and daughter to the corral, which was fifty yards or more from the kitchen door. Eudora looked back dumbly to where they were throwing Coburn's saddle on her horse. The packages were scattered on the porch, but the leader had taken charge of the little handbag. He was standing by with the evident design of riding away on her horse.

"Git in there, and stay there till you see us ride out of that gate!" their guard ordered, herding them into the corral with his gun. He pulled the gate shut and stood by on guard.

Simpson was thinking a lot but getting nowhere. He saw the tall, mustached villain put the handbag in the grain sack, as Coburn had done last night. He was lashing it to the back of his saddle, the rest of the packages ignored.

"I'll not let them take my horse! They can kill me before I'll let them take my horse!"

Eudora pushed at the gate, which the fellow held laughing at her vehemence. She ran along the fence, defiant of his gun, threw a long leg to the top and scrambled over, heedless of her mother's sharp call to come back,

but landed in the grasp of another man who ran up as she struck the ground.

"I'll shake you out of your britches, you little hellion, if you try any more breaks like that!" he said. He thrust her back into the corral, his companion opening the gate.

Simpson had lived long enough in the proper sort of company for such an education, to know when it was time for a man without a gun to rush one that had. That hogeyed man at the gate was aching for him to make a jump; that was not the time.

Satisfied there was nobody lurking in the house who might take a shot at them as they rode away, the leader and the man whom he had sent to explore the interior joined the other two at the corral. Their horses stood by, heads down, jaded and dejected, for they had been ridden hard since Simpson's trail had been struck at dawn. Simpson looked for them to demand fresh horses, which they probably would have done if there had been any in sight. But from their eagerness to take the thoroughbred he reasoned they were not far from a refuge among friends.

With a parting caution to the three penned in the corral to stay where they were, the bandits mounted, the long fellow swinging up on Eudora's horse with a malicious grin. They started off, the spare horse running free with them, slamming back a jagged round of shots to give edge to their commands.

But while the long man's leg was in the air swinging over the saddle Eudora was off on a skulking run along the side fence of the corral, making for the long shed-

like building in the rear, which Simpson knew to be the bunk-house of the ranch's old cattle days. He caught the motive of her move in a breath: she was going after a gun. Stooping, running swiftly, he was off after her, the parting shots of the robbers from the gate rattling the planks above his head.

Simpson heard them laugh as they rode away, feeling so safe they did not consider it worth while to turn back and stop this dash for arms as they must have known it to be. The girl was through the back gate and into the bunk-house before he could overtake her. She met him at the door with a rifle in her hands. He snatched it and started in a desperate, hopeless run, burning for a shot at them, one shot, before they disappeared over the hill beyond the corral.

"Cut through the orchard!" Eudora yelled.

"Through the orchard—through the orchard!" Mrs. Ellison shrieked, her voice breaking high in the vengeful passion that had mastered her cold self-control at last.

CHAPTER VII

MORE THAN ONE SHOT

The audacious rogues were in no hurry to get off, doubtless because they did not care to urge their winded horses away from no apparent danger when they might need all that was in them in case they should meet up with a true posse later on. Taking things as they appeared around the Ellison place there was little chance of anybody pursuing them in time to make trouble. There wasn't a horse around the place except the one they had taken, and nobody there that seemed very formidable.

The man who had used his dukes so effectively in the encounter with Eddie Kane seemed to go into a daze with the prod of gun in the tank. A fist man was not a gun man, as a usual thing. They rode off laughing loudly, well satisfied that they had nothing to fear from him. The little wildcat in boots and overalls had supplied them a pleasant diversion.

Their horses sank to the fetlocks in the road outside the Ellison gate, for it was bottom land, the rain had soaked it deep. The lucky retrievers of Sid Coburn's fortune, of which he stood slim chance of ever smelling a dollar again, rode boisterously toward the south, happy in their good luck, allowing their horses to take their own gait as the orchard trees cut them from view of the house and the discomfited three left penned in the corral. That was the easiest turn of fortune ever made in their adventurous

career. Good times were ahead of them; the border of the Nation was less than forty-five miles away.

They did not know that a man, whose naturally swift feet were urged on by the double desire to strike a vengeful blow and retrieve his toppled honor at one stroke, was cutting through the weed-grown forest of orchard trees with a high-powered repeating rifle in his hand. They probably would have welcomed the prospect of a little excitement and fun if they had known.

Simpson was careless whether they saw or heard him as he broke through the tangle of horseweeds and morning-glory vines still wet with rain. He angled to cut the road at the farther corner of the orchard, beyond which he could see where it topped the remembered rise. He could hear them, loud-mouthed in their feeling of security, happy over the easy way their ruse had worked. Their horses' feet were noisy in the mud as they trotted heavily on.

When Simpson broke through the wilderness of overgrown orchard the raiders were riding up the foot of the long slope, the top of which he had seen as he scrambled through branches and weeds. He was hot with blue-blazing wrath, which was based not so much on the outrage he had suffered as the affront and obscene familiarity of the scoundrels toward the girl in pants—as his disordered senses still designated her. He had been obliged to stand by and take it, humiliated by his impotency, ramming up against a gun every time he stiffened a muscle to interfere. Dying wouldn't have done either the girl or himself any good. It was one of those times in a fellow's life when he had to clinch his teeth and swallow.

Now there they rode, secure in their rascality, the bright sun glistening on the little puddles in the black road. Three hundred yards, he estimated it, picking the tall man on the stolen horse and letting drive. Too far; he overshot his mark. The raiders jumped and scattered at the crack of his gun, wheeled and began pitching lead in his direction. He stood in plain view beside the wire fence bordered with a growth of sunflowers and tall weeds; their shots came whining over his head, spattering among the orchard leaves.

They had pulled up, surprise in their attitude, which gave place quickly to contempt when they recognized him. Now they came riding back, pitching a rattling fire, yelping derisively. Once more, with steady hand, steady eye, Simpson picked the tall man and fired.

It was a true shot: the rascal weaved a moment, and slumped rather foolishly off into the muddy road. The horse Frank, free of his unwelcome rider, cut a streak for his home gate, two of the thieves, seeing their trickily won treasure galloping away, tight after him as they could urge their horses, banging away at him trying to kill or cripple him before he made the gate. Simpson crowded through the hedge of tall weeds nearer the fence, pumping away to cover the loyal animal's retreat, and there was the sound of battle in that quiet homestead such as had not echoed there in many a year.

Simpson pumped several quick shots between that streak of bay horse and the two rascals who were trying to kill him to get the handbag, and whatever unlucky stuff it contained, from the saddle. He did not try to hit anybody, having accomplished the greater end of his de-

sign; only to keep them back, to frustrate them, and make their shooting wild.

He was pretty well doing this when his gun went dry. He pumped and pumped, thinking it might have jammed, but there wasn't a kick out of it. The last cartridge was gone, and he had run off without asking that girl in pants for a handful to carry him over such an emergency. He was backing off to get under cover, for Frank was almost opposite him, the two pursuers hot behind, but a good distance behind, for Frank was fresh after his little rest and grooming, and he was heading home.

It was all off now, Simpson thought, wondering what chance he had to make it to the house, reload and get into the game before those fellows closed in on the horse at the corral, where he would run, shoot him, strip him of the stuff behind the saddle, and go. As he backed away from the fence, keeping under cover of the weeds, Frank dashed by, and somebody poked Simpson in the back with something that felt like a gun.

Simpson jumped, his hair as stiff as wire, something cold crawling over him, thinking one of them had got behind him, as such foolishly impossible things will flash into a man's thoughts when something jolts him off balance that way. It was a gun: Eudora Ellison was handing it to him, her eyes big and luminous, her hand pressed to her panting breast.

A long-barreled pistol with a rough rubber grip. Simpson grabbed it as a drowning man would have caught a float flung to him in the moment of his extremity. The two men who were chasing Frank turned and flung mud higher than the orchard trees at the first shot.

The man who had remained near their fallen leader was off his horse. He signaled to his comrades as they galloped back toward him; one of them caught the spare horse and took it back, while the other wheeled and faced Simpson to cover their operations. Simpson stopped shooting, not caring to do any further damage since Frank had made it safely through the gate.

They were loading the fallen man on the riderless horse. From the way they handled him Simpson judged he was through. They slung him across the saddle as they would have thrown the carcass of a calf, lashing him on with a rope. Simpson allowed them to depart without a shot to quicken them when they started away driving the horse with its limber burden ahead. In a few moments they were out of sight beyond the hill.

Simpson turned, meeting the girl face to face. She had picked up the rifle and had been cramming cartridges into its magazine. Now she stopped, seeing there was no further call for arms. Her eyes were still bright with the fire of combat, and she was breathing with a jerky little sound of hysteria as if about to cry.

"It will be all right, I fancy," Simpson said, in the fatuous way of one speaking when nothing that can be said will quite come up to the emergency.

"You saved my horse!" she said, the quaver of unexpressed gratitude in her tone. "I never could have got here in time."

"It will be quite all right, I am sure," he said, but not very convincingly, for he was far from sure whether it would be so.

"They didn't want you at all—they wanted that little

satchel and my horse. No sheriff ever deputized *that* gang to hunt anybody!"

"They're a set of bullying scoundrels," he said, this time with conviction, there being no reservation whatever in his opinion on that score. "I saw them in Drumwell last night."

Mrs. Ellison came up breathlessly, her composure greatly disturbed.

"Thank mercy! you're not hurt!" she said, vastly relieved to see Simpson on his feet. "They're gone—they're gone!"

"Yes, mother, they're gone," the girl said assuringly, gazing hard down the road, perhaps thinking of the limp burden across the saddle. "We've got Mr. Simpson to thank for saving Frank—I never could have done it—I never could!"

"We do thank you, Mr. Simpson—I can't tell you how much."

"You're under no obligation of thanks to me, madam. I brought the trouble with me."

"I couldn't see you—I couldn't see a thing through these trees and weeds—while all that shootin' was going on, my heart was in my mouth! When Frank came back I knew you'd got one of them, the thievin' scoundrels!"

"It was the one that took Frank," Eudora said, still gazing in that fixed stare of what emotion Simpson was not schooled enough in the subtleties of the human mind to read.

"He deserved it! If I ever saw murder, and worse than murder, in a man's face I saw it in his. I don't often trem-

ble, Mr. Simpson, but I shook to think what would happen if that man killed you and came back!"

"Never mind, mother; they'll never come back."

Eudora drew a long breath as she turned from gazing down the road; a flush of color came into her face, and she gave Tom Simpson such an open look of gratitude and admiration that embarrassment almost choked him.

Far from a hero in his own eyes Tom Simpson stood that moment. He had made a most distressing muddle of it all around, he thought, taking the wrong horse and getting himself hunted as a thief. For Coburn must have gone yelping around pretty loud over his loss to set the whole community, honest men and thieves alike, on his trail. And only the thieves had found it, apparently. It would have paid the stupid ass off properly if he had lost his money, taking it for granted that the bag contained money, carrying it around in that loose fashion.

"I'll go and unsaddle your horse again, miss," he proposed, thinking of the brown handbag in the grain sack behind the saddle, and the other packages, including the box of candy, thrown around on the porch.

They returned to the house, Mrs. Ellison turning many an uneasy look behind to see if the thieves had rallied and were coming back.

"I'm going to have this orchard cleared out and trimmed, so I can see down the road," she said.

Better as it was for a flanking movement such as he had carried out that morning, Simpson thought, but profoundly hopeful it might never be used as covert for anybody on such a mission again, himself last of all. He

gathered up Sid Coburn's scattered possessions and returned them to the sack.

Mrs. Ellison was frankly curious about the contents of the brown bag. It must be money, she said, or those rapscallions wouldn't have been so hot after it and nothing else. Not unlikely. Some cattlemen were as simple as children over money, packing it around as if nobody ever had been robbed in that country, when robbery had been the principal industry for a long time, and was pretty well followed yet. Ellison had kept as much as twenty thousand dollars in the house at times, making her so uneasy that it would have been a relief, she declared, if somebody had come and stolen it.

Simpson was not so much concerned over the contents of the bag. He was pretty well satisfied the thieves had not taken anything out of it, as it still was weighty and appeared to be fairly well filled. He did not take so much as a peep into it. He balanced the sack by putting the little bag in one end, the box of candy in the other, rolled it all up in the slicker as Coburn had done, and lashed it to the cantle rings.

He said he'd like to borrow a horse, if they felt they could trust him, to take the stuff on over to Coburn's ranch. He said nothing about the awkward fix he expected to find himself in there when it came to explaining what had become of the horse he had ridden away from Drumwell. Coburn might take it reasonably, and he might be mean. It would have to wait the issue, and no use worrying over it in advance.

If Coburn had any gratitude in him he'd gladly let the return of the other stuff, granting that it had any

value, offset the loss of the horse. At any rate, it was Coburn's business to come around and make his talk to that girl. And she was pretty certain not to be very far away from a gun for a good while to come.

Mrs. Ellison said he could have a horse, and welcome, although she advised against starting to Coburn's while those rascals were in the neighborhood. Eudora had little to say. She appeared to have become self-conscious and ill at ease, keeping in the background, although she offered to drive up the horses for Simpson to take his pick of them.

To this he would not agree, insisting on going on the errand himself. He'd find them in the fenced pasture, Mrs. Ellison said, indicating the direction, which in a general way was back of the barn. They were very likely to be over by the river among the trees.

But she would feel safer, Mrs. Ellison said, if he would stay around the house a while to see if that gang was coming back. Maybe that long-hungry wolf-eyed man was only nipped, and not badly hurt, for it took a lot to kill one of his kind. If so he was sure to rest up a little and return. While she and Eudora might do pretty well in a pinch, being forewarned and forearmed this time, a woman was not equal to a man in a fight. She seemed to come in so much better, so much more in her proper place, after the fighting was over and the hurts of it to be relieved. She sighed, as with many memories, when she spoke of that.

Simpson said she placed an estimate on his valor far in excess of his assets, yet he felt pleased at the confidence, as any man is gratified by the respect and reliance of en-

tirely competent people. He consented to wait around a while.

Eudora slipped away into the house while they were talking; Simpson went presently to the gate to take a survey of things. The road was empty; the broad landscape did not reveal a living soul. Ellison's ranch was miles from any other habitation, although homesteaders were edging up along its borders. Its own extent was so vast as to hold them in a manner isolated.

An alluring spread of land, thought Simpson; a land of fertility and rich agricultural promise. How much more profitable to turn it over to the plowman instead of the cowboy, whose contributions to society were so evanescent and insecure. What romance there was in it, lying there with its fecund breast to the sky, waiting the furrow and the sower. It was a land that seemed to offer the fulfillment of the heart's desire.

Just so, said he; when a man's desire was to leave off his roaming way of aimless seeking and make a home with elm trees beside it and broad chimneys at its low-gabled ends. He was not greatly concerned over the man who had fallen before his gun in the muddy road. No doubt the fellow was dead, which was just as well. He was not the kind that coroners' inquests were concerned with in the cattle country.

Confounded ugly fellow he was, as Mrs. Ellison had said, and a cunning rogue, as well. Think of him making that virtuous pretense of being a sheriff's man, and convicting himself for a rascal at once by taking the plunder and allowing the supposed thief to go to the

devil if he liked. Quite a joke; damned funny, for a fact, when a man looked at it that way.

Eudora came out to take a squint down the road, ostensibly; more than likely with the first and greater purpose of displaying herself in her proper garb, which she had assumed while Simpson stood speculating at the gate over many things. It was refreshing to behold the transformation, for no woman is made to look well, even the homeliest and roughest of them, in man's unlovely dress.

She had put on a checked something, very becoming to her, perhaps gingham, maybe something else. Tom Simpson, although from Manchester, was not learned in fabrics, being a tanner's son. Whatever it was it suited her admirably, and gave her a girlish grace which the baggy trousers, boots and all, had suggested, rather than revealed. She gave Simpson a broad, questioning, but altogether timid grin, as if she had come out on probation and stood doubtful of his approval.

"Good!" said he. "*Very-very* good."

He admired her frankly, a smile in his eyes, but his lips as hard-set as if they never had been broken in to bend. She was a comely brown lass, taller by a hand, it appeared, for her girlish dress, which was daringly short for that conventional age, reaching only to the tops of her buttoned shoes.

"When I work around picking up bones a dress is in the way," she explained.

"Just so," said he, full absolution for her masquerade in his warm friendly tone.

Her excitement over the recovery of her horse had

subsided. She was nervous now, and apprehensive of reprisal.

"I think they'll come back," she said, her anxious watch upon the road resumed. "That man must have been—he must have been pretty badly hurt, don't you think?"

Tom Simpson had loaded his pipe. He had it clamped in his teeth now with an expression of deep determination rather than anticipation of enjoyment, his metal match-case in his hand. He nodded, lighting a match on the end of the box with a quick little dig.

"Very likely"—puffing hard to get the damp tobacco started, a cloud of smoke enlarging around his head—"very-very likely."

There was a sort of detached indifference in his words, as if he spoke of something he had witnessed but had no direct concern in, a passing incident of his day. The girl looked at him strangely, a volume of unsatisfied curiosity in her wondering dark eyes.

"There are a lot of bad men over in the Nation," she said. "I think that gang came from down there."

"I'm not acquainted with the lairs of such gentry in this part of the country, Miss Ellison, but I dare say you're right. This is a beautiful home-setting you have here; there's a feeling of comfort in the atmosphere I've seldom found in western ranches—they're generally so raw, you know, so confounded bare. They take everything out of tins in Wyoming, even onions, if you will believe me, Miss Ellison."

He looked at her so seriously, so steadily, that Eudora was obliged to laugh in spite of the gloom that had suc-

ceeded the exultation of victory. It was as if he had laid a serious indictment against the habits of Wyoming ranchers before a high court of appeal.

"I never heard of canned onions," she admitted, "but nearly everything else is canned in this country. Mother never could stand the stuff. That's why we've got the only orchard—and we had the only garden before the homesteaders came—anywhere in this part of the country. But we're degenerating into farmers, Mr. Simpson; we're not regular cowmen now. We haven't got a head of stock left over from the big winter kill three years ago. We're out of the game."

"It looks more like a farmstead than a cow-ranch," he said, but with undisguised approval. "This looks like excellent wheat land to me. Why don't you plow up this valley and seed it?"

"Some of the homesteaders are trying it out," she said, plainly not greatly interested in the experiment, "but the old-timers say they'll fail. What do you suppose they'll do with that man if he's—if—if a doctor can't do him any good?"

"Um-m?" Simpson grunted it with surprised inflection, pipestem clenched tightly in his teeth, as if some extraneous subject had been interposed, the meaning of it not clear. "Oh, that chap. Put him in a wash somewhere and kick the banks in on him, I fancy. Convenient way to bury a fellow. I've known—at least I've heard it said they do it right along in places."

Simpson smoked along calmly, a humorous glimmer in his far-seeing gray eyes, as though he might be such a hardened rascal that death by violence, even dealt by

his own hand, offered only a slight diversion, not sufficient, indeed, to provoke a laugh. Eudora Ellison looked at him again with unfathomable astonishment in her not altogether unsophisticated eyes. She had heard many tales of violent deeds, she had known men who had taken the lives of others in more or less fair combat as such things were considered in the ethics of the range, but she never had imagined a man who could turn from shooting even a thief and put it out of his mind as easily as this strange Englishman.

She wondered if he had killed so many men that he had grown hardened to it, like the town marshal of Dodge City, who had been known to rise in the middle of his dinner to remove one or more discordant members of his wild society, and return to his steak with appetite unshaken. It was said he was a mild-spoken man, such as this one, with a humane and kindly smile.

Certainly the man who had fallen before Simpson's gun—or rather her gun in Simpson's hands—had stolen her horse, insulted her and her mother and treated the stranger with a contempt that only blood would atone. She was not sorry for the thief, but in cooler mind now she regretted the necessity that had forced this mild-mannered stranger to such hard measure.

If it had been one of the cowboys of the range her concern would have been slight. They were of the type who could slay and sheathe their guns with a laugh. They were crude unlettered men, schooled in the hard usages of frontier life, their sensibilities so embryonic or so atrophied from disuse as to be proof against remorse. Not so this thin-visaged stranger who bore the stamp of refine-

ment in his serious face. It would seem that killing a man, even under the pressure of necessity, with every legal and moral justification, should oppress him somberly.

She admired him for his courage, his aggression, and she was thankful beyond words for his defense of her rights along with his own, but she was mystified, she was troubled, she was even not a little saddened, to see him pass it off with such apparent lightness, that glimmer of a smile in his shrewd, wise eyes.

Mrs. Ellison joined them at the gate, where the shadow of an elm tree fell across the uncut lawn. She was still much disturbed by the expectation of some veneful stroke by the routed thieves, being of the opinion, as her daughter, that they had come from the Nation, where all manner of refugees from the law skulked among the hills. It was their custom to raid banks and steal horses along the Kansas border. She feared her place would be especially plagued by their depredations now, but thank goodness they hadn't much to lose, even if the rascals drove off everything.

There was not much for Simpson to say in the way of assurance. She knew the country, and the kind of men who rode in it, and while she was concerned for the future she was not afraid. She suggested that Eudora saddle Frank when he had rested a while, and drive up the horses, as she would know just about where to look for them in the pasture, which embraced several hundred acres. Simpson agreed to this after some protest. Eudora said she would drive such animals as they possessed up to the corral, and he could take his pick of them to carry him on his way to Sid Coburn's ranch.

CHAPTER VIII

COWMAN GENEROSITY

Simpson reached the Coburn ranch about sundown, where he was greeted by a sudden irruption of tow-headed children who wheeled and surged back into the house to announce him with the cry:

“Mother, mother! here’s a man!”

They made such a noisy demonstration over it, they were so excitedly jubilant, one might have thought some long expectation of their mother, or some family prophecy, had been fulfilled by the coming of a man. Mrs. Coburn came to the door winding an alarm clock, a slow, cautious curiosity evident in her face. She returned an indifferent greeting to Simpson’s polite salute, and stood looking the visitor over with the bold boorishness of one who saw the shadows of few strange men at her door.

She was a large-boned young woman, tall and ordinary, her light hair frowsy, her face not overly clean. She spoke with a nasal drawl. Apparently a slow, small-thinking creature whose interest in life did not extend beyond her door, and was not very lively even within its confines. She told Simpson her husband had not come home yet, and asked him bluntly who he was and what he wanted.

Simpson’s news that he had left Drumwell with her husband and become separated from him on the road

pricked her to considerable show of interest. Her languid eyes opened wide; signs of trouble appeared on her shallow forehead.

“Well, he ain’t come,” she said, with a twang of vindictive meanness. “I guess he’s foolin’ along somewhere on the road. You said he give you a job?”

Simpson explained again the condition on which he had hooked up with Coburn’s outfit on the train. He thought it best to leave all other explanations to Coburn, saying nothing at all about the fight or the trouble he unwittingly had run himself into by taking the wrong horse.

No doubt Coburn was tearing around over the country looking for him, Simpson thought, contemptuous of the cowman’s wild belief that he had been robbed. How would he take it when he came home and found his handbag and everything else in the sack? That remained to be seen. Mrs. Coburn said if he wanted to wait around until her husband came he could stay “back there,” vaguely indicating the region behind the house.

From experience Simpson knew about what he would find. The men’s quarters were neither better nor worse than he had expected. The bunk-house was in keeping with the rest of the place, which was bare, trodden, run-down and slovenly. Coburn was a cattleman, first and last; not a home-maker in any sense. His house was a low, gloomy sod affair, little more than a hut, with a lean-to of vertical planks slammed hit-or-miss up against one end. A smoking stovepipe sticking through the roof of this apartment identified it as the kitchen. Where that woman and her five children kept themselves when they

were not eating, Simpson wondered as he unsaddled his borrowed horse before the bunk-house door.

This bunk-house was a small log pen with a roof over it. The floor was original earth; the door, hung on leather hinges, had torn loose at the bottom. It swung crankily out of plumb, half blocking the entrance. There were bunks along the walls for ten or twelve men, their hay mattresses thrown around untidily. But it was no worse than many a cowman's home that Tom Simpson had seen during his years in the west, and little below his expectations of Coburn.

Simpson rummaged around till he found hay in a shed, put his horse in a corral, of which there were several, threw Coburn's saddle with its supposedly precious roll into a bunk, propped the crazy door out of the way with a board and sat down to have a smoke. There had been quite a violent smell of something burning on the stove as he talked with Mrs. Coburn at the front door, mingling with the unmistakable savor of fried ham. Supper was either getting or got. Taking the faces of the children as the foundation for a guess, Simpson guessed no. They were uniformly dirty all over. There would have been some high lights around their mouths if they had been fed.

He was sitting in the bunk-house door, twilight creeping around him, speculating on whether Mrs. Coburn would invite him to supper or expected him to apply, when the largest of the children, a boy of about seven, a swaggering, freckled, slit-eyed little replica of the cowboy type, came shooting out of the kitchen door, heading for the visitor. He pulled up short a few rods away, where he

stood with hands in the pockets of his long, barrel-legged overalls, legs spraddled, impertinent and challenging.

“Say, kid; you got anything to eat?” he inquired.

“Not a smell,” Simpson replied.

“Well, mother said you’d better come on in and eat what’s left, then,” the kid announced.

It was an ungracious invitation, but a welcome one. Simpson sat at a corner of the table in the kitchen where his supper had been assembled out of the leavings, as the boy had frankly said. There was no indignity intended, no affront of inferiority implied. Mrs. Coburn would have treated her husband in exactly the same indifferent way.

There were beans and biscuits, and potatoes in the jackets—which had boiled dry, accounting for the smell of burning rags—with fried ham and coffee. There was a yellow bowl of preserves, made especially for railroaders and cowmen out of apple cores, coal tar and gelatin, ringed around by a rim of flies. The boy who had carried the dubious invitation pushed it along the oilcloth-covered table out of the stranger’s reach, and stood pursing his mouth and drawing his brows belligerently as if inviting remarks on the hospitality of that house. Mrs. Coburn had disappeared. Simpson could hear her moving around in the other part of the house, and wondered whether she was morose and resentful of his intrusion, or merely dumb.

The children stood around looking at the stranger in their kitchen, every mother’s son of them—they all appeared to be boys—upright on his own proper legs, although the smallest could not have been two years old. Nature had equipped them well for their environment.

Simpson wondered if they hadn't struck the ground running and kept it up ever since. They didn't say a word; Simpson made no effort to engage them in talk, knowing the breed very well. They stood eyeing him like wild creatures ready to pitch into him at the first unfriendly movement, as untidy and mean-looking mess of brats as ever came his way.

Simpson returned to the bunk-house when he had finished supper and, there being nothing else to engage him, picked out the cleanest-smelling bunk and went to bed. He was pretty thoroughly beaten out by last night's cold ride and to-day's experiences. It was unlikely his adventures would pursue him to that place, he thought, although he tied the cinch of Coburn's saddle, the roll still behind it, around the pole that formed the foundation of his bunk, and thrust the big black-handled revolver which Mrs. Ellison had pressed him to take, under the end of his hay-stuffed pillow.

The smell of ham was in the air when he woke, and the sun was shining in at the open door. He gave his horse more hay, that being the only animal provender to be found, or expected to be found, around Coburn's shiftless sheds, made his ablutions in the trough and was looking hungrily toward the house when Coburn drove up in a muddy buggy, accompanied by a youngster who had come to take the rig back to the livery stable at Drumwell.

Coburn got out of the buggy slowly, letting himself down cautiously, keeping his eyes on Simpson with a dumbfounded, astonished expression on his face that went farther than anything he could have said. Simpson real-

ized at once that the cowman felt himself sold, and in a ridiculous situation.

The children came racing out of the house, swooping down on the buggy, stopping as abruptly as a flock of blackbirds a little way off, where they stood silently expectant. Mrs. Coburn appeared in the kitchen door, wiping a dish, a little more towsted than she had looked the evening before. She said nothing. Coburn did not greet her, but he put out his hand towards his tow-headed flock in a sort of benedictory motion of recognition, then advanced on Simpson with suspicious caution, evidently hardly crediting his own eyes. Simpson was drying his hands on a big red handkerchief in front of the bunk-house door.

"When did *you* git here?" Coburn asked.

He was looking Simpson up and down and through and through, stern displeasure displacing his astonishment, a surly challenge in his voice.

"Last evening," Simpson replied. "It was an unfortunate mixup—I blundered around all night."

"Where's my saddle?"

"Inside."

Coburn made a break for it, unfastened it from the bunk with nervous haste and came carrying it out into the sun. He threw it down and stood looking at the bundle in the slicker behind it.

"That's been opened! them ain't my knots," he said.

He whirled on Simpson with a look that charged conversion of property and larceny by night at the very mildest interpretation. The young man in the buggy drove a

little nearer to get in on everything. Simpson went on drying his hands.

"No, they're not your knots," he replied calmly; "they're mine. A bunch of men claiming to be a sheriff's posse overhauled me yesterday morning. They said they'd been sent to recover the property I'd stolen from you, which was the first news I had that you thought I'd jumped with your stuff. They got hold of your handbag and I had a little brush with them before I got it back. I don't believe they took anything, but you'll find it jumbled up a bit."

Coburn had stooped over the saddle and was cutting the bundle loose while Simpson made his unhurried explanation.

"Who in the hell was they?" he asked, looking up sharply.

"The four gentlemen who put over the joke on your man Wallace in the saloon."

"Like hell you'd ever git it back from them fellers!" Coburn scoffed. "You're slick, all right, but you ain't slick enough to put a yarn like that over on me. If you've hid that out thinkin' you'll go back and——"

Coburn had the sack open; eagerness to come at its contents cut off his ignoble innuendoes. He dumped the stuff on the ground, grabbed the brown bag, took a hurried squint into it and turned threateningly to Simpson, who was standing by filling his pipe.

"Don't make a break to leave this place till I check up on this," he warned.

Coburn poled off to the house, his tribe at his heels, the rest of the sack's contents scattered about as they had

fallen. The young man in the buggy put his foot out on the little iron step, his face a lively reflection of completely baffled understanding. He looked at Coburn's retreating figure, screwing around slowly then to stare at Simpson. He didn't have enough sense left in one place to make up a word.

What would that remarkable ass of a cowman say when he learned he was out a horse? Simpson wondered. Coburn had not seen the animal Mrs. Ellison had supplied him on his word that he would return it as soon as possible. There *was* money in that fool bag; Simpson had a glimpse of it when the cowman tore it open and thrust his hand into it, turning the bundles of banknotes to make sure no substitution had been effected. If he had it in him to be so meanly suspicious when his money was in his hands, he doubtless was small enough to kick up a rumpus over the horse.

Working for a man like that was out of the question, even though Coburn would want him after that experience, which was not likely. Simpson dismissed the possibility of a job on that ranch then and there. He went in and got the belt and holster of his borrowed gun from under the bunk where he had slept. When he came out the livery driver was unharnessing the weary team.

"Hell! That damn gripsack was *full* of money!" the young man said.

"Was it?" said Simpson, unmoved and unconcerned.

"It sure was! I seen it when he was rammin' his hand down in it. Sa-a-y man!"

The young fellow looked at Simpson as he made that

explosive utterance of astonishment, as if to say it was beyond him to understand why a man with that much cash in hand didn't keep right on going. Which would have been in accord with the ethics of Drumwell, in which the stripling had been thoroughly schooled.

"He's in there countin' it—got it spread all over the table—him and the old woman. I bet you he's got fifty thousand dollars in that pile!"

"Lucky dog," said Simpson. "Did you see a cowboy named Wallace, who works for this outfit, over at Drumwell?"

"Yeah, him and the rest of the gang come in with the boss last night. Stayed over to rest their horses—comin' on out to-day. That was a hell of a good joke they pulled on that tin-horn detective, pinnin' his damn badge to his damn ear."

"Um-m-m," a noncommittal grunt. "Did one of Coburn's men named Waco Johnson come in?"

"Waco? Yeah, I know Waco. He come in last night. Say! You're the feller that beat up Eddie Kane, ain't you?"

"So, Waco arrived?"

"Well, I tell you, kid, you'd better be hittin' the high places out of this damn country! Eddie Kane's got a double-handed gunman standin' around waitin' for you to show your snoot in Drumwell."

"Well, well," said Simpson, apparently about as much interested in the news as he would have been in the most remote gossip of the town.

Coburn was coming out, his money-counting quickly

disposed of, his weather eye on the horse that was taking its deliberate breakfast in the corral beside the bunk-house. Simpson turned to him questioningly.

“Estimatin’ by bundles, it’s all there, lucky for you, pardner,” Coburn announced. “What in the hell did you do with that horse of mine?”

“I gave him his head when I lost you, and he carried me home. But it turned out that he knew the road to the Ellison ranch better than here.”

“If you’re hintin’ I stole that horse——”

Simpson lifted a warning hand.

“That’s a matter you’ll have to discuss with Miss Eudora Ellison. She laid claim to the horse as stolen property, and held it. She loaned me that one to bring your possessions on to you, and as our business seems to be concluded, I’ll be on my way back.”

“You don’t take that horse out of that krel, pardner, till you fetch me back my own!”

Coburn laid it down forcefully, red and raging, shaking a fist at Simpson, his humor not sweetened any by the loud whoop of laughter that burst from the livery stable driver when he heard about the horse carrying its rider to the wrong place.

That laugh was the first in a roar of merriment that would roll over the range at his expense, Coburn knew, for it was a joke such as a cowman would appreciate above all others. The man whom he had raised the hue and cry against as a thief had turned out honest as far as the money was involved, but the horse he had ridden had laid a charge of thievery at the cowman’s own door.

It was a joke that Sid Coburn would not hear the end of for many a hilarious day.

"You can't steal no horse of mine and git away with it!" Coburn blustered foolishly, put to it hard to save his own face before that ribald witness from the seat of scoffing Drumwell, the debauched.

Simpson stepped quickly up to the cowman when he made that fighting remark, so close his eyelashes almost brushed his face.

"When you talk that way, talk low!" he said.

Coburn dropped his hand to his gun, white to the gills. He felt iron in his ribs before he had snaked the gun an inch. Simpson relieved him of it with deftness that told of considerable practice at that art.

"Throw a saddle on that horse, and be damn quick about it!" Simpson ordered, his words so cold and hard that the threat behind them struck even the driver, sending a little crinkle of chill along his backbone.

Coburn wisely realized that the place for words had passed and he had been too careless with them while he had his chance. He headed for one of the sheds, Simpson tight at his heels taking no risk of a gun that might be hanging around. The cowman reached in from the door and grabbed a saddle and blanket at random, it appeared, and quickly completed his enforced job.

Simpson broke the gun he had taken from Coburn, throwing out the charge, swung into the saddle, looked hard at the ungenerous cowman, and said:

"I'll not promise to return this saddle, Coburn, but you'll find it at the Ellison ranch when you come after your horse."

With that Simpson gave the horse rein and started on his way at a gallop, which he checked momentarily as he passed Coburn's door to throw the empty revolver at the threshold, as if he unburdened himself of his contempt for a being of such poor and despicable heart.

CHAPTER IX

PURELY PERSONAL

There was nothing unique to Tom Simpson in filling that very popular rôle of a man without a job. He frequently had played in the great drama of life as one of the supernumeraries in the same capacity before. He carried his part easily as he rode on toward the Ellison ranch to deliver the borrowed horse and gun. There was something new and diverting, however, in the experience of meeting such a supreme ass as Sid Coburn. How such a man could run at large, carrying on even the primitive business of grazing cattle, without somebody backing him up and taking everything away from him, passed all understanding.

Simpson wondered if the fellow would have the gall to come to Eudora Ellison with a demand for the return of the horse. He concluded it was altogether probable. No doubt Coburn had bought the animal from the man who stole it, without troubling over title in the case. Very likely he never had heard of Eudora's loss, or had not heeded it, a thing quite natural in a country where reports of stolen horses must have been as thick as flies.

It would be interesting to see how far he'd get with a demand on the girl for her valuable pet. Probably to the front gate in double-quick, with a flock of bullets cooing around his ears. Simpson stole a little grin from himself, and looked around apprehensively as he committed the

indiscretion, as if he feared somebody had caught him at it and would bring it up against him in due time.

While he was not troubled over his own situation to any worrisome extent, he could not forbear speculating on the future, or wonder where he was to take up the lost reins of his somewhat erratic destiny and begin driving a straight course again. If the livery driver had it right, there was trouble waiting for him at Drumwell. Certainly there was nothing else, the business possibilities of the town for a man out of a job being next to nothing at all.

The town marshal would have a grudge against him as well as that crab of a man who carried his head on his shoulder, as if it were another man's head that he had picked up on the road and was bringing home. Drumwell was a good enough place to avoid.

He considered Wellington, where he might resume his original intention of adventuring into the Panhandle, the trunk railroad line running through that place; and of Wichita, famed throughout the southwest as a cattlemen's centre. He had only a few dollars, a very few dollars. And there was no way for a man without a horse to travel except by rail. He might be obliged to return to Drumwell, it appeared as if he would be forced to do so, to resume his indefinite way.

At Drumwell he might get a ride on a stock train as far as Wellington or Wichita. He plotted a definite course, ending satisfactorily at either place. That would be the program: Wellington or Wichita. So much decided, he left it there.

They accepted his return at the Ellison ranch as a

matter of course. Tom would have been deeply affronted if they had taken it otherwise, and he would have been greatly surprised. It was only a little past noon when he arrived and, as he had left Coburn's inhospitable house without breakfast, the cordial invitation to dinner was doubly welcome.

Yet it was hardly an invitation, for Mrs. Ellison was calling him Tom as naturally and easily as if she had known him all his life. It was more like the pleasurable bustling around setting out things for one of the family who had arrived a little late. The two women sat at table with him, although they had finished their meal before he arrived, carrying out that comfortable feeling of family reunion after adventures afar upon the road.

They inquired of his reception at Coburn's, neither shocked nor surprised, apparently, to learn that it had been a little cold. Simpson made it a humorous recital, stressing far more the defiant strategy of the son and hope of the Coburn house in removing the bowl of preserves beyond the hungry stranger's reach than Coburn's surprise at finding him there. He passed over entirely the incident which had led up to the gun-pulling, only saying that Coburn was wrathful over the horse. He might be expected to appear with a demand for it, he was so hot over the shame the horse had brought on him in going to the wrong home.

In reply to Mrs. Ellison's inquiry on his future plans, Tom admitted they were not so fixed as to admit no revision, and at present they were laid out only as far as Wichita at the uttermost. He might pick up a job with some outfit down in the Nation if he went to Drumwell

and stayed around a while, she said, but going to town would subject him to the danger of running into the surviving members of the gang that had raided them. Which, Tom admitted with no apparent concern, was true.

Mrs. Ellison regretted that misfortune had reduced them to such straits that they could no longer offer anybody work, although there was enough of it needed around the place, in all conscience. Some of the neighbors would be driving to Drumwell in a few days, very likely; as for herself and Eudora, they seldom made the trip. It took two days, and they hadn't much to go for, although Eudora was planning big things in the bone trade, which would keep her on the road all the time if her project developed as she hoped.

Simpson proposed to work around the place, putting things to rights, until somebody came along with a conveyance bound for town. Mrs. Ellison agreed to the proposal eagerly, suggesting a scythe among the undergrowth in the orchard.

So it came around that Tom Simpson found himself hitched to an Irishman's razor among the tall horseweeds in the orchard that afternoon. It was a blue October day; the ground was sown with apples ripe and fragrant, apples fermenting and cidery and squashy under foot, apples enough to have supplied the entire population of that township. There was not even a hog on the Ellison place to profit by a little of the waste.

It was pleasant in the orchard, although mowing thick-stemmed weeds which stood higher than his head was a new experience for Tom. There was no sound of human activity in the neighborhood, although Mrs. Ellison said

homesteaders were settling around them rapidly and there would be no more range left in a little while. A condition greatly to be desired, Tom thought. The nobler purpose of that land would be served by the plowman rather than the cowman. How much better a man felt swinging a scythe in a quiet, fruit-scented orchard than riding the long watches on the range! How much more a man!

That night as he sat in the comfortable kitchen after supper, feeling very much at home in the company of the two women who had accepted him on his face with such generous and open trust, Tom got to wondering if he didn't owe it to their hospitality to tell them something of himself. They must think it strange of him to go roving around with not so much as a change of clothing when the poorest cowboy on the drift had his roll behind the saddle. A polite consideration, unusual delicacy for people in their position, had restrained their curiosity on the turn of affairs which had led to his leaving his last stopping-place without so much as an extra shirt.

They did not know whether he was a fugitive from justice or misfortune. He did not want to appear mysterious, but he had the inherent reluctance of his nation in making a public display of private difficulties. And now Mrs. Ellison was regarding him with motherly tenderness as he smoked his pipe, the filling supplied by Eudora from a large tin somebody had left on the kitchen shelf. Rather indifferent filling at that, but his own pouch was empty, and any man will agree that poor tobacco is far ahead of no tobacco in such a distressing contingency.

"Haven't you got any relatives at all in this country, Tom?" Mrs. Ellison asked.

She was darning a large, comfortable sock, he wondered for whom, a little gourd of the kind called cymblin pushed into the broken toe. She scarcely looked up from her careful work when she spoke.

"Not a soul," he replied, so readily and cheerfully as to give the impression that he preferred relatives afar to relatives close at hand any day. "Oh well, I have a distant uncle in Kansas City—one of those chaps who takes charge of your detachable property under certain conditions, you know. His name is Blitz."

"Oh, you get out!"

Mrs. Ellison rebuked his apparent facetiousness, not quite understanding the relationship. But Eudora understood all about that kind of uncle. She grinned, not very mirthfully, for she knew that uncommon hard luck must have pushed Tom to Mr. Blitz's door.

"He means a pawnbroker, mother—a place where you leave your watch for ten dollars till you can rake up the money to redeem it."

"Bless my soul!" said Mrs. Ellison, genuinely startled and shocked. She stopped darning to look at him with astonished severity. "I hope you haven't been gamblin'?"

"Mother!" Eudora chided, but gently, the reflection of an ungrinned grin in her eyes. For she had a notion that it must have been that way, knowing men somewhat better than her mother, a state of sophistication not uncommon in any age.

"Just so," Tom admitted, nodding gravely, his eyes as straight ahead as his pipestem pointed.

"Well, I'm glad you're honest enough to admit it, anyhow," Mrs. Ellison said. "What kind of a game did you lose on? They're all crooked, they tell me."

"A kind of a game of checkers," Tom replied, his eyes still fixed straight ahead on nothing but the kitchen wall that anybody but himself could see. What he saw was another thing.

"One of the biggest fool, triffin' games of all," Mrs. Ellison commented with the decisiveness of authority. "I'm surprised at you, Tom Simpson!"

"The game is played," said Tom, not turning from his concentrated staring for even one wink, "on small oblongs of land called city lots. A fellow puts his money down on them, expecting to make a quick move that will bring him out winner—then he goes to see his uncle, Blitz."

"I heard about that real estate boom in Kansas City," Mrs. Ellison said, nodding, fully enlightened now. "My sister in Lexington wrote to me about it—*her* husband's been dabblin' around in it expectin' to make a fortune."

"There's a large hole in the bottom of it now," Tom said.

"I suppose that Blitz man's got everything you own—you gambled down to the last dollar you could rake and scrape, I reckon, like a man *will* do."

"No," said Tom, looking at her with a lively light in his eyes, "my trunk and all my gay, as well as somber, apparel is being retained by a dear humanitarian for certain arrears in room rent. I hope to be able to recover it from her, but——"

"*Her?* Do you mean to tell me there's any woman that onery in the state of Missouri?"

"I think it's a question of security, rather than morals," Tom said.

"And you startin' to go away out to the Panhandle without even a change of shirts to your back!"

"Oh, mother!" said Eudora softly, a bit shocked, or making a good pretense of being, at any rate, by these personal references.

Mrs. Ellison was flushed with resentment against the hard-fisted lady in Kansas City, whose conduct in holding the trunk she took as a reflection on the world-famed hospitality of Missourians. She doubtless felt very matriarchal, although she was not more than half as old as she imagined herself to be, having nothing of the look of grandmother about her as she flicked her quick needle in and out mending the hole in the big yarn sock. Only that her years of isolation had been long, and the world of Missouri and her young days seemed very far away.

"Well, I'll tell you what you'll do, Tom Simpson," she said, laying it down with determination not to be gain-said, "you'll stay right here on this place till you can send for that trunk. I'm not goin' to have any man wanderin' around over the country without even as much as an extra handkerchief to blow his nose on."

She paused in her work to give him a defiant look, as if daring him to set up his desires and decisions against her own.

"You are *very-very* kind," Tom Simpson said, his voice gentle and low.

Eudora, busy with the after-supper work around the big, home-feeling room, came to the table where her mother sat across from Tom. She was shrouded in a checked apron, her short, curly black hair—it fell about midway of her rather long slender neck—pushed back from her forehead and held by a curved comb. There was eagerness in her eyes, a color of excitement in her bright handsome face.

“I’ve been wondering, mother,” she said, dividing a look between her parent and guest, “if we couldn’t get Mr. Simpson to go in with us on the bone business? I could pick them up and haul them here, and T— Mr. Simpson, could do the long hauling to town.”

“That’s what’s he’s going to do,” Mrs. Ellison replied calmly. “I had it all decided on when I spoke.”

“There’s no big money in it,” Eudora explained, taking it for granted that Tom had been drafted and wouldn’t refuse to serve, “but it will beat a cowboy job. All that worries me is that gang of horsethieves. They’ll lay for you—either in Drumwell or along the road.”

“I’m going to take it up with Sheriff Treadwell,” Mrs. Ellison announced in her final way. “He’s paid to rid the country of that kind of people, even if we never did call on him when we had men of our own to keep them in their proper places. If he can’t do it, or won’t do it, I’ll know the reason why.”

“I rather think they can be managed,” Tom said quietly.

“You’ll help us, then, will you, Tom? You’ll go in with us?” Eudora fairly sparkled with eagerness as she

put the double question, which all amounted to the same thing.

“You’re too generous in taking up a stray chap this way, Mrs. Ellison, Miss Eudora.”

Tom rose formally as he spoke, laying his pipe aside, his face as serious as if millions were hanging on the deal. And in relation to his financial status at that hour, it was a very important piece of business for Tom Simpson, indeed. A dollar looked as big to him that night as the hind wheel of a wagon.

“Then it’s yours for bones,” Eudora said, reaching her hand across the table to seal the compact as man to man.

“And for *the* bones,” said Tom, squeezing her hand a little more ardently than a plain business transaction justified, beyond a doubt.

CHAPTER X

OF AN EMINENT MAN

Sheriff Treadwell came around next day while Tom was greasing the wagons and making ready to go into the business of transporting bones. The sheriff had taken his own time about making a start to investigate Coburn's appeal for help in recovering his money, and had been stimulated to push his investigations that far only by the vague report of a fight at the Ellison ranch. A homesteader had heard the shooting and seen the defeated party pass by carrying a man across a saddle. He had told a neighbor, who had passed the news along until it finally reached the sheriff.

The sheriff was a small solemn man of clerical appearance. He arrived in a buckboard drawn by two horses, more in the state of a judge than a sheriff, no arms buckled on him, his badge of office carefully concealed under his short double-breasted black coat. He wore a narrow-brimmed derby hat and shoes with large black buttons, and he was altogether a trim and spick, metropolitan appearing man, about as far removed from the general type of Kansas cow-county sheriff as well could be imagined. He had a sharp and wide-awake look about him which was sufficient evidence to Tom Simpson that if he didn't break a hamestring in his efforts to catch the thieves who plagued the borders of his jurisdiction it was for very good reasons of his own.

Mrs. Ellison recounted the incidents attending Simpson's arrival at her home, growing almost epical in her praise of his conduct in recovering their property and his own. The sheriff did not laugh when Tom explained the mixup in Drumwell that had led to his riding off on Coburn's horse with the cowman's money tied on the saddle, but an appreciation of the situation glimmered in his quick blue eyes when he heard how the horse had returned to the pastures of his colthood days. He asked to see the horse. Eudora led the animal out of the barn.

Yes, he remembered the horse perfectly and could identify him anywhere. Coburn's brand didn't cut any ice, beyond the proof of dishonest intention on his part. He must have known it was a stolen horse, even if he never had seen the posters advertising its loss. If he ever had the gall to come there laying claim to the horse, take a shot at him. That was the only answer to make to such a demand: take a shot at him.

The sheriff didn't appear at all surprised to learn that Simpson had delivered the money to its owner. He had more interest in the description of the men who had followed Tom to the ranch under the pretense of being a legal posse. He nodded as if fully enlightened when Tom described the long-legged leader.

"Wade Harrison," he said.

Mrs. Ellison's face grew white when the sheriff pronounced the name. She made a little gasping sound, her ready tongue momentarily incapable under the stress of her consternation. Eudora was scarcely less shocked by the revelation. She stared breathlessly at the sheriff, as

if he had spoken the most surprising and shocking words that had ever reached her ears.

"That man!" Mrs. Ellison said, looking from one to the other in fearful amazement. "I might have known, I might have known!"

The sheriff nodded again, his broad mouth shut so close it made a line across his face.

"No doubt about it," he said. "He was quite an eminent bank robber," he explained, seeing the question in Simpson's eyes. "He'd held up several trains, and robbed a government paymaster or two, and killed more men than he had fingers and toes, I guess. He had his hang-out down in the hills along the Salt Fork in the Nation. We all knew that. But nobody ever tracked him to it. If he did he never come back. Ye-es, he was quite an eminent man."

Simpson did not appear to be greatly impressed. He had a wagon jack under a hind axle, and had been smearing the thimble with grease when the sheriff arrived. He resumed smoothing the grease with a wooden paddle after a little "Um-m-m," which seemed adequately to express his full appreciation of the border character's importance.

Sheriff Treadwell seemed somewhat affronted at the apparent indifference or plain dumbness of this stranger. He turned a sharp, frowning look on Simpson, who had picked up the lynch-pin of the old-time prairie freight wagon and was scraping the caked grease off with his paddle.

"You may not be able to throw in another lucky shot like that, kid, next time you meet that bunch," the sheriff

said. "If you ain't got no special business around this part of the country my tip to you'd be to hit the grit."

"Mr. Simpson's going in with me on the bone business," Eudora said, somewhat high in her manner, resenting the sheriff's imputation of luck rather than marksmanship and valor in the recent encounter with the border's eminent outlaw.

"It'd pay you to keep a gun hangin' around handy, anyhow, pardner," the sheriff hinted, a hard edge on the words that meant a great deal more than he really said.

"Oh, very well," Simpson replied, with what seemed light, almost lofty, indifference.

"That's a bad outfit down around Drumwell," the sheriff continued reading his lecture; "they'll hang around and gang a man they've got it in for when he's least expectin' it. I've been keepin' hands off, lettin' 'em work the froth off like a Dutchman does his wine, but I'll have to clean up on 'em one of these days. The trouble is if a man started in on 'em he wouldn't know who to take and who to leave."

The sheriff inquired whether Simpson was certain Wade Harrison was dead when his companions of the road loaded him on his horse and carried him away. Eudora was quick to answer for him.

"Oh, I'm sure he was, Mr. Treadwell. They wouldn't handle a live man that way—slingin' him around like a sack of bran."

"You'd better come along with me, Simpson," Sheriff Treadwell said, giving the women a start, but easing their fears before they could protest. "We'll track 'em

a ways and see if we can find where they dumped him. If he was dead they wouldn't carry him far. You'd better bring your gun along."

Simpson preferred a rifle for such scouting expeditions, it appeared, a choice of weapons which met the sheriff's approval and lifted the stranger a notch in his esteem. The sheriff said a buckboard would be somewhat out of order for such business, and requested the loan of a horse. It happened that Simpson had a number of animals in the corral, with the purpose in mind to try some of them out in harness, few on the place having been broken to work. He saddled two likely ones, using the saddle he had borrowed from Coburn for himself.

'As they started down the road in the direction the raiders had gone three days before, the sheriff said they'd make inquiries of the homesteaders in the valley below the Ellison place, meantime keeping an eye on the road to see if they could discover where the gang had turned out of it. If Harrison had been wounded and not killed they would head right on to Drumwell and a doctor. Otherwise they would leave the road to dispose of their burden somewhere.

"If we can find that feller's carcass you're in for a handy little piece of money," he said. "There's twenty-five hundred to three thousand dollars reward out for that man. But we've got to find the corpus delicti; you can't prove a thing without the corpus delicti."

The sheriff was proud of his coroner's Latin, and was evidently innocent of any misapplication of the term in the present case. Although it was not exactly complimentary to Simpson, he knew the sheriff did not mean

to imply that a crime had been committed in the removal of Wade Harrison from the scene. The body of Harrison would be the principal evidence, and that was what the sheriff was driving at.

As they rode that afternoon through the languorous October haze, Sheriff Treadwell told many a story of the outlaw who had fallen before Simpson's gun, in a good many of which a certain "feller" figured in the capacity of peace officer here and there in the famous cow-towns of Kansas. This feller, always nameless, had crossed lines with Harrison in more than one battle, when wounds had been given and taken, and the sheriff made it plain that an undying enmity had grown up between that peace officer and the lanky outlaw, who had carried a charmed piece of money in his pocket that had brought him through these various battles with his life.

But this unnamed feller, this peace officer, who had followed that business as faithfully as his enemy had stuck to his lawless trade, had gradually edged Harrison off the map of Kansas. He had taken refuge in the Nation four or five years ago, married a squaw and made himself solid with the chiefs, who were about as rascally a set of politicians as could be found. From his lair in the Nation Harrison raided the Kansas border, confining his activities of late exclusively to horses. These he found unquestioning market for among his Indian neighbors, and even in Texas when the local demand was slack.

The sheriff spoke slightingly of Drumwell, where Harrison and his gang were welcomed on account of the money they spent. More than once when the feller, pursuing his ancient enemy, was about to close in on Harrison while

at his carousals in Drumwell, the crooks of that town had hidden the scoundrel under their beds and saved his skin.

They were a low breed, the sheriff said; nothing like the old-timers of Abilene, Wichita and McPherson. There was a certain kind of honor among the thieves and gamblers of those once-happy places. Not so in Drumwell. They were a bunch of tin-horn sports and handkerchief gamblers, and the meanest sneak among them was the city marshal, who was Wade Harrison's chief scout.

The little sheriff certainly enlarged mightily in Tom Simpson's regard that sunny afternoon. Not once through that long recital of battles, plots and breathless escapes did he ever identify himself outright as the "feller," or connect himself with any of the moving events by one egotistical upper-case I. The evasion was made with the delicacy of true modesty, not uncommonly the harmonious companion of temperate valor.

The two men left the ranch-house strangers; at dusk they returned to it friends. Each had been given the opportunity to look under the case of the other, at the inner works; each finding there the full-jewelled movement of a man. But they had not discovered the trail of Wade Harrison's band, nor the hiding-place of the notorious scoundrel's body, living or dead. Two homesteaders about three miles from the Ellison ranch had seen them pass, carrying a limp and apparently lifeless man across the saddle. From that point all trace of them was lost.

After the sheriff had driven away on his long journey to the county seat, there was another conference around the big dining-table in the kitchen. Mrs. Ellison was in a

pessimistic mood, oppressed by a fear of revengeful reprisals by the outlaw's followers. She expected them to return, burn the buildings, drive off every hoof of livestock on the place and take bloody revenge for the defeat they had suffered there.

She did not reveal these fears emotionally, but the cloud of apprehension made her words seem almost prophetic. Under the shadow of this overhanging dread everything looked dark, even the proposed venture on the business of collecting bones.

"It seemed to me, as I thought it all over this afternoon, that you children just as well expect to make your fortune buyin' eggs as sellin' bones," she said.

"We don't expect to make a fortune, mother," Eudora set her right gently. "Only to lay the foundation of it." This she tacked on brightly, smiling across at Tom Simpson, who nodded, and made a little stair-step building movement with his hand, as if to illustrate how their fortune would grow from the small beginning of bones.

"Just so," he said heartily. "There are plenty of historical precedents for fortunes founded on bones. Very auspicious beginning, I should say."

"You can laugh about it, you two young ones," Mrs. Ellison said, shaking her head sadly, "but I've seen more fortunes turn to bones on this range than ever started out of them."

"But things have changed, mother," Eudora argued. "We're down to bones, nothing but bones, and when you can market your misfortune, I say hop to it."

"Yes, we've got a hundred and fifty thousand dollars layin' out there on the range represented by bones," Mrs.

Ellison sighed. "They're scattered all the way from here to the Cimarron, and you two couldn't find enough of them to pay back one percent on what that herd of living cattle represented."

"We're not going to confine ourselves to the Block E brand when it comes to bones, mother," Eudora said with her big, boyish grin. "All bones look alike to us."

"Let these poor, good-for-nothing homesteaders have 'em," Mrs. Ellison counseled, with a flash of the old range enmity against farmers. "Bless your innocent hearts, you two couldn't make a hundred dollars between now and Christmas, picking up bones and haulin' them down to Drumwell at five dollars a ton."

"We'll get more than that," Eudora declared. "Tom knows a man in Kansas City who buys them; we're going to sell them direct."

"A hide man," Tom nodded. "I got to know him through the affinity of the craft."

"I guess you mean the smell, Tom," Mrs. Ellison said, smiling in spite of the clouds when she remembered the tan-yard of her youth. "Even if you got twice that much you'd be a long time gettin' rich. It's a good two-days' haul from here to Drumwell, and you can't take more than a jag over these roads. Besides, it will be plain murder for us to let Tom go down to that nest of thieves, with old Wade Harrison's gang layin' for him. I'll not be guilty of it; I'm not going to let him go."

The two young ones knew she had come to the core of her objection with that. Both of them had thought of that menace to their undertaking, but both had minimized it, in the confident way of youth with what seems

insuperable obstacles to the old. For youth is the fortune-builder; earth's singing pioneer.

"There'll be no difficulty in that quarter," Tom assured her with cheerful face. "That sheriff is a very competent little man; he'll be keeping the road clear."

"Yes, any time you look to the sheriff, or anybody else, to clear the road for you!"

Mrs. Ellison discounted the implication of protection, knowing it was as far from Simpson's thoughts as her own.

In spite of her high opinion of his valor and sufficiency, Mrs. Ellison said she would feel like an accomplice in case anything happened to him while engaged in their purely selfish business. For Tom was not stopping there to enter into any such onery traffic as selling bones on his own account, she knew, but out of his generous desire to give two lone women a hand.

To this Tom made denial with a show of injury. His motives were entirely selfish, he declared; and as far as being a mere accessory to the bone business, he was going to be the prime mover. He was going to assume entire responsibility for it, and the sole management, from that moment, so that nobody could feel answerable for him. If there were risks on the road, they would be his risks; or rows, they would be his affairs, let them end as they might.

Eudora heard him with glowing cheeks and admiration in her eyes, which was not dimly reflected in her mother's face. Mrs. Ellison shook her head and sighed, making a poor pretense of yielding against her judgment, proud to have a man around the place again who could

put his foot down and stand on it where he planted it.

“You’ll have your way, Tom Simpson,” she said, shaking her head more in proud approval than distant censure of his determination.

Fear seemed to be a weak and unfounded thing in the force of this young stranger’s masterful way, and if Mrs. Ellison’s heart was quickened by the hope that her fortune might, indeed, rise again from its bones, it was not the only heart that was going fast, and leaping hurdles of time and trouble, beside the big table in the Block E ranch-house that October night.

CHAPTER XI

LOOKING FOR A SADDLE

There was plenty to do in a preliminary way making ready for the big business of carrying the Block E bones, and the bones of the unknown unfortunates mingled with them, to market. Simpson was at it early next morning, trying out a team which he had selected from the most likely looking horses in the ranch pasture.

One of these animals bore harness marks, but the other's shoulders were smooth and uncalloused. Simpson, like most saddle-broke men, was not so much of a charioteer. He put on a lively show with that team. The horse that had worn harness appeared either to have forgotten about it or to hold an indignant recollection. It stood passively enough until Simpson got the tugs hooked up, when it took a notion to demonstrate to its companion how a free-minded horse ought to assert himself in the retention of his independent state.

Although not as practiced behind a horse as on top of one, Simpson had determination, courage, strength, a steady, calculative eye and a quick hand. He missed most of the obstacles in the barnyard and vicinity which might have been a bit harsh in collision with a big wagon, although he tore up several posts and wound considerable barbed wire around the hubs.

He had an appreciative pair of spectators, who saw nothing but the comic side of the adventure as long as

Tom kept the grunting, bucking, side-swiping team clear of the picket fence and the house. But when the fractious rascals swerved out of hand and took a rod of the fence, the wagon almost grazing the porch, Mrs. Ellison concluded it was time to interfere.

"Take 'em out of here!" she ordered peremptorily, with more authority than reason, shaking her apron at the team to shoo it off.

Simpson was riding limber-legged in the swaying wagon, keeping his feet admirably over fallen fence-posts and horned skulls which had tumbled down from Eudora's mound. He guided the team in a more or less definite circuit of the large space between barn, corral, house and front fence, but he couldn't seem to hit the gate leading out into the road and the wide-open places where a high-minded horse might go till he hit the horizon in his protest against servitude beside a wagon tongue.

Tom was going around that limited enclosure so fast, his attention was so closely set on the work in hand, that he did not notice the arrival of a rider who had pulled up his horse and sat watching the lively proceedings with interest. This man had come up the road from the south, leading two horses, one of which carried his pack. He appeared to be a leisurely going man, in no haste to get wherever he was headed for, slouching limber-backed and restful, one hand on his saddle-horn, as he halted to watch the show.

Whether it was because the leader in that horse rebellion spied these strangers of his own species, or whether he took it into his head to go out where he might

dump his oppressor into some prairie wash, only a horse psychologist would be qualified to tell. Certainly not Tom Simpson, who was altogether unprepared for the straight-away dash the team made for the gate. He did the best he could to center the wagon in that gateway, which was a broad one as gateways go, but perilously narrow in Simpson's eyes that moment of fast-flying things.

The near hind hub caught the gatepost, which was a very competent post, and deeply set. It stood almost as firmly as the original oak from which it was hewn, and the wrench of the sudden stop sent Simpson flying over the high dashboard. He came down in the road with more celerity than grace, landing within touch of the rebel who had asserted himself in one burst of defiance and now appeared quite satisfied to let matters hang on the gatepost, a wise enough conclusion, seeing that he was hopelessly stalled.

Mrs. Ellison and Eudora came running. The wagon was slewed across the gate, blocking both their passage and their view of Simpson in his embarrassment. Eudora jumped into the wagon and grabbed the lines, but the stranger on horseback had taken safety measures ahead of her by riding in front of the team.

Simpson got up, feeling somewhat clouded, for it had been a hard flop. He had a notion that his nose was bleeding, which is a common delusion after a lung-collapsing jolt, and that he looked confoundedly silly in the eyes of the women, whom he expected to hear break out in unconfined mirth presently, after the custom of male and female of the species on the range. Then he remembered that these women were different. They would not

laugh at seeing a chap take a spill like that. Eudora was leaning out of the wagon, a hand on the dashboard, alarm in every feature, ready to jump down.

"Are you hurt, Tom?" she inquired anxiously.

"Are you hurt, Tom?" her mother chimed after her, tiptoeing to see him over the high wagon-bed.

"I ought to be," Tom replied in scorn of his bungling. "It's not due to any special amount of brains that I'm not. No, thank you, not a bit."

The women were hearty in their gratitude for his escape from a situation that had presented more perils to the onlookers than the participant, and the man on horseback, of whom Tom had been conscious in a confused way since hitting the ground, looked down with an expression of sympathy. He twisted his head in solemn appreciation of the lucky escape.

"If your hub 'd 'a' been three inches shorter you'd 'a' missed it clean," the stranger said.

This was such a generous, humane, altogether ridiculous way of excusing his wild driving that Simpson felt at once a friendliness for the stranger. He nodded ruefully, pretty much ashamed of himself.

"Are you sure you're not hurt?" Eudora pressed the question. To make sure his denial was not a deceit, she hopped down and felt him over, head and shoulders, that being the way he had struck.

"I ought to be if I can't do any better than that," he said.

Mrs. Ellison talked over the fence, saying she suspected that horse on account of the way he squatted when Tom threw the harness on him, and cautioning

them to watch out, he might take another spell of devilment any minute. The stranger assured her. He was squared off in front of the team, which appeared to be satisfied, no more rebellion in it than a little snorting and shying would relieve.

The stranger said now was the time to take them, while they were hot, and run the livers out of them. They'd remember it, they'd know who was boss from that time forward, but if they were allowed to stand and cool off they'd entertain doubts which would break out in a flareup again. He offered his services, saying he'd had a little experience breaking horses. Tom was not inclined to have the team acknowledge mastery to any hand but his own, more boyishly stubborn than manly reasonable, considering that it was his first attempt and a lesson would be in order.

Eudora endorsed the stranger's proposal strongly, not wanting to see Tom take another spill. She suggested that Tom go along, and it was so arranged. The stranger hooked his bridle reins over the gatepost and took the lines, Tom standing in the wagon beside him to get the fine points, granting the stranger had any to give.

He had them, and plenty. He could have turned that team and wagon on a fifty-cent piece; he could have driven the outfit through a croquet wicket and never scraped a tug. Tom Simpson knew he had met a master of his craft, and was humble in his presence.

The stranger talked all the time while he drove, although he didn't seem to be saying much. He was a tall fellow, almost as tall as Wade Harrison, very bony and flat, wide in the shoulders like a man in an Egyptian

sculpture, and narrow in the waist on the same order of art. He had a large bony nose with a down-curve at the end of it like a horse: his face was long and narrow, his cheeks and chin bluish-black with the stubble of a splendid stand of whiskers which had been mown that morning. He was cleanly dressed in the common cowboy garb, and seemed to be of a happy disposition in spite of the glum look his thinness, and dark, irrepressible stubble gave him.

He drove the team until it was a lather of sweat at every point where tug and backband touched. Then he said he guessed they'd got their dose, but it would be a good thing if they had a load behind them and a good long hill in front. Tom said he was projecting an expedition afield for bones. If the driver thought bones would answer, they could go over to the river where, he had been told, there were plenty. Bones would be admirable, the stranger declared with enthusiasm.

There were more bones along the willow fringe of that little stream than Simpson had allowed his most extravagant fancy to compute. He had supposed a few hundred cattle, at the most, had perished there, and those stretched out over a long thin line. Here lay not hundreds alone, but thousands, of skeletons, some of them still held together by dry integument. There, against the frail barrier of willows and cottonwoods the starving herds had lodged, eaten the willows and other small shrubs to the snow, and died.

The stranger stood in the wagon and looked over the desolate scene, amazement in his face, incredulity in his eyes. The grass was lush there, where no creature had

grazed since the great tragedy; it stood tall among the bones, it grew rank through the ribs that unkind nature had served to the buzzards on the platter of that vast, green plain.

“Well, gee-mo-nee cripes!” the stranger said. “What killed ’em? when did it happen?”

Simpson repeated the story of the great winter kill as it had been told him by Mrs. Ellison.

“Gee-mo-nee! You could ’a’ walked on ’em for miles,” the stranger marvelled. “I’ve been through winter kills in Montany, but I never saw one that took ’em that thick. They’re dead—they’re all dead—ever’ damn one of ’em’s dead!”

It was obviously so, too plainly true to require any such tragically surprised comment as that, Simpson believed. But he hadn’t got the trend of the man’s thought, as his next words revealed.

“They ain’t got a head left alive on the place! That’s why I never run acrost no cows when I struck this neighborhood.”

“You’re right. Ellison saved a few hundred head, lost his life doing it, but his wife and daughter sold them. They’re not in business now.”

“Bones!” said the stranger, turning to look over the wreckage that nature, in its kindlier mood, was laboring now to hide. “Cripes! Look at the bones!”

“There’ll be no trouble getting a load, anyhow,” Tom said, scarcely less astonished than his unknown helper.

“No, nor a few hundred loads, from the looks of ’em. What do you aim to do with them bones?”

Tom explained. The stranger was surprised that anybody would want to buy bones, but said he guessed there was no accounting for tastes. He pitched into the loading with energy, and soon they had the wagon heaped with enough, as the stranger said, to make a considerable number of razor and corn-knife handles. Tom said he didn't suppose many of them would be put to that purpose, considering the time they'd been lying out in the sun and weather. It was a new marvel to the stranger to learn that bones were used to enrich land. He said it was comforting to know that; some good might come of him, after all, at least what was left of him when the buzzards got through, from which Tom gathered that he did not expect to lie down for his final rest under the sod, but on top of it.

"From what you said about the women sellin' off, I reckon you married into the fam'ly since the winter kill?"

"I'm not married into the family," Tom corrected him coldly.

"Oh, you ain't?" said the horse-breaker, turning his head with a sharp, inquiring, interested movement, not in the least taken down by Tom's cool retort.

"Not at all."

"You could do worse," the stranger declared with conviction. "I thought that young lady was your wife. She sounded like a man's wife ort-a sound when she ast you if you was hurt."

"Yes, a man could do worse—a great deal worse," Tom agreed, considerably warmer in his manner.

"Related?"

“Not even distantly. I’m almost a stranger to them; I’ve known them only a short time.”

“I didn’t git a chance to mention it to the ladies, but maybe you can tell me: has there been a feller goin’ under the name of Simpson been along here the last day or two?”

“I never have gone under any other name,” Tom replied stiffly.

“The hell you say!” said the horse-breaker.

He turned his head in that listening, sharp, chicken-like way and looked at Tom with the queerest sort of grin that ever distorted human features. Instead of opening his lips, or spreading his face as a grin usually spreads out the countenance of a man, this horse-breaker’s smile worked the other way. He closed his mouth, half-shut his eyes, pursed his features in a way to gather the main portion of them around his nose, and looked very much as if about to cry. Then, sudden as a explosion, the whole thing changed, his face lit up with amazing animation, he threw his head back and let out a roar of laughter that made the horses jump.

Tom regarded this amazing conduct with stiff neck and high chin. It was the first time in his experience that his commonplace name had evoked such an outburst of mirth. It passed; the fellow’s features gathered again in that lugubrious expression that seemed a certain forecast of tears.

“You’re the feller the horse run off with and carried around that grip-sack full of money all night and didn’t know it. Coburn was a sold man when he got that money back; he was a—sold—man!”

Comment seeming unnecessary, Tom didn't attempt any. He rode along on the load of bones, his seat being a masculine skull with particularly broad forehead, wondering who the fellow could be and what he was about.

"Well, Simpson, I come by to git my saddle," the stranger said, repressing both laughter and tears, coming back to normal state as he spoke.

"What saddle?"

"The one you borried from Sid Coburn with a gun. You don't suppose Sid Coburn'd hand over a saddle of his own under them circumstances if he could lay hands on somebody else's, do you?"

"From the little I know of him I'd say he wouldn't. But how come your saddle? Do you belong to that outfit?"

"No, I'm on the drift. Wel-l-l, I did belong over there, but Sid fired me. I was up in Kansas City with him. I missed the train."

"Oh," said Tom, very much enlightened, his manner almost eager in its sudden change of friendliness. "I rode down in your place, then. You must be Waco Johnson?"

"I'm the rep-tile," Waco admitted, beginning to fix his face in that alarming smile again.

Tom offered his hand, to be met more than half way by Waco Johnson's broad paw, heartily and honestly, as a man without eyes would have known at the first grip.

"I'm glad to know you—I'm *dev'lish* glad to know you," Tom said. "I liked your name the first time I heard it."

Waco shook his head, as if to say it wouldn't do to go too far on names, unstable things that they were.

"You can have it," he said. "It never brought me no luck."

CHAPTER XII

FORTUNE AND SHORT HAIR

That was the way the bone company came to enlarge its membership, even though its capital was not increased to any appreciable degree. Waco Johnson was out of a job, the world before him and nowhere to go. He said he'd like to help—he pronounced it h'ep—around the place a while, breaking in some horses for the work, leaving them to pay him what they thought he was worth. This proposal he made to Simpson while they were unloading the bones.

Tom said an expert horse-breaker was needed around that place more than anybody else but, speaking for the bone company, nobody had any spare cash to hand out for such services, or any other. Well, said Waco, money was no object to him, anyway; somebody always got it away from him before it had time to get warm in his pocket. The more men to haul bones the more money they would make. Take him in on some kind of a split. He'd leave it to them.

Although Tom had elected himself general manager of the bone firm, he demurred about admitting another member on any kind of terms without consulting Eudora and her mother, Eudora especially. He told Waco he'd consider it if he cared to hang around the rest of the day. That place suited him as well, if not better, than any, Waco said. Meanwhile, they'd might as well make it

plain to that team who was boss. Accordingly they went after more bones.

Waco bent his long back to the work as readily as if he already had a large share or stock in the concern. While he worked he sang, not continually, but by unexpected bursts, and this was his unvarying song:

Oh, dhur me, and my dhur too,
If it wasn't for *my* dhur what'd I do?

Certainly, Simpson could not tell him, although he soon wished fervently for somebody to come along who could, and put a rest to Waco's doleful melody. But Waco was a genial cuss, for all his limited repertory, radiating a feeling of cheerfulness and honest fellowship that was a pleasure to share. Tom felt as if he had known him for years instead of hours, for he was transparent as a clean window-pane, a typical cowboy whose home was, indeed, wherever he hung up his hat.

Waco was not particularly young, although of that tenuous dry type that never grows old. About forty, Tom judged, with what history of roving and adventuring in the rough life of herdsman nobody but himself could tell. If he was for a man, he was all for him; if against him, he'd stay that way until one or the other of them lay on his cooling-board.

Tom took up Waco's proposal with Eudora and her mother after the noonday meal, Waco modestly retiring to the barn to look over the material for the further exercise of his art. Mrs. Ellison, who did not see any great future to the bone business, said it was only fair to divide such proceeds as might arise out of it in three, a

share each to the two men, who would do the work, a share between Eudora and herself, who would supply the wagons and teams.

That was too generous, Tom said. Neither he nor Waco had anything to lose, nothing to venture but their time, and the time of an unemployed man was worth no more on the range than elsewhere. Make it fifty-fifty, he proposed, on the condition that Eudora turn all the work over to them and stand clear.

Eudora was indignant over this proposed elimination of herself, although she colored up like an autumn apple when she recalled the garb Tom had seen her in when he first rode up to the gate. She was as good as any man at bones, she declared, and if she didn't keep an eye on them along the river the homesteaders would haul all of them away.

All right, said Tom; that would be her job, then. Ride out and around as often as she liked and keep an eye on the bones, but keep her hands off them. The work was too rough and heavy for a girl.

Mrs. Ellison applauded Tom's apportionment of duties.

"I've always been against her straddlin' around in man's pants," she said. "You know what even them scoundrelly horsethieves thought of you the other morning. If you'd been dressed like a young lady ought to have been dressed, your modesty'd 'a' been spared."

"I don't care what any man thinks of me, horsethief or no horsethief!" Eudora blustered, but the deep red of her cheeks, her averted eyes, all betrayed her in the sight of at least one man whose opinion she valued.

There was a glimmer of mirth in Tom Simpson's know-

ing eyes. He shook his head solemnly, as if deploring the defiance of irresponsible girlhood. Eudora gave him a push, with a little snort of a laugh at his solemn teasing.

"Oh, you shut up!" she said, although Tom had not opened his close-latched and apparently most dignified mouth.

"If you want something to do you can cook for Tom and Waco," Mrs. Ellison told her hot-cheeked, red daughter. "That'll be more becoming to a girl than straddlin' around——"

"Can't you think of any other word, mother?" Eudora asked pettishly. "It's not so very elegant, to say the least."

"It's as elegant as the doin's it describes. You can cook for the boys; that'll be——"

"Well, then, I *will* cook for them."

"Not at all," said Tom, with the voice of high authority. "Delightful as it would be, I can't permit it."

"*You* can't permit it!" Eudora fairly gasped, facing him with genuine rebellion in her eyes. "Well, I like your nerve!"

"Just so," said Tom, inflexibly, calmly. "Pleasant as it is, delightful as it would be, Mr. Johnson and I can't continue living at your expense, madam. That isn't part of the bargain, you know. Mr. Johnson and I will provision ourselves, cook for ourselves, and make our quarters in the bunk-house when not on the road. You are both *very-very* kind."

"You'd just as well let her cook for you, Tom," Mrs. Ellison said persuasively. "She'll have to cook for *some* man, sooner or later."

“‘Sufficient unto the day,’ ” said Tom.

He looked at the flushed, pouting, half angry Eudora, a slow smile breaking up the solemnity of his face. It was like a caress to ease the hurt of necessary chastisement.

“It’ll be some noble cookin’ you’ll do!” Eudora scoffed, but nothing in her way of saying it rough enough to take off any skin. She gave Tom a sidelong, humorous look, her mouth pursed in a little pout that was nothing more than the puckering string around a laugh.

“Noble’s the word,” he said cheerfully.

“I’ll bet you could knock a mule down with one of your biscuits.”

“Strong meat for strong men,” said he.

“But you boys haven’t got any supplies, Tom,” Mrs. Ellison protested.

“I’ll be going to town tomorrow morning, very early, to send a telegram to that gentleman who is to buy our goods,” Tom told her. “I’ll carry out certain food——”

“Food!” Eudora repeated, the humor of the situation further provoked by that unusual word.

“Chuck, perhaps, would be a better word,” Tom amended, making a pretense of bowing gravely to her superior knowledge.

“Much better,” said she.

“I’ll bring out enough chuck to hold us nicely till we make the first trip with the wagons. After that we’ll be in the hunky dory.”

“In the *what?*” Eudora asked, suppressing an outburst with difficulty.

“Just so,” said Tom, with the equanimity of one who knew his buttons.

"But you don't get in a hunky-dory, simple!"

"No?" said Tom, in a manner of challenge to simplicity. "Why not?"

"Well, I don't know what a hunky-dory is, only that it's a—it's a—a state of affairs, not something you get into."

"Wrong, my lady. A dory is a nice little boat, and one gets into a nice little boat, doesn't one?"

"Generally two. But that don't account for the hunky. Nobody ever gets into a hunky, alone or with somebody. I don't know what it is—it don't go alone that way, Tom. You say it hunky-hyphen-dory. It's all one thing, and it's a state of affairs, a pleasant state of affairs, not something you get into for a ride, dunce!"

"I fancy a hunky is something nice and comfortable, anyhow, and that amounts to the same thing. But it's like that other word you objected to, that word straddling, you know. Not so very elegant, when it comes to that."

The women had their laugh at Tom's serious way of humor, which seemed ponderous compared to the sharp quips they were accustomed to. Tom stood by as solemn as a priest, but with that gleam of lively appreciation in his eyes which lit up his sacerdotal countenance like firelight upon a wall. Waco Johnson was standing around the corral gate in the way of a man who waited the verdict of a jury. Tom went out to tell him he had been admitted to the bone company without bond.

Tom was on the road next morning after an early breakfast. He had explained to Waco that retaliatory measures were to be expected from the Wade Harrison gang, and left that worthy gentleman armed and hopeful. Waco was harnessing up a fresh pair of horses, neither

of which ever had felt harness on its back before. From the way he went about it Tom knew there would be no fence knocked down that morning, no wagon hung up on the mighty gatepost. If there ever lived a master of his craft, Waco Johnson was that man. He went about his job so serenely, so cheerfully, and with such sublime confidence, that the raw team was conquered before the belly-band was buckled.

It was well past noon when Tom reached Drumwell, the rifle that he had used with such good effect against Wade Harrison in a scabbard under his leg, the revolver that had supplemented it in the fight strapped on him in regulation style. He had said nothing at the ranch about possible trouble awaiting him in town. He hoped, on his arrival, to pass unnoticed, or at least unrecognized by the marshal or any of those who had seen him in Kane's place on the night of his arrival at the border.

Another row with the marshal at that stage of his business development would be most undesirable. It might even amount to his forced retirement from the enterprise. He believed his chances of escaping notice were good, as he had changed his garb completely. Mrs. Ellison had assembled a cowboy outfit even to boots, which fitted him nicely, out of the accumulation of raiment around the place. He rode into Drumwell a changed man, as far as outward covering went, with chaparejos to his legs, spurs to his heels, a broad-brimmed sombrero that Ellison himself had worn. He carried the costume as one who had a right to all that it signified, which was in every sense true.

That was a lucky day for Tom Simpson to come to Drumwell. There were three cow outfits in town, one of

them loading, the others holding their herds on the range near at hand waiting their turn at the pens, most of the men at liberty to amuse themselves in their most favored way.

There was much activity, much dust, a constant riding through the short street, a constant shifting of men and horses here and there. Tom had carried no feed, there being precious little of anything in that line on the Ellison place but hay. He put the horse in the livery stable for a feed of oats, sent his telegram to the Kansas City hide man and waited around the station for a reply.

Meantime he talked with the station agent about bones. The lumber dealer was the bone buyer in Drumwell, his business being brisk. How would a competitor's bones fare, Tom wanted to know, piled around there near the sidetrack until a carload could be assembled? The agent didn't know; it never had been attempted. He advised selling to the lumber dealer, although railroad property was pretty well respected there, and bones piled on the company's right of way might be perfectly safe. He would undertake to keep an eye on them during the day, but couldn't answer for what might happen at night.

All of which was in line with what Tom had been thinking as he rode to town that morning. He wondered if it wouldn't be just as well to let the whole thing slide, go on his way and forget it. There wouldn't be anything in hauling bones that long distance at five dollars a ton, the lumberman's price. It would require several trips to transport a carload, even with two wagons in train to each of them, as he and Waco had worked out their plan. Here in Drumwell the business did not appear half so promising

of profits as it did at the Ellison ranch, under the influence of Eudora's sparkling enthusiasm, the crop sown by the great winter kill ready for its melancholy harvesting.

It was late in the evening, the sun had gone down red in the dust of trampling herds and horses, when the answer from the hide man came. At once the bone business loomed up with new importance, its possibilities far in excess of Tom's, even Eudora's, most extravagant hopes. The bone market was active as never before; the Kansas City dealer was enthusiastic in this prospect of a new source of supply and quoted a price far in excess of that current in Drumwell. Send all he could get, and as fast as possible, the hide man urged.

This was news to cheer a doubting, despondent man, indeed. Tom stepped high as he made for a restaurant, feeling that he could afford a good supper with such prospects ahead of him. After enfolding a large tough steak, with the canned corn and tomatoes which invariably accompanied it in Drumwell and other towns of its type, Tom made his purchases of supplies out of the joint fund subscribed for that purpose by Waco and himself that morning.

While his outlay was not large, the sack behind the saddle increased the horse's burden considerably. But the animal had been well rested and regaled; it would have set out on an eager canter on the homeward road if Tom had not held it back. Better to be all night on the road and have a fit horse under him at the end, than gain an hour or two in the going. Riding a strange road in an unfamiliar land a man never knew when he'd need all there was in a horse.

He had come and gone without a glimpse of the marshal. If anybody had recognized him it hadn't caused a ripple in the town. He had not gone to Kane's resort, that being the kind of place he did not much frequent out of choice. Whether there were gun-slingers hanging around there to even Eddie Kane's score he did not know. Certainly he did not care greatly as he rode through the clear moonless night.

Tom was thinking and planning very much like any ordinary, healthy young man as he rode. He welcomed this turn of affairs that took him away from cow-camps and the rough adventures of that life. He had followed it for seven years almost without a break, not considering the job as mine guard in Colorado, his last employment before staking his savings on the real estate checkerboard in Kansas City. Like Waco Johnson's name, the pursuit of a cowboy's life never had brought him any luck. It was time, and good time, to make a change.

Perhaps fortune changed, as a man's body is said to change, every seven years. If so, the time was up for a revolution in his affairs. It looked promising. Tom roughly estimated how many cattle had perished along that little river running through the Ellison estate, during the winter kill, basing his calculations on what he had seen and what Mrs. Ellison had told him. He figured how many tons of bones lay waiting to his and Waco Johnson's hands, allowing so much weight to each of the skeletal remains. From the result he believed he and Waco could at least treble the ordinary cowboy wages between then and spring. If things came along well, they might even buy

bones from the homesteaders, enlarging their business to considerable importance.

They'd forget that little squabble in Drumwell very soon, probably had forgotten it already. The farther he rode away from Drumwell that night the more remote the likelihood of that incident being revived to disturb his business activities appeared. He had such a great feeling of elation, of satisfaction, of desire to push ahead with the new enterprise which seemed to offer so much, that his imagination was coursing up and down that long prairie road as if reviewing the past instead of projecting into the future.

There was a home-feeling about that country for him; an invitation in its untried possibilities, it seemed, to match his youth and strength against it and make his place. Queer thing how the turn of a man's life hinged on chance, sometimes. If there never had been that mixup in horses at the livery stable door; if he never had galloped off with Coburn's money, Coburn's bullets—which he had thought were the marshal's, so dev'lish difficult to identify bullets under such conditions—singing about his ears, there never would have been any Eudora Ellison in the scheme, and no bones.

Tom had left home mainly on account of an aversion to hides apart from living creatures that rightfully wore them. Hides had been the foundation of the family fortunes over there; bones were to be the foundation of his own separate and independent fortune here. So there it was; all out of a cow, take it or leave it, as one liked.

Why did Eudora have her hair cut short that way? he wondered, turning from fortune to Eudora as readily

as if one were the concomitant of the other. Had she got cockleburs in it, or had she been sick with a depilating fever? Perhaps neither. Very likely, independent and precedent-setting young lady that she was, she had cut it off because, like trousers and boots, it was easier to get around with when she worked about the place.

One would think that girls on cow-ranches would cut off their hair right along, considering the riding and wild-flying tresses he had seen. But not so: in all his experience with girls of cow-ranches he could recall but one other who wore her hair short like Eudora Ellison. That was black curly hair, also, but the wearer of it was not slim and shapely. Rather squat and thick-ankled, like a squaw. Johnson was her name—strange if she should turn out to be Waco's sister, which was improbable, considering that she had no brother—Fanny Johnson, called Buffalo for reasons unknown. Away up on the muddy North Platte in Wyoming; the dingy, low-banked, thick-running, swirling, roiling, unlovely, melancholy North Platte.

They had gone in for sheep later, the Johnsons. Buffalo was living in a sheep wagon the last time he saw her. He had been following a bunch of stolen cattle, the trail leading to the river, and the end of those beeves as far as he ever knew.

In that way of past mingling with present and future, Tom rode on with his comfortable thoughts, serene, happy. He had a feeling that he was coming into peaceful waters after a rough voyage, his long watches and hard riding at an end. He could see no farther into a wall, to be certain, than the last man to ride that road ahead of him, or the next one following behind.

CHAPTER XIII

ALARUMS AND EXCURSIONS

Tom wondered why they were up so early at the ranch. It was about half past three when he came in sight of the house, with dawn yet two hours off, but there was light in the kitchen, the movement of somebody evident within. He felt a crinkling of anxiety, a creeping of foreboding. Eudora, he dreaded, had met with an accident. That was the first leap of his thought—to Eudora. The first kindling of his concern was for her, as a man thinks of his money and his precious things when he finds the tracks of vandals at his door.

With the scent of home in his nostrils the horse had gone ahead eagerly the last several miles. Now Tom urged it to greater effort, the sense of something wrong about the place coming out to him on the beam of that lonely light. This early rising could not be on his account, this watch could not be for him. He had not set any time for his return; they hardly would expect him back before the evening of the day just then on the distant verge of dawn.

Mrs. Ellison heard him ride in; she met him at the door with the disturbing news. Wade Harrison's gang had raided the place. They had come looking for him, slipping in so stealthily that old Shep, the shaggy, indolent household dog, had not even barked.

"Where's Eudora?" Tom inquired, his voice small in

the great fear that made his legs feel numb under his weight.

“She’s gone after the doctor and——”

“Doctor for whom?”

“Waco. They shot him. He did the best he could, poor man——”

“Is he badly hurt?”

“In two places: one through the leg, one on the top of his head where they hit him. He didn’t have a chance to more than grab his gun, they sneaked in so still. But they didn’t know it was Waco till after they shot him, and that let him off with his life. They were lookin’ for you.”

“Where is he?”

“In by the stove. He’d bled so much, he was so cold——”

She left him to guess what her fearful conclusions in Waco’s case had been, opening the door softly for him to enter.

Waco was lying unconscious on a canvas cot near the kitchen stove. There were bandages and a bottle on a chair, a strong smell of turpentine in the room, that being the pioneer’s invariable first remedy in the treatment of all kinds of wounds. He looked pretty far gone to Tom, who bent over him and felt for his heart. There was a spark of life in Waco, but it was very low.

They withdrew a little from the wounded man while Mrs. Ellison recounted the story of the vengeful visitation. She was more downcast and sorrowful over Waco’s condition than her own loss, which had been considerable.

The thieves had driven off all the horses which Waco had assembled in the corral, eight or ten head, she was not

certain of the number. At the sound of shooting she and Eudora had thrown on a few garments and run out of the house, expecting the raiders to come looking for them next. She had taken a gun away from Eudora and thrown it in the weeds, fearful of a more wanton retaliation if the scoundrels should suffer any damage, or even resistance from the house.

Eudora had snatched the ax and run to the barn, where she stood on defense of her horse Frank. But they had not gone to the barn, no doubt knowing that Frank was so securely barred and locked in it that he could not have been stolen without tearing out the side of the building.

Mrs. Ellison said she had returned to the kitchen immediately after Eudora ran to the barn, thinking to draw their attention from the girl, in case any of them had seen her flit past, by making a light in the house. After shooting Waco, and cursing loudly when they discovered their mistake, they came storming to the house, inquiring for Simpson. They had not taken her word when told he had gone to Drumwell. They searched the house, hauling the bedding around, trampling and swearing, but had not taken anything so far as she knew. They seemed flighty and nervous, and in a hurry. Wade Harrison was not along, but she recognized at least two of the men who were with him on the first raid.

Tom went to the door. It was still dark, too dark to find the horses in the pasture, if any had been left. He bent over Waco again, wondering how the two women had been able to carry him to the kitchen, not so much on account of his burden as his shocking state.

“He’s not the first shot-up man I’ve helped carry into

this house," Mrs. Ellison said when Tom expressed his admiration for their bravery, "but I hope to heaven he'll be the last."

"When did it happen?" Tom inquired, not remembering whether he had asked the same question before.

"Along about midnight, maybe a little after."

"Has Eudora been gone long?"

"An hour or more."

"She went to Indian Rock, of course?" Tom turned to the door as he spoke, to look anxiously out into the dark.

"It's fifteen miles nearer than Drumwell," Mrs. Ellison said. "I wouldn't let her start till I saw there wasn't anything I could do to bring Waco to, and then I wouldn't let her leave till I was sure them thieves was cleared out and gone. I wanted her to wait till daylight, but she would go."

"Of course she'd go," Tom said gloomily.

"She'll bring Sheriff Treadwell back with her."

"It will be noon before she gets back," Tom speculated. He was standing in the door, more than half in the mind to mount his tired horse and strike out after Eudora, although she had been gone so long there was not the slightest chance of overtaking her.

"Yes, it will be about noon, the best she can do," Mrs. Ellison said.

They spoke in low, restrained tones, as people speak in a house where someone lies dead. And there was that feeling about the place to Tom Simpson of somebody gone, whose absence made him numb. It was a perilous thing Eudora had undertaken, that ride of twenty-five

miles through the night to Indian Rock, the county seat. This was not a railroad town, a village of small consequence aside from its being the seat of county government. The fact that it lay in exactly the opposite direction the raiders were likely to take gave Tom a little assurance. He was thinking of the route the raiders would take when he said:

"Sheriff Treadwell might as well try to catch the wind by the time he can take up their trail."

"Just about," she agreed. "If he'd only pin his badge inside of his vest and forget about it, and go down there in the Nation and clean up that gang!"

Mrs. Ellison spoke with deep feeling in the matter, but still in that subdued voice as if she feared she might disturb the feeble flame of Waco Johnson's life.

"I don't look for him to do it," she said. "The United States marshal down there's jealous of his authority, and he'd be as likely as not to set some of his half-breed Indian deputies on to kill the sheriff, or any other Kansas officer, that went down there after their robber friends. I guess Treadwell's wise enough when he keeps out of there, but it's hard on us folks that pay taxes for protection of the law and don't get it. We had more safety when there wasn't any law south of Wichita. No gang ever came up from the Nation and raided this ranch when our own men were the law, and all the law we needed."

"Just so," said Tom.

He was standing in the door, head up, chin lifted, as straight and stiff as a soldier on parade, peering out as if he saw something that had struck him motionless, not a

clew to his thought or intention in his thin, stern face.

"I must attend to the horse," he said, going out quickly.

Mrs. Ellison followed him to the door, a sudden feeling of dread leaping and falling like a transient flame in her heart, the awakening of old memories, the movement of old fears. She had gone to that threshold before to see determined men ride away on desperate enterprises from which they never returned, their lips closed in hard lines, as Tom Simpson's lips were closed when he peered out at the distant things no other eyes than his could see. She looked after him as he led the horse away, growing dim in the gloom, toward the corral. There was a movement of birds in the orchard trees; the eastern rim of the world was faintly gray with dawn.

Some horses had come up; Tom could see them looming enlarged out of their natural bulk in the thinning dark. Waco's horses he took them to be, a rather long-necked and scrawny breed. He did not know what others had been left by the thieves, although he believed there were no fewer than fifteen or twenty head of the Ellison stock on the place. He unsaddled the horse he had ridden, threw hay into the mangers and opened the gate to the animals outside, then carried his sack of supplies to the bunk-house.

Tom found a little lamp on the deal table, a chair beside it, Waco's boots near by. There was a pencil and piece of paper sack on the table, the paper scribbled over with figures. Waco, too, had been computing speculative profits in bones.

There was evidence of struggle around the bunk where Waco had slept. The blankets were on the floor, the hay-

stuffed pillow kicked under the bunk. Waco's various possessions which he had carried in his roll were hanging on the wall: a slicker, a pair of trousers, a bright necktie and a black coat, an immense razor strop dangling below the garment like a beaver's tail. Waco's gun was not there. A dark blot on the floor near the bunk marked where he had fallen after they shot and clubbed him.

Tom piled the provisions on the table, making a quick selection of certain things, opening a package of this, taking a can of that, putting up rations sufficient for several days of flour, bacon, coffee, and the meagre essentials of life that a man may carry behind his saddle without adding materially to his horse's burden.

He looked around then for Waco's coffee pot and pan, finding them hanging under the slicker. With supplies and simple utensils stowed in the sack, Tom borrowed Waco's slicker to protect it against rain, made a compact bundle of it all, then turned his attention to the three horses he had admitted to the corral.

They were Waco's horses, he knew, from their habit of herding together. They hadn't been around with the others long enough to get acquainted. One of them promised somewhat better than he had hoped, as the broadening day now revealed. It was a young animal, thin, as grass-fed and hard-ridden horses invariably are, but it had the lines of long wind and speed. He saddled it, tied his roll at the cantle, and went scouting around the bunk-house for ammunition.

The rifle and revolver which he had carried to Drumwell were, fortunately, of the same calibre. Eudora had told him they had belonged to her father. There was no

ammunition to be found in the bunk-house. Mrs. Ellison, to whom he was forced to appeal, found one box of fifty cartridges on a shelf in the kitchen, which she gave him, asking no questions. He returned to his horse without explanation, mounted and started on his way.

Mrs. Ellison was at the gate. She took hold of the bridle as he stopped beside her.

"Tom Simpson, where are you going?" she asked, the old dread that had moved again in her heart that tragic morning making her voice sound weary, as if she had come a long distance to meet him and question him at the gate.

"To scout around a little," he replied, trying to make his words come lightly, quickly, to give the impression that it was an expedition of slight importance.

"Don't go," she pleaded, looking up with such beseeching fear in her eyes that drew his hand with impetuous start as if to give her an assuring caress. "What are a few horses for you to put your life up for—you a stranger from another land? Don't you go. Let them have the horses—we can live down the loss, as we've lived down bigger ones."

"Just so," Tom replied abstractedly, his eyes studying the road where the hoofprints of the stolen horses told which way they had gone. "But because you are strong to bear misfortune is no reason why you shouldn't be spared it."

"Wait till Sheriff Treadwell comes, Tom. He'll be here by noon, if not before."

Tom was studying the tracks in the road, which were growing plainer as daylight increased. He read them for

peculiarities which would identify them if the trail were chopped by a crossing herd, leaning over from the saddle, peering intently. Mrs. Ellison let go the bridle, seeing something in his face which told her arguments and pleas would be of no avail. But caution was another thing.

“Don’t cross over into the Nation alone, Tom. Wait down there for Sheriff Treadwell, and do whatever he says.”

“Very well,” Tom replied, but she knew he was only dimly conscious of what she said.

His faculties were concentrated on the tracks, two of them standing out from the others like italics in roman print. He could pick these up beyond a break in the trail, and be certain.

Mrs. Ellison did not make any further suggestions or requests. She saw that he had his marks, and was chafing to go. A glance had told her he was provisioned for a long scout; his manner of leaning and reading the tracks assured her of his experience. But what he expected to do, riding out alone in pursuit of that gang, she did not know. At the best he could only trail them to their headquarters, which no man had ever done and come back for help to wipe them out.

There was no hope in her words when she reached up to shake hands with him.

“Take care of yourself, Tom,” she said, in that fatuous way of cautioning our well-beloved that all of us have been guilty of, when we knew as we spoke the words that it was advice thrown away. For he who rides to war and high adventure leaves his safety in the wild hands of chance.

Simpson took the trail with the determination to re-

cover that stolen property. How it was to be accomplished did not trouble him at the start. What he should do and how he should do it must be determined by exigencies when he overtook the thieves. Mrs. Ellison had not been able to tell him how many men were riding the horsethief trail that night. Only two had come into the house, but she saw at least two or three more driving the stolen horses out.

As he passed the first homesteader's place, about three miles south of the Ellison ranch, Tom was hailed by an excited man who came running to the road to report that his four horses had been stolen. They had cleaned him out, not leaving him the hide nor hair of a horse on the place.

Tom scarcely more than paused to hear the frantic fellow's story. He told the hard-hit homesteader of the raid on Ellison's ranch as the shaggy, lean, wild-eyed man trotted along beside him. The sheriff had been notified; he would be along in due time. With such comfort as he could leave with the poor farmer in that assurance, Tom pushed on in a swinging gallop, following the raiders' trail.

Here the four horses stolen from the farmer had joined the main band; their coming had caused a flurry which was recorded in the ground, dusty now where it had been mud on the day of Tom's arrival. Not far along an old cattle trail cut the main road running north and south. This old trail led up from the southwest; cattle had been driven over it to Wichita and Wellington before the extension of the railroad to the Cherokee line. Here the horsethieves had turned off, heading for their refuge.

Tom had followed more than one trail of that kind in his day; he knew his chances of ever catching sight of a tail in that band of stolen horses was remote. The thieves had fully six hours' start on him; they would push through unsparing of man or beast until they had crossed the border, when they would slow up, perhaps split the herd into small bands to confuse trailers, reassembling them at fixed headquarters.

No matter for their tricks, he would stick to a trail bearing one or the other of those distinguishing hoof-prints until he came to the end of it. Then there very likely would be something else to engage his wits.

A little way down this old cattle trail Tom encountered a man riding a little black mare without saddle or bridle, a noose of the neck-rope around her nose. He was barefooted, bareheaded, dressed in overalls and shirt, a red-bearded stocky man with a red and rolling eye. He looked as if he had tumbled out of bed just as he was to ride wildly at the urge of some oppressing nightmare. He pulled up in the road ahead of Tom, waving his hand to stop him.

Robbed, he said; cleaned out by a band of horse-thieves during the night. He had lost two horses, leaving him only the one he rode, which had been buckeyed last spring and never got over it and wasn't worth a damn. There's where they went with them horses—see the tracks? Right along there, headin' for the Nation, cuss their souls to that place where all good men and true consigned their enemies in that part of Kansas in those immoral days.

Tom paused to tell him his two horses were in good

company as far as horse society went. The homesteader eyed him with curious suspicion when Tom put off his questions concerning his mission abroad so early in the day and so close on the heels of the thieves. He appeared to suspect for a while that Simpson was one of the gang who had been left behind through some evil dallying of his own, and was now riding hard to overtake his fellows of the road.

But he revised his opinion after looking Tom over narrowly, from spurs to sombrero. He saw that he sat his saddle with an air of authority and the light of honest confidence in his eyes. The night dampness had made the brim of the old sombrero stiff; Tom had pressed it back from his forehead, which shape it held, and would hold until sun and wind dried it to its usual floppy state. It gave him a headlong, hard-riding, shoot-up-and-go look that moved the homesteader's admiration.

"By heavens! you're goin' after 'em!" he said. "That's where you're a goin'—you're a goin' after 'em! Yes, and by heavens! if I had a good horse and a gun and a saddle, I'd go with you. I'm an old soldier—I'd go with you. I was with Grant at Appomattox. By heavens! I were there!"

"I don't doubt it," Tom said.

"I'll give you an old soldier's blessin' if you bring them two horses back."

Tom assured the vehement veteran that such a reward was to be valued above money, and he would do his best. He rode on, his contempt of Wade Harrison's horsethieves considerably increased by this news running out to him as he followed their trail, broad as if a troop of cavalry had passed that way.

The gang probably had rounded up everything that could travel, cleaning out the entire settlement, hitting a hard blow in retaliation for the loss of their eminent leader, or the damage he had suffered if he came off with his pestiferous life. The Ellisons could survive it, as they had not been left entirely without legs. But the case of that old soldier, of his lanky flat, starved, work-worn neighbor, was desperate in the extreme.

It was hard enough to fight the tough sod, the grasshoppers, the hot winds, in heroic effort to establish independence and get a living out of the land, off there forty miles from a railroad, a doctor or a store. Add to all that the misery of being stripped by a gang of brutal thieves of the means of travel, of every beast of burden, and it amounted to cutting off their legs in truth.

Tom's own case was little better. He had ridden back to the ranch in a glow of enthusiasm over the business outlook open before him and his partners. Now this band of sneaking night-riders had slammed the door to that prospect in his face. He was riding that morning on a foray for his very existence.

They had come up on that expedition to get him. Failing in that, their vindictive spite had spent itself on the entire neighborhood. They never had raided in that vicinity before, Mrs. Ellison and the sheriff had said. They probably never would have come but for the chase after Sid Coburn's silly old handbag that unlucky night. He had lured them there; he had brought this curse on the community. It was his solemn duty to adjust the wrong, even to the limit of his life.

CHAPTER XIV

ON THE SALT FORK

When night overtook him Tom did not know whether he had crossed the border, there being no mark to indicate where Kansas left off and the Indian Territory began. He was of the opinion that he must have crossed, as the change in the driven herd of horses indicated that the thieves had slowed their gait. For an hour or more, six or seven miles, the trail had shown this slacking up in the flight. Once over the line, where a Kansas officer would look no more formidable than the next man, the thieves' concern was at rest.

Weary from his long ride to Drumwell and back, and this day's chase, Tom made camp when it grew too dark to follow the trail with certainty. It appeared likely the thieves had not split the herd, confident in the security of their refuge. The old cattle trail continued on toward the southwest, approaching the crossing of a stream which he took to be the Salt Fork of the Arkansas, there being no other considerable river near the border. This was still several miles ahead of him; before dark he had seen its wooded course from high ground.

Here at his camping-place the country had changed from treeless prairie to a park-like plain set with crab-apple, red-haw and other small trees, with an elm here and there, dark and tent-like, the thick foliage still green and untouched by frost. The country had the appearance

of timber border; his caution must increase with his danger from that point onward.

Tom withdrew from the trail a safe distance along a little branch, seeking a brush-clump to screen his fire. He found a suitable spot without much seeking, picketed his horse, kindled a fire and prepared a generous supper. He felt he had it coming to him, being his first meal in considerably more than twenty-four hours. He had not felt the need of breakfast before leaving the ranch; Mrs. Ellison had been so disturbed she had not thought of it.

He had brought only one blanket, and that from Waco's bunk, aiming to keep his packet down to the very lowest weight and dimensions. That, the saddle blanket and Waco's slicker, made ample protection for a man whose bed had been the ground many an uncounted night in a land not half so kind as this. In spite of his bone-weariness he broke his sleep to get up and move his picketed horse to give it room to satisfy its appetite.

Morning broke with a threat of rain. An hour's ride beyond his camp Tom came to the river. Here the thieves had stopped for supper and to graze the horses. He judged there were at least five men in the party and, as they had not slept there, he concluded they could not have been a great distance from the end of their journey. At this point they had left the old cattle trail, taking one that followed the course of the river in an easterly direction.

This was a wagon road, an old one; its former course, brush-grown, rutted, could be traced in places where trees had blown down and blocked it, a new one made simply by driving through the brush in the line of least

resistance. It was worm-crooked and muddy from recent rain, no wider than the tread of a wagon, hub-marks and axle-grease on the bushes along the edges.

Here a considerable forest of elm, hackberry, maple, walnut and other deciduous trees common to that latitude, skirted the river, grapevines and greenbrier clambering among them. It was a dank, nettle-grown, brush-choked piece of woods, parts of it impenetrable as a tropical jungle. Here and there came a break, where pawpaw bushes dropped their pale yellow leaves. The ground under them was covered with their insipid fruit, upon which raccoons and opossums had fed, the souring remnants setting up a smell like a brewery.

This way the thieves had gone, sometime the evening past. Simpson followed the muddy road with caution that made his gait slow. He did not care to run headlong into the band, or anybody at all in that stretch of depressing woods, where it was so still and deserted not even a blue-jay hopped from branch to branch ahead of him to herald his passing.

He had not encountered a habitation since early yesterday afternoon. That was the little sod hut of some misanthrope, Simpson thought, who had withdrawn himself as far from the interference of his kind as he could and yet not quite cut the line of communication which the most ardent hermit usually finds indispensable.

Here in the Nation he knew he was riding through the leased lands. He had seen many cattle, spread wide over the beautiful grazing lands, as cattle feed when left to themselves. Sometimes he passed a cow and calf, apparently alone in an expanse of pasture that would have

sustained ten thousand; often a lone grazer, which lifted its head with a start, trotted away and stopped to stare again. But not a man; not a rider galloping over those flattened, grass-topped hills. Which, he thought, was just as well.

Simpson followed this road until noon before coming to the river crossing toward which it had been leading all the way. More than once he had ridden aside into the thick brush on a false alarm of somebody coming, somebody following; twice he had drawn aside at the unmistakable approach of wagons, both coming from the east. One of these was driven by a negro, his Indian wife on the seat beside him, a green-bordered red blanket over her greasy head; the other by a slinking white man who carried two live hogs as passengers. Where he could have got them, where he might be taking them in that empty country, was a thing to speculate upon but not to answer.

After crossing the river the country rose abruptly, the woods thinned out to straggling small trees which in turn blended down to bushes and open prairie. The road continued its easterly course over this grassy plateau, the tracks of the stolen horses still plainly marked in it, although it was hard and dry here, and the animals had spread to the bordering sod.

About two miles beyond the ford, on the bank of a little stream such as is called a spring branch in that country, Simpson came upon a house. The hoofprints which he had been following so hotly told him it was the end of his trail.

There were trees in the dip which made the nook for this homestead, and a line of them following the brook in

its course to the river. The house stood back from the road a matter of three hundred yards, open prairie on all sides of it except the west, where the brook ran through a grove of walnut trees, its little valley broadening as it extended toward the river. Where the stream crossed the road which Simpson had followed to that unexpected, peaceful appearing end, there was quite a strip of timber and brush. Tom rode into that shelter, where he stopped and studied the ranch-house and its surroundings.

He had approached undiscovered, apparently. From his screen of brushwood he could see a dog walking lazily about the yard, and a file of ducks marching down to the stream. There was nobody about; not a sound disturbed the air of desertion that surrounded the place. There was not even a horse in sight, although the tracks of the stolen band, which must have numbered twenty, swerved from the road at the brookside and entered the premises.

A spacious corral near the house, with hay-covered sheds along its farther end, made it plain that animals in considerable number were kept there. Naturally the horses would be grazing at that time of day under a herder's care. They would be returned to the corral at evening.

The house was a two-part structure, built of logs, roofed with clapboards rived from native timber. It was built in the style common to the mountain districts of Arkansas, Missouri and other parts of the south, the kitchen on one end, living quarters on the other, a roofed passage, called a dog-run, between.

Back of the corral there was a larger log building, evi-

dently a barn. There was considerable hay in stacks, and stalks of corn littering the corral, the first evidence of cultivation Simpson had seen since leaving the Kansas homesteads, although there were no fields in sight. It was a shiftless, crude, comfortless place, not even what Simpson had expected of Wade Harrison, wide-famed as he was.

But that was the place; there was no doubt of it. The horses had been driven straight to that corral; their tracks could be followed plainly to the bars. They must have put them right through, with perhaps a few hours' rest and grazing at the place where Simpson had come across their cold fire and coffee grounds. The rascals probably were asleep in the house that minute.

Hogs were feeding on the nuts and pawpaws in the strip of woods where Simpson was concealed. He could hear them mouthing and grunting, and felt apprehensive of a stampede among the wild creatures which might betray his presence. Cautiously he withdrew farther from the road, assured as he proceeded that the wood was not frequented by anything but the livestock of the place and that no habitation was concealed among the trees. Here he might wait undiscovered, rest his horse and himself after the trying ride through the timber, and set himself for the business ahead of him.

Fire being out of the question, he made his midday meal on a can of beans, while his horse browsed, in a little glade where bluegrass grew, with only the bridle removed. Simpson kept within jump of the horse, ready for any emergency.

As he regaled himself on the cold comfort of beans,

Simpson began to be troubled by the doubts which always attend a blind situation. Perhaps the horses were not at that place; maybe they had only been driven there for a feed and a few hours' rest, and were far along the road by this time. There was no good skulking about in the brush waiting for night to confirm this probability. An immediate investigation was the thing in order, unless he was to trifle away his indefinite chance of doing anything at all.

He considered riding up to the house, boldly, putting the notion aside for lack of any plausible excuse or inquiry except the honest one, which it would be foolish and fatal to reveal. If he was to accomplish anything single-handed, far away from any possibility of help, it must be done by stealth and strategy, fortified by such foolhardiness—he would not dignify it as courage, something he would have been the last to admit was his—as he could muster in a pinch. Luck would be a big factor in his program, even to getting out of that country with his life.

He returned to the road, leading the horse, hitched the animal to a sapling where it would be out of sight but near enough to reach if needed in a hurry, pushed through the fringing thicket of hazel bushes, studying the premises again. If he could be certain the horses were at pasture somewhere near, he could proceed to lay some rough sort of plans.

The rain that had been threatening all morning was beginning to fall in a melancholy drizzle. A mistiness was in the air, making distances obscure. It was a poor day for scouting, yet it had its advantages. A man could creep through the bushes, the fallen leaves and twigs damp and

noiseless under foot. Unwise as it was to go very far from his horse, perilous as it might turn out to be to go poking his nose into the mysteries of that place, he decided to risk an investigation up the little stream for a look at that big log stable, or whatever it was, behind the corral.

He darted across the road from fringe to fringe of hazel brush. The rain was making a somnolent soft little patter on the leaves, so comfortable to hear when one is under shelter, no neglected duty to disturb his conscience. Not so comfortable when a man goes bent among the bushes, the drippings from broad hickory and pawpaw leaves spilling down his neck.

Less than half way to the stable the brush ended. Here were walnut trees, slim and tall, and a few bur oaks, thick-boled, broad-spreading, the ground under them trampled by hogs and strewn with the acorn shells from their feasting.

Simpson stopped, hesitating in the edge of the bushes. From where he had advanced he could not see as much as from the road. The same sleepy quietude prevailed around the place. Up the stream a distance he heard the friendly chatter of the ducks. That was all. He determined to risk it. After all, he might be spying on a fairly innocent place, with no more mystery or danger about it than the ordinary homestead. Only the horses had gone in there. What he wanted to know was, had they come out?

He could not believe Wade Harrison had made this place headquarters for his stolen horses when alive, granted that he was dead, or that his successors in the

business would do so now. It probably was the homestead of some Indian of a little more consequence than the general run of them, who was in with the thieves. On reflection it seemed absurd to entertain the thought of finding the stolen horses there. This place was within too easy reach of the Kansas officers and cowmen to offer refuge for a gang of horsethieves.

This revised view of it emboldened Simpson to proceed with his investigation of the place. If he should meet anybody he would say he was looking for the spring, not caring to drink out of the brook which was a succession of hog wallows. For all that he did not proceed carelessly. The trees were thick enough to partly screen his movements from anybody in the house. He cut nimbly from one to the other of the largest, pausing frequently to listen for the dog, or a movement of any kind that would tell he had been discovered.

Nothing happened; all remained as sleepily silent as before. Assured, he went openly to the fence surrounding the stable and looked over. It was a long building, higher than it appeared from the road, built so for storing hay in the loft, its gables of warped sawmill planks. Along the side of the building were several openings about two feet square for pitching out refuse. This lay banked along the logs as it had been thrown out, steaming in the cool moist air.

There were horses inside; Simpson could hear them champing hay and stamping to dislodge the flies, which always are excessively pertinacious in that country during rainy autumn weather, taking their last banquets before the frost knocks them stiff. Since he had come so far, he

would mount the last barrier for a look at the animals.

It was then late afternoon, the day obscure as early evening. Simpson mounted the high rail fence, which was overrun by Virginia creeper, rich autumnal tints enlivening here and there its dark-green leaves. Just in front of him one of the square windows stood open, its wooden shutter fastened back by a leather ear. He stood on the heap of steaming offal along the stable wall and peered within.

The stable, spacious beyond even its outward indication, was gloomy and dark. A row of stalls ran down each side, a wide aisle in the center. No fewer than twenty horses were stabled there, and the one nearest the window through which Simpson peered bore on its left shoulder the Block E brand.

So this was the place; he was looking at the stolen horses, left there by those audacious rascals to eat their hay and recuperate after the hard drive without even a guard. But the thieves must be surrounded by many vigilant friends to carry them the alarm of every suspicious stranger's approach. Simpson marvelled how he had passed through that long stretch of woods without being seen. That he had accomplished it he was certain, otherwise he never could have come in sight of that place unchallenged.

Now he was there, and the question was, what next? Before he could answer that there was the sudden break of running horses toward the front of the place. More horses were arriving, and Simpson found himself in a very likely situation for being caught. He looked around for a place to hide, the nearest thing offering conceal-

ment being a haystack at the corner of the corral, to reach which he would have to climb the fence and run two or three rods across the open.

That was a long chance; the first of the driven horses were entering the corral. Simpson had a glimpse of someone riding after them as he squeezed tight against the wall. To get back meant certain discovery; to go through that hole into the stable presented complications which he might never be resourceful enough to overcome. But it is the common inclination of humanity to grasp the unseen hope rather than face the present disaster. Simpson, being in no particular a superman, elected to risk the hole.

CHAPTER XV

A LEADER FOR THE HERD

There was a pole manger running along the front of the stalls, a feed-box for grain in each horse's compartment, a partition of poles the height of the manger separating stall from stall. Simpson recognized in the occupant of the stall into which he had lowered himself from the window, the horse he had been trying to break to harness on the morning of Waco Johnson's advent. It yanked back on its neck-rope desperately as if it meant to hang itself when he plumped through the hole at its head.

Tom attempted to assure the horse, which didn't appear to have any recollection of him, or at least any friendly remembrance. It eased off on the rope, but stood squatting as if to make a jump for the hole in the wall, its eyes bulging, blowing wild whoofs of alarm through its distended nostrils. Tom felt there never could be any lasting friendship between himself and that animal. He gave it a dig in the floating ribs, jolting a grunt out of it that cut off its frightened blowing, which he could not help believing was all a vindictive pretense. He believed that cuss was better pleased to be stolen than left at home.

While he didn't want to get very far away from that hole, Simpson knew the fool horse would surely betray his presence to anybody who might come into the stable. That fellow driving the horses into the corral might bring

his saddle in, or come rummaging around after something. In addition to the danger of betrayal by the traitorous horse—he gave it another dig with knuckle and thumb at the thought of its treason—it was too light in that stall.

He crouched to see if the shadow of the manger would hide him, discovering that it was possible to slip from stall to stall between the bottom of the sloping manger and the stall divisions. Accordingly, he wormed through into the adjoining stall, where it was darker. The occupant was another Block E horse. It gave him a sidelong look of curiosity and turned indifferently to nosing its hay.

Unfriendly outfit, those Block E horses, Simpson thought; apparently not a particle concerned whether they ever saw the old home place again. But business, not sentiment, was the motive for rescuing stolen horses, as well as being the actuating factor in their thieves' design. Whether those indifferent, hostile animals wanted to be taken home or not, he was there to return them if the desperate contrivance of one man could accomplish it.

It looked like a cloudy venture to Tom Simpson as he stood in the gloom of that big stable running his eye over the horses. How many of them belonged to the Block E, how many to the homesteaders in the neighborhood, he did not know. Those near enough to be seen distinctly were splashed to the withers with mud. They had been on the road, a long road and a heavy one. If there were any more of the Ellison horses among them he could not see the brand.

Simpson waited developments with nerves drawn as

tight as fiddle strings, all set for a fight or a break for the hole in the wall. It was not the time for attempting to cut out the Block E horses and heading them back to Kansas. His daylight business was to locate them, which he had done. Night must bring the solution or the failure of the problem ahead of him, if luck held for him and that horse wrangler didn't come in there, discover him and bring the whole thing to a premature break.

The fellow was banging around at the end of the stable as if hanging his saddle in the shed. There was no talking going on; Simpson concluded that he must be alone. Now the door in the corral end of the stable opened. Simpson dropped back against the manger, to avoid discovery in the sudden flood of light, gun out, all set for something to pop.

"Noahy! Dan! Noahy—Noahy!" the person at the door called. "You lunkheads up there goin' to sleep all day? Git out o' there, I tell you! Noahy, Noahy!"

Simpson, crouching so low he could neither see nor be seen, was more troubled than surprised to discover the horse wrangler to be a woman. It was a rough, jarring, unlovely voice, contemptuous and commanding, but unmistakably a woman's. It would be dev'lish awkward for a chap if she came prowling around and discovered him. Tom Simpson lacked any precedent in his varied experience for the manner of procedure in such a pinch.

She shouted again, repeating her formula except for a slight trimming of profanity, bumping the ladder against the hayloft to increase her awakening summons. Simpson could see the top of the ladder in the dark hole with hay spilling over its edges.

"All right, Jinny," a yawning voice answered. "What time's it gittin' to be?"

"Nearly four," Jinny replied.

"It's a rainin', ain't it?"

"Yes, it's a rainin',"—mockingly imitative of the gaping, stretching question. A laugh above rewarded her mimicry. "I brung the horses up—pile out and git something to eat, you two."

"Al-l-l right, Jinny." another voice drawled.

Jinny banged the door shut and went away. Simpson could hear the two men in the loft talking as they moved about, stamping and swearing over their damp boots, but they were too far away for him to get anything out of their conversation. That it was pleasant to them, and reminiscent of their recent foray, their frequent laughter indicated.

Simpson did some fast thinking while the two horse-thieves were kicking around overhead. It seemed as if the big chance he had hoped for had come. If they were the only men around the place, if he could be sure of that, his business was to pick them off as they came down the ladder, cut the horses loose and light out. If he could be certain they were the only men around the place! It all hung on that. If they were not, starting things prematurely would be a disastrous blunder; if they were——

He crept to the back of the stall, close against the partition, ready to knock them off as they came down from the loft. Let both of them get on the ladder, and then—if he could be certain there were no more men around! There was a jangling of tin pails outside as somebody went by with them on his arm bound for the spring at

the head of the ravine. One of the men in the loft roared a hail.

"That you, Henry?"

"Yea-a, that's me Henry. Come on out o' there, you two bums!"

Henry replied with the cheerful bandiage of a man who had risen thriftily before his mates, and Simpson thought that was rather a humorous bunch to be engaged in such sordid business. Anyway, there was at least another man on the place, and that plan for picking them off the ladder would not do. There were three of them, at least, and that woman, who sounded as if she might be the best man among them, as well as boss of the ranch. The one thing to do was trust to luck, wait till they went to the house to eat, then go back to his horse.

Noah and Dan came down the ladder presently, Simpson scarcely breathing as he watched them, his heart beating low. He already had identified Noah by his name and voice as one of the gang who had followed him to the ranch; now he also recognized the one called Dan as a member of the same distinguished company. While it would not have been exactly the sportsmanly thing to do from cover, Simpson thought, he had no reservations of conscience which held him from putting an end to their activities where they stood. Only policy restrained him. It would not be the wise thing to do.

Simpson was near the center of the stable, thirty or forty feet from where the ladder ran up to the loft. He backed into the stall, crouching under the horse's neck, hoping the two men would not precipitate a crisis by coming down the line to inspect their stolen goods.

"It's beginnin' to rain like hell," said Dan, the two of them standing at the foot of the ladder, looking around the gloomy stable, now quite dusky in the lowering evening.

"Open the door a minute—le's take a look at 'em," Noah directed.

The open door lighted up fairly well the immediate vicinity of the two, even relieving the gloom in the stall where Simpson crouched.

"Purty damn fine bunch of 'em this time," Dan said.

They came slowly down the aisle between the rows of stalls, looking the horses over critically.

"Yeah, but some of them homesteader plugs won't bring more 'n thirty dollars. I thought two of 'em 'd peter out before we got 'em here."

"Them Block E horses 'll fetch sixty to sixty-five—two of 'em down there 'll shave nearer seventy-five apiece," Dan said. "That bay mare and the geldin' next to her—damn his old eyes! he's a wild devil—he's the feller that made all them breaks to turn back. He's the hardest horse to drive I ever drove *in* a bunch of horses."

"I'll cool him; I'll slap a saddle on him after I eat and ride over to the ranch and let the old lady know we're here. We can take the bunch of 'em over in the morning—give 'em time to blow a little. That was a damn hard drive we made, pardner."

"You know it!" said Dan. "This is the cuss that wanted to go back to Kansas."

They came loafing along, stopping at the stall into which Simpson had dropped through the window, next to

the one where he now crouched under the mare's neck. His back was wedged into the slope of the manger, for he was trying to make himself smaller than a medium-size, healthy man can be reduced without some process of desiccation that even the strain of suspense cannot equal.

The men entered the stall, joking on the attachment of the horse for his home state, a quality that Simpson would not have given him credit for if the evidence had not been so direct and disinterested. They ran their hands over the horse, admiring his points, Dan declaring he was good for seventy-five dollars of any man's money. Noah grunted a horse-wise assent. Then they turned their attention to the mare.

Simpson felt his hair crinkle with apprehension. He was gripping his gun as tight as if he had been frozen to it, elbow against his side, all on edge to pump lead if they came prowling into that stall and found him.

"She's a good 'n," Dan said. "I wouldn't mind keepin' them two myself if I could afford it. How old do you take her to be?"

"About five, or goin' on," Noah replied. "I'll take a look at the hollers of her eyes; I can tell you in three months of her age."

Simpson felt a cold prickling run over the skin of his back and up to the edge of his hair. It was like a draft of wind on a sweating skin, vestigial sensation of bristles rising, inheritance of horror, anger and defiance from the arboreal days. He pressed his back against the slanting vertical poles of the manger—the tops were nailed to a horizontal timber, the bottoms to the wall, the manger

being about two feet wide at the top, at the bottom a point—at a desperate disadvantage, in a cramped, mean place for quick work.

Both men were armed, something Simpson had not been certain of before they entered the mare's stall. They went lazily to the animal's head, luckily on the side of her opposite Simpson, Noah taking her by the nose-hold common to horsemen, turning her head for a look at her eye. The mare resented the treatment; she began to squirm and back away. Noah, cursing her lights and livers, ducked under her neck to get the light on her face and, head below the top of the manger, dived into Tom Simpson crouching in the shadow.

Before Noah could squawk, Simpson laid him a blow across the flat of the head with his heavy gun, plunging it with a quick jab into Dan's belly as he leaned to inquire if that double-damned mare had struck Noah with her foot. Noah was flat on the ground, and Simpson was up as quick as a bent sapling.

"Keep still!" he growled, boring the gun hard into Dan's vitals.

Dan had his hands aloft, not knowing any more than the next man what was coming, or what had happened even then. That was the safe posture for a gentleman of Dan's profession; it was habitual with him from long practice. Simpson jerked the gun from Dan's holster and stuck it under his own belly-band.

"I don't want to kill you—but one squeal!" he warned.

It had come, and there was nothing for it but to go the limit, work fast and make the best of it. Noah appeared to be out for the moment; he was lying limber

under foot and still. Simpson wanted to reach down for the fellow's gun, but dared not take his attention from the conscious, active rascal standing on his feet before him, backed up against the manger. Dan was staring at him in surprised malevolence. The mare had backed the length of her rope, where she stood snorting, the line stretched tight between the two standing men.

Seconds were precious to Tom Simpson; he had not even the small change of one to gamble away. While the surprise of the situation numbed Dan's faculties for the moment, Simpson ducked under the taut rope, gun pressed into the horsethief's belly, and, employing foot and hand in a sudden and astonishing maneuver, tipped the surprised man backwards into the manger.

Dan plumped down into the wedge of the manger as if he had been measured and cut out for it, back against the wall, legs doubled up until his knees were at his chin. Simpson wedged him farther down, quieting his struggles and curses with the cold smell of the gun-barrel against his nose. Dan was wedged there in a ludicrous situation that held him secure for the moment, heave and struggle as he might.

Simpson told him his life hung on absolute silence, and the horsethief had lived long enough to believe him. Dan didn't give vent to a peep while Tom slipped his gun into the holster, pulled out his knife and cut the mare loose. Working swiftly and deftly with part of the mare's rope, Simpson tied Dan's hands to the pole of the manger, one on either side of his feet, in spread-eagle fashion to take the slack out of his long arms.

Before this was accomplished Noah began to stir under

foot. Simpson drew the last slip-knot on Dan's wrist tight with no gentle hand, gave him a dig in the chest with the gun and a caution to keep his mouth shut. The mare had dashed out of the stall when Simpson cut the rope; as he bent over Noah he saw her making for the corral through the open door, ears forward, head up, as if she saw the road home open before her.

Simpson stripped Noah of belt and gun, picked him up and slammed him into the manger, doubling his limp body into the V-shaped receptacle in undignified but effective wedge. Noah's feet were considerably higher than his head as he reposed in the manger, his jolted senses slowly reassembling.

There was the sound of a death warrant in Simpson's low voice as he admonished silence. He groped among the corncobs in the bottom of the manger until he found two pieces long enough for his purpose. One of these he bound into Dan's open jaws with the thief's own gaudy silk handkerchief, gagging him effectually. Noah he treated in like manner, stripping the vilely perfumed adornment from his neck to twist around the cob.

Noah was just getting enough sense back to understand that something had happened; Simpson was obliged to pry his mouth open with his knife. He stared at Tom with confusion in his eyes, face against his boot tops, wedged down in the manger so hard it must almost have unhinged his joints. Tom had something to pay that man, and this was the day it came due.

To make sure of Noah, Simpson used the remainder of the hitching-rope to bind him as Dan was tied, all of which required not above five minutes, if so long, Simpson

worked in such a pitch of haste, accurate in every movement, deft with long practice in trussing up wilder creatures than these. With the last knot drawn on Noah's bonds, Simpson ran to the door in search of the saddle he had heard the woman hanging there. Several hung under the shed beside the door. He grabbed the nearest, returned to the stable and saddled the horse that had given Dan so much trouble to drive away from his native pastures.

Not knowing how many horses belonged to the Ellisons, how many to the neighbors, Simpson went down the line and cut every animal in the stable loose. There was a general bolt for the door, Simpson urging them along. When the last animal was out of the stable he followed to the corral, shut the stable door and threw down the corral bars.

There were between twenty-five and thirty horses in the corral, including those the woman had driven in a little while before. Simpson, mounted and ready to go, waited beside the bars as the horses rushed out led by the Block E mare whose rope he had used to tie her thieves.

At that moment, doubtless having heard the rush of freed horses and puzzled to know what the two men in the barn were about, a man came bolting out of the front door of the house, in shirt sleeves, bareheaded. He stopped short at sight of Simpson herding the horses out of the corral, momentarily paralyzed by astonishment at seeing a stranger where he had expected to see his friends. He let out a wild yell and jumped for the door.

As the man disappeared on the jump for his gun, Simp-

son rode out of the corral after the last horse. He looked back, calculating his chance of getting down toward the road a little way before the fellow, with perhaps others, began to throw lead. At that moment a woman appeared in the dog-run and began to peg away at Simpson with a rifle.

He was then about half way between corral and the road, a matter of a hundred yards from the house. By the wild way the woman was shooting Simpson knew she was mad clear through. Anger and indignation at his bold move made her judgment poor; she didn't come near enough to even hit a horse. But she was doing some tall yelling and screaming, her voice splitting in high, wavering shrieks.

The man was cutting loose now, doing somewhat better work. He brought down a horse that ran beside Simpson. It stumbled headlong, and rolled over, its back broken by the shot.

Bullets were almost singeing his hair as Simpson galloped after the herd to the road, not troubling to do any shooting of his own, the distance being too great for any certainty with a revolver, and he had no ammunition to throw away. When she struck the road the Block E mare turned in the direction of home, as Simpson had confidently expected her to do, most of the others in the band trooping after her.

A number of the animals appeared to have a preference for the opposite direction, however, and a break in the ranks began, which Simpson had some trouble to stop before it drained away the bigger part of the herd. He got them going in the right direction with the loss of six,

which went galloping southward as if they belonged down that way.

Simpson rode into the timber, snatched his rifle from the saddle of the horse he had left tied there, cut the animal loose and started it on the jump after the others. Then on, toward home, with little hope in him of ever getting there.

The Kansas line must be thirty-five or forty miles away, he knew. He had taken every horse on the place, but there doubtless were others available near at hand for the thieves to mount and pursue him. He could not expect to go far without a fight. When it came, he could do no less than give them the best he had, and trust to the luck that had been kind to him this day.

He had his revolver and rifle, and Dan's gun was uncomfortably evident between his trousers waistband and his tank. Noah's gun and belt hung over the saddle-horn, where it swung with a chance of being lost in that hard riding. Tom put the belt over his shoulder in the fashion of a bandolier, the gun under his arm.

So he galloped after the band, early dusk and thickening mists making the road ahead obscure, the Block E mare leading the bunch in a race as desperate as a man ever rode on the Cherokee trails.

CHAPTER XVI

AN UNANSWERED HAIL

Day seemed to drag between dusk and nightfall a long time, a kind of gray twilight which had not thickened perceptibly when Simpson reached the ford of the Salt Fork and plunged into the woods. Here the gloom deepened, yet night seemed a long way ahead to a man who felt that its cover would bring him a measure of security.

It could not have been much past five o'clock, Simpson believed, although a guess was certain to be wide of the hour in weather like that, when a man's day had been stacked with events which seemed to make it long. He had no watch, that being a luxury sacrificed to honor along with his other possessions. It would have been useful on this journey to estimate distances by, a man knowing about how far he travelled in an hour with a band of horses as big as that.

There was no commotion of pursuit. The horses which had escaped must have belonged to the ranch, however, and headed for their grazing ground. The thieves would recover them with little trouble or delay, and soon would be hot after him, even though they had no others nearer at hand.

Simpson's scheme was to leave that muddy trail through the woods if he was not overtaken before dark, and cut for the open prairie. Unless they trailed him with lanterns, which he did not believe they would do, they

would continue on in the belief that he had followed the road. In a country of shallow streams, there could be no great barriers between him and the Kansas line, even though he might strike rough going in cutting across.

Doubtless the road was the shortest way and the best, or the thieves would not have taken it. His chance reposed in the unusual, the unexpected. At the first break in the tangled woods that presented about dark, he would head that lead mare for the prairie, which he believed could not be many miles away.

The horses had worked off their exuberance of being freed from the close stable, something they were unused to and did not like. They had settled down to a trot which they could hold for hours. Simpson felt that he would be more than half way to the Kansas line, his danger diminished by just that much, if he could keep them at it that way until midnight, when he might stop for a few hours, even until daylight, then make a spurt for the finish.

Of course the line would not be any barrier against his pursuers, but there would be some chance of running across a cow-camp or a ranch where he might take refuge and find help. Down here in the Nation there was no likelihood of help from the cowboys handling the cattle on the leased lands. They would consider him a horsethief, very likely, and throw their lead at him rather than for him, according to what the sheriff had told him of the animosities and prejudices existing between ranchers and cowpunchers on the two sides of the line.

It would be a bad place, that timber, for a man's pursuers to overtake him, night or day. In the shooting that

would have to come off in that event the horses might be stampeded, scattered and lost. In the open a man would have a chance. There he could run and see his way.

Simpson was strained as tight as a wet rope as he rode. It was raining hard, and promised to come harder; the slicker around his sack of grub would be of more use on his back, but he could not stop to get it now. It was going to be a long night if he ever lived to the end of it, and a cold one, but the sun might be shining in Kansas tomorrow.

The thought picked him up with a new hope. Then as the slow accumulation of gloom settled over the dripping land, fold on fold, blending the tree trunks in the dark, leaving only their tops outlined here and there dimly against the gray clouds, Simpson glimpsed an opening in the woods leading off in the direction he wanted to go. A trail, he took it to be, probably used by wood-haulers, perhaps leading off to some sequestered ranch.

He rode around the plodding band of steaming horses and turned the lead mare back. He had some difficulty in doing so, as she was stubbornly set on following that road. She had come that way; she knew it was the trail back home. The suspicious creature did not like the deflection from the beaten trail. She shied and bolted, starting back to the old road. Simpson was almost on the point of yielding to her instinct when she suddenly took a notion to do as he wanted her to, and trotted off up the unknown trail, the rest of the band trailing confidently after her, Simpson bringing up the rear.

It was only then, jogging along after the horses seen dimly through the thickening darkness, that Simpson be-

gan to marvel on his escape from the ranch with a whole skin. He did not know how long that man and woman continued shooting at him, but he recalled now a good deal of yelling out of the man and siren shrieking from the woman as they ran after him toward the road. He had made a quick departure, the only break in its smooth-running success being the split in the band and his pause to cut his own horse loose.

Luck surely had been with him that day. He had not fired a shot, although he had jerked the rifle out of the scabbard when that raging, cursing fellow came tearing after him, throwing lead so close it seemed a miracle he missed. Simpson's loss had been one horse, and he was not certain it was his loss, strictly speaking. He could not say it was one of the Block E brand; just as likely an animal belonging to the rascals themselves, as nearly as they ever had honest title to a horse. From the way that cuss raged, Tom inclined to the opinion that it was one of his horses. The thought brought out a grin, which Simpson felt that he had coming. That surely had been his lucky day.

Doubly fortunate that he had not been obliged to hurt anybody. Of course he applied the range definition to the word. To hurt a man, in the parlance familiar to Simpson these past several years, meant to put him out of business for good. It was a delicate way of saying that subject had become a coroner's case. The charge of killing would not stand against him in that foray; at least, not yet. He hoped night, and endurance and luck, would put him beyond the possibility of that necessity.

Before long Simpson had reason to regret leaving the

trail. It grew so dark he could not see the leader of his band; the trail was narrow, bordered by brush and brier; branches of trees hung low over it. He rode with one hand up, to encounter these barriers in time to duck and dodge. Nothing big enough to drag him from the saddle, pendent branches which had grown since the road was last used, the forest closing up the gap in its inevitable way, but always the uncertainty of a thick limb. And there were dangling greenbrier vines which scratched like catamounts, their venomous thorns leaving burning wounds. It was a worrying, perilous, tiring ride.

After what seemed to Simpson a long while—but could not have been more than an hour, if so long—he emerged in a little break, like the clearing of an old field. This seemed to be several acres in extent, as marked by the confining walls of trees, brush-grown and abandoned. It was light enough here to see that the horses still followed the lead mare in good order, few of them, if any, having parted from the band in the woods.

Simpson was satisfied now the horses would hold together unless something gave them a sudden scare. Even then they would reassemble if possible, according to horse nature, for that is an animal which likes the company of its kind above all others.

Tom considered seriously making a halt in this old clearing until daylight. It was unlikely those trailing him—and they must be out hot and in force by now—would be able to see where he had left the road. They would take it for granted he would hold a straight course, and a swift one, for the border along the plainest, surest, easiest way. When daylight revealed their mistake they

would turn back until they picked up his trail. So he reasoned, feeling more secure than his short distance from the horsethieves' lair warranted.

A little reflection on this phase of the situation set up that feeling of rising bristles along his back as he rode through the old clearing. He could not have been more than two hours on the road; at the outside he had not made more than seven or eight miles. And perhaps a good deal of that was thrown away in this divergence, which he questioned the wisdom of now. It would not do to stop. He must crowd on clear of that infernal, dripping forest, get out to the prairie where he could see a few rods at least, and draw an unhampered breath again.

There was a creek at the farther edge of this clearing, the road pitching down into it sharply. Simpson had no warning of it until he heard the horses splashing through it and the noise of the increasing waters from the downpour of rain among the stones. The stream was swift at the ford, but shallow. Lucky for him he had not come an hour later, Simpson knew, when it would have grown into an unfordable torrent. His horse lurched up the bank tight after the rest of the bunch, and there on his right was the light of some woods-dweller's cabin winking through the dripping trees.

The sight of that gleam gave Simpson an alarming start. The house stood near the creek; he was upon it before he knew it was there. It was not more than a hundred feet from the road, which was better here and gave evidence of more frequent use. Simpson had little hope of getting by without being heard. He cut in between the horses and the fence, riding forward to speed them up

a little, thinking of the fool propensity some horses had for entering every open gate or bars they ran across.

At that juncture several hounds began to whoop from their shelter under the house, and came pouring out with their mouthy clamor. The door opened as Simpson rode by, revealing for an instant a man. This householder, taking no chances, shut the door after him quickly as he stepped outside. From the glimpse Simpson caught of him he knew the man was an Indian.

“Who’s that?” the man inquired, his hail a challenge.

Simpson made no reply. The dogs were at the heels of his horse, setting up a savage yowling. Simpson heard the man, this time much nearer the road, demanding who he was and where he was going. He rode on in silence. All the information he could give that man would not enlighten him, and any he might get from the Indian certainly would not do him any good. Here the road was clear, the landscape open, and it was fairly light in comparison with the hampering blackness of the woods.

On past the place the horses galloped, splashing through puddles, setting up a racket that would give an experienced ear a very good estimate of the number in that outfit. The dogs followed, giving their tongues full liberty and, altogether, it was rather a lively event for a rainy night on that forest-smothered road. Simpson knew he was leaving a suspicious, unsatisfied Indian standing beside the rail fence in front of his little log hut, and one who was not likely to remain in passive speculation on the meaning of that troop of horses, urged on by a silent driver, passing his door along that unfrequented way.

The noisy charge of the hounds had thrown the horses

into a panic. They went galloping headlong into the dark, Simpson tight after them, thankful the animals had some other sense than sight—which experience had proved to him was little, if any, superior in the dark to man's—to keep them on the trail and hold them together. The dogs dropped behind, too indolent to follow far, although the horses held their excited gait for a mile or two. They gradually settled down to a swinging trot, and Simpson's heart lifted when he noted he was riding clear of the woods.

Directions were all one without the gleam of a familiar star or constellation to mark the way, but Simpson was not greatly concerned over that. He relied on the sense of the mare to lead her home. The trees blended down to the prairie border of shrubs; in a little while he rode clear of them, relieved to feel the prairie sod under his horse's feet. Here was elbow room; here a man could give them a run for their money, let them come when they might. Simpson was drenched to the skin; the roadside bushes had sopped his legs and poured several pints of water into his boots. But that was a condition he had been broken to long ago; it gave him no more concern nor discomfort than it would have given the average cowboy. A man learned early in that life to take a bootful of rainwater and ride on, letting it seep out and dry out as it would. It was one of the things which romancers did not stress when they discussed the wild free life of the range.

Just beyond the edge of the woods there was another cabin, dark, silent. The occupants were either in bed or the place was abandoned, but the sight of the house gave Simpson a mighty jump, and almost fixed him in the

belief that he was fast relapsing to the primitive and growing a fine crop of bristles on his back. On and on, for hours; saddle-galled from the rain, chilled to the bone, hungry, longing for a smoke. On and on, until the horses began to lag, dropping from a trot to a drooping walk, some of them now and then stopping to snip a bunch of grass, the spirit of adventure gone out of them, the long hard drive they lately had been put to telling on them all too soon for the desperate chance of the man who herded them over this trail that led he knew not where.

Simpson knew he would only be crippling his luck to push them on, tired as they were. It might come to the pinch when they'd have to travel for all that was in them. He decided to stop, let them graze and rest, and go on again with daybreak.

Here the landscape was open. Dark as the night pressed down on the prairie, there was a little lightness in the clouds, a little horizon, just about at arm's length, it seemed. Immediately he stopped the march the horses began to graze. He could hear their soft muzzling, the crisp snapping of rain-freshened grass which was both food and drink to the winded beasts.

Simpson rode around and around the little band of horses, keeping them together, listening for the sound of pursuit, unable to get out of his imagination the picture of that shaggy-haired Indian saddling and mounting, dashing away in hot lather to carry the news of this challenged and unanswering marauder passing his door. He had felt the suspicion of that man vibrating in his voice; the Indian had suspected, from the first unanswered hail,

that a horsethief, as Simpson realized he would be classed in that country, was passing. That band of horses was going in the wrong direction for any honest purpose, as honest purpose was defined on the Cherokee trails.

CHAPTER XVII

A LITTLE SKIRMISH

That was a long watch, and a weary one. It could not have been past midnight when Simpson stopped; the rain that was falling then continued for hours. As the horses settled down to their grazing Tom dismounted, slipped the bridle off his horse, yet sticking close beside it holding the neck-rope, ready to mount at the first alarm. There was nothing he could do to warm his blood a bit but stamp up and down the length of the hitching-rope, and flap his arms like a wet rooster. It helped a little, but was not too wildly exhilarating.

There was no finding the horse that carried his grub and blanket among the shadowy, shifting animals of his little band, much as he would have appreciated the slicker that watch. But uncertainty was equal to a coat, anxiety was a fire that kept him alert and keen. And not even a wolf came to disturb the wet tranquillity of the night.

At length Tom became conscious that the rain had stopped. A breeze was springing, breaks were showing in the clouds. Then a whiff of wind, and the east was like an open door. The sky was swept clear; there was the dawn.

He could hardly believe it had come so quickly; he thought he must have been asleep on his feet. Yet daylight had only been pent beneath the clouds; it was an hour past its time. He caught the horse that carried his

grub, took off the bridle it had worn since he hitched it to the sapling before going out on that spying expedition which had turned things loose like the stove-in head of a barrel. Some of the horses were lying down, others standing in little groups, heads over each other's backs in the companionable way of horses, take them where found, world without end.

The fast-broadening day discovered to Simpson that he was out of sight of the timber, in a country where laminated ledges of limestone cropped from the ribs of lean hills, with little swales where grass grew abundantly. It was in one of these that he had stopped. Brier clumps and stunted sumac bushes grew along the hillside, suggesting fuel, fire and hot coffee.

The time he would lose getting breakfast would not put him very far along the road, and if Wade Harrison's men were on his trail they'd overtake him before he could get out of there, hungry or fed. A hungry man will argue down almost any kind of danger, and Simpson was a hungry man.

He splintered some dead sumac, which is a wood that blazes quickly, and comes nearer to burning without smoke than any wood that grows, kindling a fire without much difficulty. He was so reckless and defiant of danger in his famished state that he stirred up a mess of biscuits, there being no trouble finding water for mixing his dough or filling his coffee pot, for every wash was a little torrent after the rain, some of them running as clear as if they had their founts in springs, which is the way of prairie run-off water, as every Kansas pioneer well knows.

Not more than three-quarters of an hour later Simpson,

a full man and a warm one, his spirits away up to the top of the tube, got his herd under way. The sun was rising; there would be no lack of a guide the rest of the journey, let it be long or short. There was no trail here, no faintest trace that there ever had been. That mare had followed her nose when the road gave out. Tom hoped she had gone in the right direction.

How far he was from the Kansas line he could not even guess, but the horses were fresh now, if not so frisky or keen for the march, able for it without another stop if it could be crossed before night. And so he was off, the sun at his right hand, as sustaining and helpful in his necessity as a friend encountered in a strange and hostile land.

There was not a habitation in sight anywhere in the sweep of country that presented as Simpson mounted the successive hills, not a cow-camp, although many cattle grazed in those abundant pastures. These moved indifferently out of the way as the horses approached, some of the younger animals bucking and cavorting playfully along as if to show their independence, and perhaps a little mocking contempt, of riderless horses running in a captive drove. Tom hoped luck would continue to favor him, allowing him to cross the line without meeting anybody, as curious questioning might lead to dangerous ground.

The country broke rougher as he proceeded, much limestone outcropping on the hills and slopes, a considerable growth of scrub oak here and there. The land was furrowed by deep ravines, with the perpendicular banks common to prairie washes, making long detours necessary. Simpson understood now why no trail led directly

north from the crossing of the Salt Fork. Progress was vexatiously slow here; these twistings and wormings among the hills were eating up his chance.

Simpson had been on the way about two hours when he struck an impassable wash, wider and deeper than any he had encountered. It came down from a generally northwestern direction, and appeared to be miles in length, from what he could trace of its windings. The run-off of last night's rain rushed through in a flood; crossing would have been impossible, even if a break in the banks could have been found.

It was tough luck, for this creek, a dry hollow in rainless periods as the lack of water-nourished shrubs along its banks disclosed, turned him from his direct route. Probably an hour or two would be lost getting around it, or finding a fordable place, and in an hour somebody riding after him could cover the distance he had made since leaving camp. But there was nothing to be done except skirt the wash and push ahead as fast as possible. He had elbow room, anyhow; the sun was shining, luck was with him still.

So he reflected as he started up the gulch. It was pretty good going along there; he could put them through for a while. He had not gone half a mile when he got the first sight of his pursuers. It was only a glimpse, he could not tell how many were in the party, but he saw there were plenty to keep one man busy, let him have every advantage on his side, which Simpson feared would not be his case.

They were just dipping down a slope when he saw them; a flitting glimpse of them and they were hidden

in the swale. Five or six of them, he thought; certainly not fewer than four. They were not more than half a mile away.

They had not come so tight on his heels undiscovered through any laxity in Simpson's vigilance; he had nearly screwed his head loose looking back that morning. Curiously enough, the discovery that they were coming, and so near, did not give him half the start the sight of that light in the forest cabin had given him last night. He was on edge with expectation of their appearance; there was more the feeling of disappointment, of bitter reproach against the turn of luck, than surprise.

It was a run for the money now, and he saw no reason why he couldn't go about as fast as they could come, pressed by the necessity of doing it, the country fairly open along the bank of the arroyo. He gave a whoop that raised the ears of every horse in the band, and started them with a rush.

No animal associated with man in his domestic economy, not even excepting the dog, will sense and respond to its master's nervous condition as quickly as the horse. It feels the flow of confidence through the reins as readily as it senses the thrill of panic; it will quicken to the calm word of encouragement and quiver at the excited voice of nervous command as no other living creature not endowed with human understanding.

There was not a horse in that band but understood a supreme effort was required of it. They leaped to the race in long strides, bellies close to the ground, necks stretched, chins pointing, running in open order, each picking his own way; leaping rocks, skirting bushes, gath-

ering for mighty springs over ravines which they ordinarily would have paused and looked around for breaks in the bank to ease them over. It was like a whirlwind that springs out of the somnolent quiet of a summer day.

Simpson rode tight after the band, throwing many a troubled look behind. Now he saw the pursuers, now lost them, but each fleet glimpse revealed them a little nearer. They were gaining slowly, but closing up the gap as surely as good horses and good riders could do it over a free-running band. They were getting close enough to start shooting; Simpson wondered why they didn't cut loose.

Then he remembered his standing in the eyes of those men. They didn't want to shoot him if they could save him alive for the rope. He was a horsethief, and a horsethief should always be hung if possible. It was not alone the inflexible code of the Cherokee trails, but of the range. Simpson knew it as well as anybody. He was not to be shot, except to incapacitate him from using his gun or to save the lives of those closing in upon him. They would kill his horse, and rush him while he was entangled, if he did not get clear of it as it fell.

It was not long until this hard pace began to tell on the less fleet and vigorous horses in Simpson's band. These began to lag; those in the lead drew away from them, dividing the herd. Simpson did not want to lose this bunch of laggards, there being among them several of the likeliest-looking draft horses of the Block E brand.

The fleet mare which had led the retreat from captivity was still ahead, running free and tireless, going as if certain of her course. Not more than nine or ten were able to

follow her pace. It began to look to Simpson as if he must abandon the slower animals to save himself.

While he was considering this course he saw the vanguard of his headlong retreat swerve sharply from the northwesterly course they had been following along the arroyo—which he noted for the first time was now out of sight—and head northeast. He realized in a flash they had struck the old cattle trail which he had followed into the Nation. Whooping to inspire the lagging bunch with new courage and speed, he rode among them, slapping them with his hat, setting up more noise than a man in less urgent extremity would believe possible for one human throat to make.

By the time he had turned this bunch into the trail and headed them after the leaders, the pursuers were almost within pistol-shot of Simpson. He told himself the time to stop running had come.

Sling out the rifle and begin to pump lead down the line! That was the time to stop, and to stop them. The horses were sure to go right on to Kansas, which could not be more than nine or ten miles away. It didn't seem to matter so much to Simpson just then whether he ever got there; the business immediately before him was right there, on that old cattle trail.

Simpson wheeled shooting. The pursuing band pulled up sharp, and got out their guns, slamming lead around him so fast it looked as if he had ridden into a swarm of grasshoppers which went plumping down at the roadside. Some of them came close—so close the horse squatted and jumped, trembling and snorting, apparently fully conscious of his danger.

Simpson saw there were five in the crowd that was after him. Two broke from the others, riding to flank him, or draw out of range and follow the horses—he was not certain which. Either move was not as he wanted it. He stopped the one on the right. The horse went on, stirrups dancing as it circled and galloped back toward the three riders who remained in the road where they had halted at the first report of Simpson's rifle.

On his left Tom saw the man riding hard for the foot of a little rise that would cut him off. He threw a shot, his target flashing between intervening bushes, and safely away. The three in the road came on with a whoop, cutting loose with everything they had.

Simpson turned to race them for it, hoping to find a spot where he would not loom so prominently, and there stand for the finish. Off to his right he saw the unhorsed man rise up, tall and gaunt, stand wavering a moment, and fall. A bullet caught Simpson's horse. It grunted with the slap of lead, pitching forward so abruptly, so violently, that Simpson was sent sailing as he had gone out of the wagon the morning he hitched that very animal up to its unaccustomed task.

He struck the ground some distance beyond the horse, the fall confusing him momentarily, giving him a terrific jar. He dropped the rifle, and went clawing after it on hands and knees; recovered it, threw himself in the shelter of the horse's body as a fresh shower of bullets cut over his head.

His revolver was in his holster, the one he had taken from Noah hanging to the saddle-horn. He had put Dan's gun under the rope of the packet behind the saddle,

ready to hand if needed. Noah's gun still hung on the saddle, but it was under the horse; the other gun was gone, jolted out on that last tight run. This Simpson saw in a glance as he flattened out behind the horse.

The horse had a broken foreleg, clipped by a rifle bullet. It was lying on the disabled member, and now began to make a heaving, frantic struggle to get up. Tom grabbed the reins and tried to turn the creature's head for a quieting shot. As he tugged, a bullet struck the horse's head not a span from his own, killing it instantly.

There appeared to be more caution than valor in that band of horsethieves. They were not keen to rush Simpson and dislodge him from the shelter of his fallen horse. He lay waiting for them, not risking to show his head, filling up his magazine. For a few moments their firing stopped, then there was a rush of horses and they came tearing past, off a cautious distance, riding like mad one behind the other, pouring in their lead as they went.

Simpson threw a shot at the leader and made a jump for it to change sides of the horse before the other two came directly opposite. As he went over a bullet hit the rifle, the reamed particles of lead, red-hot they felt, striking his hand. He flopped down on the other side. The three of them went tearing past, on their way to help their companion turn the horses back, Tom supposed. They knew he could not get very far away.

He was wrong in that surmise. Horse or no horse, they were not going to leave him there alive. They were circling him, closing in as they came this time, one of them an Indian, surely the very Indian he had seen for a second in that cabin door. Tom squirmed up to face them, dis-

covering that the bullet which threw hot lead parings into his hand had jammed the trigger of the rifle. It was out; he dropped it and slung his revolver.

The leader veered off, shooting wildly. It was the Indian, and Simpson knew few of his breed ever became very dangerous with a pistol, especially when shooting on the run. Tom vaulted the horse and dropped down on the other side, banging away with no more effect than his hard-riding enemies.

He knew he couldn't keep up that leap-frog business very long. Soon one of them would get him on the jump or, if not then, their courage would rise with their exasperation, they would rush him and settle their bill. So he was not going to have it that way. They'd have to take him off his feet if they got him, not lying on his belly behind a dead horse like a lizard. And there was no doubt, it appeared now, how that show was going to end.

Tom sprang up as the last man rode by, opening up with such unexpected vigor as to spur him with a spurt that carried him quickly out of range. The other two rode after him, the three of them bunching their horses in a brief conference, one of them suddenly slinging a rifle from under his leg and firing from his vantage of distance and safety.

Simpson was obliged to hunt cover again. Luck had gone off the stage, it seemed. Yet it was remarkable what a quantity of ammunition could be spent by three able-bodied men to so little damage. Beyond the small wounds in his right hand, where the hot spatterings of that bullet had struck, he was unhurt. But luck was out of it.

They were suddenly quiet down the road. The man with the rifle had stopped firing. Simpson stole a cautious look, expecting an immediate response. The three were facing the other way, watching the approach of two men who came riding from the south.

Tom's heart sagged lower, low as it had swung before. It seemed, indeed, that it hit the bottom that time. Reinforcements. The three men were waiting for them, little as they were needed. But no! The two men from the south snapped out their guns and began to shoot as they came tearing within range of the three. There was a break among the horsethieves, a wild scattering, a futile popping of their guns, and they were off.

It was useless, and it seemed an act by a man who had crept out of his hole, but Simpson emptied his gun after the three as they cut toward the southwest down the old cattle trail. The two men who had arrived in his extremity rode up to where Simpson was standing between the legs of his dead horse. Tom's hand was covered with blood; his disabled rifle lay at his feet, the trampled ground was sown with empty shells.

"Looks like you'd been havin' a little skirmish," said one of the riders.

He was slipping his gun into the holster, grinning amiably.

Simpson had to look twice before he was sure it was Sheriff Treadwell, but half a glance sufficed to identify his companion, who was nobody on earth but Wallace Ramsey of the Bar-Heart-Bar. The Sheriff was not wearing his derby hat and buttoned shoes. That was his buckboard rig. To-day he was attired like any rider of the

Cherokee trails, and he looked as fit and handy to his part as he was welcome.

Simpson did not reply to the sheriff's comment on the appearance of things around there: just stepped out from between the stiffening legs of that good horse and reached up his hand; and turned to Wallace Ramsey and reached up his hand again.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SHERIFF'S ECONOMY

"Where's the feller that belongs to that horse?" the sheriff asked, indicating the saddled animal, which had retreated discreetly beyond the zone of danger and was grazing calmly.

"Over there," Simpson replied, indicating the direction. "His name's Noah. That's all the particulars I can give you of him, Mr. Sheriff."

The sheriff and Wallace rode over to investigate the condition of Noah, who could be seen lying almost hidden in the tall grass. They approached him cautiously, guns out. Almost immediately the sheriff turned back, Wallace going after the horse, which was shy of his approach, and ran. Wallace was tight after it, swinging his rope, when the sheriff joined Simpson.

"It looks like you shot them horses on up the trail," said the sheriff, his eyes on the signs.

"One of them, a chap named Dan, got by," Simpson explained briefly. "He's after them."

"You and that boy come on when he ketches that horse," the sheriff directed. With the words he was off, hot on the trail of the man who was following the horses.

Wallace was not long in bringing up the horse, which appeared to be a very good animal, but not in the class with the one Simpson had lost. Tom transferred his rifle-scabbard, saddle-roll and captured belt and pistol to the

remount, hopped into the saddle and started after the sheriff.

"One of them got by me, the sheriff's gone after him," he explained.

Wallace demurred about rushing off like that.

"Say, Tom," he said in astonishment, "you ain't a-goin' to leave your good saddle on that dead horse, air you?"

"It don't belong to me—I don't want to burden myself with it."

"Well, if it's all the same to you, then," said Wallace, one leg tentatively over the saddle, a polite request for permission in his ingenuous face.

"Help yourself," Tom granted, curbing his impatience to be away after the sheriff.

Wallace had the saddle off in two jerks of a lamb's tail and was up again with it in front of him.

"I hate to see a good saddle throwed away," said he, frugally reflective as if he had seen it done in his time. "This here one's worth sixty dollars, cold money. But that's a Block E horse, Tom,"—quizzically puzzled; "how come your horse and somebody else's saddle?"

"I stole it," Tom explained, directly to the point.

"The hell you did! From that gang down on the Salt Fork?"

"But I'll give you a bill of sale for it if your conscience——"

"Conscience hell! I ain't *got* no conscience. That saddle's worth a million dollars to me now!"

Carrying the saddle didn't appear to encumber Wallace in the least. He loped on beside Simpson, silent quite a little while, so overcome by the flock of thoughts set

flying in his head by Simpson's explanation, which was more a confession than a boast, he hadn't words enough to go with them. But that was not a state that endured long with Wallace, who was, above all, a wordy man.

"Me and the sheriff we struck your trail at daylight this morning, away back there at the edge of the woods. We knew you'd got away with them horses, but we couldn't figger how in the hell you done it, Tom."

Wallace turned his sharp eye questioningly, with such an inquisitive look that Simpson could see curiosity was hurting him.

"Blind luck," said Tom. "We'd better hit it up—one of that gang got by me."

"Oh, he'll be all right," Wallace replied with comfortable assurance. "One man ain't goin' to keep Sheriff Treadwell busy more'n a minute or two. That's the speediest little feller with a gun in seven states."

"More speed to him!" Tom said fervently, thinking with a surge of gratitude of that moment when the sheriff galloped up and began to shoot. "How did you two come to be together on this job, Wallace?"

"I was down here scoutin' after some strays. He was headin' hell-bent after you, and I ast him to depytize me and let me go along. It don't do no good to be a dep'ty down here, but if a feller *had* a conscience, you know it might set easier if he had to fork out his iron and plug somebody. You remember I had a grudge agin that gang myself, Tom."

"You sure had, old feller."

"The sheriff he was skirtin' the timber, aimin' to take a cut through by an old loggin' road he knew, but it got

so damn dark he couldn't find it. We camped there, and started on at daylight. A little way along we hit your trail."

"But how in the seven kingdoms did you know it was mine?"

"The sheriff knew by the tracks it was the same bunch of horses them fellers run off, and he knew they wouldn't be headin' 'em north, not all together and right away, anyhow. He said you'd got 'em away from them fellers, and we knew by the tracks made since the rain that they was after your skelp, old feller. Simple as the snoot on your face. So we bucked into 'er and come on hell-bent, I'm here to say!"

"You were damn well welcome!" Tom said fervently.

"Don't mention it," Wallace requested lightly, dismissing all thought of obligation with the words.

They overtook Sheriff Treadwell about five miles from the scene of the skirmish, as he called it. He was waiting for them, holding a riderless horse by the reins. There was nobody else around. Off a little way the horses grazed beside the trail, all of them there, according to Tom's hasty estimate. Sheriff Treadwell said they were still about three miles inside the Nation.

"It's nice to ketch them fellers over the line this way," he said. "It saves the county a lot of expense."

Wallace said they'd hit one of Coburn's cow-camps about nine or thirteen miles north of the line; they could make it there by chuck-time, which would be a handy hour, as far as he was concerned, personal and private, to arrive.

They got the horses under way, the sheriff's weather eye on the saddled one running with them. He asked no

questions about the animal, and Wallace, restrained by the delicacy that most men of his calling felt in those perilous days about prying into another's purely personal affairs, held his tongue, although Simpson saw it was bulging in his mouth like a bale of hay.

"That's the horse I rode down," he explained. "It belongs to a man by the name of Waco Johnson. I'd been down to Drumwell on it, so it escaped the raid."

"Oh, that's the one," said the sheriff. "The feller they shot in the leg."

"I was wonderin' if that old cuss rambled down here and you had to take a gun to him," Wallace said. "Is he over at the Block E?"

"I left him there," Tom replied.

"Yes," the sheriff said, "he'll hang up there some time. He hadn't come to when I was past there day before yesterday evening."

Wallace was greatly interested in Waco Johnson's adventures since Coburn fired him, and pleased to learn that he had found a harbor in such kind hands as Mrs. Ellison and her daughter.

"Coburn missed it a mile when he thought that feller was crooked," Wallace declared, although he had not been above suspecting Waco himself not two minutes before. "Some of the boys suspicioned him, but I said hell! if a man's crooked because he goes on a toot and misses the train I ort 'a' been hung ten years ago and severial times since."

Wallace chuckled, but not at the review of these many deserved hangings for his train delinquencies, as it was speedily revealed.

"Coburn thought him and you framed it up to rob him of that dang money, Tom. He swore you and Waco was old trail pardners; said you framed it for him to miss the train and you to take his place so you could git away with that fool gripsack. He's kind of huffy yit 'cause it didn't turn out that way."

"Damn fool!" said Sheriff Treadwell, spitting contemptuously as only a sheriff can.

"He turned me a high compliment, thinking I had brains enough to plot out a thing like that," Tom said, but looking so grim and humorless that Wallace thought he saw trouble ahead for Sid Coburn.

"Well, you know it's natural for a man to suspicion a stranger when he hops the wrong horse and rides off with thirty-five thousand dollars," Wallace explained placatively. "I guess it's cowman nature to feel kind of sore, too, when he rides home and finds a feller's beat him there with that money, down to the last bal'-facted dime. Well sir, even Sid's wife had the laugh on him over the way you beat him home with that money, Tom. And I'm here to tell you when you make that woman laugh, you've done somethin', pardner."

"I believe you," Tom agreed solemnly.

"You can make a skinned cow laugh easier 'n you can that woman."

"She's got a streak of Cherokee in her," the sheriff remarked significantly. He said it as he might have disclosed the fact that she was afflicted with epilepsy, or some unfortunate ailment that cast a continual shadow over her days. Knowing it, one must excuse her faults.

"She's got a streak of sompin' a foot wide," Wallace

said. "Ever I marry a woman I'll marry me a simple one, but what I git one that can laugh."

"Plenty of 'em to be had," the sheriff said.

"Simple ones, or laughin' ones?" Tom inquired, perking up as keenly all on a sudden as if he might be interested in the market.

"Both," the sheriff replied sententiously. "Take Eddie Kane's wife, down at Drumwell. When that woman opens her mouth to laugh you can see her lights. Her and Curn's wife they're the limit of their kind, and between 'em—well, I guess there's *some* sensible ones between. You take Eudora Ellison: she grins, something like a man. I never heard a ha-ha out of that girl as long as I've knew her, and that's just about all her life."

Which would have made that young lady about five years old if it had been true. Sheriff Treadwell measured time by events, instead of years.

"I've never saw her," Wallace said, a little wistfully, a bit regretfully, as for something passed out of his province for good and all.

"You've got my permission to go and call on her," the sheriff bantered.

"She'd burn a brand on my old hide I couldn't git off with lye," Wallace said. "No big cowman's daughter ain't trainin' around with no bobtailed puncher the same as me."

"She was redheaded over the way that gang raided their place,"—the sheriff addressed himself to Tom—"I thought I'd have to hog-tie that girl to keep her from comin' with me. She certainly was redheaded and a rairin'."

"Um-m-m," said Simpson, his lips clamped hard around the stem of his empty pipe.

Sheriff Treadwell, seeing how it was, offered a red tobacco box. Doubtless it was not any higher grade than sheriffs usually smoke, but to Tom Simpson's palate and hard-pulled nerves it was equal to the best that ever came from old England with the king's warrant on the can. The grimness of his features relaxed; his eyes beamed so friendly and appreciative of his company that Sheriff Treadwell thought for a little while he was going to grin.

They made Coburn's camp a little after noon, just as the cowboys and the boss were licking their tin plates. Coburn was so surprised to see that big band of horses coming up from the direction of the Nation that his eyes could have been scraped off his face with a shingle. He didn't give Simpson what could have been called a brotherly greeting, not knowing what part he had taken in the enterprise, whatever it was. While the cook was frying a fresh batch of steak in a pot of grease the sheriff enlightened the cowman. Wallace, meantime, was putting the story into the ears of his comrades, Tom Simpson sitting apart on the saddle he had taken from his horse, smoking that delectable plug-cut out of the sheriff's red box.

So up bounced Sid Coburn and came stalking over to where Tom sat smoking, direct as a man who had a crow to pick. He stuck out his hand while yet ten feet away. Tom rose and met him with a demonstration no more reserved.

"Simpson, I take off my hat to you," Coburn said, and he took it off with the declaration, jerking it as if it

had long offended him and he was done with the imposition. "I done you wrong—I was as mean as a yeller dog—but, by God!"—looking Tom hard in the eye—"I didn't steal that horse!"

"You couldn't make me believe you did if you swore to it," Tom returned, with earnest and sympathetic expression, although rather equivocal words.

The point of that joke, intended or unintended, hit the spot in that camp at once. The men roared, and Coburn roared, but Tom Simpson stood as solemn and hard-featured through the gust of merriment as if his face had frozen that way, beyond the hope of any warming ray of laughter ever to thaw it out again.

Coburn looked the horses over, the cowboys looked them over, as if they were strange creatures brought from unknown lands. To their questions on how he came to get away with them, right from under that gang's noses, Tom replied that it was a greenhorn's luck, he guessed. They looked at him queerly, letting it go at that.

It was not until after he had been on the road with the sheriff some time, after a good rest at camp, that Simpson told how chance had rushed his plans to a head in the horsethieves' stable and forced his hand. He described the place, and the sheriff said yes, he knew that ranch. It was Henry Werner's place, and Henry Werner was married to a half-breed squaw, sister of Wade Harrison's wife. Harrison's hangout was farther down the river, somewhere back in the hills, just where no peace officer from Kansas ever had been able to find out. But it didn't matter now; that would be the end of the gang. Wade Harrison was dead and in hell; old Noah Hays, his chief

lieutenant, was dead and in hell; Dan Vinson, sneaking cut-throat—and he was a literal cut-throat, the sheriff declared—was dead and in hell. Hell was pretty well full of horsethieves that day.

There was an end of it, the way it looked to Sheriff Treadwell, and Tom Simpson said he hoped so, and that he could have peace now to go on hauling bones. They jogged on until evening, and made camp, feeling secure and fairly happy, although Tom was troubled by the thought of old Noah Hays lying down there in the grass unburied. He asked the sheriff if he had sent anybody back to attend to Hays and Vinson, at which inquiry the sheriff appeared to be a little indignant.

“No, that’s out of my jurisdiction,” he said. “The county wouldn’t pay for it, and who in the hell would? Oh well,—” a shade more humanely—“don’t worry over them fellers, somebody’ll find ’em. I don’t care about anybody’s carcass but old Wade Harrison’s. If we could find that feller’s carcass you’d have twenty-five hundred to three thousand dollars reward money comin’ to you, Tom. But you never could collect it without the corpus delecti, and them fellers they’ve made sure nobody’ll ever be able to prove that. Without the corpus delecti you couldn’t do a thing, Tom—not a damn thing.”

CHAPTER XIX

WACO IS SATISFIED

Next morning early, while they were still miles from the Ellison ranch, Sheriff Treadwell parted company with Simpson. There was where he turned off, the sheriff said; it was a short cut to the county seat. Simpson, more disturbed by the prospect of driving that band of horses into the neighborhood alone than he had been concerned over the desperate business of recovering them, protested vehemently at being deserted this way.

"Oh, I say now!" he expostulated, feeling hurt at the sheriff's slipping out of it. "You can't leave me with all this business on my hands this way, Treadwell."

"I didn't recover 'em," the sheriff disclaimed bluntly, as if some taint of disgrace attended the exploit, "and I ain't goin' to go paradin' through that settlement like the credit was even part mine. I didn't have a damn thing to do with it."

"Oh, I say, now!" Tom protested, feeling as weak and abandoned as if the sheriff had closed the door on his very last hope. "I only started something I couldn't finish. You know very well——"

"You'd 'a' cleaned 'em out in five minutes more if me and that cowboy had 'a' kep' out of it," the sheriff declared. "You go on home with them horses, Tom. Hand 'em around among the people they belong to, and if you have any left over let me know. I'll advertise for the

owners, and if they don't come forward in due time, they're yours."

"Oh, very well," said Tom, with that little toss of the head, that high and indifferent air, as if he accepted the situation only because it could not be evaded without coming down to the contemptible level of a cad.

They shook hands and parted. Before noon Tom was in the home neighborhood, keeping a sharp lookout for the red-eyed veteran, by whom he desired to spread the news among the homesteaders who had lost in the raid. He did not encounter anybody, however, until passing the home of the lanky neighbor who had been the first to report loss the morning Tom was trailing the thieves.

This man was sitting on the tongue, of his useless wagon, which was drawn up in the dooryard of his miserable home, when Tom suddenly rounded a bend in the road, coming from behind a little swell of land, with the horses. The homesteader jumped out of his melancholy brooding, standing dumb with amazement for a moment. Then he let out a whoop that seemed to jar his loose-jointed shack open, releasing a vast number of tow-headed children and an anxious, slatternly flat woman, who came pouring out into the yard.

"He's got 'em! he's got 'em!" the settler yelled, starting in a long lope for the road, where Tom was rounding up the horses to a stop.

The homesteader dashed among the horses without a word, wild-eyed and eager, cutting out the animals which belonged to him. He worked about the business as desperately as if his opportunity hung on seconds, and one blunder would cost him all. He was panting and sweating

when he got them cut out; his lank body was trembling, his face was white. This great and unexpected fortune had unnerved him completely; in a moment he had been elevated from the depths of despair to a plane of independence. He had no words; he could only stare and gasp, one hand on the shaggy withers of a tall, buckskin-colored mare.

He came slowly over to where Simpson sat on his horse looking as stern as if he had caught the homesteader at some unlawful deed. Only the gleam of a smile that played in the young man's eyes assured the settler. He knew this man read his profound gratitude in the very trembling of his hand.

"God A'mighty!" the homesteader said, breathing the exclamation with gasping relief. "If there's ever anything I can do for you, neighbor, let me know. I'd wade through fire to pay the debt I'm under to you for bringin' back them colts."

Tom assured him there was no obligation, and asked him to let the neighbors know that a number of the stolen horses had been recovered, theirs probably among them. The homesteader pointed out several which he recognized, especially those belonging to his neighbor, who was an old soldier with a pension, and could have made it through the winter without his horses.

"But I ain't got any pension, neighbor," the lank man said, lifting his solemn, hollow, worried eyes. "I was with Jo Shelby."

While Simpson was not acquainted with that particular hero of the late civil war, he gathered from the man's way of confessing his past commander that Jo Shelby had

been on the losing side. Tom suggested that the pensioner's colts, as the homesteader called them, be left there. The grateful man was glad to assume the responsibility for their delivery, and cut them out accordingly. The beasts were quite willing, even relieved, to stop, worn down to the last strain of endurance as they were by the longest and hardest drive they ever had experienced in their burdened lives.

Not so the Block E mare which had led the band on the homeward trip. She was off at the word, head up, tail out, stepping high and eagerly. She led the herd in at the open gate, as much pride in her bearing as if fully conscious of the dramatic situation, although there was nobody around to witness the triumphant arrival but the wheezy old dog.

He came bounding off the kitchen porch with a show of hostility not at all complimentary to the mare's pride in her achievement, not knowing his own among so many strange ones. The noise he made, together with the trampling of so many hoofs, brought Eudora out of the house like a bumblebee after a haymaker. Mrs. Ellison was a good second. They stopped in amazement at sight of the parade, Eudora poised like a dove on a bough ready to plunge off into flight.

But she had no hesitancy over her course. She flashed to the gate, where Tom Simpson sat the horse that lately had belonged, at least according to the equity of thieves, to Noah Hays, herding the hesitant animals and the strange ones into the barnyard.

"My-y heavens! it's Tom!" Mrs. Ellison exclaimed.

Then she went flying, not so much like a dove, per-

haps, as a trim and motherly hen, her arms outspread to welcome the adventurer whom neither ever had expected to see return from the perilous Cherokee trails.

"Why, Tom Simpson! Where on earth did you get all them horses?" Mrs. Ellison asked, unbounded admiration in her animated face for the prowess of this quiet, solemn-featured young man.

Eudora had not spoken. She was standing by the gatepost staring at Tom, the joy and relief pictured so plainly in her face not sufficient to erase the pallor of long watching and heart-breaking anxiety. Tears were tumbling out of her big dark eyes, and she clenched her lips with that queer little puckering look that came into them when she held them hard against a laugh.

"Sheriff Treadwell and a cowboy named Ramsey—Wallace Ramsey, the chap that had the detective badge, you know—helped me out of it. I couldn't have done a thing without their help. As it was, I lost the best one of your horses, Mrs. Ellison."

"Lost your granny!" said Mrs. Ellison. "As long as you're back safe and sound——"

"Tom! Tom!" Eudora sprang forward, the ring of pain in her voice, of reproachful alarm. "You're hurt! Look at his hand—look at his hand!"

Tom started, flushing guiltily, and turned the member that had moved Eudora's pitiful alarm to conceal its wounds.

"Scratched it," he said, lamely insufficient in his explanation, which the honest flinching of his eyes made worse. "Excuse me while I unsaddle these beasts."

But Eudora had hold of the hot, swollen hand, which

was in a serious condition between neglect and incipient infection. She looked from the wounds to Tom Simpson's eyes, hurting more by her pitying reproach for his attempted deceit than the horsethief's splintered bullet ever had done. Mrs. Ellison was beside her in a moment. She held Tom sternly when, with a confused "Oh, I say, now," he tried to withdraw his hand from their examination.

"Scratched your granny!" Mrs. Ellison said, that female relative always figuring largely in her exclamations of scoffing and depreciation. "You light right down off of that horse, Tom Simpson, and come in and let me get the lead out of them places. If you don't attend to that hand you're in for a peck of trouble with it. Scratched it! Yes, I've seen scratches of that kind too often to be put on that way."

"I'll take care of the horses, Tom; you go on in," Eudora said.

"I couldn't permit it," he replied, so high and mighty it seemed as if they had given him mortal offense.

Nor would he permit it, nor any further argument in the case at all. When he had the horses properly cared for he joined them at the corral gate, actually grinning as if he had accomplished more in overriding their tender concern than in restoring the animals to their rightful owners. But his embarrassment was almost overwhelming when Eudora jerked Noah Hays' belt and gun from under the saddle where he had tried to hide them when he hung it on the fence. He stammered something about a chap losing them, and would not say another word.

To make matters worse for him, Mrs. Ellison, with the

stern manner of a prosecutor hunting for evidence, drew the rifle out of the scarred old scabbard and saw where the horsethief's bullet had struck and jammed the trigger. She handed it to Eudora without a word. The two women stood staring at each other, white-faced, speechless, each constructing according to her imaginative capability the story that unimpeachable evidence suggested.

After that they did not question Tom on his adventure or the perils involved. They knew he had been hand to hand with death, and neither of them put the slightest credence in his evasive explanation of the sheriff and cowboy. While Mrs. Ellison probed the wounds in his hand, picking out the slivers of lead with pincers, Tom inquired of Waco Johnson. He was all right. Mrs. Ellison said. He had recovered his senses and his appetite; in about three weeks he would be the same as if nothing had happened to him.

Mrs. Ellison extracted the last bit of lead, squeezed the wounds and applied turpentine without stint. When she had the hand neatly bandaged she said Waco Johnson might be interviewed if Tom desired. He was in a bedroom just off the kitchen, more than likely reading Alice in Wonderland, which Eudora had lent him, and which he declared to be the beatinest book that ever came his way.

"And he's just about the beatinest man I ever run across," Mrs. Ellison declared. "He always asks you how you'd like to be a whale. It's a pleasantry of his, I guess, but it's past me where anybody's complimented by such a fool question as that."

Waco was bolstered up in bed with an overturned

kitchen chair and several pillows under his long back. He had not been doing much reading since the first commotion attending Tom's arrival, but he had done more listening than any invalid ought to, considering the result of such fragments as he had caught. He was flushed with excitement when Mrs. Ellison opened the door. She declared on her conscience she believed his fever was coming up, due to smoking.

Waco did not refute the charge against tobacco immediately, nor say anything whatever. He was gripping Tom Simpson's hand, looking at him with the straight eye of a man who understands far more than he has seen or heard. So the two of them remained a moment, in a sort of speechless hand-to-hand embrace. Then Waco:

"No ma'am, it ain't smokin'. I'm bilin' over havin' to lay here like a blame old lady while another man goes out to pay my debts. I couldn't help hearin' you talkin' about Tom's hand. Did they git you anyways bad, pardner?"

"Not at all," Tom said as lightly as his embarrassment could make the words. "Just a few little nicks, due to an awkward accident."

"There was a feller named Noahy, a tall, rangy, ganglin' cuss that looked a good deal like me," Waco said.

He put it more as a question than a flat statement of fact, slanting his words up at the end of it, a bid, hedged with the greatest delicacy at his command, for information on what had happened to Noah.

"Just so," said Tom. He was looking hard out of the window at the side of Waco's bed.

"He's the feller that slammed me with that gun," said

Waco, putting his hand up with rueful reminiscence to touch the bandaged hurt.

"I thought he'd be the one," said Tom in abstracted undertone.

Waco looked at him hard again, and put out his hand.

"I wish I could 'a' been along, old feller," he sighed. "But you know how I was fixed."

Waco was too wise to ask questions, knowing there were certain passages of amours and battles in a man's career which the proper kind never discussed. Tom Simpson was of that kind, and Waco had learned all he wanted, for the present at least, to know.

They were not to learn the inside of Tom's exploit until the sheriff came over next day, ostensibly to find out if there were any unclaimed horses, but mainly to unburden himself of any undue credit which he feared Simpson had set down to his account. Even after that the women 'did not talk to Tom about it: only they looked at him with great tenderness in their eyes, and once in passing him as he sat smoking after the supper dishes were cleared away, Mrs. Ellison laid her hand on his head with a caress so like the touch of kinship that a watery film came suddenly between Tom Simpson's eyes and the lamp.

CHAPTER XX

DIGNITY GETS A JOLT

Simpson was delayed more than a week in his design of becoming the leading bone freighter of that country. His wounded hand was making him pay for holding it so lightly at the start. That neglect had set up infection which required all Mrs. Ellison's experience to overcome. Then it began to heal as rapidly as it had grown alarmingly sore, and Tom found himself able to hold the lines again, ready for the great enterprise.

Mrs. Ellison was against the plan he and Waco had worked out for coupling two wagons in train to each team. It wouldn't work as well as one wagon with extra sideboards, she said. That would be all four horses could manage in the event of rain overtaking him on the road, something always likely at that season. He could pile two tons of bones on one of those old freight wagons, more if he could pull them, but two tons would be about all four horses could wiggle along with over those meandering prairie roads.

Tom deferred to her judgment, wisely. She was experienced in the transportation methods of that country, and could have given the homesteaders and greenhorns generally plenty of valuable advice if they had been wise enough to come to her. Accordingly, Tom built up the sides of the gallant old prairie argosy which he and Waco

had used in their experimental hauling, until it looked as if it would hold half a carload.

Of course it would require many such loads to fill a car. It would be an unprofitable business for one man, but he already had enlisted the neighbors, who jumped eagerly at his offer of a premium above the current price for bones in Drumwell. He was going on ahead with his load, to order a car set for a certain date, when he expected to have bones enough delivered at the track to make up his carload.

Waco mourned his misfortune in getting himself in a fix that had made the services of a doctor necessary. Two trips from the county seat by the doctor had taken twenty dollars of Waco's last month's wages, paid him by Coburn when he was fired. But in place of his own services to the bone company Waco tendered the remaining twenty-five dollars. Let his capital work for him, he proposed; use it to pay the homesteaders for their bones as far as it would go.

This was sternly refused by all concerned. Sell a couple of his horses then, said Waco. They were good for nothing but chasing cows, and, since a business man was not likely to lower himself to such menial employment, he would have no use for the colts.

The other members of the company put a damper on Waco's enthusiastic offer to sacrifice his nags. When they needed money badly enough to take a man's horses from under him, they informed him haughtily, they would let him know. And so Tom Simpson loaded the old freight wagon—which was no stranger to the governor's palace on the plaza at Santa Fé—that evening. Early next morn-

ing saw him on the road, driving two pairs of fairly willing and tractable horses as if he had been brought up to the trade.

Adventure does not always dog a man, although he may be especially painted to attract its notice, as Tom Simpson sometimes believed he was. He drove into Drumwell on the morning of his second day on the road, having made the trip without incident, and in remarkably good time. The horses had buckled down to the job as if they had a proprietary interest in the great bone enterprise.

Not so bad, Tom thought. With the freight out, that cargo of bones represented not less than twelve or fifteen dollars. He could make two trips a week, counting every day as a working day, and Waco was already hobbling around with a crutch, against Mrs. Ellison's grave advice. Waco said he healed up from that kind of punctures like a fishin' worm. He had been shot up so much that he rather resented being shot merely in the thigh. It was almost too trifling to lay a man up at all. So Waco would be able to take the road in a week or two more, when the revenues would double, to leave out of the computation entirely the profit arising from the bones they would buy.

Tom was in pretty high spirits, therefore, when he pulled up near the railroad station and asked the agent where it would be agreeable to him and his company to have the bones unloaded, to repose there until the heap grew big enough to fill a car. The agent appeared to be somewhat distant and cold. He seemed to recall only with a great effort their previous talk on that subject, and then to doubt whether he had gone so far as to say Simpson might use the company's right-of-way as a repository for

his bones. But if he had said so, he guessed it would be all right, although neither the company nor he would assume any responsibility.

Simpson largely absolved him and the railroad of all liability, but his spirits had dropped several degrees when he turned from the brief interview. It seemed as if he had climbed down from the wagon in a sweating, eager glow to see the agent, and was returning to it now after having stepped into a cold wind. He drove to the spot indicated by the agent, which was at the end of some cars of lumber, directly behind the depot.

The lumberyard was in front of him, on the left side of the switch where the freight cars stood; the station and town on his right. From town he could not be seen as he pitched the bones from his high-sided wagon, quickly making a hole down to the bottom, starting at the forward end. He had put the spring seat on the ground and hung his gun on the upright, rudely ornamented board called a standard, in the center of the dashboard.

This standard was designed for wrapping the lines when one stopped for some such job as unloading bones. The gun was in the way when he worked. Any exigency calling for the need of it seemed to be so far away from the quietude of the morning that Tom did not give its absence from the handy place where it usually hung a second thought.

That was the domestic hour in Drumwell; the time when women came out to make their purchases, when children were abroad, when homesteaders drove in to transact their business. The dominant forces in that social

organization were quiescent at that hour, lying off, as it were, with a sort of amiable deference, to give the town over to peaceful traffic and honest trading.

The sounds which reached Simpson as he labored with his load were assuring: the gabble of children at play, the hail of women from dooryard to dooryard, or across the street as they went about the business of the hour. His plan was to unload and drive away before the ruder life began to stir, after putting in the order for his car.

Tom quickly worked down to the last bone, which was a shinbone, and a noble one, of some ox that would have dressed eight hundred pounds. He stood holding it in his fist a while, looking down at the heap on the ground, thinking it was very small in comparison with the bulk of the freight car standing at his team's head. It would take many loads like that one to put enough in a car to justify freight, to say nothing of loading to capacity. But it was a beginning; there were plenty more where those came from, and a man out of a job, like one who had gambled away his money, had nothing to spend but his time.

He jumped at a sharp word behind him, turned, and looked into the bore of a large and efficient gun in the hands of an insignificant pale man whom he recognized as the city marshal.

"Put 'em up, pardner, and be damn sudden about it!" the marshal ordered, his voice grinding like a katydid's. His manner was determined, and his hand was steady, although his appearance was not entirely formidable.

Tom considered for a moment taking a chance with

that good shinbone, reckoned the probability of missing, as a man most always does when he tries hardest to hit, and passed it up.

"Oh, very well," he said lightly, not the slightest annoyance nor concern apparent in his voice, or his manner of lifting his chin, or the calm dignity of his face.

"Pile out!" the marshal directed.

He backed off a little as he spoke, to give himself unobstructed view of the prisoner's movements.

"Put your foot over on that breakbeam and hop down—and keep 'em up, keep 'em up!"

The marshal had come up on the left side of the wagon. He stood there with a lot of empty territory at his back, the wagon in front of him, the end of the freight car just a few jumps away. There wasn't anybody else in sight, not even the station agent. Tom put his foot over the side, which was a high straddle, feeling for the brakebeam, doing considerable thinking as he made the deliberate, cautious move. He managed to get to the ground without a fall, where the marshal closed up on him and ordered him to march..

"Now, hold on a minute, Mr. Marshal," Tom demurred, standing with hands lifted about on a level with his ears. "These horses are very-very skittish of trains. Better let me drive them over to the fence and hitch them, then I'll be at your service entirely."

"Hitch 'em to the ladder of that car," the marshal ordered, his meanness rising with his courage when he saw Simpson separated by ten feet or so from his gun. "I'll tend to them after I tend to you."

"Oh, very well. What's the game?"

"You're arrested," the marshal replied.

With the word Simpson swung his rather sizable foot and kicked the gun out of the marshal's hand. It would have required a quick eye to tell whether the gun hit the ground before the marshal, Simpson following up the kick with such a wallop as the officer never had stood in front of in his life.

"Wrong again, my man," said Tom.

He grabbed the marshal's gun, yanked the little chap to his groggy legs and ordered him to put the seat into the wagon. This the marshal accomplished with considerable effort, for his jawbone had been all but driven through his spinal cord and he was a dazed, dim-seeing, giddy little man.

Tom went up by the front hub as the marshal got aboard the old freight wagon amidships by means of the brake block. After the marshal, under the cold order of Simpson's eye and no word out of his tightly closed mouth, had arranged the spring seat in its proper place, Tom indicated that he was to lie down in the front of the wagon, like a dog, face to the dashboard. With a foot on the prostrate officer, Tom buckled on his gun, then took the lines and headed for home, nobody the wiser for the marshal's attempted bit of heroism to redeem himself in the eyes of his constituents.

Simpson did not say another word to the man cringing on the floor of the wagon bed; just kept him there under foot for a good five miles of about the hardest driving and the roughest riding that city marshal had experienced in many a day. At last Tom pulled up and told the officer they were out of town.

"And that being the case, you look just like any other slinkin' damned whelp to me," he said. "Get out!"

The marshal climbed down on uncertain legs, Simpson following with the two guns.

"You're beyond your contemptible jurisdiction now, and you look to me like a damned louse," Simpson told him. "Here's your gun. If you're not wearin' a dog's tail, step it off and we'll settle it, right here!"

The marshal stuck his gun in the leather, turned, and walked away, putting his feet down jerkily as if he jolted down off something at every step. There was nothing noble in his going, no high courage, no spirit of defiance. It was the exit of a coward, with a tail, Tom Simpson thought, as long as a man's arm.

But the man was full of venom for the failure of his coup, by which he had intended to lift himself to importance in town and turn the laugh they had been giving him since the prisoners locked him in his own calaboose that rainy night. Simpson knew he had no justification for lifting his hand against the officer, and he knew likewise that a lot of future trouble was walking back to town with the little beast.

There would not be any peace for him in Drumwell from that time forward, Simpson knew. He would either have to fight or quit. Technically, perhaps, he was on the wrong side of the question, but at the most they could not prefer a graver charge against him than assault and battery for that affair with Kane. But there was no knowing how they might railroad a man if Kane had the influence he was reported to hold over the county attorney. Simpson certainly had a lively nest of fledgling troubles under

his hat as he drove homeward through the languorous October day.

It was well past noon when he unloaded the marshal, but he continued on fully an hour longer, desiring to put as many miles as possible between himself and town before the marshal could get back. Somebody was certain to give the fellow a lift on his way; he might rally a gang and return for the solace of his dignity. One never could tell what to expect, except the bottom worst, of a pale-gilled rogue like that.

Tom stopped to feed the horses and put a cold dinner under his belt where he had hoped to fold away a large hot steak. Although the horses did not show any great weariness, he realized their incapacity for keeping up the gait he had put them to so far this trip. To keep them fit on a long haul like that they'd have to take it leisurely, even slowly. He was starting in on it like a man who blows his money on one short, lavish spree.

Considering all this, Tom unharnessed and picketed the horses out to graze. The late rains had quickened the grass, which grew thick and tall in that section of the country, as around and on the Ellison ranch. For miles the unmown hayfield spread around him, a sprinkling of cattle here and there, succulent grazing for the hard-blowing months of winter if there was not too much rain to leach it of its virtues. Even then it would sustain animal life and bring the herds through thin in flesh, but happy and lively, in shape to pick up quickly with the first enverduring of spring.

He had not driven more than ten or twelve miles from Drumwell, Simpson estimated, and was not at ease in

mind over his situation, but as the sunny afternoon wore away his immediate concern dissolved. Nobody came charging up the road on vengeful foray. Occasionally a rider swung in sight, sometimes two or three together, giving Simpson a start, but they always turned out cowboys or farmers returning home. These passed friendly greetings as they came along, some of them halting to chat, with the main view of satisfying their curiosity. As Tom had nothing to hide about his business, he always put their itching at ease.

Nobody had a word to say about any disturbance in town; no news of the city marshal returning from his enforced excursion with blood in his eye. It grew apparent to Simpson after a while that the marshal had kept his day's adventures to himself. He naturally would do so, considering the rude disposition of such men as inhabited Drumwell to laugh loud and long at any such official belittling as that.

Simpson was vastly relieved as this reasonable consideration of the case became established in his mind. The marshal had made a quiet sneak back to town. He was not likely to ask for help to go out and humble the man who had turned that trick on him, when the appeal would involve confession of his upset dignity.

But that little marshal would go home and make a broad chalk mark on the calaboose door, scoring an account that he, Tom Simpson, lately of Manchester, England, would be called on to settle at no distant day. Oh, very well, said he, feeling pretty easy again, tossing his head as if he threw all the trifles of the world away. He

hoped he'd be solvent when the little man came around to collect his bill.

It was such a purely personal account he could not ask anybody to ease him of his obligation, not even the sheriff, who would be quick enough, he believed, to grab a good excuse for scrubbing up that rats' nest. Yes, the sheriff would take great pleasure in making the way clear for the bone merchants' operations in Drumwell, he believed.

The city marshal was expanding over into the sheriff's jurisdiction when he interfered with the free coming and going among citizens of the county. The sheriff was jealous of his jurisdiction, although he could pin his badge inside his vest, as Mrs. Ellison had hoped to see him do, on occasion and ride out of it to good and efficient ends when necessary.

No, he could not call on the sheriff at this time. Try one more trip, go prepared for the worst, and then enlist the sheriff's assistance if it grew bigger than a one-man job. This resolution cleared all troubles and doubts away; he seemed to come out from under a weight that pressed him flat and made his breath come short. He could stand up again and haul his breath deep, and tingle with the iridescence of that bright October day.

He had hoped for peace; he desired it above money. It was a bad business to have to go around fighting one's way; it carried gloom with it, and memories which rose up in the night to confront a man and draw sweat from his pores. Nothing nice in weighting down with lead until they sunk even such wolves as those horsethieves of the Cherokee trails; nothing comforting in the recollection of

violence, however just. A hangman must have his hard hours when he wrestles with remorse.

So Tom Simpson thought, sunning himself in the bone wagon that afternoon beside the Drumwell road.

CHAPTER XXI

LAME PRETENSE

Mrs. Ellison had given Tom a list of groceries and the money to buy them; Waco Johnson had commissioned him to bring out a supply of tobacco. Tom's hasty exit from Drumwell was responsible for his return to the gate empty-handed, and he was a man with a peck of trouble ahead of him to devise an explanation that would satisfy them without divulging the true reason for his apparent remission.

Waco, evidently on the watch, heard the wagon before it came in sight. He hobbled to the gate, opened it, and stationed himself there like a toll-taker, his mouth dry for a smoke. The old cowpuncher spread a big red-gummed grin all over his face as Tom rounded to and struck the gate with the double team as nicely as Waco himself could have done it. He reached up a broad rough hand as Tom came to a stop exactly beside him.

"Hi, Tom?" he hailed heartily. "How you likes to be a w'ale?"

Tom understood this peculiar pleasantry somewhat better than Mrs. Ellison. While he had no more notion than anybody else what felicity there was in the life of a whale that would urge anybody on the Kansas prairie with a desire to exchange places with one, he knew that Waco meant to express the utmost feeling of friendship, good-fellowship and admiration when he made the specu-

lative proposal. Indeed, his manner of speech might lead one not schooled in such crude diction to take it that Waco intimated he already was a whale, for he invariably put it that way:

“How you likes to be a w’ale?”

Tom assured him, as always, that he’d like it fine, and then jumped right in to take the blame for coming home without tobacco. Waco’s face elongated till there was not a horse in the team that could have bested him much on measurement.

“Hell’s woodpeckers! I’m out!” he said.

“So am I,” Tom admitted glumly. “I left there in a devil of a hurry—tell you about it later—here comes Eudora.”

Waco knew something was urging a man along when he left town in such a hurry as to forget not only his friend’s tobacco but his own, and he suspected it was a business that Tom wanted to keep from the women, above all.

“You made a flyin’ trip, Tom,” Eudora said, running up, the brightness of welcome in her face.

“He’s a flyin’ gopher,” said Waco, pulling his long, lugubrious face down to wet-leather length. “He come off and forgot my t’backer.”

“Oh, you *Tom!*” she laughed. And then she tiptoed and took a peep into the wagon. “And you forgot the groceries!” she said, looking up at him in reproving amazement.

“I’m altogether untrustworthy and unfit to run around without a nurse,” Tom said contritely. “I didn’t think of them, Eudora, till I was fifteen or twenty miles along. Then I didn’t want to turn back.”

"Of course not," she agreed, but with evident disappointment. "You can get them next trip—but I don't know what we're going to do without sugar and coffee."

Tom brightened a little.

"I think Waco and I've got enough of both to hold you till I can bring your supplies."

"We sure have, Eudora. If that's all that's eatin' you, take it easy."

Waco was quick to come to his partner's side in the difficulty, leaving explanations to their proper time and place.

"You'll have to lend us a cup or two, then. But what on earth were you thinkin' of Tom, to forget them that way?"

"I was figuring on prospective profits, I expect—building air castles, you know."

"Bone mansions," said Waco, stretching his big red grin all over his face.

Mrs. Ellison came out before Tom could drive on to unhitch. She inquired about the trip, of which Tom gave a glowing account, although brief.

"But he forgot the groceries!" Eudora said with tragic accusation.

Mrs. Ellison looked at him in speechless vexation, Tom's face growing so hot and red it hurt to have it around.

"Well, Tom Simpson! You sure are a bright one!" she said.

"Ain't I?" said he, miserably abject.

"Comin' off and forgettin' them groceries, when I told you we was nearly out of soda, and sugar, and coffee, and

canned tomatoes, and beans, and—and nearly everything you didn't get. Think of a grown man—why, Tom Simpson! you must be in love!”

“He ort to be in jail forgittin' my t'backer,” said Waco.

Waco thought to throw a little comedy relief into the situation, but his break had the opposite effect on Mrs. Ellison, who looked sharply at Tom. She reached up suddenly and touched his arm, her face white, fright in her eyes.

“What happened down there, Tom?” she asked, her voice as gentle as if she consoled him for a loss.

“Oh, now,” said Tom, depreciating her concern. “I'm just a stupid, absent-minded ass!”

“Well, you haven't had your dinner, have you?” She withdrew her hand from his arm slowly, watching him for a betraying flicker of the eye.

“No; I started early and drove slowly, without a stop.”

“Come in when you unharness,” she said, and would hear no protest against the hospitable order.

Tom drove to the corral, Waco starting after him.

“If t'backer was all I needed in this world to make me happy,” he said, “I'd be throwin' my leg over the moon.”

He stopped, turned back and closed the gate, putting up his hand in a mock threat of immediate violence when Eudora would have done it. Mrs. Ellison was looking after Tom, trouble knitting her black brows in a frown. Waco started off again to help unhitch, swinging his game leg, singing his song:

Oh dhur me, and my dhur too,
If it wasn't for *my* dhur what'd I do?

He gave Eudora a wink as he passed her, probably to imply in his humorous way that he identified her with the lady of the couplet. She grinned, but not very mirthfully, the cloud of suspicion that all had not been plain going with Tom having spread from her mother's face to her own.

"A man *may* forget sugar and coffee when he's flighty over a woman or something, but when he forgets *t'backer!*" Mrs. Ellison said.

"Mother—" Eudora's voice wavered, her heart felt smothered and slow—"Mother, do you think——"

"I guess if it's for us to know, he'll tell us," Mrs. Ellison replied gently

She turned in at the kitchen gate, Eudora following, her light feet suddenly heavy, the ache of dread, the oppression of fear, in her breast.

It seemed it was not for them to know. Waco and Tom came to the kitchen, where Tom's lunch was spread, talking lightly, with the animation and banter that passes between a man who has a joke on his friend, and the friend who attempts a jocose defense. Tom praised the team, the wagon, the roads, as he made havoc in the hot meal. He said it was a lark to haul bones forty miles, and he was going to load up immediately to be ready for an early start in the morning.

Waco suggested trying out the other four horses which he had broken. Mrs. Ellison interposed an objection, which Waco overruled. They were as gentle as dogs, he declared, but if you let 'em stand around and forget what they'd learnt they'd be as mean as buzzards by the time he wanted to use them. Fine, said Tom; he'd put them

through their paces, and he wanted Mrs. Ellison to tie different colors of yarn in his button-holes, each representing some article in the grocery line. He wasn't coming home without those supplies this trip.

"Yes, and I'll tie a gunny sack around your neck to make you think of that t'backer," Waco said.

Then Waco began to talk about the horses which were left over from the number Tom had brought up from the Nation after the neighbors had taken their animals. There were seven of them, five good, the other two fair. He thought it was a shame for the sheriff to take them and fool around three or four months trying to find their owners. Feed bills and fees and expenses of one kind and another would eat their heads off, and there would be nothing left for Tom in the end.

"I couldn't think of laying claim to any of them. The idea is preposterous," said Tom, with his high, frozen-faced dignity.

"The one you rode home," said Waco, "he's a dang good horse. There's only one horse on this place better'n that colt, if you'll take it from a simple-minded feller like me. You're entitled to that one as much as you're entitled to the teeth in your head."

"Not at all," said Tom, distantly.

"The sheriff said so, didn't he, Eudory?"

"That's what he said, Tom."

"He's wrong," said Tom, stiffly. "Somebody owns that horse: it's the sheriff's business to find who."

Waco looked at him intently for a moment, incredulity in his leathery old face.

"You're weak," said he.

"You've hit it," Tom said, with the bright satisfaction he might have displayed if Waco had guessed a riddle which he had thought beyond his powers.

Waco and Eudora laughed, and that glimmer of mirth like firelight on a wall came into Tom Simpson's bright, wise eyes. Only Mrs. Ellison was not moved by the humor of the moment. She was sitting a little apart, the crochet work she had been half-heartedly doing lying in her lap, a sunbeam coming through the window bright on her idle needle.

"We'll take him for the one they shot under you," Eudora said, touching an episode of his adventure that had not been mentioned between them before.

Tom flushed as if confusion would drown him. If Eudora had accused him of complicity in the loss of the horse his embarrassment could not have been greater.

"Eudora!" her mother reproved gently, yet with the startled exclamation of a shock.

Eudora reached out impulsively and touched Tom's hand.

"Oh, Tom! I didn't mean——"

"Very good—*very-very* good!" Tom said, his confusion vanishing before her own. "That will be a fair arrangement, fair compensation. *Very-very* good."

Waco had taken up his quarters in the bunk-house, his wound having growed up, as he expressed it, the recuperative powers of his kind being remarkable. The same qualities which inured these hard riders of the range to withstand its vicissitudes stored up in them phenomenal healing powers. There was no creature alive, with the probable exception of a fishin' worm as Waco had said,

that repaired itself of distressing wounds with such celerity as the old-time range man. His mode of life put him down pretty much on a level with the lower animals, and a bullet hole more or less, as long as no bone was broken, no vital part touched, did not inconvenience him long.

All his leg needed now, Waco said, was movement to keep it from stiffening and staying tender too long. He went cobbling around with the harness, saddles and everything about the place that stood in need of repairs, of which there was plenty to keep him engaged, using his crutch only because Mrs. Ellison insisted, threatening him with heavy penalties if she caught him without it. This misfortune had turned out a fruitful diversion in Waco's days. He probably never had enjoyed himself so long and continuously before in his life, singing his unvarying two-line song, greasing and hammering and tinkering around in his cleverly handy way.

Mrs. Ellison and Eudora liked him as much as he liked them, everybody being on a perfect plane of equality, comfortable and unrestricted by hampering conventions. Waco knew it was not precisely the polite thing to sit in the house with his hat on, or remove his boots in the presence of ladies, or cuss overmuch when they were in hearing, although mild ejaculations were permissible when one hit his thumb with the hammer.

Tom was not surprised when Waco, after standing around while he loaded the wagon for tomorrow's trip, throwing in a bone now and then to prove his able-bodied state, proposed that he go along. He said it was beginning to get kind of dull around there, that being the longest

vacation he had taken since he was shot up the last time, down in New Mexico eight or nine years ago. He made this pretext and he advanced that, keeping his only reason under cover, where it bulged as big as a fat woman trying to hide in bed.

He could ride along just as comfortable as a bird in a tree, Waco said, and a man needed company on a slow drive like that. It wasn't the same as rackin' out on a feller's horse to go some place, when he could streak right through and line up with his navel agin the bar. Wagon travel was worse than walkin', the way he looked at it; even a slab-sided old centipede like him was better than no company under such conditions. And so on, to a great length of irrelevant argument.

Tom thanked him heartily, told him he'd appreciate his company above the company of any man alive, but that was a one-man business, a purely personal affair at that stage, and he could not permit a friend to become involved. He had started it, and he would finish it. He was appreciative, but firm, so firm that Waco realized further argument would not advance his desires an inch.

"All right, Tom," he yielded. "I fixed up that rifle yisterday so it works fine."

"Thanks, old feller."

"There's a good shotgun here, too. I ain't in favor of a shotgun as a reg'lar thing, but there's exceptions, as the widder woman said when she married the one-eyed man. I could load you up a dozen shells with buckshot—it'd be excusable if they tried to gang a man. Of course, I always like to keep in the law myself, and stick to my old gun, but a shotgun's excusable at times, perfec-ly excusable."

"I don't think anything is going to happen, Waco. That marshal 's a crook, with a streak down his back as broad as a skunk's, only his is yellow. The sheriff told me about him, knows him of old. The fellow used to be a sort of outpost for Wade Harrison; he's tipped off the sheriff's hand more than once when Treadwell was about to close in on that outfit. I believe he's due to lie down this trip."

"Yeah, maybe. But I wish you had a castiron wagon bed, pardner. You know, I found my old gun—did I tell you? Yeah. Out in the krel, where they either dropped it or throwed it away. It had a bunch of my silvery locks stuck to it—they had the nerve to hit me with my own gun! Guess that's all they thought it was good for, or maybe that they'd bent it over my old rock so it wasn't no use to nobody. It don't look fancy, but you can depend on it like pension money. You can take it along."

"You might need it, old chap, you never can tell. Keep it stickin' around you pretty close—I'll have plenty, a whole lot more than I'll need."

"Maybe," said Waco, but with little faith. "Anyhow, I'll be plenty able to drive next trip. About tomorrow I'm goin' to hitch up them colts and drag in some more bones."

"Don't get too fresh and overdo it, Waco. Many a good man's been ruined by drink and hard work."

"Nobody has to warn me agin hard work," Waco said, grinning his biggest. "I've been shyin' at it so long I'm wall-eyed."

Eudora came to the porch to hang dish towels on a line strung between the posts. Waco looked at her abstractedly, as if his thoughts were of her but not with her.

"Them two girls suspicion you got something in your hoof down at Drumwell, Tom," he said.

"Um-m-m," Tom grunted, bending over the pile of bones, pretending little concern in their suspicions.

"Missus Ellison's as uneasy as a cow with a calf hid in the brush," Waco went on, resorting to such homely simile not through any want of respect but because he made his comparisons with the most familiar things. "She'll not sleep a wink till she sees you drivin' up that road agin. I don't know, but I think sometimes it's worse to raise up a woman's suspicions by keepin' something from her than to tell her straight out. A woman's funny that way; she can sense things."

"You seem to know them pretty well," Tom remarked, turning on him a quick humorous eye.

"I ort to," Waco sighed.

As he volunteered no additional information on how he came to master the female psychology, Tom was too polite to inquire. But he supposed Waco's education had come through practical channels, perhaps by marrying. He must have gone quite extensively into the adventure, judging by his oracular declaration.

Tom knew that cowboys of Waco's type, the roving, restless, more or less romantic-minded, frequently had a wife on every range, sometimes not confining the number to one. They were as light-minded about it as certain Mexicans whom Tom had known, who boasted of a priest wife and a judge wife as ingenuously as another man might speak of a second pair of boots.

Eudora stood looking their way a little while as if she considered joining them, hesitated, appearing some-

what wistful and lonely, and returned to the house.

"She's as bright as a lookin' glass," Waco admired her, "and as handy around the place as a man. She's a good tieup for some young feller. You remember the time I thought you was married into the fam'ly?"

"Damn old ass!" said Tom.

CHAPTER XXII

AN ANXIOUS DAY

As Waco had foretold, that was an anxious day for the women. Tom had gone off at dawn with his load drawn by the partly-broken horses, which were frisky and frivolous, inclined to lunge at the collar and throw their heels somewhat too high for earnest work. Waco was on hand to give some parting advice.

“Keep ’em steppin’ lively for the first hour or two, Tom, and don’t let ’em git their tails over the lines or straddle the tugs. You’ll soon take the ginger out of ’em. By sunup they’ll be as gentle as house cats.”

Tom promised to watch the slack of the lines and the frisking tails, and keep them stepping so fast they wouldn’t have time to hoist a leg over a tug. He also made Waco do a little pledging on his own account to the effect that he wouldn’t attempt to do any hauling that day.

“You lay off of it till I come back, old man,” Tom advised. “You’ve been overdoin’ it already from the way you’re cripplin’ around this morning.”

“I got a crimp in my leg, guess I must ’a’ slep’ crooked on it,” Waco explained his limp. “But I’ll wait till you come home if you say so, Tom, even if I *could* run a shanghai rooster down when my leg gits limbered up a little. You sure you don’t want that shotgun?”

This subjoined question he whispered, turning a cau-

tious look toward the kitchen windows. Mrs. Ellison and Eudora were up, quietly as Tom had made ready and attempted to drive away without disturbing them.

"No, I'll pass it up," Tom replied.

Mrs. Ellison and Eudora came out as Tom was mounting to the high seat to wish him good luck and say good-bye. They attempted a sprightliness which they did not feel, and which carried no deceit to the man on the load of bones. He drove away with their unvoiced anxiety tingeing the promise of a bright day with gloom, a foreboding of trouble ahead of him which his quick spirits could not allay.

All that morning Mrs. Ellison went around the house restlessly. She would go to a window and peer down the road, which could be seen to the point where it passed over the hill since Tom mowed the orchard and cut away the low-hanging limbs; then to the kitchen porch, where she would stand listening, her head turned as if she expected the sound of distant shots, her face furrowed by the concern that would not let her rest.

"I shouldn't have let him go," she said time and again as the bright morning passed.

Waco was busy with something in the barn; Eudora slipped into the men's quarters and came back big-eyed and white, to report that Tom had taken the rifle, the revolver he had captured in the raid, her father's pistol, and no telling what else that Waco had supplied.

"I knew it! I knew it!" Mrs. Ellison said fatefully. "I never should have allowed that boy to go."

"We couldn't have stopped him—nobody could," Eudora said, in the voice of utter futility.

“Waco knows all about it, I can tell by his actions. He’s as restless as a wet hen. For two cents I’d have you hitch up the buckboard and I’d go after Tom and make him come back.”

“We couldn’t.” Eudora shook her head slowly, in deep and somber conviction. “He’d make us feel as little as two pins the way he’d hold his head up and bite off his words. He can *look* worse insulted and say less about it than any man I ever saw.”

“I guess it’s the English style; they’re said to be cold-hearted folks, although that’s the last thing anybody could say of Tom.”

“We ought to be the last to think that of him, all he’s done for us. I wonder if he thought I blamed him for that horse gettin’ killed?”

“A smaller man might ‘a’, the way you said it, but not Tom Simpson. He’s quick to feel and know—quicker than any man I ever saw. He’s a—I guess what you might call a gentleman, whatever his past may be.”

“Mother! I don’t believe he’s got any past.”

“Every man has, if he amounts to a hill of beans. I’ll bet that Waco feller’s got a history a mile long, and he’s so downright honest it does a person good to look at him. Of course we can’t blame him for keepin’ Tom’s trouble from us: he was told to. And men’ll stick together—they *will* stick together—whatever other faults they’ve got.”

If everything was all right with Tom he’d be about at this creek or that hill, Mrs. Ellison anxiously logged his progress through the day. At evening she computed the distance he had made if all had favored him, and the dreaded, unknown danger had not overtaken him on the

road. He would be camping at this branch, or that stock well with the windmill, or in a named piece of timber where he'd have wood for his fire.

It had been a long time since she had felt this disturbing anxiety for one of her men abroad, not since Ellison used to laugh at her fears in the old Pawnee days. And he had lived through those perils, healed of many a wound taken in battles with those swift-riding raiders who swept up from the south. She had not worried much about him when he spent day and night for three weeks on the blizzard-bound prairies trying to save some of his cattle from the disastrous winter kill, for the woman at home is not so much afraid of nature at its worst as she is of man at his meanest.

The winter storm had done what the Pawnee raiders, the horsethieves and rustlers of the Cherokee trails had failed to do. It had taken Ellison's life. And yet, there was nothing in the sound of the rising storm to make her face blanch, her heart drag with the slow pain of apprehension, that there was in the beat of galloping hoofs on the road at night. So many messengers of danger and disaster, so many appeals for help in extremity, had come on clattering hoofs to her door through the hampering, shuddering, villainy-shrouding dark.

All of those old ghosts of dead fears had risen with this unknown peril into which Tom Simpson had driven away from her gate. She arraigned herself for permitting him to go, when she knew neither command nor persuasion would have restrained him. All night she lay in that hot state of unrest between wakefulness and sleep, straining for the sound of a galloping horse. She had yielded to the weary

strain at dawn, and was asleep when the rider came.

Wallace Ramsey was the man who came riding hard as the sun was rising. Mrs. Ellison's heart gave one great bound of apprehension, then seemed to stop as she heard the rider halt at the gate. She was at the window as he rode through. Waco Johnson, his pancakes fried in the fat of his bacon, his scalding coffee drunk, was coming from the corral to meet him.

Wallace had come directly from Coburn's ranch, having been an incredibly short time on the way. By the time Mrs. Ellison and Eudora had dressed, quickly as prairie women can accomplish that feat, Wallace had told what he had come riding to bear.

Coburn had returned home from Drumwell between midnight and morning after a forced ride. There was a gang of squaw men and mongrels up from the Nation, drinking and carousing at Kane's, making no secret of their intention to wait there until Simpson came in with another load of bones, when they intended to kill him. The toughs of Drumwell, notably the marshal, were lined up with the friends and relatives of Wade Harrison's gang who had lost their lives in Simpson's recent foray against them.

Wallace had hopped his horse at once, at Coburn's request as well as his own inclination, in the hope of reaching the Ellison ranch before Simpson left. He was greatly concerned when he learned that he was twenty-four hours too late.

Mrs. Ellison turned on Waco with severe censure for keeping the facts from her when he knew Tom was going out against such great odds. Waco did not shrivel in

the hot blast of her wrath, although she gave it to him unsparingly and without a chance to defend himself until she had said a great deal more than her temperate disposition would have betrayed her into speaking if she had not reached the breaking point of strain. Waco heard her to the end of the raking-down, then calmly told her what he knew.

Tom had experienced trouble with the marshal on his last trip, the hang-over of a former row, to which Wallace could testify, and to which Wallace did add his confirming word. Tom had not known anything about this graver development which Wallace had come to report.

Ashamed of her outburst of unfounded charges, Mrs. Ellison attempted to say she was sorry, but Waco put up his large hand, which seemed to shut her off like a closed door, turned and hurried toward the barn, going as nimbly as if it was somebody else's leg the bullet had gone through a little less than two weeks ago.

Wallace, big-eyed and white around the end of his nose as if somebody lately had let go that member, was all in a froth to start to his friend's assistance. He told the two women how Tom had stood up for him when he needed help, and swore he'd wade through wildcats to pay off what he still felt to be owing on that debt. But how to do it was the question. Eudora suggested the sheriff, giving up the thought almost at once when the element of time was considered. Tom must have made twenty-five or thirty miles yesterday; he would reach town around noon, and it would be all over before the sheriff, or anybody else, could do him a bit of good.

"Give me another horse and turn me loose!" said Wallace.

Wallace was sweating in the pressure of his desire to speed to Drumwell; he began to strip the saddle off his horse as he spoke, and Eudora went tearing to the barn after Frank, never turned out to pasture at night with the other animals, to drive up the horses for Wallace to select his remount.

Waco came out of the barn as she ran up to the door. He was leading his tall lean horse, the one that had carried Simpson on the long ride south trailing the horse-thieves. He was carrying the shotgun over his shoulder; his gun was buckled around his lank body, and he was a grim and determined man, ready to ride on a grim and determined business, with a good deal of lead available for delivery.

"Where are you goin', Waco?" Eudora asked, a question that her own eyes had answered the moment she saw him in the door.

"Down the road a piece."

"Wait. That man wants a fresh horse—he'll go with you."

It wasn't much of a job to find the horses, as they always wandered up to the corrals in the morning, where they stood around in the way of horses, putting their necks over the fence, waiting, it seemed, to learn if they were wanted and, if not, to have it off their minds so they could enjoy the day. Eudora had them in the corral in less than fifteen minutes, and her mother, steady as a clock now, had a pot of coffee on the stove, biscuits in the oven

and bacon and eggs in the pan, by the time Wallace had a fresh horse saddled.

Eudora had hopped her horse barebacked to go to the pasture. She saddled him now, and came to the kitchen gate with him as Wallace was settling his feet under the table to eat a hasty breakfast. She chafed under this delay, but was as polite as Wallace was wise. He knew that ten minutes more meant little in the job ahead of him, and a full man was worth more than a hungry one for a long, hard ride. Waco was loading shotgun shells in the bunk-house: he was through by the time Wallace came out wiping egg from his chin.

Eudora, her face looking pinched and very pale, came bursting out of the house dressed for the saddle, having made the change in two swipes. Her breast was heaving as if she had been under water. She said she thought they could get some help down the road among the homesteaders, who all felt deep gratitude and obligation to Tom. She said she was going at once to see what could be done.

"You've got a good head," Waco approved. "Come on."

"Waco Johnson, you get right down off that horse!" Mrs. Ellison called sharply from the kitchen porch.

"Ma'am?" said Waco, twisting around in surprised comicality, the shotgun in his hand.

"Do you want to lose that leg?" she demanded.

"If I lose both of 'em clean up to my na—my belly-band, I don't give a cuss!" Waco replied.

They were off, the three of them starting with a bound, leaning like jockeys, their resolution made and acted on with celerity that promised badly for the gang at Drum-

well if they should have the luck to get there in time.

The long lean veteran of Jo Shelby's brigade was tinkering around his wagon, which stood in the yard loaded with bones, when the three rode up. When Waco, who assumed the office of spokesman, laid the case before him in few words, the homesteader did not say anything; simply turned and disappeared in his little board shack, which was already beginning to bulge with the customary overflow of towheads.

Eudora looked at Wallace; both turned to Waco. There was disappointment in the girl's eyes, through which the fire of indignation blazed. Wallace let his jaw go slack in the moment of unuttered contempt. He had his machinery in hand almost at once, however, and started to express himself according to his feelings. Waco put up his big interdicting hand. The homesteader was in the door, buckling a very competent and experienced-looking gun around his middle.

"Where do we meet?" he inquired.

Waco turned to Eudora.

"Where?" he repeated. "You know this country better than I do."

"Down the road where the old cattle trail crosses," she said.

They rode on.

Three had been added to their forces when they reached the house of the old soldier who had been with Grant at Appomattox. Yes, by heavens! he said; wait till he got his horse and gun. He was a cavalryman—his name was Kerns—and the cunning for quick saddling had not left his hand. He was up and with them, the eager light of ad-

venture in his blue eyes, although his only weapon was a single-barreled, breech-loading shotgun of the type called Zulu.

Eleven men gathered at the crossing of the old cattle trail, including Wallace and Waco, within an hour of the first appeal for help. They were all fairly well mounted; all were accustomed to the saddle, and if luck was with them they could make the thirty-two miles, more or less, between that point and Drumwell in five hours. There was scarcely a man among them that had not suffered some insult or humiliation at the hands of the Drumwell roughs. One's wife had been affronted; another's daughter. One had lost a son in a gambling brawl there; all were bitter against the conditions which made the town a place to be avoided.

Added to this was the recent terrifying ordeal they had experienced in being stripped of the very means of existence by the thieves from the Cherokee trails. Simpson had restored their property, by a feat of admirable heroism in their eyes; their gratitude was as great as their relief, and most of them were steady brave men who had faced death in more than one guise before that day.

Eudora would have gone with them, but Waco, who had taken the lead by a kind of inherent generalship which all appeared to recognize, lifted his hand sternly and said that was where she turned back. But he lowered his hand slowly, until his finger-tips touched her hair as in a benediction. Then he wheeled his horse, set himself at the head of the little force, Wallace tight beside him, and the girl was alone at the crossing of the trails, the cold track of tears on her white face.

CHAPTER XXIII

BRANDED BONES

For all the advice Waco had given on methods of handling half-broken draft animals, Simpson found himself lacking in a most essential one on the road that day, namely: a prescription for the cure of a balky horse.

Undoubtedly there is no more vexatious animal living than a balky horse, especially one that is swift and eager at times but stops short in the most critical situations and stands meanly unresponsive to force and persuasion alike. Such a horse Tom found he had in his team, a comely, chunky roan gelding with that facial distinction described among horses as well as men as a roman nose.

Due to the eccentricities of this beast, Simpson covered little more than half the distance between the ranch and Drumwell the first day. According to the inscrutable rules of balky horses the world over, among which there appears to be a close brotherhood, with rules and regulations like any labor union, this animal frequently did his share, and more, on hills, leaning to the collar manfully, only to stop in stubborn defiance when he reached the top. Again, he would come up short on level ground, where the pressure of the collar on his shoulders would not have mashed a fly.

Tom tried out all the remedies he ever had heard of, such as strapping up a fore leg, leaving the fellow only three to stand on, which appeared to be quite suffi-

cient for his purpose. Sometimes he went on when released from this mild punishment, more often he shook his head in haughty defiance, not at all unlike Tom Simpson's own expression of high aloofness from the petty things of life. Then Tom stuffed the striker's ears with grass, and cinched his belly hard with a rope, which he might as well have tied around himself for all the effect it had on the refractory beast. When it got ready to go, it went, always with a headlong suddenness that upset the balance of all concerned, in a manner bolting, with ears back, teeth clenched on the bit, and a general expression of desperation.

Frequently the horse held the load up half an hour before taking a notion to go on. Owing to these many delays Simpson found himself a good fifteen miles from town when he made camp, although he had pushed on until after dark. The balky horse's method had kept the horses fresh, at any rate, trying as it was to the patience of the driver.

Next morning things started off happily, that being, apparently, the day set aside by the balky horse for labor without protest. It was one of those bright, invigorating mornings which lifts a man's spirits until he minimizes his liabilities and frequently puts an unlawful valuation on his prospects. All hopes take on the color of the day at such times, perhaps due to the present physical comfort and beauty which autumn lavishes upon the travail-eased earth. A man is beguiled from speculation upon the worst phases of his existence by luxurious dreams of things to come.

So it was with Tom Simpson riding on his load of bones,

although he did not allow himself to believe the balky horse had experienced a reformation that would hold a great while. Every hour gained without a stop was at least three miles more on the way. At the rate he was going, Tom calculated on reaching town about noon.

In gratifying variance of his form, the troublesome horse kept steadily on. When he set to it earnestly that way there was not a better animal in the team. Tom forgave him much of yesterday's annoyance on account of the gratifying willingness to today. It was a little past noon when he came in sight of town, the southern end of the road being the rougher, a sight which dispelled the pleasant speculations of the morning and brought him straight down to the ground.

Yet Tom Simpson had seen trouble sufficient to know that it will come along fast enough without running ahead, even speculatively, to encounter it. What was to come, if anything, in that shape, would be the contrivance of somebody else. He had not driven there hunting trouble, although he had come heeled to meet it. His plan was to drive to the unloading place, leave his bones, pull up before a store like a man with a clear conscience and well within his rights, make his purchases and get out of town as quickly and quietly as dignity would permit.

There was a stretch of road, half a mile or more, leading into Drumwell as straight as the surveyor's transit could draw it, designed, one might believe, as a special straightaway for cowboys to put on a spurt and make a demonstration of speed and racket as they rode into the place of refreshment. This piece of road had a slight downhill tip into town, where it met the main and only

street at right angles in front of Eddie Kane's hotel and bar. Simpson let the horses swing along at a brisk trot down this finishing stretch while he buckled on the guns which had hung on the dashboard up to that time.

The balky horse was the liveliest stepper in the team, as he had been all morning. It appeared as if he knew he was approaching the end of the journey and desired to make a favorable impression on all beholders, after the manner of hypocrites everywhere. So Simpson came bowling into town rather gallantly, perched high on the spring seat, a gun on each hip-bone, the rifle beside him, a shining mark for anybody who might have the mean inclination to take a shot at him.

Nobody appeared to be so inclined, although his arrival was not without spectators. It seemed as if he was to go on his way unmolested. Certainly he knew nothing of the prowlers from the Nation, his only conceivable source of trouble lying in the city marshal and such friends as might step out in his behalf. The marshal was not in sight, nor anybody else who appeared to have more than a passing interest, such as might rest on any bone man with a good lively team.

To come to the unloading place the agent had assigned him beside the house track, as that particular switch is called in railroad parlance, Simpson had to make a right turn when entering the street and drive across the main line of railroad. All went as smoothly as a greased slide until the wagon was squarely across the main-line track, where the balky horse was taken with the notion of showing the town how mean he could be, and what a spectacle

he could make of the creature who posed as his master on the load of bones.

Tom knew there was nothing he could do to make the stubborn cuss move on. The best thing, he decided, was to take him out, tie his mate's end of the double-tree and drive the short distance without him. Accordingly he got down and began to unhitch the rebel.

At that point in the balky horse's act the station agent entered. He came on with spirit, adding considerably to the entertainment of the small crowd of men and boys who had collected out of the town's apparently barren possibilities in surprisingly short time. They wondered why a man would want to unhitch his team and leave his wagon straddle of an active piece of railroad like that.

"Git that wagon off of there!" the agent yelled, his voice cracked by what seemed to be a sense of outrage against his dignity. "Don't you see that board? Git 'em to hell off of there!"

He pointed to the semaphore signal, a red sheetiron contrivance at the end of a rod protruding to the edge of the platform from above the depot's bay window. Tom looked at it, curiously interested, it seemed.

"Very pretty," he said.

The bystanders laughed, a derisive haw-haw directed at the agent like a volley of excrement, station agents being almost invariably unpopular men in towns the size and stamp of Drumwell. This set the agent at Tom with redoubled charge of authority.

"She's due in less 'n a minute," he said, his shallow passion splitting about equally between anger and fear. "He's got to git to that tank,"—apparently making a

change in the sex of the approaching or impending thing which might have been confusing to anybody but a rail-roader, who would have known he was speaking of the train in one instance, the engineer in the other—"and how in the hell's he goin' to do it with that damn wagon on the track? Git 'em to hell off of here, I tell you—git 'em off!"

Tom was calmly, unhurriedly, unhitching the balky horse. He looked up with humorous twinkle in his eyes.

"Send it along," he said. "Maybe a locomotive could move this horse; I've tried about everything else."

The crowd laughed again, a note of friendliness in the sound for this calm young man who didn't hop any faster for all the agent's wrath. Some of the older men offered suggestions, some help, the latter quite in order, the former wasted wind. Tom gave one of them a rope and asked him to tie the end of the double-tree back to the axle, threw the tugs across the balky animal's back and started to lead him out.

But no; the horse had other plans. He braced his legs and set back against the pull on his bit. The crowd slapped him with hats, jabbed him in the belly with thumbs, twisted his tail, and the frantic agent, his eyes as big as eggs, got behind him and pushed. Wasted effort, all. The horse stood there maliciously stubborn, and the train against which the red board was turned came around a curve a quarter of a mile or so north of the station, with such a head of speed it looked as if nothing could save that load of bones, to say nothing of adding those of four pretty good horses to the collection.

The crowd broke, clearing the track, and the agent, flapping his arms in terrified signal to stop, went galloping down the road to meet the train. The engine came to a stop, Tom Simpson standing at the horse's head, hand on its bridle, with nicely calculated thrill for all beholders, about five feet from the wagon, the engineer leaning haughtily out of the cab, crabbed as if he regretted there was anything in law or morals which restrained him from making a mess of the whole affair.

It was beneath his station to speak to a man so low as a driver of a bone wagon, or any wagon whatever, there being a deep jealousy among railroad engineers against all people who guide the course of anything that moves on wheels. Not so the conductor, who came jogging forward in that little goat-trot peculiar to passenger train conductors, the gesticulating agent with him. The agent was almost wordless at this awful sacrilege in blocking the way of Number Five, or Five, as he called it, which was a prince among railroad trains in his eyes, although only a little plug of three coaches to everybody else. But there was that granger with his load of bones, blocking the way to the water tank and the station, and the agent and conductor were as vindictive against him as if the train had a thousand miles to go to get to its journey's end instead of a hundred yards.

"Git to hell out o' there! git—to—hell——out o'———there!" the conductor ordered, spacing his words farther as they ran out to the end of his command. "Don't stand there holdin' up this train!"

"Oh, very well," said Tom, understanding the horse's

view of force and duress that moment better than ever before.

But how to get to hell out of there, or to anywhere else out of there, was the question. The passengers were leaving the train, not caring much where it stopped, many of them gathering around to enjoy the spectacle of a balky horse holding up a train. Tom had tried everything he knew on that horse; if anybody had a remedy to offer that would move him before his time, suggestions were then in order.

The conductor said here, some of you fellers—speaking to all assembled—git a hold of this damn wagon and roll it to hell off of this damn track. But conductors were even less popular than agents in Drumwell, where most of the male inhabitants had memories of high-handed dealings over fares and excess fares, and the question of taking dogs on board. They gave him cold looks and no assistance.

It looked as if the conductor would have to stoop to common labor himself to remove that obstruction, when Tom Simpson, nonchalantly striking a match on the sole of his boot, held the little flame to the balky horse's belly and moved him with a grunt and much twisting of the tail, and a look of wide-awake surprise on his roman-nosed countenance.

Tom had much pleasure in his discovery as he climbed to the seat and drove his bones clear of the track, and on to his unloading place, without a look behind to see the engineer range up to the water tank or the agent go hopping along the platform to get a truck for the trunks and express.

Tom was not greatly surprised to find the place where he had left his first load empty. There was not a bone, not a horn, nor even a tooth out of a jawbone. The mark of them was there in the soft ground, as well as man tracks and wagon tracks. A cattle car, partly loaded with bones, stood up the track a little way, its freight showing between its slatted siding. All evidence bore out the suspicion that his bones had been appropriated to help out that load not many hours before his arrival.

This time Tom did not take the seat off the wagon, but pushed it up near the dashboard, ready to move in an emergency without leaving it behind. He unloaded quickly, unhampered by even an onlooking citizen, public interest in him having passed on when he cleared the track. By the time he had emptied the wagon the train had pulled down below the station, where it lay on the dead end of track like a little chunky lizard in the sun. Everybody had gone from the depot, and the town had lapsed into its usual daytime state, the plaintive yelling of cowboys mingling with the lonesome lowing of cattle where the noisy work of loading was going on at the pens. These loading pens were on the other side of the lumber yard, not visible from Simpson's situation behind the depot. He had not one spectator of his homely activities.

Leaving his team standing, Tom went to the car which he had very good reason to believe had gobbled up his first jag of bones, as Mrs. Ellison had called the load. The car was only partly loaded; its side door stood open to receive additional freight. Waiting for him to bring it, Tom thought. Tom examined several skulls in the pile that

blocked the door, then returned hastily to his wagon, drove up to the car and began loading it from the heap that lay within arm's reach.

Tom's indignation rose with every bone that he threw into the wagon. There was little use asking the agent who was loading that car, for the splay-footed coward would shield the thief, but it was due to him, Tom Simpson, to proclaim to the skulking citizenry of that town that his property must rest there untouched. He was in the car, throwing out bones with a clatter equal to that of the living cattle marching into the chutes not far away, when the one man above all others whom Simpson desired to meet that day appeared.

Simpson had heard him coming from the direction of the lumber yard, his feet noisy on the cinders of the roadbed, his manner of coming betraying his interest in that car of bones. Tom was in the door when he appeared. He was a large man, coatless, a wide brown hat shading his scowling eyes. From the little canvas apron he wore Tom knew he was the lumber dealer, the bone monopolist of the town.

There was an expression of petulant injury, rather than anger or surprise, on the man's harsh-featured brown face. He stood a moment chewing his tobacco, running a quick eye over Tom's accouterments, taking in the rifle standing inside the door.

"What in hell do you think you're doin' in that car?" he inquired, with all the sarcasm he could lay on the words, as if he would have it sound like a mistake had been made when he knew he was being robbed.

"Recovering stolen property," Simpson replied bluntly.

“You’re talkin’ kind of careless, it seems to me, pardner. You git to hell out of that car and put them bones back, and you do it damn quick!”

“I left a load of bones beside the track a few days ago, and I come back to find them in your car,” Tom told him, not greatly moved by the blustering order. “When I’ve loaded that wagon I’ll come out—unless you get too damn nasty about it.”

“You’ll have a sweet time provin’ title to a load of bones!”

“Not at all,” Tom corrected him. “I expected some damn thief would try to get away with them, and I marked a lot of them—here—look at that, you bloomin’ pirate!”

Tom tossed a skull across the wagon. On the forehead it bore the pencilled brand of the Block E ranch. The lumberman threw it down with a sneer, but a flush that was not all due to virtue overspread his face.

“You’ve had time to mark a hundred of ’em,” he said. “You can’t git away with that in this man’s town!”

The man’s manner was portentous of trouble. He spoke with that big threat, that bullying certainty, of a boy who knows his parent will take up his row. Tom did not stop to argue the case any longer. He resumed the job of filling his wagon with bones, the lumberman watching him with malignant scowl a little while. He appeared to be standing there to get his resentment up to the fighting pitch by witnessing this high-handed work of a man who would not conform to the established usage of that town, under which a man pocketed his loss and rode away, charging it up to the expense of a sucker’s education.

Presently the lumberman went away, perhaps to get his gun, maybe to summon his friends, Tom thought. Whatever his intention, it was not a pacific one. He would not throw down his hand and confess himself a thief and a coward before the ribald citizens of that town. Trouble was coming, and it would be there pretty soon. This would be the final show-down for him, Tom Simpson knew.

Simpson finished his load quickly, piling the bones high as indemnity for the labor he had spent in their recovery, drove to his heap beside the track and began to unload. He kept a wary eye out for the first hostile approach, surprised that they were so long in coming.

This surprise gave way to troubled conjecture when nothing happened. He worked down to the bottom, rearranged his seat, left the horses standing and went to the depot to order his car. The agent received the order sulkily, as if to imply that the railroad didn't want his business any more than the lumberman relished his rivalry in the merry market of osseous remains.

As matters stood, Simpson didn't see much future to that business just then. He believed the lumberman would clean up his pile of bones the minute he left town. The only way to meet such competition would be for him or Waco to remain there all the time, which would not be profitable unless they could work up a bigger trade among the homesteaders than promised.

True, they had enough bones contracted for, with what he had on the ground and would bring the next trip, when Waco would be able to handle a load, to fill a car. His customers were to deliver to Drumwell on the day he had ordered the car set, but he had grave doubts now

whether that bald-faced agent intended to place the order at all. It looked like a hopeless prospect for bones.

Thus turning the several obstacles of discouragement in his mind, Tom went back to the wagon and drove across the track into the street, the gap in his wheel-team unfilled, the balky horse in tow at the endgate. For the trip home he intended to rearrange the horses, move the lead-team back and hitch the willing horse by a single-tree to the end of the tongue, with a rope around the balky fellow's neck behind. There he could travel with the rest of them or drag, according to his perverse inclination. If he hung back and got his fool head pulled off it would be a good riddance of the pestiferous pelter.

Tom was puzzled, but not betrayed into any feeling of false security, by the disappearance of the lumberman and the apparent indifference of everybody in town to his presence. The marshal had not come forward to display the authority he was fonder of asserting than he was successful in enforcing, in Tom Simpson's case, at least.

Many horses were hitched in front of stores and restaurants, cowboys were jangling up and down the board sidewalks with spurs on their heels, but a few moments out of their saddles, their sweating horses close by, while mixed groups of cowpunchers and farmers chatted amiably here and there.

The cowboys laughed at this granger's queer way of hitching a harnessed horse behind his wagon and leaving that comical gap in his wheel-team. Some of them geyed him goodnaturedly as he drove down the street looking for a place to hitch, but drew in their horns quickly when they got a nearer look at the face of the

driver and the two guns under his elbows. They stopped to discuss him in speculative wonder, watching him as he drove slowly along looking for a space between horses and wagons to accommodate his lengthy outfit.

There was space in front of the Railroad Restaurant, the place conducted by Eddie Kane's more or less estimable mother-in-law, a family tie of which Simpson was wholly unaware. He was firmly fixed on steak and potatoes, and that joint looked about as good as any. There he drew up along the edge of the sidewalk with his cumbersome wagon, ponderously, like a steamboat making its berth, and as he threw his leg over the side to get down and hitch, the lumberman and the city marshal popped suddenly around the corner of the calaboose and began to shoot.

It was no time for argument, or consideration of legal aspects of his situation; it was the pinch between life and death. Simpson grabbed the rifle from the seat beside him, the bullets of the pair slapping the planks of the restaurant's high false front. He heard somebody squeal inside the place, the front door slam violently, as he cut loose.

The two men were diagonally across the broad street, about two hundred feet away. At Simpson's first shot the city marshal dropped in his tracks, and went rolling a little way as if he had fallen on a hillside. The lumberman ran behind the calaboose when his companion fell, and the gust of shooting ended as suddenly as it had begun.

CHAPTER XXIV

A CALL FOR WATER

Curiosity no doubt was as dominant in the minds of people who lived in Drumwell, and those who frequented its places of business and diversion, as elsewhere. Only discretion was somewhat farther to the front. Discretion cleared the street when the shooting began, as if a wind had picked all the two-legged creatures up and whisked them away like leaves.

Every door caught as many as could scramble inside before the proprietor slammed and locked it, after the custom of that town, and other places of its kind in the shooting zone of the cow country frontier. It was not the belief that a locked pine door would turn bullets; experience had proved the reverse often enough to Drumwell merchants. But a quickly shut door was outward proof of the owner's neutrality, and kept his standing unimpaired in the good graces of all belligerents.

Those who did not make it into open doors cut for spaces between the buildings which would lead to sufficient shelter behind them, from where they could leg it to back doors if they felt safer under a roof when bullets were humming around, as most people did. It was equal to a trick with cards the way that short street cleared of everything alive but horses. Some of these pranced and pulled back, frightened by that wave of warning which quickened even the senses of the dumb.

The city marshal had rolled almost to the corner of his lockup, behind which his friend had expeditiously hidden himself. Standing in the wagon, Simpson turned a look toward Kane's place to see if anybody was moving with hostile intention from that quarter. When he glanced over at the calaboose again, the city marshal was gone.

A moment later Tom saw legs flit across the space between the calaboose and the nearest building, and he was certain one pair of those legs belonged to nobody but the marshal. The crafty little cuss had been playing 'possum, waiting his moment to slide to cover. Just as well if he hadn't damaged the little devil, Tom thought. He was not a man that counted for very much, shake him out of the box as you might.

Other legs went flitting across the chinks between other buildings, few of which stood shoulder to shoulder, admirable arrangement for refuge in such a public exigency as now. The trend of those flying legs was toward Kane's place, which was about half the distance of a city square from Simpson's situation in front of the Railroad Restaurant.

Tom believed they were gathering at Kane's in a force that soon must make it pretty lively for him. He knew it was useless to attempt flight, although he considered mounting the led horse and making a dash for the open. Even while he thought of it he knew it wouldn't do. The first break to run would set every coward in town at his heels, regardless of any actuating interest in the case except that of the chase. It would be better to stand and face the partisans of the marshal than retreat and bring out the rabble.

He must get out of the wagon, and away from it. He was responsible for the horses; sticking around there for the shelter of the wagon—which would be like a chip to a bug for a man in his fix—could only result in some of the animals being killed. It would not be generous of him to stand in front of that little restaurant, either, and get it shot up. It had caught several bullets at the first outbreak; one of its windows was broken. There was only one thing to do, for the safety and consideration of all concerned except himself: walk out to the middle of the street and wait for them to come.

He jumped down, tied the lead team to the hitching-pole, emptied an extra box of ammunition into his pockets, grabbed the rifle and stepped into the road.

At that moment several men emerged so hastily from Eddie Kane's barroom door that it seemed as if the place had given way under their pressure and spilled them, exposing them before they were ready. The lumberman was conspicuous among them by his collarless white shirt, but the city marshal was not there.

They spread out like a covey of rising quail and began to shoot, some of them edging away from the building, where Eddie Kane could be seen at the door. Even at his distance, and against all the popping guns, Simpson could hear Kane, vituperative and raging, consigning him to the place where all undesirable people were billeted by the foul-mouthed of every frontier. Kane was putting on some trimmings of his own, and he was a competent decorator in that lurid line.

The distance was somewhat long for accuracy with pistols, although bullets were cutting the dust around

and beyond Simpson, edging up a little nearer as the shooters mastered their first wildness and took more calculative aim. Tom believed he could hold them beyond dangerous range with the rifle. He threw four quick shots with no other intention, and they bunched in a surge for the door as eagerly as they had emerged a few seconds before.

But Kane, false friend in their necessity, had followed the example of everybody else along the street. The door was locked. They cut around the corner, making for the main entrance, which they must have reached before Kane could slam it, for all but three of them dropped out of the open conflict, although somebody began firing with a rifle from an upstairs window a few seconds later.

The three who remained in the street were of the cowboy type, one of them a long-haired man who looked familiar to Tom, although he could not recall at the moment where he had seen him. Somebody yelled to them out of the window where the shooting had come from; Tom saw an arm between the curtains waving a rifle, which the long-haired man ran under and caught as it dropped. He was the Indian member of Wade Harrison's outfit, who had escaped that morning of the fight on the old cattle trail.

Tom jerked a shot at him as he stooped and ran swiftly for the corner of the building. It was a clean miss, although it was a shot thrown with deadly intention. The Indian began to shoot from cover around the corner, only his arm and shoulder and the side of his head visible as he fired. He was considerably better with that gun than he was with a revolver; he was handing them out pretty

close to Tom's head as he stood there a fair mark in the middle of the broad street, the brim of his old sombrero flapping in the wind.

Several cowboys had climbed to the tops of the cars they had been loading, from where they watched the fight. One of them tried to signal something to Tom that he did not understand. He waved his hand to show the friendly fellow that he appreciated his interest, even though he could not profit by the signal.

They would keep out of it, Tom knew; it was not their way to mix in sectional fights or take hand in anything that did not involve them. But he couldn't help wishing he had three or four of them with him. He'd smoke that gang out of the hotel then, and clean up that town until a man could leave his pocketbook lying over there by the sidetrack——

A shot from that same upstairs window cut off this ardent wish. Tom raised his gun to throw lead through the blowing curtains, but held it, remembering there were women in the place. The Indian, incautious at this deflection of attention, displayed a little too much of his anatomy at the corner, and Tom pitched the shot at him instead.

It was a hit. The fellow spun out into the open, whirling as if somebody unwound him from the coils of a rope. He dropped his gun, seemed to stumble over it, and fell. There was no pretense in the posture of that man, lying on his face with his arms thrown above his head in the dusty road.

Something hit Tom's arm with a spat; a gun cracked between the houses, and the meaning of the cowboy's

signal was made plain. Tom wheeled, his right arm suddenly numb as if he had been hit a hard blow on the crazy-bone. No other sensation, but the arm would not respond when he tried to lift the gun. He dropped it, slung his revolver with his left hand, and made a charge at the man who had flanked him and was still shooting, but wildly. And all the time that coward in the hotel window was pegging meanly away, maybe a woman, for all he knew.

There was nobody between the houses, where the smoke of the shooting was packed close. The sneak had heeled it, sticking close to the corner of the building—it was a little dry goods and millinery store—with that intention if pushed. It must have been the marshal, Tom believed; that was a trick worthy the wall-eyed little beast.

Tom turned back to the street, feeling a little queer, a light-headed sickness coming over him like the beginning of mal de mer. Strange such a little thing as a crack in the arm would do that; it never had upset him that way before, getting a shot in an out-of-the-way place such as an arm or leg. A smothering, sick, oppressive feeling of obscuration it was growing to be. Strange; very-very strange.

There was a lot of wet inside his shirt, and rings of varicolored light before his eyes. They must have got him somewhere—he must get under cover and find out how seriously. The sidewalk rose in front of him as he went ahead to try the door of the little shop. Locked, the curtains pulled down, no movement within answering

his knock and pettish: "Oh, I say now! Open this damn door, will you?"

That woman in the hotel—he could not think even in his extremity a man could be so base—was still shooting, and he had to go that way to get to the door of the hardware store next beyond, where a zinc washtub was standing on a barrel in front. He went on, annoyed by the shooting from the window, but not greatly concerned otherwise. The door was locked, and if anybody skulked inside he was too cowardly or vindictive to open it.

A crowd of men appeared at the corner of the hotel prancing fantastically, shooting straight in the air, it seemed to Tom. What silly asses the fellows were making of themselves, throwing their legs and arms in that outlandish dance!

Then the tipping world steadied a moment. They were not shooting in the air, but at him. A bullet hit the washtub, clanging loudly, jarring it a little from its unsteady place on the barrel. Tom sagged down behind the barrel, hoping it had salt in it, pushed the washtub off, trained his pistol over the top and began to shoot.

But that feeling of obscuration was pressing around him; there was a streak of fire running through his head. He was still pulling the trigger, his last shot going through the rusty tin dipper hanging at the end of the hardware sign, when he began falling, falling, dropping down from immeasurable heights; struck darkness, and lay still.

He did not hear the clatter of feet on the planks, nor the whoop of triumph as the crowd rushed him from the corner of the hotel; nor the break of galloping horses as

a troop of riders swept down the road and roared into town; nor the bellow of Waco Johnson's shotgun as he pulled up short at sight of the hounds rushing their fallen victim, nor the cry of despair that rose, sharp as a woman's wail, when Jo Shelby's veteran and the others emptied their miscellaneous guns.

"He's dead!" Waco said, his voice catching with the sound of a sob. "He wouldn't be layin' there if he wasn't dead—all hell couldn't stop him if he wasn't dead! Some of you men carry him to the wagon, and the rest of you come with me."

One of the cowboys on top of the cattle car, unable to keep the code of neutrality at sight of this dramatic sweep of vengeance against the gang that did its fighting like a pack of coyotes, pointed to the upstairs window, and at Simpson, leaving the rest to Waco. It was as plain as words to Waco, who backed his horse off a little way and called an order to the unmentionable-pedigreed scoundrel within to show his head. As there was no head presented, nor even the breath of anybody at the curtains, Waco fired two charges of buckshot into the window and then rode up to the saloon door.

Waco called on them to come out and fight if they had the courage to turn a key. He was so engrossed in his defiance, so set in his vengeance, so determined to make that nest too hot to hold them, as he declared, that he did not see the streak of bay horse flash by, its rider leaning like a jockey in the last lap of a mighty race. Waco was so somberly set on avenging his fallen friend that he did not even turn his head when the cowboys on the car gave the girl a cheer as she flung herself from the

saddle where two men were lifting Tom Simpson from the sidewalk in front of the hardware store.

But the men in the saloon would not come out, although somebody was so unwise as to take a blind shot at Waco through the door. It almost grazed him, and gave him clinching evidence, if any had been wanting in his mind, that Tom Simpson's murderers were hiding there. Waco flung his long leg over the saddle and led his horse to the hitching-rack across the street; he called three men to him and gave an order in quick, firm words. He did not look toward the Railroad Restaurant, into which they were carrying Tom Simpson; if he had any thought of Eudora Ellison it was that she was safe at home with her mother, and spared the heartbreak of that melancholy scene.

Two men ran across the tracks to a freight car on the siding, opened the journal boxes and pulled out handfuls of oil-dripping packing. They came back with this, another running over from the livery stable with wire that had been cut from baled hay.

Some of the men who had pursued such of the mob as had been able to run after that devastating volley, reported that the survivors had run into the back door of the hotel. Waco stormed around there, to find that entrance barred. He gave it a kick and jumped aside, getting the immediate response that he expected. They must have pegged a dozen shots through the thin pine door.

Whether through economy, or through a modest desire to shield the doings from people on the outside, the roadside wall of the hotel dining-room-dance-hall was a solid blank. From that quarter Waco Johnson's force

was safe. But there were two windows in the bar on that side, set in the wall a little above the height of a man to insure the safety of patrons against such hilarious or malicious shots as their shining mark might provoke. A man on horseback might hit the middle of the floor by riding close to these windows, but those on the inside could not even see riders as they passed.

Now somebody, either overly secure in his retreat or rash beyond common sense, pulled a table or some high piece of furniture near one of these windows and began to fire on the men before the door. Fortunately the shooter's field of vision was not large, and nobody was directly in it, but this act of insolence instantly won over some of the homesteaders who had dissented to Waco Johnson's proposed scheme of action to empty that nest of villainy and retreat of vice. They said go ahead. But Waco would give them another chance. He went to the front door and summoned Kane by name.

Kane was in a rage. He was obscenely defiant, apparently drunk and past any sensible consideration of his situation. This thing never had happened before in Drumwell; he did not appear to be able to understand that it had happened now. But somebody was arguing with him; a woman, her voice terrified and pleading. His wife, Waco believed. He stepped aside to give her time.

Kane's passion arose with her appeal to open the door and turn the gun-slingers out. He replied to her pleading with a mocking laugh. There was further talk, and a scuffle, as if she clung to him; a rough answer, a curse, the sound of a blow. Waco Johnson turned back to his men.

"Go ahead, gentlemen," he said.

Some of the men rolled chunks of railroad ballast in the oily packing, to which they attached lengths of baling wire. Then they fired the waste, and Waco Johnson, saying he was assuming entire responsibility, took the torches one by one, swung them as a boy whirls a sling, and threw them to the hotel roof.

That was not a demonstrative crowd. Almost to a man they had been through the fire of battle, the perils of Indian warfare, the adventures of the Santa Fé Trail. Talk was such a cheap commodity they disdained it when there was serious work to be done. One had ridden the border with Quantrill—of which he said nothing to certain of his neighbors, to be sure—one had been with Custer in the Pawnee campaign; the veteran of Appomattox was there, and the man of Jo Shelby's brigade. He had seen the walls of Chapultepec and the golden beard of Maximilian, whose fate might have been less unhappy if he had accepted the unconquered Shelby's proffered help.

One and all thought of the impositions, humiliations, insults, they and theirs had suffered in that sneering, obscene, evil town, which they had shunned even to the point of hardship rather than face its ribaldry. This was the day of righteous vengeance. Within the law or beyond it, they were going to apply the remedy of purgation.

They stood by, as a man stands by a tree where a squirrel is hiding, guns ready for somebody to make a break. Within five minutes the roof of Eddie Kane's place was blazing high, and there was a sound of running in

the upstairs rooms, and of women's screams as they snatched their possessions to flee.

Kane was raving and cursing, drunk with liquor and fury. He could be heard struggling, his defiance breaking down in a drunken blubber when somebody threw open the front door.

Mrs. Kane came out, carrying a baby and a little bundle of something done up in a white shawl. Her face was strained with fright and suffering, her big hollow eyes were full of terror. She paused a moment, in attitude of fearful questioning. Waco Johnson took her arm kindly, and led her to the road. There she threw one terrified look behind and ran, heading directly for the little restaurant before which Tom Simpson had hitched his team.

A dealer came out, carrying a little satchel. He walked sullenly defiant between the double file of men with guns in their hands who made a passage before the door, bending his unhurried steps toward the bank. Four women followed, their cheap finery stuffed hastily into handbags, ends of apparel showing through the gaping jaws, bundles under their arms. They were frowsy, dishevelled, crying. Nobody inside was gallant enough to give them a hand.

The rafters began to burn through, the roof to fall. Waco Johnson and his men drew back for safety. Frantic in the first realization that his place was burning, Kane rushed out yelling wildly for help.

"Put it out!" he implored, his avid wide mouth dribbling, tears streaming from his red eyes, head over on his shoulder in such a grotesque posture of villainy justly

punished that nobody ever had been heard to express pity for his affliction.

“Git water! Put it out!” he yelled, sobered up considerably at sight of the destruction. “I’ve got a two-thousand-dollar stock in there! Put it out—put it out!”

Nobody spared him much attention, seeing he was unarmed, in his shirt sleeves, his vest unbuttoned, his big watch chain dangling. The collarless band of his stiff-bosomed white shirt was fastened tight around his muscular, corded neck; there were dribblings of his late potations down its front. He went running circles around the cheap, flimsy building, and the public of Drumwell, guilty and not guilty, came out of its holes to witness the spectacle and laugh at a plea which was the last anybody ever expected to hear from the booze-lapping mouth of Eddie Kane.

“Git water, git water!” he yelled. “For God’s sake, men, git water!”

A man came to the door waving a white handkerchief, and Waco Johnson said come out, cuss you, and say it. They had a wounded man in there, the man said; they asked permission to carry him out, and for everybody to follow, peacefully. Come on, said Waco, and come with your hands above your heads, all that were not carrying the wounded man.

Four came out carrying the lumber dealer on a table. He had a mess of buckshot in his back and looked as if he was not long for this world. Waco Johnson checked him off. The others followed, fourteen in all, some of them innocent cowboys who had not been permitted by the

guilty ones to leave. Waco Johnson checked them off, also. He told them to run along. There were others that he marched to the railroad, beyond the heat of the burning building, and searched with portentous eye.

Waco called a council of war over their case, and considered what to do. It wouldn't be right to shoot all of them summarily, for there must be some who had borne no active hand in the cowardly business against Simpson. They could not expect the innocent to proclaim the guilty, in fear of future vengeance, so they debated the matter gravely, not knowing just what to do. At that point in the deliberations Wallace Ramsey returned from what all thought to be the last services Tom Simpson ever would require of his friends. To inquiries, Wallace replied:

"No, he ain't exac'ly dead, but they broke his arm, and they shot him through the side, and they creased him just over the ear. The doctor says they ain't any bullets *in* him. They went clean through."

The doctor wouldn't say what his chances were. If the bullet that creased him hadn't busted his skull bone, he might live. Anyhow, it had pressed the bone down agin his brains and he didn't know a thing. He was down there in the back room of that little eatin' house; Eudora, she was with him.

"The hell she is!" said Waco, brightening up so greatly he might have had assurance that Tom Simpson was through the rapids, and coming safely to land.

Well, considering it all, Waco said, he guessed they'd collected enough toll.

"If he's alive, he'll go on livin'," he declared. "That

girl won't let him die. She wouldn't let *nobody* die, not even me."

Seeing there was a doubt who deserved to be shot and who should go free, Waco said, and considering that it was better to allow five guilty ones to escape what was coming to them than to go wrong on one innocent man, they'd call it a day and let it end there.

"Scatter to hell out o' here! Hunt your holes!" he said.

They went, and the guns they had left behind them in Kane's bar began to pop in the fire, and the corked bottles of liquor began to explode and, as the heat grew around them, even the beer kegs raised a head of steam and burst their thick staves with fire-muffled roar.

The building burned like a box, its construction being of the cheapest and poorest, the last thing to go being the row of thick posts which had braced the ceiling of the dining-room. These stood awhile in the swirl of fire like columns in a ruin. In the bar end of the building Kane's stock of ardent spirits tinged the fire with blue.

Waco Johnson and his companions were patrolling the fire to keep it from spreading, the nearest building being not more than a hundred feet away, the corral which Kane maintained for his customers between. They kept the planks and roof of the building, which was no other than the hardware store, from going like its neighbor, a labor in which the townsmen lent a hearty hand.

Waco was standing by when the fire had burned down to safety, thinking of going to see how Tom Simpson was pulling along, when Mrs. Kane returned. She was wear-

ing the white shawl over her head, holding it under her chin like an old woman, although she was far from old, and not uncomely in her way. She stood looking intently at the ruins of her home, with what emotion her sad eyes did not betray to Waco Johnson. Presently, she turned to him, a deep, long-drawn sigh sounding from her parted lips.

“Thank God! it’s gone!” she said.

CHAPTER XXV

SAFE AND RESPECTABLE

Waco Johnson was right about it: Eudora Ellison would not let Tom Simpson die. Mrs. Ellison arrived in Drumwell while the alcoholic bottled goods were still burning blue in the ruins of Eddie Kane's bar, having hitched a team of wild young horses to the buckboard when Eudora failed to return home, making the drive in six hours.

By that feat Mrs. Ellison won Waco's unspeakable admiration. He was utterly unable to express himself. All he could do was make a hissing noise through his teeth, like a gander, and stare at the wild team with a great amount of white showing in his eyes.

In the rooms back of Mrs. Meehan's restaurant, where she lodged certain respectable trade, being a stickler for morality outside her traffic with the jug, the two women set up their camp to raise the siege that death had laid against Tom Simpson's life. He lay unconscious four days, from a blood clot formed by the concussion of the bullet that had "creased" his temple. When his senses slowly cleared as the clot was absorbed, the doctor said he was over the hill.

The coroner, attended by Sheriff Treadwell, came to Drumwell and held inquest in due form over the Indian who had fallen before Simpson's gun at the corner of the hotel, and three others who went down in the volley that

Waco and his friends slammed into the mob. As the coroner brought jurymen from the county seat, the verdict was foregone. Simpson and the others were not alone absolved from all blame, but highly commended for their service to the public. And there the matter ended.

The city marshal of Drumwell was not among the coroner's cases, nor anywhere around that town. Some said he was seen to cut a horse loose when Waco and his party appeared, and ride furiously southward. He never was seen in Drumwell, or that part of the country, again.

Kane hung around a few days, moping and sullen over his loss, threatening legal proceedings against Waco and the others for burning his property. But he had lost face with the county attorney, who saw that the old order in Drumwell was overthrown for good. Kane was told he had no legal recourse, having been engaged in an outlawed business. There was no protection under the law for a saloon keeper's property, as many another one learned years later when Carry Nation and her disciples went smashing and destroying liquor joints up and down the state.

Kane had money enough stacked away in other banks than that at Drumwell, which his business sagacity did not permit him to trust unduly, to start life over again without much worry. But his way was not a straight one, give him all the rope he wanted. He took his sad-eyed wife and baby girl away from Drumwell within a week after his fiery cleaning up, to follow the railroad camps in New Mexico.

Contrary to the expectations of everybody but himself, the lumberman made a slow recovery against odds that

would have overwhelmed a snake. They were a hardy breed in Drumwell; the seat of their intelligence was confined to a very small area, but their vitality spread to the utmost fiber of their bodies.

But, as Waco Johnson said he hoped, if the lumber dealer wasn't killed he was cured of his crooked ways. While it would not have been advisable to leave one's pocket-book beside the track in Drumwell after his recovery, any more than it would be the wisest way to dispose of that repository of treasure at the present day, it was entirely safe to leave bones.

At a great price, with little to gain but the vindication of his manhood and the upholding of a principle, Tom Simpson had brought order and respect for the security of others to that border terminus of the Cherokee trails. He had only hastened the process of time, as most men do who correct injustices and oppressions which flourish in their day. Wisely or unwisely he had stood against the stream of popular inclination there and turned it back upon itself, and now he was suffering the pangs which are too frequently the only reward of principle upheld against the contumely of men.

Mrs. Meehan, mother of Eddie Kane's wife, was no strong partisan of her son-in-law. Eddie was too free with his fists when in his cups; she had carried many a piece of beefsteak under her eye to repair the discoloration of his blows. For that she could have forgiven him, as she had gone through a long training with Meehan and accepted such usage as a male prerogative as long as he had even a remote connection with the family. A man on the outside trying such a method of emphasis would have

found a butcher-knife pinned between his shoulders.

So Mrs. Meehan could and would have borne these occasional taps under the eyes as a matter of family fellowship, but she could not forgive Eddie for bringing her daughter down to association with unspeakable women that he enforced upon her. "Blisters" she called them, in the railroad designation of ladies who pursued that ancient way of moral weakness and mental deficiency. They waited on the tables, danced with the cowboys, and took a commission on the drinks they were instrumental in selling, treating Mrs. Kane as one no better than themselves, her authority in that establishment being limited to watching the stairs for outgoing guests who might overlook the score.

Mrs. Meehan rejoiced, therefore, in the downfall of Eddie Kane and the fiery purgation of his house. She gave expression of her feelings with uncurbed tongue, and was kind to Tom Simpson for his indirect part in her daughter's deliverance. She made Mrs. Ellison and Eudora welcome, putting a room at their disposal, in addition to the one occupied by their patient, which was no small concession in view of the sharp increase in her business after Kane's establishment came down to ashes.

With all their nursing it was three weeks before Tom was mended enough to bear the journey home. His wounded arm had given them the greatest concern after it was found no serious result would come from the searing track of the bullet along the side of the head. The doctor believed the arm would have to come off, but he tinkered along day after day, at last declaring it would heal.

But it never would be an arm for quick work with a gun again, the doctor said. It would be shortened a little, very likely with a permanent crook, but for riding or driving, or even holding the handle of a plow, it would be as good an arm as any man could want. The wound in Simpson's side was not serious. A bullet had nicked his ribs and gone on. It was the shattered arm that brought on the fever and made his mending slow.

They took him out to the Block E ranch in the liveryman's spring wagon, on a bed of fresh, jolt-breaking hay, starting early in the morning, taking the whole day for it. He came through stronger than he started, cheered and invigorated by the bright sun and blue distances of that untrammelled land in which he never had expected to stretch his eyes again.

During the days of Tom's convalescence Waco Johnson had been doing a lively business in bones, getting off no less volume than two carloads a week. Waco had taken the bits of the business in his teeth and was showing himself to be a competent trader, even though he had made such a late beginning in life. He hired a man to drive the extra wagon, and stimulated the homesteaders to greater efforts. He was becoming such a figure in the business world that even the station agent called him Mr. Johnson.

It was after the Christmas holidays before Tom was able to mount a wagon again and bear his part in this merry adventure among the bones. The winter was favorable to their operations, dry, clear and frosty, with occasional wild outbursts of storm and snow which blocked all vehicular operations. But these blizzards were of few days' duration, and with clearing weather the bone men

were on the road, eager to drive the trade to the limit of their resources before spring rains made the prairie roads impassable.

Tom Simpson's arm hung as the doctor had predicted, at an angle from the elbow of about forty degrees. This gave him the appearance of always keeping his hand hovering over his gun, although he never buckled one on again after the historic cleanup of Drumwell that day.

In Drumwell there was an air of quiescence, of stagnation, those winter days. Nobody attempted to establish a saloon and profit by the economic slack Eddie Kane's exit had brought in certain phases of the town's life. There was not a great movement of cattle in winter, very few coming to the pens for shipment, and those lean ones, feeders forced on the market by the financial pinch some drover felt.

Cowboys did not make the long rides in winter that were pleasure jaunts when the weather was soft and fair; even in Kane's prosperous days there were two winter months when the wheels stood still. Now there was nothing in Drumwell but a change of fare to tempt the most frost-proof cowpuncher out of his winter hole.

Other great changes were pending for Drumwell, in addition to the drouth of ardent spirits which had overtaken it. A bill opening the Cherokee Nation, or Strip, as it was known, to settlement, had passed congress. A few years before, Oklahoma, bordering the Strip on the south, had been similarly opened. This opening of the new country might make Drumwell or might break it, snuffing it out like a cinder under the foot. The railroad, at any event, was going on down into the Cherokee country ahead of

the opening, which would await the proclamation of the president, and might not come for several months.

Already the graders were gathering again at Drumwell in those late winter days, waiting the word of the engineers to go. There was a little acceleration of business with the establishment of the graders' camp, making it seem as of old, when Eddie Kane had his baby-board in front of the stretched canvas, and the jug from which his fortunes had enlarged beneath the goods box that did him for a counter.

There was some bootlegging—the term had its origin from liquor peddlers among the Indians, who smuggled half-pint bottles into the forbidden territory in their boot-legs—going on among the graders, as always. There were sordid cutting scrapes, the graders being no men for guns, and a good deal of moral depravity in general, graders being the scum of railroad life, take them where found.

But there was no great revival of hilarity in Drumwell. It seemed as if its life had been put out with the lights of Eddie Kane's hotel and bar. Mrs. Meehan had revived the jug trade of her railroading days, but that was such an unsatisfactory way of firing up as to carry little appeal to riders of the lonely places, to whom the greatest attraction was the sociability and lights, and strange phases of life attendant upon their far-spaced days of refreshment. Nobody but a soak could enjoy whisky passed out to him in a tin cup, with suspicions and misgivings.

So the days were slack in Drumwell, where the sharp lonesome yelping of lit-up cowboys was heard no more. Those who rode in now came to buy gloves and overalls, tobacco and boots. It is true that much more of their

money was spent for useful things than went into the channels of respectable trade when Kane's games and bar were there, but even so there were some merchants who cursed the day that shooting Englishman brought trouble to town with his load of bones.

Drumwell was safe and respectable, and business was good, but it was dead as a doughnut.

CHAPTER XXVI

IT WILL BE THAT WAY

The pardners were returning from their last trip to Drumwell with bones. They had cleared up the wreckage of the great winter kill on the Block E ranch; the homesteaders had scoured the neighboring territory, picking up the last bleached rib. So far as the partnership was concerned, that business was closed.

It had turned out a profitable venture for all involved, in spite of its painful beginning. They had made a handsome profit on the bones bought and shipped, winning wide confidence and friendship through their promptness and inflexible honesty. There never had been any hedging, once their word was passed, a thing so remarkable in those lean homesteaders' experience as to cause them to remember the bone firm with deep gratitude.

Waco and Tom, homeward bound from completing the last car they were to undertake, had made camp for the night in their most favored spot, the wooded bank of a little stream about fifteen miles from Drumwell. It was a soft warm evening late in March; the frost had been out of the ground for two weeks or more, drawing out so gradually as to leave the roads in good condition, the fields mellow to the plow. Frogs were trying out their voices for the first time since frost drove them deep into the mud; the quickening influence of springtime was in the air.

The friends were smoking by their little fire, supper

eaten, the dishes licked, Tom Simpson, unarmed like any farmer, never having borne the weight of a gun since rising from the painful bed where his adventures with guns had stretched him. He had no fear that avenging riders would come up the Cherokee trails to seek him; the last vicious nest of them was empty, the straws of it blown to the winds. Waco had not given up his gun, although he confessed he had no more need of it than a cow had of wings. It was strapped around him now in due and ancient form, ready for the emergency which, much as he enjoyed a little fight now and then, he knew in his heart never would rise on that border again.

Waco was thinking of that as he sat looking across the fire at his friend. How would things have been around there if the quiet man, a stranger from a far-off land, had not come when he did and cleaned up Wade Harrison's gang? How would it have been with Drumwell, insolent and oppressive to everybody who did not come there to spend in a wastrel's way, if Tom Simpson had let them throw their bluff on him? Wide open and a hummin', very likely; a little more to his personal liking than its present respectable business state, but far worse for young fellows with their lives before them and mothers at home. Great changes had come in his brief time there; greater changes were coming, all owing to the boost Tom Simpson had given them to start them on their way.

"Hell!" said Waco, breaking out in wide irrelevance to what had been running in his mind; "I've got over six hundred dollars in the bank!"

"Rich old devil!" said Tom, the inflection of affectionate admiration in his voice.

"It'd 'a' took me five years to work and save that much."

"Work and save?" Tom repeated, feigning astonishment. "Don't you call this life work?"

"No, I don't call ridin' around in a wagon on a soft spring seat, behind a double span of good colts work. It's recreation, as the widder woman said when she changed from worshin' to cookin'. I can see now why I never started to git rich before. I always worked so hard *at* work I never had no time to make money."

"Since you've got the secret, keep it up, old feller."

"I aim to," Waco said, serenely confident.

"You'll make it go," Tom said heartily. "You've made this go—we never would have got anywhere if you hadn't taken hold with both hands while I was down and out. Lucky for the company I *was* down and out—I never would 'a' plunged into it the way you did and made it pay from the jump."

"Oh, you go on now!" said Waco, modestly embarrassed by the praise. "What I done wasn't out of enterprise, as the feller said. It was done out of revenge on that dang lumber yard man, more than anything else. When I heard he wasn't goin' to die I laid myself out to bust up his bone business. That's why I went into it tooth and toenail."

"Oh, very well," said Tom, with his old-time, word-tossing nonchalance, so expressive of disdain for the lame deceit that Waco laughed.

"Well, it was the makin' of me," Waco said. "I never would 'a' known I had sense enough in me to start up business if I hadn't been crowded to it that way."

"So you'll go right on? Now, that's the ticket!"

"Yeah, if I can ship a couple of cars a month it'll beat workin' for somebody. I guess I can do that, anyhow. They'll be rakin' up bones on this prairie for a long time to come, and down in the Strip, when they open it, they'll find plenty more. Then dam' Indians they don't pick up no bones to speak of, but the boomers they'll grab 'em in a hurry when they go in. Bones is goin' to be bacon and corn-bread to some of them fellers before they make a crop, if the openin's set for September, like they say it is."

"They're pushin' the railroad down there in a hurry," Tom said. "A cowboy from down that way was tellin' me today the graders are nearly across the Strip—sixty or seventy miles from Drumwell—already, the track-layers tight on their heels."

"Drumwell's goin' to take a boom, too, when they begin runnin' trains down into Oklahoma," Waco asserted, rather than predicted. "Them cattlemen in the Strip they'll all have to clear out of there this summer, and where in the hell they're goin' to I can't figger. It's a cinch they can't find any range in Kansas. I hate to see all that good country busted up, but I guess when I start in buyin' wheat——"

"No-o-o?" said Tom in a long, wondering, delighted question.

"I aim to put me in a pair of platform scales right away, and build a little warehouse by fall. These homesteaders they're goin' to have a purty good sprinkle of wheat to sell this fall, and maybe by the time you're ready to ship what you're goin' to raise on the Block E I'll have a grain elevator of my own. Who in the hell knows?"

"You're a man with a vision, Waco," Tom said soberly, meaning every word. "I'm only a man with a scheme."

"You've got men breakin' up that sod, and them fields old man Ellison used to have corn in, ain't you? You're makin' a start on your scheme, ain't you?"

"But I don't know how far it will go. Even Mrs. Ellison thinks I've got a leak somewhere when I talk of a thousand, five thousand, acres of wheat. Well, I'll do fine if I get a hundred in this fall, I expect, but the big time's coming, boys; the big time's coming. You'll see this country all one wheatfield before ten years have come and gone."

"Yes, it's the right lookin' kind of ground."

"Mrs. Ellison said, when I talked of buying her ranch, you know, and she put the ice on me so hard I'm cold yet——"

"Froze you stiffer 'n a corncob," Waco chuckled at the recollection. "Said no man'd ever git his hands on that land unless he married it—biddin' for me to step up and ask her. But I ain't no marryin' man at my age; not any more, Tom."

Both laughed at this, and at the memory of the widow's indignation at the proposal to sell the land she had held to through privation and lean years, going without dresses to pay the taxes sometimes. And all because Ellison had said the day was coming when the land would be worth fifteen dollars an acre. The day came when it was worth ten times that, and before there were many more gray hairs on the widow's head.

"I always suspected you was one of them lord-dukes,"

Waco said; "and when you spoke of buyin' out that ranch I knew it."

"Not at all," Tom disclaimed, laughing shortly at his friend's effort to establish him among the striped and ring-streaked of his native land. "As I've told you, I'm nothing less than the son of a tanner, but he's got the change to buy up two or three lord-dukes, Waco, if he took the notion to do it. Lord-dukes!" Tom repeated, chuckling deeply.

"Or whalin' princes, or something," said Waco.

"Just so. He told me when I got through roving, found something I wanted and believed I could make a go of it, he'd stake me to the price. Simple enough, what?"

"Sure," said Waco, enlightened, but not convinced that Tom was not at least a duke with a college education.

"So, as I liked the Block E ranch, I wanted to buy it. And I got sat down on so hard I'm still a bit flat."

"Runnin' it on shares ain't so bad, Tom."

"Not half bad, old chap."

Waco smoked a while, meditatively. Tom was sitting in a Turkish posture, shins crossed before the fire, hat pushed back from his forehead, chin up, his eyes on the stars, as the eyes of Kansans, native and adopted, have been fixed always in their aims of achievement, great and small.

"You know the boomers are beginnin' to come to Drumwell already, Tom?"

"Boomers? You mean people who expect to take up land in the Strip when it's thrown open?"

"Four or five fam'lies of 'em tentin' along the crick.

They've got a long wait ahead of 'em till fall, and if they ain't got something to live on—and no boomer I ever run into never had nothin'—they'll be in a mighty poor fix to face the winter on their claims. I reckon they'll scratch around somehow, railroad a little and cut hay, and manage to pull through. You can't kill a boomer."

"If starvation could have done it they'd have been pretty thin in Oklahoma the first year, from what I've been told. I look for a better class to come down for the opening of the Strip than rushed Oklahoma—farmers who have sold out in other places on the hunt for new land. They're always on the jump after new land out here in the west; they haven't learned how to make it last more than fifteen or twenty years."

"Land 'd last always if they'd use it out here for what it was intended," Waco said. "This prairie country wasn't made for farmin', the ground's too thin, but you could raise cattle on it a million years and leave it as good as it was when you started. I ain't knockin' farmin', but it sure gits my gizzards to see all this good country fenced off and plowed up, Tom."

"I know, old chap."

"But if I don't make a go of my business I'll bust over with the rush and grab me off a claim in the Strip. I'm out of the cattle business for good—worked at it twenty years and never owned a calf. All I had to show for that lifetime of ridin' the range from Texas to Montany when Sid Colburn fired me was three old crowbaits and a sixty-dollar saddle. Wel-l-l-l," a long, regretful sigh—"I had a good time while it lasted, anyhow."

"Yes, there were times and experiences in our cow-

punchin' days we'll remember happily when we're millionaires," Tom said.

"You started young, Tom."

"No, not so young. I was twenty-two when I came over."

"Wel-l-l," Waco sighed, "I'd like to line up with my navel agin the bar just once more to-night, old feller, and drink a round to the old days that's gone and the old life we're leavin'. But as we can't do it, we'll pass 'em up without regrets and say here's luck for the new."

Waco put out his hand; Tom's met it over the fire.

"Here's luck for the new," Tom repeated the sentiment, solemnly as a rite.

"I'll have to round up my colts in the morning when we git home and rack right back to town. I've got my scales to put in and build me a little office and put my advertisement in the paper."

"We'll be sorry to see you go," Tom said.

"Oh well, I ain't jumpin' off. I'll be out now and then to see how you're makin' it."

"Of course," Tom said. He looked up quickly, the firelight glancing in his eyes like that old trick of a glimmering smile. "Do you remember the time you thought—you remarked, you know, old chap—I was married into the family, what?"

"Sure I do," Waco replied heartily. "It was a poor guess, but it was well meant."

"Just so," said Tom. "Next time you come out, old feller, it will be that way."

"The-hell-you-say!" said Waco, his delight beyond confines.

That called for another handshake, and an expression of regret from Waco that there was no bar to line up along and drink a round to such agreeable news. He could not have been much happier if the important change had been impending in his own state. He had much to say in praise of Eudora Ellison, his highest encomium being that she was the kind of a girl that just naturally wouldn't let a man die. There were two living examples of her determination beside that fire, he said, and he wound up his talk, complimentary and advisory, with these words, solemnly delivered as if drawn from the treasure house of a vast experience:

"Take 'em one at a time, and fur apart, Tom. That's my advice to you."

They were on the road before sunrise next morning, and at the ranch a little after noon. Eudora was at the gate to meet them, and Waco, driving in the lead, stopped his wagon between the gateposts to lean down and shake hands with her as if he had not seen her in a long, long time. There was the warmth of sincere wishes, the tenderness of sincere friendship, in Waco's eyes as he held her hand a little while, bending down from his high perch, his foot on the brake.

"Hello, Eudory,"—his voice, his tender touch, his broad-spreading red grin telling her that he knew it all: "How you likes to be a w'ale?"

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Ten years and prosperity had made little change in Waco Johnson. He still wore a queer outfit half way between cowboy and country banker, although he seldom straddled a horse. Distance between his enterprises was

too great for that ancient method of travel, although he kept a high-stepping team and a red-wheeled buggy for town driving and short excursions in the country from his headquarters at Indian Rock, the county seat.

A railroad had been built through that country, a great trunk-line reaching out to El Paso and on to the Pacific coast. There was a station, around which a little town was growing, on Tom Simpson's ranch, and there Waco was building a tall, poured-concrete grain elevator, the walls of which were 'already up. It was number nine in his chain of elevators stretching across the rich wheat belt of Southern Kansas.

On this sunny day in late June the harvest was tingeing yellow; in a week the binders would be at work, and soon the red stream of hard winter wheat would be pouring into Waco Johnson's bins. Waco was driving out with a big buyer from Kansas City, who was abroad making crop estimates and contracts. They had stopped at the margin of what seemed a sea of wheat, its distant shores invisible to the eye.

"So this is the famous Simpson ranch?" said the buyer, speaking with the satisfaction of one who had fulfilled a long desire.

"Eleven thousand acres of wheat in one patch," Waco said, nodding. "I remember when he put in a hundred and forty, and people thought he was crazy. He's the man that started the ball rollin' down here in this country—I reckon they'd been rangin' cattle over here yet, lettin' this good wheat land go to waste, if it hadn't been for that far-seein' Englishman. He made all of us down here in

this country. All we had to do was trail him and git rich. Couldn't help it; wasn't nothing to our credit."

"I've seen a lot in the papers about Simpson," the wheat buyer said; "pictures of his steam gang-plows throwing a furrow ten feet wide, a disc harrow hitched on behind, turning out a finished job at once."

"All ready for the drill," Waco said. "Eleven thousand acres, all in one patch. And Simpson harvests around twenty bushels to the acre where a lot of wheat farmers don't average more than fifteen. You can figger it up for yourself, and wheat at eighty-seven cents, July delivery. Some money for a farmer to slip in his sock—tell me!"

"Is that his house down there among the trees?"

"He calls it a cottage—it's only got twenty-four rooms! Yeah, that's Tom Simpson's house. His wife's a fine woman—I've knowed her since she was knee-high—well, maybe she was a little higher—but it's been a good long time."

Waco touched the mettled horses absently with the whip, treatment which they seemed to resent from the way they started off, keeping their driver's attention fixed to the muting of his ready tongue. Presently they fell to a swinging trot, and Waco relaxed, turning to his customer with a big red grin.

"Yes sir, Tom Simpson and me made our start together, right here on this ranch, haulin' and shippin' bones. Dang his old hide! named one of his boys after me. Waco. Yeah—Waco Johnson Simpson. Mean trick to play on a innocent child. Take him a long, long time to live it down."

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